

## Square plans for a circular journey: remarks on the ‘decolonial’ critique of art history

Review of:

Carolin Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial Introduction to the Theory, History and Criticism of the Arts*, Lulu.com, 2019, ISBN 9780244195182 paperback, ISBN 9780244795177 e-book, 356 pages, 93 b/w ill.

Ricardo De Mambro Santos

This volume presents an English translation – undertaken by the author herself – of a previously published Portuguese edition of a wide breadth study, originally titled *Introdução brasileira à teoria, história e crítica das artes*.<sup>1</sup> Directly related to the author’s academic and creative experiences in Brazil and also in connection with European institutions, the book offers an overview of the developments of the concept of art – and its transformation over time into the idea of ‘arts’ in the plural – in order to demonstrate how foundational parameters and recurrent practices associated with such a concept and its disciplinary fields of investigation – namely, Art History, Art Historiography, and Aesthetics – are still significantly intertwined with Eurocentric paradigms. Organized according to a clear and solid pedagogical plan, the volume addresses very relevant matters regarding a particular critical approach or model of inquiry – referred to as ‘decolonial perspective’ – in the attempt to expose and challenge the fact that many principles involved in the creation as well as the interpretation of artistic phenomena are, in fact, expressions of a hegemonic culture that has become implicitly the epitome, if not the very synonym, of ‘art’ itself: the European tradition.

Despite the wide variety of cultural contexts in which the works examined in this book have been elaborated – from the prehistoric images in the Chauvet cave, in Southern France, to the visual creations, film operations and theatrical performances undertaken by Contemporary artists in Brazil – the author explores the common (genealogical) connection of these products with an all-encompassing Eurocentric horizon of references. In a nutshell, one could assert that the study conducted by Overhoff Ferreira aims to stress what could be called ‘the narratives of exclusion’ carried out by the prevailing Eurocentrism that has characterized – and still characterizes, according to the author’s well-articulated claims – not only the field of Art History, but also many current forms of art production that one may find in places geographically distant from – and, yet, ideologically interrelated to – practices and discourses originated in the Old Continent. The excavation through

<sup>1</sup> Carolin Overhoff Ferreira, *Introdução brasileira à teoria, história e crítica das artes*, São Paulo: Almedina, 2019.

the multilayered stages of this long process of historical consolidation – in consequence of which the concept of 'art' seems to be first and foremost the embodiment of European ideas and ideals – allows for a new consideration of the potentially emancipatory and profoundly experiential role that forms of expression, communication and symbolic exchanges usually referred to as 'artistic' may stimulate on different audiences and in accordance with non-European principles.

The choice, therefore, to adopt the expression 'arts' (in the plural) is part of a wider critical agenda pursued by the scholar in this carefully planned book. Through a series of interconnected chapters, the author undertakes a process of analytical deconstruction that intends to unveil the tacit, commonly-shared, but seldom exposed, Eurocentric roots of art-related paradigms, both in the creation as well as in the analysis or interpretation of works belonging to different cultural settings. With intelligence, Overhoff Ferreira examines how these paradigms, in spite of being originally 'local' in their European roots, are in fact assumed to encompass – and even incarnate – a 'universal' value, given the worldwide circulation and the massive presence of these canons in various latitudes across the planet. Pluralism characterizes not only the art phenomena examined in this volume, but also the methods adopted in their critical analysis. Interestingly, though, their narratives tend to obliterate such a pluralism and subscribe to a well-sedimented European set of principles. "The title of this book", comments the scholar, "indicates that it wants to speak of many arts, but it will also discuss their multiple stories, theories and modes of criticism to an audience concerned with and conscious of the decolonial/postcolonial context in which the discipline [Art History], its epistemological flaws and its exclusions need to be addressed today".<sup>2</sup> In line with this premise, the volume offers stimulating critiques and very insightful remarks regarding, in particular, the complex conditions of Contemporary art, interpreted in a (trans)historical and (trans)cultural perspective or, as the author puts it, within a 'decolonial' frame of reference.

Divided in seven chapters, whose titles are ingeniously presented as questions – starting from a disarmingly direct, yet fundamental, interrogation, "Why do we study the arts and why do we produce them?", to conclude with a (perhaps too succinct and disappointingly short) section devoted to "What is Brazilian art and how has it been studied?" – the book unfolds a strategically-sequential narrative that explores the genealogical assumptions and the conceptual consequences of the 'Eurocentric tradition', which has determined the epistemological boundaries of Art History since the time of Giorgio Vasari, as Hans Belting had already argued in his book, similarly titled with a question mark, *Das*

<sup>2</sup> Carolin Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial. Introduction to the Theory, History and Criticism of the Arts*. Lulu.com, 2019, 24.

*Ende der Kunstgeschichte?*<sup>3</sup>. In recent decades, the systematic critique of the cultural and ideological hegemony of European forms of art and their continuity over time as well as their extension across distant geographical areas have allowed, according to Overhoff Ferreira, "the entrance of other regions into the discipline".<sup>4</sup> Thanks to this process, it has become possible to productively integrate multiple, unheard voices into the choir of general discourses about art. Due to an increasingly diversified attention toward extra-European cultures and the raising of non-European narratives committed to describing the wide variety of ways in which Art History has developed itself as a discipline (especially in 'a-historical' contexts such as Brazil), Overhoff Ferreira is able to focus on the emergence of a new approach, beyond models and methods of inquiry exclusively centered on – or derived from – European-generated styles, techniques and working procedures. The scholar is very programmatic about her deconstructive pursuit and explains quite clearly the ambitious agenda of her project. From the very beginning of the volume, she enunciates, in fact, the urgency as well as the advantages of adopting a 'decolonialising' perspective: "this book's aim is to challenge the Eurocentrism in art studies by deconstructing the western discourse on art". Differently formulated, this book aims to "encourage our own readings and interpretations, especially in parts of the world that were colonised and thus are in need of emancipation and self-ownership"<sup>5</sup>.

The political and social goals inherently tied to this project appear clearly expressed in this sentence, in relation to the ideal of emancipation, autonomy and disenfranchisement from exclusively European-centred parameters. One of the most promising results of such a decolonial vantage point is, indeed, to stress the 'emancipatory potential' of art by exploring what the scholar defines the 'third space'. Since art as a creative process as well as an aesthetic concept has become a multi-ethnic and pluri-national entity, the selection of the Brazilian context as a case study is based on the fact that "the peculiarities of its acculturation and transculturation in a formerly colonised country with a vast repertoire of Amerindian and Afro-descendent art"<sup>6</sup> epitomizes the development of these forms of symbolic exchanges – or 'arts' in the plural – in areas generally neglected by the so-called *grand récits*, or 'grand narratives'. According to Overhoff Ferreira, the coexistence of multiple sources of cultural references makes the Brazilian case a paradigmatic example of how a decolonial approach could be applied in order to expose – and better understand – the dynamics of that new space of aesthetic experiences that can no longer be simply designated by the term 'art', in virtue of its

<sup>3</sup> Hans Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?*, München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1983 (for an excellent English translation, see *The End of the History of Art?*, trans. by Christopher S. Wood, Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 19.

European roots and implicitly Eurocentric coordinates. Hence the importance of an essay that may be used as an introductory textbook at universities, colleges and other centers of academic formation, designed to reassess the discursive foundations of the concept of art and to rethink its (colonising, limiting and often patronising) European configuration.

The academic target and the pedagogical goals of this study are programmatically enunciated by the author in the very first page of the volume. Reflecting on the particular situation of scholarly research in Brazil, within the specific domain of Art History, Overhoff Ferreira remarks that, prior to this publication, "there was no introductory text that addressed readers from a so-called postcolonial, or more adequate for the Latin American context, decolonial perspective".<sup>7</sup> In this comment, she introduces the key category of her analytical journey: the notion of 'decolonial perspective'. At this point, it would have been useful if the reader could have found at least a preliminary bibliography on this central postulate – that is, 'decolonial' approach – even in the limited space of a footnote. Supported by this complementary information regarding the current state of research in this rising field, the reader could have understood more clearly the implications of this critical parameter and the possible applications of such a mode of inquiry also outside the discourses elaborated in the field of Art History, since the author states that "Decolonial theories question western epistemology"<sup>8</sup> in general, thus extending the relevance of this approach beyond the specific boundaries of art historical investigations.

In order to clarify her preliminary thoughts about the 'decolonial perspective', the author provides, however, a pertinent distinction between 'postcoloniality' and 'decoloniality', arguing that "[t]hese theories are inspired by critical perspectives on western modernity, since coloniality is understood to be its darker side. While postcoloniality and its theorists question this mainly on a scholarly level and try to transform academia, decoloniality takes a broader approach and is as much analytical as [it is] programmatic, parting from a more political stance".<sup>9</sup> To put it another way, while the concept of 'postcoloniality' reflects a scholarly lexicon and belongs to the circuits of academia, 'decoloniality' sets in motion a more extensive, transformative and far-reaching social awareness and a fresher sense of collective consciousness that could be actively applied beyond the privileged spaces of universities, colleges and similar academic-oriented institutions. More than offering just a set of interpretive procedures, the 'decolonial' approach aims at reforming the mentality behind, within and underneath the longevity and the pervasiveness of the Eurocentric paradigm. The political implications of a 'decolonialising' project are thus established.

<sup>7</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 20.

According to Overhoff Ferreira, a good example of such a 'decolonialising' approach can be found, amidst European art historical discourses, in the analyses provided by Georges Didi-Huberman, in particular in his publication on Fra Angelico. By condensing some of the defining ideas of that volume, Overhoff Ferreira sustains that "the study of art by specialists reduces [images] to the transmission of knowledge".<sup>10</sup> Instead of seeking for historically accurate interpretations, on the basis of textual and visual evidences, the scholar should consider different possibilities – and even dimensions – of art-related experiences, challenging the hegemony conceded to the historical knowledge as a privileged, if not unique, form of access to that "open, sacred and mysterious space"<sup>11</sup> embodied by works of art. Accordingly, Overhoff Ferreira describes the interpretive operations conducted by Didi-Huberman as a method of analysis that "seeks to encourage the observer and eventual analyst to acquire more floating attention before engaging in any kind of analytic interpretation"<sup>12</sup>. In that regard, the example provided by Didi-Huberman brings to mind Susan Sontag's provocative conclusion in the essay *Against Interpretation*: "In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable".<sup>13</sup> In order to preserve the work of art in its promising 'unmanageable' dimension – or, we could add, in order to refrain from 'colonising' it through our own interpretive stances or 'anxieties', as Harold Bloom would have argued – one should experience "the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are".<sup>14</sup> In conclusion, Sontag euphorically recommends: "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art".<sup>15</sup> While Susan Sontag emphasizes the personal, direct involvement of every spectator with the work as an essential part of their art experiences, Didi-Huberman outlines the need to explore new directions of sense, not exclusively based on historical knowledge and cultural transmission, given "the emancipatory potential of art and its possible dissent from the status quo",<sup>16</sup> as Overhoff Ferreira suggests. In other words, a 'decolonial' approach stimulates processes of reassessment of previously-established hierarchies and non-inclusive narratives, allowing differentiated experiences of art that are not limited to the historical understanding of their contents, forms and meanings.

In relation to the political engagement associated with the goals of a 'decolonial' – or decolonialising – approach, Overhoff Ferreira points out the two-

<sup>10</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 88.

<sup>11</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 89.

<sup>12</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 89.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and other essays*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1964, 8

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 98.

sided aspirations of her scholarly project, stating that "this book presents, on the one hand, a critical perspective on the History of Art as an epistemology that has tried to defend Europe's superiority over the centuries – which has deeply affected Latin America's Eurocentric art studies until today – and, on the other hand, introduces scholars and authors of indigenous, diasporic and peripheral populations, even though there are only a few, who might help to develop in the future a truly decolonial outlook on the arts by recognising and including the importance of their artistic production – which I will be calling 'third space'".<sup>17</sup> Frustratingly, though, the author does not provide, after this programmatic statement, any bibliographical feedback to support her claims or to clarify who might be those 'few' scholars or artists that have already addressed these relevant issues. Moreover, in this long sentence, the author utilizes one of her most significant hermeneutic parameters – the notion of 'third space' – neglecting, however, to provide a more articulated explanation of this central, indeed crucial, concept within her (meta)analytical discourse. Surprisingly, this notion is merely mentioned in this paragraph and it is not properly explained, not even briefly, in its connection with the art historical and art historiographical investigations that Overhoff Ferreira intends to pursue, thus leaving the reader with an uneasy feeling of incompleteness, vagueness, indetermination. Only later, in the book, will the author provide a succinct explanation of this term, defining it, in a somewhat cryptic manner, "as extra-mental and extra-object, and, thus, as a space in which nature and culture, history and life are exiled. In other words, it is defined as a place outside the mental world and its objects are thus open enough to accommodate a decolonial epistemology, because it fits prehistoric and non-western [...] productions as well".<sup>18</sup> While other parts of the volume, addressing very complex categories and subtle topics, are clearly formulated by the author, the explanation of the concept of 'third space' results inadequate and frankly unclear to the point of sounding pointlessly convoluted, almost enigmatic, hieroglyphic, in these sentences.

Let me state, at once, that I make this comment with the utmost admiration for the overall critical value of this intellectually-engaging study; so stimulating a study that it would have deserved clearer definitions of its main concepts and theoretical components, perhaps through the compilation of a glossary or the use of notes. As a matter of fact, it is rather stunning to notice the absence of notes in a scholarly publication of this nature. Commented footnotes would have been particularly appreciated, considering the fact that one of the programmatically-announced target audiences of this volume is the category of undergraduate students. Given the relevance of concepts such as 'third space' within the epistemological economy of this – otherwise well-conducted – critique, one would have expected a more incisive, detailed and systematic definition of it. Without reading the original source which this concept has been borrowed from – namely,

<sup>17</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 32.

Emanuele Coccia's *La vita sensibile*<sup>19</sup> – the reader, even the most academically-prepared and well-informed one, will have a hard time understanding the full implications of this notion and its potential amplitude as a critical parameter. Overhoff Ferreira should have presented Coccia's concept more comprehensibly in light of its centrality in her 'decolonial' project.<sup>20</sup> Only at the end of Chapter Two – titled "How does art relate to other forms of knowledge and what is its potential?" – and, more specifically, in a discussion focused on the emergence of the concept of 'visuality' as an alternative to the European notion of 'art', the author brings back the parameter elaborated by Coccia, asserting that these "new theories of the image [...] seek to replace the historically delimited concept of art. The most comprehensive theory, which also considers the productivity of a-historical people with a perspectivist worldview, uses the concept of a third space, which encompasses all human extra-mental and extra-object production".<sup>21</sup> In conclusion, she succinctly explains that "the third space consists of everything that the human hand manipulates with some sort of aesthetic purpose".<sup>22</sup> However intriguing those sentences may sound, they offer too vague and generic definitions of this crucial term to become critically fruitful.

Overhoff Ferreira is well-aware of the almost tantalising magnitude of her task and the inherent difficulties that she will inevitably face before reaching the epistemological and ideological objectives that guide her project of (meta)critique. In that regard, she candidly acknowledges the fact that "for the moment, most of this book is still preoccupied with deconstructing the existing theories, histories and criticism, yet its main objective is to point to a new direction for studies to come".<sup>23</sup> Given this comment, one may find startling the absence, in the entire volume, of any chapter or note providing a general overview of recent scholarly publications associated with other 'decolonial' projects, in interconnected fields such as History, Anthropology, Ethnography, Sociology, Politics and Global Studies. In recent years, in fact, many conferences and symposia have been organised, along with the publication of articles, anthologies, and co-authored volumes, in order to set up the boundaries of this promising territory of research, consecrated to the reassessment of the Eurocentric perspective that still pervades the narratives of multiple fields within the Humanities.

It would have been beneficial to the reader, therefore, if the book had provided a more cohesive comment on this newly configuring approach, offering for instance a preliminary outline of significant contributions and exploring, more

<sup>19</sup> Emanuele Coccia, *La vita sensibile*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011

<sup>20</sup> For more cohesive definitions of this term, see Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 57-58. On a metaconceptual level, it could be interesting to examine the possible connections between this category – i.e., 'third space' – and the distinction suggested by Jan Mukařovský between 'artistic object' and 'aesthetic object' or Umberto Eco's concept of '*intentio operis*'.

<sup>21</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 80.

<sup>22</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 20.

systematically, the variety of intersections reunited under the overwhelmingly vast umbrella term, 'decolonial perspective', on account of its very cross-pollinating and deconstructive tendencies. Particularly striking, in this sense, is the silence regarding any gender-oriented analysis or any attempt to connect the (re)interpretive agenda of Decolonial Studies with the field of Queer Theory, as though one could possibly separate considerations on race, collective identity, and social issues from narratives of gender configuration. To clarify this point it suffices to read the introduction of a textbook – an essay, that is, belonging to the same literary genre of Overhoff Ferreira's study – devoted to Queer Theory. In this text, the author, Nikki Sullivan, explains her methodological approach by claiming that "[r]ather than focusing narrowly on sexuality and/or sexual practices, the book aims to consider critiques of normalising ways of knowing and of being that may not always initially be evident as sex-specific – hence the inclusion of topics such as community, popular culture, race".<sup>24</sup> Like many procedures adopted by Queer Theory scholars, also the 'decolonial' approach advocated by Overhoff Ferreira seeks to undermine the construed certainties of the grand narratives, in the attempt to challenge the normative, stabilising and standardising practices that govern discourses on art, thus exposing the ideological constructedness of the Eurocentric foundations that permeates current definitions and interpretations of art-related phenomena. Plurality counts and diversity matters: the paradigms set by both 'Queer' and 'Decolonial' perspectives envision an openness of experiences and a methodological self-awareness that rethink – and significantly dilate – the horizon of references of their promoters.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps in a second, revised edition of her notable study, Overhoff Ferreira could consider including paragraphs, if not an entire chapter, focusing on the epistemological and conceptual connections between these two – very close – deconstructive approaches: Queer Theory and 'decolonial perspective'.

In its current configuration, the volume borrows Emanuele Coccia's concept of 'third space' as a catalysing critical category. In its project of redefinition of the

<sup>24</sup> Nikki Sullivan, *a Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, New York: New York University Press, 2006, vi.

<sup>25</sup> In relation to this topic, it is useful to underline the centrality of spectatorship in Queer Studies as well as in 'decolonialising' discourses. In fact Overhoff Ferreira intelligently observes that "the indispensability of the aesthetic experience depends on the involvement of the observer/spectator and each artwork" (Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 107). In light of such a statement, it is surprising to note that the author did not seek to further examine the contributions of the Reception Theory in association with the development of a 'third space', nor did she explore the interconnectedness of 'decolonial perspective' and Queer Studies, since both approaches promote the urge to redefine normative stances and challenge hegemonic paradigms. Overhoff Ferreira could have further explored the role of participation and agency in the creation of the 'third space', given the performative, highly interactive implications of this concept in comparison to a more stable and stabilising, Eurocentric notion of art.

Eurocentric paradigms that inform the creation as well as the narratives of art since the sixteenth century, Overhoff Ferreira's book operates a suggestive shift, replacing the European-shaped notion of 'art' with this new dimension of symbolic exchanges: the 'third space'. To elucidate this important shift, the author states: "Within art studies, a decolonial study of the enigma of the third space would be a new value – one that esteems the production of the third space of those who have been silenced and excluded from the Eurocentric fictions of the arts in colonised countries – leading to new theories – the capacity of this third space to question conventional western theories on the arts and to offer a new understanding of art – by means of a new methodology – that avoids a hierarchical canonization of the third space, telling the fiction of this other third space (or the third space in general) not by historicising it but, for example, by offering a deeper understanding of how it creates its emancipatory and spiritual distribution of the sensible".<sup>26</sup> It is evident, in this assertion, the scholar's debt to ideas formulated by Peter Sloterdijk and, more particularly, to his notion of 'mental awareness' as a critical tool through which one could pursue – and hopefully reach – a state of intellectual and ideological emancipation. Based on the conviction that "art is more potent than the discipline of knowledge", Sloterdijk contends that "the aesthetic experience is indispensable because it is the only way to reach a specific state of mind", which he calls 'mental awareness'. "Hence, art is freed from being a compensatory social system – as Plato and Aristotle proposed – and becomes a utopian-anthropological potential for emancipation".<sup>27</sup> If the concept of art encompasses the dominating ideology imposed by European references and values, the category of 'third space' seems to stimulate, on the opposite, a process of increasing self-consciousness that ultimately may lead to a fulfilling emancipation from hegemonising (Eurocentric) discourses.

Along with this crucial notion, Overhoff Ferreira adopts two other significant paradigms in her (meta)analysis of 'narratives of exclusion': the first is Vilem Flusser's parameter of 'a-historicity' and, the second, Jacques Rancière's concept of 'aesthetic regime', which questions, in particular, the model of periodization usually followed by historians and art historians alike. Rancière's critique of the institutionalisation of social relations and his use of interdisciplinarity in connection with fictional discursivity provide an essential theoretical frame within which Overhoff Ferreira may locate her 'decolonial' enterprise: "interdisciplinarity suggests that any method, instead of examining a territory and investigating a problem that poses as an enigma, tries to define itself by means of the stories told about it. In order not to fall into the mechanism of creating new fictions, any area of knowledge must direct its attention to the fabrication of its own fictions and those of other disciplines".<sup>28</sup> This sentence clearly situates this 'decolonial' project within the methodological threshold of a deconstructive inquiry,

<sup>26</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 245.

<sup>27</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 108-109.

<sup>28</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 243.

without, however, clarifying the possible differences or specificities between these two approaches. It would have been helpful to hear from the author what could be, in her views, the most significant differences or, on the contrary, the stances of proximity between a 'decolonial' method and a 'deconstructive' critique. In other words, how could one define the 'decolonial' perspective from a methodological standpoint and distinguish it from the models of deconstruction? What are the aims, tools and interpretive strategies set up by the 'decolonial' procedure? Even if the reader may intuitively grasp the critical potential of this approach by uniting the myriad of suggestions and intelligent remarks disseminated throughout the text, it could have been useful if the author had outlined a more programmatic compendium of its main directives at the end of the book, as she actually does at the conclusion of every chapter for the topics addressed in each one of these parts, presenting a brief, yet very helpful, summary of their main points. Likewise, it would have been extremely valuable to find a more cohesive explanation of what the 'decolonial perspective' entails at the conclusion of the volume.

In the case of Flusser's concept of 'a-historicity', Overhoff Ferreira points out that it "helps to grasp the reasons for the lack of impact and consideration of countries that have not participated in the global decision-making process within arts studies".<sup>29</sup> Such a remark brings up another relevant question as to why the author decided to adopt the notion of 'decolonial perspective' instead of using the more diffused concept of 'global art'. In response to this question, the scholar sustains, in a very candid reflection, that "'global art' is more preoccupied with contemporary art", whereas her "book was written from the perspective of a country whose knowledge production on the arts/third space is not known or considered on a global level. Moreover", she explains, "the arts' studies in Brazil had and still have great difficulty in freeing themselves from a Eurocentric outlook".<sup>30</sup> In a concluding comment, inserted at the very end of this same paragraph, the author further reflects on her critical goals and clarifies her epistemological aims, stating that "[t]his book is very conscious of this colonised view and is sensible to the difficulties of its decolonising challenge, hoping that the insights that its critical approach entails will make it possible to add a fresh perspective to the revision of arts' studies, an ongoing but still incomplete task for all the related academic disciplines since at least the 1970s and 1980s".<sup>31</sup>

For this reason, Overhoff Ferreira's volume "stand[s] out from Aesthetics" and embraces the promising road of a historiographical investigation, excavating with attention the underground web of tendencies, concepts and discursive practices that have guided the construction of art historical narratives since the generation of Dominik Fiorillo, Rudolf Eitelberg, and Jacob Burckhardt, until the emergence of more interdisciplinary modes of inquiry, such as Visual Studies and

<sup>29</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 25.

Image Studies, mentioning the contributions of scholars such as Mitchell, Didi-Huberman, and Bredekamp, among others. This chapter of the book – Chapter Five – is titled “What is art criticism?”. Notwithstanding its inevitably selective range of authors, titles and examples, this section offers an overview of the development of the Historiography of Art in Europe and inserts itself within a tradition of studies that could be aligned with the pioneering research of Julius von Schlosser in *Die Kunstliteratur*, Udo Kultermann’s *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte*, and Germain Bazin’s *Histoire de l’histoire de l’art de Vasari à nos jours*.<sup>32</sup>

In a logical continuation of this chapter, the following one – Chapter Six, titled “How is art studied as an academic discipline?” – provides another succinct panorama of names and publications that have significantly contributed to the construction of the art historical discourse, in general, and the configuration of Art History as a Eurocentric discipline, in particular. These two chapters display more prominently than any others, in the volume, the academic destination of this book and its functions as a source for undergraduate and graduate students. Written with a more compendary verve, Chapter Five presents, for instance, a series of concepts quickly outlined – sometimes too succinctly sketched, one must add – and adopts a recurrent name-dropping mode of discursive organization that does not give enough space to treat, with adequate attention, the enormous range of issues and the remarkable complexities of the arguments taken into consideration. Too often, in fact, this chapter provokes an uncomfortable feeling in the reader of generalization and simplification of matters, due to the exceedingly quick-paced rhythm with which intricate narratives and difficult problems are presented in a nutshell-styled formulation, to the point of sounding, sometimes, dismissively acritical. Particularly troubling are, in that regard, the paragraphs dedicated to authors of the caliber of Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Susan Sontag, and Michel Foucault, to quote just a few. While the brevity of these considerations – in which the reader may find only few lines of comment devoted to each one of these scholars – might be partly justified by the overarching theme addressed in this subchapter – that is, “On the questioning of the author in Literary Studies” – the excessive conciseness of these analyses seems to reflect the dynamics of a potential classroom, with students following a course on an introductory level, more than recall the argumentative pace of a scholarly conversation, with the consequence of a name-dropping rhythm that does not favour the development of a more critically-conducted reflection. Such a quick-paced model of presentation reveals the somewhat hybrid nature of this volume, thought primarily as a didactic instrument to be used within the boundaries of an academic circuit. While this feature was quite understandable for the original Portuguese publication, it could have been slightly

<sup>32</sup> Julius von Schlosser, *Die Kunstliteratur. Ein Handbuch zur Quellenkunde der neueren Kunstgeschichte*, Vienna: Kunstverlag Anton Schroll & Co, 1924; Udo Kultermann, *Geschichte der Kunstgeschichte. Der Weg einer Wissenschaft*, Frankfurt: Ullstein Sachbuch, 1981 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1966); Germain Bazin, *Histoire de l’histoire de l’art de Vasari à nos jours*. Paris: Michel, 1986.

altered, and accordingly adapted and revised, in the English translation (with the inclusion, for example, of scholarly notes), in order to fully achieve the ambitious goals of the book and its important 'decolonial' aspirations.

This mixed configuration of the volume – planned as an introductory essay for academic purposes and, at the same time, written as a highly specialized research – is even more evident in the final chapter, dedicated to “What is Brazilian art and how has it been studied?”. Within this panorama of culturally and geographically (de)centered studies, the author claims that “the particularity of the Brazilian case will help to establish throughout this book the question of decoloniality”.<sup>33</sup> As it has been already noted, the choice of the Brazilian context as the focus of the conclusive part of this complex, well written and stimulating book, allows Overhoff Ferreira to put together some of the most significant issues addressed in the previous chapters, presenting this case study as an example of the 'emancipatory potential' of the arts promoted by a 'decolonial perspective'. To quote the words of the author herself: “I would like to stress that this book's aim is to challenge the Eurocentrism in art studies by deconstructing the western discourse on art. [...] Accordingly, my main objective is to provide, from a critical and decentralising perspective, a first contact with the central debates and authors who, over the last 2,500 years, have tried to define, study and evaluate the arts in the west, as well as tell their stories not only in European countries but, with Brazil as an example, in parts of the world that were colonised by them”.<sup>34</sup>

This eloquent remark leads us to a final point of discussion, regarding the core of the examples selected, examined and deconstructed by the author with great acumen in this study: with very few exceptions, the artists and authors mentioned by the scholar, “over the last 2,500 years”, are all Europeans or Europe-based individuals. Given the genealogical nature of this analysis, it is not unexpected that almost all writers, philosophers, scholars and artists considered in the book are Europeans, except in the chapter devoted to Brazilian art and in few paragraphs of Chapter One. On the other hand, it would be naïve, if not blatantly misleading, to assume that every Europe-originated art creation or discourse must be inevitably labelled as 'Eurocentric'. It is clear, in fact, that the critique conducted by the author is based on a genealogical paradigm, in a Foucaultian sense, and, consequently, the massive use of European protagonists may be seen as a tool to deconstruct – from within – the potentially Eurocentric guidelines that have conditioned art historical narratives, even in the cases of non-European art phenomena. However, one could point out as well that, in virtue of the stringent connections between seeing and reflecting, thinking and acting postulated by the author, the reader may justly wonder why there are so few non-European examples incorporated in this

<sup>33</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 36.

discourse. With rare exceptions,<sup>35</sup> Brazilian art historians are brought up, for instance, only to discuss Brazilian-related matters and are, therefore, confined to the final chapter of the book, devoted to this particular cultural context. Intellectuals such as Heidegger, Rancière, Agamben, and even Vlusser (who could represent the only notable exception in this group, but, given the relevance of his debt to a Heideggerian tradition, is still profoundly connected to a European circuit of ideas and studies) seem to have undertaken lines of analysis that undoubtedly contributed to the emergence of this new critical approach, that is, the 'decolonial perspective', regardless of their European origins. Nevertheless, a non-European reader and a multi-ethnic, pluri-national mind could imagine how views, ideas and concepts coming from different cultural settings, in response to a variety of different art-related stimuli, might have further helped – and, perhaps, even more effectively contributed to – challenge the Eurocentric ideology investigated in the book. This hypothetical reader-model could wonder, and rightly so, what theoretical assumptions and frames of reference could have emerged had the author dialogued more consistently with ideas originated in non-European cultural contexts, in particular within those a-historical territories mentioned, but seldom actually heard throughout the study. While the voices of Foucault, Rancière, and Agamben are systematically heard and regarded as the promoters of theoretical premises, conceptual reflections and critical parameters that could be adopted in any global context, the voices of African writers, Indian art historians, Japanese intellectuals or Colombian scholars, for example, are never mentioned, let alone examined in these pages. In a study devoted to 'decolonial' perspectives this sounds at least disappointing, in spite of the clear explanations provided by the author in that regard, which had programmatically set this critical operation under the aegis of a deconstructive procedure and a genealogical approach.

After reading this ambitious excursus focusing on the survival of Eurocentric paradigms in current art practices and studies, one closes the volume with the impression of having been exposed to a kaleidoscope of scholarly remarks, sometimes developed in a very thoughtful manner, some others enunciated with problematic brevity. By the end of such an enriching journey, however, to prevail is – after all and in spite of the strenuous efforts of the author – a discourse centred on Europe-originated and Europe-reflective principles. Closed the door, Europe has jumped from the window and settled itself inside the room again. Despite its scholarly tour-de-force and its intelligent chapter organization, the book seems trapped in a conceptual circularity and theoretical cyclicity, not effectively disrupted by the inclusion of the somewhat ungraspable parameter of 'third space'. Overhoff Ferreira provides well-shaped, square solid arguments, but fails nevertheless to

<sup>35</sup> Brazilian scholars and researchers, such as Alberto Martins, Glória Kok, and Eduardo Viveiro de Castro, are mentioned in Chapter One, but in strict connection to forms of prehistorical presences in Brazilian territories or in the context of an analysis focused on the "Ameridian a-historical thought". See, Overhoff Ferreira, *Decolonial*, 51-52.

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'decolonial' critique of art history

break the circularity of her discourse. At the end of this experience, the reader has certainly earned a clearer picture of the role played by European paradigms – and their ideological grounds – in the configuration of the creative and discursive universe called 'art'. Yet, once again, people and ideas from a-historical places have been kept away from this very attempt of narrative reassessment. Perhaps, a more cogent conversation with ideas, parameters, expectations and alternative concepts originating from different societies – beyond the matrix of thoughts provided by the European intellectual tradition – could have disclosed the opportunity for a more challenging and authentically pluralistic vision at the core of this relevant – indeed, urgent – project of 'decolonialisation'. Despite these issues and thanks to its multiple merits, the book by Carolin Overhoff Ferreira deserves serious attention and vivid interest, especially for its engendering a 'decolonial' approach that could assume, in the future, the function of a fully-articulated critical inquiry and become a model of (meta)analysis worth developing and cultivating on account of its preannounced emancipatory aims.

**Ricardo De Mambro Santos** is Professor of Art History and Film Studies at Willamette University (Salem, Oregon), where he is the chair of the Department of Art History. In addition to having taught Art Literature and Criticism for over a decade at the University of Rome, La Sapienza, and, as a Visiting Professor, at the University of Washington, Whitman College and the Tokyo International University of America, he has curated various exhibitions of Renaissance and Contemporary art both in Europe as well as in the United States. He is the author of several books and articles, including essays on Leonardo da Vinci, Giorgio Vasari, Karel van Mander, Hendrick Goltzius, Peter Paul Rubens and studies on art collectors such as Rev. George Ritschel and Count Alessandro Maggiori, along with publications dedicated to Film Studies (focusing, in particular, on Federico Fellini) and Art Historiography (with essays on Julius von Schlosser, Lionello Venturi and Tzvetan Todorov).

[rdemambr@willamette.edu](mailto:rdemambr@willamette.edu)



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