

## Book review

Aleš Erjavec, 2008. *Postmodernism, Postsocialism and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Aleš Erjavec is the Director of Research in the Institute of Philosophy of the Center of Scientific Research of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Ljubljana) and Professor of Aesthetics at Ljubljana University and in the Faculty of Humanities, Koper, where he is also the Chair of the Department of Cultural Studies. He has authored and edited some thirteen books, of which *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art Under Late Socialism* (Berkeley, 2003).

It was therefore a compliment to this journal that Prof. Erjavec assented to become one of this journal's international advisors.

In the book under review the themes of the 2003 publication, cited above, are further addressed. It focusses on three interrelated issues: the relationship between modernism and postmodernism, visibility and visual culture, and the relation between former European socialist countries (including Erjavec's native Slovenia) and the West as regards aesthetics, globalisation, culture and contemporary visual art.

In the first part, indexed as "From Modernism to Postmodernism", the author's reflection on the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century is insightful and convincing: "[I]n the twentieth century there existed the classical, radical, early, or historical avant-garde movements which denigrated the division between art and life, between the artistic practice and social *praxis* ..." (22). However, Erjavec argues that it was "witnessed by the historical avant-garde that [conflating art and life] is not possible" (23). Then, during the last decades of the twentieth century the West experienced the phenomenon of postmodern art that was not politicised, while in postsocialist countries art was politicised "in a specific way and was, at the same time 'avant-garde'" (36).

Postmodern art inspired philosophers of art to formulate new criteria, and the one that Erjavec deals with is "the event". In the third chapter: "Art: The Event", Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the importance of "event" for aesthetics understood as philosophy of art and also culture is discussed as "a procedure and a presentation suitable almost exclusively to avant-garde modernist art, since "Art was an event not in the sense of an art object, but in the sense of its creation and consumption (or reception). It was the process that counted, not the object" (49). And in this regard, Erjavec offers his own interpretation of the sphere of art: "[A]rt as an event would relegate art to where in my opinion it belongs: primarily in the sphere of private reception and only secondary on the mass media stage" (52).

Postmodernism furthermore subverted views of nature, as found in Heidegger, for whom nature somehow still appears within the Cartesian dualism. In the essay "The Stone and the Touchstone" the author clearly indicated how modernism redeemed nature from being regarded as an object of human exploitation. However, in the arts "nature has ceased to be a crucial aesthetic signifier", but "it has remained the force that determines our future and fortunes..." (77). The essay is memorably concluded: "We today thus have two natures: one of our body, with which we are increasingly becoming familiar and which we are accepting privately for what it is, and the other one, often imaginarily distanced ) phantasmatically existing often through the media and usually somewhere else on the globe ) and which is increasingly becoming a self-created danger to our very survival" (77).

In the second part of the book, entitled “The eye and the lens”, the emphasis is specifically on visuality. Visual culture became an object of more detailed research only in the last two decades and it retains an uneasy relationship with art and art history. European civilization has always ascribed a special place to vision. The human gaze has become an object of special study, but the way in which it differs from the “embodied” gaze of the human eye(s) is the focus of chapter seven: “Vision and the embodied eye”. In this regard the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty receives emphasis for its privileging painting as an art form. However, according to Norman Bryson this philosopher neglected the social dimension of seeing. Erjavec concludes with a further caveat concerning the recent theoretical and philosophical anti-ocularcentrism which appears to be “a consequence of the recent predominantly visual nature of postmodernist art and culture” (119) by stating: “Hence an important, but so far mostly ignored or avoided concern of the philosophy of art and culture becomes the way in which works of art and culture function not only within the social, but also within the existential framework, the latter therefore warranting renewed consideration” (119).

The second part is concluded with an essay on “The truth in photography” which deals with the problematic expectation that an ontology of photography is possible or necessary. Erjavec concludes that “Today photography shares the role of other visual media and ontologically speaking does not differ from other forms or genres of visual expression” (139).

The third part, “The East and the West” offers a global view on the philosophy of art, visual culture and the institutions that disseminate them (according to the blurb on the cover). The essay “The negativity of culture” emphasises contact, since “A live and dynamic culture borrows and appropriates incessantly” (169), which is why events such as symposia and meetings, as well as “emphasizing via works of art and culture” (168) bring “us” and “them” together. This reasoning should be persuasive for us in South Africa to remember that the present political ideal of Africanisation in art and culture is insular and will not lead to any renaissance for the African continent. We need a global view to face challenges in our postcolonial era. Perhaps a motivated avant-garde could hold up a mirror to our truth, keeping in mind the author’s insight: “[T]oday we are bound to speak of the global situation of art and that today the distinctions between the art of the Second World and that of the First and Third matter only with regard to nuances”(185).

I recommend this book to South African artists, art historians and philosophers of art. The many references it contains about postsocialism are relevant to our situation in a postcolonial country. Indeed Erjavec states in his introduction that “To some extent, the recent state of [postsocialist culture] resembles the recent or current situation in postcolonial cultures ) a connection that in this book remains implicit” (ix).

**E.A. Maré**