

LAOCOONTE

REVISTA DE ESTÉTICA Y TEORÍA DE LAS ARTES

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RESEÑAS

EDITA

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El golpe. Cultura del entorno

REVISIÓN DE TRADUCCIONES

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“Cuanto más penetramos en una obra de arte más pensamientos suscita ella en nosotros, y cuantos más pensamientos suscite tanto más debemos creer que estamos penetrando en ella”.

G. E. Lessing, *Laocoonte o los límites entre la pintura y la poesía*, 1766.



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LIQCOONTE

PANORAMA: LA ESTÉTICA EN LA ENCRUCIJADA DEL PRESENTE



Aesthetics and “transcultural” turn

La estética y el giro “transcultural”

Giuseppe Patella*

Abstract

What does “transcultural turn” exactly means and which is its relationship with aesthetics? Culture has never been as important as it is today, so it is now more than ever crucial to reflect on its current expressions and transformations. In this sense it is useful to examine the perspective of cultural studies. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the effects of the “cultural turn” on aesthetics highlighting positive and negative aspects of the relationship between aesthetics and cultural studies. In spite of many criticisms it has received (eclecticism, lack of scientific rigor, methodological unreliability and so on...), it is crucial to accept the challenge coming from cultural studies without avoiding the experience of the conflict and of the difference. Accepting this challenge means stop looking at aesthetics as a pure and self-sufficient discipline and adopting a pluralistic, transcultural and inclusive point of view. So, instead of a modern concept of culture considered as a unitary whole and based on a rigid binary opposition, a transcultural approach emphasizes a continuing process of contamination and dissemination of ideas, languages, cultural habits and artifacts. It means overcoming an ethnocentric point of view and dealing with marginal or alternative experiences coming from contemporary society, following a logic of difference understood as non-identity, complementarity and plurality.

Keywords: cultural studies, transcultural, cultural turn, pluralism.

Resumen

¿Qué significa exactamente “giro transcultural” y cuál es su relación con la estética? La idea de cultura nunca ha sido tan importante como lo es hoy, por lo que ahora resulta más crucial que nunca la reflexión sobre sus expresiones y transformaciones actuales. En este sentido, es útil examinar la perspectiva propia de los estudios culturales. El propósito de este trabajo es analizar los efectos del “giro cultural” en la estética destacando los aspectos positivos y negativos de la relación entre la estética y los estudios culturales. A pesar de las numerosas críticas que ha recibido (eclecticismo, falta de rigor científico, falta de fiabilidad metodológica, y así sucesivamente...), es crucial para aceptar el desafío proveniente de los estudios culturales sin evitar la experiencia del conflicto y de la diferencia. Aceptar este desafío significa dejar de mirar a la estética como disciplina pura y autosuficiente, adoptando un punto de vista pluralista, transcultural e incluyente. Así, en lugar de un concepto moderno de la cultura considerada como un todo unitario y con base en una oposición binaria rígida, un enfoque transcultural hace hincapié en un proceso continuo de contaminación y difusión de ideas, lenguas, hábitos culturales y artefactos. Esto implica superar un punto de vista etnocéntrico y hacer frente a experiencias marginales o alternativos procedentes de la sociedad contemporánea, siguiendo una lógica de la diferencia entendida como la no-identidad, la complementariedad y la pluralidad.

Palabras clave: estudios culturales, transcultural, giro cultural, pluralismo.

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Culture and Aesthetics

What happens when a traditional discipline like aesthetics meets cultural studies? In this paper I will analyze positive and negative aspects of this meeting, arguing that if we want a future for aesthetics we have to adopt a pluralistic, transcultural and inclusive point of view and consequently we have to deal seriously with the universe of cultural studies.

But what about the relationship between aesthetics and cultural studies? Let’s analyze closer the two sides of this relationship, cultural studies on one side and aesthetics on the other one. On the one hand, it is well known that cultural studies has met aesthetics from the outset. From the first study produced within the field of cultural studies around the sixties in Great Britain, for instance by cultural theorist such as Raymond Williams,¹ we find a strong interest gradually increasing in traditional aesthetic themes, so to speak, such as art, taste, pleasure, in artistic products so-called popular, as well as the use of aesthetic categories (such as beauty, style and so on) in the interpretation of modern cultural phenomena. The book of Dick Hebdige, *Subculture*, is also a good example of this kind of approach.²

Instead, on the other hand, it is less obvious that aesthetics as philosophical or scientific discipline has met cultural studies, has begun to seriously deal with it. But even if it is only a new experience, the combination of aesthetics and cultural studies can not be accused of arbitrariness. What just a few years ago might seem at best as an extravagance and at worst as something meaningless or even risky, has no longer any reason to be. The interactions between the two have now become reality finding its definitive consecration in an important encyclopedia of aesthetics published in 1998,³ and in the new aesthetics dictionary, *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, published in 2003,⁴ as much as in an impressive numbers of books published worldwide on this topic generally attesting to this new development.⁵

Now, the *Handbook*, for example, not only devotes an entire chapter to “postmodernism,” but also one to “aesthetics and cultural studies”. This is clearly important to me, for several reasons. First of all, because it is a dictionary that incorporates facts and events that took place throughout history or ongoing trends. Second, because this admittedly analytical approach dictionary tends to consider aesthetics predominantly as a philosophy of art; and finally, because the *Handbook* is a kind of introduction to the most current research in the relevant cultural fields. All these show the extent to which cultural studies has now entered – and rightly so – the area of aesthetics, albeit analytical, to the point that we can henceforth speak of a “cultural turn.”

But what does cultural turn exactly means and which is its relationship with aesthetics? Today, it is said, everything is culture, the term culture has been very

1 See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1958).

2 See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture. The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

3 Michael Kelly, ed., *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 4 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

4 Jerrold Levinson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

5 See for example Winfried Fluck, *Aesthetics and Cultural Studies*, in E. Elliott-L. Freitas Caton-J. Rhyne, eds., *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 79-103); Michael Bérubé, ed., *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); and Giuseppe Patella, *Estetica Culturale: Oltre il Multiculturalismo* [Cultural Aesthetics – Beyond multiculturalism] (Roma: Meltemi, 2005).

extended, fragmented and stretched in thousand different directions. Clothing, sport, sexuality, travelling, food and leisure are considered cultural expressions transmitting very complex messages whose decoding requires extensive and sophisticated knowledge, as well as critical thinking and flexible mental ability.

So, if culture has never been as important as it is today, it is now more than ever essential to reflect on its current manifestations and transformations. In this sense it becomes useful to pay attention to the perspective of cultural studies. As is well known, it brings together those disciplines that seek to understand the complexity of the phenomenon of culture and the political dimension connected with it, investigating its multiple forms in everyday life. Moreover, those disciplines seek to overcome not only the traditional separations between established cognitive areas, but also, and above all, the classical dichotomies such as knowledge and power, or culture and society. They bring into focus mainly on the relationship between cultural practices and the power devices they carry along.⁶ In this sense, in their best models, they seem meaningfully appropriate to deal with the most current issues pertaining to modern multicultural society, globalization, emerging identities, new ways of feeling, and the unusual and neglected experiences of our existence.

Now, after the so called cultural turn involving all spheres of social life and all areas of knowledge, it is clear that aesthetics can no longer hide itself, it can not remain secluded or escape from culture. Traditional aesthetic categories should thus be rethought in the light of complex and profound cultural processes; their transformations and the ways they unfold. The meeting between aesthetics and cultural studies, however, does not happen because this is the latest fashion in the intellectual field, but because the outcome of theoretical debates around cultural studies can provides new reflections to drive us to rethink our discipline from a transcultural perspective, helping us to redefine its presence today in a more appropriate way to the needs of our time.

Multicultural, Intercultural or Transcultural Approach?

So, instead of a modern concept of culture considered as a unitary whole and based on a rigid binary opposition (high/low, west/east, male/female...), a *transcultural* approach emphasizes a continuing process of contamination, ibridation and dissemination of ideas, languages, cultural habits and artifacts.

We should then distinguish a transcultural approach from a ‘simple’ intercultural or multicultural approach. The difference is well clarified, for instance, by a recent essay of Krystyna Wilkoszewska in a collected book on global discourses in aesthetics.⁷ Here, following the work of Wolfgang Iser⁸ and some other postmodern thinkers (French in particular), she clearly differentiates the transcultural approach, characterized by relational networks rather than binary oppositions, from multicultural and intercultural form of aesthetics, still based on a uniform and homogeneous conception of culture. She writes:

6 See Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

7 Krystyna Wilkoszewska, “Transcultural Studies in Aesthetics”, in *Gimme Shelter. Global Discourses in Aesthetics*, ed. Jos de Mul and Renée van de Vall (Amsterdam: Amsterdam U.P., 2013), 81-88.

8 The project of Iser of rethinking the academic discipline of aesthetics based on the concept of *aisthesis* including broader issues and a different perspective is well known. See Wolfgang Iser, *Undoing Aesthetics* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

Multi- and interculturality are placed in a modern conception of pluralism, while transculturality refers to the idea of pluralism worked out by postmodern French philosophers. In the modern version of pluralism the multitude is understood as a result of a breaking off of a whole. Every element of the broken whole preserves in itself the memory of the totality it earlier belonged to. But at the same time the element is an independent whole that is confronted with the others. ...The postmodern version of pluralism does not begin with a category of a whole. Multitude is not understood here as a derivative state that came into being after a breaking off from a primary wholeness. Multitude is primary and the whole secondary, because the latter is understood as the product of a lasting tendency of the human mind for generalization and totalisation. In the postmodern concept of plurality a category of wholeness is deconstructed on every level of thinking and no phenomenon of reality can be treated as an autonomous coherent whole. Postmodern pluralism shows that multitude goes across – in syncretic terms – every potential wholeness preventing its constitution.⁹

In this sense, as regards the problem of coexistence of cultures in the contemporary world, multiculturalist approach simply accepts the existence of many different cultures and considers each culture as a monolithic whole, whereas interculturalist postulates a kind of connection between cultures. Both approaches, however, are still imbued with a modernist idea of culture, influenced – as Wilkoszewska rightly points out – by Johann Gottfried Herder’s theory of culture,¹⁰ quite influential in Europe since the eighteenth century, that understands the different national cultures as strongly monolithic, uniform, without any internal differentiation and impenetrable each other. Today, this traditional sort of logic is no longer adequate to understand the complex cultural phenomena of our times and the concepts of multi- and interculturality seem to be only insubstantial variations of this kind of language.

Anyway, I think we should go further and argue that even the present multiculturalist perspective¹¹ that seems nowadays so updated is tremendously ambiguous, because postulates a simple coexistence of different cultural worlds without a real dialogue and this is also presented as the good face, politically correct, of the dominant ideology. As Slavoj Žižek remarks¹², multiculturalism is based on an idea of tolerance and respect at least paradoxical. Because, while proclaiming the equality of all forms of culture, it can surreptitiously assert its diversity and (therefore) its superiority. Indeed, in principle, who is aspiring to be merely tolerated? The real problem with multiculturalism is then that, behind the candid idea of tolerance of different cultural universes, with the excuse of respect for many ways of life, it can put everything on the same level and confuse everything, causing on the one hand a kind of homogenization never seen before and, on the other, from heights of its universal position, it could continue to confirm its essential superiority. In this sense, Žižek can say that multiculturalism is an unacknowledged form of racism and the new ideology of our times, the true “cultural

9 Wilkoszewska, “Transcultural Studies in Aesthetics”, 84.

10 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1791; *On World History*, eds. Hans Adler and Ernest A. Menze (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1997).

11 See Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

12 See Slavoj Žižek, “Multiculturalism, or the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism”, *New Left Review*, 225 (1997): 28-53.

logic of multinational capitalism”, against which he would paradoxically propose a “defense of intolerance”.

What we rather need today is a transcultural perspective, where the concept of transculturality – as Wilkoszewska remarks – “refers to the image of the world in the process of globalization where the concept of transaction replaces the concept of interaction, the concept of relational networks (defined through terms like rhizome, nomadism, ecosystem) proves to be more appropriate than the idea of binary and opposing relations, and the concept of complementarity and diaspora take the place of optionality. The common axis of all proposed concepts that are to replace the previous ones is their syncretic character going across the accustomed bipolar relations”.¹³

Moreover, the transcultural approach should be based on an articulated logic of difference. Considered far from the principle of identity and contradiction, difference is not to be understood as an absolute foreignness, like radical transgression that frequently, as alternative and speculative behaviour, is functional to the very system and ends up re-enforcing it. Lacan and Derrida have taught us otherwise: we can never truly find the other, the different, without domesticating it, incorporating it, reducing it in some way to the same.¹⁴ The work of difference is really a differential movement that incites us to deconstruct the illusion of a pure theory of alterity and of difference, and instead to contemplate a kind of *foreign familiarity*, a middle land that inextricably unites identity and alterity, the inherent and the foreign.¹⁵

In this new approach cultures are all really equal and different at the same time, deeply open to the dialogue, crossing, contamination, ibridation, dissemination, and where the game of identity and difference is played in the dimension of the *in-between*. Perhaps only in this transit place between cultures, that is a mediation dividing or a distance connecting, we can experience the culture of others without forgetting our own culture. The term “between,” translating the Greek word *metaxú* (from *metá* which means “in the middle,” “among,” and *sún*, which means “with,” “together”), denotes the place that lies in the middle of two elements and that links, indicating almost paradoxically on the one hand a state of separation, and on the other hand a movement of approach. In it we could find both the distance between two terms and their closeness. According to this point of view, the relationship between cultures, between us and them, inside and outside, staying and going, for instance, could not be conceived of in terms of binary relation, juxtaposition or of radical contrast and then solved in the form of a dialectical resolution, but in a complementary form through a between, that holds together the terms by the emergence of their distance. So, we could imagine this transcultural perspective, this transit philosophy through the concept of the bridge, where our task is put precisely into contact and thereby conceives ideas, concepts, perspectives, and practices that keep them together despite their distance.

But now, why do we get usually the impression that there are always real difficulties to talk of cultural studies and transcultural approach in official aesthetics and to deal seriously with it, at least in Europe and on a large scale?¹⁶

13 Wilkoszewska, “Transcultural Studies in Aesthetics”, 84-85.

14 See Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966); Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967); Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972).

15 On this idea of difference see our essay “The Aesthetics of Resistance”, *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 11 (2013).

16 A good exception in this trend is the new book just cited edited by Jos de Mul and Renée van de Vall, *Gimme*

My idea is that although things have radically changed in the last decades, and that the rigid distinctions dividing high and low culture are generally disappeared, especially after the spread of postmodernism, still endures the idea that there is a Culture with a capital “C” and cultures which are considered minor. There are still classes of artifacts and popular art forms that tend not to be taken seriously, as they look “banal”, “degrading”, and too easily “consumable”.¹⁷ There are still many concerns over whether all everyday artistic experiences are worthy of reflection. Usually, there are two kinds of reservation: that everyday life artifacts induce passive reception that affects our critical thinking and faculty of judgment; and that they supposedly do not involve any acute or skillful use of materials.

As is well-known, these concerns were seriously raised by the Frankfurt School and by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in particular.¹⁸ These concerns are not entirely unfounded, they are my own concerns too, since current socio-cultural degradation and ideological confusion within a general context of hyper-communication have muddled the boundaries between collective cultural expressions and the logic of commercialization with its market economy based on audience ratings. As such, the latest invention on the media scene is not necessarily a sign of updated and progressive reason; it is, after all, just a form of cultural populism.

Nowadays, the logic of commercialization seems to have infiltrated all levels of production and circulation of cultural goods, thus threatening the autonomy and the very idea of culture. To this end, Pierre Bourdieu would remind us that culture is always at risk wherever mere logic of profit predominates.¹⁹ One of the consequences is the difficulty for cultural practices to develop a proper political consciousness as long as we keep absorbing ourselves in the trivial and obscurantist mood of today’s spirit.

The culturalist paradigm

This said, of course, cultural studies has been subject of much criticism over the years, not only because of its alleged eclecticism, lack of scientific rigor, theoretical or methodological unreliability, but also because of its interest in opaque factuality, its historical shortcuts, and the development of a kind of *bricolage* style mixing too different elements in its analyses. A diametrically opposed criticism can be made of traditional aesthetics on account of its generally rigid methodology, elitism and even ethno-centricism. Not only did Western traditional aesthetics tended to have a suspicious attitude towards other disciplines and approaches; it also predominantly focused on “canonical” texts – the only ones thought to be serious, profound and worthy of critical analysis and evaluation.

From this standpoint, it seems difficult to find some reasons of encounter between cultural studies and aesthetics, they appear to be too different, too heterogeneous. And it is worth recalling too that cultural studies was born as a radical critique of aesthetics,

Shelter. Global Discourses in Aesthetics (Amsterdam: Amsterdam U.P., 2013).

17 See John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989); John Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Noel Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998).

18 See Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin S. Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002 [orig. pub. 1947]).

19 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Contre-feux 2* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 2001).

aimed at overcoming the latter’s autonomous, detached and disinterested outlook as much as its reluctance to incorporate other spheres of knowledge – especially when relating to social, political and economic issues. Cultural studies has offered an anthropological vision of culture that considers “the whole way of life,” to borrow Raymond Williams’ wording,²⁰ not only in its artistic and intellectual forms but also by comprising all its economic, political and social structures.

In truth, in spite of a certain dialogue’s difficulty, both cultural studies and aesthetics have, over the years, gained from each other. Aesthetics has always been a vital source for cultural studies, as I said before, and the latter claiming a broader idea of culture has done nothing but support a different concept of aesthetics. In this sense, for Ian Hunter, echoing Walter Benjamin, cultural studies is even a way of “politicizing aesthetics”.²¹

Vice versa, relatively recently there have been enriching contributions in the field of aesthetics from social, economic, and political perspectives, such as Pierre Bourdieu’s social critique of aesthetic judgement;²² Terry Eagleton on aesthetic ideology;²³ Slavoj Žižek on the complex features of mass culture;²⁴ and Jacques Rancière on the sensible and aesthetic *régimes*.²⁵ These are all noticeable instances of rethinking aesthetics on a necessarily broader political and “cultural” basis.

The contact points between aesthetics and cultural studies are thus deeper than it seems. So far, however, this meeting has happened almost completely on the basis of a culturalist paradigm, according to which culture is regarded as an organic whole, along with vitalistic elements and recalling categories like lived experience, harmony and human completeness. It is exactly what we can find in the significant study on the topic by the Australian scholar Ian Hunter.²⁶ Here, this encounter is based mainly on an harmonic ideal and a biological development, believing that at the center of cultural studies’ project there is an organic idea of society and the aesthetic ideal of an harmonious life in which all conflicts are overcome. According to Hunter this relation seems to be a sort of import of sociological issues in the field of aesthetics or an export of aesthetic issues into the domains of anthropology, sociology and history. He finds a close relationship between cultural studies and aesthetics, recalling the continuity between the harmonious ideal of aesthetic life outlined by Friedrich Schiller at the end of the eighteenth century, and the program of British cultural studies developed during the 1950s and 1960s in particular by Raymond Williams. So if “an ideal mode of life” is the main project of Schiller, based on a complete realization of the person to be achieved through a dialectical totalization of the faculties, Williams’ project is found in the search of an harmonious and fully pacified existence, what the Welsh critic called

20 Williams, *Culture and Society*, 17-18.

21 See Ian Hunter, “Aesthetics and Cultural Studies,” in Grossberg et al.; Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt ed. (London: Fontana, 1968).

22 See Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction* (Paris: Minuit, 1979); and Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de L’art* (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

23 See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

24 Among the endless production of Slavoj Žižek, see at least *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997); and *Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso 1991).

25 See Jacques Rancière, *Le Partage du Sensible: Esthétique et Politique* (Paris: Fabrique, 2000); and Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans L’esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004).

26 See Ian Hunter, “Cultural Studies”, in Kelly, 480-484.

“the whole way of life”, which integrates artistic and intellectual phenomena in the totality of society removing any conflict, any difference.

According to Hunter, cultural studies as a search for human completeness would thus recall what he calls a “critical aesthetics”, but intended in the sense of Schiller as a project of accomplishment of human being and as idea of an aesthetic society supremely reconciled, achieved through the overcoming of the faculties’ fragmentation and dialectical reconciliation of historical and anthropological contrasts in a higher harmony. In short, in Hunter’s analysis, cultural studies would somehow originate by the romantic conception of aesthetic self-accomplishment, first developed by Schiller.

Now, based on these features, the articulation of the relationship between aesthetics and cultural studies seems to me very worrying. If this is the meaning of the contribution of cultural studies to aesthetics it seems that the loss would be greater than the benefits. Because this approach seems not only completely ignoring two centuries of critical thinking (from Marx, Nietzsche, Freud to Heidegger, Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida...), which has deconstructed any absolutist claims, any accommodating and candid vision of culture and society, but even closing both eyes over the deep transformations regarding contemporary society, over globalization and present crisis. The idea of society has become so complex and multiple today that it is completely misleading claiming to reduce it to a unity, a wholeness or to represent it organically.

It is thus crucial holding off a naive vision of society like an harmonious idea of culture, embracing instead resolutely a transcultural perspective, as above mentioned, without avoiding the challenge it launches to aesthetics.

The fact that today we keep hearing that everything is culture, does not mean that it can still be thought nostalgically and systematically as a unitary whole, or as something pacific and consensual, because today, instead, it seems that culture has become even more controversial as an object of opposition, as a sort of “contested terrain” as Douglas Kellner writes.²⁷

In a sense we could say that every culture is transcultural, because cultures have never been homogeneous, monolithic, self-sufficient, impenetrable and unchanging. All cultural traditions have never had a ‘pure origin’, they have always been influenced and derived from other cultural contexts. So, the ‘origin’ of our culture itself lies always elsewhere.

This is particularly true today, with the process of globalization, that is more than an economic process affecting actually the social and cultural dimensions of life as well. And perhaps the only way to deal with globalization, as suggested by Jos de Mul and Renée van de Vall, is “to open ourselves to the cultures of others without giving up our cultural roots, but to use them as means of interpreting the rapid changes that our world and lives undergo”.²⁸ Culture thus became a field of profoundly strategic forces that contest the global scene and that transform, collapse and reposition interests, values and meanings in a grand arena where individual and collective actions intertwine, making our destiny constantly at stake.

So, if aesthetics stops thinking of itself as a pure and self-sufficient discipline, adopting a transcultural and inclusive point of view, it has to deal with the open horizon

27 Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995), 5.

28 Jos de Mul and Renée van de Vall, “Introduction”, 14.

of cultural studies, gather the challenges that come from the current multiform society, putting away conventional views and disciplinary rigidity, overcome an ethnocentric and exclusively western point of view and dealing with marginal or alternative experiences coming from society, avoiding conformism as much as pedantry.

This involves answering to the provocation and the challenge that cultural studies and transcultural approach throw to aesthetics, studying the ways in which meanings, values and experiences are given and are produced in contemporary society.

It is a challenge in certain way obliged, that is impossible, and in a way even irresponsible, to ignore. The consequences of philosophy and culture of the past fifty years are difficult to remove, they require to deal with a radical critique of traditional philosophical concepts, make a definitive break with the old humanistic and conciliatory claims of eighteenth-century aesthetics, with its classical and all-encompassing categories (such as beauty, life, pleasure...) and a dualistic, detached and aristocratic view, which separates and distinguishes clearly between high and low order of truth and meaning.

It is then essential rethinking aesthetics in a dimension different from the affirmation of its presumed purity and self-sufficiency and instead capable to rediscover its constituent impurities, its radical compromise with the spurious dimensions of the body, of feeling, of life styles, with the context of economic and social values, with symbolic powers, with the ever changing spheres of feeling and its strong links with all forms of culture and society.

The Contested Field of Aesthetics

Exactly what happens, for instance, in the new pragmatist aesthetic perspective of Richard Shusterman, which emphasizes not only the general importance of human experience, but above all the centrality of the body²⁹ (“somaesthetics” is the term he coined to denote this new interdisciplinary approach to aesthetics deeply rooted on *soma*, i.e. “corporeality”, that is a living and sentient body³⁰). Reclaiming its historical-experiential and not merely hedonistic dimension, as well as the idea that thought, language and bodies are essentially socially situated and historically determined, Shusterman attempts to rethink aesthetics as an essential intertwining of theory and practice, an interaction of art, life and thought. But he goes further theorizing meaningfully the break of overwhelming traditional aesthetic hierarchies and the boundaries of legitimacy between, for instance, high and popular art. Indeed, only a rigid dualism and an oppositional perspective could make impossible to appreciate both popular and high culture. Appreciating popular art does not mean condemning high art or vice versa. Against a principle of exclusivist disjunction which tends to focus only one of the two elements considered (A or B), and usually the one regarded as superior, the principle underlying the pragmatist aesthetics, which responds to a logic of “disjunctive stance”, as Shusterman calls it, allows to choose and enjoy both, and so one thing does not rule out the other³¹.

29 See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

30 The “somaesthetics” project is fully developed in Shusterman’s book entitled *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

31 See Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*.

As an example of breaking hierarchy and strong theoretical legitimacy of popular art, Shusterman suggests the case of rap music, often labeled as superficial, commercial and standardized, but their best examples (e.g. Stetsasonic, Ice-T, Run DMC or Public Enemy) are often not without complexity, philosophical contents, artistic awareness, creativity, as well as emotional skills, self-examination and bodily stimuli. The legitimacy of rap music as an outstanding form of popular culture is a central idea in Shusterman’s project. So, according to the author, rap music represents an excellent example to debunk the idea that popular culture can not be creative and, as everybody knows, rap music is capable of gaining success challenging the predominant musical taste.

Now, many new forms of cultural expressions are increasingly crossed by signs and codes of different nature that come together, diverge, mingle and change meaning, and all this require then openness and thought agility, as well as a critical knowledge that should be deep, articulated and flexible. We should mainly note that the loosening of narrow disciplinary ties does not lead to greater confusion or to a sterile flattening on the data, or worse still, to a mere glorification of the existent. It is important to deal always with these phenomena in a critical and lucid manner and to avoid the double error of dilettantism and superficiality, complacency or apologia, without ever avoiding the experience of conflict and difference.

In this general sense, in conclusion, aesthetics should present itself as a *contested field*, one could say, that is, as a contested field of perceptions, visions, experiences, lifestyles, judgments and values that articulate cultural practices, search for meanings, processes of individual and collective identities on a highly dynamic socio-political background.

So, to try to grasp the emergence of what’s new, aesthetic reflection should be able to really deal with the changing forms of contemporary sensibility, which are increasingly characterized by the experience of difference, opposition, conflict, as they are made up of nets, connections, ibridations and contaminations. An aesthetics that is able to pass through all these experiences comes out fully transformed, renewed, achieving full consciousness and a strong theoretical and methodological maturity. Instead, continuing to consider aesthetics as a pure science, proudly claiming its ineffable academic autonomy and its ideological superiority, it means not only deny it a future, but condemn it to an inexorable and quick decline.

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“Escribo sobre el tiempo presente.
Con lenguaje secreto escribo,
pues quién podría darnos ya la clave
de cuanto hemos de decir”.

José Ángel Valente, *Sobre el tiempo presente*



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