



Social aesthetics

A collective ideal and shared-interest framework for socio-cultural coexistence

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BelPeyi Studio,

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Abstract

Contemporary societies are experiencing increased visibility of socio-cultural identities in the international public sphere, amplified by social media, even as some of these identities have long been rendered invisible by dominant narratives.

While this diversity represents a major source of innovation, creativity, and renewed perspectives, it remains largely misunderstood and insufficiently valued, and is often perceived as a source of division and misunderstanding.

When differences are neither recognized nor harmonized, they tend to polarize, generating tensions that manifest at the individual level through frustration and lack of recognition, and are amplified at the collective level through conflict, normalized power relations, and processes of marginalization.

Social, cultural, and socio-economic diversity is not inherently conflictual. Through individual and collective choices, it can be oriented either toward confrontation or toward the co-construction of a social aesthetic ideal grounded in inclusion, relational justness, and mutual enrichment.

While political and institutional frameworks are necessary to support balanced interactions, social inclusion and peace cannot be reduced to them alone. They also rely on the ethical and voluntary engagement of each individual, who carries a political responsibility in the quality of their relationships and in the way they inhabit the shared social space.

The construction of more harmonious societies therefore requires the responsibility and empowerment of each person as an active contributor to social cohesion.

Context and challenges

Despite the existence of normative frameworks in many contemporary societies, particularly those aimed at sanctioning discrimination related to gender, origin, beliefs, or sexual orientation, and although these frameworks remain essential, intersocial and intercultural relations continue to be marked by both latent and overt tensions.

These social and cultural ideals increasingly struggle to generate sustained adherence. This is largely because socio-cultural fractures deepen within everyday and intimate spheres, those of symbolic perceptions, implicit norms, sensible codes, and relational imaginaries, which legal frameworks, even inclusive ones, have limited capacity to address.

When interactions remain shaped by subjective socio-cultural perceptions, without openness to unfamiliar postures or forms of expression, identities tend to harden. This rigidity contributes to the formation of unbalanced and conflictual relational imaginaries.

Conversely, sensible understanding and mutual adjustment, through the encounter with other perspectives and ways of thinking, open pathways toward reciprocal enrichment and more balanced relations.

Sensitive diplomacy is therefore proposed as a reframing of relations between socio-cultural alterities. Grounded in respect for their integrity and for their implicit and subtle dimensions, it seeks to support the co-construction of shared meanings and to foster processes of reconciliation through the identification of common relational ground.

The sensible experience of social aesthetics

Defining social aesthetics

In philosophy, aesthetics does not primarily refer to decorative beauty, but to the sensible experience through which meaning takes shape.

Derived from the ancient Greek αἰσθητικός (aisthētikós), meaning “pertaining to perception” or “capable of feeling,” the term refers to a way of engaging with the world through what is perceived, felt, and experienced.

With BAUMGARTEN¹, who introduced the concept in the eighteenth century, aesthetics is understood as a science of sensible knowledge, distinct from, yet complementary to, rational knowledge. It offers a mode of understanding grounded in lived experience, prior to conceptual formulation.

From this perspective, aesthetics concerns less the appearance of things than the quality of sensible experience itself.

Social aesthetics is therefore understood here in an experiential sense. It does not refer to an abstract ideal, but is manifested and interpreted through the lived experiences of individuals within their everyday social interactions.

Social aesthetics thus becomes perceptible in the quality of relationships, gestures, and attitudes that structure social bonds.

The sensible and aesthetic quality of social bonds

In this sense, certain situations are spontaneously perceived as unpleasant or unaesthetic when they express violence, abuse, injustice, or contempt, such as failing to give up one's seat to an elderly person in difficulty on public transportation, or other situations in which social relations are degraded.

Conversely, interactions grounded in respect, tolerance, dignity, and recognition generate, at the level of lived experience, feelings of well-being, such as the sense of being heard, respected, valued, or acknowledged.

This does not concern artistic aesthetics or the pursuit of decorative beauty, but rather the formal quality of the bond itself, in both its social and human dimensions.

¹ BAUMGARTEN, Alexander Gottlieb (1735), *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*. Halle.

This dimension has been highlighted by several thinkers of social recognition, among them Axel HONNETH², for whom the quality of social relations constitutes a central criterion of social justice.

According to him, individuals do not seek legal respect alone in their interactions. Recognition unfolds across three complementary spheres: affective recognition, through love and care, which affirms individual singularity; legal respect, which guarantees moral equality among persons; and social esteem, which acknowledges each person's specific contributions within society.

For these needs to be genuinely satisfied rather than frustrated, they require relational qualities such as attention, relational justness, and recognition, which go beyond the minimal requirements of rules and social norms.

Social aesthetics goes beyond norms

While social rules guarantee undifferentiated respect and a form of legal social justice, which are essential to collective life, (HONNETH), they do not, on their own, constitute the horizon of living together.

Social coexistence cannot be reduced to a set of laws or conventions designed to regulate behavior. It also rests on a social ideal carried by a relational posture between individuals. Where norms prescribe, social aesthetics engages a way of relating, placing primary attention on the quality of the bond, prior to any formalization.

It thus belongs to the field of ethics, understood not as an abstract system of principles, but as a living experience that emerges through encounter.

As shown by Emmanuel LEVINAS³, the relation precedes the norm: before any rule, there is the face of the Other, their presence, and the responsibility it calls forth. Ethics is born in the encounter itself. It is therefore grounded not in agreement or law, but in the relation as such.

It is the gaze, the manner of entering into relation, and the very form of presence that make coexistence possible.

The sensible plays a central role here, constituting the primary plane on which social relations can emerge, prior to named emotions or articulated discourse.

² HONNETH, Axel (1992), *Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte*. Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp. (English translation: *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1995).

³ LEVINAS, Emmanuel (1961), *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff.

A relational ideal of living together and the common

Relational justness as a condition of the common

Openness to the sensible does not imply emotional neutrality, nor does it belong to an excessive or fusion-based affective register. Rather, it involves an attentive and adjusted relation to others, one that is able to welcome alterity without reducing it, and to make possible a shared space grounded in openness rather than constraint.

Such sensible openness constitutes a necessary condition for social and aesthetic co-creation. It presupposes the existence of sufficiently secure emotional climates, which allow relationships to unfold without fear or defensive withdrawal.

Conversely, manipulative behaviors, power struggles, and games of domination generate sensible atmospheres, as described by Gernot BÖHME⁴, marked by control and mistrust. These contexts encourage a closure of sensibility and result in rigid, impoverished, or even violent forms of connection. The crisis of social bonds then appears less as a moral failure than as a formal one, stemming from the degradation of the very forms of relationship.

Respect for the other, and above all their recognition as a subject rather than as an object, a means, or a threat, precedes any agreement and grounds a just relation, as shown by Emmanuel LEVINAS. Such respect entails restraint and listening, opening a space of dialogue in which the other can exist freely.

The whole thus rests on an ethics of justness: the right distance, the appropriate gesture, the right moment, without domination or erasure, as the condition for a sensible, aesthetic, and sustainable form of living together.

An art of relational balance

In practice, perfectly balanced situations are rare. It is precisely within these gaps that the art of connection is exercised, not as a unilateral correction, but as a process of co-adjustment.

Through communication, posture, and relational creativity, notably through humor, imbalances engaged on both sides are transformed into inspiring spaces, where balance is collectively constructed through a dynamic of mutual enrichment.

⁴ *Atmospheres are affective tonalities of space, produced by situations, relationships, and forms of presence, and perceived bodily.* BÖHME, Gernot (2017), *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*. London, Routledge.

The quality of an interaction does not lie in the absence of tension, but in the ability to preserve or restore relational balance with respect and elegance, without offense, humiliation, or condescension, even when the situation involves discomfort or a necessary clarification.

The art of connection thus takes the form of a social elegance, shaped by tact, harmony, and diplomacy, and finds expression in what can be described as social aesthetics.

It manifests concretely in the way one addresses others, in the attention given to their words, in the recognition, or, conversely, the invisibilization, of their presence, as well as in the justness of distance and the ability to welcome without appropriating. It relies neither on naive spontaneity nor on relational laxity, but on a conscious posture grounded in clear principles.

The art of connection is therefore an embodied social art, at once practical and relational, but also sensible, intuitive, and creative. It consists in finely articulating the demands of social ethics with the capacity to adapt to the other's sensible realities, taking into account what is lived, perceived, or felt as meaningful within the relationship.

Individual social responsibility

Unlike artistic aesthetics, often associated with taste or individual subjectivity, social aesthetics does not stem from personal preference.

It is manifested in the quality of relationships, collectively perceptible, and in the justness of the forms of coexistence they make possible, such as cooperation, solidarity, or co-creation, whose aesthetic dimension is commonly recognized and valued.

Rather than seeking to directly transform social realities, social aesthetics involves adopting a posture, a way of inhabiting relationships, of recognizing the singularity of others, and of maintaining sensible openness within relational balance.

This posture is lived and tested through situations of harmony as well as misalignment, through the continuous choice to live with the Other rather than against them, in their irreducible difference and subjective imperfections.

This responsibility is both individual and collective. It does not rest with a limited group of actors or decision-makers, but unfolds through the actions of each person, expressed in ordinary, everyday gestures, paying attention to someone in difficulty, giving way to others, intervening in the face of injustice, even when such actions are not explicitly expected.

In this sense, political engagement may begin less with adherence to ideals or social programs than with a relational reappropriation of individual political responsibility.

The political dimension is not enacted solely through institutions or discourse, but through the ways in which each person, through their interactions, contributes to the quality of social bonds.

The unifying dimension of social aesthetics

Aesthetics as an attractive and unifying social imaginary

In her analysis of modernity, Barbara CARNEVALI⁵ shows that modern social processes have fragmented the symbolic unity of the social world, a unity that art, and more broadly aesthetics, can partially reconfigure.

Applied to the social sphere, this perspective allows social aesthetics to be understood as an attempt at a sensible reunification of social bonds, where competitive, rival, and rigid logics, previously identified as unaesthetic, tend to fragment them.

Social aesthetics carries a unifying force that operates neither through constraint nor domination. It invites participation in a “relational beauty” not by obligation, but through the desire to engage. Its effectiveness lies not in normative imposition, but in its capacity to generate adherence.

Like a work of art that captures attention and elicits engagement without imposing itself, certain relational qualities associated with social beauty, such as respect, dignity, recognition, and relational justness, exercise an attractive power that brings people together rather than dividing them.

In this sense, social aesthetics functions as a form of soft intra-social power, distinct from logics of domination or coercion, an influence grounded in exemplarity and attraction rather than in force or constraint.

The reorientation of symbolic struggles through mutual recognition

Dynamics of social rivalry respond to a universal need for recognition and valuation. Pierre BOURDIEU⁶ shows that this need is often expressed through symbolic struggles for the acquisition of prestige and social value, generating mechanisms of hierarchization, distinction, and separation.

Georg SIMMEL⁷ also emphasizes that the desire for recognition, distinction, and visibility is a constitutive dynamic of social life. The pursuit of recognition and distinction, the desire to be seen and appreciated, and certain forms of competitiveness appear to be part of human social behavior.

⁵ CARNEVALI, Barbara (2016), *The Power of Appearances. On the Moral Significance of Aesthetics*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

⁶ BOURDIEU, Pierre (1979), *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

⁷ SIMMEL, Georg (1908), (1908), *Sociology. Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009.

Axel HONNETH⁸ nevertheless emphasizes that this need can be fulfilled through forms of mutual recognition grounded in respect, esteem, and the fair valuation of individuals.

Social aesthetics aligns precisely with this perspective. Through relational practices, it proposes forms of mutual recognition and valuation based on the quality of relationships, rather than on competition or symbolic accumulation.

Social, socio-cultural, or symbolic rivalries can thus be reoriented, no longer toward rivalry itself, but toward a more subtle and sensible form of attraction, a form of competitiveness grounded in exemplarity, mutual recognition, and the non-hierarchical valorization of singularities.

Human beings as political, sensible, and aesthetic animals

In ARISTOTLE, human beings are defined as political animals (*zōon politikon*⁹), meaning that human fulfillment can only take place within the city and through relationships with others. This political dimension does not rest solely on laws or institutions, but on the human capacity to live together in a shared world.

This political aptitude is first rooted in the sensible. ARISTOTLE emphasizes that human beings are embodied living beings, endowed with perception (*aisthesis*¹⁰), affects, and sensibility, and that all thought is grounded in sensible experience. Collective life therefore does not begin with abstraction, but with what is felt, perceived, and experienced within relationships.

The political thus appears as a shared elaboration of the sensible through speech (*logos*), rather than as a purely normative organization. For ARISTOTLE, living together already presupposes a shared perception of the world, an attentiveness to affects, and to the quality of social bonds.

This perspective allows social aesthetics to be understood as fully inscribed within a classical anthropology: human beings are both sensible and political, and the quality of relationships, their justness, harmony, or dissonance, constitutes an essential foundation of living together.

Key insights (conclusion)

Social aesthetics can thus be understood as an experience of living together, lived at the individual level and oriented toward a shared social ideal. It does not seek to unify by neutralizing differences, but by reorienting the need for recognition and singularity toward relational forms that are attractive, sensible, and mutually recognizing.

In this sense, social aesthetics constitutes a political ideal in the strong sense of the term. It does not impose itself through norms or constraint, but is rooted in an intimate, pre-political sphere,

⁸ HONNETH, Axel (1992), *The Struggle for Recognition*. Cambridge, Polity Press.

⁹ ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, Book I, chapters 1–2.

¹⁰ ARISTOTLE, *On the Soul (De Anima)*, Book II.

where the relational dispositions that make the common possible are shaped. It reminds us that the political does not begin solely within institutions, but in the quality of everyday relationships.

To think social aesthetics is therefore to open the way to another understanding of living together, not as a balance to be decreed, but as a sensible, shared, and everyday practice, capable of inspiring renewed forms of mediation, governance, and coexistence within pluralistic societies.

