

BOOK REVIEW OF  
*JOHN DEWEY: UNA  
ESTÉTICA DE ESTE  
MUNDO*

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Luis Arenas, Ramón del Castillo, and Ángel M. Faerna (eds.). *John Dewey: una estética de este mundo*. Zaragoza: Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza, 2018, 447 p. ISBN 978-84-17358-59-4.



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In the late 1980s, John Dewey's aesthetics came out of the limbo it had been locked in by analytical philosophy. In fact, apart from very few favorable comments made sporadically,<sup>1</sup> Dewey's aesthetics, when not completely forgotten, suffered decades of ostracism. A detailed tracing of the profound reasons which had blasted Dewey into oblivion for so long goes far beyond the scope of a review. Anyhow, in the late 1980s the critical situation has been very well depicted by Thomas M. Alexander: "I have seen tenured philosophy professors struggle to associate... [Dewey's] name with a library cataloguing system or with the opponent defeated by Truman."<sup>2</sup>

Between the 1980s and the 1990s, Alexander's book *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature*, together with the works of Richard Shusterman,<sup>3</sup> have been the main sources of a renewed interest in Dewey's aesthetics, which today is fermenting worldwide. During the last years, together with the ever-present American criticism, crucial international contributions came from Italy,<sup>4</sup> Japan,<sup>5</sup> Great Britain<sup>6</sup> and France,<sup>7</sup> to mention just a few. This

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 332.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: Suny Press, 1987), p. xi.

<sup>3</sup> See, in particular, Richard Shusterman, "Why Dewey Now?", *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, V. 23 No. 3, (1989), 60-67; *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992). It is important to stress also the chapter on Dewey's aesthetics by Robert B. Westbrook in *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 387-428. Already in the 90s, Philip W. Jackson offered a first insight on the educational implications of Dewey's aesthetics. See *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Roberta Dreoni, *Fuori dalla torre d'avorio. L'estetica inclusiva di John Dewey oggi* (Genoa, Milan: Marietti 1860, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Masamichi Ueno, *Democratic Education and the Public Sphere: Towards John Dewey's Theory of Aesthetic Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Kazuyo Nakamura, "A Progressive Vision of Democratizing Art: Dewey's and Barnes's Experiments in Art Education in the 1920s", *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, V. 53 No. 1 (2019)

renewed interest is evident not only for the ongoing publication of books focusing on varied aspects of Dewey's aesthetics, but also for the growing space that international meetings and academic journals are giving to the topic.

Consequently, a review of the Spanish book *John Dewey: una estética de este mundo*,<sup>8</sup> represents an unbeatable opportunity to describe the undisputable progress on Dewey's research also within the Spanish speaking world. Both Spain and Latin America, have nowadays a consolidated academic tradition on classical pragmatism and are actively contributing to enrich the discussion about Dewey's aesthetics. Within the last decades, in fact, the research on pragmatism has acquired considerable importance and recognition in countries such as Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Perú. Although not a Spanish speaking country, Brazil is a remarkable reference within the Latin American context, too.<sup>9</sup>

To find the roots of *John Dewey: una estética de este mundo*, we

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25-42.

<sup>6</sup> Andrea R. English and Christine Doddington, "Dewey, Aesthetic Experience, and Education for Humanity", in *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey*, ed. S. Fesmire (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) 411-444.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Pierre Cometti and Giovanni Matteucci (eds.), *Après L'art comme expérience. Esthétique et politique aujourd'hui à la lumière de John Dewey* (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> The translation in English is *John Dewey: An Aesthetics of this World*. To help the international reader who does not know Spanish, we offer the English translation of the titles of the book's sections and chapters. Furthermore, all the quotations from the book are our translations.

<sup>9</sup> The *International Meeting on Pragmatism* in Sao Paulo, already in its 19th edition, is –together with the Brazilian Journal *Cognitio*–, a point of reference for international advancement of pragmatist studies. For a wider reassessment of the pragmatist research in Latin America see: Gregory F. Pappas (ed.), *Pragmatism in the Americas* (New York: Fordham, 2011); María C. Di Gregori and Federico E. López, *Regreso a la experiencia. Lecturas de Peirce, James, Dewey y Lewis* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2014); Pablo Quintanilla and Claudio M. Viale (eds.), *El pensamiento pragmatista en la actualidad: conocimiento, lenguaje, religión, estética y política* (Lima: Fondo Editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú, 2015).

must go back to 2014, to an International Symposium organized in Toledo (Spain) to commemorate the 80th anniversary of *Art as Experience*. The book, edited by the Spanish scholars Luis Arenas, Ramón del Castillo, and Ángel Faerna, is the product of extensive work, which lasted four years and involved experts from Spain, Argentina, Italy, Poland, and Puerto Rico. The volume consists of 17 chapters which, in turn, are grouped in six thematic sections. Its main goal is to shed light, through a range of different and original approaches, on a complex topic—Dewey’s aesthetics—always open to new interpretations.

The first of the six sections, “Arte y sociedad” (Art and Society), starts with the study of Carlo R. Sabariz entitled “John Dewey y el arte de hacer bien las cosas” (“John Dewey and the Art of Well-Doing the Things”, 35-56), which insightfully addresses an issue which is pivotal within Dewey’s thought, namely the continuity between aesthetics and everyday life. For Dewey, art is a form of complete experience, capable of materializing in any human activity when it reaches its own consummation—not just art as experience, therefore, but also “experience as an art” (40). In his essay, Sabariz follows an argument recently deepened also by Scott R. Stroud, among other intellectuals.<sup>10</sup>

The following chapter by José Beltrán Llavador, “En el taller de John Dewey. La experiencia común del arte” (“Within John Dewey’s Workshop. The Common Experience of Art”, 57-76), deepens the fruitful link which Dewey established between artistic and associated life. Beltrán Llavador highlights a focal point—often ignored by critics—which, on the one hand, allows to fully

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<sup>10</sup> See Scott R. Stroud, “Economic Experience as Art? John Dewey’s Lectures in China and the Problem of Mindless Occupation”, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, V. 27 No. 2 (2013) 113-133; “The Art of Experience: Dewey on the Aesthetic”, in *Practicing Pragmatist Aesthetics: Critical Perspectives on the Arts*, ed. W. Malecki (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014) 33-46.

understand Dewey's aesthetics in his long gestation before *Art as Experience*, and, on the other, shows the strong ties existing between Dewey's aesthetics and his philosophy of education. Contrasting with the well-known criticisms by Herbert Read and Philip W. Jackson—according to both, Dewey never paid too much attention to establish a link between art and education—Beltrán Llavador insightfully suggests to interpret *Art as Experience* considering his previous work at the Laboratory School of Chicago (1894-1904), connecting it with *Democracy and Education* (1916) and, finally, relating *Art as Experience* with Dewey's involvement, starting from the early 1920s, in the educational project of the Barnes Foundation of Philadelphia (58-59; 70-71).

The third chapter, “La corrosión de la experiencia. Populismo, abstracción y cultura de masas” (“The Corrosion of Experience. Populism, Abstraction, and Mass Culture,” 77-98) by Ramón del Castillo, attempts to overcome some common misunderstandings of *Art as Experience*. First, del Castillo rejects the widespread tendency to consider Dewey's approach to art as a populist one. Secondly, he supports the Deweyan idea of art conceived of as apolitical. Thirdly, he highlights Dewey's view that art is equidistant from both naturalism and formalism. Finally, he argues that, when trying to reconcile arts with everyday life, Dewey has certain reservations regarding modern forms of communication. Consequently, he avoids falling into a dangerous apology of mass culture.<sup>11</sup>

Particularly interesting are the references to American art movements, which arose under Roosevelt's New Deal, and their alleged closeness to Dewey's thought (85-86). Stefano Oliverio, within “El arte y la ‘recreación’ de/en la metrópolis. Consideraciones

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<sup>11</sup> For a good insight into the relationship between Dewey and mass culture see also Nakia S. Pope, “Hit by the Streets: Dewey and Popular Culture”, *Education & Culture*, V.27 No.1 (2011) 26-39.

filosófico-educativas sobre *El arte como experiencia* ("Art and the 'Recreation' of/in the Metropolis. Philosophical-Educational Considerations on *Art as Experience*") displays a twofold approach, political and educational. Starting from the unfair criticism of Lewis Mumford against Dewey's excess of instrumentalism,<sup>12</sup> Oliverio demonstrates how, for the pragmatist philosopher, art has a double aspect. On the one hand, art gives place to an experience that is able to articulate the individuality of the human being and, on the other, simultaneously it can promote the democratic survival of the community. The author points out interesting parallelisms between Dewey's and Simmel's views of large cities, emphasizing that the core of Dewey's aesthetics strongly relates to his experience in Chicago, the big metropolis where he lived between 1894 and 1904. Particularly valuable is his remark on the closeness of Dewey's aesthetic (and social) project with the tasks of Jane Addams in the Hull House during his stay in Chicago (101-110).<sup>13</sup> Oliverio thus historicizes, within the frenetic context of the metropolis of Chicago in the late 19th century, what Ramón del Castillo had previously said about the relationship between Dewey and the incipient mass culture.

The aesthetic project of Addams and Dewey conceives art as an "instrument of authentically human participation and

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The Golden Day: A Study in American Experience and Culture* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1926) 264.

<sup>13</sup> Although there exists a vast literature on Jane Addams socio-political and aesthetic thought, the connection between her ideas on aesthetics and those developed by Dewey a few years later has not been properly studied. About Addams art project at the Hull House see Mary Ann Stankiewicz, "Art at Hull House 1889-1901: Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr", *Woman's Art Journal*, V.10 No.1 (1989) 35-39; Judy D. Whipps, "Humanities as a Source of Resilience in Jane Addams Community Activism", in *Pragmatism and American Philosophical Perspectives on Resilience*, eds. K.A. Parker and H.E. Keith (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020) 139-156. Some connections between the Hull House and Dewey's aesthetics are described in Mary J. Jacobs, *Dewey for Artists* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

communication" (109), i.e. as an alternative to the easy and ephemeral subjective evasions produced by the modern entertainment industry. Oliverio's statement about the influence of Chicago on Dewey's aesthetics seems to be confirmed by a private letter sent by the philosopher to his wife Alice in 1894: "Dwelling in Chicago somehow gives you the feeling that the salvation of America will have to come out of pictures or some form of 'igh art [sic]".<sup>14</sup>

The second section, "Antecedentes y coetáneos" ("Precedents and Contemporaries"), traces the legacy of two important American intellectuals, Ralph W. Emerson (the precedent) and George Santayana (the contemporary), within *Art as Experience*. In the chapter by Antonio Fernández Díez, "Una historia común y más amplia" ("A Common and Wider History" 119-146), Emerson is described as a silent but constant presence in Dewey's thought. Though there already exists a vast literature about Emerson's influence on pragmatist philosophy in general, and pragmatist aesthetics in particular,<sup>15</sup> Fernández Díez's essay focuses on the similar concept of experience developed by the two intellectuals. Within "Notas sobre la presencia de George Santayana en *Arte como experiencia* de Dewey" ("Notes on George Santayana's Presence in Dewey's *Art as Experience*", 147-170), Daniel Moreno identifies similarities and differences between Dewey's and Santayana's aesthetics. It is important to stress that the meager literature about this topic makes Moreno's essay extremely interesting and original.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Larry Hickman (ed.), *The Correspondence of John Dewey*. Volume 1 (Charlottesville: Intelex, 2008) 1894.09.12,13, N. 00173.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Richard Shusterman, "Emerson's Pragmatist Aesthetics", *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, V. 53 No. 207 (1999) 87-99; Jonathan Levin, *The Poetic of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism and American Literary Modernism* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> A good precedent is the book by the same Daniel Moreno, *Santayana the Philosopher: Philosophy as a Form of Life*, trad. C. Pardon (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2015).

Among other things, the scholar appropriately points out the prominent position which the aesthetics of Santayana occupied in the cultural *milieu* of the Barnes Foundation (155-156).

The third section, “Estética y metafísica” (“Aesthetics and Metaphysics”) highlights the radical differences between Dewey's aesthetics and the basic ontological framework of main modern theories of art. “El arte, la experiencia y la crisis de la metafísica” (“Art, Experience and the Crisis of Metaphysics”, 171-190) by María A. Di Berardino and Ángel M. Faerna, offers the reader an overview of Dewey's arguments to discuss and reject traditional metaphysical perspectives. The next contribution, “Implicaciones onto-lógicas de la estética de John Dewey”, (“Onto-logical Implications of John Dewey's Aesthetics”, 191-212), by Rosa Maria Calcaterra, sheds light on the artistic dimension of an experience, on the one hand, and on its ontological value, on the other. The author takes, as a starting point, the Foucaultian interpretation of Kant's conception of *Kunst*. The section ends with the chapter by Roberta Dreon, “La ‘distinción de lo estético’ en clave pragmatista. Dewey, Gadamer y la antropología de la cultura” (“The ‘Distinction of the Aesthetics’. Dewey, Gadamer and the Anthropology of Culture”, 213-236). In her essay, the scholar makes an interesting comparison between Dewey's refusal to separate art and life and the same conception developed by Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960). Besides, Dreon accurately emphasizes an almost unexplored but essential aspect to fully understand Dewey's aesthetics: the reconstruction of the interactions between the pragmatist philosopher and Franz Boas.<sup>17</sup> As noticed by Dreon, “with his arrival at Columbia University in 1904, Dewey got in personal contact with Franz Boas, with whom he realized a seminar between 1914 and 1915. His book *The Mind of Primitive Man* appears between the bibliographical references of *Experience and*

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<sup>17</sup> For a wider insight into the relationship between Dewey, Gadamer, Boas, and Malinowski, see Chapter 4 of Dreon's book *Fuori dalla torre d'avorio*, cit., 121-158.

*Nature*" (232).

The fourth section "Arte y democracia" ("Art and Democracy") suggests an aesthetic reinterpretation of another pivotal topic of Dewey's thought, i.e. democracy. The chapter "La experiencia estética como fundamento de la democracia deweyana" ("The Aesthetic Experience as the Founding of Deweyan Democracy", 237-262) by Julio Seoane, analyzes the possibilities offered by the aesthetic experience not only to emphasize the most attractive elements of life, to stimulate individual self-formation, but also to act within the political and moral structures of society. The experience thus conceived ceases to be something merely private and takes the form of a collective social identity. This is followed by the chapter written by Krzysztof P. Skowroński "Política y estética en el pragmatismo de John Dewey: la idea de la democracia liberal y sus manifestaciones artísticas según *El arte como experiencia*" ("Politics and Aesthetics in John Dewey's Pragmatism: The Idea of Liberal Democracy and Its Artistic Manifestations Following *Art as Experience*", 263-284). The author claims, against a purely formalist view, that art has always been crossed by the cultural, moral, political, and religious tensions which characterize society. Of particular interest is the political approach with which Skowroński analyzes Dewey's critique of museums in *Art as Experience* (269), which explicitly differs from the vision proposed by Thomas M. Alexander.<sup>18</sup> As before del Castillo did before, Skowroński also focuses on the relationship between Dewey's aesthetics and contemporary art (269; 271).

The fifth section "Arte y conocimiento" ("Art and Knowledge") analyzes the link between Dewey's aesthetics and science. The chapter "¿Es el arte la continuación de la ciencia por otro medio?" ("Is Art the Continuation of Science by Other Means?", 285-

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<sup>18</sup> See Thomas M. Alexander, cit. 185.

310) by Luis Arenas, seeks to eradicate the widespread (and deeply erroneous) idea which renders pragmatism as a form of cryptopositivism. The author highlights the disdainful judgment of various European intellectuals (Heidegger, Horkheimer, Scheller) regarding both Dewey and all pragmatism in general. At the same time, it clearly shows the strong link between aesthetic experience, education and democracy in Dewey's philosophy. The following contribution by Juan Vicente Mayoral, "Unidad, emoción y significado: la estética de Dewey y la experiencia científica" ("Unity, Emotion and Meaning: Dewey's Aesthetics and Scientific Experience", 311-342), shows, starting from a series of historical examples, the intervention of aesthetic values, like beauty and harmony, in scientific theories.

The last section, "Lo estético y lo orgánico" ("The Aesthetic and the Organic") offers some insights into the properties of aesthetic pleasure, such as rhythm, balance, emotion, unity, and desire. According to Gregory F. Pappas, in the chapter entitled "La noción de equilibrio en la concepción de Dewey del ideal de vida" ("The Notion of Balance in Dewey's Conception of the Life Ideal", 343-366), the concept of balance is a central value for Dewey, not only in the formulation of his aesthetic ideas, but also in his ethics and general conception of life. The following chapter, "El pulso del proceso estético: una ilustración multicultural de la noción deweyana de ritmo" ("The Pulse of the Aesthetic Process: A Multicultural Illustration of Dewey's Concept of Rhythm", 367-384), by Gloria Luque Moya, focuses on the more formal aspects of Dewey's aesthetic. In particular, it clarifies the importance of the concept of rhythm by using the effective example of Chinese calligraphy. Guido Baggio's, "La emoción y el deseo como constituyentes de la experiencia estética" ("Emotion and Desire as Components of the Aesthetic Experience", 385-404), deals with the issue of aesthetic pleasure and its experiential nature from a psychological point of

view. The final chapter, “La unidad de la obra de arte. Variaciones pragmatistas de un tema leibniziano” (“The Unity of the Work of Art. Pragmatist Variations on a Leibnizian Theme”, 405-420) by Evelyn Vargas, explores the unity of the work of art within Dewey’s thought, through a comparison with the concept of unity in Leibniz.

Summing up, the articles of *John Dewey: una estética de este mundo* comprise an excellent book regarding the quantity as well as the quality of the texts. It is a recourse that could be useful for the specialist and also for those who have a general interest in philosophy. The main aspects to be highlighted in this book, –leaving aside a great range of insights–, are two: firstly, the several links between Dewey’s aesthetics and other branches of his thought (philosophy of education, theory of knowledge, social and political theory, etc.); secondly, the ties between the pragmatist philosopher and other important thinkers of our recent past (Boas, Gadamer, Santayana, Simmel, etc.). Without pretending to exhaust the discussion about multiple aspects of Dewey’s aesthetics, this Spanish book is an excellent example that Dewey’s theory of art has not showed evident signs of ageing. On the contrary, it claims that Dewey’s *Art as Experience* has still a lot to say about contemporary culture, times and problems.