

"Aesthetics should definitely play the central role in philosophy in the 21st Century"

Hiroshi Yoshioka

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The title of this panel: "Philosophical Role of Aesthetics" seems to imply a question: "What role does aesthetics play in philosophy?" The expression "philosophical role" also seems to me to suggest another question, a question about the role of philosophy itself: "What is the role of philosophy in the world we live in?" If these questions are to be asked in the normative sense, i.e. in the traditional context of humanities as the modern western discipline, we could perhaps give an answer to the first question by saying, for example: "Aesthetics plays an important role in philosophy as the study of human sensation, and as the philosophical study of artworks and artistic expression." And to the second question about the role of philosophy: "Philosophy plays a role as basic studies about anything we find in the world," "Philosophy serves as a foundation for all the other fields of knowledge including science, moral, laws and so on." There is nothing wrong in itself with these answers, and they would serve as a starting point for anyone to start learning aesthetics or philosophy as a more or less already fixed body of knowledge.

When I received an email of invitation to this panel from Prof. Sasaki, however, I found his intention for organizing the discussion we are having now is not to ask timeless questions about philosophy or aesthetics in their traditional sense, but to raise new questions about them with strong awareness that our contemporary world is experiencing unprecedented radical changes. I share his feeling, not only in a purely theoretical sense, but also in my actual experience in my professional life. Just take an example of academic institutions which I suppose many of us here belong to. Universities and colleges in many parts of the world are going through radical reforms in terms of the re-organization of departments, updating of names for the research fields, in order to catch up with rapid development of technology, to meet economic and political requirements of the globalizing society, and to attract more students to secure the finance. In Japan for the past two decades, these changes have given really serious and negative impacts on the field of humanities, to the extent that quite a few universities and colleges had just to give up departments under the name of "philosophy" or "aesthetics." They were integrated into newly established departments under such vague names as "international culture," "human sciences," "cultural information," etc.

Personally, I never doubt importance of philosophy and philosophical thinking when we try to understand life and the world in any fundamental way. But as a teaching staff at university I often feel it hard to convince my students of the significance and

actuality of philosophy or aesthetics if I talk about them in the same way *I* was taught thirty years ago. Young students today, brilliant ones especially, feel serious needs to re-contextualize traditional philosophy and aesthetics in the contemporary culture and society, which are so different, so far away from the culture and society where the tradition was originally formed. I understand that one of the most important tasks for today's philosophy teachers or aesthetics teachers is a search for a possibility of this re-contextualization, looking for various ways to bridge between classical, normative problems and contemporary, actual issues.

Seen from such a point of view, the long title of my talk: "Aesthetics should definitely play the central role in philosophy in the 21st Century" might sound a little bit too naïve or optimistic. (Actually this is not my intended title but the first sentence of my abstract for which I didn't put any title.) Anyway, let me explain for this rather positive formulation of mine, starting with looking back a little bit at the last couple of decades we have gone through.

What characterizes the intellectual landscape from the late 1980s through the beginning of the 21st Century could be understood as echoes of "endism," a theoretical position to grasp and to describe the present time as the "end" of a certain long-established, dominant system. Numerous articles were written, journals were featured, and conferences were held under the title of "end," say, the end of ideology, philosophy, history, art, humanity, or the human, etc. Politically and economically it corresponds to the age of globalization after the "end" of Cold War. Technologically it synchronizes with the period of information technology rapidly taking over the conventional forms of communication. Culturally it refers to postmodernity and post-coloniality as the "end" of the normative function of the modern western culture. So many people in different areas of human and social sciences, directly and indirectly, referred to the idea of Francis Fukuyama, looking back at Alexandre Kojève, and Hegel in distance. Azuma Hiroki, one of the most influential critics of the Japanese pop-culture and subculture including Manga, Anime and computer games (staffs sometimes mentioned as "Japan Cool") constructs his arguments of the postmodern on the idea of "Animalization" which is based on the interpretation of Hegel by Alexandre Kojève.

A large number of discussions from the late 80s through the beginning of this Century seem to have been haunted by the notion of "end" in many ways. In that period there was definitely something exciting in talking in this apocalyptic way. Many of us in the last decades of the 20th Century were perhaps impatient for the coming of the new millennium, or at least the new Century. So, I would like to pose a question: Are we now really ahead of these transitional decades? Are we really free from the specter of "endism" and have started a new business? My answer is NO. We do live in the 21st Century, and we have already passed its first decade, but large part of our basic world-view still seems to be formed in the reminiscence of the previous Century, just like the first decade of the 20th Century can be in many ways understood as a continuation of the 19th Century. We might assume we are stepping

into a new era of the postmodern, post-history or post-human, dazzled by overwhelming impacts by globalization, information technology, genetic engineering and so on. But I cannot help feeling there is a certain intellectual deception in this assumption. Futuristic descriptions, tendencies to represent the present time as a future, are favored by commercialism and hollywood movies. I suspect this is an psychological compensation for the fact that nothing has changed yet in an essential way. We might even be retreating to the old framework BEFORE the age of "endism," and just disguising ourselves with a new fashion.

Let me give you an example. I have been at times involved in curatorial works of contemporary arts and media arts, mainly in Japan, besides my theoretical teaching and research. Through this experience I remember very well that around 1980, there was still a feeling of resistance to include even photographic works in an exhibition at museums of fine arts. This shows that people then felt the subversive power that photography as reproductive media has against the traditional notion of fine arts. Art forms using new media ("computer art" as it was called at that time) was almost totally outside of normal museum walls. There had been a group of artists involved in new attempts using computers since the late 1960s, but they were regarded as eccentrics, total outsiders to the normative world of arts. Similar was also the case with the distinction of high culture and subculture. A more or less clear line had been generally drawn, perhaps up to the mid-1980s, a line dividing fine arts and TV, popular films, comics, animation and so on. Now, looking at the situation around us, we might be amazed by the "progress" in pluralism and multiplicity in terms of recognition of art. Museums of fine arts can host almost anything without causing threat to the notion of fine art. More than 10 years ago Japanese Agency of Cultural Affairs (Bunkacho) established the concept of "Media Geijutsu" (literally translated into "Media Fine Arts") which is supposed to include comics, animations and computer games beside new media arts, as a policy to promote and export these cultural products as uniquely Japanese new forms of artwork.

It is important to talk about this subject in the context of this international congress with the theme of "diversities of aesthetics." I respect very much the organizers's decision to take up the issue of "diversities," as it is hard for anyone to deny that one of the most important tasks in our time is to face diversities, not necessarily of aesthetics but diversities among different cultures and various ways of life. However, notions like diversity, multiplicity and pluralism would lose their theoretical significance if they are deprived of their disputable quality and changed into a spectacle celebrating the globalizing world. I am saying this because this is how industry deals with these notions, and we are constantly exposed to this cliché in everyday life. One of images dominating in the present consumer society all over the world is not "diversities of aesthetics" but "aestheticized diversities." "United colors of Benetton" is a clever idea, but not enough when we try to think seriously about what pluralism really means. In short, my basic position in regard to the issue of cultural diversities, multiplicities and pluralism is that they are all crucially important

and should be regarded as hopeful features, but unfortunately we still do not face them in a true sense.

Let's go back to art. After the "end" of art, we still have something like art. This doesn't mean art has survived the crisis of its extinction. What we see around us under the name of art is something uncanny, "unheimlich" in the sense of Sigmund Freud: the word refers to a thing which looks very familiar at first glance, but later reveals itself to be something totally alien. Last year I received a paper from a student who attended my class on contemporary art. She was actually a very good student and she concluded her writing with a most impressive sentence: "ART IS UNCANNY." I felt this expression amazingly tells a feeling many of us share, deep in our mind, about art today. But I like to emphasize that this "uncanny" feeling is caused not from the fact that the notion of art has recently come to include too many heterogeneous cultural activities, but from a fatal lack of theory properly to describe and understand today's cultural reality. Maybe we have jumped too quickly from the age of "endism" into a "brave new world" of diversities, without having any time to develop a corresponding theory, new concepts to cope with today's unprecedented situation. What we are doing about art might be, if using an old expression, "putting new wine into old wineskins." Or even worse, we can be shortening our reality to fit it into an outdated framework of knowledge.

It is in this recognition of our time that I dare to say: "Aesthetics should be central in philosophy in the 21st Century." To make this statement a convincing one, of course, we should radically re-define aesthetics as well as philosophy, transform them into theoretical attempts which can effectively address our reality. In the remaining time, however, I have to content myself with giving a hint about the direction of such transformation by means of giving you another episode.

Academic researches including aesthetics are part of "high culture." Traditionally, aesthetics was supposed mainly to deal with appreciation of beauty and questions of fine arts which themselves also belong to "high" culture. Today's aesthetics is, as you see, allowed to study a wide range of subjects in pop-culture or subculture such as sports, films, comics, games, animation and so on, but these are understood as "subjects" of study and there still seems to exist a clear distinction between aesthetics itself and its subjects. Recently, however, I have found quite a few colleagues of mine in aesthetics, philosophy, or in humanities in general, start confessing they are OTAKU, a mania of "Manga," "Anime" and so on. This is NOT an issue that a professor in humanities is also a fan of subculture. It would not be surprising at all. What they confess is that they find no difference between, for example, serious study of German classical philosophy and extreme enthusiasm about "Evangelion," a cult TV and film animation series from the later 1990s to the present. As I understand, this tendency started back in the late 1990s, when Azuma, a critic I mentioned before, declared himself both as a serious cultural critic and an outspoken OTAKU at the same time.

This change is not only with the case with humanities. On the contrary, what is happening in humanities (and in social sciences, too) is just a reflection of a change which took place earlier among younger generation in engineering and natural sciences. There are far greater number of researchers in science and technologies, who regard their own research activities - such as information technology, robotics and genetic engineering - as OTAKU activities, something very similar to their own enthusiasm about fictional world of Manga, Anime and Games. The attitude can be described as a systematic confusion of fiction and reality. But I don't mean that they don't know their research can affect, sometime very seriously, the real world. They know that very well, but there is a certain basic disconnection between this knowledge and their professional knowledge in science. I have argued that this kind of attitude has been formed, in large part, by what I call "Metaphysics of Digital Media," i.e. both aesthetic and ethical effect caused by the wide-spread use of personal computers and the Internet. The point of my argument is that it is a fatal mistake to understand Digital Media as just a tool or means or a condition which happens to be there. Digital media has a strongly aesthetic, and ethical dimension inside its own logic. In this sense, I think OTAKU attitude is not limited to academics, or to people in Japan but a more or less universal tendency, according to the degree of influence of digital media.

It is exactly here that I sense an emergence of new aesthetics. In my view, aesthetics should be a study not only about beauty and what appears as "art," but about the fundamental relation of theory to reality. In the contemporary society inevitably mediated by digital technology, theoretical or rational thinking reveals its aesthetic quality. And I feel something "uncanny" in this situation, "uncanny" in a positive sense that it requires a new effort of investigation. I don't mean just to say that it is weird that more and more academics come to understand themselves as OTAKU. This is becoming rather commonplace and quite familiar, and there is nothing uncanny about it. Being OTAKU itself is neither good nor bad, but it is equivalent to living as if everything was a fiction, and it is naturally accompanied with unconscious cynicism inside it, because if everything is a fiction the very word "fiction" will lose its meaning. In other words, the point of this hyper-postmodern attitude is to cut a certain nerve fiber channel connecting language and reality, to give a lobotomy operation by oneself. I hope a new aesthetics will recover sensation from this state of anesthesia. It is not enough for aesthetics to update itself by paying attention to new media arts or information culture. Aesthetics has to get deeper into the inner logic of information processing that is so powerful in both in our intellectual and everyday life today, and transform itself into a new discipline equipped with analyzing power to cope with the reality in front of us.