

# THE RHYTHM OF OUR LIVES. AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVES EAST & WEST

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## Abstract

The leading approach to everyday aesthetics for the past few decades has departed from analytic philosophical grounds, generating some tensions or dichotomies regarding its foundational cornerstones: the ordinary *vs.* extraordinary character of everyday aesthetic experience, contextual familiarity *vs.* strangeness, object *vs.* process orientation, etc. Although John Dewey has been widely acclaimed as a sort of foundational figure for this burgeoning sub-discipline of aesthetics, maybe not enough emphasis has been laid on his very different pragmatist approach. In this regard, his reliance on Hegelian *cum* Darwinian premises might allow for a connection with other branches of continental as well as Asian philosophies, from which also some research on everyday aesthetics has been made.

It is from this wider ontological framework that the notion of rhythm could be vindicated as a pivotal aspect of the aesthetic dimension of our everyday lives. Dewey deals extensively with it in *Art as Experience*, conceiving it as a sort of pattern of accomplished experiences, accounting also for his naturalistic approach and art and life continuity thesis. On the other hand, neo-pragmatist exponent Richard Shusterman, among others, has posited links of connection between Pragmatist aesthetics and East-Asian philosophies. Particularly, Dewey's resonances with Asian philosophies have been studied, with a preeminence on the notions of harmony and rhythm. This paper will depart from the analysis of the notion of rhythm in Dewey's philosophy, trying to hint at some possible developments of its implications. Particularly, it will expand on some East Asian parallels to his philosophy, trying to link them with the notion of rhythm as an epitomizing ground for the conjunction of the extraordinary (art) and the ordinary (life).

My interest in everyday aesthetics is a consequence of my previous ones in Asian and pragmatist aesthetics, so my presentation of today is somehow a result of the possible interrelations between these three areas of research. To this end, I have selected a topic, the notion of rhythm, which is important for Dewey, the founding figure of pragmatist and everyday aesthetics as well as in the context of East Asian philosophies and aesthetics. Besides, some continental European traditions such as phenomenology, already discussed in other round-table session, may also resonate positively with this wider picture in which I am placing my reflection. Finally, my interest in socio-historical and genealogical approaches to aesthetics also shows in my reflection. As an encompassing umbrella, for my overall approach, I may feel comfortable with the label of "process philosophy".

I will start by addressing some current issues of everyday aesthetics trying to underline their indebtedness to the wider framework of Western history of aesthetics, which somehow is in alliance with a substantialist and static metaphysical worldview. Then I will explore possible alternatives that a reading of Dewey's notion of rhythm may offer, particularly with regard to the temporal and processual dimension of the aesthetic experience, and will finally refer to a different philosophical scenario, the East Asian one where the notion of rhythm and the aesthetic dimension of life are prominent as a result of their process philosophies.

## 1. THE EXTRAORDINARY NATURE OF THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN EVERYDAY LIFE: AN EC-STATIC PERSPECTIVE AND ITS HISTORICAL ASCENDANCY

To make my presentation a bit more lively, let us consider two images of works exhibited at the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art in Seoul. The first one [figure 1] is from the permanent collection on traditional Korean art, an ancient comb of Goryeo Dynasty (9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century), made of tortoise shell and decorated with jade and gold filaments.



[Figure 1] Tortoise shell comb, Goryeo Dynasty, Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art

Its delicate and sophisticated design makes one think that, despite its functional shape, it probably mingled its everyday practical use with other purposes related to legitimizing the social and political status of its owner, a lady from the ruling class; we may also presume that it was not used on a daily basis but on special occasions. So many times this has been the case with valuable functional items in the history of art that this example may help us remember how controversial the notion of the “everyday” can be if we apply it only with reference to specific physical objects, for example, functional ones (vs. aesthetic or non practical ones) and their experiences.

Too often we tend to forget that the opposition between the functional, practical and everyday on the one side, and the artistic *cum* aesthetic domains on the other only took place historically from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards in the context of the European Enlightenment. Indeed, I think that the current debate

on everyday aesthetics has been centered on whether or not the character of the everyday aesthetic experience should be considered “special”, “unique”, or “extraordinary”, to use Thomas Leddy’s expression<sup>1</sup>, but maybe in doing so, we are unduly disregarding the pervasive influence of thought schemes inherited from our recent past.

Following Larry Shiner’s book *The Invention of Art*<sup>2</sup>, particularly the confrontation in terms of opposites between the ancient art/craft system (where functionality was not in conflict with formal pleasure) and the modern system of the arts (where the aesthetic was erected in opposition to the practical / functional), we could state that, everyday aesthetics as a sub-discipline of aesthetics, evolves ultimately out of this historical confrontation that excluded the ordinary life of the common people from an increasingly elitist aesthetic discourse.

Shiner, as other authors, deliberately underlines the hidden ideological agenda which help explain why the distinction between fine art and aesthetic relish were defined trying deliberately to exclude anything “ordinary” from its scope. In any case, this modern distinction between the artistic, aesthetic and the ordinary, is a historical and recent one, whereas in other traditional art/crafts systems, such as the Korean and the Asian ones in general, or even the Western pre-modern one, there was not an essential conflict in experiencing at the same time the practical, functional and formal aspects of different objects surrounding our everyday lives.

Furthermore, we also tend to forget how much our contemplative ideal of an aesthetic experience, conceived in terms of isolated moments of heightened pleasure, historically derives from the ideal of religious experience, coming up to the middle ages with *Scottus Erigena* and his notion of “contemplatio dei” and even further back to the Aristotelian notion of *theoros* as a distant and passive observer.

In sum, the arts vs. crafts dichotomy, as much as the the subject / object structure, legacies of our Western substantialist premises may prove unsufficient, particularly when we come to dealing with the everyday, a domain where our transient and temporary nature becomes all the more obvious since the ordinary is what consumes most of our conscious lives.

Anti-substantialists process philosophies such as pragmatism, and Dewey’s notion of rhythm is a pivotal example of it, or phenomenology in the

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<sup>1</sup> Leddy, Th. (2012). *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary. The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.

<sup>2</sup> Shiner, L. (2001). *The Invention of Art. A Cultural History*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press.

continental tradition, may offer an alternative and more sounded ground for dealing with our topic. This last track has been followed by prof. Haapala, today here with us, avoiding thus the subject / object structure and defending controversially the “objectless” nature of the everyday aesthetic experience and its reliance on routine and predictability. His distance from the traditional Western metaphysical background is evident when he states that: “One could paradoxically say that the aesthetics of the familiar is an aesthetics of ‘the lacking’, the quiet fascination of the absence of visual, auditory, and any other kinds of demands from the surroundings”<sup>3</sup>.

With the notion of rhythm I will be delineating here, I position myself in line with Haapala’s emphasis on the temporary dimension, (he emphasizes routine and regularity), and I will try to expand as well on the idea of sensual withdrawal as a necessary condition for everyday aesthetic experience to take place. Also, I would like to emphasize that rhythmic movement does not imply repetition, as Deleuze clearly stated in his introduction of *Difference and Repetition*, when he distinguished “cadence-repetition” from “rhythmic repetition”<sup>4</sup>. Whereas the first one would be negative, static, material and inanimate, the second one is affirmative, dynamic, carrying with it an internal differential input, one that, according to Yves Millet, would allow for an aesthetic experience founded on variations and intensities (“disparities” in Deleuzian terminology)<sup>5</sup>.

But let me first show you the second image [figure 2], an untitled painting by Cy Twombly from 1968, made of a repetitive line drawing, akin to young children’s handwriting and which lead the artist to state that in it “every line is...the actual experience with its unique story”. To be able to trace a story, a life, within a movement, recurrent like a loop but at the same time ever new and unique as life itself always is...It seems to me that the now acclaimed grandfather of everyday aesthetics, John Dewey, was not talking about something entirely different when in *Art as Experience*<sup>6</sup> he defended the rhythmic nature of the aesthetic experience. In fact, we cannot appreciate any interruption in Twombly’s line drawing gesture, so also, we could say, with Dewey’s art and life continuity thesis. That whirling line, recurrent but ever new, could transmit life’s inner essence: the rhythmic pattern of “ordered change” that, according to Dewey presided, the unfoldment of events within our existential dimension.

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<sup>3</sup> Haapala, A. “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place”, in Light, A. and Smith J.M. (2005). *The Aesthetics of the Everyday*. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> See Millet, Y. (2012). “Rhythm and Intensity. The Art of Punctuation and the Aesthetics of the Everyday”. *Contrastes. Revista Internacional de Filosofía, Suplemento 17*, pp. 207-219.

<sup>5</sup> Millet, Y., *cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> Dewey, J. (1980). *Art as Experience*. New York, NY: Perigee books [1934].



[Figure 2. Cy Twombly, *Untitled (New York)*, 1968, Oil based house paint, wax crayon on canvas 200.6 x 261.6cm. Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art

## 2. DEWEY'S NOTION OF RHYTHM: LIFE'S CREATIVE PATTERN

Dewey's terminology relies and is widely inspired by the science of his day, evolutionary biology and particularly physics. In the following quote it is evident that also the notion of rhythm derived from them: "Today the rhythms which physical science celebrates are obvious only to thought, not to perception in immediate experience. They are presented in symbols which signify nothing in sense-perception. They make natural rhythms manifest only to those who have undergone long and severe discipline. Yet a common interest in rhythm is still the tie which holds science and art in kinship"<sup>7</sup>.

The influence of evolutionary biology is particularly felt in his claim of rhythm as a pattern or law governing a living world made of "ordered change"<sup>8</sup>, not a mere erratic or mechanic "flux"<sup>9</sup>. In the living creature, harmony and balance in life's development is attained through a dynamic equilibrium between the loss of integration with the environment and the recovery of the

<sup>7</sup> Dewey, J., *op.cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, J., *op.cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Etimologically "rhythm" comes from the Greek "rhythmos", meaning "measured flow or movement", and ultimately from "rhein", meaning "flux".



union with it, between tension, resistance and fulfillment. In *Art as Experience* we read: “The marvel of organic, of vital, adaptation through expansion (instead of by contraction and passive accommodation) actually takes place. Here in germ are balance and harmony attained through rhythm. Equilibrium comes about not mechanically and inertly but out of, and because of tension”<sup>10</sup>.

This ordered dynamics already present in nature and non-human living creatures, evolves and manifests in a human condition through emotionality and intentional thinking, transforming mere physical actions and reactions into conscious thoughts and feelings. In this level, Dewey distinguishes the scientist’s outlook and interests from the artist’s ones, since whereas the former focuses on goals and the achievement phase, the artist is devoid of aims and is more open to embrace tensions and resistances as a source of inspiration<sup>11</sup>.

Dewey writes: “Since the artist cares in a peculiar way for the phases of experience in which union is achieved, he does not shun moments of resistance and tension. He rather cultivates them, not for their own sake but because of their potentialities, bringing to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total.(...) The difference between the esthetic and the intellectual is thus one of the place where emphasis falls in the constant rhythm that marks the interaction of the live creature with its surroundings”<sup>12</sup>.

It would seem, thus, that to develop artistic skills as well as aesthetic abilities requires a special connection with the rhythm of life, one that embraces obstacles and resistances and, maybe also because of it, fix one’s attention more actively in the present moment. This difference of *tempo*, with relation to the scientist for example, has to do also with the artist’s and experiencer’s closer connection to his own body awareness. In this regard he states: “The odd notion that an artist does not think and a scientific inquirer does nothing else is the result of converting a difference of tempo and emphasis into a difference in kind (...) The artist thinks as he works. But his thought is more immediately embodied in the object”<sup>13</sup>.

Dewey considers the artist as more naturally apt to remain focused on the present moment and prone to experience growth through creativity<sup>14</sup>. Unlike other living creatures, time experience in humans allows for growing in ethical terms and it is rhythm, particularly through its phase of pause, what explains how past experiences are accumulated in the present and remain available to enrich further our perception in the future. In this point I would like to call

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<sup>10</sup> Dewey, J., *op.cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Dewey, J., *op.cit.*, p. 15-6.

<sup>12</sup> Dewey, J., *op.cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Dewey, J., *op.cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>14</sup> Dewey, J., *op.cit.*, p. 18.

attention to one particular aspect of Dewey's notion of rhythm in relation with time: "Time –we read in *Art as Experience*– as organization in change is growth, and growth signifies that a varied series of change enters upon intervals of pause and rest"<sup>15</sup>. These pauses, according to Dewey, "punctuate and define the quality of movement"<sup>16</sup>. It is precisely here where I would like to make a connection with Haapala's exhortion to sense withdrawal, since without pause, rest, as Dewey says there is no assimilation nor growing. I would also like to mention in passing Kalle Puolakka's defense of Dewey's notion of rhythm as a guarantee of the endurance of the aesthetic experience beyond the ecstatic and *momentum* interpretation of it derived from his expression "an experience"<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. EAST ASIAN RESONANCES: ARTISTIC RHYTHM AND LIFE'S UNFOLDMENT

In my brief account of Dewey's notion of rhythm, I have focused on his emphasis on the peculiar aesthetic attention to the "here and now" (*hic et nunc*), something which in Asian arts and philosophies is a strong *desideratum*, being the traditional arts "ways of" (*do*) attaining, through practice, that sort of special awareness of the present moment which is at the same time a spiritual aim.

But also, I would like to call attention to a pair of dynamic and complementary opposites which are salient in Dewey's notion of rhythm: these are tension and rest, seen respectively as the climatic and anti-climatic moments that punctuate the creative evolution of living beings and of nature as a whole. I would go as far as trying to relate this pair of opposites in their dynamic structure of opposed complementaries, with the pattern of reality at work in classical Chinese philosophy, with its ontological pair of *yin-yang* as the basic structure for the dynamic unfolding (*dao*) of the universe. Indeed, the new advancements of 20<sup>th</sup> century physics and biology, from where Dewey seemed to get his inspiration for defending rhythm, have proved to resonate quite well with Asian philosophies as Fritjov Capra's bestseller of 1975 *The Tao of Physics* has widely popularized. Besides, Dewey spent two years in China (1919-1921), having the opportunity to receive the impact of Chinese philosophy<sup>18</sup>.

The notion of rhythm in Chinese philosophy is not only evident in the ontological dynamism postulated through the *yin-yang* pairing and the

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<sup>15</sup> Dewey, J., *op.cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Dewey, J., *op.cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> Puolakka, K. (2015, November). The Aesthetic Pulse of the Everyday: Defending Dewey. *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol.15, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=730>

<sup>18</sup> See Ching-Sze Wang, J.(2008). *John Dewey in China. To Teach and to Learn*, Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press.

correlational philosophy consonant with it, but also in art theory; for example, in painting it is implied in the first of the six canons in the famous treatise by Xie He (5<sup>th</sup> century), which holds that a painting should be pervaded by a spirit resonance with life's movement or rhythm (*qiyun shendong*)<sup>19</sup>. The stylistic prominence of the line within the highly regarded "arts of the brush" (painting-calligraphy-poetry), and the fact that these were "deictic", that is, correction was impossible, account for the centrality of this principle as an art and life continuum, as Dewey also would have contended. Twombly's painting, equally pervaded by a deictic dimension through the uninterrupted rhythm of a single line, seems to connect writing with painting. Only that in Twombly's example it is the case of a tradition that has lost its faith in the mimetic representation of reality for its lack of connection with the principle of life. It is remarkable in this sense how the main aim of traditional East Asian visual arts has always been to convey the inner essence of reality and not its outer appearance, which was considered as fleeting and deceiving.

Coming a bit closer to our days, some resonances between pragmatism, everyday aesthetics and Asian traditions has been studied in the past decade and a half by neopragmatist author Richard Shusterman, who, by the way, I consider fair to remember it in this congress, was a real pioneer when in the early nineties advocated the aesthetic status of mass art forms such as rap music<sup>20</sup>. In 2004, in an Essay on "Pragmatism and East Asian Thought", he wrote: "wider natural forces need to be discerned and utilized to advance our human projects, including the global project of perfecting our humanity. In aesthetics, this means recognizing that art's rhythms, forms and energies emerge from and fruitfully build on those of the environing natural world"<sup>21</sup>.

Besides this statement about the continuity between art and life on the basis of a Chinese philosophical background, including the notion of rhythm, Shusterman underlined the emphasis that both pragmatism and Chinese philosophies lay on practice and the connection between arts, aesthetics and the ethical dimension. In fact, the melioristic trait of pragmatist aesthetics resonates well with the Confucian ideal of attaining "self-cultivation" through the embodied practice of traditional arts, especially painting, calligraphy and poetry. Shusterman will integrate this latter aspect within his project of somaesthetics, where the refinement of our aesthetic perception is attained through embodied

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<sup>19</sup> See Sirén, O. (2005). *The Chinese on the Art of Painting: Translations and Comments*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications [1936]

<sup>20</sup> See Shusterman, R. (2000). *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield [1992].

<sup>21</sup> Shusterman, R. (2004, January). "Pragmatism and East Asian Thought" *Metaphilosophy*. Vol 35. Issue 1/2, p. 25.



practices<sup>22</sup>. Indeed, it is true that throughout East Asia, traditional art practices are approached with this idea in mind of attaining a higher level of perception and an inner state of peace and balance, no doubt, as a result of an active harmonization of one's inner bodily (circadian) rhythms with those of the surrounding environment.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As a way of conclusion, as specialist in Japanese and everyday aesthetics Yuriko Saito, has stated recently, in East Asian cultures, “with distinctive art-making practices of paintings, literature, theater, and the like, aesthetic practices permeate people's daily life. In these cultures, there may not be a need for an aesthetic discourse specifically devoted to everyday life”<sup>23</sup>.

But, in Western modern cultures, affected by the divorce of aesthetics and everyday life, what can we learn from the example of these cultures and their approach to traditional arts? And how does it relate to the notion of rhythm?

I find it still inspiring reading classic Daoist texts such as the *Dao De Jing* which could be read as a handbook for attaining inner harmony with the universe's rhythm. One of his English translators, Roger T. Ames, holds that, according to the Daoist view, the universe is a flowing process (*dao*), governed by an “aesthetic order” in the sense that reality is always concrete in its immanence. So if we learn to flow with the *dao* in our lives, this would amount to attune ourselves with that already existing “aesthetic order” in the world<sup>24</sup>.

So, put briefly, if we develop our intuition and learn how to become aware and adapt to the flowing *yin-yang* rhythm of the universe, in its recurrent alternance of these opposite forces, Ames would say, “we may get the most out of our circumstances”, which, joining ethics and aesthetics, would amount to melioristically leading a mindful aesthetic life. In another paper, I defended cultivating a poetic attitude, an intuitive and attentive appreciation to how the events unfold in our daily lives, trying to appreciate the recurrent alternation

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<sup>22</sup> See Shusterman, R. (2008). *Body Consciousness. A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press and Shusterman, R. (2012). *Thinking through the Body. Essays in Somaesthetics*. New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>23</sup> Saito, Y. (2015, September). “Aesthetics of the Everyday”, entry at the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetics-of-everyday/>

<sup>24</sup> See Ames, R.T. and Hall, D.L. (2003). *Dao De Jing. Making this Life Significant*. New York, N.Y.: Ballantines books, and Hall, D.L. and Ames, R.T.(1987). *Thinking through Confucious*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, pp. 131-138.

between manifestation and recession, focus and field in terms of R. Ames<sup>25</sup>. Many aesthetic categories, especially in Japan, are based on this principle of poetic mystery based on reserve and indirect allusion: (*sabi-wabi*, *yugen*, *aware*), awakening our imagination in indescribable and relishable ways.

Likewise, in our lives, experiencing and attuning to the rhythm within it, could be equated with taking a step back from the immediacy of sensual stimuli (withdrawal) in order to appreciate the recurrence behind the transiency of our feelings and thoughts as a response to our interaction with our surrounding, the recurrence between their recession and their manifestation. This, I am sure, could also find some resonances in Western notions too grounded on phenomenology, such as the Heideggerian polarity between “Earth” and “World” in his work *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935) but that would be a topic for another paper<sup>26</sup>. Thank you.

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<sup>25</sup> Fernández, R. (2015). “The Poetic Dimension of Everyday Aesthetic Appreciation. Perspectives from East-Asian Traditions” in Petri, J.ed (2015), *Performing Cultures*. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Libron-Filip Lohner, pp. 165-172.

<sup>26</sup> There is evidence that Heidegger was a habitual reader of the *Dao De Jing*. For a thorough study between the connections of his philosophy and Asian thought, see Parkes, G. (1990). *Heidegger and Asian Thought*. Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press.