

Introduction

The aim of this Introduction to Modern and Contemporary Art Theory is to provide theoretical tools for understanding art and culture. In order to achieve this, it addresses the fundamental characteristics defining artistic Modernity and postmodernism.

Some key points for a general understanding of the subject are shown below:

1. In the context of this course, **culture** is considered to be *the product of men and women's rational mediation with the world*. This definition implies that not everything is culture, because not all forms of human action are productive. It also entails that, among the ones that are productive –and can therefore be called *culture*–, a ranking or hierarchy can be established, depending on the quality of the mediation.

Culture is therefore language, but also technology, and forms of work, customs, political systems, borders –all of these mediation devices that we have created for better or worse to structure our thinking– dominate the medium, regulate social roles and behaviors, order a calendar, differentiate spaces, etc.

Cultural forms develop in a shared way, that is to say, socially: cultures evolve with societies and, to some extent, define them. As a result, culture means mediation not only with the world, but mainly among mankind.

2. Among other cultural products, it is possible to point out the ones commonly known as «**works of art**», works of human creativity with a particular aesthetic value. Depending on the period and the society concerned, they are linked to either magical, religious, representative, or leisure functions... or they develop separately in what we call the art world (art as an institution). Art works'

aesthetic substance is materialized in the aesthetic experience from which it comes and to which it in turn leads the creator, the receiver or the interpreter.

3. The **aesthetic experience** is that kind of relationship with the world that, being active, does not lead to conceptualizations. Like knowledge, it starts from senses, but unlike this, it retains everything that cognitive abstraction drops: the secondary qualities, the formalities of appearing, everything that is particular in the experience of the world. We will see that this does not exclude its cognitive value, unless we take only rational abstractions for knowledge. It does not imply the irrational character of aesthetic experience, but in any case a pre-rational or supra-rational one. Although the aesthetic experience is not limited to works of art, it cannot nevertheless be missing in the relationship with the work of art as such. Responsibility for the achievement of the aesthetic experience does not lie completely with the artwork, but depends largely on the sounding board, which is us. We are not neutral receptacles, but have a given configuration that affects our acceptance or rejection of the work. Such a configuration, although subjective, is not merely individual or private. There are common traits, partly inherited, partly acquired, that allow us to speak of an «inter-subjectivity». As mentioned above, the aesthetic experience is not passive, as a mere emotional reaction would be, but active, productive and, above all, free: not linked to any previous necessity.
4. Given the link between cultural products –including works of art among these– and the societies that produce them, cultural expressions can be opaque to the aesthetic experience of those who do not share their same **context**. Works of art, even if they develop at the heart of the art world (and hence are disconnected from other social functions) can never be considered completely autonomous, nor reach an absolutely universal value. The theoretical explanation, the critical analytical skills or the aesthetic sensitivity that give us access to the artwork are heavily dependent on the understanding and management of certain cultural codes.

Access to Western modern and postmodern art (whether the latter is a moment of crisis of the previous one or, on the contrary, its radical denial and a step on to something else) also requires the mastery of specific cultural codes. If the context is not shared, art becomes inaccessible. Today's cultural shift makes it difficult to master this context, not only because of our social diversity and fragmentation, but also because of the distance between our tradition and contemporary experience. Studies and readings often do not help, because what we learn at school, which may allow us to appreciate

artistic expressions of past centuries, may be completely inadequate for contemporary art. This gap often entails the rejection of what appears alien to us. But to experience as alien what is indeed familiar is undoubtedly a failure. The present course therefore aims to reduce the risk of failure, to foster a familiarity with modern and contemporary basic traits that enable a proper appreciation and criticism.

5. As a consequence of the foregoing, **transversality** has been considered a necessary trait in this course approach: i.e. artistic disciplines are not understood separately, but interconnected with each other and with other cultural aspects. The literature, music and visual arts of the same territory and time share very similar theoretical approaches, and cannot be understood if this is not in connection with social, political or economic issues. This is why the explanations are covered with multiple and very different cultural references. These particular references are not however the object of study, which is the thought that they intend to exemplify. The list of references is not intended to form any canon: it could be replaced with any other list. Cultural references have been chosen for reasons of proximity, or because of their special appropriateness for the concept or theme explained. Students will do well to complete the matter with their own examples, cases or experiences, taken from their own cultural background, constantly testing the assimilation of the theories explained on them and, in the best cases, being able to develop, adjust or criticize those same theories. Studies of culture require a continuous mapping of interconnected references that vary from one individual to another and that must constantly grow. Eventually it will mean the progressive improvement of the sounding board that each one of us ultimately is.