

Form, Body and Space. Aesthetics, Cognition and Anthropology of Art

Els LAGROU

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Chimerical design and Image-songs: body, space and movement in Amerindian aesthetics

The creation of pattern, in the daily practice of weaving and tracing lines on the surfaces of bodies, faces and artifacts by native Amerindian women of several related groups in the Northwestern Amazon, eschews representation. The unfolding of design partakes of the chimerical ontology of the image in that it is focused on the passage from the visible to the invisible. Design in the Amazon is a perceptive technique, more than a technique to represent what is already there. The pattern is a path to be followed by the gaze; the onlooker is projected, as with abstract art, into the space created by the lines. In previous writings I have shown how this generative logic of creating patterns can only be understood when related to the ritual use of design in rites of passage and shamanistic rituals. Being an art of movement and metamorphosis, the line points towards a figure that is never revealed, only suggested. The visualization of design is considered of utmost importance for the outcome of visionary experience with ayahuasca for the people under study. In this paper I will explore the role of design in vision and its relation with body, space and movement as revealed in ritual song.

Alexandre SURRALLEES

(Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, CNRS, Collège de France)

Le sens de la couleur en son absence.

Si la couleur semble communiquer des valeurs qui fluctuent selon les cultures et les époques, l'attribution de corrélations affectives aux variations chromatiques paraît, elle en revanche, être une disposition largement répandue parmi les groupes humains. Mais, est-il vrai que la notion de couleur et des termes pour désigner les couleurs existent dans toutes les langues? Si certains contextes culturels ne disposent pas d'une notion de la couleur, et par conséquent d'une nomenclature des couleurs individuelles, peut-on parler encore d'une sémantique des couleurs, voire une connotation affective des couleurs? L'ethnographie d'une population autochtone de la Haute Amazonie, qui évalue les expériences sensorielles relatives aux couleurs sans l'un des principaux outils descriptifs que sont pour nous les noms de couleurs, nous offre la possibilité de réfléchir à ce qu'on pourrait nommer avec un oxymore : le sens de l'ineffable.

Mots-clés : perception, sensation, couleurs, anthropologie, Amazonie

Arnaud MORVAN

(Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale, Collège de France)

From ground to canvas: the body in translation in kija Indigenous art (north-west Australia)

The paper investigates the connections between images, songs and the body within kija art traditions from the East Kimberley (north-west Australia). Kija ochre paintings on wooden boards or canvas show the tracks of totemic ancestors, spirits and historical characters as they appear in the landscape as living imprints. The tracks are charged with a triple memory of place: mythical, historical and biographical. My exploration of the ritual origins of kija iconography, where the participants literally dance with their paintings, reveals the specific way songs and body movements generate a mnemonic process associating places and events in the painting.

Susanne KUECHLER

(Director, Department of Anthropology, UCL, London)

Making the Social Body: The Aesthetics of the Stitched Surface

This talk will examine what lies behind the attention to piecework coverlets in Eastern Polynesia where the cutting, stitching and gifting of cloth has taken over the work of ancient ritual of *paieatua* or second burial. The case study material is taken from the Cook Islands and a comparison with data from Hawaii and Tahiti will serve to problematize the articulation of three distinct modes of construction of coverlets and their associated forms that prevail in the Cooks as index of a complex genealogy that defines Cook Island ideas of two different types of power, over people and over land, and their legitimacy to this day. The mapping of genealogical information on the surface of the coverlets will be argued to be grounded in numerical and geometric skills associated with maritime navigation and cosmological ideas that conjure up an inter-subjectively shared understanding of how many can become one, yet the compelling force of this mathematical aesthetics comes into its own during the stitching of the coverlets itself, when the hands of many women work as if they attached to a single body.

Carlo SEVERI

(Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Sociale, EHESS-CNRS, Collège de France)

The Pragmatics of what is shown: a mask from the Sepik

Pragmatics is the study of what is said. It aims to understand how the elaboration of the indexical part of language influences the production of meaning. Using ritual iconographies from the Sepik (Papua-New Guinea) I want to show how – mobilizing the perception of complex bodies - images can play a relational, communicational game, which can enable them to concur in the definition of the indexical field.

Andrea PINOTTI

(Università Statale, Milano)

Make a right or make a left? Laterality in aesthetic experience

My paper will address the issue of lateralization in aesthetic experience, assuming “aesthetic” both in its etymological sense (from aisthesis, sensation, perception) and in the sense of a theoretical reflection on art. I will compare phenomenological, anthropological and kunstwissenschaftlich approaches, with a specific focus on the production and reception of static pictures, in which the polarization left/right impacts on syntactic, semantic, symbolic and pragmatic issues.

Michele COMETA

(Università di Palermo)

Bodies That Matter. Miniaturization and the Origin(s) of “Art”

Small things matter, especially in the so-called “arts”. From visual arts to music and literature, “miniatures” are a transcultural and transhistorical phenomenon which concern our aesthetic attitudes but also our everyday life, our emotional, social and cognitive life. Miniaturization characterizes our cognitive life and the “cognitive life of things” that we produce, manipulate and discard. We can study miniaturization as a particular way to handle things that characterizes the whole evolution of Homo Sapiens and insofar all human cognition. In a certain sense, we could say that all “art” is a kind of miniaturization (from palaeolithic venuses to japanese netsuke, from bonsai to chinese micro-mountains, from miniature portraits to daguerrotypes and stereoscopies. My paper is articulated in two sections: the first, after a quick visual survey on Homo Sapiens’ miniatures, especially palaeolithic ones, is a brief survey of the very challenging history of miniature-interpretation during the twentieth-century philosophy of culture and anthropology, which I consider a kind of pre-history of the cognitive interpretation of miniaturization. In the second part I will focus on four cognitive interpretations of miniature, which are supported by some experimental evidence, and give a fifth, starting from Gallese’s notion of “liberated embodied simulation”

Isabella PASQUALINI

(École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne).

Between mimesis & mood – Biofeedback for architectonic space

The human body has been used as a reference for two-dimensional proportion in architecture since ancient times. This notion has been favoured by the fact that shapes influence the subjective experience of the architectonic environment –or mood– according to its style. On the other hand, one of the main references for the evolution of the human sense of architectonic space is the primordial shelter. What if we considered the body in its three- or multidimensional relationships to space as an aspect related to the imitation of nature –or mimesis?

Cognitive neuroscience disposes of several notions of embodiment linked to perception, action and thinking. Embodiment and the self-conscious experience of one-self in space are associated with multisensory aspects of bodily self-consciousness, evoking a combination of modalities in architectonic space. Empirical scientific investigations revealed that bodily self-consciousness is linked to self-identification (or body ownership) and self-location (or the feeling to occupy a specific

position) in space. When testing multisensory aspects of architectonic space in Virtual Reality or through other interactive media the multidimensional character of the subjective experience of architecture can be revealed by measuring self-identification and self-location. Using cardio-visual biofeedback we have tested two different rooms on healthy participants at the Laboratory of Cognitive Neuroscience (EPFL). Participants were exposed to rooms of which surfaces were covered with different shapes glowing either in synchrony to their heartbeats, or, with a modulation factor. A first experiment revealed a strong impact of cardio-visual biofeedback on feelings of happiness and the heartrate when the cardio-visual biofeedback loop was accelerated. When exposed to their own decelerated heartrate participants reported higher levels of self-identification with the glowing shapes. In a second experiment, we have found that these feelings were only induced when biofeedback was coupled to participants' heartrates. On such background, I discuss the critical connection between emotion, embodiment and geometry involving architecture as a discipline that unifies science and art to build tangible spaces.

Sir Colin BLAKEMORE

(Professor of Neuroscience & Philosophy, School of Advanced Study, University of London & Emeritus Professor of Neuroscience, University of Oxford)

Perceiving the third dimension

We see the world in three dimensions, despite the fact that the image in our eye is essentially two-dimensional. Animals with forward-pointing eyes have the luxury of stereoscopic vision – the ability to interpret the relative distances of features in the world from the tiny differences between the images in the two eyes. But if you close one eye, you can still perceive distance from information in the single image. Figurative painting depends completely on the viewer's ability to infer depth from monocular cues, especially perspective, even when the surface of a painting is actually flat. I shall discuss the possible brain mechanisms for interpreting perspective, whether and how monocular cues are integrated with stereoscopic vision, and the implications of this for figurative art and architecture. And I shall offer an explanation for one of the puzzles in the history of architecture – why Michelangelo apparently made a mistake in the design of one of Rome's most famous piazze.

Vittorio GALLESE

(Università di Parma, University of London)

The bodily space of images

Experimental aesthetics will be discussed in relation with current neuroscientific approaches to art and aesthetics. We can now look at the aesthetic-symbolic dimension not only from a semiotic-hermeneutic perspective, but starting from the dimension of beholders' body. I will present results of our empirical research showing that the creative expressive processes characterizing our species, in spite of their progressive abstraction and externalization from the body, keep their bodily ties intact. Creative expression is tied to the body not only because the body is the instrument of creative expression, but also because it is the main medium allowing its experience.