

Henrik Kaare Nielsen

## **The Aestheticization of the Public Sphere and Its Consequences for Democratic Political Culture**

*The aestheticization of politics and the public sphere in general is not a new phenomenon. Aestheticizing techniques such as addressing the public by way of sensuous-emotional appeals and the sympathetic staging of personal qualities of politicians at the expense of the political substance are well known throughout the 20th century. What appears to be a new development, however, is the massivity and intensity with which aestheticization in recent years has been advancing to an overall condition of social practice in late modernity.*

*A variety of dynamics has propelled this line of development: the unbound, both libidinal and orientation-seeking identity work emerging on a mass scale from the processes of individualization and cultural modernization in general; the increase in societal complexity and the consequential need for giving concrete, tangible shape to the abstract, non-lucid relations and interdependencies of global capitalism; the mainstreamification of political contents due to a predominant technocratization of politics which increasingly makes the aesthetic appearance the central competitive issue in the political battlefield; and the general struggle between market agents, media and politicians over public attention as a scarce resource also contributes considerably to the process of aestheticization – just to name a few, crucial dynamics.*

*The paper will discuss the possible implications of this radicalized process of aestheticization for the developmental conditions of democratic political culture. The argument will be made that aestheticization does not necessarily imply dedifferentiation but should rather be reflected concretely as a question of hegemonic interactions between different discursive practices. Further, the paper will suggest a distinction between a variety of types of aesthetic interventions into politics – each of which has specific consequences in terms of political culture. In specific forms, aestheticization may thus be a positive resource for political culture, in that it channels subjective dynamics into political participation and empowerment; in other forms it reduces the public to infantilized consumers and thus undermines the critically reflecting formation of conflict experience that constitutes democratic political culture.*

It is a well described main feature of the process of modernization that social practice has differentiated itself into a number of specific types of discourses and related fields of action: a scholarly discourse, an economic discourse, a political discourse, a juridical discourse, an aesthetic discourse etc. and corresponding, relatively autonomous fields of practice (e.g. Habermas 1981; Bourdieu 1993). The distinction between these fields of practice and types of discourse has been a crucial foundation for the development of both the institutions and the everyday life practice of modernity.

However, it is important to be aware that this fundamental and thorough process of differentiation does not imply that the various discursively constituted fields of action remain unaffected by one another. They are currently involved in a complex, mutual interplay in which they engage in more or less conflictual relations with one another and in which genuine issues of discursive hegemony may occasionally arise. This dynamics of conflictual interplay and reciprocal intervention forms a basic condition of the social practice of modernity, and if it takes place in ways that allow the maintenance of the respective discursive domains, it may productively stimulate the fields of practice involved. However, if the balance between discourses is challenged, and one form of discourse marginalizes the other, problematic, dedifferentiating consequences may arise that impoverish society as a whole in terms of the available variety of types of knowledge and reflection. This type of intervention reduces society's ability to make qualitative distinctions and reflect nuanced, alternative possibilities of development.

In other words, when speaking of the aestheticization of politics, i.e. interventions of aesthetic discourse in political practice, the crucial question is not whether this kind of intervention exists – it currently does, and vice versa – but whether it takes shapes in which the discourse of politics still has enough scope to unfold and create meaning on its own terms, or whether the pressure from aestheticizing dynamics reaches a level where the political discourse breaks down and the political field of practice is in one way or another (cf. later) taken over by the aesthetic discourse. These questions will be discussed in the following after brief general outlines of main characteristics of political and aesthetic practice.

### **Political practice and democratic political culture**

Political practice is basically about the non-violent conquering of the definition power over society's common concerns, and, as part of this process, about the contending political agents' struggle to close and determine the social formation of meaning on their own premises. The discourse is, in other words, to a high degree intrinsically goal orientated.

In modern democracies, the political struggle unfolds within the normative framework of democratic political culture, in the sense of the set of shared values and assumptions that tie modern democratic society together as a political collective (Habermas 1992; Nielsen 1991, 1993). Political culture is shaped in society's processing and adaptation of the experiences of conflict that it historically gains in internal struggles between various classes, interest groups, and movements as well as in external conflicts with other nation-states. These collective experiences are inscribed as memory traces in the citizens' bodies and forms of interaction and are reflected in the shape of collective narratives and in the formation of societal institutions.

As an integrated dimension of this ongoing reflective adaptation of the experiences of conflict to which the historical process gives rise, the political collective develops a series of normative assumptions about the nature of the world and the right way of handling it. These assumptions then serve as the obvious value-based frame of reference in the political process – until it is perhaps modified or entirely transformed by new experiences of conflict that break up the former construction of experience. Evidently, the democratic perspectives of political culture are dependent on the nature of the conflict experiences in question and the way in which society processes and reflects them in the political public sphere. So far, in the late modern democratic societies this process has resulted in universalistic conceptions of value and democratic institutions inclined towards compromise and consensus. The basic relations of this type of political process are illustrated in the following model (Nielsen 1991, 1993):

A: (social and cultural conflicts  power relations)  compromise

B: collective historical experience  consensual ethics/political culture

The model proposes to analyse the democratic political process as an integrated interplay between two levels. On the one hand, a level of conflict (A), characterized by non-violent struggles of interests being settled in the form of always temporary compromises, and mediated by the current relationship of power between the contending parties. On the other hand, a level of consensus (B) which processes and condenses the ongoing, collective formation of experiences of conflict from level A to a consensual ethical framework. This framework is not up for discussion in the concrete political disputes, but serves as the evident, common standard of social interaction to which the ongoing struggles of interests and the formation of compromises must at any time be able to legitimize themselves. In other words, this experience-based, "tacit" ethical consensus functions as a civilizing, normative sounding-board under society's handling of conflicts and thus constitutes the core of the democratic political culture which is currently being created, recreated and transformed as part of the broader societal formation of experience. The developmental rhythm of this consensus, though, is slower than that of the conflicts and the formation of compromises on level A. Furthermore, political culture will always represent a hegemonic interpretation of the societal experiences of conflict, and tends to play down or even marginalize social interests and needs that have not been able to manifest themselves in a sufficient position of power in order to gain influence in the formation of compromises.

The mediation between the two levels, i.e. the collective processing of conflict experience in which societal meaning-formation and normative evaluation emerges, takes place in the public sphere in a broad sense of the term. The public sphere in late modernity can advantageously be understood as the medium of civil society in all its complexity and is thus characterized by a variety of conflicting articulations of interests and formations of meaning struggling for hegemony in a multiplicity of institutional settings (Cohen & Arato 1992; Habermas 1992; Calhoun et al. 1992; Nielsen 2001). In this conceptualisation, evidently, it makes no sense to speak of 'the public sphere' in terms of one, unambiguously demarcated space. The overall, parliament-orientated public debate, operating and forming experience in the abstract, universalisticly reasoning mode of the 'bourgeois public sphere'

(Habermas 1962), coexists with – and engages in conflictual interplay with – a diverse multiplicity of social movements and subcultures that organize social experience and cultural needs in the more concrete and diverse modes of autonomous, single issue-oriented partial publics and, in a general sense oppositionally defined, counterpublics, whose modalities of processing conflict experience tend to include sensory-emotional dynamics and issues of subjective needs and particular identity formation (Negt & Kluge 1972).

As pointed out earlier, the processing of conflict experience has hegemonic character in the sense that only those expressions of e.g. social movements or subcultures that have contrived to establish themselves in an adequate position of power are able to leave their mark on the politico-cultural self-conception of society. But in spite of this tendency towards a selective processing of experience, the parliament-orientated public debate is still – due to its capacity as the institutional overall interpreter and organizer of the conflict experience of society, and thereby as the main forum for the ongoing creation, recreation and transformation of democratic political culture (Nielsen 1991) – crucially important, also in respect to the autonomous partial publics' chances of contributing productively to the perspective of democracy in the civil society sense. At their point of departure, partial publics tend to orientate themselves toward special interests and particular needs connected to their own specific experiential horizon, and therefore experience-expanding learning processes in interaction with other partial publics, and not least with the universal mode of reflection of the parliament-orientated public sphere, are required in order to channel this dynamics of politicization into a socio-politically qualified shape (Nielsen 2001).

In other words: if we define the public sphere as the overall mediator between the levels of conflict and consensus in the political process and thus the main forum for the generation of democratic political culture, it should in principle be capable of processing all relevant social experience, and it thus cannot be reduced to the universal mode of reflection of the bourgeois public sphere. It must also be able to include and process the modalities of conflictual social action in which a diversity of civil society agents interact in common spaces of practice, make new experiences, challenge each other's dictums, and in this process gradually develop a consciousness of common concerns and mutual obligations in spite of the

differences. Such spaces of practice, where informal encounters and processes of experience across partial publics take place, are increasingly scarce resources in late modern everyday life, and this fact constitutes a significant problem for the developmental perspectives of civil society and democratic political culture (Sennett 1996).

In this type of communicative practice in which individuals in a physico-spatial sense impose themselves on each other, agents may develop their own means of production to constructively comprehend and process conflicts in the immediate context of everyday life, and on this basis also develop a capacity to understand and act in relation to overall societal conflicts. This type of experience thus implies crucial perspectives for a democratic political culture and for a public interaction that are able to combine the recognition of differences and the reflection of the universal principles of the common good.

The decreasing occurrence of such mixed spaces of practice and experience in late modern everyday life is partly due to prominent features of urban development like the tendency towards separating groups of the population with different social and cultural backgrounds - and like the ongoing transformation of city spaces into zones of pure consumption at the expense of the physical and aesthetic facilitation of the activity of civil society (Häußermann et al. 2008). Instead of animating encounters between strangers and the reflection of common concerns across differences, public spaces in late modernity increasingly appear primarily as forums for the smooth, harmonizing, consumerist appeals of market agents (Sennett 1996; Barber 2007).

### **Characteristics of aesthetic practice**

Like the field of the political, the field of aesthetic practice is of a composite nature: it comprises both the highly institutionalized expert culture of art, the heterogeneous field of popular culture, creative amateur activity, and the general charging of the late modern life-world with experiential appeals to senses and emotions – the tendency commonly known as the ‘process of aestheticization’ to which we shall return shortly (Welsch 1990; Seel 2003; Nielsen 1996).

Contrary to the orientation of the political discourse towards determining definite, universal and goal-orientated principles for the development of society, the aesthetic discourse is however characterized by its non-directed nature. The purpose of aesthetic practice is the practice itself, and when it unfolds on its own premises, it challenges established formations of meaning, but without prescribing edifying alternatives. The aesthetic discourse, in other words, opens the social formation of meaning in an undetermined way, thereby encouraging the agents of aesthetic practice to perform the unceasing, autonomous and pleasure-motivated seeking process between a specific phenomenon and a non-existing overall concept which characterizes the process of aesthetic experience (Bubner 1989; Kant 1790/1963). In other words, whereas political discourse in a Kantian sense operates according to the determinative judgement, taking its point of departure in an established universal conceptual frame, aesthetic discourse works in the mode of the reflective judgement whose seeking-process remains in the point of view of the specific. The aesthetic discourse therefore represents a more sensitive, nuanced and wide-ranging potential for experience formation than a purely cognitive or moral discourse could accomplish.

Aesthetic practice and the experiences to which it gives rise are characterized by the stylizing reduction of the complexity and the ambivalences of modernity. The diffuse mixture of various incompatible forms of practice and experience in modern everyday life – which interfere with and disrupt one another, resulting in distraction and a loss of orientation (Ziehe 2004) – is transformed into clearly profiled forms, emotions and conflicts in the experiential space of aesthetic practice. The heterogeneous and ambivalent experience of modernity is subjected to a synthesization that makes it accessible to intense experience as well as focused reflection. Hence, the complexity-reducing starting point of aesthetic practice in everyday experience paves the way for a special type of autonomous formation of meaning that can assume a multiplicity of forms.

These forms evidently include purely pleasurable sensory and emotional experiences (*Erlebnis*), but the aesthetic discourse is also capable of challenging established patterns of expectation and thus of activating and processing intellectual forms of experience (*Erfahrung*), and in this capacity it represents a potentially emancipatory perspective of human development and empowerment. In

German philosophy of the Enlightenment, this potential of aesthetic experience was conceptualized as *Bildung* (Schiller 1975). Historically this concept has in different forms been attached to elitist positions and accompanying, monocultural canons of artworks. However, on the premises of late modernity and cultural democracy, *Bildung* should be regarded as a general question of human growth processes and processes of empowerment in the broadest sense, and under these circumstances no specific forms of culture or categories of aesthetic artefacts can claim a monopoly on representing contemporary *Bildung*: the important question is whether concrete processes of aesthetic experience encourage the growth and empowerment of concrete individuals. The only general definition we can reasonably attach to contemporary processes of *Bildung* is that they create an interplay between sensory-emotional and intellectual capacities of the individual and that they always involve an element of challenge and the reflexive reshaping of established self-conceptions and structures of meaning, including reflection on the individual's rootedness in an ethically binding sociality.

As argued above, the successful process of aesthetic experience has special potentials as regards *Bildung*, insofar as it, more comprehensively than a purely cognitive or moral learning process, has a sensibilizing effect and opens up individuals' horizons for a complex – emotional as well as intellectual – processing of the conflicts and ambivalences of the modern life-world. But it is crucial to be aware that aesthetic experience in this sense is first of all a counterpart to established structures of meaning and value – including traditional concepts of *Bildung*. In the mode of reflective judgement, aesthetic experience diversifies and breaks down habitual formations of meaning, and this may in effect animate and qualify processes of *Bildung*, but there is no intrinsically given, edifying end to aesthetic experience (Seel 2007).

### **Dynamics of aestheticization**

A crucial dimension of aesthetic practice in late modernity is constituted by the overall tendency towards aestheticization which is characterized by the dispersion of the appeal to the sensory and emotional qualities of experience to all relations in society and which implies transcending discursive and institutional borderlines

(Welsch et al. 1993; Knodt 1994; Ziehe 2004; Nielsen 1996, 2005; Bisgaard & Friberg 2006). The fact that this type of aestheticization has achieved an almost hegemonic status is due to its ability to channel a heterogeneous multiplicity of dynamics that are active in the current development of culture and society.

This includes not least the dynamics of *culturalization* which originates in the process of individualization and the destabilization of traditional forms of life and identity (Nielsen 1993; Beck, Giddens, Lash 1996). In ongoing identity-seeking processes drawing on the entire register of cognitive, moral and aesthetic types of discourse, late modern individuals work on balancing and stabilizing their life-world relations on constantly changing premises. In principle, this identity work is challenging and contains wide-ranging potentials for empowerment and processes of *Bildung*, but it also constitutes a considerable strain on individuals, and a main tendency is therefore for individuals to look for relief by channelling their identity work into collective frameworks – and in this process a reductive, conformity-oriented version of the aesthetic discourse tends to conquer a privileged position.

As a consequence of the far-reaching disintegration of the class-specific life-worlds and their tangible collective points of orientation that has characterized the process of modernization since the 1960s, individuals today primarily orient themselves according to aesthetic life-style delineations based on age and educational background (Schulze 1992). Life-style groups negatively differentiate themselves from one another and in this way create clarity in the disintegrated cultural context of late modernity. As taste-based communities of aesthetic fascination, life-style groups simultaneously comply with the need for sensory-emotional experiences, a need that assumes a key position among the behavioural motivations of modern individuals. In other words, every single life-style proposes how to create a collective orientation by way of aesthetic projection, and in this sense the aesthetic preferences of a life-style can also be said to be 'genred', just as the continuous innovations in the staging of life styles are in a relation of exchange with the meaning formation of the media, fashion, art, and other aesthetic artefacts.

Aestheticization has not entirely 'taken over' the complex identity work of late modern individuals, and it has not reached the status of a universal principle for the formation of late modern communities either, but by virtue of its distinct channelling of the need for orientation and sensory-emotional experiences it is in

practice becoming progressively more important in the organization of interhuman communication. This condition is increasingly reflected in marketing strategies and in organizational strategies on the labour market encouraging – or even demanding – ambitious, yet conforming, aesthetic self-realization of clients and employees (Andersen & Born 2001; Stjernfelt & Thyssen 2000; Brinkmann & Eriksen 2005).

However, one should not be blind to the fact that this expanding tendency towards the formation of aestheticized communities potentially contains problematic perspectives for the further development of democratic political culture: the life-style groups' reciprocal delimitation based on taste preferences has a particularizing quality and outlines a future perspective that is more marked by irreconcilable oppositions between ghettoized, self-absoluting life-style communities than by critical reflection and universalistic public interaction. On this level the tendency to aestheticize is thus inscribed in a general displacement of emphasis in social practice, the role of the citizen and civil society being in danger of getting forced into the background behind the role of the consumer and the market.

Additionally, aestheticization draws on the dynamics which is created by the fact that *attention* today is a scarce resource, over which an ongoing struggle takes place between a multiplicity of agents: individuals striving for self-reassurance and social identity, politicians up for election, the branding strategists of private and public organisations, the media and the advertising business – all of them are making onslaughts on established discursive borderlines by means of intensified sensory and emotional appeals in order to compel attention and thereby – assumedly – recognition, wealth, and power.

This type of aestheticization, which unfolds with particular intensity in the electronic media, tends to intertwine with a monologic market discourse that in reality merely aims at pleasing and confirming the recipients in their private wishful fantasies and inclinations. In other words, this is a reduced version of the aesthetic discourse which marginalizes the potential of the discourse for challenging established worldviews and self-conceptions and creating an interplay between senses, emotions and intellect. Critical, investigating reflection and the dialogical perspective in relation to common concerns of society are not addressed by this restricted version of the aesthetic discourse, which instead encourages one-

dimensional lingering on immediate sensations, emotions and moods (Prokop 2005).

Furthermore, in the course of globalization and the general rise in complexity, it is becoming increasingly difficult to establish a clear understanding of societal relations from the perspective of everyday life. As a result of this development, it becomes a central task of the political system to secure the continuing *trust* of the population towards the institutions of society, but because of the complex and non-transparent nature of institutions and globalized societal relations, it is not possible to establish this trust solely in the media of a political or a scholarly discourse (Giddens 1991). Elucidating measures are required, and in this respect an aesthetic reduction of complexity presents itself as an immediately effective way of creating trust: the sympathetically staged power figure as such incarnates the guarantee that things are probably in order concerning non-lucid matters like the economy, pensions, food control, security and so forth.

One of the fundamental conditions for the media's communication of experience in the modern space of relations is the transformation of intangible relations into tangible ones, and this necessarily involves an element of aesthetic reduction of complexity. The crux of the matter is whether media communication lets the aesthetic appeal to the immediate, sensory-emotional preferences of the individual stand alone: in which case it is a question of the recipient being addressed as a consumer and encouraged to engage in an *uninformed* relation of trust with the incalculable institutions of modernity. Or whether the aesthetic reduction of complexity is put in a productive interplay with cognitive and moral discourses' struggles with the complexity of modernity: this would involve the possibility of establishing an *informed* relation of trust with the institutions in the modern space of relations – not in the sense that everything then becomes transparent for everyday consciousness, but in the sense that the individual is addressed in its role as a citizen and is encouraged to participate and take a position as a critically reasoning and active social subject.

As is the case with aesthetic artefacts according to the aesthetics of reception, every single appeal of the general process of aestheticization can be said to involve an inscribed 'model recipient' (Eco 1984; Iser 1988) that organizes the addressing of the empirical recipient. Even though this is not a deterministic relation, this model

recipient plays a highly conditioning role in the projecting dialogue that empirical recipients can conduct with the appeal, and hence in the scope and quality of the aesthetic experience. It is therefore decisive for the perspectives of the various attempts to form meaning on the basis of aestheticization whether their model recipient is the self-sufficient consumer, the impotent client, or the critically reflecting citizen.

In other words, it is possible to consider the offer of a projecting exchange with the forms of everyday life emerging from the general tendency to aestheticize and the proposal for reducing complexity made by the media as an input for a comprehensive, empowering process of experience in the individual, and thus as a potential for *Bildung* in the modernized sense outlined above. But if it is merely a question of a permanent carpet bombing of public space with aesthetic appeals that solely address the individuals as consumers and whose invitation to dialogue does not reach further than the performed act of purchasing, then the process of aesthetic experience runs idle from the start, and the possibility of *Bildung* and empowerment fades out of sight. In this sense Wolfgang Iser is right in claiming that the comprehensive aestheticization of everyday life turns into an-aestheticization in the sense of de-sensitization and the experience of emptiness (Iser 1990; Iser 1996). But as Iser also points out, this characteristic represents a specific, instrumentalized variant of the tendency to aestheticize, not the tendency itself.

Consequently, there is good reason to refrain from totalizing, unequivocating definitions of the phenomenon: the aestheticization of everyday life and public space is on the whole a conflictual process in which monological and dialogical attempts at creating meaning struggle amongst themselves to achieve hegemony – and the developmental conditions of the public sphere will to a large extent be marked by the hegemonic relationship between these contending types of appeal. At the same time it should be maintained that the aesthetic reduction of complexity is not a universal principle for the formation of meaning: cognitive-instrumental and moral-practical discourses remain available for public, communicative interaction and can form an essential counterweight to the monological variant of the aesthetic discourse.

### **Aestheticization of the political: potentials and risks**

This general tendency towards aestheticization currently represents a prominent condition of competition in public space, and it thereby also to a large degree constitutes the premises on which the agents of political life operate. Related to the model above, a prominent principle of aesthetic intervention in the political process consists in the use of aesthetic effects by political agents to establish themselves in a position of strength in the struggle of interests and the formation of compromises on level A.

The articulation of interests and the positioning in the political power-play always imply an aesthetic/performative dimension (e.g. in the shape of rhetorical style, visual staging, etc.) (Schulze 2006), and occasionally this dimension in interplay with political and economic factors may be decisive for the balances of power in the political struggle. As regards the fundamental relationship between the aesthetic and the political, however, the crucial question appears to be on which premises and with which type of appeal the relationship is established: Is it a dialogic, challenging appeal which allows the process of aesthetic experience and the interplay between sensory-emotional and intellectual capacities to unfold? Or, on the contrary, a monologic, tranquilising approach that only appeals to regressive fascination?

In addition to the general issue of establishing trust in the institutions of modernity, the political system in the late modern welfare states faces a further challenge in respect to the formation of democratic political culture. By way of the institutionalization of the welfare state as generally accepted, overall compromise on the level of the nation-state, and the extensive world-market-strategic technocratization of the framework of the political process, which the privileged OECD countries are propelling forward in unanimity in the effort to prevail in the globalized competition, it has increasingly become difficult to distinguish substantial differences between the positions of the various political parties. The technocratic agenda which reaches from the international safe-guarding of privileges over national distribution policy to common guidelines for research,

education, cultural policy etc., unites the whole political mainstream under the motto “There is no alternative”, and it has therefore become nearly impossible for the leading political parties to profile themselves in terms of political content (Hirsch 1998; Nielsen 2001).

On these premises political positioning and power struggles are increasingly carried out with aesthetic means: the performance of the individual politician, his/her ability to communicate enthusiasm, attract sympathy, demonstrate quick wit, rhetorically make problems disappear, look good on TV, and so on, replaces political content in the struggle over political power. A prominent example of the successful creation of this undetermining appeal to senses and emotions would be Tony Blair campaign “Time for change” in 1997, but also the Obama campaign in 2008 had a strong element of harmonizing, aesthetic appeal in its undefined overall slogans of “hope” and “change”. The trust in the institutions of society which is established in this way, however, must be characterized as uninformed trust, and the use that is being made of the aesthetic discourse reduces it to the affirmative processing of senses and emotions, whereas the element of challenge and critical reflection is marginalized.

As pointed out above, the positioning in the political struggle always contains an aesthetic element, but since performativity tends to totally replace political content in the current situation, we are dealing with a process of dedifferentiation which could undermine public debate and democratic political culture. A political process which does not critically reflect a variety of alternative developmental possibilities and offer these for public dialogue, but conversely claims that nothing can be changed, denies actual problems, conflicts and ambivalences in society. Instead, society is being aesthetically staged as a set of harmonious contractual relationships, the solidity and credibility of which are being conjured up in the shape of the monologic, emotion-orientated marketing of the individual politician as a trustworthy person (smiling, well dressed, authoritative – and therefore ‘trustworthy’), which characterizes this type of aestheticization of politics.

This development transforms the participating citizen into a passive consumer of pleasing, aestheticized appeals, depoliticizes the political process, and weakens the collective formation of political experience. The increasing use of non-public governance networks in the decision making process further accentuates this

problem of emptying the public sphere of political content and collective experience to process (Sørensen & Torfing 2005). Thereby the public knowledge of common concerns of society and the capacity of the political process to tolerate differences and cope dialogically with conflicts – when they manifest themselves from time to time in spite of the smoothed surface of public space – remain underdeveloped. In other words, the ability of the political process to create meaning on its own conditions is threatened.

This tendency towards conflict-denying, depoliticising aestheticization of politics in late modernity is flanked by a contrary tendency towards *polarizing* aestheticization. Prominent examples are the rhetoric and public staging of politicians like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, but in later years it is first of all the aestheticized conduct of the Bush administration and its allies in the fields of foreign policy and security policy in the wake of the terrorist attack on the United States on 11.9. 2001 that has left its mark on the political public sphere on both a national and an international level.

The circumstances of this event and the following measures had a solid core of power politics concerning both geo-political and economic interests, including the question of controlling the ‘terms of trade’ in the Middle East and not least the access to the oil wells of the region. The constellation of interests surrounding these questions of power politics was basically of a highly complex nature in both the Middle East and in the West, but after September 2001 the multiplicity of interests and political positions in the field was forced into a reductionist, dichotomous scenario.

It further contributed to this simplified picture that both sides legitimized their actions by claiming to be defending sublime values. In this way, the political conflict was discursively transformed into a pure conflict of cultures, where, for instance, Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the “Clash of Civilizations” (Huntington 1998) served as a convenient legitimizing ideology for the reductionism. On this background, the polarization developed a dynamics of its own in the public consciousness by way of a stylizing, aesthetic discourse. We were, in other words, dealing with an aesthetic intensification of a political conflict, and from the start we were operating in a scenario where a political process based on reason, dialogue,

and compromise-orientated interaction had no scope whatsoever. As intended by the strategists on both sides, this process of aestheticization served to strengthen their position in the political power play, but at the same time it undermined the political process in its capacity for handling conflicts of interest in a civilized manner, and the perspective of this type of aestheticization of politics is therefore the replacement of politics by barbarism and the rule of violence.

This tendency is evident on the side of the terrorists who explicitly aimed at destroying the foundations of democracy, but the Western counterpart in this dichotomous scenario conducted a parallel aestheticization of politics: in a semi-religious setting, a complex, global constellation was stylized to the conflict between Good and Evil, between democracy and “the axis of evil”, between freedom and terrorism. As a simple reflex of the fundamentalist worldview of the terrorists, the Western leaders formed a political space of meaning which was modelled in accordance with the stereotypes of B movies: “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists”. The scenario was a permanent state of emergency with apocalypse lurking around the corner, and, consequently, with no scope for discussion and disagreement on the inner lines. We were, in other words, dealing with a highly reduced version of the aesthetic discourse, since in this context it was being utilized to decomplexify and close down the public space of reflection.

This aesthetic reduction of a complex political constellation and the related positioning of the state leaders as firm, energetic, and uncompromising guarantors of democracy and peace against attacks from the powers of darkness strengthened them in the power struggles on the national level and granted them an extended freedom of action on the international scene. But the same aestheticized, uncompromising approach to politics threatened the very democratic process which the discourse claimed to protect; this occurred in the form of authoritarian conduct, including throwing suspicion on and intimidating critical voices in public debate, and in the shape of exponentially growing surveillance activities that threatened to undermine civil liberties. The politico-cultural formation of experience which is caused by this polarizing aestheticization of politics internally in democratic societies is thus characterized by a narrowing of the horizon of reflection and a disempowered orientation towards conformity with the politicians in power.

Art, however, has the potential to offer a quite different type of aesthetic intervention in politics. Whereas the two types of aestheticization mentioned above both intervene on the conflict level (A) of the political process, where they affect the relations of power and as an indirect effect influence the politico-cultural formation of experience, the interventions of art are not orientated towards power politics. When art intervenes into politics, it happens via the cultural public sphere, where art by way of its specific formal and thematic tools creates 'odd' new insights and ways of experiencing, and on this basis offers its own, specific space of reflection as a mirror to other discursive fields, including the political.

Adequately intervening art thus addresses the critically reasoning citizen and aims, on the premises of the aesthetic discourse, at establishing an enlightened dialogue on the common concerns of society. Its area of operation is the general public debate, in which the mediation between the levels of conflict and consensus of the political process takes place – in other words, in relation to the above model, art intervenes in the experience-processing interplay between the levels. On the basis of the indeterminately challenging discourse of aesthetic practice, art therefore contributes to opening up established formations of meaning, to the renewed processing of the conflictual experience of society, and to the further development and transformation of politico-cultural consensus – but without relating directly to the struggles of power and distribution of resources on the level of conflict (A).

A general characteristic of successful artistic interventions in politics is that they maintain the autonomy of discourses and that their critical approach is not abstract utopian, but immanent: that their indeterminate challenging and opening of the formations of meaning of politics refer to normative potentials which have already been developed and anchored in the politico-cultural formation of experience on the level of consensus (B), and to which politics therefore in principle is committed. The inconsistencies between the levels of the political process demonstrated by the aesthetic interventions thus represent real dilemmas for political practice, and in an unspecific way the interventions therefore challenge political life to reflect on possible alternative forms of practice.

In other words, the interplay between the aesthetic and the political occurs in quite diverse shapes in late modernity, and these shapes imply correspondingly diverse perspectives for the development of democratic political culture. A critical point is the question whether discursive autonomy is being maintained in the interplay or, instead, one discourse colonizes the other, resulting in the reduction of the potential for reflection and the formation of meaning of the colonized discourse. As to the aesthetic discourse, another main question is whether it intervenes in politics in harmonizing or polarizing, monologic forms that deny complexity and marginalize critical reflection, or its approach takes the shape of a dialogic, challenging appeal in the service of enlightened conversation in society. In this case it would be able to contribute to challenging and qualifying the political discourse, to channelling the unbound subjective dynamics of culturalization into political participation and empowerment, and thereby to strengthening democratic political culture.

Dr.phil. Henrik Kaare Nielsen is associate professor of aesthetics and culture at the University of Aarhus. Selected publications: *Demokrati i bevægelse. Studier i politisk kultur og nye sociale bevægelser i Danmark og Vesttyskland* (1991), *Kultur og modernitet* (1993), *Æstetik, kultur og politik* (1996), *Kritisk teori og samtidsanalyse* (2001), *Konsument eller samfundsborger? Kritiske essays* (2007).

## References

- Andersen, Niels Åkerstrøm & Born, Asmund, 2001: *Kærlighed og omstilling*, Kbh.: Nyt fra Samfundsvidenskaberne
- Barber, Benjamin, 2007: *Consumed*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co.
- Beck, Ulrich, Giddens, Anthony & Lash, Scott, 1996: *Reflexive Modernisierung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp
- Bisgaard, Ulrik & Carsten Friberg (red.), 2006: *Det æstetiskes aktualitet*, Copenhagen: Multivers
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 1993: *The Field of Cultural Production*, New York: Columbia University Press
- Brinkmann, Svend & Eriksen, Cecilie (ed.), 2005: *Selvrealisering*, Århus: Klim

Bubner, Rüdiger, 1989: *Ästhetische Erfahrung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp

Calhoun, Craig (ed.), 1992: *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press

Cohen, Jean & Arato, Andrew, 1992: *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge: MIT Press

Eco, Umberto, 1984: *The Role of the Reader*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Giddens, Anthony, 1991: *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Stanford: Stanford University Press

Habermas, Jürgen, 1962: *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Neuwied: Luchterhand

Habermas, Jürgen, 1981: *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Vols. 1-2, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Habermas, Jürgen, 1992: *Faktizität und Geltung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp

Häußermann, Hartmut, Läßle, Dieter & Siebel, Walter, 2008: *Stadtpolitik* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp

Hirsch, Joachim, 1998: *Vom Sicherheitsstaat zum nationalen Wettbewerbsstaat*, Berlin: ID-Verlag

Huntington, Samuel P., 1998: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, London: Touchstone Books

Iser, Wolfgang, 1988: *Der Akt des Lesens*, München: Wilhelm Fink

Kant, Immanuel, 1963 (1790): *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Stuttgart: Reclam

Knodt, Reinhard, 1994: *Ästhetische Korrespondenzen*, Stuttgart: Reclam

Negt, Oskar & Kluge, Alexander, 1972: *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp

Nielsen, Henrik Kaare, 1991: *Demokrati i bevægelse. Studier i politisk kultur og nye sociale bevægelser i Danmark og Vesttyskland*, Århus: Aarhus University Press

Nielsen, Henrik Kaare, 1993: *Kultur og modernitet*, Århus: Aarhus University Press

Nielsen, Henrik Kaare, 1996: *Æstetik, kultur og politik*, Århus: Aarhus University Press

Nielsen, Henrik Kaare, 2001: *Kritisk teori og samtidsanalyse*, Århus: Aarhus University Press

Nielsen, Henrik Kaare, 2005: "Totalizing Aesthetics? Aesthetic Theory and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life" in *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 32

Prokop, Dieter, 2005: *Der kulturindustrielle Machtkomplex*, Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag

- Schiller, Friedrich, 1975 (1795): *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*, Stuttgart: Reclam
- Schulze, Detlef Georgia m.fl., 2006: *Politisierung und Ent-Politisierung als performative Praxis*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot
- Schulze, Gerhard, 1992: *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main: Campus
- Seel, Martin, 2003: *Ästhetik des Erscheinens*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp
- Seel, Martin, 2007: *Die Macht des Erscheinens*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp
- Stjernfelt, Frederik & Thyssen, Ole (ed.), 2000: *Æstetisk kommunikation*, Kbh.: Handelshøjskolens Forlag
- Sørensen, Eva & Torfing, Jacob, 2005: *Netværksstyring: fra government til governance*, Frederiksberg: Samfundslitteratur
- Welsch, Wolfgang, 1990: *Ästhetisches Denken*, Stuttgart: Reclam
- Welsch, Wolfgang (ed.), 1993: *Die Aktualität des Ästhetischen*, München: Wilhelm Fink
- Welsch, Wolfgang, 1996: *Grenzgänge des Ästhetischen*, Stuttgart: Reclam
- Ziehe, Thomas, 2004: *Øer af intensitet i et hav af rutine*, Copenhagen: Politisk Revy