



INTERVIEW WITH THE AESTHETICIAN AND (POP)CULTURE THEORIST MAX RYYNÄNEN MAYBE WE NEED A EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION FOR AESTHETICS OF POPULAR CULTURE(?)

Doc. Max Ryyänen, PhD. is a Helsinki-based scholar in aesthetics, cultural studies, semiotics and idea history, who works as senior university lecturer at the Department of Art of the Aalto University (Helsinki, Finland). In addition, he has professional history in gallery management and art writing/criticism. Regarding the reflected topics our colleague has examined e. g. the “faces” of contemporary art, body philosophy, aesthetic experience, kitsch and popular culture, what is particularly significant for us.

His ties to Slovakia are pretty strong: 1. He co-edited (together with the Slovak aesthetician Jozef Kovalčík) *Aesthetics of Popular Culture* (2015), a collection of papers that was published by Slovart and Academy of fine arts and design in Bratislava. 2. he founded *Popular Inquiry: The Journal of the Aesthetics of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture* (since 2017), also with Jozef Kovalčík. 3. In 2019 he was the keynote speaker at the annual conference organized by the Slovak Association for Aesthetics in Bratislava.

He visits Slovakia quite often and we hope that one of his next journeys downwards will lead to Nitra as there is a lot we have in common – mainly concerning the way we view the world.

Let's begin widely. In Slovakia there is a noticeable tension between natural sciences and humanities, whereby the humanities are quite often seen as not scientific enough and – what's worse – as a field which has no use. Therefore humanities have to adapt to such game rules that are not humanities-friendly and they have to permanently, in blood and tears, affirm the meaning of their existence in an, so to speak, environment in which they are not welcome. How is the situation in Finland? How do you view the opposition natural sciences – humanities? And, for that matter, how do you view the position of aesthetics in this?

In my experience, natural scientists are arrogant towards economists and social scientists. At least math-driven economists are sometimes arrogant towards social scientists, but also the latter might think that economy is a very narrow field scholarly speaking, so this might also be mutual. Both economists and social scientists debase the humanities. Scholars in the humanities – my own background group – tend to debase artists' theory writing and artistic research, as I can constantly witness in my own work, as I teach artists (they always pick the bad

examples, but there are great works too in artistic research). Interestingly, none of these groups think self-critically about their own prejudices downwards on the scale, but they are very critical about the arrogance they meet from the “upper level”.

On the other hand, there is a type of a Stockholm-syndrome at stake too. Many scholars love to debase themselves, and they look hierarchically upwards. In arts, people who do research, often do not look at scholars in humanities, but go straight to natural scientists with their self-debasement. It is bizarre that some experimental guy from film wants natural scientists to accept his theoretical writing. It is a very tricky dynamics, I think, that we are talking about.

In Finland the crisis of humanities has so far turned profitable for the art schools. As Helsinki University, which is the biggest and best of all, cut a lot of funding from the humanities, and smaller universities followed, art universities like the one where I teach (ARTS School at Aalto University), used this to gain more academic power. I have myself worked 14 years in my job here, and we have drafted many others to work for us. My guess is that university colleges, which offer only BAs, will also start to draft people from the humanities who have worked for universities. Humanities might partly find a new solution for their institutional existence in art schools, really, and this change might be as radical as changing to the university from the *artes liberales* during the timespan between late Medieval times and the Renaissance. Universities assess scholarly work in a weird way nowadays, and there is not much freedom, so this can be good in the end. Let's leave the science universities. I myself rather work in an art university as I am so free to do what I want – as long as I teach theory to MA and doctoral students. Many big names have done that during their formative years, e.g. Umberto Eco, Peter Sloterdijk, Boris Groys... Of course, art education can help only art and culture driven humanities to find new ways to survive, and linguistics, history and many other disciplines will not have this opportunity...

Otherwise, aesthetics in Finland is really strong. There is no disciplinary activity of the type of the ex Austrian-Hungarian countries, where many universities have aesthetics departments, but there are many scholars who are very active, and among the humanities I think we are visible and relatively powerful. I was the chair of the society here for years, and I think I met mostly people who were just positive about it.

Popular culture studies is a more complicated issue. I established the Society for Popular Culture Research in Finland in 2002, when I returned from the US, where I had been working with Richard Shusterman on my PhD for one term, and where I had realized the strong role of popular culture studies in the American university world. But eventually, aestheticians and other theoretically minded scholars have a hard time working with many popular culture scholars as they are not traditionally much into theory... I proposed that we would make it a European one and attach it to the Popular Culture Association in America, which eventually happened – at the time when I already left, as I felt I did not really find good dialogue in the association which I initiated (I invited 3 Turku-based cultural historians to put it up with me, originally). In this sense I

suppose what you do in Nitra is different, at least thinking about your and Juraj Malíček's work, which I have read with interest. It is theoretical. Maybe we need a European association for Aesthetics of Popular Culture? I am in, if you are.

How did you get to the studies of and in the field of aesthetics? Why aesthetics in particular?

I did not want to study at the university after the gymnasium, which was really hard for me (I had to do one year twice, as I failed in the exams, and in the end I had to take a half year extra to finish some other ones, so the three years became 4,5). I was planning to become some kind of 80% writer and 20% bum, but I was also sincerely thinking naively about becoming some kind of criminal (romantically, like a pirate; it is just had to make money with crimes). My girlfriend at the time, who actually is a writer now (translated into many languages), went to do religious studies. She once took a course at Helsinki University on Afro-American popular culture. I had played in a funk-punk band called *Lekamestarin Kliimax* (The Climax of the Person Using the Sledgehammer), and I was a lot into old James Brown records, so I attended the course with her. It was great, so I realized that university did not have much in common with gymnasium, which was a lot about just learning facts, not discussing them – nor what facts are. I applied for Swedish literature, as I am half a minority Finn, and at the time Helsinki University still had this weird relic from the Swedish colonial times – but I did not take a single class there. At the time you could change majors easily. On the first day I walked in to the office of aesthetics and asked if I could start there. Arto Haapala had just started as the chairing professor, he was 36, first day there, and he was open-minded. He asked what are you interested in? I said aesthetics of war and wine (I have later written only about war). He said that is interesting and that for sure we would find some material for my studies. Pauline von Bonsdorff who was a phenomenologist and architecture theorists was his assistant then (today Pauline works at Jyväskylä University, as the professor chair in Art Education), and the community felt just good, also the teaching. Aesthetics was very open-minded in Finland, and it still is – probably a bit like in Slovakia.

As you had to go for cultural studies or cultural history in many countries to talk about what you wanted to talk about, in Finland the most open place might have been the aesthetics department. The department was also very active at the time, and quite rich (which it is not anymore), so we had incredible visitors all the time. During my 4,5 years of study I recall that Shusterman, Margolis, Berleant... many others too, taught visiting courses. I did a big minor in semiotics, which was led by Eero Tarasti, who had a great network at the time, and I enjoyed that too. I started in Helsinki, continued in Uppsala and Pisa too, and I visited Temple as a PhD student – but Helsinki University is my alma mater I am very grateful to, and the same applies to

Arto Haapala who was my main teacher, and in the end also asked if I would be interested to do PhD studies (I did not even think that would be possible).

As an aesthete you are heavily concerned with popular culture. How did you get to it?

The answer might sound Freudian. I was raised in a Western Marxist family. We lived in Rinkeby Stockholm, which is nowadays made infamous, by e.g. Donald Trump, as a no go area (which is not true, I think, I was raised there and I still visit it when I am in town – my family mostly lives in Stockholm). It was a very radical area. In the next house there were people who were caught as they were members of the Baader-Meinhof. Our neighbors were from dictatorships like Chile and Iran. I picked up with the working class cosmopolitanism, but my parents mindwashed me badly with modernism. I was not allowed to read comics or watch American TV programs for example, nor watch entertainment movies which were important for my friends. I agree with my dad when he said that Indiana Jones steals artworks from 3rd world countries to Western museums and that Tarzan is a racist book, but in the end, art as a tradition is about the same too, as we can now easily recall through reading e.g. bell hooks or the postcolonialists. But I think there was an Althusserian tendency at the time to think that popular culture manipulated people (and that in art we could somehow better reflect on these problems). As an adult, popular culture was for me like art is for many who find it later on. Theoretically I found it, though, through Adorno, whose critical thinking I admired. I think he criticized art as much as popular culture, and as I wrote my BA on rap music, I kind of worked out my basic position in the field, paradoxically by reading Adorno from that point of view too.

By the way how do you understand popular culture? Where does it begin and where does it end from your point of view? Where are the, so to speak, borders of popular culture?

Well, in some sense, it would be easier to answer what art is... as this tradition was built in Central Europe in mid-17th century and it has a clear, separated history... Popular culture does not have that, it is just a classification, where things have fallen or where they more or less exist. In this sense, I have a hard time thinking that it could have boundaries. But it is interesting sometimes, when you feel the dynamics which informs us about a boundary. Take for example Frank Zappa, the way the music is sometimes so much more virtuosically played and more complicated than classical music, whose proponents have always based their metaphysics of their sovereignty on these elements. And I like the meta-poppish movement, which has become a commonplace with Frank Miller's comics, Tarantino's movies and many others' works/careers,

where popular culture is reflected upon in a poppish way, not elevated through borrowing 'artistic elements' into the piece so that it would look/sound more like "art" (which was the case with e.g. Beatles' Sgt Peppers, where the string instruments artified it (I like that too, though, aesthetically speaking)).

Although it's not exactly an up-to-date or progressive attitude, an open-minded approach, there are people who think popular culture isn't worth being a research subject matter. What do you think about this issue which, unfortunately, is pretty en vogue in Slovakian contexts? And why are you exploring popular culture?

Well, in the working class many people think opera singers are clowns. This is just the other way around, there are people debasing popular culture – but of course it is more serious as they have more power in saying what culture is and what it should be... I don't much listen to them, as I don't listen to Nazis, bankers or other people who are totally out from my world. I think popular culture is quite established academically in Finland. I hope it would be that soon in Slovakia too.

If you should – coming to the end of the interview – introduce yourself not as a scholar, but as a recipient of popular culture, how would you define yourself by means of remarks on popular culture contents? In other words, which videogames, films, TV shows, comic books, books etc. are for you of vital/existential importance?

In Finland, an alcoholic who stops drinking, says: No thank you, I already drank a lake. (We have many lakes.) I ate a mountain of popular culture. So the question is hard.

I could say that some of the young (or relatively young) female rap artists today, around the world, make me happy (Princess Nokia, Vafe Jhous, Lin Que, Deadly Venoms, SOFA, to mention just a few). This is a phenomenon, clearly. I watch TV series a lot now, and I have really liked *The Vikings* (for obvious reasons), *The Wire*, *Wasteland*, *Sacred Objects*... I used to read Edgar Rice Burroughs' Mars novels, I used to watch "trash" (I use the concept as a positive one) movies (Meyer, Waters, *Lady Snowblood*, Jackie Chan), I used to listen to progressive rock, I used to... There are so many things! These days, I follow a lot what comes from India, from music to TV series, and as I work a lot in other scenes (like Riga, Tallinn, Bratislava), I have grown to think that the thing popular culture has lost as it hasn't been institutionalized the way art has, is internationality. In the art scene (I am a serial gallerist, I have had 3 galleries) I think we see things from everywhere. In popular culture this is not the case. Through hard work I have found some Slovakian and Latvian rap music, but the US mostly dominates everything too much, also the West, in Europe maybe England. In this sense, I think, we scholars should aim more at

internationalizing our discourse product-wise, at least – so that the products would move around from other centers and peripheries too.