

METAL COMMUNITY AND AESTHETICS OF IDENTITY

Before being spoken of, the notion of 'aesthetics of identity' needs, in my mind, a little introduction to show how it fits in the discourse of contemporary theoretical aesthetics.

The subject of aesthetics changed quite profoundly in the 20th century. If before, in the paradigm of 18th-19th century it was art, several processes in the contemporary society broadened the focus of the discipline. First of them is the changing nature of art, the second one is even more important – it's the divergence of the notions of 'art' and 'aesthetic', which for some time were almost synonymic.

As a result, contemporary aesthetics deals more on the meta-level, analyzing the history of aesthetics and the recent changes in notions of aesthetic and future possible ones.

As one of the theoreticians working on the meta-aesthetics, German philosopher Benno Hübner proposed to divide the field of contemporary discussion about aesthetics roughly in two distinctively different paradigms – *aesthetics of truth* and *aesthetics of enchantment*. The first paradigm is grounded in the history of European philosophy and goes back to the influence Christian theology and metaphysics exerted on medieval aesthetics. It correlates the notion of aesthetic beauty with the ideas of truth and good, insisting that the goal of aesthetic experience is not the physical pleasure, but understanding something about the fundamental Truth of the world. The aesthetics of enchantment on the other hand denies any significance behind the 'big narratives' and views sensory pleasure as the main goal of aesthetic experience. The versions of 'aesthetics of the ugly' or 'aesthetics of absurd' also belong to this paradigm.

Hübner himself admits that his division is rather schematic and vague as it aims rather to give a notion of the opposite 'poles' in the discussion on aesthetics rather than divide all possible points of view neatly into two groups. They also do not present two separate 'stages' in the development of aesthetic theory.

Hübner also notes that the general theory of aesthetics is barely possible in contemporary world.

In my opinion, in such a situation we shouldn't try to formulate the theory of aesthetics in general, but rather work in the selected areas with the common set of ideas and beliefs – such areas would in phenomenological terminology be called lifeworlds.

One of the most commonly ignored lifeworlds with the common set of aesthetic ideas and values is what in sociology is dubbed 'subcultures'. I would not go in the particular details why I consider this name to be outdated and rather inaccurate in contemporary world. It's enough to point out that thanks to the cultural globalization and technologies of mass communication urban 'subcultures' are rather spread out groups, permeating all the world and do not act as localized and enclosed urban tribes

any more.

The term I would prefer to use for such groups, basing on the writings of Richard Barbrook, is 'participatory movements'. One particular participatory movement I paid most attention to and one is the community of metal. It's also the one movement I took as 'iconic' when working on my theory (as, for example, Dick Hebdige's theory of subcultures took punk movement as iconic one). In my opinion, metal community as a participatory movement could be understood best of all when taken from the angle of a specific aesthetics that exists within it.

Although most commonly the aesthetics of 'subcultures' is understood as a modified version of aesthetics of truth in Hübner's binary model, I suppose it's barely the case. In my opinion, it's not the aesthetics of enchantment either, but rather some new and very specific approach to the aesthetics that I would call aesthetics of identity. Although it seems to be a rather tautological utterance when formulated in simple terms - 'metalheads are united group because the music they listen to has a specific uniting quality' – it has rather serious implications on one hand, and is grounded in fundamental changes of contemporary society on the other.

One of these changes I would try to explain through the theory of Alasdire MacIntyre that speaks of the emotivism of the contemporary society. From his point of view, due to the crisis of values, for most of the people, ethical and political issues are easily changeable, mutable and could not be based in any positive manner. Because of this, people usually cannot explain their values in any rational way and mostly choose them, basing on how they *feel* about them.

Another one is named panaesthetization by the German philosopher Wolfgang Iser. Paneasthetization for Iser means both the decline of aesthetic and it's widespread domination. According to him, aesthetic as a quality isn't separated from ethical, political and economical issues any more, but rather permeates all the contemporary world. Aesthetics is thus not a separate field anymore, but is necessarily a part of every discussion and plays a much more important role in organizing everyday life.

Aesthetics of identity mean in this case that in a context of emotivist attitude neither political nor moral issues are that socially integrating as they were before on one hand, on the other, aesthetic issues become much more significant. It also implies that the sets of values and ideas could be bonded in the aesthetic context as secondary ones, and it is most clearly illustrated on the example of metalhead community. According to my experience, it doesn't really has the qualities of classical 'Hebdigian/Mafessollean' subculture with fixed set of political beliefs, religious ideas and behavioral rituals. As I could not directly experience the communities of the past I cannot say if it was the case then for 70ies punks, but it's most obviously not the case for contemporary metalheads. They do not follow strictly the same rules of behavior, do not follow the same dress code, do not hold the same religion and vote for different parties, yet at the same time there's rather something

like Wittgenstein's 'family resemblance' uniting them.

As I can understand it, the integrating factor is the aesthetics itself, so 'how metal' the music is could be only determined by 'how metal' it is. It also works as a main criteria in the community and numerous pools in different internet forums prove that. Yet at the same time, aesthetics of identity bears in it some common 'pre-packaged' sets of beliefs, values and habits, that are in no way absolutely necessary to be that part of the community, but rather help those members of it, who do not have any opinion or preference in some particular issue, make up their mind. It's societal implications can vary from casual 'satanism' of those not spiritually inclined to 'leather and jeans' or 'army surplus' dress code of ones not interested in keeping eye on fashion.

In that way, in my mind, aesthetics of identity tries to work as a sort of adaptive mechanism to changes of contemporary society and particularly it's emotivity and panaesthetization, but also globalization and information overflow.