Post-Structural Aesthetica: A discourse on culture representation and meaning.
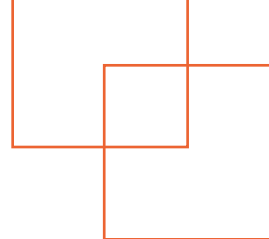
Estética pós-estrutural: um discurso sobre representação e significado cultural.

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Abstract

This essay attempts to shed some light on the relationship between Kantian aesthetics and post-structuralism theory. As point of departure, I will argue that a close examination of aesthetics and post-structuralism engages much more than a major discussion on cultural representation and meaning. It also prompts an investigation into aesthetic criteria as ontological and socio-political forms. Like language, aesthetics is subject to its own historical and cultural revival, accrued from external inorganic forces such as the physicality of the art forms, ideas, concepts and narrative significance.
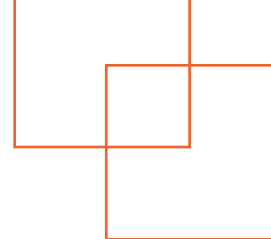
Keywords

Semiotics; aesthetics; post-structuralism; linguistic studies.

Resumo

Este artigo é uma tentativa de investigar a relação entre a estética Kantiana e teorias do pós-estruturalismo. Como ponto de partida, argumentarei que uma leitura atenta entre estética e pós-estruturalismo envolve muito mais que uma discussão importante sobre representação e significado cultural. Também estimula uma investigação sobre critérios estéticos como formas ontológicas e sócio-políticas. Como a linguagem, a estética está sujeita a seu próprio renascimento histórico e cultural, resultante de forças inorgânicas externas, como a fisicalidade das formas de arte, idéias, conceitos e significado narrativo.

Palavra-chave

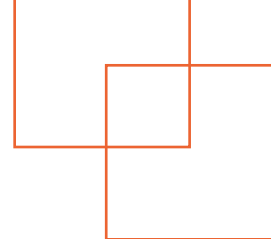Semiótica; estética; pós-estruturalismo; estudos linguísticos.

1 Introdução

The reformulation of discourse within Aesthetics and Post-structuralism, inevitably results in philosophical debate, but we must keep in mind that such topics cannot be overshadowed by rhetorical engagements when searching for commonalities. Although there is a vast range of publications richly covering Romantic, and modernistic aesthetics theories, within the reappearance of aesthetics, clearly calls for a continuous discussion. It is evident today, to notice a trajectory towards a great number of texts that propose language and meaning as governing forces over judgments of taste and cognition.

The process of demystifying these complex topics not only requires philosophical investigations but also a historical understanding of issues related to language, and visual culture. But what is this revival really about? Does the negation of aesthetic principles in contemporary art really mean the complete abandonment of aesthetics? And as result, when putting aside mannerisms, one is perhaps reformulating a new aesthetic—an aesthetic which dualities have embodied a separation of subject and object, form and content, idea and concept, text and non-text.

The Swiss-born linguist Ferdinand de Saussure sees the constitution of language as the function of a system (or structure)—his insightful arguments put in motion the resurgence of structuralism in the 20th-century (SAUSSURE, 1966). Conversely, post-structuralism suggests that we live in a linguistic world, ruled by our own interpretations based on individual consciousness. Nowadays, that is to say a negation of traditional aesthetic principles followed by a rejection of reality. Moreover, it is clear that the consequences of a postmodern culture promoting 'anti-aesthetic' concepts, throughout the mutability of art forms, have resulted in a 'diachronic aesthetic' of their own—could this be a post-structural aesthetica?

In this essay, I will argue that a close examination of aesthetics and post-structuralism engages much more than a major discussion on cultural representation, and meaning. It also prompts an investigation into aesthetic criteria as ontological and socio-political forms. I will also argue that although it becomes increasingly evident this basic constitution of the individual consciousness towards dismemberment of Kantian, or any other canonical aesthetic principles, is a derailed engagement one assume the non-existence of any principles justified by the negation of 'art and aesthetics', and representation. Like language, aesthetics is subject to its own historical and cultural revival, accrued from external inor-
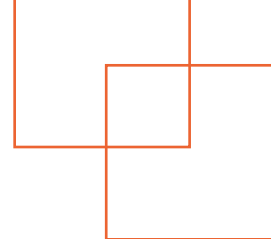
ganic forces such as the physicality of the art forms, ideas, concepts and narrative significance.

In his seminal work (published posthumously), Course in General Linguistics, Saussure introduces his unique insight into the phenomenon of language. He sees that language is a 'self-contained system whose interdependent parts function and acquire value through their relationship to the whole'. Saussure's intention was to change the postulation that the function of language was to represent ideas, and the view of language as a passive collection of names assigned to pre-existing concepts. In his definitions, "language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual" (SAUSSURE, 1966). Thus, 'language is a social fact' (Ibid.). Saussure also defends two important, foundational characteristics of an internal and external linguistics structures, which emerge from the polarized oppositions in language and speech. He sees these dualities as static and evolutionary linguistics. In the internal part, evolutionary linguistics has been neglected in favor of synchronic linguistics. Consequently, the internal shall be implicit within the context of immutable, self-contained language structures, and inner prevailing principles.

On the other hand, there are what Saussure defines as the 'linguistics external inorganic forces' such as political history, culture of a nation, and institutions. The external is related with those language-attributes that are resultant from ethnology, history of civilizations, and is determined by the arbitrary randomness of specific speech engagements. "Finally, everything that relates to the geographical spreading of languages and dialectal splitting belongs to external linguistics. Doubtless, the distinction between internal and external linguistics seems most paradoxical here, since the geographical phenomenon is so closely linked to the existence of any language. In any case, separation of the two viewpoints is mandatory, and the more rigidly they are kept apart, the better it will be... The best proof of the need for separating the two viewpoints is that each creates a distinct method. External linguistics can add detail to detail without being caught in the vise of a system." (Ibid.)

Of course, this polarized analysis of formal structures reflected Saussure's attacks on the historical and comparative favoritism of contemporary linguistics. He emphatically believed that the differences

between internal and external were essentially important for the integrity of language as a system. And that for one to accurately understand how language functions, one must first understand langue and parole. By dividing language into two main components: langue (the structure and rules of language—synchronic) and parole (language as it is spoken—diachronic), Saussure aims for a clear understanding and basic principles of how language functions at any given time. By tracing a parallel, after an analytical examination of Kantian philosophy of the art, his early aesthetic models presented on The Critique of Judgement, are formulated on the verge of internal, immutable, synchronic judgements. Kant's ontological aesthetics philosophy, fundamentally neglects cultural and historical dimensions when considering judgements of taste according to a priori principles, should be universal. Aesthetics does suffer from inflections by external influences—which I shall detail them in that follows—or as I have mentioned, attempts to deny any aesthetic reference from culture or time.

In his essay The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism, Craig Owens (1987) diligently argues that what is at stake, then is not only the hegemony of Western culture, but also (our sense of) our identity as a culture. Essential to Owens claims is his reading of Ricoeur's Civilization and National Cultures as fundamental to the condition of postmodernism:

> When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and consequently at the time when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an "other" among others. All meaning and every goal having disappeared, it becomes possible to wander through civilization as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes an imaginary museum: where shall we go this weekend—visit the Angkor ruins of take a stroll in the Tivoli of Copenhagen? We can easily imagine a time close at hand when any fairly well-to-do person will be able to leave his country indefinitely in order to taste his own national death in an interminable, aimless voyage. (RICOUER, 1987).

Nevertheless, Owens' analysis of pluralism weaved by identity and culture, determines the consolidation of a culture that is 'neither homogenous nor monolithic, as we once believed it to be' (Ibid.). Important to Owens is the implication of diversity of cultures. He also concludes, "It is
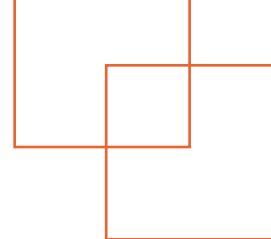
precisely at the legislative frontier between what can be represented and what cannot that the postmodernist operation is being staged—not in order to transcend representation, but in order to expose that system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others" (Ibid., p59). As such, the idea of a homogeneous aesthetic does not take into consideration that for one to formulate judgment principles, one must consider a vocabulary, which is eventually permeated by ontological experiences, or to what Kant simply refers as territorium. Such vocabulary belongs to both visual and linguistics realms. It is this notion of acquired vocabulary that makes us distinguish between flower and rose, sheep and goat. Therefore, before one sees beauty, one sees form, and signification. But a debate on aesthetics is not limited to cognitive faculties only; its engagement is also sensual and conveys experiences based on individual emotions.

Roger Fry defines emotions out of supersensual, "beauty in the former sense belongs to works of art where only the perceptual aspect of the imaginative life is exercised, beauty in the second sense becomes as it were supersensual, and is concerned with the appropriateness and intensity of the emotions aroused" (FRY, 2003, p.75-82). Fry then concludes, "If, then, an object of any kind is created by man not for use, for its fitness to actual life, but as an object of art, an object subserving the imaginative life, what will its qualities be? It must in the first place be adapted to that disinterested intensity of contemplation, which we have found to be the effect of cutting off the responsive action. It must be suited to that heightened power of perception which we found to result therefrom" (Ibid.). One of the chief purposes of Fry's aesthetic is the fundamental difference between art and nature. The similarities between art objects and natural effects, said Fry, 'were merely superficial.' Hegel also puts in motion this separation between beauty of art different than beauty in nature.

On the other hand, for Clive Bell, "The starting-point for all systems of aesthetics must be the personal experience of a peculiar emotion ... this emotion is called the aesthetic emotion" (BELL, 2003. p.107-116). Bell argues that visual artworks, in general, have common quality elements that art could not possibly exist without them—a quality that is shared by all objects that provokes our aesthetic emotions. He then suggests that the significant form is the only quality common to all works, in which color, lines, and certain forms combined in certain arrangements, stir our aesthetic emotions. "The hypothesis that significant form is the essential quality in a work of art has at least one merit denied to many more famous and more striking—it does help to explain things" (Ibid.).
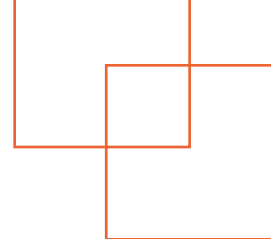
2 Semiotics and Aesthetics

A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology' (from Greek semefon 'sign'). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts (SAUSSURE, 1966).

Saussure's crucial position is to elucidate that linguistic signs have no essential meaning (words, sound, etc.)—they are empty. Meaning is delineated by the arbitrary system of signs. For Saussure, the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image (Ibid.). He then proposes 'to retain the word sign to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified and signifier' (Ibid.). Saussure opened the way to analyzing culture itself as a system of signs by suggesting that structural linguistics was part of semiology, a general science of signs which studies the various systems of cultural conventions or common concurrences. Thus, linguistics is a semiological model because the arbitrary and conventional nature of language is particularly obvious. Accommodating the arbitrariness of signs is the primary step of structuralist or semiotic analysis.

Structuralism asserts that meaning is a product of signification and culture, a process maintained by timeless and universal structures forming a stable and self-contained system based on binary oppositions. However, structuralism fails by surpassing one's reason for using the language. It is a concept based on non-historical analysis, discarding of historical origins and motivations. But this view of semiological analysis collapses back into paradoxical language.

Insofar, I have restricted my observations to language and structuralism, not as intent to rescue ontological history, but to provide relative philosophical inflections on cultural meaning and aesthetics. The beginning of a postmodernist standpoint is credited to Roland Barthes' change of opinion about structuralism through the line of reasoning that any literary word has multiple meanings. He also pursuit that the author was not the prime source of the work's semantic content. In his essay From Work to Text, one of Barthes' arguments—which he would rather refer to them as 'enunciations', is that "The Text is plural. Which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but it accomplishes the
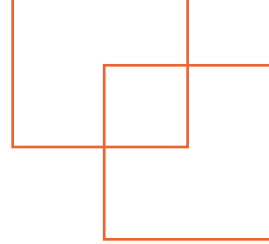
very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plural. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, dissemination" (BARTHES, 2003, p.965-970).

An idea of how this reference functions may be derived from another point from abovementioned essay. Barthes then suggests, "The work is caught up in a process of filiation. Are postulated: a determination of the work by the world (by race, then by History), a consecution of works amongst themselves, and a conformity of the work to the author. The author is reputed the father and owner of his work: literary science therefore teaches respect for the manuscript and the author's declared intensions, while society asserts the legality of the relation of author to work ... As for the Text, it reads without the inscription of the Father" (Ibid.).

A post-structural aesthetics embraces the perception of "self" as a singular, and coherent independent existence. Therefore, an individual encompasses disagreeing tensions and knowledge assertion, and to appropriately study a text or work of art, an individual must understand how the work is related to one's own personal concept of self. By allowing this personal interpretation, postmodernism inclines its attention to a shift towards art as social phenomenon. Whereas, structuralism fails when it assumes that understanding is universal, timeless and invariant. It rejects idiosyncratic assumptions and choices, and any meaning is conditional and relative. Logocentrism then appears from Saussure's extensive studies in linguistics. It presents a theory that there are certain theoretical, conceptual and hierarchical opposites—binary opposition.

3. Deconstruction and Aesthetics

Despite the magnetic pull of the extremes of the binary oppositions in the mainstream of structuralism, certain ideas have dominated—and continue to dominate—the belief system of Deconstruction. Jacques Derrida defines deconstruction as a form of investigating technologies, formal devices, social institutions, and central metaphors or representations. According to Derrida's theory, deconstruction questions how representation dwells in reality. How the external representation of things means their internal essence. That there is no such thing as truth, and that everything is relative. Deconstruction attacks such oppositions by
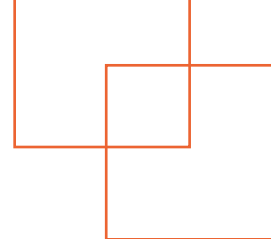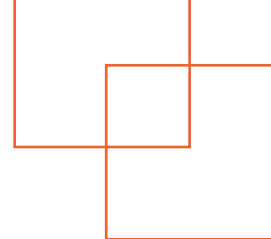
showing how the unimportant, negative meaning inhabits the important, positive one. It serves both the condition of possibility or impossibility of meaning. Derrida (2003, p.944-949) argues

> Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text towards something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general.

For Derrida, deconstruction abandoned the concepts of modern criticism, which its sole intention was to uncover the meaning of a literary work by studying the way form and content corresponded fundamentally humanistic messages. Deconstruction, unlike critical approaches established on semiotics, focuses on the linguistics and institutional systems that surround their production. According to Derrida, "If it seems to us in principle impossible to separate, through interpretation or commentary, the signified from the signifier, and thus to destroy writing by the writing that is yet reading, we nevertheless believe that this impossibility is historically articulated. It does not limit attempts at deciphering in the same way, to the same degree, and according to the same rules. Here we must take into account the history of the text in general. When we speak of the writer and of the encompassing power of the language to which he is subject, we are not only thinking of the writer in literature. The philosopher, the chronicler, the theoretician in general, and at the limit everyone writing, is thus taken by surprise. But, in each case, the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system. Even if there is never a pure signified, there are different relationships as to that which, from the signifier, is presented as the irreducible stratum of the signified" (Ibid.).

Deconstruction not only belongs to language but to history, culture, art, architecture, and theory. It is impregnated in visual culture, and it expresses an approach to critique a new form-content-making. In this sense, a deconstructed aesthetic seems to assume a dialectic sphere of separation which once held in meaningful unity.
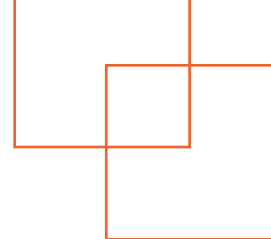
Although Derrida's attacks on linguistics seem a bit nihilistic and controversial, 'his basic formulation of the nature of language is relatively simple', concludes Gregory Ulmer (1987). Key to Ulmer's argument is his reading of Derrida's Of Grammatology which he comments, "Grammato-

logy is "poststructuralist" in that it replaces the "sign" (composed of signifier and signified—the most basic unit of meaning according to structuralism)." And this information must be what its audience needs to know about the finality of the sign, Derrida then adds, "We must be attentive to the ultimate finality of the esteem which the sign enjoys. According to a general rule which is important for us, attention to the signifier has the paradoxical effect of reducing it" (ULMER, 1987, p.83-110).

The important question today must be, then, about the reappearance of aesthetics not as a major ideological concept, but as a re-evaluation of disinterestedness and embodiment. As we study the origins of these deconstructed ideas, we begin to interconnect them with concepts of aesthetics once initiated by Kant, and reformulated by Hegel, while as opposing principles. Although the word aesthetic apparently might be a bewildering feature for establishing such connections, as it seems apparent by now, I would argue that it becomes clear and indispensable not to abandon or deny such reference. In the case of the visual arts, the work, as Derrida reminds us, is regarded as a container or dwelling place for meaning. In this light, Derrida's philosophical investigation is exemplary, and the anatomical likeness within language, visual, (and architectural) models is reinforced. To say that for the hierarchical relation between speech and writing that deconstruction analyses, and is determined to disjoint, is traditionally illustrated in terms of that between an inside and an outside. 'We shall therefore take language, discourse, speech, etc., to mean any signification unit or synthesis.' Speech is seized to continue self-contained—in a closed 'speaking-circuit' characterized by the speaker and listener. On the other hand, writing—per result of faulty reasoning, finds itself outside, trapped by an unavoidable materiality, and its materiality guarantees that it will function beyond of the control of its author, from where it will always threaten the veracity of the hypothetical unbroken system of speech.
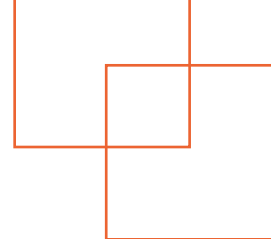
> But this static relationship once formulated by structuralists, no longer allowed individual, personal contemplation of reality. Jean Baudrillard suggests, "True, as far as perception is concerned, writing and pictures, one can use many kinds of reading: a diagram lends itself to signification more than a drawing, a copy more than an original, and a caricature more than a portrait. But this is the point: we are no longer dealing here with a theoretical mode of representation: we are dealing with this particular image that is given for this particular signification (BARTHES, 2003, p.693-698).

Baudrillard argues that the space that reality previously occupied has now been inundated with "meticulous reduplication" (BAUDRILLARD, 2003, p.1018-1020) to the point that the line between the real and the imaginary has become indistinct. He describes this 'hyperrealism' and adds that it is a progression from surrealism—obliged to redouble with the imaginary. "To escape the crisis of representation, reality loops around itself in pure repetition, a tendency that was already apparent, before the days of pop art and pictorial neorealism, in the nouveau roman" (Ibid.).

Baudrillard's ideas seem to suggest that an already-replaced banal reality by hyperreality, is then experienced by aesthetic hallucination of reality. That is to say that real and imaginary no longer belong to the same metaphysical coin, they unfold themselves into a kind of 'subliminal perception'—simulacra. Baudrillard is, in a way, relating this allegorical simulation of reality with Lacan's mirrors. As he comments in his essay The Ecstasy of Communication, "The description of this whole intimate universe—projective, imaginary and symbolic—still corresponded to the object's status as mirror of the subject, and that in turn to the imaginary depths of the mirror and "scene": there is a domestic scene, a scene of interiority, a private space-time (correlative, moreover, to a public space). The oppositions subject/object and public/private were still meaningful (BAUDRILLARD, 2003). Nonetheless, he sets forth a dissolution of public space into simulated aestheticization. Private "telematics": each person sees himself at the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect and remote sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his universe of origin. Which is to say, in the exact position of an astronaut in his capsule, in a state of weightlessness that necessitates a perpetual orbital flight and a speed sufficient to keep him from crashing back his planet of origin ... This realization of a living satellite, in vivo in a quotidian space, corresponds to the satellitization of the real, or what I call the "hyperrealism of simulation" (Ibid.).

Redoubling reality—the combination between the sign, concept, and mechanical reproduction becomes clearly evident when looking at photography, film, and some contemporary art works (such as those of Andy Warhol). Although hyperreality influences culture in its entirety, hyperrealism is promptly recognized in art because of its ability to 'express the pure form of production.' If considered only in this aspect, one must limit art as physical phenomenon. 'Whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something.'
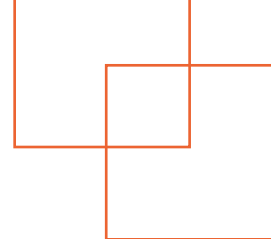
Benedetto Croce refutes to accept the physicality of art as its simplest definition. He suggests that although artists produce images or pictures, the person looking at the art will be guided to look at the direction the artist has pointed. Then, one 'reproduces in himself the artist's image.' By this experience, Croce defines art as vision or intuition. "The answer denies, above all, that art is a physical fact, as, for example, certain particular colors or combinations of colors, forms of the body, sounds or combinations of sounds, phenomena of heat or electricity—in brief, anything goes under the name of 'physical'" (CROCE, 2003, p.103-107).

He suggests that as intuition, art acquires significance and implicitly denies that art is physical fact. Croce then concludes, "Thus, physical facts, by their internal logic and by common consent, make themselves known not as something truly real, but as a construction of our intellect for purposes of science. Consequently, the question as to whether art is a physical fact should rationally assume another meaning, namely whether art may *be constructed physically*" (Ibid.). It is clear that Croce is interested in the significance of the works of art rather than in their physical appearances. For Habermas,

> relation of opposites had come into being; art had become a critical mirror, showing the irreconcilable nature of the aesthetic and the social worlds ... out of such emotional currents finally gathered those explosive energies which unloaded in the surrealist attempt to blow up the autarkical sphere of art and to force a reconciliation of art and life (HABERMAS, 2003, p.1123-1131).

Insofar, a post-structural aesthetica is not a self-contained normative set of directives, and makes it clear that its role still is to promote critical thought through history and engagement. Whether or not it takes form of identifiable shapes, colors, and sounds, it always ends intertwined within materiality. In this sense, it constitutes itself as a cyclical system that belongs to time, nation and environment. Some of the ideological confusion that has marked the post-structural aesthetica is that it mistakenly proposes the end of art—as based on Hegelian idea. Today the whole rights discourse is moving in a different direction, toward a sensibility in which the distinctions between objects, plants, animals, and humans are not as clear as they have been for the last two hundred years

In summary, in a postmodern condition, meaning—unlike beauty, is not matter of taste nor materialized in its characteristics, but it is contingent of cultural interpretations and associations, whether cognitive

or linguistics. These types of associations depend upon semantically or literally understanding. Post-structural aesthetica neither function as a movement nor a style, but an attitude which is continuously being re--formulated, re-read, re-appeared, and re-discovered '...structure and form cannot be separated.' Thus, although the sign and Text apparently disappear, a post-structural aesthetica takes a holistic approach to art in considering a multitude of external elements—related to culture, language, and meaning. It reassures itself as aesthetic behavior resulted from dialectical combinations of intertwined themes and backgrounds.

Another way of being receptive to this revived aesthetics is considering a look back into philosophy of art, once obscured and almost annihilated by anti-aesthetic rhetoric. It is a moment of return to poetic modes of thinking, as this aesthetics autonomously present openness and purpose, idea and material, culture and history, as distinct alternatives and spheres. It is more than an ideological resurgence to aesthetics that is neither concerned to nature nor beauty.

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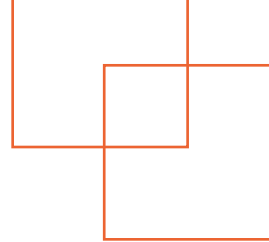
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