

MEETING OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ART CRITICS.

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THE VITALITY OF THE GREEK MYTHS IN CONTEMPORARY CREATIVE
THOUGHT.

"The New Italian Manner"

by Giuseppe Gatt

The theme of myth, in the terms proposed by this meeting, would have been considered before 1982 a fruitless subject for debate other than in purely abstract terms. Before, that is to say, the events that have received official sanction in the 41st Venice Biennial and which, although still in an embryonic form, have now crossed the Italian frontier to spread to the rest of Europe.

The entire periode of the seventies was, in fact, dominated by the logic of the avant-garde, whose exclusive, obstinate commitment was to the destruction of myth: a program carried through by the reduction to zero of all systems of thought that, in one way or another, might influence the birth or development of a theory of myth.

The mentality of the historical avant-garde movements prevailed up to the experiments of the '70's. Behind every methodology (Conceptualism, Behaviourism, Performance) lurked the command: debunk, destroy the myth.

Paradoxically this undermining of myth and the sacro-sanct came about schizophrenically in the name of the most primitive of all myths - Creativity. At the heart of the avant-garde thus came to be lodged an insidious, fatal contradiction: destroy everything to do with myth, in the name of myth.

The presence of this gap between subject and object, ego and the outer world (identifiable as the great evil of modern existence) has triggered the desire for its elimination. The analysis is justified by the variety and diversity of the symptoms.

Time is the non-conducting flux in which, at this century's end, the survivors are struggling to keep their heads above water in an effort to bridge the gap, and try for a possible reconciliation with the world.

Once the barrier of mundane appearance, the empirical space patterns had been broken, painting was able to venture into the dark tunnel of time.

And there, fumbling uneasily in search of a kind of movement that is not rectilinear, progressive, it

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discovers that the essential nature of time is cyclical. In this direction, painting rediscovered memory, history and the story of art, and doggedly keeping on along the same road finally came back to myth.

illumination
The real function of myth in relation to reality is revelation. A mysterious function, without a doubt, but one which not even the Illuminism has ever been able to clarify.

Among those produced in the course of human history (the Sumerians, Hyperboreans, Egyptians, Indians), the Mediterranean myths have left the deepest sense of the primordial in Italian thought, and continues to be a major source of inspiration in contemporary European culture.

Romanticism found its source of inspiration in an imagination tinged with vague premonition of immortality and the divine. Nietzsche unloosed Crete and its minoic-micene world against contemporary sensibility, burying the hare and-now under the terrifying Dionysian awareness which founded its cult in Crete.

The painters called Anachronistics or Hypermannerists

or New Manner make use of myth both as an archetypal key to interpret the world, and in a more personal approach to a private universe, seen through a lucid imagination. These painters allude frequently to myths: the Italian countryside as an Arcadia, ^{not} contaminated by progress, and still inhabited by nymphs (Bartolini), classicism as a solar myth of proportion and beauty (Mariani); the Dionysian possession of the Word (D'Arcevia) giving power to the hand; the visionary prodigies of the Cthonian divinities, emerging darkly from the sea (Galliani); the religious sentiment of catholic obscurantism taking the form of sacrifice, martyrdom, revelation and transmutation (Di Stasio); heroes and art as eternal return and ²inteminable superimposition of the iconographies of art history (Pulini); the myth of the hero in history associated with the theme of the winged horse (Bellerophon, hippocri²ten) in Le Brun:

? the "citations" of the myth of art and artists in Giorda and Alberola; the Pan canticle everywhere evident in the works of Garouste.

In all these, painting becomes the means of revealing

a new feeling for nature, both in its primordial acceptance (when man felt a part of it, not apart from it), as well as in its more evolved form, as means to the promotion of intellect and imagination, transforming the existing into the thinking man, capable of escaping from the quotidian (homo ludens).

The narrative training in all this neo-mannerism has no direct relation to mundane facts, nor is it ^{be} based on a new type of naturalist iconography; it is connected indirectly to the subjects and aspects of the representation of the world that uses the myth by filtering it through the patterns of art history.

The use of myth to mediate the ^{hi} story of art is a double-edged tool which can extract ritualistic effects from nature while relying on interior reminiscence and visionary power.

Bartolini's tree, for example, far from being a straight presentation of landscape is philologically inspired, involving Lorrain or Dughet, and recalls something of the religious atmosphere evoked by Quintilian in its majesty, venerable age and especially in the sacred association of the oak, in the same way that many of

the backgrounds of D'Arcevia's unquiet and dazzling painting return to a vital spirit pervading the world. All Galliani's painting ^{talks about} a primordial emotional human joy in natural surroundings involving surface and depth.

Throughout the pattern (which seems to become ~~description as the~~ most radical and decisive swing from modernism) is woven the assertion of a symbolic event which is ~~said to stand for~~ the culminating and liberalizing moment of every authentic ritual; radically denying in se the essence of our spectacularized society which having dropped scripture and forgotten history now crazily imitates itself in easily reproducible shams and appearances.

This symbolic fact does not come through myth as mere ~~story~~ ^{is} (i.e. as content) frozen in history, but rather as an active principle of our mind and culture, hence as emotive image supercharged by the great mystery of art's origin.

Naturally, this radical anti-modernist stand has not failed and is not failing to disconcert the conformists who are comfortably installed on the certainties of

modernist modes, tried and tested by decades of the avant-garde.

On the other hand, not a few of them have experienced a sort of reflex action of rejection in the presence of the symptoms of change which are emerging in current art trends. In the last analysis, they are the same as those who, at different times, were scandalized by the modes of the Informal, Programmed Art, Pop Art, Behaviourist Art, Conceptual Art, etc.

To the more radical manifestations of Italian art in the eighties these critics make a triple series of prejudicial objections.

On one side are the upholders of the theory of the 'ontological' existence of the avant-garde (those, that is to say, who have an inner drive towards continual experimentalism): these maintain that the new movement is ~~no~~ other than flat regression towards outdated and outworn forms and types.

On the other side are the moralists of the here-and-now (who basically are ^{the} victims of the creative myth erected by the avant-garde): these urge a presentation of the situation in the ephemeral terms of fashion, the

remake, and the revival, identifying phenomenologically - from a post-modernist point of view - various tendencies which are scarcely comparable and, in any case, non-homogeneous in size, weight and historical importance.

Finally, there is a third objection which tries to see in present attitudes nothing more but an antique-loving variant of tendencies which recently invaded the great teaching of the avant-garde. This objection, in fact, does not appear to have substantial theoretical background ^{ground} ~~and~~ and is therefore mentioned here only for reasons of completeness.

The scandalous bone of contention is that tangled and varied pattern of theoretical, ethical and aesthetical motivations clustered around the apparently 'reactionary' but basically profoundly anti-modern attitudes, which have led to the coining of various critical classifications such as cultured painting, anachronism, hypermannerism, and that I personally, I would rather ~~see~~ see grouped under the definition of the New Italian Art Manner.

The complexity of the problems raised ^{from} the movement

described shows how the most distant mythologies and figurative conceptions of the past are still deeply and - if you like - mysteriously entrenched in the mind of today's man.

If, on ~~the~~ one hand, this leads us to distrust still more the general principles induced from the logic of 'fashion', which clearly is incapable of dealing with the ~~wealth~~^{richness} of experience at various critical, theoretical and cultural levels, on the other hand it points out ~~to~~ the need for further ~~deep~~^{deep} enquirement just because these recent events may be the signs of a transformation and radical change in the accepted modern pattern, with consequent changes in the mentality and historic role of the intellectual, the critic, and finally of the institutions.

Faced with such interior changes in the development of art, it ~~seems~~^{have to} that we ~~must~~ recognize that the modernist chapter is closed and that we are now ~~passing~~^{moving} from a uniform mass culture (which has enslaved the mind of the modern and post-modern) to an increasingly more individualized and more personalized culture.

~~Saving~~ - obviously - the undeniable historical values which have been provided in the process of our

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growth by the AVant-garde.

This is not the right place for further examination of the concrete terms in which these new tendencies express themselves (although some examples have been given here) or of the critical items that support them; especially because that subject matter, though apparently homogeneous, is going really to develop many different specific levels inevitably determined by individualities and personalities that it is difficult to compare.

Further, it should be said at once, that though in many cases reference to certain starting points is still valid and enduring, the brief but intense development of events has already led to the suspicion that certain artistic productions apparently introducing the New Italian Manner, are really merely the final phases of Conceptualism, instead of the new terms of an approach which phenomenologically is radically "other": a fact which perhaps is already making itself felt in positive terms through a second wave of artists, still more radically opposed to modernism.

One thing, however, is certain, that the new situation

beyond all consideration of labels and names, concentrates interest not so much on its capacity to create a "movement" as, on the contrary, for the shifting of critical interest towards such vital components as individuality, quality, painting, memory, and time. Here another point should be made: when the value of the work of art was discounted and the spread of art was a way -perhaps the only one- of negating its "Aura" and ensuring its immersion into the collectivity, the suppression of painting in itself was a natural condition of artistic work.

After the return of Art to the search for the "value" of positive and purposive affirmation, after the magnificent and unrepeatable semiotic adventure of the avant-garde, art must recover its own "specific", not as absolute value, but as a working condition for the return to itself: hence, to painting.

Now, in the wake of these arguments, let us come to the direction that discussion is likely to take after the collapse of modernism and described in the analysis of the symptoms examined at all levels here.

One thing is now certain: it has become impossible to indicate a ^{line} ~~route~~ or supply what was once called a 'panorama'.

Reversing the order of the 'drives' that once more intensify for consumer purposes the practice of a game based on novelty and 'jumping the queue, it will be necessary to examine the various components of the subjects and create opportunities for discussion and meditation in a theoretical effort which though stimulating the widest possible references and exchanges between various branches of knowledge should never be confused with eclecticism.

If the new epistemology operate through disciplined comparison, art will make a principal contribution, not as abstract key to the interpretation of reality (as though to seize an opportunity for the exercise of the ^{the} ~~generalizing~~ and totalizing faculty), but as an instrument for penetrating to the core of otherness, no longer in the mystifying direction of sociology but with the deeper aim of an intimate, specific knowledge. ^{Hence} ~~On the contrary,~~ in this sense, the statement of art as the rediscovered mean~~x~~ of ^{"value"} ~~evaluation~~ and sign of

the stratification of time, marks the definite removal of the power factor and heralds the time when the debate will be carried on in the silence of the artistic object at the core of its intimacy and close to the craftsmanship of its specific individuality.

Everything, then, converges: theme, the subject's space, rather than thesis.

Ahead of other realms of creativity, art suggests that it is still possible to take this road.

In fact, the type of painting created today marks the crucial turning point of a social-historical conception of art or, more simply, of the history of art.

By keeping its distance from the conditioning influence of theories, poetry, ideologies, systems of art, it insists on the individual's work, in this way laying a claim to the rights of the subject to exist and to be. The individual story related by each artist constitutes the body which sets up resistance to the influence of homogeneous regulation at a level and frequency imposed by contemporary society.

The artist as a subject provides the supply of theoretical, irreducible resistance to the ideological pressures of the system.

In this way, the progressist, panoramic, horizontal conception of art gives the way to the spacemoment which restates through the problem of the subject the themes of the value, of the "aura", of sociality, of myth and origin. It is not so much a question of recognizing the existence of parameters as of recognizing the value of the theoretical and figurative culture, beyond the several negations of it by the avant-garde.

The individuality of art as vehicle of the idea of value defeats at one blow the political moment, making it possible to reestablish, through its loneliness, a centrality not conditioned by contemporary forms of alienation (dream, distance, madness, materialism) that the classical Marxist, Structuralist and anti-ethnocentric had provoked in the body of the historical avant-garde.