Aesthetics and the End of Civilization

Francis Sparshott
Aesthetics and the End of Civilization

Francis Sparshott

I

In June 1993 a new association for the study of aesthetics was inaugurated in Sydney, Australia. This might seem a strange time for such a move. Aesthetics, the theory of beauty and the fine arts, has seldom been much esteemed or studied in the English-speaking world, and in recent years it has been partially eclipsed by more fashionable studies. However, if an association for aesthetics is to be founded at all in these unpropitious times, the city of Sydney is certainly a good place for it. For a quarter of a century the new Sydney Opera House has been famous as one of the world’s most remarkable buildings, and the story of its origin will introduce my present topic.

The true history of the Sydney Opera House is intricate and controversial. The myth that the world knows, which is what concerns us here, is roughly as follows. A conspicuous site was chosen for a new concert hall, and an international competition was announced for its design. The complex practical requirements the building was to fulfil were specified in detail, in accordance with the best prevailing practice for such competitions. Three internationally eminent members of the architectural profession, together with a distinguished local architect, served as judges. There were over two hundred entries. The winning design paid no attention to the stipulated practical requirements, but was chosen on the basis of a rough drawing of an overall shape for the proposed complex. Admittedly, given the location, the quality of the silhouette was a primary concern; even so, the selection procedure was something of a scandal, and the practical consequences were unfortunate. It is as if the judges had been overwhelmed by what they referred to as the “striking architectural composition.” As it turned out, the original architect had no idea how his proposal could be carried through; the practical demands could not be fully accommodated; the roofs as drawn could not be constructed, and shells of a simpler curvature had to be substituted. But in the end, after a lot of time and money and grief, in the words of the account I am following “the exterior of the building as designed by Utzon was completed, and that is what people see and admire and remember.”

It was precisely this undisputed power of certain images to be “seen and admired and remembered” that the young Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten had in mind when he invented the term and topic of aesthetics in 1735. The science of logic had long existed to provide a critique of cogency in arguments; why should there not be a comparable science to found the critique of the imagery that formed the substance of poems and other works of art? What is it about the mind that makes it able and willing to generate and appreciate images capable of commanding universal recognition, borne by travel supplements and posters to the far ends of the earth, so that the silhouette of the Opera House says “Sydney” everywhere as clearly as the Parthenon says “Athens” and the Taj Mahal says “Agra”?

What the story of the Opera House clearly shows is not merely the allure of beauty, but its compelling power. What was special about the design was not its distinctiveness and recognizability, but the sheer overwhelming beauty of which the original sketches held the promise and the finished building was the fulfillment, the authority with which it compelled and continues to compel admiration and respect. In all the tangle of political and economic motivations that surrounded the project from beginning to end, what
stands out is that the imagined and perceived quality of a design imposed itself as an imperative, to which important professional concerns must be sacrificed and important public resources devoted.

The new discipline that Baumgarten proposed was made into a recognized part of systematic philosophy by Immanuel Kant. He founded it, not on the charm of pleasing sights and sounds, but on this distinctive value of beauty, the imputed necessity of the admiration and delight it evokes. It is this authority that aesthetics has to explore and explain. Kant himself, in a profoundly original move that escapes many of his readers, split this authoritativeness of beauty into two. In the sphere of artistic and perceptual beauty, it manifests itself only as the delighted cognition of the necessity of a necessary pleasure. Practical coerciveness is confined to the moral law within us, the beauty of which evokes that idealistic devotion which Kant calls the “sense of duty.” It was left for Mikel Dufrenne two centuries later to allow a sort of dynamic force to the recognition of aesthetic beauty, which compels artists to bring their designs to fruition, and entices the organizers of architectural competitions to establish a place for those designs in the economic world.

However it is to be described and explained, it is the recognition of the compelling force that beauty exercises on human minds that gives aesthetics its place in philosophy. That means that aesthetics must be grounded in axiology, the general theory of values, which must itself be a chief and central part of the philosophy of action. It is a long time since philosophers in the English-speaking world gave much serious thought to this, but in the early days of philosophy it was an important theme. What are the relationships, philosophers wondered, between enjoyability, charm, utility, fittingness, beauty, goodness, rightness, lawfulness, love? What are the defensible and distinguishable reasons we as philosophers can give for seeking and avoiding, cherishing and shunning? These were once pressing questions for philosophers, but nowadays we avoid them, so that aesthetics and ethics alike are separately adrift in an ocean of vagueness and evasion.

Whatever our modern delinquencies in this area, aesthetics remains in principle that branch of philosophy that must identify and anatomize whatever area of value it is of whose power the Sydney Opera House stands as an inescapable reminder. Lacking the will and the intellectual resources to take this approach, however, many recent philosophers turn to a task more amenable to their preferred methods. Whatever the nature and source of their power over our senses and minds, beautiful buildings are built for reasons, and architectural competitions lead to the formulation and defence of judgments. Such reasons and judgments belong to a domain of critical discourse, the logic of which can be observed and explored. And logic, many of us feel, is what philosophy really comes down to. So aesthetics as generally practiced does not attempt general value theory, but confines itself to the logic of critical discourse, the meaning and justification of the things people say when they criticize those kinds and aspects of human production in which aesthetic value seems to play a dominant part.

Aesthetics, then, tends to turn into the philosophy of art and art criticism. But when we look at what people mostly write about in aesthetics, we cannot help noticing that the preferred terrain is not art as a whole, the generality of artistic production, but the fine arts in their most notable manifestations, as exemplified by masterpieces and enshrined in museums. Aesthetics in practice is a philosophy of the exceptional rather than of the normal. In this, aesthetics differs markedly from ethics and the philosophy of science, in which heroic actions and great discoveries play no great part. Why is aesthetics different?

The obvious answer is that it is in the greatest masterpieces of art that the power of
beauty is really compelling. But this obvious answer is not available to an aesthetics that has abandoned direct concern with the theory of value. So we are left to ask, given the concern of aesthetics with criticism and its objects, what it is that is so exceptional about the exceptional.

At first sight, the answer seems quite straightforward. The arts are skilled activities. In any sphere of activity some people do better than others: they find the activity more congenial, master the techniques sooner, grasp the principles, acquire knacks, work harder and with more self-confidence or self-criticism. Hundreds of thousands of children play ice hockey, but there are only a few teams in the National Hockey League, and of the players who make it to that league only a dozen or two are stars and maybe three are superstars. Their prowess is manifest and no one disputes it, even though the rules and skills and institutions in relation to which alone that prowess can exist are entirely artificial, and to a great extent accidental and arbitrary. Something like this must be the norm for the use and development of complex skills in all highly structured and stable fields of activity. So it is only to be expected that “elitist” values should be enshrined in art museums and literary canons. It could hardly be otherwise. All the inquirer has to do is to explain the actual dialectics of the development and appreciation of skills, and the values involved, together with the concrete particularities in which those dialectics are from time to time realized.

The existence of an art of geniuses and masterpieces and great traditions is the inevitable outcome of the rhythms of work, energy, ability, education and cooperation in any society that aims to improve itself, rather than simply to maintain itself. Aesthetics has to include, as a distinctive part, the study of the standards and aspirations involved in those rhythms: in effect, the development of a reflective criticism in relation to the highest art. The problem is not why these supreme achievements should exist and be recognized, but why they should have figured so largely in our theories.

It is here that misgivings arise. Historians remind us that art museums, despite their claim to be shrines of spiritual achievement, are actually the repositories of artistic loot accumulated by predatory courts and capitalists, signs of power and affluence flaunted philanthropically in the fawning faces of the weak and humble. Aesthetics historically came into effective existence to construct an idealistic ideology capable of cloaking what was originally nothing but naked greed. High art was the art favored by the rich and powerful; aestheticians functioned as their court intellectuals, providing their acquisitions with forged documents of spiritual provenance. Aesthetics, as it has been practiced, stands guilty of assigning superior value to whatever happens to be preferred by a socially or politically privileged class.

The position just stated is familiar and persuasive. But it is not a complete alternative to the view that acknowledges the dynamics of achievement. The paintings that millionaires buy would not confirm the prestige of their purchasers unless their value had already been established on other grounds. More fundamentally, a bank could not establish its solidity by spending millions of dollars on a painting unless there was a consensus, among those who were meant to be impressed, that the aesthetic value the best paintings have is a kind of value on which it is sometimes justifiable to put a very high price. What the facts of museum and market do seem to explain is why aesthetics devotes such a high proportion of its discourse to what elites happen to prefer. Aesthetics, no less than art, depends directly and indirectly on the patronage of the rich and the great.

In sum, what appears in our art histories, and by implication in much writing on the philosophy of art, is simply the best work around, the work of those deservedly chosen.
and trained and encouraged and criticized and eventually esteemed. That is true even if the fact that only the rich and powerful can command such abilities means that the best talent is warped in directions that the rich and powerful dictate or encourage, and even if the worth of achievement becomes exchange value in a dubious market.

II

Such are the explanations I used to accept of why aesthetics has traditionally concentrated so heavily on the narrow range of artistic practice identified as the fine arts, and on the supreme achievements in those arts. Lately, though, I have come to think of these explanations as inadequate. The very idea of the fine arts, a restricted range of "high" art practice in which alone supreme efforts are to be made and supreme achievements recognized and rewarded, seems to me now to be bound up with the phenomenon of empire, by which I mean the situation in which a number of socio-cultural units are bound together in an administrative unity without losing their vital identity. Such a unity exists primarily as an information system. In the great civilizations, notably the Indian and the Sino-Japanese as well as the Greco-Roman and its successors, we find an officially recognized high art that is associated not only with the central organization of the political power but, more closely and relevantly, with an educational system into which those are coopted who are to be concerned with the civilization as a whole. If one is to move out of one's village one goes to a school in which one is indoctrinated in what passes current throughout the empire; and this indoctrination includes a recognized music and literature, which does not express the lived reality of any specific local or ethnic identity, but passes current everywhere. Thus in India the classical dance theatre, of which the principles were set out in the Natyashastra about two thousand years ago, is politically and culturally enshrined not as one set of dance forms among others, but as the kind of dance that is proper to the spiritual and intellectual system that is identified with India as India. In comparison with this, all other dances indigenous to the sub-continent are relegated to the status of ethnic or folk practice and either excluded from the educational system or taught as marginal or exotic.

The way this ideological pattern works in the United States today has been somewhat unselfconsciously expounded by E. D. Hirsch Jr. and his colleagues in their work on "cultural literacy": there are a lot of things, they point out, that all Americans need to know before they can read and understand a newspaper or take part in a polite conversation, and without which they cannot take part effectively in public life but are confined to relatively menial employment in a narrow sphere. What moves me to call Hirsch's exposition "unselfconscious" is that he writes as if the wider sphere into which cultural literacy is the initiation were an intrinsically superior reality, rather than merely what it more straightforwardly is, a domain of public mobility and potential power of which the public schools are official doorkeepers.

Empire is commonly presented in terms of imperialism, a Hobbesian "restless desire of power after power" in which strong political organizations seek to dominate and incorporate others. In these terms, empire is defined by relations of dominance and exploitation between peoples of grossly unequal power who remain essentially separate from each other, unified at best by the bureaucratic control of the dominant group. "High" arts are accordingly taken to be the arts of the dominant ethnic group, their prestige simply manifesting the oppressive power of that group. My argument here is that these relations of domination, which have so preoccupied us lately, are no more significant than the internal structure of an empire or a civilization as an information system, a system of
educational and cultural centralization that articulates the actual social functioning of
the empire as such and in which racial and ethnic differentiation play no essential part.

In an imperial civilization, the high art is the art that is integral to the educational
system that feeds and defines the mandarinate, the body of those whose common
schooling makes them eligible to participate in public affairs, even though that art may
itself not be promoted formally by the educational institutions. It should be obvious that
such an educational system cannot be open to all members of an ethnically dominant
group as such, and cannot accordingly be identified with the artistic expression of that
group; while the whole point of the educational system is that it is open to the talents of
anyone, of whatever ethnic background, within the imperial boundaries, who by the
same token form the proper public for the high arts of the empire and may take part in
their practice.

The association of High Art with the mandarinate is clearly visible in Hume's 1759
essay "On the Standard of Taste." The standard, he tells us, is the consensus of the best
judges. But when we look closely at who these authoritative judges are, they turn out to
be people who have precisely the sympathetic sensitivity, scrupulous impartiality, and
discriminating care that we look for in people who are to take responsible positions in law
or bureaucracy. The close connection between high art and the educational system also
appears in Hume's essay, though less explicitly. The canonical works whose admitted
excellence testifies to the durability of the alleged standard are such as the Iliad, which
had been the staple of the schools of ancient Greece, the Aeneid of Virgil, which
permanently acquired similar standing in Roman schools in its author's lifetime, and the
handful of Athenian tragedies selected and edited for school use by the educational
bureaucracy of Byzantium. Quite generally, it seems, the high arts around which the
concept of the fine arts was being articulated in Hume's day were not in the first instance
those preferred by the artistically creative community or by wielders of the central
political power, but those selected and endorsed by the educational system that gave the
civilization in question a semblance of intellectual coherence and a common set of
methods and references to orient itself by. And a key point for my argument here is that
such systems, whatever the actual forces that shape them, do purport to be systems of
education, not of indoctrination, and accordingly to discover rather than to decree the
value of what they teach.

In the days of Hume and Kant, European civilization was strongly unified by its
educational system, centred on the international university network of Christendom
through which ideas and teachers circulated. In the next century, the growth of the exact
sciences and the conscious development of critical standards called "the Enlighten-
ment" caused that network to begin its expansion into the articulation of something like
a world system, linked to a shadowy order that has some of the features of a world cultural
empire. Modern science, and to a lesser extent modern technology, though inseparable
from an elaborate educational system with its associated disciplines of thought and
procedure, are no longer closely linked to any living culture other than their own. And
this moving out into the world is accompanied by a comparable movement in the arts;
the winner of a piano competition or a ballet competition nowadays may come from
anywhere in the world. But though the worldwide authority of science rests on
theoretical coherence and experimental confirmation, the international spread of art
forms rooted in European traditions has no visible ground other than the internal
cohesion of the educational system that is centred on universities of the sort in which
science is native. High art is art that happens to be internationally institutionalized by
way of an educational system that has no competitors, because it is the only established
vehicle of the science that underpins the technology that has made itself everywhere indispensable. And the discipline of aesthetics, as it has originated and grown, is indigenous to that educational system and nowhere else. A conference in Brockport can be addressed by an aesthetician from Australia, or Russia, or Japan, or Canada, without anyone noticing the difference; the only kind of speaker who would be exotic would be one from outside the worldwide university system.

This final cultural empire is what Hegel’s absolute idealism already divined. His system articulated a process whereby research science and scientific history would inevitably, by their own impetus, make all their competitors irrelevant, so that a world cultural community would attain unassailable authority. The imaginative expression of this complex spiritual unity would be world art; it was the task of the philosophy of art to articulate this development and establish the hierarchy of fine art within the hierarchy of the manifestations of mind. At least, that would have been its task, if Hegel had not kindly carried it out already.

Today’s international order, then, consists of a sort of super-imperial hierarchy superimposed on or superseding all other imperial systems, articulated by an international cultural and educational system that carries along with it its own high art with its own procedures and canons; and this, in the end, is what aesthetics has in view and supports. This system has received surprisingly little public attention, partly because it was obscured for a long time by Marxism and its variants, which preferred to postulate and evaluate socio-economic mechanisms that kept the system going rather than examine the actual working of the educational complex itself.

Because the significance of empire as an informational system rather than as institutionalized oppression is missed, all cultural phenomena risk being misconstrued. Such phenomena need to be understood, in the first instance, in terms of their precise relationship to the flow of information, not merely diagnosed as oppressing or oppressed. Ethnic and imperial traditions of training, practice, and reception interact in subtle ways that insistence on the brutal dualisms of power falsifies, and every artistic phenomenon will be related in its own way to the historical specifics of these interactions.

III

This discourse began by saying what a fit emblem the Sydney Opera House was of the necessity of aesthetics, as the philosophical discipline evoked by the compelling force of the values of beauty. It is now time to point to what we surely cannot have forgotten, that the actual function for which that building complex was called into existence was at least nominally to be an opera house, and actually and primarily to be a symphonic hall, the locus for public concerts of orchestral music. And it would surprise me to learn that the performances put on there were predominantly the outcome of the musical traditions and genius of Australia, any more than the works performed in the symphony hall of my own city of Toronto are predominantly Canadian. The works played and heard in such places mostly belong to the high art of the international civilization. Opera itself in its original form was not the natural flowering of a local culture, but was invented to realise the supposed ideals and methods of the most prestigious art form to which European civilization looked back, Athenian tragedy (the crucial cultural significance of which Plato and Aristotle had in their separate ways emphasized, and thus ensured for it a permanent place in the educational consciousness of the successor civilization). In its development, opera became a sort of potlatch, the extravagant art in which civic or regal pride could be invested, and in which the lack of any specifically local character is a point
of honor. Instrumental music, as principally exemplified by Beethoven, became inseparable from the new nineteenth-century metropolitan institution of the subscription concert, the cultural shrine for the new class of educated middle-class functionaries whose informed taste stood for their commitment to the national and international order as opposed to the festivities of their fellow townspeople. The Sydney Opera House, then, stands not only for the power of beauty, but for the implicit authority of the fine arts and the world-wide cultural order that has fallen heir to the unique civilization in which they were indigenous. This order and its authority are manifested in much the same way wherever in the world there are the educational institutions that appear to be necessary for the maintenance of the science and technology on which the economic fabric of our world depends.

We are so used to the worldwide hegemony of a single body of high art practice, with a sharply distinctive and historically conditioned identity of its own, that we tend to lose sight of how very odd the situation is. The oddity is comparable to that of the worldwide propagation of the eccentricities of the world religions. However, there is nothing odd about oddity. A study of natural history is enough to remind us that the actualities of the world we live in are nothing if not weird. Things have happened as they happen to have happened as a result of the forces that happened to impinge and prevail, and resist further explication. But in addition to this oddity two other things need to be noted: first, that the compelling power of beauty is experienced as inhering in the actual objects chosen by whatever process it is, so that the prestige of what has prestige seems self-evidently self-justifying; and second, that the art institutionalized in the super-imperial international order has no effectual rival.

In its freedom from effective competition, this high art has inherited the authority claimed by the 18th-century European Enlightenment, of which the project was precisely to substitute defensible standards for mere local preferences in all areas of cultural and spiritual activity. The Enlightenment as it conceived itself admitted no competitor or rival, because to accept the very idea of such rivalry was to concede that there was a competition, and to be in a competition is to accept that there are standards of success; and it was this acceptance itself that was the central theme of the Enlightenment. In principle, the Enlightenment was to be the hegemony of reason, the first and only fully self-correcting system of theory and taste.

What aesthetics and the philosophy of art relied on was the very intelligibility of this idea. It never mattered how many mistakes were made, how many crazy projects formed and abandoned. What mattered was that mistakes were mistakes. In principle, mistakes can always be discovered, and when they are discovered they can be corrected. As for the oddness and arbitrariness of the cultural phenomena and preferences that actually flourished as the art of this paramount civilization, that did not matter either, insofar as the educational system remained integral and, within it, prowess could be achieved and the compelling power of beauty could actually be experienced, in appropriate ways on appropriate occasions, by those whom the education adequately prepared.

IV

A suitable title for what I have said so far would have been “Aesthetics and Empire.” But I actually called it “Aesthetics and the End of Civilization.” At the very moment of their decisive triumph, the high arts of the imperially dominant civilization and the entrenched educational system that supports them, are being called into question. More seriously, the idea of civilization itself is losing its hold on us. It is being challenged on
many sides, and simply vanishing from sight on others; and when that idea goes the justifying mission of aesthetics, and aesthetics itself as we have known it, go with it.

We all know that the pretended universality of the overarching civilization itself, with its educational support system, is widely perceived to be a sham, at best contaminated by and at worst a mask for the diverse systems of oppression that Marxists, feminists, spokespeople for indigenous minorities, and other agents of demystification have laid embarrassingly bare. What is beginning to make the very idea of civilization generally invisible, or even unintelligible, is something quite different. It involves the rise to dominance of the electronic media, with their tendency to eliminate structure. It is through the electronic media that the public world nowadays reaches us in the first instance, and those media, especially television, work through a democracy of appearances. Everything that appears through them is necessarily shown as equally present, immediate and actual—just as a photograph taken by an inexperienced or incautious photographer turns out to be a picture, not of what interested the photographer, but indifferently of everything within the photo frame. A judicial verdict in a criminal case looks and sounds on television no different from a mere expression of arbitrary opinion; structure and hierarchy may be asserted, but the assertion remains just an assertion alongside the data to which it relates, and may always be countered by a denial; and the denial, because it is equally audible and visible, has equal weight. And these destructuring media are necessarily coextensive with the advanced technology which gives the international super-empire of the world educational system its effective edge.

An exemplary event took place in 1987 at Stanford University. It was proposed to eliminate the introductory course in “Western Civilization,” which was compulsory for first-year students, in favor of a course in “Culture, Ideas, and Values.” To quote a recent advocate of this reform, “the aim of CIV [the proposed new course] was, and is, to broaden the concept of what constitutes ‘valid’ intellectual history by including non-Western as well as Western perspectives on culture, society, history, literature and so on. Such a change necessarily involves a challenge to the formerly unquestioned dominance of the predominantly white, male, upper-class contributors to the Western intellectual tradition.”10 The advocate, we observe, does not challenge the old course’s interpretation of western civilization, but ignores it altogether. A course on the basics of the worldwide educational and cultural structure, the structure on which Stanford University depends for its meaningful existence, and without which the audience the advocate is addressing could not exist, is to be jettisoned in favor of a mass of material whose only stated merit is that it has no structural connection with that system. What this advocacy represents is the world of disconnected appearances that the electronic media present, not the practical world in which policies can be framed and put into effect.

The advocates of the new Stanford program could have mounted a critique free of this terrifying insouciance, and I have no doubt that in the deliberative bodies concerned they did. Mere historical association with the educational and cultural system by which science and the intellectual world are sustained has no doubt lent a spurious authority to pernicious prejudices and socially injurious judgments such as the advocate I quoted has in the forefront of his mind. The new course may well be more valuable to its victims than the old, and I have no answer for the historians who point out the dubious origins of such ideological indoctrination.11 What is disconcerting in this particular piece of advocacy is the absence of any suspicion that there might be such a thing as a civilization, outside of which the formation of the advocate and the terms of his advocacy are unthinkable.12

The sense of a civilization that articulates the public world of thought and culture has,
it seems, been undermined. But even where its existence is recognized the superimperial civilization is met with a hostility that is accompanied by, and to some extent based on, a rejection of the idea of enlightenment and the older idea of civilization itself.

What is thus rejected, more or less articulately, is what is perceived as a misdirected holism and a spurious universalism. The idea of a universal research-based science is repudiated in favour of an empirical wisdom to be based directly on life as experienced by those who live it, with the accretions of their local lore; intrusive ecological and medical engineering, aimed at specific results and effects without regard to their eventual overall outcome, are denounced in the name of skills and remedies discovered and used within a familiar working context. The underlying perception is that planned and researched order, on a scale that goes beyond the control of a face-to-face community, simply generates a more widespread disorder; and this disorder cannot be controlled or mitigated, because it could be counteracted only by an even more massive and hence necessarily more destructive intrusion. So the very idea of a worldwide civilization within which humanity remodels itself into the truly rational animal through a universal science-based education—everything from Socrates to UNESCO, in fact—is repudiated as inevitably leading to something that, ironically, only our new world-wide information networks enable us to foresee: irreversible, world-wide, demographic and ecological disaster. The few humans who live through the incipient catastrophe, if any do, will have to return to something like the conditions of the Bronze Age, or construct some new social order of comparable modesty. Meanwhile, “enlightenment” has become a term of abuse, standing for the intrusion of heartless reasoning into areas where observant and sensitive experience should be our only guides.

With the dissolution of the idea of civilization must also disappear the idea of high art, the unique symbolic order of imaginative achievement; and when the idea of high art loses its authority aesthetics as a discipline loses its original reason for being. That has no practical consequences for university professors of aesthetics or their students, of course, because aesthetics is no less integral to the universal educational order than the fine arts themselves, so that its institutional identity and its principal subject matter stand or fall together. The discipline of aesthetics exists only so long as the educational order exists, and while that order exists the high arts are sustained. All that has changed is the authority of the order to which the fine arts belong and, hence, the claim of aesthetics as we have known it to an important place in the ideal order of humane learning and inquiry.

As the idea of civilization and the concomitant idea of high art lose their hold, we can expect aesthetics to be effectively displaced by other disciplines or modes of discourse. And so it has been. One of these successors is semiotics, the general study of systems of codes and variously language-like systems of meaning by which human culture and the interactions of social animals are articulated. To this study, it is unimportant whether the phenomena under study pertain to art or to authoritative hegemonies of practice or not. Another mode of postaesthetic discourse is what goes under the name of deconstruction, a set of strategic approaches designed to destroy the oppressive authority of systems of thought and practice by unravelling them at the edges, showing how they necessarily fail to possess the autonomy on which they rely, and thereby allowing full scope to the indeterminate ways in which living intelligences actually move. A third mode of discourse, overlapping these, is what is called “literary theory” or simply “theory,” which is based on the realization that when the hegemony of supposedly authoritative systems is broken the way is open for the free play of interpretative systems that need no further justification than the light they are felt to shed on a certain range of phenomena.
Of course, these fashionable modes of discourse, and others like them, flourish only within the educational establishment and have no audience outside it, and one becomes tired of repeating that deconstruction would lose its edge if there were no powerful and persuasive structures to direct it against. But flourish they do, and they do so because of a genuine loss of inner conviction in the sorts of structure that art and civilization represent. And it is time we reminded ourselves how deeply this loss of conviction is involved with the basic critique of feminism, the suggestion that the idea of civilization with all its interlocking hierarchies, including arts organizations and the international educational system on which civilization most directly depends, does not after all represent the best hope for humanity. It stands rather for the drives to domination and competition proper only to the behavior patterns of idle masculinity, to be stripped of privilege if not destroyed as the feminine half of humanity regains the fulfillment of which it has so long been deprived.

Are we to conclude from all this that aesthetics today is at the worst a dead duck, or, at the best, flapping like Minerva’s owl through a deepening twilight? Hardly. Aesthetics remains an integral part of philosophy, and philosophy is not to be identified with its fashions. Whatever professional departments of philosophy may or may not be doing, philosophy is defined by the breadth of its scope and the depth of its critique, simply because any mode of inquiry that established a broader scope or a greater penetration would ipso facto be recognized as philosophy; it is the function of the concept of philosophy to ensure precisely that. Philosophy must include within its scope the recognizable domains of human value and the distinctive deployments of human reason; neither the compelling power of aesthetic value nor the free development of the resources of imaginative creation and communication can be eliminated from the map of mind, and aesthetics as the critique and explication of that domain of thought therefore cannot be eliminated either—though it certainly may be neglected, or cultivated trivially or ineffectively. Aesthetics may indeed owe its institutional viability, with its familiar forms and preoccupations, to the ideologies of civilization and high art as well as to the super-imperial educational hegemony of the university world; but it does not depend on them for the validation of its inquiries. The compelling force of beauty retains all the power it ever had; the traditions and disciplines of the fine arts and their ancillary practices continue to absorb all the devotion and skill they ever did, and are, as indisputably as ever, a distinctive and significant domain of human reason; and the changing procedures of critical discourse continue to display a logic and a rhetoric that call for analysis. And, to speak the truth, if we divert our attention from the sort of loose talk we subject ourselves to in the academy, the institutions of civilization and art and education remain solidly in place, much as our distraught governments would like to cut them down to size.

It is indeed at the very moment of its global triumph that the super-imperial order of scientific and technological civilization, together with the idea of civilization itself, is called into question. And this is no coincidence. It is the revelation of its power that makes its dangers plain. It was when its dreams were impotent that the lure of their fulfillment seemed irresistible. This being so, what we should look for is probably not the death of civilization but an unstable condition in which a universal educational and cultural system and its regional alternatives coexist in various conditions of rivalry and harmony.¹¹

But after all, when we wrench our minds free from the intellectual habits we have formed in seminars and examination halls and consider the actual shapes of the lives we live and the situations we live them in, it may strike us that “civilization” cannot
meaningfully be said to die or to live. The word fails to pick out any concrete and substantial reality. Meanwhile, whatever the destiny of aesthetics may be, and whatever may come of the world we live in, there is no difficulty in locating a lot of specific and practicable projects that we can spend time on with interest and excitement, and for many of these projects the word “aesthetics” continues to afford the most suitable name.

Notes

A version of this paper was presented at the inaugural meeting of the Australia and New Zealand Association for Literature and Aesthetics on June 10, 1993.


Much of the language Kant uses of the sense of duty in the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals is borrowed from what is said of “beauty” in the classical philosophy with which Kant and his readers were thoroughly familiar. Kant’s aesthetics and his ethics divide the classical discourse on beauty between them, though neither German nor English has a word like the Greek kalon that is idiomatic in both contexts.


This reduction of aesthetics to the theory of criticism is not a turning away from Kant and Baumgarten, but maintains the stance of the British critique of taste, which flourished throughout the eighteenth century and is most familiarly exemplified by David Hume’s essay on “The Standard of Taste” (Four Dissertations (London: A. Millar, 1757).


It is also true that gamelan groups may be formed in the United States. Information transmission in an empire is not a one-way affair. Readers are invited to consult their own judgment and experience to see how far the hegemony of an international system of high-art practice prevails and how it operates.


Carol S. Gruber argues that all these “Western Civilization” courses stem from “war issues” courses introduced during World War I, when United States universities were largely transformed from institutes of learning into parts of the war machine. The aim was not to initiate students into the basics.
of the civilization to which we all belong, but to emphasize the anti-German elements in United States ideology. "After the war was over, the theme of absolute good versus absolute evil was retained by simply putting the Bolshevik in place of the Hun as the menace to democracy everywhere." The prototype of compulsory "western civilization" courses was introduced at Columbia in 1919, and promoted as a bulwark against radicalism (Carol S. Gruber, Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of the Higher Learning in America (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975; the quotation is from page 241).

A recent television program [in the series Dancing] on a multicultural dance festival in Los Angeles shed some light on the CIV ideology. Los Angeles was presented as a microcosm of the world, with its numerous national groups from all over the world. The dance festival was to be a meeting place for ethnicities, as Southern California in effect is—and as its universities should be. The viewer of this program noted, however, that the festival itself was organized by Americans using the resources of the international educational and cultural network, and that the dances presented were adapted and packaged for display in this context. These brilliant displays were not interspersed with comparable examples of American dancing, but with satirical shots of the more depressing sides of Los Angeles life—cars on freeways, fast food outlets, police arrests, and so on; and an important part of the program was repeated denunciations of "the white man" by members of the dancing groups. Nothing in the program made any reference to the logistics or the organization of the festival itself. The idea of CIV seems likely to be to afford a set of similarly sanitized icons for the American counter-culture, with a comparable neglect of the institutional organization that makes such courses possible.

This assumes that the end of civilization is not in fact accompanied by a demographic and ecological catastrophe. But imminent catastrophe, though not altogether improbable, seems less than certain, since its prophets are over-inclined to discount certain obvious countervailing factors.