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Philosophical Foundations of Art-criticism .

Reading some recent publications - among which I should mention Art in the seventies. Lectures presented on the occasion of the 12th Congress of AICA, held in Cologne, September 1977 - on the nature and even the possibility of art-criticism, I have - on many occasions - encountered statements and questions that somewhat betray a sense of insecurity and even express doubts as to the function of art-criticism in the context of institutionalised culture and mass-media. Those statements alarmed and, at once, intrigued me.

Choosing, on purpose, the discussion of a topic not ostensibly related to the general theme of this Congress, and acknowledging my very limited experience and expertise in criticism, I shall only suggest some fragmentary considerations that would help me understand the nature of art-criticism.

The art-critic - thinking the word in its original and etymological sense - judges and discriminates, and he does so insofar as he "interprets". That the critic is an interpreter seems quite obvious and easily acceptable. For this very reason, it would be significant and enlightening to examine what and how, precisely, the critic interprets and what it means "to interpret". But allow me, first of all, a few general considerations that may help us place art-criticism in its adequate perspective.

The intuitions of the Romantics and - more so - the dialectical models of modern Idealism have justified the conviction that the interpreter, the educated and literate receiver, creates with the work of art and with the artist. As the inspired creative subject is fully realised and - as "maker" - exists only in his works, so too the work of art reaches its fulfilled existence, its actuality and its realised destiny in the act of reception, fruition and recognition by the spectator.

The spectator and receiver, on the other hand, is properly and fully spectator insofar as he recognises the ideal presence, the epiphany of truth manifested in the work of art.

But although Idealism - and I think of Hegel in particular - had realised that the essence of things consists in their becoming and that reality is a process, nonetheless the same Hegel seems to suggest a Platonic-contemplative conception of art and of the work of art. In other words, the work of art - as a manifestation of ideal truth - would exist in the very act of visual cognition and of contemplative recognition from without, as it were. The contemplative recognition would, then, be a vision of the outer appearance, of the "phenomenon" that reveals the absolute Idea. The "phenomenon" would, consequently acquire a state of totality, absoluteness and static all-inclusiveness. The work of art would - according to this conception, as I understand it - exist in the vision of its translucent appearance. It is "Erscheinung". This conception seems to suggest that the work of art - as object of contemplative vision - is the phenomenon or the surface and the façade that statically imposes itself. And I think I could safely suggest that the artists themselves intentionally operated to achieve this effect. Quite rightly Adorno - to quote a fertile and inspiring music-critic - observed how Mozart's music behaves. Its very essence consists in revealing itself as complete and polished result. It imposes itself as final appearance and as a "face" that hides the "structures", the compositional processes, the technical solutions, the tricks of the trade and the "poietic" labour. Finally, Idealistic aesthetics and the practise of pre-avant-garde artists treasured the Platonic intuition according to which the work of art is a nostalgic copy of an ideal beauty.

Anticipating a point to which I shall return, it seems quite clear that - since the first avant-garde - art refuses to impose itself as a

phenomenal exhaustive presence, as appearance, and that it rather aims at denouncing and expressing the very chemistry of the compositional processes. Works of art aim at foregrounding the adventure of the "poietic" labour. The work of art demands to be seen as manifestation of compositional and creative processes.

To come closer to the appointed task announced by the title of this fragmentary presentation, I should perhaps start afresh. It would not be unfair to presume that art-critics know what art is. Such knowledge should also be the first criterion needed for the critical exercise of art-criticism. I shall attempt to find some basic methodological and philosophical foundation to my understanding of art-criticism.

By and large, traditional considerations and reflections on art inherited the Platonic and Neo-platonic assumption according to which art is the realm of participated beauty, where beauty itself is considered as a metaphysically transcendent and hypostatically divine paradigm. Beauty, then, should be taken as the criterion for the recognition and evaluation of any work of art. Although, I confess, I am far from hostile to the idea of beauty and - in fact - I am normally quite sympathetic to and attracted by what I consider beautiful things and people; I would nonetheless hesitate to take an assumed definition of beauty as a starting point for the definition of art and of art-works. In point of fact, we have witnessed - particularly in this century - the emergence of what could be called a form of "nominalism". Frustrated by the difficulties of defining, once and for all, in a logically and linguistically justifiable manner the concept of beauty and the concept of art, the mentioned "nominalistic" trend would argue that "art is all the things that we call art". This approach is particularly favoured by sympathisers of analytic philosophy, and is partially grounded on an a-historical conception and analysis of language. According to this view, beauty could

not be adequately defined nor logically explained; it could only be privately employed as a connotational word, in particular circumstances. It would follow, from this position, that a definition of aesthetics as "the science of the beautiful" is finally nonsensical and - even more - that it is no definition at all. By the same token, any definition - or attempt at a definition - of art, which were to employ the word "beauty" as part of the definition, would equally be nonsensical - qua definition - and finally, again, left to the whim of private, subjectivistic, unwarranted and circumstantial interpretations.

I suggest that neither Platonic and Neo-Platonic idealism, nor a "nominalistic" conception of art could ever provide an adequate foundation to the exercise of interpretative art-criticism. It would rather seem to me that, unlike most - if not all - aesthetic theories since Baumgarten, which - being Platonic in inspiration - impose themselves as normative doctrines, and unlike the opinative, subjectivistic and sceptic pronouncements of nominalism; Aristotle's intuitions and reflections on art ground the possibility of an open, flexible and yet well defined discourse on art.

"All art deals with bringing something into existence; and to pursue an art means to study how to bring into existence a thing which may either exist or not..." (E.N., 1140a 10ff.)

Aristotle is concerned with the activity and the process that constitute and bring to light the object "artefact". In this sense it has been rightly and repeatedly observed that the Philosopher's considerations on art initiate the articulation of a "poetic" discourse and focus upon the close analysis of the individual "artefact" as such. "Aesthetic investigation may be centred either in the concept of beauty or the concept of art. While Plato gave priority to the concept of beauty, Aristotle, according to Zeller, "at the beginning of his Poetics has put aside the concept of beauty and launched upon the study of art". (W.Tatarkiewicz,

History of Aesthetics, Vol.I, The Hague - Warsaw, 1970, p-139).

Art ("techne"-"poiesis") - we must observe - meant, for the Greeks, any activity of making, of producing from without an artefact. It meant all arts and crafts. Furthermore, art - understood in the Greek sense - proceeds in a manner analogous to the immanent, autonomous and self-sufficient processes of nature. Art - that is - strives to reach its goals following a nearly-organic process. Art is mimetic of nature. And it can aim at producing primarily useful artefacts or what we would call "design objects". Aristotle, however, gives clear indications of a further - and to us more significant - distinction, namely: art as the production of "aesthetic" artefacts, fine art. In a more specific sense, "poiesis" - as discussed in the context of the Poetics and of the Rhetorics "mimesises" in the sense that, instead of aiming at a functional goal, first and foremost it aims at exhibiting characters and features that foreground the very "form" of the artefact: its order, its symmetry, its uselessness, its "beauty", its being an image of autonomous, immanent and self-sufficient "nature". If this is so, "mimesis" must be understood as the very goal and aim of the poetic and artistic making. The product of art - understood as fine art - should be understood as an image, a "mimesis", of the self-sufficient order of being, that is: total, measured, ordered, proportioned and self-revealing. This is what we call "artistic form" and "beauty".

Apart from being self-sufficient or, better, quasi-self-sufficient; i.e. while being a goal in itself and beyond the constrictions of utility and functionality, the beautiful artefact is constituted as an analogical synthesis of many perfections. In this respect, the artefact of fine art is better and greater than real objects. As Aristotle puts it: "the superiority of handsome men over the plain men and the works of the painter art over the real object, really consists in this, that a number of

scattered good points have been collected together into one example...". (*Politica*, 1281b 10). This remark points to what in contemporary aesthetics is called the plurisemanticity, the open-ness, the inexhaustibility, finally the ambiguity of the work of art, and the virtually infinite possibility of its interpretations and "imitations".

Furthermore, insofar as poetry mimesises "what may happen, what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity" (*Poëtica*, 1451a 36), we can understand that art either mimesises nature or perfects it by reaching goals that "nature" could never realise (*Physica*, 199a 15). The work of art, therefore, is constituted as the "sign" of the real, of the ideal, of the possible, of the utopic image of a more perfect spiritual or cultural world. Thus, reading Aristotle, I can understand in a deeper manner the contemporary claims and suggestions that the work of art is an event of co-reality (*Mit-realität*), as M. Bense and other phenomenologists (not forgetting J.-P. Sartre) would put it; that it is an occurrence of the "immanence the valeur" and of the "plénitude d'être", of which M. Dufrenne eloquently and elegantly writes; it is the "pure presence", an incident of "pure visibility", the triumphant, undisturbed luminosity of the "form"; it is finally what, with C. Brandi, we would call an instance of the "astanza".

We have become increasingly more aware of what Prof. Lohmann has pregnantly called "the linguistic constitution of the world". In the universe of human culture we can consider, with some profit, the work of art as a sign. Indeed, humanity was born with the birth of sign-processes. The mind, with its ability to inform and transform "nature", was born when a first man/woman saw something as something else: the stone on a beach and the flint; the branch and the weapon; the fur and the clothing; the word and the concept... This, as I understand it, is "mimesis".

In the splendid Homeric Hymn to the god, Hermes - still in nappies! -

walks out of the cave and meets the tortoise. At its sight "he gained endless delight", he laughed, for he had seen the humble creature and something else: the musical instrument, the lyre. Hermes embodies the experience of language, of sign-processes, of artistic invention and creativity. He saw nature as culture. He transformed the tortoise into music. Later in the poem, the god is referred to as the "inventor of the art of making fire". And later in time, through the centuries, he became the god of articulate speech and the god of interpretation. The making of signs is already the act of creative hermeneutics. And any exercise of critical interpretation is a production of new signs and a carrier of new meanings.

If works of art are signs, they are nonetheless distinguishable from all other signs in the universal economy of "language", because of some precise characters that semiology calls: self-reference and plurisemantic ambiguity. (To my mind, both determinations are already implicit in Aristotle's thoughtful meditations on art). As self-referential, the sign that is the work of art points to itself, is viewed and contemplated for its own sake; it is beautiful, in the wide sense of the word, i.e. as attracting to its very presence. The self-reference however is triggered, warranted and sustained by the unfamiliar, gratuitous, ambiguous and plurisemantic structure of the sign that is the work of art.

With avant-garde poetics a new experience of art has been established. The work of art embodies the explicit intention to violate the norm. The work questions every previous language and code, and it affirms itself as a message bearing new meanings and projecting new possible codes or languages. Being the expression of the very chemistry of its compositional processes, and foregrounding the adventure of the "poietic" labour, the work of art is co-extensive with its own "poetics". The work is its own "poetics", its own productive process.

For this reason the denotational and descriptive functions are extremely

minimised, if not totally suspended, in contemporary art-works. The art-work, exhaustive of its own "poetics", establishes itself as a new language and, hence, lives in an instant, though capable of generating new readings and new interpretations that prolong its life. The abundance of new messages that aim at constituting new languages, has caused an abysmal distance between art and the vast majority of the intended receivers. Art has never been as "élite", distant and aloof as nowadays.

And never the need of serious and responsible art-criticism has been as great as nowadays.

For those who cannot learn a new language every half hour..., art-criticism should be practised as a "poetic exercise", as an interpretation of productive processes, as a "structural" reading.

Reading, re-reading, making others read, the critic abandons himself to the becoming of the work, to the "poetics" of the "open work", and - therefore - interprets by creating, creates by interpreting.

In his analytical metalanguage he helps the growth of experience and the expansion of our linguistic horizons.

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