

Aesthetic values, art and the physiognomy of pseudo art-works

Abstract: Within the contemporary world we have to deal with an inflation of pseudo-artistic products and false aesthetic guide marks. We became witnesses and accomplices to the exaltation of the subjectivism in what concern the art's axiology, by according to the audience unlimited power of judgment. In this way the art object is totally subordinated to the human subject's view and this kind of approach is susceptible to encourage the rejection of possible masterpieces in the detriment of soap-operas or entertainment acts. If there will be no man to appreciate the beauty of a sculpture made by Michelangelo and we consider the beauty to abide only the "eye of the viewer", then Michelangelo's creations are supposed to disappear from the map of the Art-models, to be banished because nobody considers them aesthetically meaningful anymore. This is what I want to question in the following study. Are there some objective criteria to testify the value of an art work or we cannot escape from the ground of random subjectivity?

Keywords: aesthetic value, aesthetic axiology, aesthetic fake, the non-aesthetic beauty and ugliness.

Introduction

The crisis and the confusion of values which came along with the development of the consumerist society create not only a disintegration of the moral cardinal points but also an alteration of the aesthetic receptivity and comprehension: the public is more and more puzzled about the notion of beauty, more and more unable to evaluate it. The dominant tendency of the main collective mentality is towards relativism especially in what concerns the judgments of taste. This attitude is prone to project the subjective plurality of appreciations upon the objects, creations and phenomena that are susceptible to have aesthetic features and quality, in other words to axiomatically consider the beauty as being ONLY in the "eye of the viewer", in the ears of the listener etc. When a human subject resonates with an artefact, with a representation that apparently belongs to the conventional language of a consecrated art, that construct is attributed with a presumptive aesthetic value in addition to the empathetic response. The border between the aesthetic

* Public name of Ilinca Mihaela Dobrescu.

Doctor in philosophy, university assistant, stage director, writer, București, România
email: ilinca_bernea@yahoo.com

empathy and all the other kinds of empathy (emotional, intellectual) vanishes in the postmodern perspective.

The matter of taste

An axiological crisis involves not only the confusion of moral values, but also the distortion of the aesthetic compass. The more relative and subjective the values are the more probable the imminence of the axiological chaos is.

In the history of aesthetic thinking Plotinus is the philosopher who introduces the concept of “internal sense” providing it with an aesthetic meaning.

The tastes are not to be “disputed” when one has a certain preference for things which are to be wound in a frame of axiological equality. There when someone prefers the red colour to the blue or when prefers the dry seasons to the rainy ones, we have to deal with a reference system wherein all the elements are equally valuable and therefore the subjective options cannot be submitted to critical judgment; once more when these choices belong to an authentic individual bent. By the contrary, when we talk about someone’s preference for a kitsch pattern in the detriment of a paint of Michelangelo, then the tastes are to be “discussed” because, under these circumstances, the taste doesn’t appear in its genuine inborn form, but as a derivation a consequence of certain cultural influences. We can distinguish between two types of taste: the inborn one, determined by the natural individual sensibility and the achieved one, submitted to a cultivation process such is the taste for certain music, poetry, visual expressions and so on.

There are at least four concepts subsequent to that one of aesthetic attitude: the aesthetic sense, the aesthetic interest, the aesthetic taste and the aesthetic ideal.

Louis Kahn describes the germination phenomena of the taste: it takes shape from the inherent pattern emphasized through an art work. What forms the taste is the existence of this work: it appears to be an appetite, a need, a sort of hunger. But we cannot starve for something which has a taste that we never experienced before. “The creation of art is not the fulfilment of a need but the creation of a need. The world never needed Beethoven's Fifth Symphony until he created it. Now we could not live without it”. Analogically, the bad taste is determined by what we call, generically, kitsch. The expansion of the kitsch products provokes the inflation of bad taste. The kitsch addicts have no clue about the lack of aesthetic value of their preferences and they tend to assimilate their taste to the interest for art. The overall decline of the artistic standards is symptomatic for the decadence of a civilization, because the arts are its soul and when the soul gets decrepit the body cannot survive any longer. The decline of the ancient civilizations occurred along with the decadence of the arts. In our times, the mass culture had initially a democratic role: it aimed to facilitate everybody’s access to art matters, but, in time this

phenomena turned into consumerist culture and consumerism. It has been proven that the industrialized entertaining had negative effects upon human behaviour, by stimulating the primary impulses and altering the critical judgement. Even before the explosion of this phenomena, thinkers such Adorno¹ or Marcuse² warned about the danger supposed by the mass culture: it stimulates the hedonistic superficial accomplishment, the artificial needs and the facile satisfaction and produces a type of consumer which is passive and lacks critical sense. The great public manifests a bulimic hunger for pop art and most times doesn't prove to have appetite for any other kind of art. It starves only for entertainment and fashion. There is a vicious circle: the bad taste creates the need of false values and fake art shapes and fake beauty and the audience asks for what is used to consume.

The aesthetic fake

In basic lines the patterns that spread out false values are those humanly artefacts which could be obtained without any previous specific training, without creative effort and without moral, intellectual or aesthetic goals. In a film or in a musical piece belonging to the commercial genre, there is no general aim for an aesthetic purpose, for an ideal or for a certain category of value. Most often pop music doesn't even follow a coherent connection between the sound schema and the lyrics: the enchainment of notes are sometimes very joyful and meant to induce some sort of fun while the lyrics are made by lamentations and invocations of pain, sorrow, grief, even death. Within previous centuries the "worst" artists used to be the imitators of the genuine ones: men that used to have the necessary training, but not also the talent. Nowadays anyone able to manipulate with precarious means a non-quotidian language is allowed to take on the *artist* title under the tutelary support of a certain audience.

Each domain that inherently implies emotionally coloured expressions is also submitted to an emotional examination that could attract passions, controversial reactions, rejection attitudes etc. The empathy of the audience with the object of a representation (visual, sonic, textual) could induce a certain euphoria of the senses and this type of emotional response could be easily confounded with the aesthetic experience even though that creation doesn't embody the qualities of an art work. Roman Ingarden³, the famous aesthetician, discusses the matter of the aesthetic experience arguing that the emotional response of the audience is not a criterion of aesthetic value. In

¹ Adorno, Th.W., *Aesthetic Theory*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004

² Marcuse, H., *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Beacon Press, Boston, June 1979

³ Ingarden, R., *Studii de estetică*, ed. Univers, București 1978

other words either the artists or the public could experience emotionally charged reactions in front of artefacts which are not aesthetically meaningful or valuable. They can trick and cheat themselves thinking that they have to do with a masterpiece because of the emotional response, confounding it with the aesthetic emotion.

What the fake artist and its public feel in front of a work without aesthetic value is an ordinary emotion (no matter how intensive or spectacular), but not an aesthetic emotion. One cannot have the same kind of reaction when confronting with an expression of beauty and an expression of anything else belonging to the sensible domain. Therefore we can state that the feeling is a fallible guide mark of the beauty like the taste. The feelings we project on an artefact are not always originated in its qualities, they are sometimes attached to its features, invested in and not provoked by specific nature of the object. David Hume⁴ insists on the dualistic status of the sentiment in the context of art evaluation. We cannot decide with cold blood if we have to deal with a valuable art work: the feeling is a necessary compass because an art work doesn't appeal only to our intellectual, cognitive or rational capacities. Therefore the sentiment is supposed to be, like a revelatory substance, the necessary ingredient in the appreciation of art, but it must act like a function of value not like random affective response. Hume⁵ emphasizes that the pertinent evaluation of the aesthetic quality of an object is done only if the sentiments experienced by the audience are inoculated by the features of the object itself and not attached or projected upon the object. The source of the aesthetic feeling must always originate in the features of the art work and not in the disposition, in the spectre of taste, in the mood or in the emotional status of the audience. In Hume's view the critical judgment must follow the correspondence between the aesthetic object and the aesthetic feeling. Here comes the following dilemma: how is it possible for a human subject to recognize the authentic beauty and the virtue or the value engraved in an art work of not having but a poor representation and understanding, an incomplete map of beauty, virtue and value? The recognition of the virtue and the beauty supposes the existence of an individual which has already well configured certain axiological fair guide marks. But someone who is quite confused in his (her) everyday life about these values will certainly be confused in front of an artwork too. In this point we should appeal to the concept of aesthetic discernment. Although the artistic language and the aesthetic experience are equivalent with the quotidian ones it is basically impossible for someone dis-oriented in axiological matters in the everyday life to have a good compass in

⁴ Hume, D. "Of the Standard of Taste", in *Four dissertations*, Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 2009.

⁵ Shiner, R.A. "Hume and the Causal Theory of Taste". in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Summer, 1996), pp. 237-249.

the field of art creation. The problem of the discernment remains open and, apparently, without practical solution.

„The aesthetics of ugliness” and the non-aesthetic ugly

We shall probably make a clear distinction between the art works belonging to the species of the „aesthetics of ugliness” and those ones which are not beautiful or aesthetically meaningful. Plenty of artists, especially in the modern times, searched to catch and to transmit the beauty by other means than those ones belonging to the rigors of the shapes’ harmony. Artists such as Goya, Daumier, Van Gogh, Camille Claudel, Käthe Kollwitz, musicians like Liszt, Prokofiev, Shostakovich or poets as Walt Whitman or Sylvia Plath didn’t aim to immortalize the apparent or evident beauty of things nor to integrate in their art works naturally beautiful elements and they also didn’t cultivate with premeditation the classical artistic norm supposing the transfiguration of the ugliness from reality, but they rather tried and reached to find the beauty there where others didn’t dare to look for: in decadent beings, in outcasts, in individuals disfigured by burdens and grief, in the eyes of the prostitutes, in life forms half-destroyed or – in the case of musicians – in audible expressions of pain, conflict, tension, etc. Also on level of representation (the subject depicted by the art work) and of formal expression (style) these artists didn’t take in account the classical rules and norms of the aesthetics. In spite of this “ignorance” they came to create masterpieces while the works of some skilled and “obedient” artisans which didn’t dare to defy the rules were quite boring, insignificant, predictable and not shining, because they followed a consecrated pattern of expression when the art field is a domain in continuous expansion, caught in a permanent process of germination of a new language. Therefore we can state that the true artists are those ones able to open and to enlarge the horizon of the aesthetic thinking and not the conformist ones approaching it dogmatically. For the artists like those ones mentioned above the “world’s representation” doesn’t mean a simple act of mirroring an inner or external reality in the substance of a creative language, but a meditation – interrogation act that inquires these realities and puts them in a dilemmatic frame and the aesthetic dimension of their works comes from an imperative sense of beauty and value of the being, impregnated in the articulation between the style and the content of representation. The beauty, in their case, is not the property of the shape or attribute of the depicted object. It is somewhere in the shadow of their expressivity. Their works are an interpretation not a “mimesis”... They are not just contemplative, they are rather philosophical in the way they approach their subjects. To them representation doesn’t mean just mirroring an inner or external reality. They represent the beauty of each particular being’s uniqueness and this is tragic because it fades away. The fact that we are

unique and mortal makes our lives beautiful and tragic and it's a more comfortable position for one to invest his interest and passion in eternal things, or in unalterable kinds of beauty... Loving God is easier than loving a fallible being. I'll try appeal to a parable in order to explain myself better:

Somewhere on a bridge is a lost child. He stands on the edge quiet, without crying or asking for help. Some passengers don't notice him at all, some others look at him and go ahead, some others feel sorry for him or pity, but pretend they haven't seen him and finally some passengers stop by and try to talk to him, to help him. There is nothing special about the child, the situation is banal somehow and the benevolent men could be otherwise uninteresting. But there is something beautiful in this stop by. The concern for a stranger. The beauty is not necessarily in the eyes of Egon Schiele's prostitutes, neither in his style but in his concern for their fate. He values and paints their unique existence in this world. All of Hermann Hesse's books are also crossed by the meaning of these words of him: „If we wouldn't be more than unique individuals, if it would be possible indeed for us to be completely erased from this world with a simple gun shot, it wouldn't have been necessary to tell stories. I have no permission to consider myself as an initiate. I've been a finder and I still am, but I'm not searching more what I'm looking for in stars or in books. I have begun to observe the advices that my blood is whispering to me. My story is not attractive, is not sweet and full of harmony like the invented stories, its taste is like emptiness and confusion, like madness and dream, like the life of all the human beings which refuse to lie each other any more...” These artists immortalize something meant to vanish and the beauty is in the essence of this act.

Without this inner sensible experience that makes the expression to carry on the prints of a true aesthetic charge; the shapes – no matter how beautiful apparently – are but a disarticulated enchainment of images, sounds, words; a simple artifice of language. Not the allegory of shapes, patterns or ideas assembled in a creative work provide it with aesthetic radiation, but the axiological vision from the background of the artist's thinking. The true artists are followed by their stylistic disciples that are walking their path with dogmatic convictions and with a missionary heart and these disciples are, basically, building the bridge between creation and contra-creation within the frame of the same aesthetic phenotype, the ultimate point of the decadence of an aesthetic model being the kitsch. If we can define art as the most original way of embodying meanings, the kitsch is the burial of the meaning, if the art is the most efficient way to propagate a communicative structure, the kitsch is the surest way to mortify the human sensibility to communicative stimuli, if the art is one of the most creative languages, the kitsch is a juggle with clichés

and belongs to the species of serial products. The famous saw questioning if we can consider Kafka a true Kafkaian spirit is quite relevant in the context.

Conclusions

The value of an art work is given only by its own capacity to configure a reality which is not a copy of the contingent one but another with of a comparable complexity and intensity. The reality invoked through the art works is not a quotidian one, but an essential-ontological one, a force field of meanings that coin the existence. In the case of the artistic fake the meaning is a secondary product of the shape and submitted to its caprices, it is totally integrated in the convention of a language. The message of the pseudo-artistic products is mostly clear, intelligible and easily communicable in another communication code; it is not susceptible of ambiguity or different interpretations, while the authentic art works have multiple meanings and their message cannot be reduced to the formal attributes of the artefact: there is always a doze of ineffable, an *active substance* transported by an art work that no interpretation can consume or cover completely, something impossible to be translated in another language.