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“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures”**

**Towards a Theory of Symbolic Forms.  
Aesthetics in the Age of Multiculturalism**

*Giuseppe Patella, Professor of Aesthetics,  
Rome, Italy*

**Everything is culture**

In an age of globalization or post-globalization, the question that we must pose here is whether or not our traditional disciplines, as we know them and as they have been organized up till now, are effectively prepared to face the profound transformations that today implicate, at all levels, society, individuals, and knowledge. What happens to our knowledge, organized in distinct fields at the moment when culture explodes, that is, the moment when today we say that everything is culture?

There is no doubt, in fact, that in our age of interrelated growth of economic, social and cultural processes on a planetary scale, the term culture has noticeably been broadened, fragmented and stretched in thousand different directions. The fact that everything is culture does not mean that it can still be thought nostalgically and systematically as a unitary whole, or as something pacific and consensual, because today, instead, it seems that culture has become even more controversial and an object of opposition, becoming itself a sort of “contested terrain”,<sup>1</sup> that is a field of forces profoundly strategic where the global scene is being contested, where interests, values, meanings are transformed, collapsed and repositioned, in a grand arena where individual and collective actions intertwine, and where the destiny of women and men of our time are constantly at stake.

**Confronting with cultural studies**

Thus, if culture has never been as important as today, it is now more than ever necessary to investigate in its current manifestations and transformations. In this sense it is useful to confront it with the perspective of cultural studies which, as is well-known, group together those disciplines that seek to understand the complexity of the term culture and the political uses connected with it, investigating the multiplicity of forms of our everyday life, and which set themselves the objective of overcoming not only the traditional separation among the great areas of knowledge, but also and above all the classical dichotomy between knowledge and power, culture and society, concentrating their attention on the relationship between cultural practices and the devices of power that they imply.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, in their best models, they seem particularly apt to deal with the most current issues of our modern multicultural society, problems of globalization, new emerging identities and the unusual and neglected experiences of our existence.

Within this framework, then, I would like briefly to grasp the significance of the transformations of culture's concept for the discipline of aesthetics. So, how are we to understand aesthetics in the age of multiculturalism?

After the so called cultural turn that has invested all spheres of social life and all areas of knowledge, it appears clear that aesthetics can no longer hide itself, remain isolated or collocate itself in a role removed from culture. Its categories must be rethought in the light of the complex procedures of the idea of culture, of its profound transformations and articulations. As a result, our concept of aesthetics also changes, which can no longer be thought of according to a purely autonomous and academic vision, tied to an exclusive treatment of the traditional themes of beauty and art. It presents itself, rather, as a *contested field*, one could say, that is, as a contested field of perceptions, visions, experiences, lifestyles, judgments and values that articulate cultural practices, search for meanings, processes of individual and collective identities on a highly dynamic socio-political background.

Thus, to the extent that aesthetics ceases to think itself as a pure and self-sufficient discipline, and makes a pluralistic and inclusive conception its own, it is called upon to face itself with the open horizon of cultural studies, to gather the challenges that come from the current multicultural society, putting aside conventional views and disciplinary rigidity, to overcome an ethnocentric and exclusively western point of view as well, to be confronted with other experiences of contemporary feeling. This encounter, after all, represents by now a given ever since the birth of cultural studies in the sixties, and asserts itself as a necessity if aesthetics aims to bridge the gap that separates it from contemporary society.

In fact, if we look at it closely, despite the fact that cultural studies have been quarrelling with official aesthetics, because of its traditional autonomy and detachment from society, by taking an interest in themes similar to those of aesthetics and often making use of similar categories and principal figures, they appear to be an aesthetics, but a dissimulated aesthetics, which does not want to be recognized as such, although they share with aesthetics an idea of art understood as communication and an idea of communication understood as a process of construction of identity.

### **Concerns about popular or mass culture**

Now, despite the fact that things have changed radically in the last decades, and that the rigid distinctions which separate the cultured sphere from the popular one, high culture from the low, especially after the spread of postmodernism, have tendentially disappeared, is still predominant the idea that there is a Culture with a capital 'C' and cultures which are considered minor, or that there are arts and artifacts of the first, second or third kind, that so-called popular or masses forms of art are not to be taken seriously, that they are banal, degrading, standardized, or of too easy consumption. There are still many concerns and reservations before considering as worthy of reflection the multitude of artifacts from everyday life. Generally, with respect to these phenomena the concerns seem to be mostly twofold: that they favor a passive reception, a too inattentive use of materials, and that they may have a negative impact, deleterious for our perceptive, evaluative habits favoring a sort of weakening of our critical functions.

It is necessary to acknowledge that these concerns reminiscent of the Frankfurt School are not entirely unfounded. They are also my own concerns in as much as the current situation of socio-cultural degradation and ideological confusion, amplified by the system of generalized communication in which we live,<sup>3</sup> the boundary between attention with respect to collective cultural expressions and the acquiescence to the commercial logic and to the market based on audience rating, has become very thin. In this context, to pursue the latest find on the media scene can no longer be passed off as “updated” and progressive reason because it is, after all, just a form of cultural populism. This is how one falls into the trap of an apologia for a culture of mass consumption or by adjusting to the existent, to what is living in an essentially collusive or at least submissive attitude.

To this end, Antonio Gramsci<sup>4</sup> – who is not by chance always included among the founding fathers of cultural studies – although he encouraged us to consider always with great attention the expressions of popular culture and cultural mass phenomena, he warned against the dangers of cultural degradation, populism and obscurantism closely connected to them. In this sense, his lesson today must be reformulated in the effort of searching for a possible link between cultural forms and the modes of feeling of the multitudes, on the one hand, and a critical vision of society, on the other. Even if it is necessary to admit, realistically, that in today’s modern age of mass idiocy communicated and propagated by the mass media, it is always more arduous to succeed in identifying this link clearly, and to maintain the middle way indicated by Gramsci; just as it becomes difficult to discern in everyday practices of mass culture, in the practices of consumption and in the enjoyment of mass media, a potential creativity (Carroll<sup>5</sup>), spaces of resistance to the dominant meanings (Fiske<sup>6</sup>), or to the productive re-appropriation of potential subversive contents (de Certeau<sup>7</sup>; Carmagnola<sup>8</sup>). What prevails, rather, is the impression that commercial logic has by now penetrated in every phases of the production and circulation of cultural goods, putting in serious danger the autonomy of culture and, there where, the mere logic of profit predominates – as Bourdieu pointed out – culture always finds itself in constant danger.<sup>9</sup> Hence, the difficulty of thinking a clear political culture as long as we remain immersed in the futile and essentially obscurantist atmosphere so prevalent today.

As to the fundamental objection against the tendency of cultural studies to flatten itself out on a mere opaque factuality, one can usually add many others such as that they are too eclectic, without scientific rigor or any theoretical relevance, impure from a methodological point of view, to place together phenomena too different and too distant from each other, to employ a sort of bricolage style that allows them to analyze any object. Academic aesthetics, on the other hand, tends to be methodologically too rigid, rather closed in on itself, tendentially elitist and adverse to the new, hostile to the contamination and encounter with other disciplines, ethnocentric, and always ready to judge only canonical texts, the works traditionally considered serious, highbrow, profound, and the only ones worthy of critical analysis and evaluation.

### **The challenge**

Now it is a question of responding to the provocation and the challenge that cultural studies presents to aesthetics, to be subjected to the final test of a radical rethinking of itself and its own method of being, to get away from its isolation, verifying its own hypotheses on the ground of positive forms of knowledge and by studying the ways in

which meanings, values and experiences are given and are produced in our contemporary world.

### **Rethinking value...**

This is a challenge that provokes aesthetics to also re-examine what today are the most problematic key points to place under evaluation; what are the crucial questions to face right now and which to put on the agenda for the next future. From this encounter, rethought on a new basis, new problems emerge and an aesthetics worthy of its name can no longer afford to neglect. I shall briefly outline only some of these and only those that seem to me most urgent, without any claim to be comprehensive.

The first notion is a re-examination of the fundamental question of *value*, which is intimately linked to the form of judgment of taste and to aesthetic value, and is the classical theme of aesthetics since its inception, but that philosophical thought in the last decades seems to have somehow forgotten. In considering the question of value, Pierre Bourdieu's contributions seem to me to be decisive, not only for the insight in the study of processes that control the mechanisms of formation, maintenance and growth of value in the intellectual field, evident in his attempt to found a so-called "science of works"<sup>10</sup>, which has as its object both the material production of the work and also the production of its value, but, more generally, for his capacity of amplifying the aesthetic point of view and making it interact in a useful way with the economic, the political and the symbolic<sup>11</sup>.

### **Appraisal and admiration**

Moreover, understood as the result of a process of evaluation tied to processes of valorization and devalorization, the concept of value brings with it, inevitably, the related topic of *appraisal* and *admiration*, thus bringing with it the question of interdependence and mutual recognition,<sup>12</sup> and thus the processes that transform the work, the creative production, in shared cultural values, where together with the different social and political factors tied to the question of appreciation the connection between aesthetic and symbolic modes is also made clear. Hence the necessary attention not only to the dimension of individual creativity, its uniqueness and exceptionality<sup>13</sup> – particularly in evidence in the field of arts where a symbolic economy predominates based not on quantitative data but on qualitative factors – but also towards relations of interdependence that keep social actors and institutions tied to a reticular structure of cross-accreditation, understanding that today more than ever, the reciprocal recognition is a fundamental prerequisite of life in society.

### **Taste**

Within this perspective, even the aesthetic notion of *taste* becomes crucial, no longer understood, however, as an ineffable internal faculty, merely subjective or as a specific faculty of judging the beautiful, according to the classical definition of Kant<sup>14</sup>, but as a sort of "capital" – one could say, to use a term dear to Bourdieu – that is, as a sort of practical baggage, a set of manageable tools of how to do, which define a capacity to discern, an ability/ a knowing how to grasp differences, a continuous exercise in evaluating the artifacts of our social and cultural life.

### **Interest and disinterest**

Likewise connected to the general theme of value is also the question – always more crucial for aesthetics – of *interest* and *disinterest*. It becomes necessary, therefore, to ask oneself not only what interest and disinterest consist of today, in an age dominated by the logic of takings and generalized profits, but above all how they relate today to aesthetics, which – as is well-known – originates in the eighteenth century as a modern discipline founding its own autonomy precisely on the detachment of aesthetic judgment from any form of interest, thus proclaiming itself independent from possible tutelage from the sciences, from morals and from religion, but also from economics and politics.

This autonomous and detached position of aesthetics, which perhaps had its own reason for being till the first half of the twentieth century, when it was a question of safeguarding its independence from competition from other disciplines, appears today not only anachronistic, but minimally credible and defensible, even for reasons I recalled earlier. As a result it becomes essential to posit the question of interest and disinterestedness in a way completely different from a merely economic and utilitarian logic, following which, one ends up by understanding aesthetics only as an ornamental and basically useless discipline.

### **Aesthetics and Economy**

It is now evident how these issues by and large impose a greater attention to the other important subject to insert in our agenda, namely, a concern for an appropriate comparison between aesthetics and economy. It is necessary, however, that this comparison takes its starting point from a broader conception of economy; certainly not from a narrow one that takes into account material products alone and their reduction to terms of utility, but from a “general economy”, as Georges Bataille defined it,<sup>15</sup> which embraces all those cultural artifacts, those symbolic goods that escape the rigorous criteria of personal profit and advantage, and emphasizes precisely the limits of the useful as is the case, for example, in unproductive exchanges, in the *potlatch*, in the experience of the gift, in ritual ceremonies, in excessive practices, considered a “loss” and tied to forms of *dépense*, as Bataille called it. In other words “an economy of symbolic goods,” as Bourdieu defined it,<sup>16</sup> which, contrary to the economy of *do ut des* is based on the overturning or the removal of the economical in a strict sense, on the rejection of a logic of maximization of economic profit. An economy, in other words, of the undefined and the undetermined, one could say, which for us today has become so much more impenetrable and incomprehensible the more we have taken our distance from the forms of pre-capitalist economy of archaic societies.

But, on the other hand, if we observe the economic situation of today’s postindustrial society, we clearly see how it always appears under cover of an intangible and imaginary economy, a *fiction economy*, as it has also been called,<sup>17</sup> in which aesthetics takes on a role unexpected thus far. The aesthetic horizon, in fact, has been greatly broadened, investing even the world of goods, the sphere of cultural consumption, the entirety of symbolic goods. The aesthetic, therefore, attains to the sphere of economic values, is positioned in the midst of economic processes of valorization – to which nothing escapes today: neither beauty, nor art, nor the so-called symbolic goods – and is engaged deeply in the universe of everyday life.

In this situation, however, aesthetics is called to a more critical and demystifying exercise in denouncing openly the degrading and populist results, as well as the despotic and

totalitarian traps of our system of communication, moving toward a more precise critique of the new forms of late capitalistic economy, an expression of what has been called the “new spirit of capitalism” or “third capitalism”.<sup>18</sup>

### **The art world**

And still, in following up on our items to fit in the agenda, for what concerns the art world, spurred on by cultural studies, we are urged not to consider it anymore as an isolated or a singular world<sup>19</sup>, a fixed and enchanted realm in which art conserves its autonomy, its privilege and its functional exemplarity, but becomes always a more social and widely cultural phenomena invested by a multiplicity of forces and conditions, and made up by a plurality of ideas, strategies, factors, actors, figures and institutions that make up a very dynamic and complex whole more than one could possibly imagine.<sup>20</sup> As a plural phenomena, we ought to also consider art by looking in the direction of all the arts and all the artistic expressions, from the ancient minor arts to the new and “irregular” art forms (outsider art, insane art, visionary art, etc.), to new electronic, media, and virtual forms, without limiting oneself to only European and Western cultures and paying particular attention to other different experiences, unusual and provoking, on the contemporary scene.

### **Positionality**

Last but not least, another question emerges strongly from cultural studies, it is one that can be said to constitute the central question of position, that is the “positionality” of culture. By concentrating its attention on the relation between cultural practices and the devices of power that they imply, cultural studies place at the forefront the fact that knowledge is never a neutral and an objective phenomena, and from this point of view there is no theory or pure and disembodied knowledge, but cultural practices produced by determined social subjectivities, defined by language and marked by the difference that constitutes it. In this sense they would be particularly attentive to the historical, relational and economic dimension of cultural processes, very much insisting on their political, economic, social, sexual, and racial conditioning that articulate on the whole even aesthetic experience by calling attention to the ways in which aesthetic facts are produced, from whom and in what conditions they are realized, communicated and to what ends they are transmitted.

### **A theory of symbolic goods**

If we now take seriously the points highlighted and the issues taken up and consider the useful “provocations” that come to us from the sphere of cultural studies, we cannot but conclude that we must say goodbye to aesthetics, that is, we have to abandon the academic discipline as we have known it and thought until now, leaving room, rather, to what we could call a *theory of symbolic goods*, or a *science of cultural artifacts*, open to all forms of culture, society and contemporary feeling. A science that concerns itself not only with aesthetic and artistic phenomena, but also with socio-economic values, symbolic powers, lifestyles, objects of desire, in short, with all those modes connected to the paradigm of “disinterested interest” which encompasses aesthetic experience, in which one can find not only the arts, but also those cultural activities that escape the economy of immediate profit and point to the formation of a symbolic capital foreign to economic capital.<sup>21</sup>

As a science of symbolic goods, aesthetics can be measured on the grounds of cultural practices to find once again the conditions of a more concrete actuality. In this sense aesthetics becomes a battleground for the determination of the principles on whose base an evaluation can be expressed. It is essential, therefore, to become open to the directions of all forms of culture, society and contemporary feeling but by paying attention that the abandonment of narrow disciplinary ties and traditional interpretive categories does not lead to greater confusion or to a sterile flattening of data, or worse still, to a mere exaltation of the existent. It is important to always confront these phenomena in a critical and lucid manner and to avoid the double error of dilettantism and superficiality, complacency or apologia, without ever avoiding the experience of conflict and difference.

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