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AESTHETICS, MULTICULTURALISM, AND DECOLONIALITY*

I would like to start out with Aimé Césaire's idea that no one group "holds a monopoly on beauty, intelligence, and strength".[1] While Western-European philosophy may have appropriated for itself the category of the aesthetic, sensory pleasure and appreciation of creativity are not exclusive to this paradigm. With this in mind, this paper will look at two approaches for theorizing aesthetics beyond a Western-European framework. Through Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's work on polycentric aesthetics,[2] I will look at a multicultural model for thinking about aesthetics in a non-Eurocentric framework. And through Walter Mignolo's decolonial *aesthesis*,[3] I will consider a modernity / coloniality model for thinking about aesthetics in the framework of decoloniality. After presenting

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[1] Cited in Shohat, Ella & Stam, Robert (1994). *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. London: Routledge, 3.

[2] Shohat & Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*; and Shohat, Ella & Stam, Robert (1998). "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics". In Nicholas Mirzoeff (Ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader* London: Routledge, 27-52.

[3] Mignolo, Walter (2010). *Aiesthesis* decolonial. *Calle14*, 14(4), 10-25.

some of the main ideas from these models, I will set them into a dialogue with each other, finding the points of convergence and divergence between them. Finally, I will sketch out some potential avenues for a rehabilitation of the category of aesthetics in the field of visual studies.

Multiculturalism and aesthetics

Shohat and Stam situate their work on polycentric aesthetics in the context of a multiculturalist non-Eurocentric framework. For them, Eurocentrism is the discursive precipitate of colonialism that functions as the colonizer's model of the world, normalizing the hierarchical power relations generated by colonialism and imperialism.[4] And, fundamentally, Eurocentrism is a kind of fiction that ends up flattening cultural diversity both in non-European spaces and in Europe itself. Eurocentrism forces cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigmatic point of view in which Europe is seen as the only source of meaning possible. This homogenization of cultural diversity is particularly palpable in the arena of image production; specifically, through the grand narrative of "Great Western Art". In this story, art goes through different stages, with the most recent one superseding the previous one in a sort of linear succession that presents a progressive history of human creativity. Hence, this narrative, firmly situated in the Western world, exalts only one legitimate culture and prescribes only one path to aesthetic creation. It is constructed from a single, local perspective; but it presents itself as central and universal. Non-European creators are inevitably presented as copyists, considered aesthetically inferior and lagging behind in the progressive history of human creativity. Under a frankly infantilizing trope, non-European peoples are produced as "culturally immature", always playing catch-up to the West's presumed cultural advancement. Yet, Shohat and Stam argue, all cultures – European culture included– are built on the basis of longstanding interconnectedness between different peoples. Western culture (if one can make this generalization) is the result of a collective heritage where non-European cultures have not only been influential but directly constitutive. In this sense, the authors vindicate the discipline of visual culture studies as a field that interrogates how art history and visual culture have been narrativized, privileging certain

[4] Shohat & Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*.

locations of image production over others. Through their reconsideration of aesthetics, Shohat and Stam seek to problematize the canonical narrativizing of art history and open up different aesthetic strategies that go beyond Eurocentrism.

In this sense, Shohat and Stam argue for a polycentric aesthetics.[5] Since, in their view, aesthetic innovation arises –not exclusively but importantly- from multicultural knowledges, a polycentric, dialogical, and relational analysis of visual cultures becomes crucial. A polycentric aesthetics would, then, focus on the relational dynamics between cultures, especially avoiding the epistemological privileging of any single group or part of the world. The "polycentrism" in polycentric aesthetics does not refer to spatial points or a finite list of centers, they clarify, but it indicates a systematic principle of differentiation, relationality and linkage. Hence, a polycentric aesthetics would project one set of histories across another set of histories, such that diverse cultural experiences are understood as existing concurrently through a logic of co-implication. Its focus would be on the global relationalities of artistic production and reception, looking at the ways that art between individuals, communities and cultures are part of a process of dialogic interaction. However, they are quick to specify, the championing of a polycentric aesthetics would not imply a mindless leveling that denies all criteria of aesthetic evaluation. Rather, it would sustain a historically grounded analysis of multicultural relationality through which one history is read contrapuntally against another in a process of reciprocal relativization. In short, a polycentric aesthetics would look at cultural production in terms of a "reversibility of perspectives",[6] such that each culture would be able to perceive the limitations of their own social and cultural perspective: to see how it is seen, and to be ready to be transformed by it.

Decoloniality and aesthetics

Mignolo approaches the matter of Western- European aesthetics through a modernity / coloniality framework. He argues that "modernity" is a European

[5] Shohat & Stam, "Narrativizing Visual Culture".

[6] Maurice Merleau-Ponty cited in Shohat & Stam, "Narrativizing Visual Culture", 46.

narrative that has adroitly hidden its darker, often more violent side –coloniality– from view.[7] In fact, for him, modernity has an intrinsic need for coloniality given that exploitation, repression, dehumanization and population control have all been mobilized in order to forward "the modernizing project". In this context, coloniality is not derivative of, nor contingent to, modernity; instead, coloniality is the reverse and unavoidable side of modernity. He situates the historical emergence of modernity/coloniality in the 16th century when the material and epistemological conditions for modernity were made possible by Europe's contact and conquest of the Americas and its peoples. This became the starting point for what Enrique Dussel has termed "the myth of modernity": the supposed superiority of Europe over the rest of the world cultures.[8] European accomplishments, such as increased economic and epistemological production during the early modern period, came at the cost of the dispensability of human life in the pursuit of increased wealth and knowledge; thus, coloniality was central in making modernity directly possible. Simultaneously, the discourse of modernity kept coloniality hidden, "as its incidental though not its constitutive side".[9] Yet, Mignolo clarifies, coloniality is not the same thing as colonialism. For him, colonialism refers to the historical processes and particularities of modes of colonial rule, while coloniality describes the continuous condition of submission to colonial legacies. While it can be argued that historically colonialism ended in the world in the 20th century, the condition of coloniality continues to this day as the structuring force behind globalization. In philosophical terms, the ongoing condition of coloniality means that it is possible to theorize its many modalities, such as the coloniality of knowledge, the coloniality of being, and the coloniality of aesthetics.

Focusing on aesthetics in art, but not exclusively, Mignolo argues that aesthetics participates in both colonial and decolonial processes. For him, in its Greek origins *aesthesis* was conceived as a process of perception of sensations that was

[7] Mignolo, Walter (2000). *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 22.
[8] Dussel, Enrique (2008). Philosophy of Liberation, the Postmodern Debate, and Latin American Studies. In Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, & Carlos A. Jáuregui (Eds.), *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 341.
[9] Mignolo, Walter (2002). Introduction and Commentary. In José de Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 459.

common to all living beings with a nervous system. By the 17th century in Europe, the concept of aesthesis was reduced and limited to the capacity to perceive "the sensation of beauty". At this point, Esthetics with a capital E was born, as was the practice of Art with a capital A. This process of the conversion of aesthesis into Esthetics is what Mignolo calls the colonization of aesthesis through Esthetics. This involved the re-writing of the history of aesthetics, converting what is a *particular* theory that ties the perception of sensory stimuli with *particular* conceptions of beauty into a universal, naturalized conceptualization of beauty. As Mignolo argues, there is no universal law that associates aesthesis to particular forms of (Western) beauty. The appreciation of creativity and the satisfaction in sensation are common to a myriad of groups the world over. Moreover, the universalization and naturalization of aesthesis implies the devaluation of any other form of aesthetic experience that does not conform to the Western canon because it has failed to be conceptualized in the terms determined by Europe according to its own specific sensory experience. Significantly, the coloniality of Esthetics implies the colonization of the imaginary of dominated peoples, which in turn perpetuates the power plays involved in modern/colonial relations. For Mignolo, it is important to reveal the colonization of aesthesis by Esthetics in order to begin to trace a program of decolonial aesthesis, one that brings to the surface the contradictions and power dynamics that constitute modernity/ coloniality.

Convergences and divergences

Both Shohat and Stam's multiculturalist approach to esthetics and Mignolo's decolonial aesthesis have some points in common. Firstly, they converge in their understanding that an esthetics of modernism (Esthetics with a capital E) assumes a telos towards which non-Western peoples are supposed to be evolving. This places non-European cultures as lagging behind on a linear temporal conception of the history of cultural production, condemning them to a perpetual game of catch-up. As it has been theorized by Johannes Fabian,[10] these kind of constructions are based on the assumption of a spatio-temporal distance

[10] Fabian, Johannes (1983). *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.

between Europe and its others. The non-European other is imagined as far away from the European center, both in space and time, and thus denied contemporaneity (coevalness) with his European counterpart through an organization and ranking of cultures and societies through time. In fact, Shohat, Stam and Mignolo would argue, non-European and European cultures exist and interrelate in coeval worlds; they mutually define each other through webs of relationality and mutual dependence.

Secondly, Shohat, Stam and Mignolo discuss representation as a tool for perpetuating the hierarchies between European and non-European cultures. In a decolonial framework, for instance, representation is conceived as one of the building blocks of the overarching imaginary of the modern/colonial world. Yet this does not only mean the simple mobilization of stereotypical representations of non-Western societies; what is important here is that this representational privilege is intrinsically linked with the global deployment of Western power. For Fernando Coronil, this implies the production of particular representational styles that depict non-Occidental peoples as "other" in practices that directly correlate otherness to Western displays of power and expansionism.[11] As Santiago Castro-Gómez has argued, the representational element is fundamental to establishing colonial dominance through a discourse on the "other" which becomes engrained in the *habitus* of both the dominators and dominated; without it, power over the colonies is impossible.[12] Moroever, for Mignolo an imperial Esthetic based on representation (mimesis) facilitates the cooption of aesthesis and results in its impoverishment as sensorial experience. For Shohat and Stam, however, there is a caveat to the importance of representation in a polycentric aesthetics. Seeking to go beyond representation, Shohat and Stam focus more on the power relations established within and among different cultural communities, highlighting the importance of agency in the constitution

[11] Coronil, Fernando (1998). Más allá del occidentalismo: Hacia categorías geohistóricas no-imperialistas. In Santiago Castro-Gómez & Eduardo Mendieta (Coords.), *Teorías sin disciplina. Latinoamericanismo, poscolonialidad y globalización en debate*. Mexico: Miguel Ángel Porrúa Ed, 121-146.

[12] Castro-Gómez, Santiago (2008). (Post)Coloniality for Dummies: Latin American Perspectives on Modernity, Coloniality, and the Geopolitics of Knowledge. In Mabel Moraña, Enrique Dussel, & Carlos A. Jáuregui (Eds.), *Coloniality at Large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 259-285.

of these relationships. For them, a radical multiculturalism would have less to do with artifacts, canons and representation, and more with the communities behind the artifacts. In this sense, they point to the limitations of so-called "image studies". The analysis of stereotypes and their distortions is problematic because it is based on an association between representations and "the real", pointing to current debates on authenticity or lack thereof. Hence, Shohat and Stam champion more multidimensional methods such as a focus on institutional setting, the politics of language, generic mediation and cultural variation.

Another difference in approach is the importance accorded to subject positions and agency. While Shohat and Stam highlight agency as an important factor in the mobilization of particular communities, they tend to focus on collectivities and not so much on the power relations that generate particular subject positions, privileging to a certain extent the category of nation-state. Mignolo, on the other hand, reclaims the importance of a re-politicization of the creative subject's position. Citing a contemporary artist, he underlines the significance of questioning the conditions of our lives and how our lives are produced from our specific subjectivity. Hence, the un-situatedness implied in Shohat and Stam's *polycentric* aesthetics does not fully address how the pressures of power and knowledge constitute subjectivities, especially in the case of creative workers; while Mignolo's position does not focus on the networks and communities of influence that surround cultural producers. In this sense, both approaches complement each other and help to fill in each other's blanks.

Avenues

Some of the avenues forwarded by these two approaches provide alternatives for considering the esthetic dimension of images in visual culture studies. For instance, Shohat and Stam's emphasis on establishing connections between typically compartmentalized areas is very interesting. For them, a polycentric aesthetics is one that makes connections in trans-temporal and trans-spatial terms, across disciplines, in intertextual terms (doing away with the distinction between erudite and popular cultural production), and in conceptual terms (by bringing together colonialism, imperialism and Third World nationalism in a productive relationship). Centrally, Shohat and Stam reaffirm the importance of

visual language as an integral part of culture and history; as a complexly activating principle that provides a point of entry into a multidimensional world of intertextual dialogism.

Mignolo, for his part, goes beyond postcolonial theory's typically Anglo-centric approaches to cultural analysis by highlighting his situatedness as a Latin American academic producing knowledge from a Western center of power. For him, the political positioning of the producer of knowledge or cultural artifacts is central, and must be permanently questioned. Moreover, history and its rewriting is fundamental to a decolonial approach insofar as the production of particular forms of knowledge perpetuates specific asymmetrical relations of power. Mignolo stresses that the role of cultural products and institutions is key in the re-writing of history. What's more, art, and culture in general, has the capacity to break through the rhetoric of modernity by evidencing the naturalized expectations that operate in the coloniality of feeling. By bringing to the surface things that have remained hidden and denied, art can be –in itself- a tool against oppression and denial. In short, a decolonial art, a decolonial aesthesis, would make sure it cannot be coopted, simplified or limited through representation.

These are just some of the avenues that result from thinking of an aesthetics otherwise. The polycentric approach highlights the horizontal and vertical links that thread cultural communities in a conflictual network, while a decolonial aesthetics underlines the importance of art in order to unmount imperial-colonial projects and discourses with the aim to imagine decolonial subjectivities and futures. What is important to remember here is that in many cases, the strategies of resistance and decolonization are already happening on the ground through cultural practice understood in the widest of senses.

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