

Who Was Oscar Masotta? Response to Derbyshire

Philip Derbyshire ('Who Was Oscar Masotta? Psychoanalysis in Argentina', *RP* 158) should be commended for his insightful consideration of the literary and psychoanalytic writings of Oscar Masotta, one of the most important Argentine intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s. I would like to make a case for juxtaposing these texts with Masotta's idiosyncratic and interdisciplinary explorations of aesthetics, which included actual artistic production between 1965 and 1967 – years omitted from Derbyshire's account. This period lies directly between the early and later phases of Masotta's writing, the former being more focused on literary criticism, the latter on Lacan. I can offer two reasons for including Masotta's brief interest in art in any larger history of his output: first, a full picture of his relationship to foreign sources only becomes clear in light of these activities, and second, there is some intriguing shared ground.

Derbyshire characterizes Masotta as a would-be 'beacon author' who struggled with and reflected upon the obligatory 'mastery-effect' implicit in translating and interpreting foreign thinkers such as Lacan for his Latin American readership. Masotta's aesthetic production, however – his *El 'pop-art'* lectures of 1965, essays in the collection *Happenings* and quasi-manifesto 'Después del Pop: Nosotros desmaterializamos' (After Pop, We Dematerialize), both 1967, as well as four event-based artworks organized and executed in 1966 – does not translate or explicate textual sources so much as pilfer from and intermingle them to generate entirely novel critical and artistic models. From the start, he incorporated terms that he had previously applied to Lacan into his aesthetic theory. For example, 'code' and 'message' appear in Masotta's 1964 essay on Lacan ('The subject of psychoanalysis wanders for Lacan between the code ... and the message') as well as in his argument in the *El 'pop-art'* lectures a year later that Warhol's repeated silkscreens of advertisements and journalistic photography 'aim to make us feel the presence of the code'. Transposing Lacan's fixation on the signifier to Warhol, Masotta developed an aesthetic system in which the work of art's purpose was to direct attention to deep structure (code) at the expense of superficial content (message).



This system lay at the heart of Masotta's calls for a new genre of art that was designed to critique and demystify artistic, mediatic and political structures for a newly enlightened viewer. His initial target was the happening, at that time the object of a media craze in Buenos Aires: chaotic, seemingly spontaneous participatory events. Masotta's artworks *Para inducir al espíritu de la imagen* and *El helicóptero* created situations in which the authenticity or presence of a given art-event was undermined. In the former, a group of seemingly impoverished people (actually played by actors) were put on display in an attempt to reveal their constructed identities; in the latter, a flyover by a helicopter was scheduled to be seen by only some of the participants, who were then obligated to describe the event to the others, converting it into information. These works were described and explained at length in Masotta's own writings (he was artist and critic in one). They promote a structuralist awareness of one's imbrication with structures of language and power, albeit in formats and contexts that would have been alien to Lacan himself.

Between 1965 and 1967 Masotta was not content to dramatize the anxiety of influence brought on by the labours of the 'beacon author'. His engagement of contemporary art availed him to interdisciplinary critical strategies that, for a time, made him much more than a writer and a wholly independent source of ideas.

Daniel R. Quiles