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*The Enlarging of the Aesthetic Ecumene
through Transcultural Studies*

The long, detailed title given to the ninth session of this conference seems to reflect a need and possibly a concern whose presence has been felt in varying degrees at the official conferences of the international aesthetic community preceding it. And since this IAA Conference in Ljubljana happens to be the last to take place in the twentieth century, it may be useful to ponder a little on a problem implicit in the title, and look it squarely in the face. »Art, Culture and Aesthetics in the East, the West, the First, the Second and the Third World« conveys a message both reassuring and worrying. Reassuring, because in theory it would not seem to exclude any of the contributions to aesthetics *as philosophy* in any part of the world – at the very worst, sporadic lines of aesthetic research in the Arctic or in societies impervious to media coverage might resent not being an explicit part of an assembly described in such precise terms. However, the message is also in my view somewhat worrying, for in order to include contributions to aesthetics outside the Euro-Anglo-American perimeter, whose hegemony has always been taken for granted, geopolitical criteria have been adopted. And this is worrying because there is a risk that these very criteria may widen rather than bridge the gulf between the so-called first, second and third worlds, and furthermore that this is only the beginning of a list likely to become much longer.

Not that I wish, with this preamble, to give the impression that I am getting over-concerned about what is after all just a title, nor that I have launched into lexical hair-splitting in order to hawk an expression, like the one in the title of this paper, that I consider preferable. Nevertheless, »Ecumene«, with all the semantic limits inherent in the word,¹ seems to me

¹ The Greek word »*oikumene*« was of common use in the classical authors. From Homer onward, *oikèò* is used both in the intransitive sense of »I dwell«, »I inhabit«, referring to single individuals, groups and entire communities, and in the transitive sense of inhabiting a place, a territory, a city. *Oikia* is the habitation, the house, things domestic, even lineage, stock. In Attic law *òikos* is patrimony. *Oikizo* refers transitively to the enterprise of populating a country, establishing a colony, cultivating a region. Herodotus, however, dealt a pretty effective blow to the contextual use of the word. *Ecumene* is not a land inhabited in general, but a land inhabited by Greeks, compared

to be a more appropriate term for designating a context which, at least in principle, cannot be measured on the same scale used to weigh stock-exchange prices, Third World demographic figures, or human existence in terms of money.

Consider for example Bertolt Brecht's remark: »What is man? I don't know what a man is, but I know his price.«

It is clear that the word »price« deliberately circumscribes the idea of human being. Certainly it is not inappropriate to speak about human being – in the first, the second and the third worlds – in terms of price, the price of a life being one of the faces of the »human condition« prism, but unless one wishes to impose or contest the idea that a human being is merely the price that one pays to suppress or save him or her, it is tendentious and, to my mind, contrary to a truly philosophical approach to direct our enquiry exclusively in that direction.

But what does »a truly philosophical approach« mean? According to Erjavec, the nature of philosophical activity is basically critical. I quote from his recent contribution to the Arezzo Aesthetic Conference (June 1998): »... no matter from which cultural tradition we commence our attempts to determine what philosophy is, we are confronted with the fact that philosophy proper doesn't exist if it doesn't possess this self-reflective strain, i.e. of being not only a thought about extant reality, but also a critical thought about thinking as such.«²

In we now wish to consider what other features determine the structure of philosophical thought, three concomitant factors seem to go together

with whom all other peoples are barbarians: literally »stammerers«, in the sense that they speak Greek badly.

The Greeks were by no means the only people of the ancient world to convert a linguistic handicap into downright inferiority. There is no human group that is not »programmed« to conceive otherness in terms that rarely admit equal dignity. How could philosophy, which according to Heidegger has its foundations in the Greek mind, be an exception to this rule?

This is, however, a prejudice which needs to be exposed and torn out root and branch. It has gone on too long and has restricted our studies in many senses. My major issue in this paper is to claim a truly ecumenical approach to aesthetic matters philosophically, anthropologically and historically considered. See also the present author's: »Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom, Birds and Crabgrass notwithstanding«, *Proceedings of the Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics*, E. Benitez ed., University of Sydney, June 1997 (an electronic publication ISBN 0-646-28504-1). And Introduction to *East and West in Aesthetics*, G. Marchianò ed., Pisa-Rome, Istituti Editoriali Internazionali 1997.

² A. Erjavec, »Aesthetics and Philosophies«, *Proceedings of the Arezzo Conference on Reconfiguring Aesthetics?*, Turin, Trauben, 1998 (text in Italian).

with it, namely a conceptual lexicon, a dialectical structure and a textual body of reference.

In whichever cultural milieu we meet with these concomitant factors, we may say that a philosophical activity takes place on a technically common basis. And it is here that »ecumene«³ may give a sound idea of the contexts – philosophical, religious, literary, artistic – in which aesthetic knowledge has been able to grow and expand in the last thousand years or so. If then we wished to visualise it as an imaginary »tree of knowledge« inscribed in a compass card, we would see that the vastest land-mass between the Atlantic and the Pacific, the Eurasian continent, is also that in which the tree of aesthetic knowledge has put forth its branches in the principal linguistic *koinè* of the ancient Eurasian world: Sanskrit, Greek, Persian, Chinese, Japanese. Those languages acted indeed as formidable propellers of learning, religious faith, artistic sensibility and aesthetic awareness both in their original areas and in those in which they came to be influential. This basic recognition, which is borne out by historical evidence, allows us to consider the branches and sub-branches of the tree of aesthetic knowledge as part of a common Eurasian heritage to be investigated in ways which, consequently, cannot but be cross-culturally and comparatively oriented.

Put in these terms, our approach to aesthetics as a philosophical field becomes wider, and prismatic, not only because of its multi-faceted background but also because it will also have to take into due account the multiple ways in which a set of major recurrent issues pertaining to the aesthetic sphere have been dealt with on a technically common basis from one corner of Eurasia to the other.

At this point someone might object: »All right, aesthetic thought in Eurasia is no doubt an irreplaceable legacy, but here we are at the threshold of the 21st century of the common era, and a lot of water has passed under the bridges of aesthetics. And unless one wants to be exclusively concerned with an archaeology of aesthetic knowledge, it is surely more important to join forces to re-shape aesthetics in ways – like those proposed by Wolfgang Iser⁴ – that are in key with the new times.« To this pertinent objection I would answer: To claim a truly cross-cultural approach to philosophical aesthetics is part of a research strategy perfectly in line with a time, like the present one, of radical transformations in all avenues of knowledge and in all directions of life at a personal and collective level. The varieties

³ See Ref. 1.

⁴ Particularly in *Die Aktualität des Ästhetischen*, ed. W. Iser, Munich, Fink, 1993; *Undoing Aesthetics*, London, Sage, 1997; *Aesthetics Beyond Aesthetics*, Proceedings of the Arezzo Conference on *Reconfiguring Aesthetics?*, Turin, Trauben, 1998 (text in Italian).

of investigations made in European and Asian thought in the sphere of aesthetic experience and aesthetic cognition offer some formidable keys to plumbing that region where – in Keiji Nishitani's words – »resides the marrow of the mind of men.«⁵ There are in my opinion few spheres of human experience as close to that elusive region as the aesthetic sphere, and it is the task of aesthetics in its theoretical capacity to explore that region with the support of the investigations conducted in several other non-philosophic fields. In fact, no discipline today, least of all philosophy, can afford to be self-sufficient to such an extent as to discard, in principle and practice, the benefits of interdisciplinarity.

Two examples may concretely illustrate my point. Suppose we want to ascertain whether beauty is universally acknowledged as an aesthetic value, or whether it is not, rather, a »local« cultural trait, depending on the extent to which an aesthetic sensibility is present in a given human community where speculations in abstract, conceptual and dialectical terms are fashioned in a consistent body of knowledge, as has happened in Eurasia.

In order to obtain evidence relating to the latter question, philosophical aesthetics will have to rely on cultural anthropology and on the results of its field-research in native communities. It would then be somewhat pointless for the aesthetician to predicate beauty as if it were a »universal«, like Plato's *to kalòn*, given that ethnological research provides enough evidence that no traces of a notion and of an appreciation of beauty are found among so-called primitive societies.

A report given by Garry W. Trompf on his field research in Papua New Guinea is in this respect illuminating, and I shall briefly summarise it. In the company of Kai, a young educated Papuan native from the Wahgi ethnic group, Garry arrives at the edge of a ridge overlooking the Wahgi River, near Kup, in highland New Guinea.⁶ The magnificence of the place is such as to make him exclaim: »What an extraordinarily beautiful valley!« To which Kai replies: »Ah, Garry, yes, but we don't really talk about it that way, or in the way whites usually do.« For the Wahgi people, Trompf tells us, »the valley was not, at least traditionally speaking, scenically beautiful, not even conceived as a »joy to the senses«. It was *ka-* via the most commonly used adjective in the Wahgi language and usually translated as »good« — or in other words it »pleased« insofar as it brought the benefits, or »riches« that the local people needed from it. But apparently (or at least *prima facie*) it was not an

⁵ Nishitani K., *Religion and Nothingness*, Jan Van Bragt ed., Berkeley, University of California Press, 1982.

⁶ G.W. Trompf, »Croce and Collingwood on »Primitive« and »Classical« Aesthetics», *Literature and Aesthetics*, University of Sydney, October 1997.

object of aesthetic appreciation, and certainly, Kai insisted, no one would ever have thought of painting it, or evoking the whole scene in art.« »My prior experience of his culture,« Trompf continues, »soon made me realise an experiential chasm yawned between myself and his people, with Kai, a clever undergraduate at the University of Papua New Guinea, mediating between the two. The Wahgi, I accepted, clearly possessed art« (a long list of items is mentioned by the author) — yet »Ka, we might presume, can never be used to articulate a strictly »aesthetic« judgement, for any possibility of art's genuine independence is precluded while a »total traditional life-way«, the »religion of the solidarity group« is triumphant.«⁷

These last two phrases, which are quoted from O'Hanlon,⁸ and the direction taken by Trompf's further analysis offer an opportunity to approach the issue of an »aesthetic ecumene« from an angle significantly different from and wider than that encompassing Eurasian philosophies but apparently excluding African thought and what is currently referred to as ethnophilosophy.⁹

It is true that the ways of thinking highlighted by this kind of philosophy do not rely on a conceptual lexicon, a dialectical structure and a textual body of reference in their original formulations. Yet they no less conspicuously articulate customs, common beliefs and worldviews of ethnic groups in the whole of Africa and in a number of native communities scattered in the rest of the world. And since there is no justification today in denying folk philosophies their admission to the club of world philosophies, the very notion of »ecumene« — be it related to philosophy in general or to aesthetics as a branch of it — is duty bound to include both kinds of philosophies, thereby reconfiguring the body of philosophic knowledge in entirely new terms.

To further illustrate my point from within the aesthetic domain, I shall turn to a case considered by Hou Weirui of the University of Shanghai in

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁸ M. O'Hanlon, »'Handsome is as Handsome Does': Display and Betrayal in the Wahgi«, *Oceania* 53/4 (1983).

⁹ »Ethnophilosophy« is a term employed in the current debate on the existence and nature of African philosophy as it has been articulated by such notable scholars as Placide Tempels in his *Bantu Philosophy*, John Mbiti in his *African Philosophy and Religion*, and William Abraham in his *The Mind of Africa*, to mention just three. These and other scholars of similar orientation in African philosophy have come to be known by what Paulin Hountondji has referred to as »ethnophilosophy«. This explanation is by Fidelis U. Okafor in his learned article »In defense of Afro-Japanese Ethnophilosophy«, *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 47, No. 3, July 1997.

On the Western notion of rationality and its relativity, see G.W. Trompf, »African Philosophy and the Relativities of Rationality. In response to Carole Pearce«, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 24, No. 2, June 1994.

his comparative analysis of metaphor in Chinese classical poetry. I shall quote a few passages from Hou's contribution to the »Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics« (University of Sydney, June 1997).¹⁰ »Literary imagery,« he says, »especially long-established and widely accepted imagery, is the crystallization of the aesthetic values and literary taste of a certain nation, and, to a certain extent, reflects its way of thinking. Therefore, the preservation of the original image is essential to the conveying of cultural flavor and national color.« ... »Imagery with strong national character arises usually from a nation's special way of life or living environment. It cannot always be treated by direct translation. When direct translation is not possible the second best choice is substitution. Substitution means finding another image which conveys a similar meaning and produces a similar effect on the readers of the target language as the original imagery does in the source language. A case in point,« Wou says, »is the treatment of *zhu* (bamboo). Bamboo is an image of vigorous and luxurious growth and the usual translation is »to spring up or grow like bamboo shoots after a spring rain«. Native readers of English may not be familiar with the way bamboo grows in spring. If we replace »bamboo« with »mushroom«, an immediate picture of rapid growth is evoked in the mind of an English reader. Equivalence, however, is only relative. »To grow like bamboo shoots after a spring rain« is used in Chinese only for rapid and vigorous growth and never for quick decay, while mushrooms, according to one definition offered in the Longman Modern English Dictionary, means »like a mushroom in a rapidity of growth and decay«. The substituted image,« concludes the author, »has to be in harmony with the entire cultural atmosphere and literary tradition of the original work.«¹¹

Hou's relevant point is that the procedure of replacing »bamboo« in the original language with »mushroom« in the target language is a rather unfaithful, though unavoidable, device whereby the resulting picture becomes something rather different.

A perceptive analysis of this syndrome of »aesthetic ineffability« is in Kuki Shūzō's treatise *The Structure of »Iki«* (»*Iki*« *no Kōzō*), which first appeared in the Japanese journal *Shisō* (»Thought«) in 1930, and is now available in an accurate English version by the Australian scholar John Clark.¹²

¹⁰ Hou W., »Bamboo or Mushroom: Imagery in Chinese Poetry and its Translation«, *Proceedings of the Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics*, University of Sydney, E. Benitez ed., quoted.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

¹² Kuki S., *An Essay on Japanese Taste: The Structure of »Iki«*, translated by John Clark; edited by Sakuko Matsui and John Clark; introduction by Nakano Hajimul, Sydney, Power Publications, 1996.

According to Kuki, aesthetic concepts are subtle revealers of the ways of feeling shared by people of the same linguistic and ethnic community. The case of *iki* is in this respect illuminating. A term recurrently employed in Edo times to connote the peculiar gracefulness and *charme* possessed by the *geisha*, *iki* emanates a plethora of nuances which only native customers of the »flowered quarters« in XVIII century Edo and Kyôto could taste and emotionally enjoy in their own, unique way.

Trompf's and Wou's investigations in their respective fields bring to light two curiously equivalent, though opposite, cases of a scarce permeability of aesthetic emotion to transcultural and linguistic transfer. In the case of the Wahgi term »*ka*«, its range of meanings, pivoted on a generalized idea of »life-power«, seems however to lack specifically aesthetic connotations; whereas in the case of Japanese »*iki*«, not a deficiency but rather an excess of emotional overtones emanating from it will prove to be impervious to adequate renderings in contexts different from the original one.

Some provisional conclusions

Since the time for presenting this paper is nearly over, I shall devote the remaining minutes to focussing on a couple of factors relating to my working notion of the aesthetic ecumene.

The first of these factors concerns an increasing awareness among scholars, mostly of the younger generation (in their thirties and forties), that to approach aesthetic matters in transcultural terms is no longer, at least from the Western side, a rather bizarre attitude displayed by a handful of exoticists, but quite simply what needs to be done, and should it not be done it would be detrimental to the advancement of aesthetic research. In the last twenty years the successful attempts by a few distinguished comparative philosophers to relate Western and Asian thought in hermeneutically advanced ways, as in the case of J.J. Clarke's recent survey on *Oriental Enlightenment*,¹³ cannot but encourage endeavours of a similar quality and kind in the sphere of aesthetic studies.

The second factor concerns the notable role interdisciplinarity will have to play in future aesthetic research. Connections with all avenues of knowledge ready to provide cognitive inputs to aesthetic research have to be

¹³ J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment. The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997.

