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The re-orientation of aesthetics and its significance for aesthetic education

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Loss and rediscovery

More and more these days it is asked whether aesthetics is still possible. A question that, given the context and phrasing, seems to direct us towards its answer. Conferences and meetings, books and journal specials examine the issue of aesthetics, talk about rediscovery or return of aesthetics. Well known philosophers and aestheticians underscore the need to reconsider the foundations of aesthetics and set new directions for aesthetics today (Berleant, 2004) or attempt to expand aesthetics beyond aesthetics – like Welsch, for example who tries to extend aesthetics beyond art to society and the life-world (Welsch, 1997). Others underline the need to revisit the aesthetic experience (Shusterman, 1999; Iseminger, 2002, Fenner, 1996) and examine the relevance or irrelevance of the aesthetic with art (Carroll, 2001). It seems that it is strongly recommended to turn to aesthetics on the condition however to carefully re-approach the meaning and import of the term in the present situation.

The aesthetic that Passmore condemned as “dreary” (Passmore, 1954), the one Sparshott considered a formless conception, vague and loose in application (Sparshott, 1982), the same that Danto emphatically argues that has nothing to do with the definition of art or arts in general (Danto, 1981) returns to claim its rightful place in the fields of philosophy and critical theory (Levine, 1994, Michaud, 1999), as well as artistic creation. And one cannot but wonder: what does this return mean? What was the degree of aesthetics decline that we need to discuss about recovery or for new implementations of aesthetics? Furthermore, how is this recovery possible amidst all those disputes and proclamations of art’s end or of art’s exit from its own history as well as of the corresponding elimination of the aesthetic experience with which our experience of art had been associated?

It was during the 60s when a strong wave of doubt began to question aesthetics (both in the Anglo-Saxon world, where research was directed towards issues dealing with the definition of art, as well as in continental philosophy where it developed into a confrontation with traditional aesthetic theories, meanings and categories). The concept of aesthetics was disputed, although this dispute was set within a wider context of heated arguments about arts, their status, their role and their place in contemporary conditions etc. Aesthetics was called a myth, an invention of modernity that we very well could do without favouring a more precise description and analysis of the elements distinguishing arts from other fields of human endeavour. It was argued that when we talk about art we shouldn’t do it in terms of aesthetic perception

and experience. Characteristic example is the case of George Dickie who talks about the phantom of aesthetic experience and the myth of aesthetic attitude, expressing, in a rather explicit manner, the wider scepticism regarding the relevance of “aesthetics” in understanding and forming comprehensive definitions on art (Dickie, 1965; Dickie, 1974). Philosophical aesthetics could finally become de-aestheticised. Now one could, or better yet ought to, develop theories on art with non aesthetic or beyond aesthetic terms, in other words theories that examine art outside the aspect of aesthetic responses and experiences that art is capable to produce. Aesthetic theories were criticised as not competent to form substantial arguments or to comprehend issues relative to artistic pursuits and art concerns. The criticism exercised upon these theories by Noël Carroll is indicative of that trend (Carroll, 2001). He stated that “aesthetic theories” dominated the area of aesthetic philosophy because of a misunderstanding; theories about beauty (such as those from Hutcheson or Kant) were erroneously perceived as theories on art, resulting in a reduced perception of what should be expected by our contact with art. This contact was thus assumed to be a disinterested contact with the formal qualities of a work of art. Of course, when Kant analysed the principles used to formulate judgments on beauty wasn’t trying to produce a theory on art (it is common knowledge that Kant’s theory on beauty transcends pure art to cover the beauty of nature, which he exemplifies) and in any case it’s not at all certain that his analysis on beauty leads to a formalistic aesthetic approach. This approach was probably the result of a rather selective and possibly constrained interpretation of Kantian theory on beauty by Clive Bell. Clive Bell transferred Kant’s perceptions on form and disinterestedness into a theory on art, thus introducing a strict aesthetic formalism which was subsequently connected to artistic modernism. Key-concepts from the theory on beauty (form and disinterested pleasure) were transferred into art theory and directed philosophical aesthetics towards an “aesthetic” orientation. This led to the systematic reduction of art theory into aesthetic theory, which, as Carroll argues, leads to a de facto reduction into a theory on beauty (Carroll, 2001: 32-33), as it was expressed during the 18th century. Rejection of aesthetic theory thus (that theory which was developed under the prism of aesthetical=beautiful) was considered –within the context of that criticism– as a positive departure from a fallacy. It was considered as liberation from, as some thought, the tyranny of modern aesthetics’ claim for universality, from its hermetic seclusion and persistence for its field purity as well as its ensuing refusal to mingle with other forms of culture.

Aesthetics emerged in the context of modernity and within this context it has been formed as an autonomous area of experience amongst the other fields of experience constituting the differentiated realm of Reason. In the context of criticism towards modernity this claim for aesthetics autonomy has been questioned as well and the possibility of formulating a distinctive aesthetic reason was strongly contested: Many argue that there is no such a thing as an autonomous reason of aesthetic experience, one that can clearly make the distinction from non aesthetic experiences. It was also assumed that defending this kind of reason leads to an isolation of the aesthetic experience, to a nostalgic devotion to the romantic and post-romantic ideal of aesthetic autonomy. This ideal however –being always in conflict with artistic practice– has been irrevocably surpassed by avant-garde –at least by some of its forms – (Bürger, 1984), post-modern and contemporary art.

In this case too the contestation of aesthetic experience autonomy is based on a misconception or, rather, misinterpretation of the third Kantian Critique. While it is beyond any doubt that Kant defines aesthetic as a distinct category of human experience, he didn't isolate it from theoretical reason and he certainly associated it with moral reason. Nevertheless, most Kant researchers including those who used Kant as a basis to form theories for modern art (headed by Clive Bell), focused on his arguments on the distinctiveness of aesthetic experience – exhibiting a selective preference on his analysis of the beautiful and grounded upon it a theory for absolute aesthetic purity. They were based on Kant's notion of purposiveness without purpose to develop a theory for the purity and independence of the art world and the aesthetic experience, which, as they argue, bears no relation with everyday interests and common experience. In the words of Clive Bell: “Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life” (Bell, 1958: 25). Obviously, these types of arguments raised a lot of objections and strong criticism. A characteristic such example is the critical approach of Terry Eagleton who, adopting a socio-political perspective, shows that the autonomy claimed for the aesthetic serves political goals, constituting a model of bourgeois individualism, i.e. of its own claims to autonomy. Aesthetic, in this view, appears attached to a political purpose and thus evidently non autonomous. Aesthetic autonomy is therefore completely rejected as specious (Eagleton, 1990).

In the last decades of the 20th century, criticism on aesthetics becomes more radical. Viewed from the area of cultural studies as well as from various forms of post-modern thought, aesthetics is approached as an ideology, deemed as retrograde and oppressive, accused of being discriminatory –since it allegedly concerns only those few who are capable of identifying aesthetic quality. It is repudiated as fetishist and confusing since it mystifies, as some argue, the value of art, imposing art as a preferential area for the emergence of higher values, thus isolating art from its historical, social or political dimension. The distinction principle instituted via aesthetic criteria is declared a negative value, a principle used to discriminate, one that shows conceit and failure to recognize something that is not similar to us. Thus the retreat or even the removal of aesthetic takes, from that point of view, a positive character. It relates with a movement of universal democratization, in other words, equal acceptance of all individual judgments as well as of all locally produced cultural or art like products (Michaud, 1997). Yet, at the same time it creates the risk for a less democratic acceptance even of the indifferent and the undifferentiated and succumbs to the false charm of relativism. This is something to be taken into serious thought in any attempt for critical re-consideration of aesthetics.

Strong doubts were also voiced from the side of artistic production, both on aesthetic purity as well as aesthetic autonomy. These doubts were expressed in a most radical way via some avant-garde and post-avant-garde movements of the 20th century, which advocated concurrence of art and life, removing art's integral capacity for form distinction, and thus denying aesthetic autonomy. As for contemporary art production, or at least a great part of it, it adopts a change in attitude, regarding previous art and the aesthetics of modernism, asking for maximum proximity to current aesthetics of production, transmission and reproduction of (constantly) changing images (in mass

media, advertising, video, cyber-media, interactive television etc). It appears that we moved from the modernistic defense of aesthetic autonomy to a state where art vies for its own assimilation in this new environment, the one imposed by pulsating, wobbling electronic image.

Is aesthetics something more?

After all these reservations and disputes, one cannot but wonder: Is there any room left to formulate an aesthetics which manages to rise above the mounting waves of criticism at theoretical level and able to confront the multiplicity of all available forms of artistic expression? An aesthetics, i.e., that needs to assume the duty to describe and comprehend this extremely mobile world, which is ours, this contemporary world of digital imagery and developing arts within virtual reality? If there is a chance then it has to be associated with the need to understand that *aesthetics is something more than what is conventionally acknowledged that it is.*

This can be achieved only if we identify the blank spots and errors that marked the development of modern aesthetics and restore the central categories of aesthetic and autonomy, purged from the weight of all those misconceptions associated with it during the modernistic period as well as the more recent period of doubt and criticism. In other words, on condition that aesthetic thought turns to itself in reflection and strives to clarify the nature of the aesthetic.

The problem with critical approaches of “aesthetic” philosophical aesthetics is that they remain restrained by the same misconception they bring to light: they continue to identify aesthetics with beauty while at the same time they go to emphasize how restrictive was this narrow focus of aesthetics in the idea of beauty, i.e. the identification of almost all aesthetic qualities with beautiful. Furthermore, they appear to overlook the other dimension of the “aesthetic”, the one undermined by the erroneous insistence to equate “aesthetic” with a narrow formalistic orientation. Danto –this ardent critic of aesthetics– says that the very notion of aesthetic undervaluates art, presenting art as something that is strictly related to pleasure, not with meaning and truth (Danto, 1986: 13). This is the reason why Danto questions every attempt to define art via aesthetic qualities. In *The Transfiguration of the Common Place* (Danto, 1981) Danto supports the view to cut the umbilical cord connecting art and aesthetics. Beauty, he argues, is not a parameter to define art, anything that possesses aesthetic qualities is not necessarily a work of art and subsequently a work of art is not identified as such by some inherent aesthetic qualities. Identifying an object as a work of art can’t be made in perceptual – aesthetic terms, it is necessary to resort to something else, thought and philosophy. We don’t “perceive” something as work of art; we interpret it as such within the frame of an “atmosphere of art theory”.

The cognitive dimension of the aesthetic is thus summarily dismissed resulting in one more misconception with serious repercussions on aesthetics, taking a place next to – and in relation to– the views equating aesthetic with beauty. Yet, the meaning of aesthetics is relative to the cognitive from the start, with Baumgarten as well as Kant. Initially Baumgarten didn’t develop his aesthetics as philosophy of art. Creating and understanding works of arts had served in his programme as an example – albeit preferentially – for the application of his philosophy. He exemplified cognitio

sensitiva as ars (art with its ancient Greek meaning): art is not passive acceptance of mimicry but action and expression. What Baumgarten tried to do was to propose an alternative philosophy on knowledge that moves beyond purely rationalistic, empirical or perceptual approaches, as noted by Stephen Gross (Gross, 2002: 403-414.) In reference to beauty, it's not connected with a sense of beauty, it's an intellectual category closely related to his theory of cognition and knowledge.

It is therefore the duty of philosophical aesthetics (which assumes also the duty to be a philosophical approach to art even within the complexity of the modern world of art) to: - Show how a simplistic interpretation of past theories of beauty, Kant's especially, separated rational from aesthetic judgment, and led to the view that aesthetic experience is connected exclusively with the immediacy of pleasure (disinterested pleasure of form, disassociated from any cognitive content). - Revisit Kant's theory of art—which ironically art philosophers and theoreticians sidestep in formulating their own theories on art— and discover there that the notion of the aesthetic may be far wider than is considered to be.

Kant, bringing the aesthetic under the authority of reflective judgements, shows how aesthetic experience should be conceived as a grasp of *meanings* through the senses. He claims that the notion of aesthetic experience is based not only on sensation but on reflection as well:

“The universal communicability of a pleasure already includes in its concept that this must not be a pleasure of enjoyment, from mere sensation, but one of reflection; and thus aesthetic art, as beautiful art, is one that has the reflecting power of judgment and not mere sensation as its standard” [Kant, 2000:185 - §44 (5: 306)].

Response to the form then, means to comprehend a meaning presented aesthetically, i.e., via images which do not represent what lies in concepts but *something else* [Kant, 2000:193 - §49 (5: 315)]; via representations of the imagination which allow the addition to a concept of much that is *unnamable* and the *feeling* of which animate the cognitive faculties [Kant, 2000:194 - §49 (5: 316)].

Aesthetic images tell us more than determinate linguistic expression can tell, permit us to think more than we can express in a concept determined by words. It is that *something else*, that *feeling of the unnamable*, that *more* which ascribes uniqueness to aesthetic experience.

Aesthetic experience is revealed as that rich, multidimensional experience (sensuous, emotive as well as cognitive), which constitutes the field of *aesthetics as that something more than what is conventionally acknowledged that it is*.

Clarify that aesthetic autonomy is not isolation but rather the necessary condition for aesthetic experience to freely unfold its potential. Aesthetic experience, as that meaningful experience described above, suspends familiarity with the world, upsets convictions and conventional ways of perception and leads to a critical approach of established meanings and representations of reality. And this not despite but rather because of its autonomy—of its necessary distance from other modes of experience—permitting it to apply its critical impact. It means aesthetic experience is not

immediately implicated in a critique of other forms of Reason; it can provide such a critique as an *effect* of the autonomy of its enactment (Menke, 1999).

It is therefore necessary for contemporary philosophical aesthetics to re-examine aesthetic as a value, one that we can apply to signify and re-signify our relation with the world. This value is connected, at the level of artistic creation, with opening new ways of expression and, at the level of experience, with advancing possibilities to surpass the narrow confines of individuality allowing participation in ever changing ways of perception or even transforming aspects of our relation with the world. From this point of view it is a measure of freedom exercised mainly due to this transformational influence of art or rather of our experience of art.

Aesthetics and aesthetic education

As such, aesthetics can have an essential role to play in the foundation of aesthetic education as a consistent, important and distinctive educational field. Aesthetics as conceived here, can orientate aesthetic education toward its self-understanding as an actual, living philosophy, putting in the centre of its own educational pursuits the creation of possibilities for the development of meaningful aesthetic experiences. Thus, aesthetic education assumes the duty to provide a practical answer to the question concerning the possibility of aesthetics. And it gives this answer by educating young people in grasping the meanings available from expressive forms, i.e. in understanding and responding to meaningful forms.

Potentially, everything in the world can be assumed to be producing these types of meanings, i.e., as a case of a meaningful form or in other words as something that can be aesthetically experienced. Art is precisely this intentional human endeavour to create forms revealing such kind of meanings and thus art “adds the crucial dimension of human engagement in the processes of generating, capturing, and sharing the cognitions available from this mode of representation” (Reimer, 1991: 202). Consequently, art –arts– teaching is the roadmap needed by aesthetic education to fulfil its purpose. The pursuit, mainly but not exclusively, with the kinds of artworks that emphatically project their meaning as art, in the sense and significance described above, can therefore bear the definition of “aesthetic education.” In this way aesthetic education becomes a route of initiation into processes of generating and conceiving meanings, derived by this particular way of engaging with the world and its various modes of articulation (or in other words, as an initiation into the aesthetic dimension of our contact with the world).

Thus, aesthetic education aims to create a comprehensive education field, the scope of which is to show that, through the interaction of young people with the conditions of creating and the ways of comprehending different arts, potential new ways of articulating certain aspects of their relation with the world can be developed. Via the various ways individual arts call upon them to understand their own particular aesthetic perceptions of how things are, the ability of young people for complete aesthetic responses should be enhanced, the complex (sensuous, emotive and cognitive) character of aesthetic experience promoted, and, what is most important, its critical impact exercised. Through its power to transport beyond daily routine, aesthetic experience (the complete aesthetic experience we mentioned above) can

exercise its “transformational” power on young people: it can make them appreciate the “benefits” they may gain if they open up to things and the world in ways different than usual, ways that do not convert things into utility or domination tools but help them “discover” the still invisible and unspoken dimensions of things, as bearers of mute meanings (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 35; Merleau-Ponty, 1960; Johnson & Smith, 1993: 14-34, 35). Art objects have this impact, being vehicles of meaning themselves; of a meaning not always explicit, arriving as the result of an earlier transformational process and calling upon us to grasp it through the way they are structured, i.e. organised as form. The study of various art forms and the comparison of the ways they are relating to reality, the examination of the meaning of art objects, aid in distinguishing not only the multiplicity of meanings mediated through art but, mainly, the transformational process allowing this mediation. Any type of subject may take part in defining the meaning of art works, on the assumption that, in every case, they’re subjected to a kind of transformation allowing them to function as essential parts of aesthetic meaning. It can be said that art transcends its referential content via its form, producing meanings disparate from the contents it incorporates: i.e. meanings non-interpretable by common or discursive language, aesthetically grasped and providing a reminder that there are other ways of seeing the world and human activity, apart from the instrumental views and commerce (Bowie, 2003: 1-14).

Aesthetic education, thus, as we understand it here –enhancing i.e. people’s ability to respond to meanings integrated in artistic forms–, should reorient our thinking as well as educational practices, towards restoring aesthetic experience as a value: as a meaningful, living experience, stimulating sensuous perception and at the same time calling for thinking. Paraphrasing Kant, we would say that contact with art gives occasion to young people’s imagination to spread itself over a number of aesthetically presented ideas and understand them as embodied meanings that arouse more thought that can be expressed in a concept determined by words. In other words, aesthetically experiencing art presents young people with opportunities to develop and nurture forms of knowledge and understanding that “marry thought and emotion in the service of meaning”. Eisner, talking about visual arts, fittingly notes that “they help us learn to see and to feel what we see”. This means that it is imperative to include arts education in aesthetic education programs and the most profound reason for this is that contact with arts can “help students understand that there is another way to live, another way to think, another way to be in the world” (Eisner, 2001: 9). And this other way is an aesthetic way. For aesthetic education this means that it can continue to defend the core meaning of aesthetic experience – and through that the autonomy of its own field – drawing arguments from philosophic aesthetic theory while at the same time validating these arguments within educational praxis (deed).

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