

Subjetividad, juego y diferencia: elementos para una aproximación a la seriedad en el arte

SUBJETIVIDAD, JUEGO Y DIFERENCIA: ELEMENTOS PARA UNA APROXIMACIÓN A LA SERIEDAD EN EL ARTE

RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda el concepto de seriedad en sus dimensiones ética y estética, explorando la dualidad fundamental entre la seriedad y la no seriedad (o lo lúdico) en la expresión artística. Analiza cómo los discursos mantienen su seriedad al establecer vínculos con la realidad, mientras que el arte, como discurso performativo, tiende a romper con las concepciones ingenuas del realismo. El objetivo central es investigar cómo el arte navega la antinomia entre seriedad y subjetividad. Busca comprender cómo la experiencia estética depende de esta relación tensional, distinguiendo la seriedad orientada a la relevancia social (ética) de aquella que persigue la autenticidad poética (estética). La investigación se fundamenta en el enfoque posmetafísico de Michel Foucault sobre el problema de la subjetividad. Además, se adopta la fenomenología como la principal alternativa metodológica para especificar los mecanismos de subjetivación y la transición de la experiencia objetiva a la subjetiva a través de la performatividad. Los hallazgos revelan la coexistencia de dos regímenes distintos de seriedad: la seriedad ética, asociada al compromiso social y al consenso, y la seriedad estética, que se manifiesta en el ocultamiento del artificio para revelar la contingencia de lo real. El artículo presenta la sensibilidad camp como un estudio de caso emblemático, demostrando cómo esta estética teatraliza la seriedad *fallida* para reivindicar el poder político de la diferencia y el disenso. El estudio concluye que el arte no anula la seriedad, sino que la integra en un *círculo mágico* donde la performatividad y el compromiso con lo real se complementan profundamente. La experiencia estética se define como el camino que conduce al sujeto desde la responsabilidad ética hacia la plenitud de la autenticidad, preservando una subjetividad que es, simultáneamente, políticamente disidente y poéticamente desinteresada.

Keywords: Seriedad; subjetividad; juego; arte; camp

SUBJECTIVITY, PLAY AND DIFFERENCE: ELEMENTS FOR AN APPROACH TO SERIOUSNESS IN ART

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the concept of seriousness across its ethical and aesthetic dimensions, exploring the fundamental duality between seriousness and non-seriousness (or playfulness) in artistic expression. It analyzes how discourses uphold their seriousness by establishing bonds with reality, while art, as a performative discourse, tends to break away from naive conceptions of realism. The central objective is to investigate how art navigates the antinomy between seriousness and subjectivity. It seeks to understand how aesthetic experience depends on this tensional relationship, distinguishing the seriousness aimed at social relevance (ethics) from that which pursues poetic authenticity (aesthetics). The research is grounded in Michel Foucault's post-metaphysical approach to the problem of subjectivity. Additionally, phenomenology is adopted as the primary methodological alternative to specify the mechanisms of subjectivation and the transition from objective to subjective experience through performativity. The findings reveal the coexistence of two distinct regimes of seriousness: ethical seriousness, associated with social commitment and consensus, and aesthetic seriousness, which manifests in the concealment of artifice to reveal the contingency of the real. The paper presents camp sensibility as an emblematic case study, demonstrating how this aesthetic theatricalizes *failed* seriousness to assert the political power of difference and dissensus. The study concludes that art does not nullify seriousness but rather integrates it into a *magic circle* where performativity and a commitment to the real profoundly complement one another. Aesthetic experience is defined as the path leading the subject from ethical responsibility to the plenitude of authenticity, preserving a subjectivity that is simultaneously politically dissident and poetically disinterested.

Keywords: Seriousness; subjectivity; play; art; camp

1 THE ANTINOMY BETWEEN SERIOUSNESS AND SUBJECTIVITY

The value of art depends largely on its seriousness, whether through institutional and cultural lobbying, its auratic power or the very aesthetic richness of the artworks. On the one hand, there is an *ethical seriousness* implied in everything that, in some way, grants artistic work a consequential, intervening or vigilant tone (for example, when the artist chooses a socially relevant theme that reflects the real world). On the other hand, there is an *aesthetic seriousness*, perhaps closer to the classical conception of art as a disinterested practice, dedicated to a particular kind of realism where access to the real is indirect, performative, poetic—a seriousness that, in a subtle but unquestionable way, mobilizes the sensitivity of artists and audiences, evoking an *authenticity* that is distinctly aesthetic (Martins, 2023). Both ethical seriousness and aesthetic seriousness are types of realism. All seriousness is, by definition, realist—and it is precisely in the rejection of realism, in fiction, in pretense, that seriousness falters.

The relation between seriousness and realism lies in the value of objectivity, as opposed to subjectivity. Realist discourses tend toward objectivity, consensus and ultimately universality (as is expected, for example, of the scientific discourse), while subjectivity, in turn, compromises the utility of discourses, their reliability or their capacity to intervene. Therefore, the connection between seriousness and subjectivity appears to be antinomic, especially in light of the modern conception of subjects, who have gradually lost their metaphysical anchors to become mere discursive products rather than sovereign agents of discursivity.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that art also values subjectivity, the singular voice, the discursive freedom, digression, reverie and difference. As a performative discourse, art emancipates itself from the real, inventing new worlds, new plots and new possibilities, positioning itself, therefore, in a delicate limbo between seriousness and non-seriousness. Undoubtedly, there is more to art than the strict value of seriousness. In this respect, art shares a space with other characteristically “non-serious” practices such as fantasy, play, games, and entertainment. This raises the question: within art, understood as performative discourse, how does the duality between seriousness (both ethical and aesthetic) and non-seriousness manifest? In other words, how does art navigate the antinomy between seriousness and subjectivity? Is subjectivity doomed to be non-serious? These questions, in turn, invite us to briefly revisit a more essential level of inquiry: What, after all, is subjectivity? What is subjective discourse? What is the subject?

2 FOUCAULT AND THE ANTI-SUBJECTIVE ATTITUDE

Historically, the modern revision of the concept of subjectivity occurred in two main stages. The first, which took place primarily during the first half of the 20th century, was characterized by the rejection of the metaphysical sovereignty of the subject, marking the definitive exhaustion of classical phenomenology (largely at the hands of phenomenology itself). The maturation of the post-metaphysical perspective—which had already been hinted at, for instance, in Baudelairean consciousness of modernity—constituted an emancipatory movement, an appeal to responsibility and freedom. The collapse of metaphysics brought with it the existentialist declaration of human freedom, which, by virtue of this freedom, made humans entirely responsible for themselves. According to Sartre, if man possesses no *a priori* essence, then he is condemned to freedom and is responsible for his own constitution as a subject.

The second stage, which flourished mainly in the second half of the 20th century and was led by thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, took the precepts outlined within the so-called *linguistic turn* to their ultimate consequences and marked the definitive reversal of the priority between the subject (of discourse) and discursivity. Schools of thought such as structuralism, post-structuralism and historical materialism each prescribed, in their own way, the end of the transcendent status of the discursive subject and its *subjection* to the wanderings of language. The subject came to be seen as emerging from discourse rather than the other way around.

The modern philosophical reframing of the notion of *subject* led, at its most radical, to the proclamation of the failure of subjectivity and to declarations such as the *death of the subject*, the *death of the author* or the *death of man*. Such proclamations were often attributed to Foucault's thought and to philosophical positions associated with the so-called "anti-subjective hypothesis". As José A. Bragança de Miranda and António Fernando Cascais summarized in their account of Foucault's philosophy: "The critique of subjectivity is inseparable from a 'language without an attributable subject,' which leads to a purely negative conception of the subject and all its categories and practices" (Miranda & Cascais, 2002, p. 19). According to A. Allen:

The anti-subjective hypothesis consists in the belief that the point of Foucault's archaeological analyses of discourse and his genealogical analyses of power/knowledge is to attack, undermine and eventually eradicate the concept of the human subject. In short, those who subscribe to the anti-subjective hypothesis believe that Foucault participates in, even celebrates, the so-called 'death of the subject' (2000, p. 114).

Indeed, this seems to be Foucault's stance when, for example, he describes his genealogy as "a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject" (Foucault, 1980, p. 117). This apparent devaluation of the subject lies at the heart of many criticisms directed at Foucault's philosophy. Ultimately, free will, the possibility of agency, moral responsibility and even humanism itself appear to be compromised. The consequence of the radical demotion of the subject is determinism. In this sense, Nancy Hartsock asked: "why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?" (1990, p. 163).

Such criticisms are undoubtedly excessive. Foucault's philosophy did not kill the subject; on the contrary, the concept has always remained at the center of his investigations. In Foucault's own words: "I would like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the last twenty years. [It] has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (1982, p. 777). Simply put, instead of assuming the subject as a transcendental and sovereign entity that produces discourses to express an inner homuncular essence, Foucault proposes an inversion of perspective that prioritizes discourses as relatively autonomous entities dictating the conditions of possibility for subjecthood. In short, in the subject/discourse relationship, the subject ceases to be the *explanans* and becomes the *explanandum*.

Regarding discourse, Foucault insists that "it is neither by recourse to a transcendental subject nor by recourse to a psychological subjectivity that the regulation of its enunciations should be defined" (1972 [1969], p. 55). Through this marginalization of the subject, Foucault distances himself from transcendentalism: "I misunderstood the transcendence of discourse; in describing

it, I refused to refer it to a subjectivity” (p. 200). Nonetheless, subjectivity remains implicated in Foucault’s argumentation; it is still possible to identify the positions of subjects through the analysis of discursive formations.

3 PHENOMENOLOGICAL SUBJECTIVATION

There is, however, an additional consequence worth noting here: the approach developed by Foucault allows us to conceive the mechanism of subjectivity as a particular, non-universal, discursive dimension—a “subject-function” that is not necessarily implied in all discursivity (and the same applies to related concepts such as that of *authorship*)¹. As Allen states: “Once Foucault shifts the subject from *explanans* to *explanandum*, the modern formation of subjectivity is revealed as contingent rather than necessary” (2000, p. 124). Thus, drawing from Foucault’s thought, it becomes possible to speak of a-subjective discourses (or properly objective ones), that is, discourses that remain orphaned and for which the question of who is speaking does not arise.

Foucault’s approach to the problem of subjectivity seeks to avoid the pitfalls of classical phenomenology by adopting an externalist perspective, in which discourses are assumed to be autonomous entities that occur on a material and historical level and can be investigated in archaeological and genealogical terms. It is in this methodological framework that the *subject function* appears or not as a specific attribute of discourse. There are subjective discourses (where the subject function is implied) and there are purely objective discourses (guided by anonymity, by the absence of signature, and which can evolve towards impartiality and epistemological thoroughness that is the prerogative of the natural sciences). It is in these terms that subjectivity is finally assumed as a dispensable element—or even an undesirable one, notably in discursive modalities that aim to combat subjectivity, such as scientific discourses or, in a broader sense, legislative discourses.

As an alternative to the externalist interpretation of subjectivity (which, in Foucault’s view, is understood as a function of discourse analyzable in genealogical or memetic terms), the concept of subjectivity can also be approached through phenomenology, which we adopt here as the major methodological alternative to epistemological and historicist externalism. While Foucault’s perspective considers discourses as contingent and autonomous entities that dictate the conditions of possibility of subjectivity, the phenomenological approach makes discourse converge with one’s own inner experience.

It is no longer a question, however, of rescuing the subject as the origin of all phenomenological experience, but merely of recognizing subjectivity as a specific modality of experience. In the same way that, in Foucault’s externalist perspective, subjectivity ceased to be a universal criterion of discursivity, the modern phenomenological perspective, in its post-metaphysical development, also acknowledges that not all experience is subjective. There is, in fact, a resonance between the diagnoses proposed by both methodological approaches (externalist and phenomenological) regarding the status of subjectivity. Undoubtedly, the modern evolution of phenomenology—and its post-metaphysical understanding of subjectivity—has also been inspired by philosophical currents aligned with Foucault.

However, once again, this is not about demoting subjectivity or decreeing the death of the subject but about specifying the mechanisms involved in subjectivation and the conditions under which phenomenological experience should be considered subjective. In short, by limiting the scope of subjectivity within phenomenological life, we are not necessarily opting for a negative approach to subjects, but, on the contrary, we are moving towards a more rigorous specification of the traits of subjectivity within the global spectrum of experience, where not everything is subjective (assuming that the subjective does not coincide with the phenomenological).

If the subject is not a phenomenological primacy, then how does the subjectivation of experience occur? How does phenomenological experience shift from objective to subjective? By emancipating itself from the *real*². In phenomenological terms, subjectivity corresponds to a spectrum of experience that tends to distance itself from realism and, correlatively, from the discursive seriousness associated with it. Subjectivity is originally non-serious, converging with the notion of *performativity*. The phenomenological subject is, from the outset, the result of a dissociative process—like a reflection in a mirror—that involves assuming a role and whose ontological figure is that of the actor. The subject's performative gesture is an act of freedom, a movement of emancipation from the real and its anchors. Indeed, the divergence between performativity and seriousness is primarily tied to the linking of subjectivity to the notion of freedom (namely in Sartre's existentialist sense, as opposed to what he described as *bad faith*). This freedom, which Foucault associated with the spirit of modernity, tends to relate to playfulness, political impulse and art.

This does not mean, however, that these practices or discursive orientations should summarily be considered non-serious. Even setting aside the fact that such discourses are embedded within the fabric of society, occupying real functions that are, by definition, serious, their performative nature does not necessarily negate the possibility of intrinsic seriousness in discourse. On the one hand, performative discourses also outline perimeters within which rules must be respected, as in games or the *story worlds* in fiction. On the other hand, performative spaces themselves (or *magic circles*, to adopt a term from Johan Huizinga) are not necessarily anti-realist and may even be dedicated to the real (as happens, in an exemplary way, in the aesthetic seriousness of art, which also seeks to produce, by its own means, poetic effects of authenticity).

4 SERIOUSNESS AND BAD FAITH

In Sartrean existentialism, the *spirit of seriousness* consists of transferring the determination of life to the objectivity of the world itself, thereby absolving the subject of the burden of responsibility that arises from his ontological awareness of freedom. Since this freedom entails existential anguish, the (serious) individual prefers to take refuge in self-deception, assuming that his determination is dictated by the objectivity and materiality of the world and not by himself as a fundamentally free subject. In Sartre's words:

The serious attitude involves starting from the world and attributing more reality to the world than to oneself; at the very least the serious man confers reality on himself to the degree to which he belongs to the world. It is not by chance that materialism is serious; it is not by chance that it is found at all times and places as the favorite doctrine of the revolutionary. This is because revolutionaries are serious. They come to know themselves first in terms of the world which oppresses them, and they wish to

change this world. [...] Thus, all serious thought is thickened by the world; it coagulates; it is a dismissal of human reality in favor of the world. The serious man is 'of the world' and has no resource in himself. He does not even imagine any longer the possibility of getting out of the world, for he has given to himself the type of existence of the rock, the consistency, the inertia, the opacity of being-in-the-midst-of-the-world (Sartre, 1993 [1943], p. 580).

It is precisely because it involves intentional self-deception that this spirit of seriousness is one of *bad faith*. The serious man convinces himself that the meaning of the world is inscribed in the very objects of reality, which are consequential. According to Sartre:

It is obvious that the serious man at bottom is hiding from himself the consciousness of his freedom; he is in bad faith, and his bad faith aims at presenting himself to his own eyes as a consequence; everything is a consequence for him, and there is never any beginning. That is why he is so concerned with the consequences of his acts. Marx proposed the original dogma of the serious when he asserted the priority of object over subject. Man is serious when he takes himself for an object (Sartre, 1993 [1943], p. 580).

Conversely, the ludic spirit emerges as the opposite of seriousness. Play has the power to restore freedom and subjectivity to man, allowing them to constitute themselves as a principle rather than a consequence. In Sartre's words:

Play as contrasted with the spirit of seriousness appears to be the least possessive attitude; it strips the real of its reality [...] [Play] releases subjectivity. What is play indeed if not an activity of which man is the first origin, for which man himself sets the rules, and which has no consequences except according to the rules posited? As soon as a man apprehends himself as free and wishes to use his freedom, a freedom, by the way, which could just as well be his anguish, then his activity is play. The first principle of play is man himself; through it he escapes his natural nature; he himself sets the value and rules for his acts and consents to play only according to the rules which he himself has established and defined. As a result, there is in a sense 'little reality' in the world. It might appear then that when a man is playing, bent on discovering himself as free in his very action, he certainly could not be concerned with possessing a being in the world (Sartre, 1993 [1943], pp. 580-581).

In this passage, Sartre draws the affinity between play, freedom and subjectivity, as opposed to seriousness and the natural world. Seriousness signifies the objectification of the subject and the end of their freedom. Instead of individual responsibility, social concertation. Instead of the political man, the ethical individual.

This does not mean that the emancipation of the subject implies a wholesale rejection of realism. More than escapism or alienation, subjective freedom is responsibility-laden, creates authorship, and this performative process can also redirect itself toward the real rather than ignoring it. In such cases, it is not so much about an anti-realist attitude but rather an aesthetic or potentially aesthetic one. According to Foucault, this is precisely one of the distinguishing traits of modernity. Referring to Baudelairean thought, Foucault notes that the modern man "is not the one who sets out to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the one who seeks to invent himself. This modernity does not liberate man in his own being; it

imposes on him the task of creating himself” (Foucault, 2000 [1984], p. 344), and he adds: “Baudelairean modernity is an exercise in which the utmost attention to the real is confronted with the practice of a freedom that simultaneously respects that real and violates it” (p. 344). For Baudelaire, modern man does not limit himself to observing the present in the manner of the *flâneur*, who seeks only the “fleeting pleasure of circumstance” (p. 343), but rather seeks to eternalize the present in the manner of the *dandy*, “who makes of his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his existence, a work of art” (p. 344). Foucault concludes:

This ironic heroification of the present, this play of freedom with the real for its transfiguration, this ascetic elaboration of oneself, Baudelaire does not conceive that they can occur within society or the political body. They can only take place in a different realm that Baudelaire calls art” (p. 344).

In the field of art, what is required, first and foremost, is an institutional seriousness that shapes the value of artistic practices and the entire social machinery that promotes them and makes them work. It is the institution that supports the protocol of art at each historical moment, its autonomy, its discursive focus, its porosity to other discourses within culture, as well as its historiography. It is a pragmatic and deontological ethics of art, even when it seems to appeal to transcendent values. Some might also call it a materialist, de-subjectivizing, dehumanizing ethics—one of bad faith. Modernity has not freed itself from this seriousness, on the contrary, but it has enabled us to interpret the dynamics of culture from the viewpoint of a new philosophical ethos. Foucault proposed, as both method and goal, an archaeology and genealogy of discourses³—a *Memetics*, if you will⁴. From this perspective, Foucault recognized in modernity the double impulse to eternalize the present and surpass it.

5 THE POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF ART

There are two complementary interpretations of the concept of politics that are relevant to the present discussion. The first and more common interpretation considers politics as a set of discursive practices that put groups in confrontation, debating and claiming solutions for the common good. It is through politics that distinctions are drawn between good and bad, friend and enemy, justice and injustice. By definition, the political adheres to some conception of progress, adopting causes and being driven by the impulse for change or revolution. Politics is consequential, applied, and is reflected in the very course of civilizations. Within it, there are leaders, icons, ideologies, propaganda, coercion, punishment, war, and peace. In these terms, politics essentially overlaps with the mechanism of ethics—it is the very historical evolution of the ethical organism within culture. To all intents and purposes, the distinction between ethics and politics becomes blurred here, as both concepts claim for themselves the logic of both dissent and consensus, revolution and order. Politicians are agents of ethics, and engaging in politics means negotiating, establishing, and preserving ethical values.

The second interpretation offers a narrower but also more transversal use of the concept of politics, tying it primarily to *difference*. Politics constitutes the very phenomenological impulse of difference, operating through dissent but not consensus, the latter being reserved for ethics. In this perspective, the political gesture is always a dissident one, while ethical conciliation marks the end of politics—or of the political episode—replacing politics with *policing*, to use Rancière’s terms. As he states: “Consensus consists, then, in the reduction of politics to the

police. Consensus is the 'end of politics': in other words, not the accomplishment of the ends of politics but simply a return to the normal state of things—the non-existence of politics" (Rancière, 2010, pp. 42-43).

Difference escapes ethics, precedes it, and constantly threatens to postpone it. To a large extent, the drive for difference is prior to political causes; it is more primitive, inconsequential, and free. It constitutes the very essence of freedom and is more concerned with aesthetics than ethics. Modern art fully grasped this dimension of politics as the pure impulse of difference, moving in opposition to ethics. Modern aesthetic sensibility does not coexist well with political causes, which, in art, tend to be dismissed as propaganda, threatening to reduce the work to the status of an ideological tool. The notion of a *political cause* itself becomes contradictory here because the political dimension of art is always set back in relation to concrete causes. In the aesthetic purpose of art, there is no room for *political correctness*. Artistic subversion does not require causes; and even when they are present, the artist puts them into perspective, betraying, ironizing or disguising them between the lines of the discourse. In the aesthetic dimension of art, unlike propaganda, the message is never univocal—it is in perpetual retreat or deferral. In these terms, we can say that politics, understood in its phenomenological sense, is not serious. As it expresses pure freedom and manifests in the spirit of difference and dissent, it aligns more with nihilism than with social enterprise, more with aesthetics than ethics, more with playfulness than seriousness.

However, the political impulse, even in this latter sense, is not entirely dissociated from reality: it not only materializes in various facets of art and life, but also, conversely, it feeds off what is conventionally recognized as political activism (in the more common sense of politics). Just as there is mutual resonance between material life and phenomenological life, politics (as pure difference) tends to adhere to discourses that are conventionally regarded as political—discourses considered serious because they engage with managing social reality and ethical values. Thus, we return to the original (and more common) sense of the term *politics*, convergent with that of *ethics*, which is, by definition, applied—that is, serious. For the purposes of our argument, we should retain the following from this discussion of the term *politics*: In the aesthetic context of art, the political dimension corresponds to the phenomenological impulse of difference and dissent, preceding ethics. In the ethical context of art, on the other hand, the political dimension reintegrates the idea of consensus, giving art a more *serious* aura—that is, a more intervening, consequential, and potentially more *relevant* disposition. In this latter framework, dissent becomes a temporary stage aimed at achieving consensus and order.

Now, to the extent that aesthetic and ethical dimensions cohabit within art, we should be careful not to confuse the uses of the term *politics* in each of them. Politics, in an aesthetic sense, ignores or postpones ethics and is only interested in difference. Politics, in an ethical sense, tends to coincide with the mechanism of ethics itself, seeking to overcome difference and achieve consensus or even universality. In the first case, politics has its end in itself; in the second, politics is applied and effectively serves social reality and its contracts. We are thus faced with two distinct interpretations of politics, depending on whether we approach art from an aesthetic or ethical perspective. From the aesthetic perspective, the political dimension is non-serious (essentially tied to the phenomenological impulse for difference). From the ethical perspective, on the contrary, the political dimension is serious (connected to the actual effort of intervening in material and social reality).

This duality concerning the concept of politics should not lead us to the conclusion that the aesthetic dimension of art cannot be serious, contrary to its ethical dimension. It can. But the *aesthetic seriousness* no longer directly relates to the political impulse. While the operation of difference (and thus the phenomenological, non-serious dimension of politics) constitutes a fundamental ingredient of the aesthetic process, it is far from exhausting it (Martins, 2020, 2023). Aesthetic experience is a complex and dynamic phenomenon where various vectors intersect, with difference being only one of them; and it is certainly not from the vector of difference that aesthetic experience derives its seriousness—quite the opposite. Aesthetic seriousness is *apolitical*. At the core of the ludic dimension—play, games, performativity, art—there is no ethical seriousness, though there is another type of seriousness that grows within the magic circle and manifests itself there in various ways. Within the realm of art, this seriousness can evolve into a properly *aesthetic seriousness*. Aesthetic seriousness is intuited in art as that which grants it *authenticity*. Since art is, by definition, artificial, the path to aesthetic authenticity must involve the concealment of art itself, of the traces of authorship, of the artists' agendas, so that the real can reveal itself directly in its contingency.

By inhibiting authorship and the subjective voice, this aesthetic seriousness simultaneously rejects both political dimensions previously described. It is doubly apolitical. On the aesthetic level, the operation of difference gives way to the operation of contingency, which works against artifice. And on the ethical level, there is also no content; the author no longer speaks, having withdrawn to give voice to the real, which is mute, orphaned, contingent. More than opposing ethics, aesthetic seriousness is disinterested—it simply does not consider the ethical dimension, even if it ends up coexisting with it. Thus, in the theoretical context that concerns us here, a distinction must be made between two types of seriousness that seem to be especially involved in the appreciation and valuation of artistic objects: *ethical seriousness and aesthetic seriousness*.

However, as we have seen, it is not only necessary to distinguish the ethical seriousness of art from its aesthetic seriousness, but also to distinguish aesthetic seriousness from the non-seriousness (or playfulness) that is equally implied in the aesthetic process. The aesthetic experience, understood in its full phenomenological scope, although it possesses a serious component and maintains an umbilical connection with realism, does not intend to be confined by its own seriousness. And this departure beyond seriousness is fundamentally nourished by the (political) spirit of difference.

6 THE CASE OF CAMP ART

Let's consider the emblematic example of the so-called camp sensibility. In general terms, this is a type of aestheticism focused on stylization, exaggeration, artificialness and the poetic emphasis on form at the expense of content. By abandoning any claim to content, camp defines itself as an aesthetic sensibility emancipated from the real and the seriousness of the real, whether by rejecting naturalism or any tragic or moral connotation. According to Sontag, "the whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious" (Sontag, 1966 [1964], p. 288). In these terms, camp art assumes a neutral or even naïve attitude toward politics: "It goes without saying that the camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (p. 277).

However, we should not rush to the summary conclusion that political strength is absent from camp's sensibility, or that it lacks any kind of seriousness. Regarding the first of these two points, we have already seen that it is possible to identify an aesthetic dimension of politics, a political drive dissociated from ethics (and, therefore, non-serious), which is expressed via the aesthetic operativity of difference. In general, difference manifests itself in art not so much through the programmatic spirit of subversion and novelty, but, more specifically, through the formal overlap of opposing meanings or stimuli, such as exaggeration, extravagance, contrast, irony, theatricality, etc. Even more than the differential relationship between distinct things, art works on the difference within the things themselves, provoking internal disparities and exploring formal hybridisms. Now, camp sensibility could not be more politically fertile in these terms. As Sontag states (1966 [1964], p. 280): "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman.' To perceive camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater". She further observes: "Camp is the triumph of the epicene style. (The convertibility of 'man' and 'woman,' 'person' and 'thing'). But all style, that is, artifice, is, ultimately, epicene" (p. 280).

As for the second point, about the rejection of seriousness, it is worth noting that camp is not limited to "dethroning the serious". The camp sensibility also recognizes seriousness, first because it appropriates it as matter, even if only to make it fail: "In naïve, or pure, camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails" (Sontag, 1966 [1964], p. 283). This relationship is subtle: "More precisely, camp involves a new, more complex relation to 'the serious.' One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious" (p. 288). It is a strictly aestheticist and anti-ethical appropriation of seriousness, although not in the same sense in which we intend to refer to aesthetic seriousness. Sontag brings together the concepts of ethics and content, opposing both to aesthetics. When art asserts something or invites interpretation, it immediately lapses into propaganda or sentimentality. For Sontag, all artistic regimes and objects fall somewhere along the spectrum between the opposing and incompatible poles of ethics and aesthetics; and aestheticism is purer the greater its rejection of ethical seriousness.

Specifically, Sontag identifies three levels of seriousness within the artistic landscape: "The first sensibility, that of high culture, is basically moralistic. The second sensibility, that of extreme states of feeling, represented in much contemporary *avant-garde* art, gains power by a tension between moral and aesthetic passion. The third, camp, is wholly aesthetic" (Sontag, 1966 [1964], p. 287). Here, the relationship between aesthetic refinement and the rejection of moral or symbolic content is evident. Camp, Sontag asserts, is not about "the familiar split-level construction of a literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice" (p. 281). By defining itself as pure style, pure artifice, pure contentlessness, camp pushes to the extreme the separation between art and nature: "The more we study Art, the less we care for Nature" (p. 279, quoting Oscar Wilde). Yet this radical aestheticism still relates to some form of seriousness: camp is "the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling" (p. 287). In other words, the aestheticism represented by camp sensibility takes seriousness directly as matter, approaching it, once again, through the operation of difference, which installs itself in the very heart of seriousness, turning it inside out, subjecting it to an internal revolution where the serious and the frivolous blur into one another.

It is true that this particular aestheticist movement should not be confused with aesthetic seriousness in the strict sense that we have granted it here—a seriousness whose poetic impetus consists, after all, in the aesthetic apology of the raw contingency of the real, as well as in the concealment of authorship and artificialness. Artistic movements interested in this contingency are typically more sober, with a more restrained style (such as cinematographic neorealism, for example). However, there is an evident affinity between the contingency associated with aesthetic seriousness (which rejects artificialness) and the paradoxicality of camp sensibility (which asserts itself as pure artifice). Both tendencies reject morality, content and fixed meaning, whether through ambiguity (in the poetic operation of contingency) or formal paradoxicality (in the operation of difference). This is why camp sensibility promotes innocence and spontaneity while rejecting a certain *formalism*. Sontag notes: “Eisenstein’s films are seldom camp because, despite all exaggeration, they do succeed (dramatically) without surplus” (Sontag, 1966 [1964], p. 284).

Camp demands a truly free, passionate and naïve excess, unrestrained by formalism—an *authentic* excess where the oversized object is entirely at peace with itself in its outsized nature, with no other intention beyond that. Referring to great works in the historical pantheon of culture, Sontag notes that, typically, “we value a work of art because of the seriousness and dignity of what it achieves. We value it because it succeeds—in being what it is and, presumably, in fulfilling the intention that lies behind it. We assume a proper, that is to say, straightforward relation between intention and performance” (p. 286). Although Sontag aims to distance camp sensibility from the high artistic culture described here, the balance between intention and execution is implicated wherever aesthetic authenticity is perceived, including in camp.

Finally, there is one last level of seriousness applicable to camp, namely as a form of aesthetic sensibility valued by the art-world *status quo*. While “many examples of camp are things which, from a *serious* point of view, are either bad art or kitsch” (Sontag, 1966 [1964], p. 278), Sontag notes that this unserious status can change over time: “Time contracts the sphere of banality (Banality is, strictly speaking, always a category of the contemporary). What was banal can, with the passage of time, become fantastic” (p. 285). This scenario of gradual restoration of seriousness—this reinstatement of relevance—is largely explained through evaluative criteria that relate more to ethical seriousness than to aesthetic seriousness. No matter how much camp work strives to be anti-ethical, they can always be reabsorbed into ethical consensus based on their historical relevance within the artistic landscape.

7 CONCLUSION

The camp sensibility has served us here as a radical example to highlight different forms of implication of seriousness in art. First, there is an *ethical seriousness* that guides the paths of art toward utility, pedagogy, morality, critique, denunciation, activism, social intervention, but also lobbying, popularity, and, ultimately, practical and cultural relevance. At the same time, art also contains a non-serious dimension that is expressed not so much by its ludic character, but by the spirit of freedom, performativity, and the drive for difference, which are essentially prior to ethics. Finally, situated between the drive for ethical seriousness and the counter-movement of deconstructing ethical consensus via the (political) operation of difference, art pursues yet a third avenue for implying seriousness: a strictly *aesthetic seriousness*, inspired by the contingency of the real, whose poetic effect of authenticity can no longer be sustained by ethical consensus or political dissent, but by a truly apolitical attitude. It is precisely in this latter sense that Sontag considers that “a work of art, so far as it is a work of art, cannot—whatever the artist’s personal intentions—advocate anything at all. The greatest artists attain a sublime neutrality” (Sontag, 2009 [1964], p. 26). Art is the quintessential discourse where ethical seriousness, performativity, and aesthetic seriousness do not stand in contradiction, but profoundly complement one another.

The reflection outlined throughout this article aimed to establish a foundation for more exhaustive investigations into the problem of seriousness applied to the art world. There are various forms of intersection between artistic discourses and material and social reality (which is serious)—from the deontology of production and exhibition to the morality of artistic narratives and contents—contrasting testimonial or militant commitment with the pursuit of an aesthetic authenticity based on contingency. At the same time, within the same analytical horizon, there remains the challenge of understanding how art navigates between, on the one hand, the role of cultural intervention and institutional lobbying, and, on the other hand, the demand for a subjectivity fueled by the spirit of *difference*, political dissent, play, and performative freedom, consolidating the path that leads the spectator from ethical commitment to the plenitude of the aesthetic experience.

Discourses uphold their seriousness by establishing some form of bond with reality (social, historical, empirical). The seriousness of discourse is invariably tied to some form of realism, even in art, whether viewed through an ethical or aesthetic lens. Yet, the theoretical questioning of art is not limited to the issue of its seriousness. As a performative discourse, art tends to break away from realism—or at least from its most naive conceptions—opening itself to subjectivity. There is a wholly performative, playful, and essentially non-serious dimension to art. In this sense, we can identify an inherent tension between seriousness and subjectivity in the artistic context. Aesthetic experience, conceived as the ultimate purpose of art, not only accommodates but relies upon this tension. Within art, performativity and seriousness are fundamentally complementary.

8 BIBLIOGRAPHY

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NOTES

1. Quoting Foucault: “the name of an author is a variable that accompanies only certain texts to the exclusion of others: a private letter may have a signatory, but it does not have an author; a contract can have an underwriter, but not an author; and, similarly, an anonymous poster attached to a wall may have a writer, but he cannot be an author. In this sense, the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society” (1996 [1977], p. 124).
2. For an in-depth description of the concept of the real as a phenomenological modality of experience, see Martins 2024.
3. It is, moreover, on this approach that Foucault bases his entire critical project of culture, which he refers to as a “historical ontology of ourselves”. In his words: “Criticism will no longer be exercised in the search for formal structures of universal value, but as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and recognize ourselves as subjects of what we do, think and say. In this sense, this criticism is not transcendental and does not aim to make a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its aim and archaeological in its method” (Foucault, 2000 [1984], pp. 347-348).
4. On the original use of this concept, see Dawkins, 2016 (1976).