

*Wittgenstein and Aesthetics.  
Perspectives and Debates*

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In the contemporary debate about Aesthetics, the name of Ludwig Wittgenstein is appearing more and more often. The relationship between the Austrian philosopher, founding father of the 20th century's linguistic turn, and Aesthetics is not only a matter of cultural education or personal interests but most of all it is a theoretical question.

As it is well known, Wittgenstein's *Bildung* is very deeply related to the Viennese cultural and artistic milieu between the end of 19th and the beginning of 20th century: as pointed out by several biographers (cfr. Janik and Toulmin 1973; Monk 1990), Wittgenstein's house was an important cultural gathering, where it was possible to meet personalities like Brahms and Mahler, Clara Schumann and Richard Strauss. The Wittgenstein family's patronage involved, for example, Gustav Klimt, who painted a portrait of Ludwig's sister Margarethe, and Maurice Revel, who was asked to compose a concert for left hand alone by the pianist Paul, one of the philosopher's brothers who was mutilated during the World War I.

But Wittgenstein's interest for Aesthetics is more theoretical than biographical, as witnessed by the recent *Wittgenstein and Aesthetics. Perspective and Debates*, a collective volume edited by Alessandro Arbo, Michel Le Du and Sabine Plaud, from Strasbourg University. The different contributions offer a comprehensive overview of the international studies on Wittgenstein: among the authors, Maurizio Ferraris, Jerrold Levinson and Antonia Soulez have a peculiar prominence.

The volume is composed of five parts: the first is devoted to the definition of what an Aesthetic Investigation is, while the second part is focused on Aesthetic Grammar, intended as a specific application of "second Wittgenstein" reflection to phenomenology of perception and philosophy of art; the third part, on the other hand, is completely devoted to Musical Understanding, showing the relevance of this particular form of art in the philosopher's work, while the fourth part addresses the relationship between Ethics and Aesthetics, both

pointed out in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1922) as transcendental fields; to conclude, the fifth part is explicitly dedicated to the Theory of Art, investigated from both an ontological and methodological point of view.

In the editors' intention,

the point of this book is not exclusively to clarify what Wittgenstein said about art and aesthetics (and how he said it), but also to examine how these conceptions may be exploited nowadays in the field of aesthetics, and how we might proceed our own way on some paths Wittgenstein has started open up. (8)

According to the above statement, some contributions try to exploit Wittgenstein's philosophical remarks to solve specific aesthetic problems. Marie-Anne Lescourret, for example, evokes some passages of 30's works about grammar in order to elucidate what musical understanding is and in which sense a grammatical analysis may offer an *Übersicht*, an overview intended as a global perspective on a musical phenomenon. In the same way, Maurizio Ferraris, using the idea of family resemblances, recognizes that when we speak about *art* – as when we speak about *games* – we use a word for phenomena “too diverse to admit of the unification that a satisfactory definition strives for” (183). Nevertheless, he tries to overcome the difficulties of giving such a definition by showing which kind of game is played by art, reaching in this way the idea of *documentality*. Another example of this assumption of wittgensteinian categories in order to develop new solutions to aesthetic problems is the contribution of Alessandro Arbo: the Italian philosopher, starting from Wittgenstein's reflection about the aspectual vision (what is called in the *Philosophical Investigations* “seeing as”), obtains a new analytical tool called ‘hearing as’. This new category finds an interesting application in the debate about the ontology of musical work: there is a specific way of listening a piece that involves our “attention to its origin, composer or to the historical context” (125). In this way a musical work is not only an amount of notes but it is something that requires that we *hear it as* a piece of music.

As we said, Wittgenstein's interest in art – and in particular in music – is not only a matter of biography but a relevant theoretical issue. We want to point out that this strong – even if not always well appraised – relationship is important not only for the special domain of Aesthetics but also for a larger inquire about Philosophy *tout court*. In fact, the application of wittgensteinian categories to the current debate about, for example, musical understanding or the ontology of artwork is certainly an interesting and fruitful operation but it risks to be reductive, especially having in mind the role of Aesthetics in Wittgenstein's philosophical itinerary. The problem is even more subtle if we consider that in the very unique work published by the philosopher during his

life, the word “Aesthetics” occurs just once: in the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, indeed, we read that “It is clear that Ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and Aesthetics are one)” (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.421). As underlined by João Vergílio Gallerani Cuter, the position granted to Aesthetics coincides with the one of Logic and Ethics: therefore we can look in this direction in order to find a key to access the whole philosophical endeavor of Wittgenstein, intended as an inquiry not about facts but on the transcendental possibilities of them.

Furthermore, the *Cambridge Lectures 1932-33* (1979) and the more famous *Lectures and Conversation on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (1966) add important observations that confirm the role Wittgenstein assigns to Aesthetics in order to redefine the entire concept of Philosophy. As Antonia Soulez writes, “Aesthetics is descriptive, placing things side by side as to exhibit features conveyed by reasons which are ‘further descriptions’ justifying features in a work of art” (46); this descriptive rather than explicative nature of Aesthetics allows Wittgenstein to propose a comparison between artistic, philosophical and psychoanalytical investigations:

[t]herefore, the right question to raise is: what is an aesthetical investigation like? But there again, aesthetics is never defined in itself. It is a web of family resemblances that consist in comparisons: psychoanalysis looks like aesthetics, philosophy also, and philosophy looks like aesthetics. Aesthetics is a partially shared predicate between two leading fields: psychoanalysis and philosophy. It is less a field in itself than an aspect of comparative activity. (46)

According to Antonia Soulez, for Wittgenstein the aesthetic investigation is less a specialized field of research than a specific way of posing the question about what Philosophy is. In this perspective, as Leonardo Distaso recalls, the philosopher’s work leads to *seeing clearly*, that means “seeing connections in the use of language” (130). The goal of Philosophy becomes then a “perspicuous representation” of our language games and forms of life: “Thus *comprehension* implies leaving everything as it is while describing the use of language” (*Ibidem*). The descriptive aim of Philosophy neither provokes a change in facts nor produces something like an ultimate explanation; as Wittgenstein says:

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us. (Wittgenstein 1953; Eng. tr., §126)

Wittgenstein’s idea of Aesthetics coincides with a global point of view that reorganizes our conception of Philosophy: in his exhortation to see rather than to think there is the complete change of paradigm that conduces to an anti-

theoretical account of Philosophy, considered as a *praxis* – a comparative *praxis* – rather than a collection of abstract thoughts and reflections. The aesthetic dimension of this activity becomes evident in the investigation about resemblances and differences that compose the unmistakable style of Wittgenstein's pages: in this direction we can read the contribution of Chiara Cappelletto, who stresses the importance of the “operation character of family resemblances” (36), and the one of Julia Tanney, who points out the relevance not only of similarities but of differences in order to achieve a clear vision of the phenomena. Because, as we suggested earlier, the aesthetic point of view has a close relationship with an ethical aspect of Wittgenstein's reflection: one of our linguistic tendency – that becomes a philosophical disease – is due to the fact that “we are much more inclined to say ‘all these things, though looking different, are really the same’ rather than stressing the differences” (99). So Wittgenstein's comparative method, enlightening both similarities and differences, combines an aesthetic approach – putting things side by side without looking for a single essence beyond them – and an ethical purpose, because it tends to a therapeutic treatment of our philosophical sickness due to linguistic confusion.

The collective volume *Wittgenstein and Aesthetics* has the correct aspiration to give a complete account of Wittgenstein's relevance in contemporary Aesthetics and, at the same time, to rethink the whole Philosophy of the author from an aesthetic point of view (in the sense we tried to recall). We can consider both these intentions achieved, but with two little misgivings. First: it seems that an introduction of Wittgenstein's reflections in contemporary aesthetic debate could be promising for the research of new solutions but it probably implies a reallocation of categories that, out of their context, may lose their philosophical sharpness. Second (but related to the first point): the wittgensteinian account of Aesthetics seems to be broader than a traditional conception of Philosophy of Art; in this sense, it seems to require a complete rethinking of Philosophy – a very demanding work for several short contributions. We hope that this volume would be not an arrival but a starting point for wittgensteinian studies about Philosophy and Aesthetics.

## *References*

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