

HOW TO DEFEND AESTHETICS?

A B S T R A C T

Milan Damjanović (1924-1994) published his aesthetic opus in the context of (Yugoslav) Marxist “overcoming” (Aufhebung) of aesthetics and of aesthetics’ self-criticism expressed as the “crisis of aesthetics”. To oppose both of these critical positions and at the same time reform aesthetics’ ability to treat all aesthetic phenomena, but still keep art in special focus, he introduced the problem of immediacy of experience of the world by a human being. In his article “The Problem of Immediacy and Mediation in Marx’s Thought” (1970) Damjanović wanted to demonstrate the primacy of aesthetic dimension in immediacy and immediate mediation/reflection which can support philosophy’s legitimate claim to organize it as an open system, and aesthetics’ solidity as a discipline of such system. To achieve this purpose, he introduced an intertwined argumentation which combines his reading of Marx’s philosophy of labour from Paris Manuscripts and from Capital with Helmut Plessner’s esthesiology and Paul Valéry’s esthésique. To revisit Damjanović’s defence of the Whole, of philosophical systematicity, and of aesthetics’ autonomous position as a discipline is an opportunity to argue that he pointed into the right direction, be it in taking Plessner and Valéry for support, or, in taking fundamental philosophical problem of immediacy/mediation as a foundation stone of the status of aesthetics.

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KEY WORDS

DEFENCE OF AESTHETICS

MILAN DAMNJANOVIĆ

HELMUT PLESSNER

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IMMEDIACY AND MEDIATION

Defence of aesthetics, or its abandonment, was discussed in Yugoslav philosophical community as well, but under specific circumstances which included manifold elements. The first one was a need to reject Stalinist philosophy of dialectical and historical materialism (Stalin, 1938) together with socialist realism as its artistic doctrine which included theory of art as reflection of class struggle and dependence of superstructure upon its socio-economic base. This need which appeared after 1948 when Yugoslavia was expelled from the family of socialist countries opened a way to other kinds of Marxism, with so-called Western Marxism as the main new influence on Yugoslav philosophy and aesthetics. Stalinism was a unified and centralised doctrine which excluded all other possible interpretations of Marx's work and of actual historical circumstances of the 20th century, but Western Marxism included a great number of different interpretations and schools of Marxist thought which were developing, as Perry Anderson describes it, in direction opposite to Marx's own, not from philosophy to critique of the political economy but back to philosophy, and consequently to young Marx's works, especially manuscripts. (Anderson, 1976) During 1960s and later, there were two important questions discussed in Yugoslav Marxism: is philosophy possible and necessary after the 11th Thesis, and, as Marx wanted to write aesthetics but did not accomplish it, what kind of aesthetics could Marxist aesthetics be, or, does Marxism need aesthetics at all. But there was a third element as well. With pluralism of Marxism, and with orientation towards Western thought, all other contemporary living philosophies and their aesthetics were read, translated, studied and embraced as well, and with them their doubts about philosophy and aesthetics. These three elements brought up vivid and sometimes quite peppery discussions. Disagreements about ability and status of aesthetics divided Yugoslav philosophers into different camps, and influenced art criticism on one and socialist cultural politics on the other. It was an important issue. To present a view of its borderlines, positions of Danko Grlić and Sreten Petrović may be presented shortly.

Danko Grlić accepted two initiatives: that of Marx's thesis that philosophy has to be abolished (*aufheben*) in praxis, and that of contemporary formula "the death of the aesthetic", and concluded that a shift from aesthetics to another kind of theory of art cannot represent sufficient medicine, proposing a farewell to the existing conditions of the world as such. The answer is, therefore, an art which upsets and disturbs the whole existing reality by producing its own world. Marxism has to abolish aesthetics in favour of art which is an esthesis of not-yet-existing world.¹

Sreten Petrović positioned himself against constitutive Marxist aesthetics which has to be dogmatic because it denies relative autonomy of art. He divided development of Marxist aesthetics in aesthetics of mimesis, of poiesis and of the sensual, which follow the development of German classical aesthetics in reverse. Marxist aesthetics can only be a critique of the aesthetic mind and has to proceed to sensuality and sensitivity as meta-aesthetical realm.²

They both jumped into post- and beyond-aesthetics through esthesis as a field of immediate sensual being-in-the-world. But their worlds are substantially different: Danko Grlić insists on esthesis as a continuity of critical revolutionary praxis and action of art, while Sreten Petrović insists on phenomenology of the sensual which follows his final stage. This final stage is not found in Hegel as in other Marxist re-assessments of German classical philosophy but in Schiller and Schelling who opened the way to the mystical and mythical esthesis of the sensual.

Milan Damnjanović³ took different position, opposing both Marxist 'overcoming' of philosophy and of aesthetics in (revolutionary) praxis and general Western self-criticism and post-philosophical criticism of aesthetics. From his point of view, it is equally wrong to leave aesthetics behind together with systematic philosophical thinking as such, and to treat art which is a kind of production - as an ideology. If art is production, aesthetics has to start with solution of one of the oldest disputes in philosophy: have humans immediate, or only mediated access to the world? Before entering into discussions about Marxist or any other criticism of art, before shaping fields of human sciences of art, and before Marxist or any other aesthetics, this fundamental problem has to be approached and philosophically examined. Its possible solution then enables aesthetics to function as philosophical discipline, i.e., as part of, if not systematic at least coherent philosophical thinking. Damnjanović's text 'Problem of Immediacy and Mediation in Marx's Thought' which appeared first in 1970⁴ represents potential construction for such a solution. Here, he employs philosophical initiatives by Paul Valéry and Helmut Plessner together with his own choice of aesthetic starting point in Marx.

Damnjanović does not start from a definition of an object of aesthetics. Aesthetics is not a science, it is a philosophical discipline, therefore its first question, as in classical aesthetics (Hegel, for instance) is to find out why a phenomenon can become a philosophical phenomenon, and to justify its appearance as a philosophical problem by connecting it with broader philosophical problematics. The initial question is not what is art; the initial

question is why is it important for philosophy, and in what relationship it is with general philosophical account. Damnjanović does not follow these lines in direction of a closed and circular philosophical system – such idea would be out of time in 20th century anyway – but he proceeds to connectivity as general philosophical property and as a property which ties different realms into potential, albeit open unity. He does not start with art, and he does not even start with sensuality or perception. He starts with very old philosophical problem which belongs to gnoseology or epistemology. 'The problem of getting at fully immediate instance of knowledge, or problem of immediate experience as sensual experience, or primordial and pre-reflexive experience of meaning, epistemological and also metaphysical problem of hold on 'real reality', direct contact with the existing which is as it is, with independent existence of the world of nature or with by itself, *extra mentem* existing world of things, represents an always actual problem of the philosophy of art, if art is understood as real instance of immediate experience, primordial meaning etc., or, the aesthetic problem in primary, Baumgarten's sense of the 'aesthetics'...'.⁵ The question which determines importance and status of the aesthetics or of the philosophy of art is: do we have immediate or mediated relation with phenomenal world. Marxism or no Marxism, autonomy and dignity of philosophy demand an answer, its arguments, and consequences for aesthetics. Damnjanović's purpose is to build an acceptable basis for aesthetics against its self-criticism and against its abandonment or overcoming. In need of supportive hand, he calls Paul Valéry, Helmut Plessner and Karl Marx to help him.

From Paul Valéry he takes proposal for establishment of *Esthétique* which he delivered as an invited lecture "Discours on Aesthetics" (1937) at the 2nd international congress of aesthetics and sciences of art in Paris.⁶ Valéry started with admiration for aesthetics importance as 'Science of the Beautiful' and 'Science of the Sensations', choosing the latter because it may lead to better solutions about the secrets of art. After he dismissed Cartesian approach to put aesthetic phenomena in scientific order, he examined pleasure to found out that it contains something which, in spite of this more empirical approach, leads towards metaphysical domains with its 'desire to create for the sake of creating'⁷ which produces its own world when it only thought to represent it. With his third step, he dismissed aesthetics as metaphysics of pure ideas like that of Beauty, because pleasure and beauty cannot be abstracted from beautiful things which are so diverse that unified idea seems out of reach; and because pleasure appears and disappears in just an instant with much more enigmatic than pure existence. Pure and universal aesthetics is out of question, yet that is what we have inherited. To change it according to enigmatic diversity of

aesthetic phenomenon, Valéry is proposing to divide diverse problems into two groups. The first one should be called *Esthétique* and deal with all that relates to sensations, with special concern for all excitations which do not have uniform and well defined physiological function. He claims that all the luxury of arts is developed from infinite resources of sensations. The second one is examining human actions and works in totality, starting from psychological and physiological roots of human activity and its purposes. This one could be called *Poétique*, or, even better, *Poïétique*. Finally, there should be a third one to catch those problems which will continue to puzzle *esthétique* and *poïétique*. As he turns attention to Plessner's esthesiology, Damnjanović does not elaborate further on Valéry. He takes *The Unity of Senses*⁸ as a starting point. His reason is obvious, because in this earlier work Plessner himself started to build a case for esthesiology, which later became the anthropology of senses. Before it comes to esthesiology as a new philosophical discipline, Plessner has to overcome Descartes' and Kant's gnoseology. To accomplish that, he went beyond Husserl as well, claiming that aisthesis has autonomous normative value of its own. Aesthetics, to become esthesiology, has to treat modalities of relationship between humans and environment including cultural processes involved in these connections. With concept of connection, or contact, Plessner upgrades Husserl's intentionality into an open and transitional connection between humans and their world which is not just what there is on the other side of human being but a product of this relation. Alessia Ruco comments: 'Concerning biological centre, human being lives in a situation of radical fracture.'⁹ To understand this fracture, one has to introduce different positionalities of living bodies in the world, where 'positionality' defines their specific being-in-the-world. Lifeless things do not have a boundary between themselves and environment, which means that they cannot cross it. Plants have a boundary, but their organism does not express relationship to their own positionality. Animals have this relationship, as they possess closed or centric positionality, which means that an animal does have a body, which plant does not, and it is in its body. Humans, in addition, cultivate their relationship with their own center and are therefore eccentric, or, as Jos de Mul characterizes, 'as eccentric beings we are not where we experience, and we don't experience where we are.'¹⁰ Or, as Plessner explained: 'A living person is a body, is in his body (as inner experience or soul) and at the same time outside his body as the perspective, from which he is both.'¹¹ We live in three worlds: outside world, inside world, and shared world of culture. For Damnjanović's argument from 1970, the second anthropological law of Plessner is essential: the law of mediated immediacy. Being decentred or eccentric, humans are artificial by nature; our distancing from just being bodies and being in our bodies opens a perspective

and at the same time represents homelessness as our permanent condition. The boundary we possess is at the same time direct connection and the first indirectness or reflection, and this first reflectivity which is a starting point of all culture and artificiality is really a try to bridge the gap of mediation between ourselves and the world. In place where Descartes installed unbridgeable gap between senses and perception, with animal spirits (*ésprits animaux*) mediating between them, is now a boundary crossed in both directions and eccentrically reflected. Here lies another difference between Plessner and Heidegger: where Heidegger expresses the idea that authenticity of human life was lost during time, mainly in favour of technical manipulation with the world, Plessner explains that our initial and eternal authenticity is this difference between inside and outside our body, which triggers the desire to bridge the gap between them by artificial means, i.e., technique. There is no nostalgia for lost authenticity in Plessner's anthropology. In the same year when Damnjanović published his article, Helmut Plessner returned to his idea of an esthesiology based on the unity of senses, but esthesiology now became anthropology of senses, equally important for neuroscience and for philosophy of art.

To open the corridor from esthesiology to philosophy of art, Damnjanović now turns to Marx, after he declared that his effort 'belongs to Marxist aesthetics understood in relation to the problem of sensual immediacy of esthetics (Valéry) or of esthesiology of the spirit (Plessner)'.¹² His turn is typical for Yugoslav Marxism which, instead of division between 'bourgeois' and 'proletarian' philosophy understood philosophy as unified and connected field where different initiatives were harvested to support another kind of Marxism from inherited, and where archaeological excavations through layers of misguided interpretations had to take place to get at Karl Marx himself.

Damnjanović takes 'generic essence' of Marx's early works without questioning where such essence could come from, or examining its pretention to get installed as the truth of humans and humanity. He is satisfied with a change accomplished by putting together Plessner's eccentricity and Marx's potential essentialism. It means that 'anthropocentrism' of humanist and enlightened concept of emancipation and of human being are both decentered, so that a satisfactory outcome of emancipatory process becomes possible. Homelessness as human destiny and definition does not open doors to anti-humanism which started its way at approximately the same time, but it does open the doors. These doors may lead away from what Marx calls radical in 1843, when theory '...demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical.'¹³ Instead of leading a way directly to radical praxis (which in Marxism

inevitably means revolutionary praxis), Damnjanović leads the way to *poiesis* understood in Marxian terms as production of human generic situation where *Vergegenständlichung* (objectification) makes humans more at home in the world and the world more humanized. For Marx the problem of immediacy and mediation appears, declares Damnjanović, as 'the philosophical problem of immediate reality understood as a problem of authentic sensual praxis, and not as a problem of immediately given nature (as in naturalism), not as a problem of materially given world (as in traditional metaphysical materialism), but additionally as a problem of unity between everyday sensual perception and sensuality mediated by scientific concept, and finally as a problem of aesthetic *Gestalt* understood in a Marxist way, which means from Marx derived *aestheticum*; with ontological priority of artistic (poetically) understood Whole of meaning and being in relation to any other *Gestalt*: scientific, philosophical (metaphysical) and even theological *Gestalt*.'¹⁴ Philosophy always looks for the original and authentic reality, really real reality covered and overlooked by previous philosophy, and that is what Marx has done both with Hegel and Feuerbach when he arrived at the aesthetic senses and immediate sensual apprehension of aesthetic phenomena. Damnjanović continues that in Marx (obviously taken from his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts from 1844 also known as The Paris Manuscripts),¹⁵ immediate reality as original living situation of human is work as an activity which produces culture, or production in the broadest sense of the word. That is what art is: work and production. Marx's use of the term *urwüchsig* as 'primordial' or 'original' or 'authentic' or 'spontaneous' is interpreted by Damnjanović as the immediacy of experience which arises from work. Work, warns Damnjanović, shouldn't be taken for 'a new objectified metaphysics but ontologically as production of new human reality (human world), a production in which the meaning of being and our existence... is dialectically discovered.'¹⁶ Here are his conclusions on Marx:

1. In the history of philosophy Marx represents a new beginning and not the end of philosophy.
2. Marx's thought does not start with the human being as a being which thinks, it even does not start from any defined human being because it is impossible to define something that plastic and capable of universal productivity. It starts from this universality itself activated in partnership with transcendental being or nature.

From here on, Damnjanović takes a direct path towards art as an inevitable partner of philosophy in production of the real reality over which art has a monopoly, and towards human being as a being which longs to find a sense of/in its existence and turn it into reality. Mediated immediacy, or immediate

mediation is a combination of direct and distanced sensual contact between human being and the world. Even skin as the most important sense represents both direct and indirect contact, while five senses include those more direct, as smell and touch, and more indirect or mediated as vision and hearing. For Damjanović, immediate mediation or mediated immediacy have another, further meaning, that of the first reflection and therefore of the first knowledge. This touch between human being and the world, however, in difference with herbs or animals, has to be understood not just as a sensual drowning into the world, or a source of useful orientation for our needs in the world: it has to be understood as production of new reality, a production of a world which lies beyond that what already is. And that is what art does: art and art only can produce new real realities. And if art is neither a source of knowledge nor morality, not even an education, 'then it is not ideology, even if it was really in the service of ideology and is always endangered by such heteronomy.'¹⁷

Damjanović started with esthetics and esthesiology to get at primordial or original problem of foundation for any aesthetics. This problem is immediate access to reality, and it includes mediation expressed in the reflectivity included into this access. To solve this puzzle, he took Plessner's approach. Then, he went through Marx understood in terms of Western Marxist humanism, but only to develop it in direction of art as the most important praxis which, being production, cannot be ideology (false consciousness) in itself: it can only get in service of ideology. Finally, he arrived where he wanted to: art is production, ability necessary for human beings longing to heal their homelessness, because art produces new worlds from the immediate mediation with the real world.

Damjanović did not find universal way out of the crisis of aesthetics. He himself wrote that aesthetics is doomed to be in crisis till it exists. But he has taken sensual touch between human being and the world under Plessner's terms for aesthetics' foundation, and put a layer of Marx(ist) understanding of praxis, production and work on it. If not else, his positionality was indeed eccentric, even under strange ways of aesthetics in Yugoslavia.

NOTES

- 1 See: Danko Grlić, *Estetika: Povijest filozofskih problema* (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1974), Danko Grlić, *Estetika II: Epoha estetike* (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1976), Danko Grlić, *Estetika III: Smrt estetskog* (Zagreb: Naprijed, 1978) and Danko Grlić, *Estetika IV: S onu stranu estetike* (Naprijed: Zagreb, 1979).
- 2 Sreten Petrović, *Marksistička estetika: Kritika estetičkog uma* (Beograd: BIGZ, 1979).
- 3 Milan Damnjanović, "Problem neposrednosti i posredovanja u Marksovom mišljenju s obzirom na estetiku, filozofiju i književnu kritiku," *Književna kritika*, 1, 2 (1970): 78-82; Milan Damnjanović, *Suština i povest* (Beograd: Univerzitet umetnosti, 1976).
- 4 Milan Damnjanović, "Problem neposrednosti i posredovanja u Marksovom mišljenju s obzirom na estetiku, filozofiju i književnu kritiku," 2-12)
- 5 Ibid., 12-13)
- 6 Paul Valéry, "Discours prononcé au deuxième Congrès international d'esthétique et de science de l'art", 1937., available at: http://www.musicologie.org/theses/valery_02.htm .
- 7 Ibid., 8.
- 8 Helmuth Plessner. *Die Einheit der Sinne: Grundlinien einer Ästhesiologie des Geistes* □ *Gesammelte Schriften, Band III* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 7-315.
- 9 Alessia Ruco, "Estetica e antropologia dei sensi in Plessner," *Aisthesis: rivista on-line del Seminario Permanente di Estetica SPES*, 4, Special Issue (2012): 117-140.
- 10 Jos de Mul, "Artificial by Nature: An Introduction to Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology," in *Plessner's Philosophical Anthropology: Perspective and Prospects*, ed. Jos de Mul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 16.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Milan Damnjanović, *Suština i povest* (Beograd: Univerzitet umetnosti, 1976), 11.
- 13 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction*, 1843., available at: <https://www.marxist.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hps/intro.htm> .
- 14 Milan Damnjanović, *Suština i povest*, 14.
- 15 Karl Marx, *Economic & Philosophical Manuscripts*, 1844., available at: <https://www.marxist.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts.htm> .
- 16 Milan Damnjanović, *Suština i povest*, 19.
- 17 (Damnjanović, 1976, 25)

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STATUS ESTETIKE DANAS

Aleš Erjavec

U svom radu ću ispitati neke od prekretnica u novijoj istoriji estetike. Tvrdim da su nedavni događaji u estetici ne samo proširili njenu paletu interesa i učinili je savremenijom nasuprot konkurentnoj umetnosti, već su takođe uveli estetiku u oblasti koje prethodno nisu bile njene. U tom smislu, vidim Žaka Ransijera kao glavnu figuru, čiji nedavni spisi nude mogući pokušaj romana – mada takođe rizično. Osim toga, ja ću ispitati neke druge – divergentne, ali i veoma produktivne – estetske teorije poslednjih decenija.

KLJUČNE REČI: ESTETIKA, ISTORIJA, ŽAK RANSIJER, UMETNOST, PREKRETNICE

KOOPTACIJA SENZIBILITETA I SUBVERZIJE LEPOTE

Arnold Berlant

Estetska analiza svakodnevnog života je razvila važan opus čiji značaj prevazilazi akademski. Zbog svoje rasprostranjenosti u iskustvu, estetski senzibilitet ima mnogo manifestacija, kako otvorenih tako i skrivenih. Ovaj rad ispituje neke u velikoj meri skrivene načine na koje su ukus i estetski sud, koji se manifestuju u dojmu, suptilno prisvojeni i eksploatisani. Ja identifikujem i opisujem takve postupke kao kooptaciju (ili prisvajanje) estetskog senzibiliteta, što je fenomen koji ima posledice štetne po zdravlje, društvo, i životnu sredinu. Ovi postupci su oblik negativne estetike koja narušava i manipuliše razumnim iskustvom u interesu masovnog marketinga i političke kontrole. Takve prakse imaju veliki etički značaj i nose društvene i političke implikacije koje ukazuju drugu ulogu estetike, onu kritičku: estetika kao instrument emancipacije u društvenim analizama i političkom kriticizmu.

KLJUČNE REČI: ESTETSKI SENZIBILITET, KOOPTACIJA, NEADEKVATNO OBRAZOVANJE, DOBIT, UKUS

KAKO BRANITI ESTETIKU?

Lev Kreft

Milan Damnjanović (1924-1994) objavio je svoj estetski opus u kontekstu (Jugoslovenskog) marksističkog “prevazilaženja” (Aufhebung) estetike i estetske samokritike izražene kao “kriza estetike”. Da bi se suprotstavio obema ovim kritičnim pozicijama i u isto vreme reformisao sposobnost estetike da tretira sve estetske fenomene, ali i dalje zadržao umetnost u posebnom fokusu, on je uveo problem neposrednosti doživljaja sveta od strane čoveka. U svom članku “Problem neposrednosti i posredovanja u Marksovoj misli” (1970) Damnjanović je želeo da pokaže primat estetske dimenzije u neposrednosti i neposredno posredovanje/razmišljanje koje može da podrži legitimno pravo filozofije da je organizuje kao otvoreni sistem, i solidnost estetike kao disciplinu takvog sistema. Da bi postigao ovaj cilj, predstavio je isprepletenu argumentaciju koja kombinuje njegovo tumačenje Marksove filozofije rada iz pariskih rukopisa i Kapitala sa Plesnerovom esteziologijom i Valerijevom “esthétique”.

Preispitivanje Damnjanovićeve odbrane Celine, filozofske sistematičnosti, i autonomnog položaja estetike kao discipline je prilika da se utvrdi da li je ukazao na pravi smer, bilo uzimajući Plesnera i Valerija kao podršku, ili, uzimajući osnovni filozofski problem neposrednosti / posredovanja kao kamen temeljac statusa estetike.

KLJUČNE REČI: ODBRANA ESTETIKE, MILAN DAMNJANOVIĆ, HELMUT PLESNER, ESTEZOLOGIJA, MARKSISTIČKA ESTETIKA, NEPOSREDNOST I POSREDOVANJE
