

Listening to art: some considerations

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Ascoltare l'arte: alcune considerazioni

In this paper the author discusses the problem about fruition of art from the book edited by Sergio Givone and Graziella Magherini *Listening to Art. Figural Arts, Literature, Music* (in English translation: Nicomp, Firenze 2014). It deals with the theme of listening – a code which certainly characterizes very well both the world of art, in all its diverse forms, and the world of psychoanalysis. In both sectors, the term “listening” is understood in its broadest sense, as a disposition and openness towards the other and their opacity: opacity of the artistic creation, and the “opacity” characterizing the analyst-patient relationship and the relationship between a work of art and its public.

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The book which is the source of this discussion¹ deals with the theme of listening – a code which certainly characterizes very well both the world of art, in all its diverse forms, and the world of psychoanalysis. In both sectors, the term “listen” is understood in its broadest sense, as a disposition and openness one towards another and their opacity: opacity of the artistic creation and the opacity characterizing the analyst-patient relationship – a relationship which, as we know, is not one way, just as the relationship between a work of art and its public is not one way. But how is it possible today – or was it in the past, for that matter – to succeed in combining the idea of listening, with its overt and problematic aspects as well as its nuances, with the need for exactness and unambiguousness of an interpretation claiming to be “scientific”? In the book, the voices of psychoanalysis are compared and contrasted with those of aesthetics, neuroscience, literary criticism, musicology and even quantum physics. And the message, rightly so, highlights a substantial problematic nature of languages, related to the problematic nature and variability of works, contexts and audience. The epistemological model and methodological proposals can be nothing other than open and flexible and indeed require precisely the humility and spirit of being able to listen.

One aspect I would like to dwell on, both out of personal interest and because it provides me with the opportunity to engage in a dialogue with Graziella Magherini (who is here today), concerns the theme of “invariability and variability”, which the writer addresses in the second part of her paper *Re-Reading Art. A Psychoanalytical Model*.² On the one hand, we have psychoanalysis, which investigates precisely the “variables” of the aesthetic process and, in fact, multiplies them; thus demonstrating how the artistic experience is different for every subject every time, revealing ever new meanings and experiences capable of giving sense and depth to exquisitely individual approaches. On the other hand, we have to address the ideal of science to identify those fixed points (in physics, physiology and neurology) capable of providing certain and incontrovertible answers – only to then have to recant and acknowledge that even in its diverse sectors problematic exceptions have to be admitted. The constant temptation to simplify and the need for certainty have always been features of Man’s nature and partly explain his scientific spirit and the illusion of reductionisms. But this temptation also belongs, although in different ways, to art and its critical dimension, in that works appear in turn to aim for a permanent objective validity beyond the individual’s experiences and incalculable emotions.

Graziella Magherini’s paper is largely concerned with underlining the wealth and unpredictable nature, and therefore the *variability* of artistic fruition. This is characterized in the model which is proposed here by the interaction of contingent factors, or more precisely “the primary mother-child aesthetic experience, the uncanny, and the selected fact”. But this formula, as we heard in her own words, refers also to the

¹ Givone, Magherini (2012-2014).

² Ivi.

hypothesis of an F-factor which interprets and takes on this unrestrainable desire for constancy and invariability. I would like to dwell on this point, which appears crucial to me, and take up Graziella's conclusions as a starting point for some further and much freer reflection.

An intrinsically problematic point concerns the dynamics of the "selected fact": this, on the one hand, is something exquisitely subjective and unpredictable. It is bound to the context, to the personality and to personal background of the viewer and, on the other, it appears to belong to the work or to be something objective, in which the selected fact hides and on which it is nurtured. It is certainly in part like this, in the sense that every viewer can discover or project something in a work, or in some of its parts. Something, however, which belongs only to the viewer and to whom the work has, so to say, lent the opportunity to reveal itself. But if things were simply like this, the emotion the work transmits would not be qualitatively different from that of any other experience of fruition before any visual stimulus. Moreover, it is true that in determined situations, every image is capable of generating emotional responses which may be equated with the selected fact. The thinking is that there is a *tendential* correspondence between this selected fact and the specificity of the form and content of the work. And a correspondence of such a kind that has the capacity to express a "selected fact" valid for "all". I realize that hypothesizing a sort of universality of the selected fact is a kind of oxymoron, a contradiction of terms, but here too lies, deep down, the paradox of art.

We must hypothesize that the form and content of the work in its entirety have the potential to generate a selected fact which is different for every viewer, because to a certain extent the work contains it. Here, I'm talking about "form-content" in a wider sense, considering the diverse specificities of the themes addressed and the way in which they are organized, and therefore the formal and stylistic characteristics of the artistic work as well as its overall development, context, frame, layout and so forth. This is about foreseeing and hypothesizing as to the unpredictability of the subjective response, and the eventuality that there be instead a potential constancy in it, albeit in its diverse manifestations. That is, more precisely, as if the work contained a polyvalent structure capable of accommodating diverse responses, inserting them in one same horizon of sense thanks to an intrinsic receptive capacity of the work capable of guaranteeing an effectively intersubjective significativity.

I have already had the opportunity to partly address such questions by referring to T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative". That is, the artist is such only if he is able to find, for the expression of his own emotions, an equivalent, or more precisely an objective correlative capable of evoking in the reader emotions and analogous affections. If we transpose this formula into a psychodynamic perspective, we can say the reader's emotion is certainly in relation and correspondence to that of the author. It is stimulated and conveyed by the aesthetic form but fuelled by experiences which are the reader's own. This is in part what Freud argued with regard

the allurement function (“reward of seduction”) of the artistic form.³ But such a function does not have to be limited to, and considered solely within, the logic of a “*preliminary pleasure*” in that this “preliminary nature” can pertain to every type of emotion, as Marie Bonaparte had implicitly noted in her study on Edgar Allan Poe.⁴ This author – as it were – in fact succeeds in instilling in the reader, through the form and content of his tales, a “preliminary anguish” which certainly touches and feeds off certain profound experiences, attributing a value of originality to his experience of fruition.

In this sense, the selected fact is indeed suggested by the work, but its thrust comes from the viewer: that is, the work triggers an emotion corresponding to that of the artist, in the sense that it takes root in the same psychic constellation. However, it has its own specificity bound to the story and background of every viewer. At the same time the emotion is something objective and trans-individual, in that it expresses itself through shared mechanisms and languages. Among these also fundamental expressive forms such as the *memi* and the *Pathosformeln* undoubtedly enter the picture. These are referred to by Graziella Magherini, who also cites Jean-Pierre Changeux: “It is legitimate to think that, from infancy a rich repertoire of expressive forms develops spontaneously in Man. These forms are reproduced and recognized above all in the non-verbal communication babies have with their mother and their like. Many of these elements are similar in diverse cultures.”⁵

This hesitation, the threshold between private and public, between what is subjective and what belongs to a social and collective dimension, characterizes the dynamic which we experience before dreaming and then in the joke, where those same purely subjective psychic processes come into play and connect with the objectivity of the shared codes. We may hypothesize that the selected fact, considered as a response by the observer which lies inside the personal psychic event, therefore mirrors, to a certain degree, in its formation processes (and not certainly in its effects) the dream mechanisms – at least as for what happens in the dreamer’s psyche is concerned. In fact dreams, beyond their unconscious meanings, similarly to what occurs in the logic of the selected fact, are, however capable of giving shape to the intimate emotions of the subject. The dream-work, in the organization and packaging of its materials (ie, in the construction of the specificity and uniqueness of the “manifest content”) uses in fact the “day’s residues” (which are like the bricks with which the dream scene is built) and they, despite their absolute randomness, manages to give an adequate and, retrospectively, “necessary” representation of emotions and affections of the dreamer. In other words, the dream is able to select the most suitable formal solutions to express the very private feelings of the dreamer, maintaining from this point of view, the subjective and unpredictable logic of selected fact . However, as evidenced by the presence and activity of the

³ Freud (1908).

⁴ Bonaparte (1949).

⁵ Changeux (1995 p. 53).

“secondary elaboration”, which already operates within the dream process, these formal solutions, although not intended for communication, cannot completely ignore the constraints of the PC System and therefore the use of shared expressive codes.

But if it is true that dreams do not exactly foresee a viewer – if it did, it would be the dreamer – we can therefore hypothesize, from Changeux’s viewpoint, that the artwork functions as a “shared dream”, and which provides “ample room for subjectivity and individual experience” of the viewer. From this point of view, even in daytime activity, there would be the conditions for a certain form of communication that, disregarding partly precise common codes and paradigms, passes through something deeper and primitive. And so much so that we are able to hypothesize, according to Graziella Magherini, “a *mirroring* between pre-symbolic unconscious of the viewer and pre-symbolic unconscious of artists which is present in their works.”⁶

Needless to say that in the joke (and even more so in art) these processes become more transparent and pressing, in that the relationship and exchange with another are the given condition. These same mechanisms are in fact utilized in the horizon of communication, and the emotion of the subject finds, in the shape of a joke and an artistic product, an “objective correlative” likely to draw analogous emotional responses the viewer, albeit fostered by the specific nature of the experience. The artist, in other words, is capable of giving a voice to his emotions through processes of psychic elaboration which, although responding to his own specific, private needs, utilize shared expressive patterns, which belong to common cultural contexts and psychic structures. This allows the viewer to experience his own emotions and discover new meaning in them through art and thanks to the artist’s work.

We are aware that with these reflections of ours have not taken things much further than what Freud already theorized and more widely so by Kris and Gombrich, however, we shall try now to add a few ideas with regard artistic fruition, and more generally on listening to works, when such *listening* transforms and translates into *critical* interpretation.

Of all the possible models of criticism, on the basis of what has been said so far, I have in mind a situation in which the relationship between a work and its observer is, in a general sense, traceable to the analytical relationship characterized, as we know, by the mutual influence of complex mechanisms of projection and identification. In this case, too, as has already been said, the “fluctuating attention” of the critic can be no freer than the “free associations” deriving from the work, given that also this relationship cannot exclude the need to share similar psychic schemas and similar cultural codes.

What, therefore, distinguishes a casual viewer, let’s say, from a “critic” perceived as such? Let us say that the critic is that viewer who is capable of or who simply

⁶ Magherini (2012, p. 43).

takes on the task (or the liberty) of making explicit his emotions before the work, explaining them, justifying them, relating them to the artist and the context. He therefore listens to and gives body to his experiences, albeit in an “attenuated and veiled” form, according to the noted formula which Freud used, however, in reference to artists’ works. But if in this case, too, the work triggers or renews emotions which appear to belong in the first place to the subjectivity of the critic, then his emotion, unlike the contingent emotion of the casual viewer, is, so to speak, prolonged and elaborated in a perspective which is, precisely, defined as critical and therefore returns and concentrates on the work and its effects. It is evident that in the hypothesis suggested here, which evokes a very open model of “psychoanalytical critique”, the critic-viewer, through his elaborations and systematizations, should attempt to become aware of those processes which we have dealt with in relation to fruition in general. In this perspective, the critic-viewer’s response, compared to that of the common viewer, will necessarily be more mediated and practiced and, as we have said, will be able to not only prolong but also describe and formalize the initial emotion. Without concealing the subjective and affective nature, he should be aware of his own mental processes, organize them in turn into a text, and aim to demonstrate how and why there is a correspondence between the emotions of the author and viewer, between the “selected fact” of the work and of the observer. He will have to attempt to make clear in the content and form of the artistic object precisely those elements (be they structural, cultural, phylogenetic) which act as channels between the unconscious of the work and the unconscious of the viewer.

Critical comment, from this point of view, takes the form of a more or less suitable “skirting around” the text, its problematics and, above all, the emotions it arouses: a simple pattern (or at times very intricate) of questions and answers which follow on one after the other. But then what is it that establishes whether a critical interpretation “works” or not? That it is both valid and pertinent? Nothing, except for the fact that it is capable of letting the text or work to speak for itself, and when stimulated to do so, they provide responses. And, more appropriate the question then more appropriate the response. But this is what happens also in the analytical relation, conditioned by similar dynamics of reciprocity.

In particular, to me it seems beneficial to associate the idea of critique that we are addressing here with what Freud wrote on the subject of “constructions in analysis”, where he contrasted this term (“construction”), what in itself is hypothetical and open, with that of “interpretation” which is more rigid and conclusive.⁷ In life (as in artwork) there is no Truth to interpret; the “truth” of the construction is guaranteed only by the effectiveness of the cure... The truth of the critique (psychoanalytical) is guaranteed – if it is right to speak of guarantees – by its capacity to adhere to the logic of the text and its propositions.

In this case, too, we must not therefore propose or support the idea of extemporary and capricious criticism, which in substance is dominated by the arbitrariness and

⁷ Freud (1937).

subjectivity of the reactions of the critic and his moods. As we have seen, if the interpretation is pertinent, this responds to a scheme, and conveys an inner coherence which belongs as much to the work as to the critic's analysis. In the same way, the interpretation, or rather the analyst's "construction", must correspond to the experiences of the patient who, only through his concrete behaviour can guarantee the authenticity of the interpretation and therefore the effectiveness of the treatment.

If this is how things stand, even here we can speak of a tendential correspondence between variability and unpredictability of the "selected fact" and the constancy of the "F-factor" Graziella Magherini speaks of. The critic's response, much more so than that of the sometime viewer, as we have reiterated, is not in fact purely humoral and emotional: when listening to a work, the critic-viewer also projects his own culture, his own models and his own codes. And these, in turn, and to a certain degree, will have to mirror those of the artist. Only in this way can the virtuous cycle which distinguishes an open and truly creative critique be set in motion. We therefore find ourselves within the same dynamic described by Freud concerning the fruition of the joke. But this cannot come about if, beyond an individual affinity and sensitivity tied to a common "psychic constellation", there are no shared expressive canons and codes within the same historical-cultural context between the provider of the joke and the listener.

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