THE ROLE OF CULTURE IN SHAPING AESTHETIC TASTE AND ATTITUDE

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Abstract: *It appears it is vital to return to the subtle and complex issues of the aesthetic discourse under the current circumstances, in which people are reduced, often against their better judgment, to a pragmatic existence, out of culture, out of spirit, contaminated by tediousness and folly. While intellectuals are denouncing the worrisome features of popular culture and postmodern artists are building a self-referential hermetic world within an art they see as autonomous, the general public is in the position of being unable to take part or even being excluded from the area of culture and authentic art. The specialization of scientific and philosophical language, the declaring of art as either autonomous or "dead", the emergence of a puerile daily imaginary, the turning of folk art into kitsch, the syncretic occultismus - of any kind – proliferation, here are just some of the causes generating the current gap between elite and popular culture.*

Keywords: *aesthetic attitude, aesthetic interest, aesthetic taste, common sense, kitsch.*

There is a fairly extensive special literature dealing with the issue of *aesthetic attitude*, either to explain its specificity versus other human attitudes, or to characterize it by appealing to other related notions: aesthetic sense, aesthetic taste, aesthetic experience, aesthetic feeling, aesthetic interest, et cetera. The first important distinction is made between the aesthetic and the unaesthetic attitude. Generally, the aesthetic attitude is the particular manner a person looks at a certain thing or phenomenon, revealing *aesthetic interest* to it. However, the mere presence of the object neither guarantees any aesthetic interest for it, nor causes an aesthetic attitude. Equally true is that not only special objects (works of art) may cause aesthetic attitudes.

What is then aesthetic attitude? What is the relationship between it and the aesthetic taste? Is the aesthetic taste subjective or should it be

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objective? Is it innate or the result of a specific exercise provided by culture or aesthetic education?

At first glance, what distinguishes the aesthetic attitude from any other kind of attitude (cognitive, practical, and so on) is its selfless nature, meaning that the object of one's aesthetic judgement is looked at for itself, free, with no other purposes. Secondly, if we call aesthetic attitude a mood for aesthetic assessment of a certain object, it should be noted that this mood is voluntary (one *wants* to behold an object aesthetically) or involuntary (we happen to behold an object aesthetically). In this case, the analysis will be focused to the *intentional* nature of the aesthetic attitude. In other words, is *our aesthetic interest* brought about by the object or do we intentionally focus on it? What is the role of culture and education in the onset of the aesthetic interest, and consequently, in shaping aesthetic attitudes to prevent good taste slippages?

The search of the *aesthetic interest* for an object has been often linked to questioning the *aesthetic taste*. In modern philosophy, the meanings of the aesthetic taste indicate either the ability to derive pleasure from certain natural or artistic objects, or the ability to identify properties of objects, namely "special" ones. In its first meaning, aesthetic taste was the cherished analysis subject for aestheticians and philosophers of the 18th century, with the starting point in understanding beauty as a product of our judgments and not as their objective property. Such a theory of taste was developed by Immanuel Kant. According to the second meaning, whose most eminent theorist was D. Hume, taste was understood as the facility to distinguish certain properties through the five senses.

David Hume has paid attention to the topic of taste, after it had been understood for a long time as a human capacity to respond or react, by means of negative or positive emotions, to beauty or to ugliness. After Hume developed his theory, the perspective has been reversed: *taste* has become an *indicator* of beauty and ugliness, in the sense that the ability to distinguish certain attributes of objects is herewith defining for the aesthetic taste.

During the 18th century there was a great deal of talking about people with good taste, who enjoyed beautiful and valuable things, or simply about people who had highly developed senses (those working in the perfume industry, for instance). In Hume's opinion, the Beautiful is essential for one's response in matters of taste, having attributions which may even become subject of empirical investigations, but each mind perceives it differently. While to empiricist or naturalist aestheticians the

judgement of taste was an ability of irrational faculties, of sensitive perception, of feelings and the imaginative faculty, to rationalist aestheticians the judgement of taste had to obey some universal rules.

Kant agreed too that the Beautiful is experienced through taste, but denied the possibility of any empirical investigation of the sort stated by Hume. Consequently to his gnoseology, the German thinker claimed that the attempt to develop a "pure judgement of taste" starting from an object that he considered really beautiful would be doomed to failure with respect to proving its truth. Nobody can prove that such a judgement is fair. Moreover, such a judgement on the Beautiful will always be *impure*. In *The Critique of Judgment*[1], criticizing both the aesthetic-empiricist and the aesthetic-rationalist positions, Kant argued that we issue personal judgments of taste in no way subsumed to universal principles, although the aesthetic judgments should be founded in a manner to warrant them general adherence. The taste should be both a *judgement of feeling* and a *feeling of judgement*, that is to say *"a universal emotionally needed"*.

In fact, Kant has explained four characteristics of the judgement of taste: *universality*, *necessity*, *selfless nature* and *finality without an end in view*. Obviously, it seems curious that a judgement, as that of taste, could be both subjective and universal. If it is *universal*, is it *necessary* too? First, the satisfaction determining the judgement of taste is disinterested, unlike other types of satisfaction, for example the satisfaction produced by the good or the agreeable. The judgement by agreeable, despite the fact that shares the subjective nature of the judgement of taste, is however interested: it depends on one's desire for the object and is given to one by sensation. We see thus that, for Kant, satisfaction does not involve only the simple judgement on an object, but also the relationship established between the knowing subject and the known object, to the extent that the former feels moved by the latter.

In conclusion, only *the judgement of taste is disinterested* and *purely contemplative*, because it referrs to the appearance of the object, to its image and not to a related interest, whatever that may be. Precisely the disinterested character of the aesthetic judgement is the one *claiming certain universality*. The beautiful, says Kant, is that which is universally enjoyed, "without concept". As the satisfaction or pleasure produced by the object is irrelevant, he reasserts that the object should contain a

[1] Imm. Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, Bucharest, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing House, 1981.

principle of satisfaction for everyone. And as pleasure is not based on a certain inclination of the subject, as one feels completely free in relation to the satisfaction given to one by the contemplated object, it results that aesthetic pleasure is based on a *principle common* to all people.

So when the subject pronounces a judgement of taste, he assumes that other people share the same judgement. Hence an easily made confusion between the *judgement of knowledge*, which is universal, and the *judgement of taste*, which appears to have other attributes further than subjectivity. The *judgement of taste is subjective*, on the one hand, since the judging subject *does not need another judgement* on which to build his own judgement of taste; on the other hand, the judgement of taste appears to us as *universal*, whereas the subject, speaking out a judgement of taste, implicitly hints to other subjects, too. In other words, one believes that one's *own judgement of taste is, if truth be told, universal*.

Kant emphasizes this dual make-up of taste: personal, individual, subjective taste in opposition to the taste claiming to universality. The judgement of taste, although it has a propensity towards universality, does not lose its subjective nature. Additionally, the *judgement of taste is not a logical one*, since there is no logical law by way of which one could extract subjective universality. Hence a very important idea: the judgement of taste is universal, but *does not presume a concept*.

For Kant, therefore, the judgement of taste is an attachment; it cannot be postulated to anybody else, save for *ascribing* it to them. This is tantamount to saying that when one finds an object is beautiful, one assumes the others agree with this appraisal or subjective attachment, too. So it seems to one that beauty is within the object structure, as a property of it, and that one's judgement of taste is *logical*. In short, one enunciates one's judgement of taste, although one knows too well that it is subjective, *making a claim it were objective* since it expressed the *real properties* of the contemplated object. What Kant did is explaining the mechanism by which *a subjective judgment can qualify as objective*, through *awarding* certain properties to the object.

Back to the question asked earlier, let us see whether the *judgement of taste needs necessity too*, besides universality. Kant argues that *the judgement of taste is also necessary*, but in a particular, exemplary manner: it is the need that every one adheres to a judgement, designed as a universal rule, although one cannot express it. To substantiate *necessity* and *universality* in the judgement of taste, Kant introduces the principle of *common sense* allowing the ascription of a subjective judgement of taste to others, too,

whereby its universality is ascertained. But this claim to universality is not simply an admission of the judgement of taste by other subjects, but involves even the *necessity* of acceptance by others, by virtue of its exemplary value. In short, whenever a subject judges the beauty of an object, his judgement of taste has reference to the idea of universality.

It would appear that the judgement of taste takes its stand not on concept, but on feeling, hence on common sense. Contemporary aestheticians have carried on the discussion on that *common sense* speculated by Kant, most often to find fault with it, such as G. Genette or with J-M Schaeffer.

Gerard Genette[1], for instance, does not believe in the existence of universal standards of taste, hence he feels that using the phrase *the judgement of taste* is impossible. He focuses on *aesthetic appreciation*, which is *purely subjective* and differs from the act of diagnosis practiced for instance by Hume. Aesthetic appreciation cannot be learnt studying, by education; the taste *is and stays* a matter of personal fondness, and any attempt to state laws and judgments on it is absurd. This derives from the impossibility of theorizing the pleasure caused in one by an object.

One can theorize, he says, no more than *the qualities of a work of art*; when one says a work of art is beautiful, that statement is subjective and objective simultaneously, since it refers to beauty as to a property of that masterwork. Genette will take up this idea uttered away back by Kant in a wording proposed by George Santayana[2]: during the aesthetic judgement an element of one's sensation turns into *de facto* qualities of the object. In other words, one's assumption that the others will join one's judgement of taste is based on the fact that one allots beauty to objects. But, says the American esthetician, beauty is not *inside the object*, it is *a value*. Therefore it is impossible to regard it as an independent existence affecting our senses and being perceived just the way one perceives other existencies. Beauty exists in a single way: *in one's perception*, because unperceived beauty is an unfelt beauty, i.e. a contradiction[3]. Starting from this premise, obviously of Kantian source, Santayana maintained not only the separation of perception from pleasure, but also the consideration of perception as the source of pleasure. The error to assign beauty to the contemplated object arises specifically from the confusion between pleasure and the perception of object.

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[1] G. Genette, *L'oeuvre de l'art*, vol. II: *La relation esthétique*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1997.

[2] G. Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty. Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory*, New York, Dover Publications, 1955.

[3] G. Santayana, *op. cit*, p. 55.

Genette calls this confusion "*the illusion of objectiveness*". When one says an object is beautiful, one does nothing else but to express the *satisfaction* it gives to one. Instead, one tends to preach about the object having certain properties which, in fact, *one has ascribed to it*: "The content of appreciation (the Beautiful) has no objective existence, because it remains a false objectifying of the appreciation itself"[1]. Therefore, objectifying is passing on objective value to the pleasure caused by the object. Saying that an object is beautiful means that one likes this object, i.e. makes a statement on what one feels about it. One lives this *illusion of objectiveness* when one believes to say something about the object itself.

Furthermore, evaluation of an object will always involve such an objectifying: "If I judge that an object is beautiful, I cannot admit at the same time (or in the same act) the subjectivist and typically reductive sentence telling me: <You hold it for beautiful, but that means only that you happened to like it>"[2]. In the same way Kant had shown that the judgement of taste is associated to the idea of universality, Genette argues that there is a direct relationship between the *pleasure* that an object awakens in one and *one's thinking* that the object in question is objectively enjoyable. Pleasure is precisely that objectivist belief and the aesthetic appreciation is assigning aesthetic predicates to the object.

In fact, what preoccupied Genette was to explain both divergences and convergences in aesthetic assessment. Becoming aware of the fact that the mere repetitive manifestation of an event does not imply, theoretically, the objective grounding of that event, Genette argues that the pleasure, singular or repetitive, that one senses to an object depends on the *aesthetic relationship* one has to the object and does not represent in any way the object itself. The French esthetician has taken from Durhkeim the phrase *collective-subjective* to name the appreciation of the same object shared by a few subjects. Indeed, aesthetic appreciation is born from the encounter between the dispositions of the receiving subject and the properties of the intercepted object. If two or more subjects show a *same* aesthetic appreciation for the same object, even purelly by chance, then that assessment becomes the status of a collective-subjective[3] one.

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[1] G. Genette, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

[2] G. Genette, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

[3] G. Genette, *L'oeuvre de l'art*, vol. II: *La relation esthétique*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1997, p. 126.

We observe the same idea had been expressed by Kant: empirical observation of a convergence in assessment does not allow us to infer its universality; subsequently the assessment remains definingly *subjective*. As for the evolution of aesthetic evaluation, noticeable at the same subject on two different times, it is explainable by the complex modification of one's dispositions through the persuasive nature of some exterior aesthetic valuations. Such a change requires the integration of new norms, values and meanings, but only insofar as the subject's disposition permits. Aesthetic evaluation becomes this way exclusively subjective (accounting for more than a simple description of the aesthetic object) and the outcome of *one's relationship* with the object, being defined by the illusion of objectiveness. If aesthetic appreciation is so subjective, how can its communication still be possible or explained? The way out is suggested by J-M Schaeffer, by means of a distinction between aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgement. His conception of aesthetic appreciation and judgement is built around the concept of *intentionality*, as defined by the American John Searle[1]. The aesthetic evaluation is given by the aesthetic rapport the subject has to the object, but the object does not necessarily have to be a masterwork, it can be an ordinary object as well. In other words, the aesthetic relationship is *transcultural*[2], highlighting a particular human conduct, is *interested* and is also a *cognitive relationship*, being comparable to a *form of attention to the world*. The aesthetic judgement is not the center of the aesthetic relationship; the former is neither the essence nor the purpose of the latter. However, Schaeffer shows: "(...) the fact that aesthetic judgement can be subjective doesn't imply in any way that aesthetic attention is unamendable. Intersubjective validity of aesthetic behaviour – just like that of any other cognitive relationships – is going on not only at the level of assessment and evaluation, but also at the level of attention"[3].

Aesthetic judgement is defined then as a verbalization of the aesthetic assessment and is an individual, solipsist and interested judgment of value. From this point of view, a disinterested aesthetic judgement, in the

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[1] *Intentionality* means the ability of human consciousness to be always in relation to one thing: it wants something, it implies something, says something about something, etc. Not to be confused with *intent*, which is only one type of intentional state. *See* John Searle, *Intentionalité: essai de philosophie des états mentaux*, Paris, Éditions Minuit, 1985.

[2] J.-M. Schaeffer, *Les célibataires de l'art. Pour une esthétique sans mythes*, Paris, Édition Gallimard, 1996, p. 16.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

sense Kant thought of it, is nonsense, since it just loses the quality of being *a judgement of value*. Schaeffer believes it is important to examine the relationship between satisfaction/dissatisfaction and aesthetic judgement. The analysis of this relationship is considered vital for another relationship: the one between aesthetic assessment and aesthetic judgement. The aesthetic assessment is an *intentional state*, while the aesthetic judgement is an act, *an intentional* and *judicative process* vs the state of satisfaction or insatisfaction expressed in the aesthetic assessment.

Schaeffer also distinguishes between the aesthetic judgement as value judgement and what he calls the "judgement of work success", a judgement of teleological appropriateness that shows in which degree a work has the necessary means to accomplish its goal as a masterpiece. Work judgments are classified in a) judgments of technical success, i.e. *expertise judgments*, where one evaluates the work in relation to what it should be, that is according to a previously established finality and b) *judgments of teleological success*, where one judges the work by its ability to meet its specific functions, especially that of producing satisfaction. Schaeffer points out that often one mixes up *aesthetic judgments* or judgments of taste with judgments of *work success*. One may, for instance, judge a work as perfectly successful from a technical viewpoint, despite the fact that one remains completely indifferent to it: it did not captivate one's *attention aesthetically speaking*. In this case, one can only evaluate the skill of the artist, i.e. the *work success*.

Moreover, *in order to be aesthetic, a judgement* must be based on *genuine aesthetic interest*. If the interest is of any other type but aesthetic, moral for instance, one does not perform an aesthetic judgment. If one says about a book that it is very well written but immoral, one performs a judgment on the book-object, and exhibits an interest which is anything else but aesthetic. Lastly, one must not confuse the based on fact judgments with the aesthetic judgments, which are judgments of value. In fact, *one cannot even deduce* from a factual judgement an aesthetic judgement. It is not the object the one that has the properties that make us appreciate it aesthetically. Aesthetic judgement and of taste is, consequently, *relative to individual assessment*, including the case that the subject of the judgement may be culturally biased.

It is an idea which clearly *makes* the matter of aesthetic judgement *relative* and also makes futile any critical attempt in the art area, since no aesthetic judgement can be epistemically founded. Opposing aesthetic judgement to assessment and assessment to obtaining satisfaction,

Schaeffer isolates the problem of aesthetic judgement, analyzing it out of aesthetic normativity. In other words, one judges aesthetically, but *the judgement unfolds irrationally*, external to any rational rules and cannot be altered by cultural acquisitions.

The perspective suggested by Schaeffer on the judgement of taste was criticized by authors such as Luc Ferry[1] and Rainer Rochlitz[2]. Luc Ferry cannot allow that the judgement of taste remains in the sphere of pure empirical subjectivity, since it is based, however, on the perception of a real object: "(...) that, if beautiful, (...) rouses a necessary idea of reason that, per se, is *common to humanity*. So, in relation to this undetermined idea (...) one can discuss taste and broaden the scope of pure subjectivity in order to consider undogmatic sharing of the aesthetic experience with another, insofar as that another is human"[3]. In his view, any aesthetic experience should abide a *reflexive judgement* giving it the value of aesthetic judgement.

Rochlitz criticizes Genette and Schaeffer for this reduction of aesthetic judgement to *the judgement of pleasure* or *of satisfaction*. As the aesthetic judgement has a *claim to validity*, it has to be rationally argued. The simple pleasure one feels when approaching an object does not make it automatically a work of art, and does not turn one's judgement into an aesthetical one. Therefore, for Rochlitz, neither the aesthetic intention of the author nor the aesthetic attention of the receiver is sufficient to account for the specificity of the aesthetic relationship. The *aesthetic relationship* is fulfilled when it is necessarily *evaluative* and *normative*.

Thus, the assertion "The work of art X is beautiful" says not only that one likes X, but states a postulate that makes a claim to intersubjective validity, too. Aesthetic pleasure is hence only an aspect of the aesthetic relationship one maintains with the work of art. For this reason, Rochlitz criticizes Genette and Schaeffer for equalling the aesthetic judgement and a statement such as "I like this work of art", and suggests formulating something like: "this work is a success", by virtue of some criteria of rationality.

On our part, we believe that aesthetic education has exactly the task to demarcate the criteria of reason&value validity one should use when

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[1] L, Ferry, *Homo Aestheticus. L'invention du goût a l'âge démocratique*, Paris, Éditions Grasset, 1990.

[2] Rainer Rochlitz, *L'art au banc d'essay, Esthétique et critique*, Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1998.

[3] L. Ferry, *op. cit*, p. 127.

judging something. The real and obvious danger of the lack of aesthetic education is the proliferation of *kitsch*, although the causes that have led to it are extremely numerous: social, cultural, and even artistic. The positivist philosophy, the development of natural sciences, the technical progress, the trade focused on profitability, productivity and competition, some anvangardist artistic movements, even the development of means of transport and mass media are only few catalyst of this phenomenon. The shift to consumers' civilization, alongside social events that have displaced groups of people from their enviroment – where they had been born and had lived - and forced them into a different way of living, the lack of culture and, implicitly, of solid hierarchies of spiritual values, have invariably led to this phenomenon. Last but not least, the loss of a culture of genuine artistic and spiritual experiences (reading a book, watching an art film, listening to classical music concerts, and so on) i.e. its dramatical reduction to some culturally submediocre, unauthentic "facts", causes sometimes irreversible changes in the individual good taste, up to annihilating one's real need for culture. Such distorted aesthetic attitudes have been most likely shaped also because theorists have paired the aesthetic taste with feeling, with the irrational, and not with the rational doubled by the sharing of authentic art.

Kitsch is most frequently recognizable in what is called popular culture. There is only a step from surrogate-art to surrogate-reality. The industry of derisory entertainment, promoting film melodramas, pop music (sometimes *excessively* popular) and comic shows based on small psychological needs (relaxation, deviation of attention from the really serious problems one faces, and the like) makes a minimum appeal to one's background and does not require *judgments of taste* or great *intellectual efforts*. The effect of massive use of those products is first and foremost the uniformization or standardization of one's taste, intellectual profile and personality. Mediocrity, reductive logic, conventionalism, cheap sentimentalism, vulgarity - on which such cultural substitutes are built – may become one's attributes.

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