

INTRODUCTION

Eugenio Benitez

But come, examine by every means each thing how it is clear, neither putting greater faith in anything seen than in what is heard, nor in a thundering sound more than in the clear assertions of the tongue, nor keep from trusting any of the other members in which there lies means of knowledge, but know each thing in the way in which it is clear.

Empedocles, fragment 3 (Diels)

Aesthetics presents a confusing domain for a philosopher. Its territory seems like an Empedoclean cosmos: a ceaselessly dynamic interchange of mixtures, at times resisting division, at times fracturing into an incomprehensible manifold. There may be no truth in aesthetics at all. Perhaps there is not even much truth *about* it. Some think of aesthetics primarily as a cultural or political phenomenon, others manage to reduce it to history (indeed, to a history that is *over*, and therefore safe). Still others investigate it from the points of view of psychology, physiology, religion, technology, or morality. These are just a few of the innumerable “discourses” of aesthetics. Within a narrow focus some of these discourses appear to be meaningful, but this appearance owes much to the artificial and conditioned structure of the conversation. When viewed from the outside, the discourses of aesthetics often appear to be little more than babble. The hypothesis that they might someday converge on a perfectly general aesthetics seems implausible, even for arts and art histories of a more or less continuous, singular culture.

If aesthetics is fraught with so much difficulty, then the very idea of *transcultural* aesthetics seems positively audacious. It challenges basic assumptions of academic epistemology and methodology. It embraces the incomprehensible manifold as an opportunity, not to delineate the boundaries of aesthetics, but to transgress them. Transcultural aesthetics seeks to understand, as Empedocles advised, “by every means”; not only by the senses, or the intellect, but also emotively, poetically,

synaesthetically. Transcultural aesthetics supposes, perhaps naively, that just as the Empedoclean cosmos was one day to be drawn together by the power of Love, so also a comprehension of human making may be drawn together through all the powers of understanding. Perhaps not all the contributors to this volume would agree with such a bold supposition. Many of them write from within a particular perspective, about a particular problem. But the fact that they are presented together in the context of transcultural aesthetics, for consideration not just by the other contributors but by outsiders, suggests that they are attracted at least to the possibility of transculturality. On this view, for example, Alice Jarrat's essay, "Why Schmaltz Matters", whose context is primarily Twentieth-Century Hollywood blockbusters, is not merely about why schmaltz matters to contemporary moviegoers, but about why schmaltz matters full stop. The other contributors also would show us things that matter, or *should* matter—the Yoruba people, Tongan poetry, Aboriginal art, Zen—not just to them but to anyone who can understand. Aesthetic understanding cannot always be brought about in a straightforward way, through familiar concepts or precise arguments. Transcultural aesthetics promotes the appreciation of things that matter through whatever means possible.

The intellectual experiment that has culminated in this volume began with the first Pacific Rim Conference in Transcultural Aesthetics in 1997, organised in Sydney by Catherine Runcie. An international group of thinkers from philosophy, literature, art, music, cultural studies, and art history gathered in Sydney to share perspectives on transculturality in the hope of promoting the cross-fertilisation of cultures and disciplines. Although there was plenty of discussion of specific cross-cultural issues in aesthetics, there was not much principled thought about what the group constituted, or about its goals. The lack of collective vision, however, was more than compensated for by the synergy of ideas and interest. And, with the publication of the conference proceedings (still available free at the SSLA website), a global movement in transcultural aesthetics was born.

Grazia Marchianò was there from the beginning, a generative force, fostering connections between thinkers from all over the world, constantly bringing new ideas and cultures into the mix. Her philosophy of

“letting a hundred flowers bloom, birds and crabgrass notwithstanding” (as described in her article for the first Pacific Rim conference) has produced genuinely daring and creative results, not fettered by disciplinary boundaries. When Bologna was the European City of Culture in 2000, she organised, with Rafael Milani, a second international conference, and subsequently published two collections: *Frontiers of Transculturality in Contemporary Aesthetics* (2001), and *Aesthetics and Chaos* (2002). As a result of these ventures, major international conferences featuring transcultural aesthetics were organised in Beijing (2002), Wuhan (2004), and Rio de Janeiro (2004). A second Pacific Rim conference was held in Sydney in September-October, 2004. Many of the papers in this volume were presented in their first form at that conference, and I have included both Grazia’s address to the conference and the program of original papers here. Our idea in presenting this volume of essays, however, was not to complete the circle begun in 1997, but to launch transcultural aesthetics to higher ground. Thus, most of the essays in this volume have been thoroughly revised, and several completely new essays have been added (including those by Sonja Servomaa, Wang Keping and myself). Hopefully this serves as an indication of continued interest in transcultural aesthetics. If any greater indication were necessary, it will likely be found at the the international conference sponsored by the Ferguson Centre of the Open University at Edinburgh in September this year.

This volume honours the work of Grazia Marchianò in promoting her vision of transculturality to the world. I have tried to construct it so that it presents to her a progress report on the transculturality movement. It brings together several of those who participated in the first transcultural aesthetics conference, others who have joined in since then, and some completely new faces. It attempts to show that transcultural aesthetics is truly global, by presenting articles concerning aesthetics in all of the inhabited continents. It also shows that the flowers Professor Marchianò spoke of in 1997 have not bloomed haphazardly. Sincere reflections have begun to shape the substance and direction of transcultural aesthetics. But these reflections are not merely philosophical (though they include philosophy), nor are they narrowly intellectual. They are imaginative, creative, inspired, visceral, sympathetic, even loving. This multiplicity of avenues for understanding has

been a feature of transcultural aesthetics from the start, and remains essential.

I have arranged the book in three sections, *Aesthetic Theory*, *Aesthetics and Poetics*, and *Aesthetics and Culture*, to reflect the three disciplines of philosophy, art, and cultural studies, that are most deeply concerned with aesthetics. But many of the papers in one section connect with papers in another. For example, Elizabeth Burns Coleman's paper on aesthetics as a cross-cultural concept dovetails nicely with Patrick Hutching's paper on Aboriginal art. Sonja Servomaa's paper on Zen, poetry and transcultural aesthetics fits neatly with Grazia Marchianò's own contribution, "Bridging the Gap Between Heart and Mind". And Masaru Yoneyama's "Beautiful Lotuses, Beautiful Roses" is a deeply philosophical essay that complements the thoughts on aesthetic principles expressed in my own article. Thus, to impose a more specific framework on the volume would be artificially restrictive. I will therefore resist the temptation to describe each essay in relation to the others, and allow you to make your own connections. The boundaries of aesthetics are not static.

This last point reminds me of at least one person likely to disagree with everything I've said here: my friend Eddy Zemach, author of *Boundaries of the Aesthetic Domain*, *Analytic Aesthetics* and *Real Beauty*. Eddy has been a force for incisiveness in aesthetics for over thirty years, and his ingenious application of the methods of analytic philosophy to aesthetic problems (most recently to the question, "What is an aesthetic property?") has led to progress on many points. Eddy would insist on the importance of keeping the boundaries of aesthetics sharp, of keeping the discourses separate, and of not confusing one kind of cognition with another. Yet Eddy is also a profoundly sensitive author and reader, who understands that there is much more to literature, poetry, scripture, music and art than what can be expressed in philosophy. His comments about this book, and about transcultural aesthetics in general, would be invaluable. Eddy recently suffered a serious AVM haemorrhage, and now faces a difficult prospect for recovery. I wish more than ever, that I will have the opportunity to discuss this book, and the idea of transcultural aesthetics, with Eddy, who was so generous with his time and talents when I visited him in Jerusalem in 1998.

About the Title and Cover

Grazia Marchianò provided the idea for the title of this volume when, in her address to the Pacific Rim Conference, she compared the assembly of scholars to *Gondwana*. *Gondwana* was the great Southern land that comprised Australia, Antarctica and New Zealand, so the name was appropriate to our location in Sydney. My idea for this volume, however, was to augment Grazia's geology metaphor with a global one, naming it after *Pangaea*, the vast supercontinent that once comprised all six major land masses. Initially I intended the title to contain a play on words, calling it *After Pangaea* to indicate both a diverse collection, *after the fashion of Pangaea*, and to note our current state of separation. Grazia convinced me, however, that *Before Pangaea* was more hopeful, and perhaps, if Empedocles is right, more true: if the return of all things to unity is inevitable, so perhaps the movement of transculturality is inexorable—it is only a matter of time.

The cover, designed by my sister, Sylvia Benitez, shows our enterprise in its early, unrealised and somewhat surreal state. Its grey tones and simple, naive geometry depict a time prior to the appreciation of the real structure and organicity of the garden that is to be. There appear no transcultural flowers *yet*. The original 1997 Pacific Rim design, a Douglas Albion woodcut, showed the tree of knowledge extending to encompass all directions. The new cover shows the one tree as many—six wooden poles to symbolize the six inhabited continents—each tall but branchless and defoliated, expressing the difficulty of transcultural aesthetics in an environment as austere as the professional academic world now is. But the image is not without life. Indeed, there are life-lines extending from each of the columns into the garden, vital threads linking together the topics of transcultural aesthetics. How easy it is for them to be cut! Yet they spread, like vines, further and further into the garden, eventually to allow the growth of something new.