

International Congress of Aesthetics 2007 “Aesthetics Bridging Cultures

Aesthetics and Multiculturalism¹

*Mikel Iriondo, Department of Philosophy,
University of Basque Country, Spain*

Polish journalist and writer Ryszard Kapuscinski (1932-2007) was internationally well known by his writings on different personalities and places from all over the world. Unlike other journalists he did not like the safe accommodation in luxurious hotels or the work of the journalist who writes his chronicles away from the centre of the news, using second hand information.

He understood his work like a commitment with the truth, knowing that in the present world it is impossible to find certainty, but trying to offer coherent interpretations, well informed into the reality, and moved away of any trace of cynicism. In order to obtain it, he was ready to mixing himself, incognito, with the population of the place, trying to get used to their ways of life and to learn and communicate in the language of the people who surrounded him.

His works about Africa, about the Shah of the old Persia (Iran), the emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie, his trips through India recalling Herodotus, his chronicles written before the decline of the USSR, or about the surrealistic war in the Sixties between Honduras and El Salvador, the decolonization of Angola, etc., are exemplary. They are a compendium of patience and common sense, humility, empathy and deep knowledge of the necessity to explain with intentionality human conflicts.

Kapuscinski succeeded in communicating the voice of million human beings without voice, condemned to mere survival, and that resonated in the western world of development, consume and privilege. In our days, when million human beings still die of thirst or hunger, it seems evident that we are not able to put remedy to this infamy.

Kapuscinski described these people's ways of life, their efforts to survive, their joy within poverty, remembering us that in spite of the special attention paid by the mass media to violent conflicts:

we live in a relatively pacific world, if we consider that we are about six thousand million people, that speak two or three thousand different languages and defend innumerable interests.²

Reading his works, we find the claim that art is the light that indicates us the way to the future. His lucid scepticism and his sense of prudence always find in the artistic manifestations a safe direction:

It has always been art that, with great anticipation and clarity, has indicated the direction the world was taking and the great transformations that were being prepared.³

Thus, Kapuscinski saw in art new paths opened to society. I do not think that Kapuscinski wanted to defend a sort of visionary theory of art, where art is the society's avant-garde, in the same way that Kandinsky, for instance, understood it in *On the spiritual in art*, 1911. On the contrary, Kapuscinski conceives art as connected with everyday experiences, in the sense that Dewey formulated it, understanding that what artists do is to reject old forms and generate new paths of expression: new ways to speak about the issues that have always worried people.

To grasp this sensitivity is essential for the Polish journalist, who knew very well that sometimes even the own artist is not aware of the obtained profit, the new way or horizon he opens.

In addition, Kapuscinski believed in art as a common or collective benefit, because creative imagination does not belong entirely to anyone. Innumerable people participate in every creation, although the author does not know what owes to others. Thus, modesty is necessary, since it is difficult to determine what is what we make out of our own forces and what we owe to our fellows. Modesty, besides, allows paying attention, listening to the voice of the other, increasing solidarity, and sharing part of our time, the time that we have mostly reduced to pure business.

If we observe nowadays art, one of its characteristics is the mixture or the fusion of everything what the artist has been able to collect, the undefined influence of others. Since the times in which some privileged artists acceded to remote places in the world to contemplate original and surprising creative forms, the situation has changed a lot. The low cost possibility of travelling, the presence of mass media in the most remote places, and the development of the new information technologies have revolutionized our world. This global world has allowed easy access to different cultures and ways of life, and all of that has served and still serves as stimulus for new creations.

If we approach pop music world, its sounds incorporate rhythms and musical forms from all the places of the world. The work of musicians like Peter Gabriel or Paul Simon, two well known examples, making use of African rhythms, turned usual the path already opened by The Beatles and its mystical approach to Indian music. Today we can listen to fusion of rock and Arab music, jazz and Turkish pop music, Basque and Guinean popular music, etc.

I use pop music as an example of the arts today, because it is easy for us to listen to it and be informed about what musicians nowadays compose. Everyday we hear all type of compositions, and sound floods everything. In the Western world it is quite unusual to find public places not surrounded by music. As we can see in the film by Fatih Akin *Crossing the Bridge. The sound of Istanbul*, it is difficult to avoid the influence of music composed abroad. In fact, its main character is a German composer, Alexander Hacke, enthusiastic of Turkish music. The film begins with an advice: "If you want to know a civilization you should listen to its music. Music can reveal everything about a place". Although this is for certain, it is not less truth than nowadays, in pop music, all type of influences are mixed.

Although we are able to coexist with other people's music, to see films that narrate conflicts in other countries, to read novels or biographies about events happened in remote places, or to enjoy the creations of African plastic artists, it seems that good coexistence with art does not have a correspondent reflection in social life.

In short, we can listen to Arab music and avoid dealing with Arabs, reading North American writers but rejecting everything coming from that country, admiring the example of Nelson Mandela and exploiting black people working in our country, practicing Tai-Chi and repudiating our Chinese neighbours.

It seems that art is so elevated and exquisite that it does not allow that our aesthetic sensitivity to derive in an identical social sensitivity. It is evident that ideologies, contradictory interests, national policies, different strategies to reach the power, etc., degrade our social sensitivity. Aesthetic taste can walk next to the scorn and fratricide hatred. Examples are clear and innumerable.

After this introduction, I will confess that my opinion about the so-called multiculturalism policy is that it does not solve social conflicts, and that may contribute to increase them. I will try to explain it. To think that there are different cultures in the world, and argue that all have right to be defended and preserved, it is leading to the creation of isolated groups. The existing groups and ghettos in many European cities feed on distrust towards the different. Consequently, the process of integration of masses of immigrants who run away from miserable conditions of life, looking for a substantial improvement in their lives, seems impossible to obtain.

Artistic creations show an inevitable way, an unequivocal fusion of cultures in the future, but present experience also shows that the way is long, slow and full of difficulties. Art will be a light for the future, but the way is difficult and without guarantee of success.

Thus, although it is undeniable that many people guide their life confronting and testing their values, there are also those, normally tie to a group, with difficulties to put them under revision. Not every cultural principle is equally valid or defensible, and cultures, in which equality and fight against humiliation and cruelty are basic, are worthier than those in which these principles have easy exceptions or limitations. Where, whatever the reason -sex, religion, ethnic origin, ideology, power, etc-, individual rights are limited, culture is used to impose endogenous and traditional ways of life with the clear intention to perpetuate political domination. It is relevant to remind that pain is always personal, undergone by the individual herself, and that any group suffers for us. In the same way I understand freedom to be an individual right and not a collective one.

In addition to the prominence of those cultures that respect human rights and individual liberties, it is necessary to point out that there are not self-sufficient cultures, neither ours nor other people's, and only fanaticism finds truth and irreplaceable values in immutable beliefs. Without despising the tradition, it is evident that human societies are necessarily changing, although in some places sometimes the change is apparently insignificant. Far from considering each culture self-sufficient and needing a closed compartment for its indefinite perpetuation, we should consider them essentially dynamic. Cultures have always communicated to each other, that is, people from different cultures have always intercommunicated: making business or war, learning or teaching, arranging marriages, and so on. And so, changes happen. People's curiosity, search for freedom, wish to overcome dissatisfactions, or a better future for their children, finish laying a hope way.

For that reason, migrations of the poor, travelling to places that promise to palliate their misery, will become more and more inevitable. It is difficult to set up obstacles to that and, in many occasions, those who think to be helping emigrants with multiculturalist policies create separated worlds and extend marginalization and disappointment.

Although the responsibility of multicultural conflicts is shared, it does not seem that we have thought carefully the transit to the heterogeneous world of the future. Mixture, would be necessary to add, does not imply losing roots, but simply extracting their food from new contexts.

Tolerance is necessary and must allow us to eradicate humiliation and intransigency, trying to build a future moving away from past errors. Aberrations, genocides and crimes against humanity have been made in name of values and beliefs. Art and Literature have a fundamental role to play in order to denounce it, to give account of our past, and not to forget it. They show us made errors and, teach us to avoid analogous situations in the future. What else can teach us art, apart from keeping memory?

In what follows I will speak of a few literary authors whom in its aesthetic elaborations have built a new way to understand human beings, trying to face its perplexities and disagreements. All of them represent a challenge to old forms to understand human relationships, and incite to reconsider what we believed for sure and untouchable. To read their works adds freshness to our thought, removes our values revealing unsuspected forms of experience. From my point of view, immaturity and insufficiency are concepts pertinent to characterize individuals and cultures, and these authors have pointed to them from different perspectives.

Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969). The immaturity and the mask

If something characterizes this Polish writer, aside from his exile in Argentina during almost thirty years, it is his rejection of collective values like patriotism, nation or group pride. For Gombrowicz, these exaltations always hide a fear of the future, and of the possibility of improving. Stuck obstinately in our collective pride, we disguised ourselves with sufficiency, and we pretend to give lessons to the world from our high and singular position. This is false and lamentable, and although it can be based on strategies of collective affirmation, it hides in its interior the permanent immaturity of the person. If the nations mask themselves, also the individuals disguise themselves. We need to show a solid and self-sufficient image, when in fact we are full of doubts and perplexities. Our mask of adults is always trickery, and it would be more convenient to acknowledge our eternal immaturity. Assuming this insufficiency we can surpass our masked form and try to build a different future.

Thus, in relation to the idea of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, Gombrowicz said the following:

Nietzsche did not have the minimum intuition for these issues; it is difficult to imagine something more artificial and even ridiculous and of worse taste than his *Übermensch* and his young human beast; no, it is not truth, it is not the fullness but exactly the insufficiency, the inferiority, the immaturity, which is proper of all young people, that is to say, any alive being.⁴

Fernando Pessoa (1888-1935). The multiple and unfinished identity

The Portuguese poet is well known all over the world by his heteronymous creations, for giving life to poets born of him self but having their own life. All of them have their own biographical data, a different aesthetics, opposed beliefs and, in addition, they discuss to each other on all these subjects.

The most known are Alberto Caeiro –the Anti-metaphysical poet-, Ricardo Reis –the stoic and Horatian poet-, Alvaro de Campos –the futurist and exalted poet-, Bernardo

Soares -species of semi-heteronymous and author of the wonderful *Livro do Desassossego*- and Fernando Pessoa –essayist and poet.

With his heteronymous, Pessoa shows something similar to Gombrowicz, but in his case the masks do not try to deceive but to display a multiple identity. Heteronym could become an endless process, creating heteronymous behind others. But, even taking this operation until unsuspected limits, it would be impossible to give account of our complexity. We are something and his opposite, and the antagonistic also concern us because we are essentially contradictory.

We can perceive the same from different points of view and according to the circumstances we are able to defend all of them. The intellectual, according to Pessoa, must be a creator of anarchies to be able to deny today what defended yesterday⁵. Although it can seem schizophrenic, it shows a horizon of tolerance, because it makes easier to put oneself into other's shoes.

Imre Kertész (1929-). The exemplary memory and the resource to the creative imagination

Nobel Prize of Literature and Hungarian Jew, Kertész lived the terrible experience of Nazi concentration camps. A first approach to his work shows that writing, the creative activity, it is a remedy to be able to accept life after the experience of extermination. As Jorge Semprún says, "man only can assimilate the essence of evil through fiction"⁶. Writing allows Kertész to overcome paradoxical feelings and, most of all, the shame of being a survivor.

His work teaches a non literal perspective about Nazi genocide. It was not a singular and unique experience that turned Jews into a different category of human beings. We are always able to repeat similar experiences, and only literature can allow us to extract certain lessons of that unfortunate experiment of destruction. But memory of the terrible, of the genocide, must be exemplar. In fact, we know other different cases: the Stalinist purges, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Cambodia, Rwanda...

Kertész also writes on the issue of belonging to a group with marked rules of behaviour. So, in *Kaddish for the Unborn Child* he writes about a born Jewish person that does not accept a future of orthodoxy in the familiar community. This Jew, necessarily forced to remember the considered unique infamy, does not have the possibility of resigning to his condition. He is not free to choose to belong to this persecuted group or not (any way, he can be persecuted for that reason too).

The literal understanding of the Jews by Nazism as beings destined to extermination without exclusions leads also to understand the genocide like something literal and also impossible to repeat: the constituent essence of identity for all new Jew who comes to the world. The exemplary understanding, on the contrary, allows acceding to this knowledge in freedom and with the aim to extract universal conclusions: "The horror of holocaust is extended to become a universal experience (...) holocaust is a worldwide experience."⁷

Holocaust, as Kertész says, must allow to create values: "Holocaust is a value because it leads to an immeasurable knowledge through an immeasurable suffering; for that reason it also hides an incommensurable moral reserve."⁸

According to Kertész, modern world is also fascinated by abstraction, whose excess in its metaphysical elevation overlooks concrete individuals. A true fascination by closed worlds of the intellect is the inheritance of idealistic systems that consider that in front of History, victims are like flowers treaded and left in the way. Ideology needs this intellectual resource to dominate the world.

Art can break this dominion, because art deals with concrete experiences. It tries to surpass the closed world of the ideology, changing our way to perceive things. It is a new fight against necessity because "the historical crimes of this century are related to excess of abstraction, to the fury of thought that has degenerated, somehow, in pathological and the corresponding absolute lack of imagination."⁹

Winfried Georg Sebald (1944-2001). The margins of History

Sebald tells the life of other forgotten and anonymous individuals. He uses images and pictures to evoke the experience of already disappeared lives, and uses fiction to complete their biographies. History always shows us excellent characters, but Sebald recovers through memory and fiction forgotten stories, recreates disappeared places, and shows objects and buildings, which intimate their relation with persons and their lives in other times. Every individual has its own story, although History digests and marginalizes it.

In a similar way, Sebald collects memories of cruelties committed on the German population already defeated in the last years of World War II. Horror has not justification, even when their executors may have more powerful reasons than their enemies. The bombing of Dresden on the part of the allied forces was a clear example of this.

Susan Sontag (1933-2004). Against relativism and intellectual deceit

In one of her last books *Regarding the pain of Others*, Sontag reconstructs the history of war photography, and the way that press employs it to the service of different governments. But she also criticizes certain post-modern philosophical positions, which proclaim the dominion of spectacle, and the inexistence of an independent reality out of her representations. Let's just remember those claims about reality as a species of simulacrum conformed by mass media, or what French philosopher Baudrillard said about the Gulf War not taking place. After Sontag, "fancy rethoric, this."¹⁰

Although, as a routine, we deal with images about different conflicts and wars, to derive from this audio-visual traffic the conclusion that reality is a simulacrum, is nothing but a cynical or a west ideological view of the world: "...to speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism"¹¹. For Sontag, like for Sebald, images have the value of representing concrete people, those that suffer and unfortunately happen to increase the number of dead or exterminated. This, certainly, is not simulacrum, but the crude reality of individual suffering countless times.

If certain post-modern speeches allow us to calm our bad conscience, at the same time they prevent to become aware of real problems. To conceive the whole world as watched through a television screen is stupidity, an example of intellectual arrogance in a planet where still more than half of the population must think about surviving without having access to the civilization of the image.

Sandor Marai (1900-1989). The voice of the without voice. Different perceptions of human conflicts

When the Germans ran away from Hungary and the Russians arrived, Sandor Marai, who had lived in Germany and France during years, was in his home country, Hungary. What stroke him about Russians was, on one hand, their disorder and anarchy and, on the other hand, the fact that most of them seemed not to know that there were people in the world different from themselves. Their behaviour was erratic and unpredictable, and those who hoped that the USSR would bring the dreamed freedom for Hungary, soon understood that they could hardly obtain freedom from men who were absolutely not free.

Marai listened to many of them speaking about its miserable conditions of life, of its lack of hope and freedom. When he asked a Russian why was he telling him so many things questioning the Russian revolution and the supposed elimination of class privileges, his answer was that he had observed that Marai had many books at home, that Marai was a reputed writer, and that, consequently, Marai would be able to give voice to those who did not have voice, to those who could not write like him. The world had to find out the real conditions of life in the Soviet Republics.

Marai wrote *Earth, earth* to tell these experiences with the Russians, but he also perceived that his life in Hungary and his work there did not have future under the communist regime. As a result he exiled in 1948, and ended up living in the United States.

In *Az Igazi y Judith* Marai managed to show the difficulty of human relationships, in this case, through a sentimental relation among three people caught in a love triangle. Marai dedicates a chapter to each one in where presents their respective reasons and feelings, their vision of the love affair that had made their lives fail. Every conflict has a polyhedral form, and everyone offers reasons and rationale to his or her acts.

I could have mentioned other writers like **Robert Walser** (1878-1956) and his affirmation of simple life, reporting in his *Jakob von Gunten* how education tries to turn us into servants, into "zeros on the left" used for other people's interests. I could have mentioned the exiled Russian poet and Nobel prize **Joseph Brodsky** (1940-1996), who like Gombrowicz said that we are "less than one", and that our false sufficiency shows an incapacity to conform a whole subject, a whole identity, as also Pessoa knew.

These writers advocate an aesthetics that go beyond the mere form and the enthusiasm of art by art's sake, while showing the commitment with human destiny. Literature is for them, as Susan Sontag said

"an essential form of nourishment to consciousness. It plays a vital role in the creation of inwardness and the enlarging and deepening of our sympathies and our sensitivities to other human beings, and to language. (...)

That literature is a fundamentally cosmopolitan enterprise. The great writers are part of world literature. We should be reading across national and tribal boundaries: great literature should transport us. Writers are citizens of a world community, in which we all read and learn from one another. Considering each major literary achievement as, finally, part of world literature is to make us more open to the foreign, to what is not "us." The distinctive power of literature is to inspire in us a feeling of strangeness. Of wonder. Of disorientation. Of being somewhere else.¹²

¹ Research Project The Expression of Subjectivity in the Arts (HUM2005-02533), funded by the Ministerio de Educacion y Ciencia (Spain).

² Kapucinsky, Il cinico non è adatto a questo mestiere. Conversazioni sul buon giornalismo, Roma, 2000, p.114. (Quoted from the Spanish translation.)

³ *Idem.*, 13.

⁴ Gombrowicz, *Diario (1953-1969)*, Barcelona, 2005, p.212.

⁵ Pessoa, F., *Obras em prosa*, Rio de Janeiro, 1986, p. 43.

⁶ Semprún, J., *Interview in "El País"*, 6 May 2003.

⁷ Kertész, I., *Un instante de silencio en el paredón*, Barcelona, 1999, p. 69-70.

⁸ *Idem.*, p.85.

⁹ *Idem.*, p.114.

¹⁰ Sontag, S., *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Penguin, 2003, p.97.

¹¹ *Idem.*, p.98.

¹² Sontag, S., *Discours prize Fundación Príncipe de Asturias 2003*. In <http://www.fundacionprincipedeasturias.org/esp/04/premiados/discursos/discursorig778.html>

