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ΕΚΔΟΣΗ ΤΟΥ ΙΔΡΥΜΑΤΟΣ ΠΑΝΑΓΙΩΤΗ ΚΑΙ ΕΦΗΣ ΜΙΧΕΛΗ
ΜΕ ΤΗ ΣΥΝΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ ΤΗΣ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ ΑΙΣΘΗΤΙΚΗΣ

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QUOTIDIAN AESTHETICS*

To the Western ear, the mere idea of "quotidian aesthetics" seems an oxymoron. The first attempts to distinguish it as a particular branch of philosophical studies during the mid-eighteenth century understood it as being related to the extraordinary phenomena of art and beauty, despite the fact that, etymologically, the aesthetic refers to perception, the most common and indispensable activity of all living creatures. John Dewey, on the other hand, was well aware of the fact that the aesthetic is grounded in simple everyday activities when he stated that "Mountaintops do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth: They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations".¹ Hence, according to this metaphorically expressed idea, art is based on worldly, everyday activities where energy, rhythm and balance are continuously at stake. Art is, in fact, the tip of an iceberg beneath which the vast world of the prosaic is pulsating.

In direct reference to Aristotle's definition of "Poetics" (1447)² as the study of art in general, I have chosen the term "prosaics" to designate this other outlook towards aesthetic activity performed in everyday life. Derived from the Latin verb *provertere* (to turn to the front) "prosaics" seems adequate for comprising ordinary aesthetic interactions. As an antecedent to the use of "prosaics" in the field of aesthetics, I must quote Morson and Emerson (1990) stating:

* This paper will be part of the book *Quotidian Aesthetics and Social Identities* (in publication).

Prosaics encompasses two related but different concepts. First, in opposition to "poetics", prosaics designates a theory of literature that favors prose in general and the novel in particular over poetic genres. Prosaics in its second meaning is much wider than that in literary theory: it is a manner of thinking that assumes the importance of the everyday, the commonplace, the "prosaic".³

I quote this definition because it is the first time that the term is mentioned for theoretical purposes and not in a derogatory sense. Although I understand prosaics as "what assumes the importance of the everyday", it is not the commonplace itself that would concern prosaics, but its display of the aesthetic function as Jakobson (1963) and Mukarovsky (1977) understood it.⁴

There are two fundamental differences between aesthetic activities in poetics and in prosaics. The first lies in the finite and consummated character of the products of poetics, namely artworks, in contrast to the intermittent, continuous, and unfinished character of prosaics. The qualities of unity, coherence and completeness that Beardsley (1987) attributed to the aesthetic experience may only be applied to the products of poetics, rather than to aesthetic experience itself.⁵ Every elocution in poetics, independently of its quality and range, is finite, with a clearly established beginning and end according to genre conventions. Poetic statements, however, always remain open to interpretation, and change according to the readers or spectators' interpretative codes and strategies. In prosaics, on the other hand, unity, coherence, and completion are never definitive, since aesthetic interactions are in a continuous flow, pause after pause, turn after turn, varying and alternating with time.

The second difference between prosaics and poetics is that the latter is based on a social division of work. Only very few of us can learn and perform artistic expression, whereas each of us, without exception, constantly practice aesthetic communication or prosaic interactions. We display it to seduce and be appreciated by others, as well as to convey the credibility of our personal and collective identities in a manifold of social activities.

Other meanings of the term prosaics, as the trite, the vulgar, or the insignificant, are applicable to both poetics and prosaics, since both vulgarity and triviality are not absent from art and everyday life. We will consequently have to veer the traditional approach to aesthetics 180

degrees by focusing not up such as art, fashion or design *tics* performed within a widely, school, religion, the State the aesthetic quality of practice is exactly the question that thus, to study aesthetics not *stitutive* of practices and separate social effects that dep

The emphasis on this can no longer be theoretically whether speculative as in postmodernist trends. Anal logic of aesthetic related also not suitable for this alike and remains trapped the subject of enunciation a dition of possibility for per only rely upon an inter ethnography, phenomen prove to have any heurist interactionism, particularly sentation of identities and Berger and Luckmann's rases of common practices becomes salient.⁷

The results of this endeavor book and published paper played through various sources results in this brief presentation the method used. Based on Saussure, Peirce, Jakobson, Hall's concept of play and Caillois' theory of play simultaneously analyze the or visual, acoustic, somatic human communication, at least one of these registers

degrees by focusing not upon the *aesthetic effects of social practices* such as art, fashion or design, but on the *social effects of aesthetic practices* performed within a wide array of social institutions such as the family, school, religion, the State, prison and the military. The specificity of the aesthetic quality of practices performed in each of these institutions is exactly the question that prosaics will have to answer. The purpose is, thus, to study aesthetics not as the *effect* of art and beauty, but as *constitutive* of practices and strategies elaborated towards producing deliberate social effects that depend upon involving the subjects' sensibility.

The emphasis on this constitutive function proper to aesthetics can no longer be theoretically dealt via a purely philosophical approach, whether speculative as in idealistic tendencies or meta-disciplinary as postmodernist trends. Analytic aesthetics' method for inspecting the logic of aesthetic related propositions and their matching to reality is also not suitable for this purpose, since it erases context and subject alike and remains trapped in its own propositions. We are dealing with the subject of enunciation and its contextualized positioning as the condition of possibility for perception and valuation. Consequently we can only rely upon an interdisciplinary perspective involving semiotics, ethnography, phenomenology, and whatever theoretical tools may prove to have any heuristic value for this purpose. Applying symbolic interactionism, particularly Goffman's (1981) work on dramaturgical presentation of identities and his incursion into micro-sociology⁶, like Berger and Luckmann's radical constructivism enables qualitative analyses of common practices where the relevance of quotidian aesthetics becomes salient.⁷

The results of this endeavor have now filled hundreds of pages in a book and published papers where I explore aesthetic strategies displayed through various social matrixes. It is impossible to sum up those results in this brief presentation, but a word at least may be said about the method used. Based upon a semiotic approach that is a hybrid of Saussure, Peirce, Jakobson and Bakhtin's contributions, and incorporating Hall's concept of proxemics, Birdwhistell's kinesics, Huizinga's and Caillois' theory of play among others, I have constructed a model to simultaneously analyze these different practices in four registers: scopic or visual, acoustic, somatic or corporeal and lexic or verbal. Every act of human communication, artistic or not, must necessarily pass through at least one of these registers: painting, sculpture and architecture depend

on the scopic register while literature and poetry on the lexical and music on the acoustic, whereas dance, theatre, cinema and opera are hybrids of acoustic, lexical, somatic and scopic registers. These registers are displayed through four modalities: proxemics as distancing, kinetics as dynamism, emphatics as accent and fluxion as flowing.

Proxemics Proximate: transparency, small scale, detail, subtlety, intimacy, closeness,

Distant: manifold, large scale, aloofness, wholeness

Kinetics Static: immobility, regularity, continuity, predictability, rigidity, equilibrium, symmetry, sequence, solidity, monotony.

Dynamic: randomness, irregularity, spontaneity, instability, variation, asymmetry, flexibility, mobility, rhythm.

Emphatics Sharp: Contrast, distortion, tonicity, accent, audacity, focused, vividness, boldness, eloquence, vehemence.

Diffused: vagueness, softness, neutrality, opacity, fluffiness.

Fluxion Centrifugal: profusion, dispersion, fragmentation, variety, exuberance, overflowing, incontinence, loquacity,

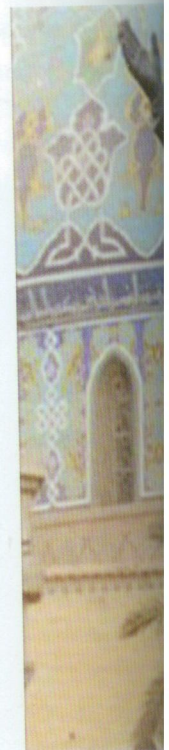
Centripetal: enclosure, contour, overlapping, unity, reticence, concentration, withholding.

To illustrate the use of this model I will briefly apply it to a recent event you all probably remember, the destruction of Saddam's statue in Firdos Square on April 9, 2003⁸.

On the purely semiotic level, these images can be simply described as the "Iraqi people destroy Hussein's statue" yet, beside their political consequences, the world media (including the Arabic *Al Jazeera*) repeatedly transmitted these images for hours on end for no other reason than their aesthetic and symbolic appeal upon the audience. Their dramaticism was a result of the *scopic kinetics* in the radical change of visual representation of power in Iraq, the close *somatic proxemics* between Iraqis and Americans, erstwhile enemies, cooperating in the destruction of the statue, the vehement *scopic emphatics* of demolishing the symbol of Saddam's regime, the contrast between the Iraqis' flimsy *kinetic scopics* of tying it with the rope with the solid *kinetic scopics* of the American tank pulling the statue off the pedestal and Saddam's image off its boots. The Iraqis' overflowing *somatic fluxion* in kick-

ing and spitting on the statue of Baghdad, and the *scopic shoes* to stomp on his in Arab culture, must be heeded to protest at the *scopic* immediate substitution by the (liberation?) complete the

This example is obviously beautiful nor sublime, yet the audience's sensibility. On the other hand, Saddam's regime is over" and require more than information of meaning that exceeds the aesthetic, as it involves c



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ing and spitting on the statue's head and dragging it through the streets of Baghdad, and the *scopic-somatic emphatics* of using the sole of their shoes to stomp on his image, the ultimate expression of disrespect in Arab culture, must be heeded. The expulsive *acoustic fluxion* of whistling to protest at the *scopic emphatics* of a marine trying to place the American flag over Saddam statue's face, meaning occupation, and its immediate substitution by the Iraqi flag and its ambiguous signifying effect (liberation?) complete the scene.

This example is obviously not quotidian; neither is it artistic, nor beautiful nor sublime, yet it is difficult to deny that it touched the audience's sensibility. On the purely semiotic level, merely declaring "Saddam's regime is over" would have sufficed, yet as human beings, we require more than information to make sense of our world. This surplus of meaning that exceeds the informative enters into the dimension of the aesthetic, as it involves our senses, emotions, experiences and values.





We can equally appreciate the *Cypresses*, whose impact is achieved through aesthetic strategies such as the dynamic kinetics of the swirling clouds and sky, the emotional accent, and the intense inner life through these categories to enjoy for understanding what I mean by this "excitement" as "cypresses", "a Van Gogh", "Postimpressionism", or beyond signification; what

This model is merely a tool to use by colleagues in film, fashion, political discourse. Its initial proposal was presented at the International Conference in Lahti in 1995. Hopefully, that is why I must express my appreciation for the aesthetics and the Panayotis Foundation for this opportunity to present *Perspectives in Aesthetics* bringing forth these long-

NOTES

1. John Dewey [1934] *Art as Experience*.
2. Aristóteles, *Poética*. Traducción de María José Gredes (Madrid: Alianza, 1989) 2nd edition.
3. Gary.S. Morson, & Caryl Phillips (Eds.), *Postcolonialism: A Critical Reader* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
4. Cf. Roman Jakobson, *On the Poetics of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963) and Jan Mukarovsky, *On the Poetics of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1963) translated by Hanna Anthony-Visovská.



We can equally apply this model to poetics, say in Van Gogh's *Cypresses*, whose impact upon the spectator can be partly explained by aesthetic strategies such as *short scopic proxemics* that places the spectator so close to the painting as to discern its detailed texture, the *dynamic kinetics* of the trees' flaming movement together with undulating clouds and sky, the *vigorous emphatics* of the brush strokes as an emotional accent, and the *centrifugal fluxion* of Vincent's ardent and intense inner life throughout the painting. The spectator does not need these categories to enjoy it, but for the theoretician, they are useful tools for understanding what actually happens to the viewer. It also illustrates what I mean by this "excess", since the painting can be simply decoded as "cypresses", "a Van Gogh", "modern painting", "\$50,000,000.00", "Postimpressionism", or "art" depending on the code applied, yet beyond signification; what is relevant here, is its aesthetic appreciation.

This model is merely a map for exploring the prosaic. It has been put to use by colleagues and students for inquiries into the aesthetics of film, fashion, political discourse, soap opera etc. with quite stimulating results. Its initial proposal was published in a book in 1994⁹, and briefly presented at the International Association of Aesthetics Congress in Lahti in 1995. Hopefully I may soon have an English version to offer. That is why I must express my gratitude to the Hellenic Society for Aesthetics and the Panayotis and Effie Michelis Foundation for granting me this opportunity to present my work. The theme of this meeting, *New Perspectives in Aesthetics*, couldn't have been more appropriate for bringing forth these long-pondered thoughts and sharing them with you.

NOTES

1. John Dewey [1934] *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee, 1980).
2. Aristóteles, *Poética*. Translated by García Bacca. (México: Editores Mexicanos Unidos, 1989) 2nd edition.
3. Gary.S. Morson, & Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin, Creation of a Prosaics* (California: Stanford University Press, 1990) p.15.
4. Cf. Roman Jakobson, *Essais de Linguistique Générale* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963) and Jan Mukarovsky, *Escritos de estética y semiótica del arte*. Translated by Hanna Anthony-Visová (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1977).

5. Monroe C. Beardsley, "Aesthetic Point Of View" in Joseph Margolis (ed.) *Philosophy Looks at the Arts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) 3rd edition.
6. Erving Goffman, [1959] *La Presentación de la Persona en la Vida Cotidiana*. Translated by Hildegard B. Torres Perrén and Flora Setaro (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1981).
7. P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *La construcción social de la realidad* (Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 1986).
8. <http://www.capecodonline.com/special/iraq/saddamtoppled9.htm>
9. Katya Mandoki, *Prosaica: introducción a la estética de lo cotidiano* (México: Grijalbo, 1994).