TOWARD A HISTORY OF ART AS A HISTORY OF VIEWING

Art produces not only a knowledge and an aesthetic pleasure, but also simultaneously conceives a form of organization of perception.

It evolves as knowledge and as code; its history is also a trek through myths and their representational forms. If we propose, then, to register the History of Art as the History of the Representation of Forms, as certain current historians suggest, we could evince an order of attitudes toward the world according to historical periods and, equally, according to the culture which embodies it. Through such an exercise we could understand that art has as principal object to identify cultural communities through aesthetic symbols, which, inasmuch as symbols, cannot be reduced to linguistic signs. Rather, art and language constitute two paths, to a certain point autonomous and independant, which complement each other to express human reality. (1)

Considering this, what we propose in the present essay is to introduce injo the study of iconography itself, as an instrument to further the proposal, certain concepts handled preferably in the psychoanalytical field, such as the distinction between vision and looking; the first dominated by the exercise of seeing, and the second implying the desire and the fantasies it produces. Looking, then, as a slow but progressive advance in the history of the images of art toward subjectivity. Of course, the observation of each image, even those produced outside art, demands both exercises, but it is nonetheless true that, once placed in the history of art, there has been, and has had to be for tecchnical, objective and ideological reasons, a

primacy of the one over the other. The domain of vision we shall call the conquest of objectivity ; and that of looking, the triumph of subjectivity over the objectual appearances of vision.

Within this framework, we can locate two culminating moments in the history of Western Art: the period of Greek Art, without doubt the starting point of man's capacity to dominate technics and convert it in a sufficient means to represent its object with an adequate pertinence of verosimilitude. And modern and contemporary art, at which point vision introjects itself to bring forth an image pretty much 'looked at' by the individual artist ; and thus to engender a code of aesthetic communication of high interpretative tenor. These images, in principle not recongnizable in real phenomena, come to optimize in the spectator a desciphering look, a task which culminates in its own, let us say internal, vision of the world.

Notwithstanding, between Greeks and contemporaries there is another notable difference. The Greeks, top conquistadores of phenomenic visioning, lived in a society ruled by mythology, involved more in cultural than in real images, dominated more by significances than by concrete realisms, as corresponds to mythic space, a space in which the real world and the world of fantasy were hardly distinguished. So it was that the artists and poets - priests notwithstanding : "maintained close links with the gods and deserved the respect of mortals" (2). Meanwhile, the contemporaries, absolute conquistadores of technology, and thus, of the capacity to trick the human eye with those images superimposed on the real ones, as is the

case with cinema and other technologies which fabricate and duplicate tri-diemensional icons, live in a society in which the certainty of reality displaces myth; or instead, this need engenders another mythology which is not properly deifying but scientific and technical. But it is precisely in this advance in "seeing", vision, where art has broken the phenomenic tradition to enter into the informal and mysterious caverns of fantasy: imagined images more than seen visions.

There is, between Greeks and contemporaries, a discursion of two opposite ways, the Greeks making tangible that which was practically impossible for vision, and in that operation perfecting desire in body: and the contemporaries, who in dislocating the look do not intervene directly in the world of objectivity. The subject, as an analyst explains, through this attitude, "maintains itself in function of desire" (3). I would say that in the Greeks desire is the body, whereas for the contemporaries the body is desire, a plausible distinction for vision and looking; some images are made to be seen, others, as in oniric delirium, nowadays somewhat comprehensible, are made to show themselves.

Panofsky, in his study of classical Greek iconography, (4) holds that in opposition to Egyptian Art, the Greeks developed the principle of organic differentiation. The identify between technics and the objective conditions to be expressed was broken when they introduce, the conditions resulting from organic movement, registered by the process of vision. This is why in the code of Policletus (5), the bases of anthropometry are defined, with regard to the mathematical differences of the

proportions of the human being: "Beauty comes little by little through numbers". We have thus a visually dominated experience.

But it is only recently, after Impressionism, when the need to 'read' through images begins, as another great historian, Gombrich, recognizes. In the mosaic of Impressionist strokes and smudges a recognizable figure is no longer indicated; the image, through the deductive effort of the spectator, gets animated as a shared suggestion. "Art gives the spectator 'evermore to do', it draws him into the magic circle of creation and allows him to experience something of the thrill of 'making' wich had once been the privilege of the artist" (6), In this way we enter into the parade of images wich, inspired by the gestures of Nietzsche and Freud, Ehrenzweig[7] studied, as coming from man's deep perception, the subjectivizing domain of contemporary figurations.

Finally, I wish to propose another difference in the continuum Greeks - contemporaries, from the study carried out some years ago by Jan Mukarovsky (8) on functions of the sign, in other words semiological; referring, among others, to those of Art. Among the functions of the sign, fundamentally two can be found: the symbolic and the aesthetic; when the first dominate, the object stands out in the foreground as a fact of communication, a fusion of the sign and what is represented by it; it is the fundamental and indispensable feature of the symbolic sign, not to be lost in pure allegory. In the aesthetic function it is instead the subject that stands out in the foreground; the aesthetic sign does not act upon any reality or particular object, as does the symbolic; instead it expresses reality as a Whole. In our understanding, then, the Art of the Greeks is — fundamentally symbolic, constructed on the

object that al ready represents a symbol, beauty, lore, the god or gods of all mythology.

But it is only for the contemporaries that the aesthetic function is privileged ; it is not projected onto objects, except, through the subjectivity of the artist and the spectator, with their figurations, powerfully aesthetizised, seeking to move the vision of the world of each and every one; alluding always to reality as a whole. Reality is unified precisely by the aesthetic sign (not only art). This contemporary iconography manifests, strictly speaking, an anguish before God and not the god in fact ; the beauty we desire rather than beauty itself. The Greek concept of Art is thus objective - symbolic; whereas the contemporary is subjective - aesthetic. Art has been transformed.

Subsequent to such considerations and in a further effort, we might inquire into the relations between Art and representation in newer continents. Latin América, for example, cultures in which, besides the Western tradition, there survives an archaic thought which establishes a numbers of perceptual, and symbolic symbioses. Our reality, subjugated par excellence, produces an Art mostly directed by international mandates. This, with more independent and natural expressions, makes up our iconographic point of view such as it is. Surely our pursuit of identity is equally a quest after images which could represent us. Perhaps literature, inasmuch as it inherits the rich oral traditions of the continent, has managed to embody our being with greatest efficacy. Without in any way demeriting the images obtained by our most outstanding visual artists, my impression is that our most potent images have

yet to appear, perhaps at the moment in which our cultural evolution grasps Art as a social necessity, in order to be able to corroborate that truth consigned in a recent essay, that the world of Art is the ultimate world of signs, which "being de-materialized find meaning in their ideal essence" (9).

Let us conclude recognizing a historical truth: that the object of Art, as equally that of psychoanalysis, "is not man, but what he lacks". Art and psychoanalysis meet in their object when a quest after images to suture our broken unity gets established. The creative process manifests from its origin a dramatic character never to be lost while art remains a social necessity.

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NOTES

1) This aspect of the communicative properties of art has been dealt with in depth, inthe paper I presented to the 17 th Congress of the AICA in Caracas. This paper was subsequently published in the Revista Colombiana de psiquiatría titled: "El Arte como obra del deseo" (Art as a Working of Desire)' Vol XII, No 3, Bogotá 1.983 P.318-333.

2) E. Hamilton, Mythology, 1940, New American Library, 1969, New York, P. 18.

3) J. Lacan, Los Cuatro Conceptos Básicos del Psicoanálisis, 1973, Ed. Barral, 1977, Barcelona, P. 94.

4) E. Panofsky, Meaning In The Visual Arts, 1955, Doubleday, Company, Inc, New York, Chapter II.

5) Cit, by Panofsky, Ibid , Chapter II.

6) E. Gombrich, Art And Illusion, 1959, phaidon press limited, Oxford, P. 169.

7) A. Ehrenzweig, The Psychoanalysis of Artistic visión and Hearing, 1965, Sheldon press, london, 1975.

8) J. Mukarosky, La Funzione, La norma e il valore estético come fatti social, 1966, Giulio Einaudi, Torino, 1971.

9) G. Deleuze, Proust y los Signos, 1964, Ed. Anagrama, Barcelona, 1970, P.22.