

Social aesthetics and plastic flowers in home-making processes

Estética social e flores de plástico nos processos de *home-making*

Estética social y flores de plástico en procesos de *home-making*

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Abstract: This article proposes a discussion, from an anthropological perspective, about social aesthetics in relation to plastic flowers – objects that Romanian Roma/Gypsy women use to embellish their *homes* in Spain. In the first part, the paper introduces *social aesthetics* and *everyday aesthetics* as notions which shed light on understandings of *aesthetics* beyond the parameters of paradigmatic art and which value the experiences relegated to the sphere of the trivial. This section traces some connections between aesthetics and notions of identity, habitus and power. In the second part, based on an ethnographic field research in Romania and Spain, the paper discusses the proposed concepts in relation to the role of objects like plastic flowers in processes of migration, of home-making and of contesting hegemonic narratives that subject Roma/Gypsy people to a domain of otherness.

Keywords: social aesthetics; Roma/Gypsies; material objects; home-making.

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Resumo: O presente artigo propõe, em uma perspectiva antropológica, uma discussão acerca do conceito de estética social em relação a flores de plástico – objetos que mulheres romenas ciganas usam para embelezar seus novos lares na Espanha. Na primeira parte, o texto introduz *estética social* e *estética cotidiana* como noções que valoram as experiências usualmente relegadas à esfera do trivial, trazendo à tona entendimentos de estética além dos parâmetros de arte paradigmática. Ainda, essa seção traça conexões entre estética e noções de identidade, *habitus* e poder. Na segunda parte, com base em uma pesquisa etnográfica na Romênia e na Espanha, desenvolvem-se os conceitos propostos em análise direta do papel que objetos como flores de plástico têm em processos de migração, de *home-making* e de contestação de narrativas hegemônicas que sujeitam pessoas romenas ciganas ao domínio da alteridade.

Palavras-chave: estética social; Roma/ciganos; objetos materiais; *home-making*.

Resumen: El presente artículo propone, en una perspectiva antropológica, una discusión sobre estética social en relación a flores artificiales (de plástico) – objetos que mujeres rumanas gitanas usan para adornar sus nuevos hogares en España. La primera parte introduce los conceptos *social aesthetics* y *everyday aesthetics*, que permiten un entendimiento de la estética más allá de los parámetros del arte paradigmático y valoran las experiencias relegadas a la esfera del trivial. También se articulan relaciones entre estética y conceptos como identidad, *habitus* y poder. Partiendo de una investigación etnográfica en Rumania y España, la segunda parte del artículo se enfoca en el análisis concreto del rol que objetos como flores artificiales tienen en procesos de migración y *home-making*, como también en contestaciones de narrativas hegemónicas que hacen de los rumenos gitanos sujetos de la otredad.

Palabras clave: estética social; Roma/Gitanos; objetos materiales; *home-making*.

INTRODUCTION

Aesthetics beyond the parameters of paradigmatic art has been underestimated and scholarly little explored. The sphere of everyday life, which constitutes the main focus here, has been relegated to the field of triviality, of the banal, considered to have no potentiality to trigger aesthetic experiences. This treatment resides mostly in the fact that the notion has been colonised by arts and by what it has been called “high culture”, which sees aesthetics intrinsically interlinked with manifestations of “beauty”. Departing from this critique, the first task of this paper is to shed light on those understandings of *aesthetics* as incorporated in our social lives and our everyday relationships with/-in the material worlds. “Social aesthetics” and “everyday aesthetics” constitute the core notions that will be theoretically explored. They will provide means for analysing the specific case of plastic flowers exhibited in flats inhabited by Roma migrants in Spain, analysis which constitutes the second task of this paper. Empirically, the analysis will rely on ethnographic material from the anthropological field research that I conducted among Roma people who migrate/-ed to Spain looking for a better life. In particular, I will draw on my observations, photographs and conversations with Romanian women who in 2015 were living in Zamora, Gernika and Callosa d’en Sarrià (Spain) and had the kindness to host me in order pursue these research endeavours².

² This empirical study was part of a broader project, namely my PhD research, which explored ethnographically notions of (non-)belonging, constitution of otherness and material attachments. It was conducted for more than six months among Romanian/Gypsy people from a north-eastern Romanian town which, for anonymity purposes, I call Rotoieni. The financial support for this research was provided by the Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen, Germany).

SOCIAL AND EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

The notion of social aesthetics, as developed by the visual anthropologist David MacDougall (1999), does not refer to beauty or art, but to “valuation of sensory experience” in relation to people’s aptitude to identify the familiar from the unfamiliar (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 5). The development of this concept emerged in the context of the video study of a boys’ boarding school – Doon School –, that MacDougall carried out in northern India. Arguing for the importance of understanding the social environment and the setting of human life “in experiential terms,” MacDougall states that it is not enough to approach these dynamics only through exploring written material, museum exhibitions or visual material (photography, video, etc.). In addition, what is important in analysing the setting in which social relationships happen is the “sensitivity to the aesthetics of community life” (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 4). In approaching the study of the Doon School as the study of a community, MacDougall counts as elements which constitute its social aesthetics the following:

The design of buildings and grounds, the use of clothing and colours, the rules of dormitory life, the organisation of students’ time, particular styles of speech and gesture, and many rituals of everyday life that accompany such activities as eating, school gathering, and sport (itself already a highly ritualised activity (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 5).

It is argued that such elements are often looked at from the perspective of broader socio-economic, political, historical or ideological dynamics that they are entrenched in. Although they may not be disconnected from these forces, MacDougall (1999) maintains that they should not be treated as symbolic manifestations or “residues” of these broad processes. In a bid to recognize their influence on people’s everyday decisions, actions and negotiation of identities, MacDougall intimates that the aesthetic dimension of human existence is “an important social fact, to be taken seriously alongside such other facts as economic survival, political power, and religious belief” (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 5).

Theorisations of social aesthetics have been also connected to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus. Composed of objects and practices, the realm of social aesthetics can be understood as “the physical manifestations of the largely internalised and invisible ‘embodied history’ that Bourdieu calls *habitus*” (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 5). According to MacDougall (1999), what differentiates the two of them is the treatment of “physiognomy.” While habitus establishes that physiognomy is “a system of structured, structuring dispositions” (BOURDIEU, 1990, p. 52 *apud* MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 5), social aesthetics understands it in relation to all what surrounds us in terms of “dispositions of time, space, material objects, and social activities” (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 6).

The social anthropologist Sarah Buckler (2011), in her book about Gypsiness in North East England, has also discussed social aesthetics in relation to habitus. Buckler emphasises the individual agency in dealing with the embodied knowledge that people acquire in the social contexts in which they grow up and live. Consider following quotation:

A social aesthetic standard refers to something that the experienced instructor knows and understands and can transmit to the novice. Habitus is described as an embodied sense of “fit” or the right/acceptable/appropriate way to behave, which is taught to us in ways that mould our bodies as well as language, and a part of which always remains in the unconscious of the individual and outside that individual’s power to choose their actions. In other words, social aesthetics are intentionally taught to us and become part of our acceptable and expected behaviour but are open to change, adaptation and deliberate flouting, whereas habitus is an unconsciously internalised way of behaving over which we have little conscious control (BUCKLER, 2011, p. 62).

What Buckler imputes to the notion of habitus is that it fails to acknowledge that “we do not become socialised into some determining prison of which we are unconscious”, that we become who we are in accordance to signs and meanings “by the use of which we can develop enormously subtle and complex relationships and which we can use, mould and manipulate to achieve our own personal projects” (BUCKLER, 2011, p. 64).

Apart from social aesthetics, a notion that seeks to make justice to the sphere of the familiar is “everyday aesthetics” developed by the Japanese (however trained in the United States) philosopher Yuriko Saito (2010). This notion is meant to turn the focus from art-centred aesthetics to everyday things deemed as being ordinary, trivial and laying “hidden in plain sight” (SAITO, 2010, p. 2). By developing an action-oriented rather than a contemplation perspective on aesthetics, Saito attempts to explore “the power of aesthetics” and their moral, social, political or environmental ramifications (SAITO, 2010, p. 22).

In denouncing the academic neglect of “everyday aesthetics”, Saito takes a feminist approach considering that many of the activities regularly assigned to the female sphere – like chores, domestic and mothering activities – have been disregarded due to their alleged “ordinary and mundane nature” (2010, p. 4). Thus, Saito’s main endeavour is to “restore aesthetics to its proper place in our everyday life and to reclaim its status in shaping us and the world” (SAITO, 2010, p. 12).

The aesthetics of everyday life has also been referred to in the context of a critique of the arts domain, which tends to marginalise the so called “low senses” – touch, smell and taste (DIACONU, 2006). Diaconu critically argues that modern aesthetics attributed to touch, smell and taste the incapacity to offer pleasant stimuli and to “achieve the status of art objects.” However, what Saito’s view adds to this standpoint is that aesthetics is not only about “pleasant stimuli,” but about “any reactions we form toward the sensuous and/or design qualities of any object, phenomenon, or activity” (SAITO, 2010, p. 9), including “unpleasant experience characterised as depressing, disgusting, or dreary” (SAITO, 2010, p. 10).

What both notions – social aesthetics and everyday aesthetics – signal is that their elements shall not be divorced from their daily use or practicality. While Saito (2010, p. 27) argues that the aesthetic value of objects should be found in their everyday use, without disconnecting them from their practical significance and utilitarian rationale, MacDougall warns that the isolation from their practical meaning implies the risk of awarding them “excessive symbolic importance” (1999, p. 11). Not divorcing them from their actual contexts allows for an understanding of elements and objects of everyday life as part of multi-sensorial ways of experiencing the world, beyond the contemplative. The example of a chair is provided by Saito to illustrate the different ways of experiencing such an object, not only by “inspecting its shape and colour, but also by touching its fabric, sitting in it, leaning against it, and moving it to get the feel for its texture, comfort, and stability” (SAITO, 2010, p. 20).

It becomes clear that the notions of social aesthetics and everyday aesthetics refer to how we experience the world around us through all our senses and to the emotions that these experiences trigger. In this sense, MacDougall emphasises that by creating a social aesthetics of the Doon School he does not mean the creation of “a system of signs and meanings encoded in school life, but rather the creation of aesthetic spaces of sensory culture” (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 9). Differently, social aesthetics is not about reading signs and meanings, as a cultural text, but it is rather about how individuals’ sensorial experiences reveal much more than any interpretation that history, ideology or other hegemonic discourses might place on particular objects (or elements of social aesthetics) (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 9). In fact, the etymological analysis of the word *aesthetics* shows that the term is tightly connected to senses and emotions. The cultural anthropologist Nadia Seremetakis (1996) explains that in Greek:

The word for senses is *aesthísis*; emotion-feeling and aesthetics are respectively *aésthima* and *aesthitikí*. They all derive from the verb *aesthánome* or *aesthísome* meaning I feel or sense, I understand, grasp, learn or receive news or information, and I have an accurate sense of good and evil, that is I judge correctly. *Aesthesis* is defined as action or power through the medium of the senses, and the media or the *semía* (points, tracks, marks) by which one senses. *Aésthima*, emotion feeling, is also an ailment of the soul, an event that happens, that impacts on one viscerally through the senses (SEREMETAKIS, 1996, p. 4-5).

Seremetakis provides an interesting insight on senses as “meaning-generating apparatuses that operate beyond consciousness and intention” (1996, p. 6). Seen as such, “the interpretation of and through senses becomes a recovery of truth as collective, material experience”, of a truth based on the “corporate communication between the body and things, the person and the world,” revealed not linguistically, but “through expression, performance, material culture and conditions of embodiment” (SEREMETAKIS, 1996, p. 6). Thus, for Seremetakis a social aesthetics is “embedded in, and inherited from, an autonomous network of object relations and prior sensory sensations” (SEREMETAKIS, 1996, p. 7) that supposes a cross-communication between things and senses.

What is particularly interesting for the purposes of this paper is the idea of “local aesthetic sensibility” that both MacDougall (1999) and Saito (2010) refer to. Saito for instance writes:

Japanese aesthetics, which happens to reflect my cultural upbringing, also cannot be separated from the everyday. [...] I find that there is a prevailing aesthetic sensibility that permeates everyday objects and activities such as cooking, packaging, and seasonal celebration (SAITO, 2010, p. 3).

Similarly, MacDougall brings into the discussions the question of “local aesthetic sensibilities” in relation to individuals’ sense of belonging, suggesting that “those that draw their membership from varied backgrounds, or that need to contain serious internal divisions, may find in the sharing of a strong aesthetic experience a unifying principle” (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 6). MacDougall’s view, more than Saito’s, is predisposed towards showing the ideological and power related implications of something that lays so much at intersection between individual dispositions and structural conditions like aesthetic sensibilities. Consider the following quotation:

Appeals to the aesthetic sensibility may also be a means of social control, as in totalitarian states that create a powerful repertoire of public rhetoric and ritual. It does not follow that these states are particularly interested in the arts; indeed, rather than encouraging artistic experimentations, their attitude is more likely to be conservative and prescriptive (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 6).

The work of Anne Allison (1997) on the ideological meanings of *Obentōs* is an example that shows the relation between aesthetic sensibilities and the ways either in which state prescriptions are enforced or in which social control is exerted on individuals. *Obentōs* – boxed lunches that Japanese mothers prepare for their children to carry to the nursery – is discussed as an everyday practice invested with gendered state ideology which prescribes what to be a good mother means. Based on Louis Althusser’s conceptualisation of power “as a force which operates in ways that are subtle, disguised and accepted in everyday social practice” (ALLISON, 1997, p. 297), it is reminded that culture is not certainly innocent,

just as power is not transparent. Allison concludes that “food is coded as a cultural and aesthetic apparatus in Japan,” and that *Obentōs* constitute “a routine, task and art form of nursery school culture” through which the state indirectly, though uncoercively, control and “manipulate” individuals (ALLISON, 1997, p. 297).

Far from essentialising cultures and suggesting that it is something like “aesthetic sensibility” that make people belong to or identify with a certain community or group, it is still relevant to discuss it in relation to how the material texture of the world in which we live shapes the experiences and negotiations of who we are. Differently, “aesthetic sensibilities” have to do with material and socio-economic circumstances that determine our appreciations of, preferences for and engagement with, what constitutes the realm of our everyday life.

ROMA/GYPSY PEOPLE MIGRATING TO SPAIN

People who in the European Union (EU) institutional vocabulary are called generically (and politically correct) *Roma* are amongst the most impoverished and discriminated European citizens, and constitute the biggest ethnic minority in Europe. In Romania, one of the countries with the highest rates³ of Roma/Gypsies in Europe, people self/-identified as such, have been historically treated as “the other from within” and subjected to exclusionary practices on many levels EU institutional vocabulary until today. But the question “who are *the Roma people*?” is a question that preoccupied and still does many scholars whose work is complicated by the diversity of histories, socio-cultural and linguistic features of the people who are identified or identify themselves with the label Roma/Gypsies. To be more concrete, the Roma/Gypsies with who I conducted my research belong to a group called *Ursari*⁴. This “group” is associated with the history of nomadism of Roma/Gypsies who, until mid-19th century, on the territories of nowadays Romania were slaves. Due to sedentarisation policies implemented throughout the decades after their emancipation from slavery (second half of the 19th century), in our days there is hardly any Roma/Gypsy group practicing nomadism in Romania.

Today the *Ursari* from Rotoieni⁵ – the north-eastern Romanian locality where I carried out a six-month ethnographic field research – engages in activities that are contingent to global and local economic dynamics which shape their access to the local labour market and the local labour market itself. The post-1989 changes, such as the closure of the big state companies, agriculture cooperatives and factories, affected the Roma/Gypsy people, who were the first ones in losing their jobs and in having to find alternative, sometimes informal, ways to support their families. Similarly, such dynamics of privatisation and of market liberalisation impacted the occupational status of those who used to engage in the so-called “traditional practices” (such as manufacturing combs or aluminium pots), which stopped being sources of income. One of the major effects of these global dynamics was the massive migration of Eastern Europeans, in this case Romanians, Roma and non-Roma, to Western European countries, which seemed to promise better access to jobs and to a higher

³ Statistics from 2009 showed that Roma/Gypsies constituted 8.32% from the population of Romania, which at that time counted 22.246.862 citizens (EUROPEAN NETWORK AGAINST RACISM, 2011).

⁴ Etymologically, the word *Ursari* originates from the Romanian word *urs*, which means “bear.” The definition provided by the *Historical Dictionary of the Gypsies (Romanies)* states that *Ursari* constitute “the name of several clans of Gypsies who traditionally trained bears and of at least two distinct dialects of Romani” (KENRICK, 2007, p. 285).

⁵ Rotoieni is located in Iași County, approximately 390 km north from Bucharest, the capital city of Romania.

standard of living. In this context, many Roma/Gypsies from Rotoieni migrated to Spain (among other countries), temporarily or permanently, looking for a better living.

Returning to the focus on social aesthetics that this paper is concerned with, the questions that is going to be explored in the following section is how migrant Romanian Roma women negotiate their feeling of home while making a living in Spain, far from what they call “their birth place.” Moreover, what role do elements of social and/or everyday aesthetics play in these negotiations? To explore these questions I will focus on the analysis of the plastic flowers – one of the objects that I identified in almost all the flats that I visited in Spain and that were inhabited by Roma families from Rotoieni.

PLASTIC FLOWERS AND MAKING A HOME IN SPAIN

Liliana

The figure 1 illustrates a corner from Liliana’s flat in Gernika, where in 2015 she was living with her husband and their two children. Liliana, in her mid-40s, travelled to Spain for the first time in 2006 with the help of her brothers who were already there. A year later, she brought all her six children, since, in her words, she did not want her family to be separated. The first struggle that she and her extended family went through was the lack of adequate housing, having to live in improvised, informal and overcrowded shelter. However, with support from the local social system, Liliana and her family moved to a three-room flat which she referred to as a place of her own. “You see what’s here? Apart from the furniture it’s all mine!” is what Liliana enforced when I asked about the household items that were in the flat. “When you rent a flat here, you get it almost empty; I equipped it with everything!,” stressed in a manner that suggested a feeling of being comfortable and safe in a place that she *made*.

Figure 1 – Liliana’s flat in Gernika (Spain)



Source: author’s personal archive, August 2015

Most of the plastic flowers that she had were located in the big kitchen, which she had arranged as a living room and where most of the everyday life activities were taking place (daily visits of Liliana’s relatives, cooking, eating together, children doing homework, watching television, etc.). She gladly recalled that most of her plastic flowers were decorative items from events like her son’s wedding and her grandson’s baptism that they celebrated. In her words, “only with our Romanians, so that we could speak our [Romanian] language.” In contrast to what I had projected previously, Liliana, as well as the other women I talked to, had only few things brought from Romania to her new place in Spain. Liliana commented: “I only brought two wall-carpets from home. [...] What else shall I bring from Romania? On

the contrary, what I am doing is collecting stuff to take back home [to Rotoieni].” She took me then to one of her wardrobes, opened the doors and showed me the amount of sheets, blankets, covers and other similar items that she was collecting with the idea of taking back *home* to Romania.

Cosmina

I also met Cosmina, a woman in her early 30s (Liliana’s sister-in-law), who at that time was living in a four-room flat with her mother-in-law, her husband and their three children, all younger than 5. In Cosmina’s flat, the plastic flowers were all around: on the corridor walls, on tables or on the margins of beds from the sleeping rooms, in the kitchen (which, again, was rather used as a living room), including in a small room which seemed to serve only for depositing extra pieces of furniture, religious icons and other small-sized decorative figurines.

Figure 2 – Cosmina’s flat in Gernika (Spain)



Source: author’s personal archive, August 2015

Cosmina and her husband have expressed their content with their life in Gernika emphasising that what they are able to offer to their children there (in terms of consumption patterns, school system, food, etc.) would be impossible to offer them while living in Romania. However, just as many other Romanian migrants, they aimed at and succeeded in building a new house in Rotoieni, where they plan to go back “when there will be no way to stay here.” The fear that “a national law might throw out us all [the migrants] from here” is common among my research participants, nurturing the motivation to be constantly investing in their *home* in Romania. Cosmina’s plastic flowers were also bought there, in Gernika, and nothing from what they had in their flat was brought from Romania. “Bringing from there?” she asked rhetorically, “not at all, because I want to have something that I like, [not something that I used to have in Romania]. So, if I see something I go, I buy and perhaps I take it home later. I rather buy from here to take home, not the way around.”

Speranța

It was in 2009 that Speranța arrived in Zamora for the first time with her husband, with the hope to work for one to two months, and then to return to Rotoieni with savings that would have enabled them to enlarge their house. At that time, back in Romania, they used to share a two-room house with Speranța's mother and their five children, all underage. They ended up working sporadically for a year before returning to Rotoieni and deciding to move with all their children to Spain. In 2015, when I visited Speranța, she was in her late 30s, living in a four-room flat with her partner, her sister-in-law and with five of her children, the eldest one living there too with his wife and their two-year-old child.

Figure 3 – Speranța's flat in Zamora (Spain)



Source: author's personal archive, August 2015

Most of the time that I spent with them was in the room that she organised as a living room. As seen in figure 3, plastic flowers were also the main decorative items together with framed photographs of beloved family members or other stuff that, as she said, were bought from local Chinese stores. Asking about the plastic flowers meant opening a box of memories about her everyday life in Rotoieni:

I got them [the plastic flowers] from the Chinese. They're about two euro, two fifty... and when Sundays I'd get the chance, I'd get flowers for myself. That's how I collected them. [...] That's how I used to arrange [my house] at home too. I used to like flowers a lot, just that at home I'd have the original ones [natural, not the plastic ones]. I used to have only one room, a bed, a bed settee – which during the day would become a sofa so that we had more space in the house [room]. I had a cooker, the gas bottle, a table and a small closet, but a small one because for a big one I did not have enough space. In the middle, I had a table, a small one on which sometimes we'd eat together. And like I have here, I used to have a beautiful carpet on the floor and two carpets on the walls. I was asking my sister-

in-law, who was a child at that time, to steal flowers for me to put inside the house. I liked so much the lilac, when it was its season there was no way that I wouldn't have lilac in my house⁶.

What Speranța's words indicate is what I had already observed considering my previous stay among the Roma from Rotoieni, namely that people who move abroad tend to arrange, decorate and use their new inhabited space(s) in ways that are similar to their engagements in household practices back in Romania. However, this should not be read as a predisposition to "traditionalism" or conservatism, but rather in the context of the broader home-making processes, which cannot be disconnected from who we used to be before plunging into a migratory experience of any kind.

PLASTIC FLOWERS – VIEWING AND TOUCHING SOCIAL AESTHETICS

Recalling Saito's notion of everyday aesthetics which articulates an action oriented approach (SAITO, 2010, p. 4-5), what the short stories of Liliana, Cosmina and Speranța indicate is their engagement with the space(s) that they and their families inhabit and their important role in mediating the process of home-making. The plastic flowers will be discussed here as material objects through which social aesthetics, "as both backdrop and product of everyday life" (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 11) will be approached in relation to the Romanian Roma women's engagements in the process of making a home in Spain.

In understanding home I rely on approaches that emerge from the critical geography thought deems home as a process "of creating and understanding forms of dwelling and belonging," a process which supposes both "material and imaginative elements" and is created through social and emotional relationships (BLUNT; DOWLING, 2006, p. 23). In the context of transnational migration dynamics, Datta and Brickell (2011) propose the notion of translocality, which deconstructs the idea of home as a single-locale enrooted experience. They argue for a view on home as "multi-faceted and multiscalar, negotiated in the in-between spaces of migration" (DATTA; BRICKELL, 2011, p. 74), as "an actual place or nodal point of social relations and lived experience" (DATTA; BRICKELL, 2011, p. 27). Placing it in the context of a critique of transnationalism, Brickell and Datta argue that "translocality" takes "an 'agency oriented' approach to transnational migrant experiences" (DATTA; BRICKELL, 2011, p. 3).

It is an agency oriented approach that Saito proposes too in her theorisation of everyday aesthetics intimating that any reaction that stimulates us to take actions, "such as cleaning, (re)moving, purchasing, and so on" is aesthetic (SAITO, 2010, p. 10). Thus, I discuss my Roma research participants' action of purchasing plastic flowers and decorating their inhabited flats in Spain in relation to this understanding of aesthetics. I read the use of plastic flowers as decorative items in their flats abroad as a means through which the women create a sense of home. They craft a space which, visually and materially, is alike the spaces that they inhabited back in their country of origin.

These objects have no particular signification in themselves or a specific biography that would charge them with certain symbolism. As shown before, all these flowers were purchased during their living in Spain and none of these women agree on that bringing stuff from their house in Romania would make sense as things should be rather "taken back" than "brought from there." This allows me to suggest that the plastic flowers acquire signification as they play an important role in the practice of "making their place" and of creating an "atmosphere of home." Atmosphere here is understood as "an external effect,

⁶ Author's free translation of the original text in Romanian.

instantiated in perception, of social goods and human beings in their situated spatial ordering” (LÖW, 2008, p. 25).

At the same time, it could be argued that embellishing their inhabited space(s) with these objects enables the materialisation of what was earlier called as “aesthetic sensibility.” Without suggesting that the aesthetic sensibility is something innate, with which people are born and which essentially shape any decision or action they might take, I use it as a notion which triggers a reflection about the personal understandings of what looks desirable and pleasant. And these understandings might coincide or not with what *others* (in terms of class, ethnic, gender, etc.) evaluate as such. For example, all the women I referred to earlier implied that their use of plastic flowers enables them to make the inhabited space look “*frumos*”, which in Romanian means “beautiful.” Thus, the use of plastic flowers could be interpreted as the manifestation of a practice “transported” from Rotoieni into their new place of living, but at the same time as the materialisation of an embodied understanding of what “beautiful” means.

Considering that what is “beautiful” in this case addresses the vision (the plastic flowers make the flat “looks” nicer), we could agree with Cristina Grasseni, who argues that the capacity to look in a certain way is a result of training. She defines vision (like all the other senses) as “an embodied, skilled, trained sense that characterises (certain) practices,” which “needs educating and training in a relationship of apprenticeship” (GRASSEN, 2004, p. 41). In my discussions with the earlier quoted women and with other Roma women in Rotoieni, many of them invoked their mothers’ ways of organising the house from whom they suggest they have gotten the sense of what a “beautifully arranged house” means.

Nonetheless, their accounts have never lacked of reflections on what has changed in the way that they currently engage in household practices considering the “contemporary home-making standards” (BLUNT; DOWLING, 2006, p. 118). For example, many of my Roma research participants talk about items like wall-carpet⁷ as being out-fashioned and “discordant” (SEREMETAKIS, 1996, p. 21) with the “modern” standards of decorating the house. This reminds of Buckler’s emphasis, that, in comparison to *habitus*, social aesthetics stresses the individual agency and the individual consciousness as regards how we do the things. MacDougall insightfully states:

The aesthetic sense would then be seen as a regulatory feature of our consciousness, telling us when to be pleased and content or, on the contrary, anxious, disgusted, or fearful. It would be accepted as one among the many regulatory systems of society although considerably less specific than, for example, kinship or customary law (MACDOUGALL, 1999, p. 11-12).

This viewpoint that relates social aesthetics to power rapports provides means to briefly reflect on how Gypsiness is constituted as racialised otherness on the local level. Non-Roma in Rotoieni speak often about “the Gypsies’ exuberant character” as being materialised on the level of their inhabited space. They emphasise what they call “the Gypsies’ bad taste” and an innate preference for bright colours and exaggeration in decoration, a predisposition towards emulation and a proclivity to display fake wealth. More than that, in an essentialising

⁷ About the Romanian uses of the word *frumos*, Adam Drazin writes the following: “*Frumos* is so ubiquitous a term that it can be used to describe almost any situation or thing, like the word ‘nice’. Tidying up an apartment for visitor is making the place *frumos*; smartening oneself up, or putting on make-up, is making oneself *frumos* (*frumoasă* for women); a good atmosphere at a part or concert is *frumos*. The work of making people and places *frumos* can be described in different ways: housework is commonly referred to as *curațenia* [cleanliness] in Suceava; another term might be *îngrijire* (caring), which may refer to taking care of the family, or of the home, or of one’s person” (DRAZIN, 2002, p. 111).

manner that reduces everything to Roma people's ethnicity, non-Roma accuses Roma of not wanting and not being able to adjust their life-styles to contemporary ideas of what is a "normal" home such as "simplicity" and "practicality" (GARVEY, 2003, p. 250).

In this context, one could say that the practice of embellishing their inhabited space with colourful plastic flowers constitutes one way of engaging with such narratives about Roma/Gypsies, both by confirming and contesting them. I suggest that it is a practice which contests hegemonic principles that establish what is "normal" and contemporary as regards the standards of home-making. Differently, the use of plastic flowers – that the non-Roma in Rotoieni (but not only) would catalogue as "ostentatious" – could be interpreted as a practice that subverts certain politics of normality which are highly enforced by those (the non-Roma) who subject them (the Roma) to a position of otherness.

This dynamic shows that subjects who are relegated to the realm of otherness are not passive actors who simply internalise representations about them as being insurmountably "different" and who suffer the consequences of subjectifying processes. But they actively engage with such subjectifying narratives by contesting and destabilising them.

CLOSING CONSIDERATIONS

The plastic flowers that colourfully reign the living space, visibly present all around inside the flats, seem to be here materialisations of Roma women's engagements with subjectifying narratives as those earlier invoked. In relation to power, MacDougall writes: "The aesthetics of power is thus as much an enactment of power as a representation of it, and is codeterminate with a wider range of activities and social relationships, each with its own aesthetics manifestations" (1999, p. 12). However, the plastic flowers enthusiastically exhibited in their rented flats from Spain by Roma women from Rotoieni could be rather considered aesthetic manifestations of contestation of subtle forms of power, as well as manifestations of women's agentiality in the whole home-making journey.

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