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TITLE: The Poetic Dimension of Everyday Aesthetic Appreciation. Perspectives from East-Asian Traditions.

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ABSTRACT: As Yuriko Saito, one of the main exponents of everyday aesthetics holds, East-Asian cultures have long established a deep link between artistic practices and everyday life, transforming apparently mundane practices such as having a cup of tea with cakes into a highly ritualized form of art (cha-no-yu) and allowing us to enjoy the fleeting moment. The tea ceremony example is grounded, as this paper aims at showing, on a whole East-Asian worldview (as exemplified in Confucianism, Daoism and Zen Buddhism philosophies) whereby aesthetic appreciation is deeply pervaded by a poetic feeling, mainly consisting in the interactive harmony or attunement established with the particular circumstances of one's own life due precisely to its fleeting and evanescent nature. To accomplish this, savouring and perceiving the uniqueness ingrained in every single human experience, the adequate attitude is the poetic one, due to its holistic and non-discriminative nature. Having as its focus everyday life, or simply put, life as such in its specificity, traditional artistic practices in East-Asia as the arts of the brush, garden design or utilitarian crafts such as pottery, become means of revealing what, due to its closeness, lies hidden in ordinary experience. Utilitarian arts are, in this sense, a privileged way of conveying this end due precisely to its practical link with ordinary existence, preventing the eventual arousal of a purely formal and detached apprehension. The only coherent way to develop this awareness of the extraordinary in the ordinary, to use LeDdy's expression, is through the main feature of all poetic qualities: indirect allusion and subdued reference so that what is close at hand may shine in a different light. Particularly, in association with Japanese Zen Buddhism, where the rootedness of aesthetics in the ordinary is stronger, it has frequently adopted the form of restraint, contention, reserve, or, as Saito puts it, "insufficiency". This paper aims at showing with the help of a few examples how this diffuse poetic attitude, so prevalent in Traditional East-Asian contexts, is required not only in standardized art practices, but also in a wider aesthetic level of awareness of our ordinary experiences. In order to justify these claims, it will refer first to the ideal of harmony or poetic resonance in Chinese aesthetics and then it will refer to some concrete Japanese aesthetic categories inspired by Zen Buddhism, such as mono-no-aware, sabi, wabi, or yugen.

1.ENGAGEMENT, FUSION, DEVOTION AS ASPECTS OF A POETIC ATTITUDE

Everyday aesthetics, as a recent movement within the contemporary aesthetic panorama, represents one of the ultimate evidences that the modern system of the arts and aesthetics, adumbrated in 18th Europe, within the Enlightenment ideals, was grounded on dichotomies which do not apply any more today. As Larry Shiner shows us in his book *The Invention of Art*, this system was basically grounded on the opposition of the so-called Fine Arts (*Beaux-Arts*) not to nature but to other human

activities such as applied arts or crafts, and the subsequent division between aesthetic experience (as the correlate of art) as opposed to everyday ordinary experience which could take place with regard to crafts and other utilitarian and more clearly functional activities. The isolation of the art-world so much denounced by everyday aesthetics comes from this eighteenth century formalist division.

In my view, to adopt a socio-historical approach regarding the genesis of philosophical ideas and concepts related to the notion of “art” could be of much help in trying to deepen on what is the particular one that we may be supporting and in what sense a widening of it would be desirable as many defenders of everyday aesthetics seem to imply. Indeed, from this socio-historical perspective, it’s clear that a wider notion of art was, more related to the idea of process than product, was already present in the pre-modern European system of the arts/crafts, where people paid undifferentiated attention to form, function and meaning in their art-craft experiences. Thus, we could then more easily realise how regarding the connection between the art/craft system and everyday life, pre-modern Europe was much closer to, say, East-Asian cultures than to the 18th century system of the arts.

However, as the disparate aesthetic sensibilities of classical East-Asia and pre-modern Europe may also illustrate, it is no less true that in philosophical perspective, both pre-modern Europe and East-Asia have been in many respects entirely different, even opposed, as I will try to show here with regard to the predominance of a logico-conceptual approach of the former (prone indeed to establish binary oppositions) and a poetic, more holistic and integrative one of the latter. As a matter of fact, it is going to be my contention here that these opposed philosophical sensibilities may account for the predominance in pre-modern East Asia (in comparison to Europe) of a more intense and pervasive integration of the artistic / creative domain within the everyday life of the people.

Indeed, it could rightly be said that the opposition between fine arts and crafts, between high and low, minor or applied arts could not have arisen in Asia, as their historical records about classifications of the arts may corroborate. The most distant roots of such a division may be found in ancient Greek epistemology and metaphysics, based on conceptual thought whose logical principles allow for the exclusivistic claims that binary oppositions imply¹. One of the main defenders of everyday aesthetics, Arnold Berleant, in his seminal work *Art and Engagement* (1991) reminds us already that “although formulated in the 18th century, the doctrine of disinterested contemplation has its roots in the distant past. Aristotle’s contemplative model of cognitive experience still rules the realm of aesthetics and many share with Aquinas the conviction that we grasp the beauty in art with the same intuitive directness and certainty as the axioms and proofs of logic” (p. 13). Equally, Richard Shusterman, following Dewey’s pragmatism and particularly his thesis of the continuity between art and life, denounces the basic dualistic structures of Western thought that have kidnapped our experience of art with binary oppositions between the refined or high vs. the low, popular and unsophisticated (p. 13).

John Dewey, Arnold Berleant, Richard Shusterman, Crispin Sartwell and Ben-Ami Scharfstein among others, in trying to defend various aspects globally encompassed by what today we call “everyday aesthetics”, underline the need to surpass the wider epistemological *cum* metaphysical model operative in Western philosophy and based on classical Western logic and in general on theoretical cognition. In a way or another, these authors variously hint at what here I would like to call a more poetic or aesthetic

¹ R. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics. Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, 2000, p. 43. About the “wrapper theories”.

attitude, one which, with some particular adaptations has been prevalent in the philosophical *weltaanschauung* of East Asian cultures.

Most of these authors support an epistemological *cum* ontological approach based on the notion of process and fusion of subject and object, emphasizing notions such as rhythm and continuity (Dewey) resonance, reciprocity, empathy, engagement (Berleant), devotion (Sartwell), fusion (Scharftstein), or the somatic (Shusterman). With different terms and formulations, it seems to me, they all subscribe a more holistic view of the aesthetic experience where the need to intuitively harmonise with the ever changing situational constrictions of everyday life becomes a key factor. It is in this point where I would like to make a connection with traditional arts and aesthetics from East Asia and their underlying philosophical substratum. There, a more poetic or aesthetic thought pattern has been pervasive since antiquity favouring the development of arts as ways (*do*) not only to attain enlightenment but also, less ambitiously, to come to terms with our ephemeral condition.

In this context, the poetic attitude, as I will take it here, is the one that intuitively and by means of analogical thinking, allows us to perceive and create correlations between us and our unique and ever changing living situation so that we may become harmonised with a wider potency –or energy (*qi*)– operative in it. Everyday life is the given and unescapable arena where this -if we want to call it “artistic”- , attunement between us and our environment is constantly taking place in different levels and degrees. East Asian cultures, from their varied but interrelated philosophical *cum* spiritual backgrounds (daoism, confucianism, buddhism, shintoism, shamanism, etc.) have variously appreciated transiency and ordinary phenomenal existence, developing specific art practices where the processual dynamics is a major distinctive trait. Thus, their performative nature guarantees their connection with the concrete here and now of phenomenal ordinary existence.

2. POETIC ATTENTION TO SENSUOUS INMANENCE

Sinologist and philosopher Roger T. Ames has defended the aesthetic dimension of Chinese thought as a part of an inmanent approach inspired by the poetic observation of natural environment, paying attention to changes and order in their succession, as *Yi Jing*, *Dao De Jing*, *Zhuang Zi* classical treatises exemplify. Ames together with David L. Hall propose conceiving Chinese thought as an *ars contextualis* governed by an aesthetic order in the sense that maximum respect is payed to the concrete uniqueness of any entity understood in the spatiotemporal terms of an event. Both authors hold: “Chinese thinkers sought the understanding of order through the artful disposition of things, a participatory process which does not presume that there are essential features, or antecedent-determining principles, serving as transcendent sources of order. The art of contextualizing seeks to understand and appreciate the manner in which particular things present-to-hand are, or may be, most harmoniously correlated. Classical Chinese thinkers located the energy of transformation and change within a world that is *ziran*, autogenerative or literally ‘so-of-itself’, and found the more or less harmonious interrelations among the particular things around them to be the natural condition of things, requiring no appeal to an ordering principle or agency for explanation”².

² Hall, David, L. y Ames, Roger, T., *Chinese Philosophy*, en Craig, E., (Ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1998. Accessed from the electronic version in: <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/G001SECT1>. [01/06/2013]. Cf. Hall, David, L. y Ames, Roger T., *Thinking through Confucious*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1987, pp. 131-138.

In contrast to the Western notion of order as uniformity and regularity, following a logical or rational ordering of the cosmos, on which a organicistic aesthetics was based since ancient Greece, the Chinese sense of order is aesthetic, according to Ames and Hall, due to the crucial importance conferred to particulars in their unicity and concreteness³; that's why these authors prefer to consider this order "acosmological" and with a strong immanentist character due to its lack of a dominant pattern of order. So we could say that in China *ars contextualis* consists in the harmonic correlation among the particular things inhabiting a cosmos artistically conceived as self-generating power. This aim of correlation and harmonization, establishing links between different temporal entities is indeed what the poetic attitude is about, with its keen attention to phenomenal isomorphisms. According to Ames and Hall it could be seen as an artistic activity given the fact that the whole cosmos inherent process of self-development is naturally creative. They hold: "There was a dominance of correlative thinking which welcomed ambiguity, vagueness and incoherence since the chaotic factor in the undetermined correlative order was considered to have a positive value as an opportunity for personalization and self-construal"⁴.

From this broad philosophical sensibility, embraced by Confucianism and Daoism alike, we can say that the main theoretical principle governing the creative but also the receptive process of classical arts in China, and then also in Korea and Japan, has been this attunement or harmonization with the cosmos' artistic unfoldment through the concrete medium of each specific art. Furthermore, Mahayana Ch'an and then sen/zen Buddhism, introduced in China on the 3rd century, and also influenced by the native Chinese spiritualities, was to play a determining role in the arts with its non-discriminative attitude in rational terms and its sacralization of everyday ordinary experience as the perfect setting for the sudden enlightenment experience (*satori*). I will sketch out now a few reflections on art theory and aesthetic principles of classical pre-modern East Asia in order to better illustrate and articulate the pervasive presence of this poetic attitude in major East-Asian arts. As said above, in my view, this poetic approach is reflected in the deictic and processual character of most traditional arts, being this ephemeral and performative dimension of them what guarantees its deeper link with everyday life in comparison to other typical Western art practices more product and object-oriented.

3. CHINESE TRADITION: INDIRECT ALLUSIONS TO CONJURE UP THE HIDDEN ESSENCE IN THE FLEETING MOMENT

The centrality and superiority of sight over the other senses in the Western cultural tradition may be interpreted in accordance with the realistic and naturalistic byass of most of its visual arts, giving birth to the replicational ideal of mimetic painting in Renaissance and then to photography, cinema and the digital revolution of our days. It may as well be in accordance with the Western divisionist tendency between art and life, art and craft in contrast to the Eastern art and life continuity based on the transmission of the inner fleeting essence of things. It is interesting to note that

³ Ames and Hall hold: "Rational or logical thinking, grounded in analytic, dialectical and analogical argumentation, stresses the explanatory power of physical causation. In contrast, Chinese thinking depends upon a species of analogy which may be called 'correlative thinking'. (...) It involves the association of image or concept-clusters related by meaningful disposition rather than physical causation. Correlative thinking is a species of spontaneous thinking grounded in informal and *ad hoc* analogical procedures presupposing both association and differentiation." (Ibid.)

⁴ Hall, D.L. and Ames, R.T., *cit.*, p. 3. ("The dominance of correlative thinking").

although the *camera obscura* was first described in an ancient Chinese treatise, Chinese traditional painters were never interested in obtaining a realistic rendering of the visual appearances nor did they ever feel the need to abandon figurative representation towards abstract painting. Chinese traditional painting was born already obeying one of the definitory marks of the poetic act: to transmit the hidden essence (*qi*) of things through evocation and indirect allusion and, as said above, on the basis of the isomorphic and correlational nature of the *ten thousand worldly things* (Ch. *ganlei*) This is already expressed in the first of the six principles of Chinese painting of Xie He (6th century) which demands for the presence of “spirit resonance” or vitality for a painting to be valuable.

Indeed, the centrality of poetry as an artistic genre in Chinese tradition, related to the peculiarities of Chinese language and script, was already outstanding in the Han dynasty (206bce - 220ce) as the so called “arts of the brush” (poetry, painting and calligraphy) illustrate conferring to this long cultural tradition the unique and unparalleled feature of joining together the written, visual and spatial communication together with the oral, hearing and the temporal one. The “deictic” nature of these three interrelated arts, making it impossible to implement the works with corrections, is also a technical peculiarity which illustrates the processual character of many Chinese arts and its poetic character in the sense of paying a respectful attention to the concrete and unique fleeting moment that the poem or the painting recreates. The transmission of the *qi* or life energy with the unique fresh vitality that single gestures convey stands in stark opposition to the Western ideal of replicative mimesis.

Particularly in the *literati* tradition (*wen ren*), poetry, painting and calligraphy were joined not only technically, having the same materials as medium of transmission (brush, paper or silk water and ink), but they also mostly represented nature as a means of indirect allusion to the human psyche and emotionality. The paucity of materials, expressive means and stylistic composition is another characteristic feature of these three interrelated arts, aiming at conveying the quintessential aspect of something, thus increasing the resonances. Thus, we have, for example, the monochrome tendency in *sumi-e* painting, the paramount importance of empty space in compositions (*dao*) and, again, the short length of most of the poems, particularly those accompanying paintings, describing single instants of a lived experience in a natural setting.

Likewise, the customary practices of looking and experiencing aesthetically these works of painting+poetry+calligraphy corroborate their inclusion of the temporal and processual element: their frequent avoidance of symmetrical, typically squared formats, hint at their narrative structure inserting time in space either vertically (hanging scrolls) or horizontally (handscrolls), but above all in the case of the long hand-scrolls, the practice of unfolding and holding close at hand the work reveals again the intimate and transient nature of the act of looking and savouring the poetic images of the scrolls.

On the other hand, the unparalleled level of creativity and technical craftsmanship in other “applied arts” referring to utilitarian objects and, thus closer to everyday contexts, such as the works on porcelain, lacquer, silk, jade and so on, illustrate as much their aesthetic preference for refined elegance and contention as their practices of enjoying these objects while using them, thus incorporating again the processual time dimension that their functional and utilitarian shape implies.

This elegant and poetic sensibility, based on restraint and evocation that pervaded most of Chinese artistic and aesthetic practices, reached a summit in Japan with the impact of Zen buddhism, mixed with the autoctonous shinto reverence for the natural world, allowing for a full-fledged manifestation of arts where ordinary acts of everyday

life were performed in a ritualized manner so as to maximize the experience of the fleeting moment.

4. JAPANESE TRADITION: ACCEPTING TRANSIENCY THROUGH AESTHETIC INSUFFICIENCY

Yuriko Saito, as a leading exponent of everyday aesthetics and Japanese by birth is maybe in the best position to evaluate the pervasiveness of the aesthetic dimension in Japanese people's everyday life. In her exposition of the entry "Japanese aesthetics" for the *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics* of Oxford University Press (1998), her first contention is what she calls "aesthetic egalitarianism", referring to the fact that aesthetic concerns affect all the areas of people's lives in Japan⁵. As in China with Daoism and Confucianism, Japan's native Shinto spirituality accounts for an overt acceptance and even sacralization of every manifestation of phenomenal existence in its concreteness, especially natural phenomena. As in China, the "this-worldly" characteristic of most Japanese art was historically reinforced by zen Buddhism's acceptance of the facticity of everything (suchness). This religious *milieu* favoured the recurrent adoption of an aesthetic attitude for its all-embracing non-discriminative nature and also the emergence of various arts as "ways" (*do*) to cultivate an ego-less consciousness, eventually conducive to enlightenment.

Japanese people received and fully accepted the artistic legacy of China and they further emphasized this poetic attitude previously mentioned, developing creatively some of its inherent possibilities above all in terms of aesthetic categories and originating artistic processes, like the tea ceremony (*cha-no-yu*) where different arts were complementarily present to savour the uniqueness of the ephemeral moment. Most of the aesthetic categories representative of Japanese aesthetic sensibility incorporate the above mentioned element of reserve and contention as the main element allowing for the evocative and poetic process to unfold. A taste for minimalism, Saito holds, further gave rise to the preference for indirect communication as the first Japanese treatise on literary criticism of the 10th century, the *Kokinshū*, already shows.⁶ Accordingly, implication, suggestion and imperfection are some of the most salient features of Japanese aesthetics as the following terms show: *yojō* can be described as the emotional aftertaste in poetry, *wabi* as the beauty of poverty in the tea ceremony,⁷ *sabi* as lonely beauty in haiku and *yūgen* as mystery and depth, primarily in Nō theater⁷.

It could rightly be said that the preference for the minimalistic and incomplete or, as Saito calls it, "the aesthetics of insufficiency" which pervade many of Japanese aesthetic terms, has a double way to contribute to the "poetic dimension" necessary to savour the transiency of everyday experience: on the one hand, all of these categories advocate the stimulation of the imagination in order to satisfy curiosity and actively complete what is offered half-hidden, as it also did in 18th century Europe the category of the picturesque. In this sense, the active stimulation of the receiver is a proper way to activate and enliven the significance of the concrete moment of the aesthetic experience.

On the other hand, although the preference for simplicity and insufficiency was primarily cultivated by the wealthy elite belonging to the aristocracy and military class, from 12th century onwards, eventually it became widely entrenched in the whole of Japanese society since it allowed for the aestheticization of the conditions of life in

⁵ SAITO, J., "Japanese Aesthetics", in Kelly, M.(ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, 1998, vol. 2, pp. 545-553.

⁶ SAITO, J., *cit.*, p. 548.

⁷ SAITO, *cit.*, p. 547.

general. In Saito's words: "the aestheticization of the aged and the imperfect in the aesthetics of *wabi*, *sabi*, and *yugen* became the prevalent mode of affirming one's existential predicament in the Japanese tradition. The aesthetic celebration of perishability and imperfection makes the difficulties of life more palatable and even attractive."⁸ So the insertion of everyday aesthetic experiences within the wider scope of human life's limited condition, is one of the many possible contributions that the legacy of East Asian traditions have to offer for nowadays debate on everyday aesthetics in general.

5. CONCLUSION

As a way of conclusion, I have tried to show some traits of Asian aesthetics emphasizing the link of arts and the everyday through the cultivation of a poetic sensibility and based on restraint and subdued emotionality. With the help of classical arts and philosophies from Eastern Asia, I have been defending that: to try to cultivate a poetic attitude, paying a closer but at the same time more detached attention to the individuality of our living experiential events, is an important aspect in order to perceive and actively engage the aesthetic dimension of our lives. When we practice this more subtle approach in our daily existence and try to attune ourselves making use of a sort of intuitive correlative thinking (based on correspondences that in our globalized transcultural scenario, we may borrow indeed from different cultural traditions and backgrounds) we may begin to see our live's unfolding from a more artful ground; a life which, to borrow Berleant and Saito's terminology, is not only our own individual life, but a common *aesthetic field*, readily available for aesthetic enjoyment and for our more positive engagement in the process of world-making, to use also Saito's expression.

In my view, to actively attune ourselves (*ars contextualis*) with each life situation that is given to us (something which is an art in itself, an *art of living*) is one of the lessons we might learn from the long established tradition of artistic processual practices in East Asia; practices which evidence the need for active participation (engagement) on the side of the recipients, which, in its turn, is achieved mainly stimulating our poetic (evocative) sensibility, appealing to the establishment of perceptual correlations; a variety of this evocative correlations can be further strengthened through restraint, hidden mystery, and also through the serene atmosphere that minimalistic and simplified composition may imply, so as to potentiate a more poignant manifestation of the essence of things. There would be, of course, an equally important moral and epistemological dimension congenious with the aesthetic one, to which Saito has rightly pointed out, which would definitely need to be dealt with in some depth in some further research on the topic.

Indeed, somewhere else I have tried to defend a sort of "creative living", understanding by it a higher degree of conscious participation in the subtle artistic process of events *weaving the fabric of our lives*⁹. This more acute creative self-awareness derives from a playful attitude emanating from an intuitive contact with our unconscious emotionality; a playful and aesthetic distance with regard to our own ever changing actions in the constantly renewed horizon of uncertainty framing our lives.

⁸ SAITO, *cit.*, p. 550.

⁹ FERNANDEZ GÓMEZ, Rosa, "Une vie créative: disposition et rôle de l'inconscient du point de vue de l'esthétique indienne", en V. Alexandre-Journeau (ed.), *Le surgissement créateur: jeu, hasard et inconscient*. Paris: Editions L' Harmattan, 2011, pp. 85-100.