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## THE PERSPECTIVE OF “FESTIVENESS” AS MODEL OF A NEW AESTHETICS

**Abstract.** International research in the aesthetic sector has been undergoing very crucial transformations for more than two decades, in an attempt to outline an aesthetics of environments rather than an aesthetics of "works". However, the problem that has not yet been resolved in the construction of this aesthetic seems to be the production of its models, which must inevitably be models of processes and actions. In this sense, the suggestion in this article is to look at the foundational potential of the different aesthetics of celebrations and festivals, anniversaries and feasts, as well as of parties and events, joyous family celebrations, whether they be Venetian beach parties or (even) Love Fests in Berlin.

**Keywords.** New aesthetics, Aesthetics of environments, Festiveness, Celebration, Planning, Cultural Policy.

### 1.

International philosophical culture is undergoing very crucial transformations. The changes are related to the transition from an “old” to a “new” aesthetics. If the old aesthetics was an aesthetics of “works”, the new aesthetics is one of environments. Old aesthetics underscored the “separateness” of the aesthetic quality, whereas the new aesthetics is the aesthetics of pervasiveness. If the old aesthetics was museum bound and relied on a spectator, the new aesthetics is recognizing a radiating action that all things – meaning not only works – are capable of emanating in order to invest their environment with beauty. In one word, whereas the old aesthetics is a static one expressed in forms, the new aesthetics is the aesthetics of processes and ac-

tions. Thus, it cannot be but the aesthetics of celebrations and festivals, anniversaries and feasts, as well as of parties and events, joyous family celebrations, whether they be Venetian beach parties or even Love Fests in Berlin.

But, what is a celebration? Given that traditionally aesthetics has showered its attention on the arts, finding an answer to this question was predictably left to religion and anthropology. However, not all consequences of the attention of these disciplines have been positive. In spite of all possible appearances to the contrary, I think, in fact, that studies taking a science of religion approach – especially those with a liturgical center of gravity – or an anthropological one, for that matter, end up with a vision of celebration as a circumscribed phenomenon, inherent to a specific culture, and thus able to design an environment only in a relativistic sense. Even the most important essays on the subject fail to substantially dispel this impression. Karl Kerény's essays, *Die Religion der Griechen und Römer*, 1963 and, *Wesen des Festes*, in *Paideuma* 1 (1938/ 1940), pp. 59-74; or W. Ward Fowler's, *Roman festivals of the period of the Republic*, London 1908; or G. Vaccai's, *Le feste di Roma antica*, Torino 1927; or G. Lieberg's, *Die Bedeutung des Festes bei Horaz*, in *Synusia*, Festgabe für W. Schadewaldt, 1965, pp. 403-427, show an obvious interest for classifying celebrations according to type based on their different manifestations rather than an analysis of the forces they are capable of unleashing or the perspectives they are capable of drawing. These studies define celebrations as an action performed by a community, either privately or publicly, for the purpose of giving a more or less institutional form – or, at any rate, an organized and regulated form – to the expression of indebtedness, thanksgiving, recollection, assigning value to a belief, etc. In addition, a celebration is always circumscribed in secular time and space, so that it occupies its own specific and distinctive time and place, that is simultaneously inside and outside daily life. Its degree of "other-ness" may vary, and it may prescribe behavior that is appropriate for participants in the celebration. Celebrations entail a quantity of events such as sacrifices and banquets, fights and competitions, games, dances, music and songs, disguises and decorations. They also include set ups varying in size and nature providing, to varying extents, for the arts in the traditional sense of the word. Very often celebrations

are related to a mythological or historical occasion (the founding of communities, victories, crownings, taking office, etc.), which may characteristically be in turn interpreted in relation to a gift (in thanks, donation) or, at any rate, as an event for which one cannot take exclusive credit. In a typical circular structure, he who has received a gift receives it again, the recipient thanks the donor, the donor in his turn thanks the recipient, and so on.

All these features are definitely correct, but the outlook of the disciplines that were able to point out these elements does not allow it to go beyond the idea of celebrations as a phenomenon belonging to a specific past and religion, and, therefore, a relative phenomenon. In spite of appearances being appreciably to the contrary, this relativity has never been overcome even in philosophical studies based on ethics and hermeneutics, studies made by great German speaking scholars such as Romano Guardini, Josef Pieper, Hans Georg Gadamer, Helmut Kuhn, Odo Marquard or the French Roger Callois. That relativity is not overcome by hermeneutics, I think is also emphasized precisely in studies by Josef Pieper (1904-1997), the most authoritative among the above philosophers on the topic of celebrations. Josef Pieper, the great Thomist scholar, who is very well known in the Anglo-Saxon world, was the author of many famous works on celebration and idleness, including *Musse und Kult*, München, Kösel, 1948, 1995<sup>9</sup>; or *Zustimmung zur Welt. Eine Theorie des Festes*, München 1963 (1964<sup>2</sup>); or the article *Beschreibung eines indischen Festes*, in: *Hochland* 56 (1964), pp. 333-344, originating from his travels in the East searching for its traditions related to festivity. We would never dare to criticize or in some way try to diminish an authority such as his, the authority of a man whose fame is intercultural, if we consider that in Tokyo, not so many years ago, in 1987, a symposium was devoted to him, on the initiative of Y. Masuda, a symposium by the title *On "Yutori" - Symposium on J.P.'s philosophy of leisure*. Joseph Pieper is entirely correct and we agree with his thinking when he teaches us that the root of celebration is in the concept *otium* and contemplation, and that to celebrate is a mode of knowing. I am quoting from Pieper's 1963 aforementioned text *Zustimmung zur Welt*, which says that "a holyday is not day of abstention from work", but much more, since "celebrating a holyday has the same value and the same meaning as "becoming visible (beschaulich)", and

therefore meeting the higher realities on which human existence is founded”, then he adds that a celebration “is not a manifestation of wealth, in the sense of money but rather of existential richness”. “A celebration – continues Pieper – is nourished by affirmation, and a celebration becomes such only when humans confirm the goodness of their being through the answer of joy. By engaging in celebrations, human beings overcome the boundaries of temporal and local existence”. All these are definitely central features, yet something is missing from this profile of celebration, something simple, yet essential, that is, its aesthetic dimension, i.e., the ideas concerning the possibility of engaging “in the practice” of celebration. Pieper’s observations, as well as those of the aforementioned scholars, attract many followers to the cause of celebration, but they fail to mention strategies that are appropriate to bringing out its “generative” (generative of a cosmos, cosmogonic) nature, to re-establishing its ability to “design” an environment that is “our” environment. This inability stems from the, so to say, relatively “tragic” character of this study and others, their inability to prescribe a therapy after making their diagnosis, in spite of the fatal prognosis they have evidenced.

We surely must admit that what we unceremoniously called the “old” aesthetics is responsible for the expulsion of the generative character of celebrations from the philosophical debate. There were important reasons for this and they are related to the events that Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) vehemently condemned in his famous *Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacle*, of 1758. Starting from 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, the center stage of aesthetics was occupied by the theater, by pretence, by spectacle, vanity and more generally, by an emphasis on playing, imagination, on novels, but also by the so-called pedagogic function of art, the cult of limitless sensibility. All these are circumstances that – as Rousseau points out – could prevail (and that is what actually happened) over the festive spirit as the ability and legitimacy to open the world.

## 2.

Actually, the character of celebration, its aesthetic countenance, its festive spirit could make it an essential resource for any type

of planning, from the design of objects to fashion design, from architecture to interior design, from city planning, to communications, politics, up to, naturally that design of communities, which I consider to be that cultural planning I refer to in the title of this presentation. The fluid, process driven, choreographic, imitative radiant, dynamic, relational, narrative and involving character of celebrations, as well as their vertical and cosmic aspects, briefly the grammar of celebrations – may be profitably used to generate those events and narratives that are inherent to any kind of planning. To take it to an extreme: if I want to solve a problem or open a perspective I could start by organizing a celebration on behalf of that problem. I celebrate therefore I create; therefore I give birth to something. Let's visualize any "empty space", a "poor" space in both in the literal and figurative sense. Let's say we want to "fill it", "enrich" it. We could organize many celebrations in that space, we would have to make that space their subject and then we would let all those events settle and then take them up again, filter them and then graft them on again. We could set up a sort of permanent performance of the things and places that we want to take care of, and then we would collect everything to form their profile. Let us visualize one of the many things we know to be lifeless and devoid of energy, lacking a story to tell, something that is opaque and unrecognizable, let's visualize taking this thing from celebration to celebration, from festive tale to festive tale and we could certainly expect that the narratives emerging about it would penetrate inside it, coat it and rewrite it, thus redefining it [Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowsky, Victor Turner].

### 3.

Are there examples of a culture of planning that consciously finds its support on a culture of celebration? The answer is affirmative, in a limited way. The issue of the aesthetic quality of celebration for the purpose of promoting a culture and practice of planning is actually one that has been neglected in the literature, both in the field of aesthetics and under the different rubrics of cultural planning. There is no such thing as an academy or a workshop one can attend to get training in it. Furthermore, because of the fact that the opposite examples we can show are mainly artistic

in origin, they wear a “uniform” (the artistic one) so to speak, rather than “civilian” clothing which would allow for a “secular” approach to planning (one which is not immediately connected to the arts and therefore circumscribed to museums and galleries). We have to admit that the potential of celebrations was mainly discovered by the arts, particularly since the 50’s. The most important names that come to mind are the great American Allan Kaprow, or Fluxus. Recently this “applied” potential of celebrations was discovered by several young artists. The Argentinian Rirkrit Tiravanija bases her work on the introduction of elementary daily activities in gallery spaces and museums. By abolishing the boundaries between actors and spectators in the (festive) contexts of traditional exhibition spaces, she studies the effect they have on the content of daily actions. German artist Claus Fottinger adopts similar strategies but he reverses them by using photographs of cinematic works over a fifty year period to cover all the furnishings of a café (table, chairs and counter), and thus materially transforming it through a simple set of images. Finally, visiting the Japanese art gallery *Designfesta* may reinforce the impression of an art that, more or less explicitly, places its techniques back in the context of celebration. *Designfesta* is not an art container, but rather a kind of toy box which people happily rummage through looking for surprises. *Designfesta* seems to consist of volunteers and young artists from all over the world, improvised performance, individualism, independence from money (which is important only for self-organization purposes), creativity, youth, an encounter between the beauty of different cultures, irony, and playfulness.

#### 4.

We are now coming close to our conclusion, dealing with the last of the issues we have raised, certainly the most important one. The issue is the following: taking for granted the primacy of the arts, how can one put “civilian clothes” on festive culture? How can one develop a method from celebration, how can one draw hands on ideas from it, capable of sustaining a planning culture? First of all one has to be aware that a celebration is not an event like any other, but rather is “festiveness”, i.e., a direction in and of itself. A celebration is a kind of syntax, a metadiscourse, and

not a simple sum of actions. It is an attitude, a general tone determining the celebration character, and not the implementation of specific concrete events. As a cuisine is much more than its simple ingredients, similarly to make a celebration it's not enough to take some music, a theme, add some audience, press releases and some special foods. It is not enough to mix all of this together and "voila" you get a celebration.

What is essential instead, is coming up with distinct and explicit indicators of festivity. Without them it is impossible to put into practice any of its aesthetic elements. Finally, here we offer some indices of celebration, listed here as a contribution to the elaboration of a method, still at its elementary stages. The festive-ness of a celebration consists of:

- non stop creativity (celebrations as a continuum of creativity)
- ease of relations (celebrations are porous)
- exceptionality of relations (celebrations are marvelous)
- the unplanned and/or unpredictable nature of the events (celebrations are surprising)
- everybody participating in everything (celebrations put everyone on a pedestal)
- non hierarchical nature (celebrations are subtly anarchistic)
- inclusiveness (celebrations mix their participants)
- re-symbolization of places and things (celebrations exercises a high degree of transfiguration of things and spaces)
- extraordinariness compared to daily life (celebrations are capable of raising domestic and daily life to the heights of the extraordinary)
- daily-life compared to extraordinariness (celebrations are capable of bringing extraordinary events to daily life)

- overcoming time and space (celebrations can connect things that are poles apart, if necessary)
- ritualization and/or formalism (celebrations act also through repetition, quotation and variation)
- connection with life powers (celebrations are always connected with those who possess the keys of life)
- gratitude and generosity (celebrations are always in recognition of indebtedness and as visible compensation)

I am very much aware that I still owe to myself many clarifications, but I truly believe that the path to empowering a planning culture and the foundation of a New Aesthetics passes through the practice of applying the culture of festiveness.