

Contemporary Aesthetics. A Topographic Attempt

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Introduction. Echoes from the Present

The primary goal of the ESPES Journal is to promote dissemination of contemporary approaches in the field of Aesthetics and the Philosophy of art. One way to do this is by publishing general, non thematic issues that can provide the readers with a realistic snapshot of the discipline in its current state, outside and beyond the constraints of its academic capacity.

Among the things that can be argued about aesthetics today, one is especially true: heterogeneity. As never before, the field is characterized nowadays by a great variety of styles, attitudes, and methodologies that make it look like a jagged land - a discontinuous and irregular ensemble of diverse interests and concerns. Presumably, this plurality is the result of internal developments happened in the artistic discourse of the twentieth century, which lead to an increasing complexity in artistic practice in the first place, and in art theory in the second.¹

Whatever its exact causes, though, this situation can create a sense of dizziness in those approaching the field for the first time. Finding a clear path in the *mare magnum* of theories, schools, attitudes that emerge from current aesthetic theorizing may seem like trying to find one's bearings without a compass. And yet, for the professional aesthetician, this vertiginous plurality is but a striking sign of the vitality of the discipline itself. In the absence of a single direction, of stable and well-rooted philosophical traditions, scholars are today free to choose, to invent, to make their own independent discoveries outside the cage of ready-made ideologies. Interestingly, this freedom also gives one the chance to engage in a more creative relationship with the past. Retracing the past, indeed, goes along with exploring new territories towards yet unforeseen areas of interest.

Without any attempt to reduce this complexity, our goal in the present issue of ESPES is to provide a tentative 'topography' of the diversified theoretical experiences that compose the scope of contemporary aesthetics. The aim is not to present a comprehensive anthology of the discipline and its sub-branches, one able to cover all issues that are discussed today in aesthetic fori. Such a venture would be a priori doomed to failure, nor is a perfect representation of reality on a one-by-one scale what a topography is primarily meant to do. Rather, our attempt is to shed light on some significant patterns of current aesthetic discourse that can serve as landmarks facilitating the exploration of the field.

As the reader will observe, all the eight essays that comprise this collection focus on issues that are, albeit different from one another, emblematic of a number of debates in contemporary aesthetics. Most of these papers provide a re-interpretation of a variety of old problems - the status of kitsch, the complex subject of art reception and interpretation, the ontology of art, the notion of post-historical art - that represent *topoi* in the history of aesthetics. Others seek to inaugurate a contemporary and unprecedented perspective - the notion of

¹ See Welsch, 1992, p. 387

projective aesthetics, a different idea of aesthetic education. In any case, whether they commit in dialogue with tradition or attempt to uncover new theoretical avenues, all the texts presented here bring an original contribution to the clarification of the various problems they address. In the remainder of this *Introduction*, we will briefly address these papers individually so as to highlight how each of them may serve as a useful benchmark that can help us draw the map of today's aesthetics.

Old Problems, New Solutions

Max Rynnänen's insightful article *Kitsch Happens* provides a re-evaluation of the negative characterisation of kitsch as pseudo or bad art that has been raging in much aesthetic investigation of the 20th century. Questioning the assumption that kitsch is not possible in nature but only in *representations* of nature (Kulka, 1994), Rynnänen analyses the case of landscapes to ask whether natural phenomena can be a possible source for experiences of kitsch. This leads him to reconsider the history of the concept, from its first theorization in the work of Clement Greenberg to the latest tendencies of so-called "pro kitsch art community" (Nerdrum et al., 2001). While, according to Rynnänen, in earliest years kitsch was mainly examined "from the outside" just to be condemned as fiercely contrasting with true Art (i.e., modernism, in Greenberg's terms) and authenticity, a "second wave" of research on kitsch was initiated by Umberto Eco's (1997), and Tomáš Kulka (1994). In this period, kitsch started attracting the curiosity of scholars as a phenomenon of interest in itself, worthy of serious examination and scientific analysis. Finally, in the last few years, "a third wave" of studies on kitsch has emerged, which emphasizes the positive aspects of kitsch and examines how kitsch as a concept and as a form of sensitivity can vary according to the different countries and cultures. "*Authors on this side of the millennium*" Rynnänen writes "*are no longer much interested in good/ bad art (which for them is just good/ bad art) or the non-legitimization of certain forms of e.g. (lowbrow) painting, when they discuss kitsch.*"

Interestingly, it is in the light of this more recent evolution of the notion that the question of nature as a source of kitsch becomes possible. Indeed, according to Rynnänen, once we stop looking at kitsch as a despicable phenomenon and begin considering it as a shared cultural 'heritage' – a part of "our cultural *a priori*", in his words – we can come to recognize kitsch as something that simply happens, and that we can therefore recognize also in nature – in a sunset for instance – as a trace of the images or pictures we have learned to see and identify. This consideration brings Rynnänen to a redefinition of the notion of the *Kitschmensch*, as someone who, rather than simply lacking so-called 'good taste', is instead visually "programmed" to appreciate kitsch, to the point of being led to make choices, even perhaps moral choices, on the basis of her implicit identification of kitsch (consider the use of sentimental and kitschy images to drive people to charity).

A more critical consideration of kitsch characterizes Doron Avital's and Karolína Dolanská's dense contribution, *From Tomas Kulka on Kitsch and Art to Art as a Singular Rule*. Drawing on Kulka's concept of a Popper-inspired aesthetics, the authors contend that kitsch works can be defined as alteration-resistant: they cannot allow for any change in their form – whether better or worse – because each possible variation is in principle able to replace the original item without loss of aesthetic value. Since it cannot be falsified, kitsch is only pseudo-art. What indeed defines true Art (like true science in Popper's account) is, according to Avital and Dolanská, the possibility of its being improved upon, thus 'falsified'; in other words, its capacity to survive, as it were, the 'falsifiability test'. But what are these variations about? And how do they relate to the specific "perceptual Gestalt" that, in Kulka's terms, that makes each single work what it is? According to the authors, a distinction that helps clarify the matter is that between the 'what' and the 'how' of the work of art. Variations affect the way (i.e. *how*) a work's perceptual Gestalt (i.e. *what*) is presented.

This distinction provides the basis for Avital's and Dolanská's criticism of Kulka (1994). Thinking, with Kulka, that there exists a single, constant, unchangeable 'what' for every work of art is for the two authors misleading, since the different manners and conditions according to which a work can be presented and experienced (its *how*) necessarily intrude upon what we consider its Gestalt (i.e., its *what*) to be. To explain this, the authors

refers to the famous example of the duck-rabbit: when we switch the figure and the background in the picture (either the duck or that of the rabbit), we also switch the ‘what’ and the ‘how’. In this sense, the distinction between the ‘what’ and ‘how’, between figure and background, is far less clear-cut than it may appear, and should be conceived of as open to our “free play” among competing visual readings. This is also compatible, according to the authors, with the notion of a work of art being a ‘singular rule’ in itself. This notion is important for aesthetic appreciation, because it determines the extent to which a given work succeeds or fails in complying with the standard it itself has posited and thus provides us with a parameter to assess how valuable the work is. It is only to the extent that a work is a singular rule that it can qualify as a proper ‘Work of Art’ as well as, in Kantian terms, as “the mark of genius”; this, Avital and Dolanská conclude, is just another way of claiming that kitsch does not count as art.

Expanding on the relation between an artwork’s possible ‘variations’ and aesthetic appreciation is also Vlastimil Zuska’s paper *Non-structural version of the variational method - the explanatory weakness of Gestalt, the limits of imagination and rejection of the Other*. Commenting on Kulka’s (2019) notion of ‘variational method’, Zuska claims that what we regard as ‘altered versions’ of a work of art are in fact just imaginary constructs, characterized by a different ontological status with respect to the object of our actual perception (the work before our eyes). In this sense, they cannot receive the same kind of consideration we accord to the real artwork when it comes to aesthetic appreciation.

Just like Avital, Zuska criticizes Kulka’s use of the concept of a *unique* non-aesthetic perceptual Gestalt determining the identity of an artwork. Using the ‘figure-background’ scheme as an example, he points out how certain pictures, like for instance the duck-rabbit, are bistable and do not allow for any singular reading, and concludes therefore that the assumption of the uniqueness of the perceptive Gestalt is misplaced. In fact, according to Zuska, the main flaw of Kulka’s account lies in its recourse to the notion of Gestalt. Quoting Jan Mukařovský, Zuska argues that the structure of a work of art, meant as a whole, is hierarchical, i.e. it contains subordinate and superior components, so its totality cannot simply be reduced to a “Gestaltqualität”. In this sense, the concept of structure seems to him more productive when it comes to explaining artworks’ intrinsic ambiguity, because – unlike the rigidity of the notion of Gestalt – it involves the idea of a vital interaction among the work’s components and the context. Able as it is to account for the interactions taking place among the work’s parts as well as between the work and the living artistic tradition that comprises it, structuralism offers us a method that outreaches the limits of Gestalt as such.

A further concern, according to Zuska, is represented by the fact that Kulka is not clear about the reasons why the method of ‘alterations’ should constitute the best way of addressing aesthetic problems. Even the introduction of the three core notions of unity, complexity and intensity, according to Zuska, does not help him avoid some form of skepticism, mainly because at least two of these notions, unity and intensity, rely on the viewer’s ability to correctly interpreting the work. When evaluating a work of art, viewers are indeed prone to overemphasize unity among the work’s parts, while disregarding all the elements that may disturb the whole. This suggests that the method of alteration is unable to exempt us from misunderstandings and errors of assessment.

The modalities through which works of art are usually perceived and evaluated lie at the core of Ondřej Krátký’s paper *Perception, Length Of Its Duration, Evaluation: Various Authors, Related Observations*. Focusing on the case of artistic ‘texts’ (a term which is taken by Krátký to refer to all genres of artistic production - from literature and painting to music, movies, sculpture) the author examines what he refers to as the ‘linear’ facet that characterises the spectator’s perception. According to Krátký, the standard way recipients have to approach a text is by gradually gaining a sequence of perceptions of it, until the moment the text is somehow “replete” in their eyes. In this sense, Krátký claims, the more ‘static’ an artistic text is (like a painting for instance) the greater will be the activity required on the part of the recipient to appreciate it.

Referring to Paul Grice’s conversational theory (1975), Krátký argues that the main goal underlying all forms of artistic creation is an effort, on the part of an artist, to communicate a certain message to an audience. In

this sense, art appreciation can be seen as implying an “exchange” between the artists’ communicative intent and the recipients’ perception of such intent. According to Grice, ideal communication in conversations occurs when all so-called *maxims of conversation* (cooperation, quantity, quality, relation) are respected by the speakers. Nevertheless, according to Krátký, in the case of artistic texts, effective communication can be obtained also by intentional violations of the norms that ground the expectations of the recipient.

Violation of the recipients’ expectations is indeed a tool often used by artists to produce a certain communicative effect on the part of the spectator, which Krátký identifies in a phenomenon of ‘arousal’. Arousals are not necessarily negative, but may in fact have a positive effect on the recipient. In this sense, according to Krátký, artistic communication succeeds both when the spectator’s expectations are fulfilled and when the spectator is brought, by experiencing a state of ‘arousal’, to “jump” to a different reading or perception of the work itself. Our evaluation of an artistic text, thus, does not strictly depend on how much a text meets our expectations. Predictability and unpredictability - i.e., the qualities of an object to either meet or fail our expectations - are in themselves neutral features that can be perceived as good or bad (“welcomed” or “unwelcomed” in Krátký’s terms) by different people in different situations. Accordingly, one recipient may interpret an artistic text negatively because of its unpredictability, while the other can appreciate it exactly for the same reason. This, however, leads Krátký to raise the following question: when it comes to appreciating an artistic product, are we expecting the unexpected or are we rather expecting the expected?

In his captivating contribution, *Projective Aesthetics as a Possible World*, Boris Orlov explains the nature, origins and purposes of the approach he calls “projective aesthetics” (Orlov, 2015, p. 43) as well as its possible role in the development of future discourses in aesthetics. Projective aesthetics, Orlov claims, prospects a new way of understanding aesthetic practices, one resting essentially on three main pillars: Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of ‘schizoanalysis’ (2010) as stemming from the important concept of rhizome; a so-called ‘conceptivistic methodology’, where conceptivism stands for an interpretation of philosophy as concept-production; and, third, the notion of projectivity, meant as a practical way of engaging with the dimension of aesthetics. This practical engagement, that Orlov ascribes to Dewey’s pragmatism and Berleant’s aesthetic thinking, turns projective aesthetics into a non purely theoretical discipline, aiming to account for all the aesthetic experiences potentially happening at any time and any place of human everyday life. Because of its shift from theory to praxis, the object of projective aesthetics must be re-configured in terms of the two related phenomena that, Orlov contends, contribute in equal way to making our experience of the world meaningful, what he calls *aestheticization* and *artification* of reality. It is the goal of projective aesthetics to potentiate our aesthetic taste so as to enable us to “saturate our life” by way of aestheticizing or artificizing it to its maximum. In this sense, projective aestheticians do not simply investigate what is beauty or what is art, but explore “*how to bring [...] beauty or artistry in their own life?*”.

Relevantly, it is mainly in virtue of its practical connotation that projective aesthetic can enter into dialogue with some of the most innovative approaches characterizing contemporary aesthetic field, from everyday aesthetics to environmental aesthetics, contemporary art practices and media aesthetics. A common feature of all these approaches - however different they may be from one another in content and concern - is indeed that they all interpret aesthetics as a dimension that is able to provide us with something existentially significant, potentially capable of transforming our whole being. The transformative power of aesthetic experience also represents an important element in Orlov’s educational practice as an aesthetic teacher. Beyond the constraints of traditional ex cathedra academic communication, embracing projective aesthetics can lead to the implementation of educational projects in which students are allowed to engage personally and practically with the aesthetic dimension, for example by relying on their own experience of beauty or with their own sensitive body.

An interest in education also features in Jana Migašová’s paper *Black Mountain College Case: Transformation Trends in Art Education in the First Half of the 20th century*. Migašová analyzes the case of the Black Mountain College, a college operating in Black Mountains (North Carolina, United States) from 1933 to 1957, *alma mater* to many

famous artists such as Josef Albers, John Cage, Walter Gropius, Willem de Kooning, and Robert Rauschenberg, among the others. Focusing on the role played by John Dewey's pragmatism and progressivism on the educational approach implemented in the college, Migašová investigates the relationship that tied the American school to another important institution of that time - also groundbreaking in concept and vocation - namely, the German Bauhaus. Like Walter Gropius' school in Weimar, the Black Mountain College was clearly devoted to both practical and formal instruction in the field of liberal arts, including subjects as mathematics, psychology, economy, etc. Placed at the core of the education delivered by the academy, art was seen as providing a synthesis between the humanities and the natural sciences, a dimension capable of bringing together all the multiple facets that comprise culture.

This was in fact the idea of one of the school's leading figures, the German painter and teacher Josef Albers, to whom Migašová devotes a large part of her contribution. A former member of the Bauhaus who emigrated to the United States in the Nazi period, Josef Albers had distinctive opinions concerning the role of education in society and politics, which he derived, according to Migašová, from his own practice as an artist. In his educational 'manifesto', *Concerning Art Instruction*, Albers conceived art as both the "experimental arm of culture" as well as a way to create meaningful forms, what he saw as the prerequisite of cultural production and progress. In his courses at the College, Migašová tells us, Albers followed Dewey's conception of the *learning by doing*, beginning each lesson with exercises of a practical nature (like measuring, dividing, estimating etc.) that, to his mind, could strengthen students' handicraft capability and, subsequently, their freedom to engage in more personal kind of work. One important part of Albers' educational methods, according to Migašová, was indeed attributed to training the learners' discipline - where discipline was, however, meant in a strictly "anti-academic" way. The role Albers granted to freedom for exploration and experimentation in his teaching activity at Black Mountains College, his understanding of art as necessarily related to ethics and politics, and, more generally, his progressive ideas concerning education may, according to Migašová, represent an interesting model for re-conceiving our higher education, especially in the field of arts, in a more progressive and democratic sense.

Lisa Giombini's paper *Descriptivism in Meta-Ontology of Music. A plea for Reflective Equilibrium*, inaugurates a shift toward the realm of ontological and meta-ontological investigations about the arts. Drawing on current discussions in analytic aesthetics concerning the methodology underlying musical ontology, Giombini examines one of the most popular positions in the debate, namely, descriptivism. As a general meta-ontological approach, descriptivism can be traced back to a tradition coming prominently from Peter Strawson's (1959), who introduces it to discuss the broader issue of determining the task of general metaphysics. According to Strawson, metaphysics should be aimed at describing "the actual structure of our thought about the world" (Strawson, 1959, p. 9) as reflected in ordinary language. Applied to the case of music, this implies that our best ontological theories of musical works are those which prove consistent with our intuitive thought and discourse about actual practice, more than with the abstract claims of metaphysics.

Despite its current success among scholars, descriptivism raises in fact, in Giombini's perspective, a whole number of issues, the first being the role it assigns to our pre-theoretical intuitions about music as the main sources for ontological theorizing. This, according to Giombini, is especially problematic because of the contradictory nature of intuitions themselves. For example, there seems to be a broad variety of intuitions underlying what we believe an authentic performance of a musical work is, all in conflict with each other. It is therefore unclear how we should choose between them and which of them we must elect as the foundation for our ontology. Moreover, Giombini contends, it seems also disputable whether descriptivism is really able to offer us any form of non-trivial knowledge, given that its deliberate task is to codify the regularities found in our intuitive discourses about musical practice.

A possible way to redeem descriptivism against these lines of criticism, according to Giombini, might be through reference to the so-called method of *reflective equilibrium*, as famously envisaged in the field of ethics by John Rawls (1971). As a philosophical method, reflective equilibrium refers to a procedure aimed at revising,

adjusting or filtering our pre-theoretical intuitions, so as to achieve the higher possible level of consistency among the judgments that have stood up under rational examination. Importing this method in the framework of ontological inquiries about music, Giombini argues, might help descriptivism overcome some of the difficulties entailed in recourse to intuitions, thus making it more resistant to objections. What is more, reflective equilibrium could also have an impact on the type of knowledge achievable by means of a descriptivist ontological theorizing. Indeed, according to Giombini, by acknowledging some degree of revision in our intuitive conception of musical practice, we end up with a knowledge that is not just trifle codification of the already-known.

In her inspiring contribution, Daniela Blahutková presents a different perspective on a subject that has attracted the attention of theoreticians for decades if not for centuries, namely, that of the end of art and of the fate of art in the post-historical period. This topic, commonly referred to the thought of Hans Belting and Arthur Danto, is complemented in Blahutková's paper with the work of the relatively less known philosopher and sociologist Arnold Gehlen. Post-history, in Gehlen's perspective, corresponded to the crystallization of a culture which was modern, technical and shaped by the avant-garde - a culture, however, in which syncretism of styles and creative production survived. As Blahutková highlights, to explain the notion of post-history Gehlen resorted to the idea that both the present and the future state of society were the result of an internal development of humankind according to three different stages, prehistory, history and posthistory, each identified by a different character. Gehlen's conception of art and of the logic behind the historical progress of pictorial rationality were based, according to Blahutková, on his view of the relationship insisting between art and social institutions, natural sciences, the bourgeoisie, and the industrial society of the 20th century.

Writing in the 1950s, Gehlen contended - somewhat pessimistically - that society was static and that no stimulus for a change could be expected - no "new horizons, breathtaking utopias". At the same time, however, he maintained that posthistory did not represent the finale stage of human existence. Since posthistory was, to his mind, the product of cultural crystallization, he emphasized the value of experimentation (both as an artistic process and as a symptom of the spiritual atmosphere of the industrial era), transformation and multiplication spreading both in post-historical culture and in art. As Blahutková underlines, this aspect explains why the avant-garde signified, for Gehlen, a new hope against the process of social crystallization. The emergence of the avant-garde had to be understood as the onset of subjectivity in the arts, associated in turn with the crisis of institutions such as state or religion. However, experimentation in the avant-garde art did not represent, he contended, a real form of artistic progress, mainly because of avant-garde persisting commitment with such institutions.

Relevantly, knowing that our post-historical society no longer requires art to fulfill its needs could give us, according to Gehlen, further opportunities to socialize, integrate, and coordinate our actions. Gehlen's attempt to devise an art theory despite his post-histoire diagnosis emerged from a need to investigate the boundaries of art and his concept of art as a vehicle of reflection. This is why, Blahutková concludes, Gehlen's example may still be relevant for our culture today.

Conclusions

What lesson could we learn from this tour into the jagged topography of contemporary aesthetics? From a purely academic viewpoint, the most relevant idea is probably the multifaceted nature of aesthetics as a field, intertwining philosophy, the theory of perception, sociology, art history and art criticism and addressing issues that go far beyond the realm of art and art theory.

Although the papers presented here do not answer to all the problems they raise – perhaps because there simply are no straightforward, easy answers – they all show originality and insightfulness in the particular way in which they put the relevant questions. To our mind, this is in fact one of the key aspects of any valuable theoretical investigation (in all fields): rather than finding solutions, raising the issue in a novel and interesting

way. This might also represent a way for aesthetics to cross the boundaries of the academic world and reach the interest of the general public, thus resisting to the increasing marginalization and excessive specialization to which all scientific disciplines are subject nowadays. We hope this issue will make a little contribution to this process too.

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