Eduard Ghiță[*]

"IT WAS A PLEASING REFLECTION TO SEE THE WORLD SO PRETTILY CHEQUER'D": AESTHETICS OF URBAN EXPERIENCE IN THE SPECTATOR[1]

Keywords*: everyday aesthetics; novelty; the sublime; urban studies; the imagination.*
Abstract*: Joseph Addison's 1712 collection of papers on the* Pleasures of the Imagination *has been read extensively as a founding statement of modern aesthetics. The great majority of studies take Addison's essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination to be a self-contained document which prevents their authors from turning their attention to The Spectator at large. As I turn my attention to the periodical at large, my aim in this paper is to show how the urban experience of Mr. Spectator was consequential in the emergence of a modern aesthetic discourse. First, I will present the views of Donald Newman, Martha Woodmansee, John Brewer and Wilhelm Dilthey, in order to support the view that the city could be envisaged as a condition for the aesthetic. This lends itself to extra-textual approaches to the periodical, tracing the importance of the social, political and economic contexts for the rise of aesthetics. A short introduction to the scope of aesthetics outside of art will help me recuperate the aesthetic dimension of Mr. Spectator's reflections on his urban environment. I will then start my analysis of the city as a source of the aesthetic. I argue that the locus of aesthetic theory, Addison's essays on the Pleasures of the Imagination, needs to be enlarged so as to accommodate Mr. Spectator's reflections on the city. Tracing back the findings in The Spectator at large to the imagination papers, I show how the metropolis offered Mr. Spectator an immediate space where his two most important aesthetic categories —the new and the great—would be played out.*

Joseph Addison's 1712 collection of papers on the *Pleasures of the Imagination* has been read extensively as a founding statement of modern aesthetics. Jerome Stolnitz for instance, recognized in Addison's essays the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness (Stolnitz 139), a concept only explicitly elaborated in Kant's Third Critique. Paul Guyer has named Addison the first thinker to have overtly employed the freedom of the imagination, a key concept in the development of much of Kant's aesthetic theory (Guyer 29-30). What these scholars have in common is a way of looking back at Addison's text in order to discover in it some hidden conceptual traces which make possible the founding of philosophical aesthetics. But it has to be acknowledged that these studies tend to overemphasize the somewhat unconvincing continuity of a concept in the history of ideas at the expense of wider and sometimes

[*] University of Louisville, The United States of America.
[1] Research for this paper was carried out with support from UEFISCDI Research Grant PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-1776.

illuminating contextual readings. These studies also take Addison's essays on the *Pleasures of the Imagination* to be a self-contained document which prevents their authors from turning their attention to *The Spectator* at large.

By paying attention to the contextual readings but also through an enlargement of the corpus to include *The Spectator* at large, my aim in this paper is to explore how Mr. Spectator's reflections on his urban environment helped to articulate a modern aesthetic discourse. My thesis is that the urban experience of Mr. Spectator was consequential in this development. Two intertwined facets are worth exploring here: the presence of the city as a *condition* for the aesthetic and the discourse on the city as a *source* of the aesthetic. As I turn my attention to the city as a context for the aesthetic, I will present some of the existent approaches without proposing any new theory. Most of the time, these are extra-textual approaches to *The Spectator,* as they trace the importance of the social, political and economic contexts for the rise of aesthetics. As I move toward my analysis of the city as a source of the aesthetic I will make a short introduction to the scope of aesthetics outside of art. This will help me recuperate the aesthetic dimension of Mr. Spectator's reflections on his urban environment. I also argue that these findings need to be understood in light of Addison's aesthetic theory in the *Pleasures of the Imagination*. The result is the view that the metropolis, through its great size, phenomenal growth and diversity of population, offered the immediate space where the two most important categories of pleasures—the pleasures from what is new and the pleasures from what is great—would be played out.

When I say that the city was a context for the aesthetic, I mean that the development of modern aesthetics, as brought about by *The Spectator,* was an essentially urban phenomenon. The essays were urban in virtue of where they were originally published. *The Spectator* was a periodical essay authored by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele and released in London between 1711 and 1712. Taking into consideration the target audience of these texts, as well as the social, political and periodical history, there are several related contextual approaches which crop up. Donald Newman's work *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses* announces this change of perspective and as he puts it: "some historians and literary scholars have begun investigating *The Spectator*'s relationship with an expanding middle class in a rapidly developing urban culture where traditional cultural authorities were weakening, capitalist values where on the ascendant, and a gender ideology that domesticated women was being refined" (Newman 12).

As early as 1994, Martha Woodmansee's work was ready to offer an alternative to those studies in the history of aesthetics which tended to forget the communicative setup of Addison's essays. According to her, Addison's *Pleasures of the Imagination* has to be read with greater sensitivity to this context. If read properly, Addison's papers on the imagination is not so much a text on aesthetics as it is a pedagogical project, a work of literature born as a solution to the problem of leisure (Woodmansee 6). By inquiring into the target audience of this text, she finds out that it was comprised chiefly of a rising class of bankers, merchants and manufacturers who had recently achieved a modicum of leisure enjoyed by the aristocracy and they were still in the process of developing ways to fill it (Woodmansee 88). It is arguable whether Woodmansee's position really cancels out the claim that Addison's essays

are a founding document of modern aesthetics. No doubt that her foray is inimical to those who willingly or not choose to read Kantian concepts into Addison's text, but what she does not really dismiss is the possibility that the problem of leisure, as she calls it, might have paved the way for the aesthetic *par excellence*.

John Brewer has stressed the political and economic context for the rise of fine arts in England and he has insisted that this rise was the triumph of a commercial and *urban society*, not the achievement of a royal court (Brewer 7): "It was the political as well as economic condition of England—its weak monarchy, free constitution and rule of law—which helped create literature and performing arts that aimed for the public and were organized commercially rather than being confined to a few" (Brewer 9). Long before any of the scholars above could write down their thoughts, German historian Wilhelm Dilthey put forth his insights in a text called *The Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics* (1892). Dilthey wrote:

> Here […] [in England], a transformation of the social order – accomplished through the English revolution of 1688 – was the basis of an altered attitude among people, and this attitude then simultaneously influenced the arts and aesthetic reflection. In this land of industry, commerce, and political freedom, the power of autocrats, princes, and courtiers – a power bound by form, and inwardly motivated by aristocratic and feudal impulses – gradually lost its authority over the will and imagination of the people; the independent cultured gentleman began to be conscious of his worth (Dilthey 188)

The common denominator of these views (Newman, Woodmansee, Brewer and Dilthey) is the turning away from the study of conceptual continuities in the history of aesthetics and an emphasis on contextual readings. All these scholars also tend to acknowledge that the context was eminently urban.

Monroe Beardsley opened his celebrated 1958 book *Aesthetics, Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* with the bold statement that "there would be no problems of aesthetics, in the sense in which I propose to mark out this field of study, if no one ever talked about works of art" (Beardsley 1). This way of looking at the discipline by limiting its subject matter to the study of art has been later recognized as part of an analytic movement and its desiderata have been spelled out in such publications as Richard Shusterman's 1989 *Analytic Aesthetics*. In the introduction to this book, Shusterman seems aware and sometimes painfully so, that in "analytic aesthetics the bias toward art and neglect of nature is particularly pronounced" (Shusterman 8). He writes that the "tension between art and the aesthetic was usually swept deftly under the carpet by ignoring natural beauty and tacitly identifying the aesthetic with what relates to art and its criticism" (Shusterman 9). But philosophers like Ronald Hepburn, Arnold Berleant, Allen Carlson and Yuriko Saito, to name a few, through their works, have shifted the focus of aesthetics to the study of nature, the environment and even everyday life. Carlson writes that "although environmental aesthetics has developed as a sub-field of Western philosophical aesthetics only in the last forty years, it has historical roots in eighteenth and nineteenth century European and North American aesthetics" (Carlson). My paper is a contribution to the story of aesthetics outside of art.

Before plunging into the analysis of the city as the source of the aesthetic, I would like to bring into focus an important critical work on this topic. Brian Michael Norton's recent article "The Spectator and Everyday Aesthetics" sets out to demonstrate that Addison and Steele played a central role in developing a way of looking at the world that we would now identify as aesthetic and that this perspective was first applied not to art but to the otherwise ordinary experiences of everyday life (Norton 124-5). Norton's essay is important inasmuch as he affirms that the object of his study will go beyond the essays devoted explicitly to literary and aesthetic themes and will be sifting those that deal with "Mr. Spectator's experiences in and reflections on his natural and urban environments" (Norton 124). While this enlargement of the corpus is well received, what I believe is lacking is an attempt to understand Mr. Spectator's experiences and reflections on his urban environment in light of the aesthetic theory in the *Pleasures of the Imagination*. What is the connection between the urban environment in which these experiences were had and Addison's aesthetic categories of the new and the great?

At first glance, it would seem quite striking to claim that the urban has any bearing whatsoever on Addison's aesthetic theory in the imagination papers. This reserve might stem from the fact that Addison's vocabulary, as well as his theoretical foundation, does not overtly include reflections on his urban environment. Addison formulates his aesthetic theory in terms of "Primary" pleasures "which entirely proceed from such Objects as are before our Eyes" and "Secondary" pleasures "which flow from the Ideas of Visible Objects, when the Objects are not actually before the Eye, but are called up into our Memories […]" (Addison and Steele III:537). There is no direct reference to the urban environment in his aesthetic theory. Some may complain that the pursuit of the present topic would be a kind of departure from the actual scope of the imagination papers. In these papers, Addison does not really purport to explain the importance of the urban environment in one's aesthetic engagement with the world. Yet I would like to show that this view is incomplete. I argue that the *Pleasures of the Imagination* offers an aesthetic theory not complete of itself, but which remains yet to be filled with some of Mr. Spectator's most intense aesthetic intimations. Bearing this in mind, I argue that the metropolis offered Mr. Spectator an immediate space where his two most important aesthetic categories would be played out: the new and the great. I aim to trace the straightforward, but largely unacknowledged connections between these well-known categories of aesthetic pleasures, and how they are illustrated in the city.

In his papers on the imagination, Addison talks about the "Primary" pleasures which "arise from visible Objects" that we have currently in our view and the secondary pleasures when we "call up their Ideas into our Minds by Paintings, Statues, Descriptions, or any the like Occasion" (Addison and Steele III:537). As stated above, I will only limit my analysis to these primary pleasures to be had in the urban environment. In No. 412 (June 23, 1712), Addison considers how everything that is new and great is apt to affect the imagination with pleasure. He begins with an account of the pleasures from what is new or uncommon:

> Every Thing that is *new* or *uncommon* raises a Pleasure in the Imagination, because it fills the Soul with an agreeable Surprise, *gratifies its Curiosity*, and gives it an Idea

> of which it was not before possest. […] whatever is *new* or *uncommon* contributes a little *to vary Human Life,* and to divert our Minds, for a while, with the *Strangeness of its Appearance* […]. It is this that recommends *Variety*, where the Mind is every Instant called off to something new […] (emphasis added) (Addison and Steele III: 541)

He also notes that this kind of pleasure arises when "the *Scene is perpetually shifting,* and the entertaining the Sight every Moment with something that is new. […] such *Objects as are ever in Motion, and sliding away from beneath the Eye of the Beholder"* (emphasis added) (Addison and Steele III: 542). In order to understand the urban nature of this kind of pleasure, it would be useful to recount an episode of Mr. Spectator's reflections on his visit to Sir Roger De Coverley's country estate. Mr. Spectator surely looks down upon Sir Roger's only way of entertainment which is fox hunting. It is against the backdrop of this 'country sport' that Mr. Spectator defines the town as "the great Field of Game for Sportsmen of my Species" (Addison and Steele II:19). The contrast between town and country is imminent:

> I am here [in the countryside] forced to use a great deal of Diligence before I can spring any thing to my Mind, whereas in Town, whilst I am following one Character, it is ten to one but I am crossed in my Way by another, and put up such *a Variety of odd Creatures in both Sexes* that they foil the Scent of one another, and puzzle the Chace. My greatest Difficulty in the Country is to find Sport, and in Town to chuse it (emphasis added) (Addison and Steele II:19).

What kind of odd creatures were there in the town? A good answer would be Steele's comprehensive, and to some extent exaggerated list of the characters to be found in London:

> […] Scholars, Citizens, Courtiers, Gentlemen of the Town or Country, and all Beaux, Rakes, Smarts, Prudes, Coquets, Housewives […] and Persons of all Sorts of Tempers and Complexions, whether the Severe, the Delightful, the Impertinent, the Agreeable, the Thoughtful, Busy, or Careless; the Serene or Cloudy, Jovial or Melancholy, Untowardly or Easy; the Cold, Temperate, or Sanguine; and of what Manners or Dispositions soever, whether the Ambitious or Humble-minded, the Proud or Pitiful, Ingenious or Base-minded, Good or Ill-natur'd, Publick-spirited or Selfish; and under what Fortune or Circumstance soever, whether the Contented or Miserable, Happy or Unfortunate, High or Low, Rich or Poor, […] Healthy or Sickly, Marry'd or Single; nay, whether Tall or Short, Fat or Lean; and of what Trade, Occupation, Profession, Station, Country, Faction, Party, Perswasion, Quality, Age or Condition soever […] (Addison and Steele IV:53-4)

The resolution of some to leave the city completely and retire to the countryside is invalidated by Steele who asserts that "we can never live to our Satisfaction in the deepest Retirement, unless we are capable of living so in some measure amidst *the Noise and Business of the World*" (emphasis added) (Addison and Steele I:113). What Steele is doing here is to identify the sensory overload of the metropolis and then to reserve an aesthetic dimension to it by discovering the aesthetic

category of novelty. Scott Black has studied Addison's aesthetics of novelty and has argued for its centrality in relation to the city. He has concluded that "with the category of novelty, Addison theorizes the pleasures of *The Spectator*, and so provides an aesthetics for the emerging urban and urbane public space defined by the periodical essay" (Black 271). To return to the multitude of stimuli offered by the city, it is important to mention Dana Brand's study of the development of the flaneur in England. He writes: "In this bustling, thriving and increasingly diverse metropolis, ongoing economic changes created an [economic and cultural] environment favorable for the development of a culture of urban spectacle" (Brand 15). If the pleasures of novelty imply variety, then London's diversity, lack of unity and coherence played an important part in putting these pleasures on display: "[London is] an Aggregate of various Nations distinguished from each other by their respective Customs, Manners and Interests. […] the Inhabitants of St. *James's,* […] are a distinct People from those of *Cheapside*, who are likewise removed from those of the *Temple* on the one side, and those of *Smithfield* on the other, by several Climates and Degrees in their ways of Thinking and Conversing together" (Addison and Steele III:506). But Steele promised in No. 428 (July 11, 1712)

> a great Harvest of new Circumstances, Persons, and Things from this Proposal; and a World, which may think they are well acquainted with, discovered as wholly new. This Sort of Intelligence will give a lively Image of the Chain and mutual Dependence of Humane Society, take off impertinent Prejudices, enlarge the Minds of those, whose Views are confin'd to their own Circumstances […] (Addison and Steele IV:6-7)

The ethical overtone of this passage is clear if one bears in mind that the final cause of taking delight in anything that is new or uncommon is established by Addison to be the "Pursuit after Knowledge" (Addison and Steele III:545). To be delighted by the urban novelties of characters, persons and things would mean to immediately recognize the ideal of a polite gentleman. According to Black, the polite gentleman inhabits a discursive site in which disagreements could be bracketed in the name of peace, a peace in turn guaranteed by a shared commitment to a discourse of politeness (Black 284).

Apart from these pleasures from the new, presented above, London also offered pleasures of the uncommon and the exotic. When the four Mohawk Kings traveled from New York to London for a diplomatic visit in 1710, Addison did not lose the chance to dedicate a paper to the event: "[…] I often mix'd with the Rabble and followed them a whole Day together, being wonderfully struck with the Sight of every thing that is *new* or *uncommon*" (emphasis added) (Addison and Steele I:211). A journal was then discovered, containing the thoughts of one of the Indian kings, his incapacity to comprehend the life of the English especially their religious practice. But in return, Mr. Spectator points out that this might be the condition of his own readers: "[…] That we are all guilty in some Measure of the same narrow Way of Thinking, which we meet with in this Abstract of the *Indian* Journal; when we fancy the Customs, Dresses, and Manners of other Countries are ridiculous and extravagant, if they do no resemble those of our own" (Addison and Steele I:215)

I further argue that while the category of novelty offers a pleasure that arises from a definite object, the pleasure from the great arises from our response to the breadth of the scene that we strive to grasp as a whole. This would best explain why the modifier "great" was often attached to the metropolis. To better understand this, let us go back to an essay on the pleasures of the imagination where Addison makes it clear that "By *Greatness,* I do not only mean the Bulk of any single Object, but the *Largeness of a whole View*, considered as one entire Piece" (Addison and Steele III:540). It is true that his examples are entirely drawn from what he calls the stupendous works of nature: "the Prospects of an open Champian Country, a vast uncultivated Desart, of huge Heaps of Mountains, high Rocks and Precipices, or a wide Expanse of Waters […]" (Addison and Steele III:540). But he also defines greatness as originating in the view where "the Eye has Room to range abroad, to expatiate at large on the Immensity of its Views, and to lose it self amidst the *Variety of Objects* that offer themselves to Observation (Addison and Steele III:541). This could be in no way confined to natural environments. As I will show, *The Spectator* is replete with examples in which the metropolis can lend itself to such aesthetic reading. We have some precise textual evidence in No. 430 (July 14, 1712), in which Mr. Spectator is confronted with "the scandalous Appearance of Poor in all Parts of this wealthy City" (Addison and Steele IV:11). He goes on saying that "[s]uch miserable Objects affect the compassionate Beholder with dismal Ideas, discompose the Chearfulness of the Mind, and deprive him of the Pleasure that he might otherwise take in surveying the *Grandeur of our Metropolis*" (emphasis added) (Addison and Steele IV:11).

To be a spectator of the grand metropolis implied the vision of variety, but also the perpetual motion in the eye of the beholder so that one would lose oneself among the accumulated number of objects. In this sense, the most intense aesthetic experience to be had in the city is depicted by Steele in No. 454 (August 11, 1712). He begins by admitting that the city is an environment where people are strangers to one another: "It is an inexpressible Pleasure to know a little of the World, and be of no Character or Significancy in it" (Addison and Steele IV:98). But in no way does he turn this into a disadvantage. On the contrary, this is a catalyst for new pleasures: "To be ever unconcerned, and ever looking on *new* Objects with an endless Curiosity" (Addison and Steele IV:98). The rest of paper No. 454 is devoted to Mr. Spectator's visit to London with the professed aim of drawing no worldly advantage out of it, but simply for amusement. The aesthetic nature of the journey is inevitable when he confesses that the tour would last "Four and twenty Hours, till the many different Objects I must needs meet with should tire my *Imagination* […]" (emphasis added) (Addison and Steele IV:98). London unfolds into a series of captivating scenes, populated by: "Fruit Wenches", "Morning Rakes", "Chimney Sweepers", "Covent Garden Purveyors", "Coachmen", "Ladies", "Silk Worms", "Tradesmen", "Ballad Singers" and "People of Fashion" (Addison and Steele IV:99). One striking feature is the diversity of people populating the city according to different hours: "Men of Six a Clock give Way to those of Nine, they of Nine to the Generation of Twelve, and they of Twelve disappear, and make Room for the fashionable World, who have made Two a Clock the Noon of the Day" (Addison and Steele IV:99). The tour starts with a boat trip from Richmond to the city of London via the Thames. On the boat, Mr. Spectator

falls in with a group of gardeners traveling to several market-ports of London. He takes pleasure in the cheerfulness with which those people played their part to a certain sale of their goods. The next stop is the market at Covent Garden where Mr. Spectator takes delight in strolling from one fruit shop to another. He confesses wholeheartedly that "It was almost Eight of the Clock before I could leave that *Variety of Objects*" (emphasis added) (Addison and Steele IV:100). As Mr. Spectator is heading to the Royal Exchange, his most fundamental remark is that "it was a pleasing Reflection to see the World so prettily *chequer'd* since I left *Richmond*" (emphasis added) (Addison and Steele IV:101). This inescapable flux of characters, persons and things, has to be underlined here. The power that London held over the eighteenth-century English imagination is not difficult to understand, John Brewer says, and he describes it in the following manner: "Metropolitan life was […] about variety and difference, something that had to be confronted" (Brewer 51) […], "variety, energy, noise – these were the first impressions of visitors to London. They were astonished by its constant flow of humanity, which some of them found impossible to imagine as the routine of urban life and attributed to some special event" (Brewer 34).

The act of recovering the aesthetic dimension of Mr. Spectator's reflections on his urban environment, as well as the need to comprehend these reflections through Addison's aesthetic theory in the imagination papers, has reinforced the more general belief that the rise of the aesthetic in early eighteenth-century was not reducible to art. The city was present not only as a context for the periodical writer, without which important ideas about the aesthetic would not have proliferated, but it was also an immediate and everyday source of aesthetic pleasures. I believe that once the implications of this twofold statement are acknowledged, they will enrich our understanding of both Addison's innovative categories—novelty and greatness—and how these ideas came to the fore.

Works Cited

Addison, Joseph, and Richard Steele. *The Spectator*, Edited by Donald F. Bond, ed., vols. I-V, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.

Beardsley, Monroe. *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981.

Black, Scott. "Addison's Aesthetics of Novelty." *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 30.1 (2001): 269-88.

Brand, Dana. *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-century American Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.

Brewer, John. *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997.

Carlson, Allen, "Environmental Aesthetics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/environmental-aesthetics/>.

Dilthey, Wilhelm, and Rudolf Makkreel A. "The Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics and Its Present Task." *Selected Works*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U, 2002. 175-221. Print.

Guyer, Paul. "The Origins of Modern Aesthetics: 1711-35" *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*. Ed. Peter Kivy. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004. 15-44.

Newman, Donald J. "Introduction." *The Spectator: Emerging Discourses*. Newark: U of Delaware, 2005. 11-40.

Norton, Brian Michael. "The Spectator and Everyday Aesthetics." *Lumen Lumen: Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34 (2015): 123-136.

Shusterman, Richard. *Analytic Aesthetics*. Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1989

Stolnitz, Jerome. "On the Origins of 'Aesthetic Disinterestedness'" The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 20.2 (1961): 131-143.

Woodmansee, Martha. *The Author, Art, and the Market: Rereading the History of Aesthetics*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.