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Intellectual Passivity and the Aesthetic Attitude

Abstract

The intention of this essay is to show the consequences different ways of understanding, the aesthetic experience, have on the philosophy of man. The understanding of the aesthetic experience as "aisthesis" – i.e., as intrinsically receptive, passive, and based on sensation – leads to a one-dimensional vision of the human mind, and to a vision of the human being with a flattened personality. The post-Kantian analysis of the aesthetic experience developed in the twenties and thirties by, among others, Polish philosophers, is based on three characteristics of this experience: "selflessness", "contemplation", and "enclaveness". Within this framework, the aesthetic experience cannot be characterized by passivity. Rather, it appears as complex mental activity, which, besides providing pleasure, maintains the tension throughout all the mental functions and all distinct psychological divisions. The source of this activity is the focus of the aesthetic experience on values. The idea of the aesthetization of life – akin to aisthesis – means the transformation of an axiological stance into a psychological one. It means the change of the stance focused on values, norms, principles, criteria, and the justification of one's beliefs, to the stance focused on impressions, feelings, emotions, and expression.

The author's ideal is the merging of both stances. Because the stance based solely on impressions and expression without the axiological dimension is blind; while the purely axiological one without the emotional engagement – is dead.

The aim of this essay is to find the answer to the question whether there are any relationships between intellectual passivity and the aesthetic attitude.

This question arises because of reflection over the ways we experience the times we live in. Describing and qualifying contemporary everyday life as receptive and aesthetic ignores the concept of the aesthetic experience developed in philosophy and becomes a source of terminological chaos that impedes the understanding of the changes that take place in everyday life, as well as our relation to it.

Although the changes taking place in our social reality are variously assessed, their description is fairly unanimous. Different words and styles are employed to emphasize passivity or even apathy as the fundamental feature. The existential sentiments in the Poland of the 1990s were analogous to those phenomena described by sociologists and historians which had been observed in the form of feelings and impressions in the USA of the 1960s and 70s, as well as in the FRG of the 1970s and 1980s. Apathy has its etymological roots in the Greek word *apatheia*, which is translated in dictionaries as the inability to experience emotions, lack of interest, insensitivity and a sense of numbness. Sometimes, such descriptions are supplemented with the notions of “depression” and “melancholy.” However, in order to avoid slipping into the medical meaning of these terms, I shall stick to the notion of “intellectual passivity.” By this term I understand a sense of lack of a cognitive passion, deprivation of broader interests, stereotyping of thinking, as well as the inability to discern, qualify and judge.

In today’s Poland – claims Ryszard Przybylski – which has sunk into a spiritual collapse, our “bookshops” are fortunately not threatened by Omar. However, Vain Time has had it in for the essential books from the past and present. He is just as cruel and ruthless as the broken society which was led, by a terrible mistake, to believe that it can form a community without the knowledge of its ancestors [...]. Therefore, I flee to the oasis of beautiful texts, as is usually the case with people who have been oppressed by the vulgarity of contemporary social life.¹

This approach is fostered by the general atmosphere of the culture in which we have come to live. It has ceased to be a demanding culture and has become – if I may say so – a formation that lulls any autonomous creative effort. The most peculiar forms of postmodernism that are now surfacing (let us pass over the multitude of this term’s meanings), combined with subjectivism and a moral arbitrariness weaken the intellectual condition of contemporaneity.²

These two and many more opinions draw our attention to and underline the following characteristic features of our times: lack of respect for tradition, spiritual collapse, dulling of individual creative effort, weakening of intellectual condition, moral arbitrariness and a lack of ethical energy. “Passivity” is thus distinguished as the primary feature and is accompanied by the severance with the past.

Intellectual passivity is sometimes associated with the so-called mass-man and his culture. Ortega y Gasset noticed the changing social role of the “mass-man” in the 1950s. He contrasted him with the “select man” and thus characterized the two: “select man is not the petulant person who thinks himself superior to the rest, but the man who demands more of himself than the rest, even though he may not fulfil in his person those

¹ Ryszard Przybylski, *Pustelnicy i demony* (Kraków: Żnak, 1994), 5.

² Jan Sochoń, “Komentujemy dzieła filozoficzne,” *Nowe Książki* 1 (1995): 21.

higher exigencies. For there is no doubt that the most radical division that it is possible to make of humanity is that which splits it into two classes of creatures: those who make great demands on themselves, piling up difficulties and duties; and those who demand nothing special of themselves, but for whom to live is to be at every moment what they already are, without imposing on themselves any effort towards perfection; mere buoys that float on the waves.”³

According to Ortega y Gasset, the change in the participation of the mass-man and his role in culture manifests itself in a twofold manner:

1. “Mass-man” has now at his disposal a whole spectrum of possibilities which once were at the disposal of the elite minority only.
2. “[...] these masses have at the same time shown themselves indocile to the minorities – they do not obey them, follow them, or respect them; on the contrary, they push them aside and supplant them.”⁴

This description can be complemented with a third point that we can draw from cultural studies, i.e. the claim that elite culture, the so-called “high culture”, tries to win the favour of the masses and enters a dialogue with them, drawing from there motifs for its creativity, so as to satisfy the tastes of the masses. The elites aspire to the masses. It is no longer the mass art that popularizes the elite art, but the other way round – the mass-man sets all the standards, which is emphasized by Stefan Morawski in his works on postmodernism. “Postmodernism is destructive, because it tries to put high art within the frames of popular culture; it gravitates towards a symbiosis with mass culture.”⁵

Postmodernism resigns from the gravity of the mission – from the search for meaning. It plays with everything. It is, in the understanding of Ortega y Gasset, a “cocksure dandy”, a favourite who is allowed to do everything. The postmodernist transformation of the social structure can be treated as the next step, the stage that follows the “revolt of the masses.”⁶

Gerhard Schulze, who has been describing the changes in everyday life that took place in Germany from the end of the Second World War to the 1990s, distinguishes two types of activity: “exerting influence” and “choosing.”⁷ “Exerting influence” is the production of possibilities, while “choosing” is their utilization. These two terms do not correspond to the concepts of “production” and “consumption”, because they are not limited to the economic aspect. They rather try to encompass the

³ Juan Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*. Online. <http://morfoze.files.wordpress.com/2009/05/ortega-y-gasset-the-revolt-of-the-masses.pdf>, p. 3. (Accessed on 10 June, 2009)

⁴ Ibid., 6–7.

⁵ Stefan Morawski, “W mrokach postmodernizmu. Rozmyślania rekolekcyjne,” in *Dokąd zmierza współczesna humanistyka*, ed. Teresa Kostyrko (IK, 1994), 16 ff.

⁶ I refer here to the title of the book by Ortega y Gasset.

⁷ Cf. Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft. Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt/New York, 1992).

psycho-social area of attitudes and patterns of thinking which dominate in everyday life. According to him, the most general characteristic of the changes in the social reality is the passage from the active to the passive position. Paradoxically, this change is related to the “expansion of possibilities”, i.e. the increase of the production of goods on the one hand and the enhancement of assimilative possibilities on the other. The expansion of possibilities also includes the ego itself. “Aided by the hordes of advisors and therapists who have been multiplying in the 1970s, people are more and more intensively preoccupied with being someone else,” writes Schulze.⁸ Subjectivity and orientation towards sensations mark the boundaries of interest and engagement. In the 1970s and 1980s, the chief task of culture professionals was to draw people out of passivity, activate them and stimulate their cooperation. “Passive TV consumer,” “lethargic holiday-maker” and the lack of “cultural independence” were all a part of the phenomenon that had to be changed. However, in the second part of the 1980s and in the 1990s the missionary tendencies disappeared, along with any interest in them. Comparing oneself to the others, ambition, envy and competition are perceived as stressful, which leads to the weakening of emotional bonds (both negative and positive) between various social groups. The Don Juan type of a personality pattern is becoming more and more common – people are focusing on individual emotions and their intensification. Change becomes a rule and in turn, paradoxically, something repeatable and continuous. Finally it becomes monotonous or boring as well and we no longer notice it or react to in any way. Uncertainty, disillusionment and the diminution of the capability to feel are the results of the orientation towards sensation (*Erlebnis*).

Christopher Lasch noticed analogous characteristics in the American society of the late 1970s, although he refers to different materials than Schulze. He is less concerned with economic and sociological sources. Instead, he focuses on psychiatric and literature-related ones. Still, the image of the social personality of the Americans in the 1970s contains very many colours similar to the ones from the portrait of the German social personality of the 1980s. Although it appears for different reasons, narcissism and its effects – emptiness, anxiety and apathy – would be one of the common traits.

After the political turmoil of the sixties, Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating healthy food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the East, jogging, learning how to “relate” [...]. Harmless in themselves, these pursuits, elevated to a program and wrapped in the rhetoric of authenticity and awareness, signify a retreat from politics

⁸ Gerhard Schulze, *Metamorfozy rzeczywistości społecznej od lat 50-tych* (Warszawa: Goethe Institut, 1994), 17.

and repudiation of the recent past.⁹ The ideology of personal growth, superficially optimistic, radiates a profound despair and resignation. It is the faith of those without faith.¹⁰

Authors who describe the transformations of the social personality under the term “postmodernism” do not limit themselves to a particular country, but give their descriptions a universal character. Their statements also contain an image of passivity and apathy, which would be a paradoxical consequence of the excess of stimuli and possibilities, as well as of the lack of internal certainty. “I dream of a simpler world,” writes Bauman, “a more explicit one that could be grasped with a single glance and measured with a single measure. The longing for a «great simplification» is a typically postmodern version of melancholy which we are familiar with since ages [...] this common ailment of the postmodern reality.”¹¹

It is constantly underlined that the element which influences the shape of human personality is the increasing role of the media in the production, circulation and consumption of cultural goods. The “postmodern man” is a product of the mass-media – he is a mass-man.

However, the identification of the postmodern personality with a mass personality obscures the bigger picture, because it eliminates the “select man” from the field of observation, or suggests that he has transformed into a mass-man, which after all seems unlikely. The description of changes which take place in the more or less autonomous fields of culture, e.g. religion, art, science and literature would imply something contrary, namely the fact that the “select man” has become more refined, self-conscious and, it might be claimed, heroic, as he has to make his decisions alone. Thus, his problem would not lay in the intellectual passivity, but rather in the fact that he is intellectually overactive, which is the source of the longing for the above-mentioned “great simplification” – passivity. This longing is different from being passive. Bauman’s description would therefore relate to the problems of Gasset’s “select man” rather than to the mass-man. Although they share some characteristic features in the postmodern era, it is not fair to identify them and fail to see the things that differ them from each other.

How does it happen then that the mass-media actively shape human personality? Is it possible to resist this influence?

It is a commonly held opinion that the mass-media adapt to the tastes of an average person. Still, the taste of an average person is not fully shaped and cannot be perfectly diagnosed. Although some of its features are widely known, like the fondness for emotional and sensual scenes which are clear and straightforward, the broadcasting of programmes based on these qualities not only satisfies the tastes of most viewers, but also reinforces and shapes them. It happens so, because, among other things,

⁹ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York, 1991), 4–5.

¹⁰ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism* (London, 1980), 103.

¹¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Dwa szkice o moralności ponowoczesnej* (IK, 1994), 38.

the mass viewer has not developed the “resistance to art”¹² and the publicly transmitted content functions for him as a pattern that is to be followed.

It remains a mystery why it happens so¹³, although the phenomenon itself and its role in social life have been discovered already in biblical times. One only needs to recall the Gospel according to Saint Mark: “[a]nd whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea.”¹⁴ “Offend” means in this context no less than to gain influence through imitation which is possible when the resistance mechanism is absent. The attitude of resistance cannot be understood as the lack of sensitivity. On the contrary, the necessity of resistance is meaningful only when there is a possibility of seduction. The tension between sensibility and resistance was aptly expressed by Baudelaire: “But if, without being entranced, / Your eye can plunge in the abyss, / Read me, to learn to love me.”¹⁵ Mass-man is not capable of such strains of mind. The most general rule that governs his behaviour is the rule of comfort¹⁶ – both material and psychic. This is also the rule that the mass-media refer to and at the same time reinforce.

Martin Esselin¹⁷ who has analyzed the structure of the television transmission claims that the television does not only present the real world, but also transforms it. According to Esselin, reality changes in such a way as to fit the demands of television, i.e. to draw the viewers’ attention. At the root of this behaviour lies an axiological thesis that being in television is more important than being in reality. What is more, being in television is true being, while being in reality is not being at all. From here there is just one step to the claim that television is reality.

The blurred sense of reality which is generated by a television broadcast facilitates the formation of other psychic features which are listed among the characteristics of people living during the postmodern transformations. Jean Baudrillard groups them all under such terms as “disappearance” or “lack.” The disappearance of the boundary between reality and its image also facilitates other disappearances, e.g. of memory (amputation of the past and tradition which shakes the sense of identity), of the sense of necessity (which results in the lack of gravity, as well as the responsibility for one’s deeds and the functioning of closer and distant society) and of standards (which implies the inability to improve). Finally, there is the

¹² Cf. Mieczysław Porębski, *Granica współczesności. Ze studiów nad kształtowaniem się poglądów artystycznych XX w.* (Wrocław, 1965).

¹³ Cf. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (SAGE, 1991). Chapter 5: “The Aestheticization of Everyday Life”.

¹⁴ Mark, 9:42, *King James Version of the Holy Bible*. Online: <http://ebible.org/bible/kjv/>. (Accessed on 10 June, 2009).

¹⁵ Charles Baudelaire, “Epigraph for a Condemned Book.” trans. William Aggeler, in: *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Online: http://justcheckingonall.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/baudelaire-fleurs_du_mal.pdf, 442. (Accessed on 10 June, 2009).

¹⁶ Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writing* (Cambridge, 1988).

¹⁷ Cf. Martin Esselin, *The Age of Television* (San Francisco, 1982).

inability to concentrate which runs parallel to all of the above-mentioned problems.

What features of the television broadcast are “responsible” for the changes in human personality, as described above?

According to Esselin, one of the features of the television broadcast which can be said to bear some responsibility for the changes in the psyche is the “dramatic means of communication.” The phenomena shown in television look real. Still, as long as they are irreversible in reality, they can be rewound in television. Every situation can be repeated many times; evil deeds or simple frustration can be wiped out or rearranged. Perhaps it satisfies the childish desire for omnipotence. Such an attitude is generalized and transferred back onto the reality that is outside television, the consequence of which might manifest in the above-mentioned ways of experiencing.

Another feature which fosters the emergence of such ways of reacting is the “sandwiching” of the news items which are served to the viewer in neat slices of fictional stories. Their common feature is repeatability – one can watch them over and over, more than ten times, because they exist only as images and appearances. An unqualified viewer sometimes does not need more than a couple of common features in order to identify two phenomena – in this case the real news with fictional stories. Let us add an observation of our own – the mass nature of the images of disaster and harm shown in television makes us grow accustomed to them, neutralizes moral sensitivity and dulls the attitude of engagement.

These personality changes are often called the aestheticization of life or aestheticism. These notions do not refer to the idea of beauty and aesthetic values, but rather to the psychological aesthetics – the area of aesthetic research which is primarily preoccupied with the aesthetic experience in its creative and receptive form. Still, as reflection on the reception or creativity in aesthetics is always combined with a consideration of aesthetic values – since it is always the creation or reception of beauty, charm or ugliness – the postmodern aestheticism is focused on reception alone. Creativity and value both disappear.

The notion of aesthetics is employed in this essay in its pre-aesthetic meaning, along the lines of Baumgarten’s understanding of it as the knowledge of sensual sensations. The aestheticization of life would equal the exchange of attitudes oriented towards values, norms, rules, criteria and justification of assessments, for those which emphasize sensations, feelings, experiences, emotions and expression. It signals a move from the axiological domain to psychology, from the rational and logical approach to a sensual and emotional one.

Is aestheticization, understood in this way, the same thing as aesthetic experience? Do they share any features?

Psychological research in the area of aesthetics tries to determine the psychological conditions and mechanisms that lie at root of the aesthetic experience. Another aim is to grasp those which are specific and make it possible to discern the aesthetic experience from others. The very fact

that such research is taking place contradicts the postmodernist attitude, because it is a search for the boundary between that which is aesthetic and that which is not, which entails the reinforcing of that boundary. It is a postmodernist tendency to overcome boundaries, or at least encroach on them. It should not come as a surprise, since aesthetics as a separate discipline is the creation of enlightenment and modernism. The effects of these pursuits may seem analogous to postmodern experiences. Still, it is an illusory track.

Let us consider four crucial terms:

1. **Disinterestedness** – this term was introduced by Kant. He described it as the lack of interest in the real existence of the object that we consider aesthetically. “Now when the question is if a thing is beautiful, we do not want to know whether anything depends or can depend on the existence of the thing either for myself or for any one else, but how we judge it by mere observation (intuition or reflection).” Further on, he states that “[w]e must not be in the least prejudiced in favour of the existence of the things, but be quite indifferent in this respect, in order to play the judge in things of taste.”¹⁸
2. **Contemplation** – a feature also noticed by Kant and analyzed by Polish aestheticians in the inter-war period. Contemplation is disinterested (in the above sense) fondness for the appearance, without the wish of altering it. Władysław Tatarkiewicz claims that experiences are aesthetic, because “[...] we have in front of us the object, when we look at it, when we perceive it, when we contemplate it. Looking alone brings us joy and instils a fondness for the perceived object.”¹⁹ Henryk Elzenberg claims that “by contemplation I understand a certain prolonged perception, an act during which we no longer penetrate the object cognitively, but retain in our field of consciousness those elements and features that we have previously recognized.” He adds that contemplation is also “the experiencing of all those emotional states which have awoken within us and develop as we contemplate the object, owing to the fact that we do so.” Finally, he remarks that “contemplation is one of the natural and intentional attitudes that people assume when confronted with a valuable object.”²⁰ To complete this picture, let us also quote the views of Jakub Segal and Wallis. The former places contemplation at the heart of aesthetic experience and identifies it with “a passive, complete surrendering to the sensations and sensations only.”²¹ Wallis speaks of an aesthetic use in which contemplation has great importance, but is not the only element:

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*. trans. J.H. Bernard, online: http://files.libertyfund.org/files/1217/Kant_0318_EBk_v4.pdf, 56. (Accessed on 10 June, 2009).

¹⁹ Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *Droga przez estetykę* (Warszawa: PWN, 1972), 80.

²⁰ Henryk Elzenberg, *Wartość i człowiek. Rozprawy z humanistyki i filozofii* (Toruń, 1966), 20.

²¹ Jakub Segal, “O charakterze psychologicznym zasadniczych zagadnień estetyki,” *Przegląd Filozoficzny* (1991), 374.

[...] when looking at a landscape or picture, when listening to music, reading a novel, or watching a play in theatre we focus all our attention, concentrating entirely on the object of our perception. We plunge into it, sink in it and are lost in it. This object completely fills our field of consciousness [...] [so that] we are a purely experiencing subject.²²

3. Insularity – “Every sensation is separate and insular in a twofold way [...] a) it does not refer to other aesthetic experiences and b) it breaks the flow of our daily life.”²³ Insularity is closely connected with a feature that Ossowski called “living the moment.” Both features underline the isolating character of the aesthetic experience. Insularity is isolation in space, while living the moment is an isolation in time.

Aesthetic experiences can be treated in many respects in the same way as the so-called ludic experiences [...] [since] in all kinds of play and in all aesthetic contemplation there is a certain profound common denominator which may be the source of disinterestedness that is connected with those states: in all of these cases we live the moment [...] we cherish the present regardless of what is going to happen in the future. These are actions and experiences which draw us by themselves and form something like holes in the continuity of our serious life, because serious life is about looking into the future.²⁴

A very interesting thought was also expressed by Stefan Baley:

[a] truly aesthetic attitude definitely demands that the one who adopts it shall split in two. It is necessary that one part of his psyche should enter into the given object and stick to it somehow, while the other part remains free and is not actively engaged in this process, contemplating only its form and content. In order to experience something aesthetically, one should allow himself a certain freedom for a disinterested perception, as if stepping aside and outside.²⁵

The four above-mentioned features of the aesthetic experience: disinterestedness, contemplation, insularity and living the moment can serve as the basis for defining the passivity and aestheticism of postmodern mass-man.

Would it be justified and to what extent? Does passivity imply the aestheticization of life? It might seem so: contemplation, disinterestedness and isolation can be associated with passivity, for they define inner sensations and behaviour – not a political, economic or even social type of activity. Still, inner sensations and behaviour cannot be considered passive. Treating inner life as *ex definitione* passive can be partially responsible for the shape of the mass-man, especially for his passivity, that is the lack of developed psychological mechanisms which enable to react aesthetically and build resistance to the luring charm of images and words.

²² Mieczysław Wallis, “O doznaniu estetycznym,” in: *Przeżycie i wartość* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1968), 238.

²³ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁴ Stanisław Ossowski, *U podstaw estetyki* (Warszawa: PWN, 1958), 271–272.

²⁵ Stefan Baley, *Psychologia wieku dojrzewania* (Warszawa, 1931), 227–228.

Is passivity an essential element of the aesthetic experience? Apart from Segal, who emphasizes the passive process of giving in to sensations, no one treats passivity as an important element of the aesthetic experience. On the contrary – it is underlined that the psychic process of the aesthetic experience is complicated, multi-layered and dynamic. Roman Ingarden puts it in this way: “aesthetic experience is a very active phase of life. Only in some moments there is place in it for a purely receptive attitude.”²⁶

Leopold Blaustein expresses a similar idea to that of Ingarden. He does not doubt that the aesthetic experience demands from us intense spiritual effort. He writes that

[...] the one who experiences aesthetically is active and actively influences the constitution of the object. What he sees and hears does not only depend on the properties of the perceived object, but also on the way in which the process of perception develops.²⁷

Thus, already in the phase of perception we have to be active. Sometimes we change something within the object: we oversee its shortcomings or supplement some element with our fantasy, or focus our attention on one part so that the others become merely secondary. Finally, we can isolate the object from its more general background. When perceiving moving objects, e.g. in music or ballet, we have to use memory and refine our perception even more, because we have to notice not only the particular elements, but also the transitions between them.

The differentiation between the reproduced, the imaginative and the reproducing object reveals other fields of activity in the aesthetic experience, e.g.:

- 1) a change of psychic attitudes within the aesthetic frame from the reproduced to the imaginative and reproducing objects [...],
- 2) an unconscious projection of one's own body onto the imaginative objects.

Thanks to the mechanism of projection, we notice the spatial relations that exist between the elements of an imaginative object. For example, I see that in a picture, as Blaustein observes,

[...] the building in the background is higher than the one to the right. It is lower in the picture, but I take into consideration the fact that the building with turrets is more distant from me than the house to the right²⁸

– not from the “I” which is sitting and looking at the picture, but the “I” projected into the world depicted on the painting, that is the world of imaginative objects. Similar is the case with the perception of time of imaginative objects. Blaustein, however, does not define the psychological mechanism that would be responsible for the perception of imaginative time. The ability to notice the spatial and temporal autonomy of objects

²⁶ Roman Ingarden, *Przeżycie, dzieło, wartość* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1966), 12.

²⁷ Leopold Blaustein, *O ujmowaniu przedmiotów estetycznych* (Lvov, 1938), 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

in the imaginative world from the objects in the real world becomes a necessary condition for the change of attitude from the one inherent to the natural world to the one operating in the imaginative one. This defends us from illusion, as well as confusion of the natural and artistic realities. As Blaustein has it, “[...] a sense of the autonomy of the imaginative artistic reality”²⁹ does not leave us for even a slightest moment.

The identification of the imaginative world with the natural one is characteristic for childlike perception in which the mechanisms of changing attitudes do not function or have not yet been developed.

Apart from the recording and imaginative perception, Blaustein discerns a “signifying perception” which is characteristic for the processing of literary works or, as we may add, any kind of a verbal message. The basic element of the signifying perception is the “conceptual understanding of signs, expressions of speech” – the ability to understand symbols, to notice the symbolic or schematic character of representation and its beauty (simplicity, clarity and purposefulness). It is also the ability to interpret.

The direct psychological basis of the discussed aesthetic pleasure that springs from the accuracy of the schema in relation to the symbol is the schematic representation with reference to the symbolic, although it requires as its indirect psychological basis the image in which there is given the schema with reference to the symbol.³⁰

It is also interesting from our point of view to investigate the half-aesthetic feelings, such as horror or sublimity, which are evoked by the symbolized objects alone. Since these feelings occur

[...] as elements of the aesthetic experience, they are different from the feelings evoked in reality, outside their aesthetic representations.³¹

What guarantees this differentiation is – I claim – their “quasi” character, analogous to the perception of time and space. Just like other aesthetic experiences, these are not “true” feelings. The “quasi” character of aesthetic experiences – their insularity – is possible to obtain as a result of the workings of the psychological mechanism that changes the attitude from that of the natural world to that of an aesthetic one. This operation reveals the boundary between these two worlds. It can be passed, but its crossing is accompanied by a consciousness of that fact, as well as the awareness of the difference in the rules that govern these two domains.

Blaustein’s analyses clearly reveal that the aesthetic experience activates those psychic mechanisms that participate in everyday life, e.g. perception, memory, imagination and empathy. The aesthetic experience refines and specifies these faculties, bringing about new mechanisms and functions. They keep the mind active and agile, just like gymnastics keeps the body fit.

²⁹ Leopold Blaustein, *Przedstawienia schematyczne i symboliczne* (Lvov, 1931), 131.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

³¹ Mieczysław Wallis, *op. cit.*, 239.

Mieczysław Wallis does not doubt in the active character of aesthetic experiences as well:

in every aesthetic experience there are active elements; decisions, choices, [...] we want to prolong that state [...] we stand on one side or the other, [...] erotic arousal [...] sharpening of the appetite. However, when the appetite or desire grows stronger, the aesthetic experience disappears. It [...] evokes a certain surge of energy within us, some kind of a general need to act, a desire for activity and expansion.³²

All the above quoted examples of aesthetic thought had as its aim the pointing out of the fact that the aesthetic experience does not have a passive character. On the contrary, it is perceived as a complicated activity of the mind, which is a source of pleasure, but whose side effect is also the sustaining of the tension of all psychic powers, as well as the upholding of psychic divisions and distinctions whose lack flattens the perception of the world and interpersonal relations, facilitating at the same time manipulation of people.

Of course, passive elements of the aesthetic experience do exist, but they do not constitute its core. It is misleading to suggest that the mentality shaped by television is passive and that it is an indicator of aestheticism in life. I do not question the intellectual passivity of the mass-man, but I do query its relationship with aestheticism. My opinion is that a person who has had an aesthetic training is not transformed into a mass-man in the postmodern era, but rather into a refined human being.

Contemplation is understood superficially. Only one of its aspects is exploited – passivity. What is being forgotten is that it is connected with values, that it is as if a natural reaction of the human mind to value, be it an aesthetic or religious one – something that we react to with admiration, and wish that it would last in an unchanged, perfect form.

As aestheticization is becoming a more and more popular term for describing a receptive personality that is oriented towards sensations, it is commonly underestimated that in traditional aesthetics all aesthetic reception, not only contemplation, is connected with values.

The insularity of the human experience at the end of the 20th century – in the sense of our isolation from other experiences, their fragmentation and the break with the past and the future – seems to go along the line of the insularity of aesthetic experience as described by aestheticians. There also appears an important distinction whose roots lie in the separation of the psychological mechanisms that are active in both situations. In aesthetic experience, the insularity is achieved by the change of attitude from the natural to the aesthetic one. Insularity in the natural attitude might lead to the psycho-social behaviour becoming schizoid.

Finally, we can come to the question of those emotions Blaustein called half-aesthetic. I think that he would include among them also erotic

³² Ibid.

arousal, disgust and fear – all the feelings caused by the import of brutality and eroticism into film and theatre scenes. Within the aesthetic attitude, all of these feelings – as he claims – are as if “untrue.” We distance ourselves from them and are constantly aware of the imaginative separateness of the artistic reality, in other words achieving a sense of insularity. It guards us against contamination with these feelings, from being infected by them. Moreover, it facilitates the above-mentioned aesthetic resistance. If there is a lack of aesthetic insularity and the aesthetic attitude is underdeveloped, these feelings lose their half-aesthetic character. They become natural feelings, because they cannot be anything else within the frame of a natural attitude.

The natural insularity differs from the aesthetic one in the fact that it is homeless, that it does not have a place to return to – the aesthetic attitude can always return to the natural one. Perhaps in this sense Baudrillard is right in claiming that the postmodern culture (in its mass version, if we may add) is a culture of lack and the postmodern man in his mass variant is, perhaps unfortunately irreversibly, a man of a flattened personality. What remains to be addressed is the influence of postmodern transformations on the “select man” – one who has developed various mechanisms and levels of psycho-social functioning through a commune with art.

Trans. Grzegorz Czemieli