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Da un'idea di Massimo Tantardini ed Alessandro Ferrari. Periodico realizzato da Accademia di Belle Arti di Brescia SantaGiulia.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

What artistic experience in the Metaverse?

Notes for artistic training and work.

By Fabio Togni (Università degli Studi di Firenze)

Abstract: The artistic work (dynamically considered between identity and otherness) is deeply connected with the integral and corporal dimension and therefore becomes experience. Is it possible to live an authentic and artistic experience in the Metaverse, be it considered real and virtual environment?

In *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche, in his “physiologization” of his thought, had pointed out, with the caustic wit that characterized him, that any discourse on beauty was merely a discourse on the subject. According to him, the rhetoric of beauty was the strategy through which the subject positioned themselves as the measure of perfection, activating that particularly narcissistic process of self-reflection in things and the discovery of the self in things. Thus, every discourse on beauty became a self-referential narrative, not too subtly veiled by a delusion of omnipotence [1].

The same applied to ugliness. Ugliness should not be understood as the absence of beauty, but as the absence of the subject. One need only think of the emphasis placed on the taste for ugliness in futurism and dadaism, which was functional in deconstructing the “metaphysical” idea of beauty in order to assert its own difference [2].

Therefore, in the narcissistic delusion of omnipotence of the subject, aesthetic judgment would be functional to the affirmation of an hypertrophic and pervasive self. Beauty and ugliness, once opposites, became synonyms; two sides of the same coin of the despotic subject.

Certainly, Nietzsche’s thesis intervened forcefully in the long discussion surrounding aesthetic judgment, which was linked to that complex human experience called “taste,” and which deepened the rethinking of a “sentient” subject more than an “obedient” one, finally liberated from the extrinsic certainties of classical rational metaphysics [3].

Indeed, in the experience of the “feeling of the mind” – also called sentimental – two fundamental human experiences were united: reflection and suffering. They merged to the point where feeling could be defined as a rational reworking of emotional, instinctual, and impulsive experiences [4]. But this distinctly human dimension was not without its awkwardness, posing the conceptual problem of the universality of such intimate experiences for the subject’s body.

Taking a quick glance at the reflection of philosophical aesthetics, the pairing of feeling and taste signaled an inability to reduce the experience of beauty to predetermined, determined, and universally shared schemas. At the same time, it recorded its plausible social shareability. This particular type of experience would, in fact, be strictly subjective and, precisely for this reason, not common to all humans. One need only think of the vernacular saying “what is beautiful is not beautiful, but what pleases is beautiful.” Simultaneously, in many cases, taste would be structured in a way common to multiple subjects, becoming a sort of shared aesthetic code, as seen in trends [5]. The solution would therefore lie in a third way [6].

It was especially Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), who identified a lateral position in relation to the more innatist interpretations, opposed to the more explicitly sensualist theses, creating a connection between taste and the immediate communication of the feeling of beauty, that is, without the mediation of a concept. According to him, reaffirming the primacy of practical experience, universality would not be guaranteed by the intrinsic characteristics of the “beautiful” object, but by the communication of the feeling it allowed.

Thus, the more a work of art was able to communicate feelings, the more, according to Kant, it would generate taste and consensus around its “beauty.” This beauty, therefore, would be subject to the regime of communication. A sort of dialogue – what we could define as a biographical story and narrative – was set in motion between the work and the subject, making possible the complex and articulated reworking of rational and emotional, instinctual, and rational elements [7].

The intuition was as modern as it was. Beauty was not a metaphysical characteristic, but a relational and communicative one. The transcendental was not in the mind, nor in *Mens Dei*, but in the relationship the subject established with the work of art, and in the relationship subjects had with one another in front of the work of art.

It was a dimension connected to the story and the intertwining that arose between human beings and became a promoter of narrative. It had a narrative profile, inaugurating, to use more contemporary terms, a story of mutual implication between people, of the construction of meanings.

This seems to us an interesting intuition. In fact, this makes the work of art – to speak in post-structuralist terms like Michel Foucault – a kind of narrative device, which presents itself with all its promises, sometimes negative, sometimes positive, before the subject, who is called (“provoked”) to decide and take a position in front of it, inaugurating a relationship that, if we look closely, we could define as formative[8]. A relationship that cannot be separated from corporeality, which, through experience, becomes a place of encounter with that alterity that is the work of art.

In this sense, Nietzsche and Kant, so seemingly distant, grasp, in our view, the inevitability of the relationship with that form of difference constituted by the work of art and show how the experience of beauty, even in its deteriorated forms of narcissistic reflection, affects and strikes the subject in one of the most radical places of their alterity, that of corporeality, through forms of narration.

The experience of relating to the work of art as “other” happens, indeed, at the level of the viscera, in the position of the Greek *splanchnizomai* which refers to the belly of sacrificial victims, but also the mother’s womb, which with pain brings life into the world.

In light of this carnal [9] – if one emphasizes the dimension of desire, which characterizes corporeality – and corporeal – if one emphasizes the passive, ecstatic, and excessive dimension of need, which characterizes human existence [10] – in the current society of the Metaverse, we are witnessing a radical transformation of the relationship between body and work of art and the forms of narrative construction that establish themselves between the two.

This brings with it the radical modification of the forms of difference and alterity that characterize this relationship. Not only does the body and the work of art merge, as in Body art, but they blur, multiplying the planes of reality to infinity or fading into fuzzy and approximate logics, losing profiles and contours.

It seems to us that the path of identity, both of the artist and the spectator – which, though narcissistic, still remained strongly anchored to the subject even in Nietzsche – is today interrupted in favor of an absolute preference for alterity [11]. The idolatry of originality, the desperate attempt to seek “novelty for novelty’s sake,” seems to have interrupted the plot and the intertwining of the narrative, which must necessarily characterize the artistic experience.

If it is true that the foundation of beauty is a formative and formative relationship, what possibilities exist in a reality where identity is liquid and where the contours are so blurred as to become imperceptible? Is beauty still possible if the paths connecting subjective identity to the alterity of the work of art are not evident? And, by paradox, does ugliness still have reason to exist in the despotism of the difference of the work of art? Only alienation and the virtualization of corporeality – that of the Metaverse, to be precise – can be the solution to a reality that now appears emptied of its value and meaning?

To use a pictorial image, let us refer to *The Three Ages of Woman* by Gustav Klimt, an effective icon and exemplum of human existence painted in 1905. The aged body of a woman, marked or irreversibly disfigured by pregnancies, with a bloated but sterile belly, vigilant or looming, unveils the fleeting tenderness of a young mother, who rests

her face on her daughter’s head. The dark shadow that stands behind this innocent and fertile image is faceless, and, to emphasize even further the tragedy of the inevitability of time, with her own hands, she not only covers her face but lifts her head and gaze away from youth. It is a plastic image of envy – understood in its etymological sense of *in-videre*, meaning the inability to bear the other’s gaze in the certainty that the other has taken away a possibility – of late adulthood, which completes and summarizes the absence of the gaze of youth, which, despite its generativity, still has its eyes closed.

The artistic icon extends its meaningful and demystifying power even to the experience of contemporary artistic production, which, with a deeply carnal image unable to envision a future, devoid of a perspectival gaze and fixed in an instantaneous “here and now,” fails to perceive the blind and unsettling threat of the fading possibilities of the body.

The pictorial commentary becomes even more unsettling if the alterity of the body is replaced with the alterity of the work of art, offering an instantaneous and ephemeral image of beauty, crushed by the experience of the work’s own emptiness, revealing all of its “ugly” transience.

It is not our task here to judge and diagnose how this process of exalting alterity at the expense of identity has occurred and who the protagonists were. Rather, our task is to approach it from the side of prognosis, offering perspectives of openness that carry the transformative flavor of growth and development.

In other words, we believe it is particularly important to point out some concrete paths that can bring the artistic experience back to

the level of identity, releasing its formative and shaping power. Only under this condition, in fact, can the flow of narrative meaning that can be realized in the relationship with the artwork occur.

The many questions listed above, it seems to us, can be reversed into a simple question: how is it possible for the artistic experience to contribute to the existential task of each human being, engaged in the journey of “taking form” of the self?

First, it is important that the artistic experience is brought back to the dimension of identity, recovering its value as “discipline.” The modern and contemporary mythology of the naïve and damned artist, devoid of any rules, appears as a romantic narrative and finds few biographical counterparts. Even in the most careful biographies, characters like Caravaggio, despite having a tortured existence and the traces of this reflected in their works, manifest a strict work discipline, attested to by their significant output [12]. Artistic work is work in every sense. It is made of dedication and application, study and passion [13]. It is about bringing the artistic experience back from the agitation of inspiration – already pointed out by Nietzsche above – to the discipline of form, recovering its value as a free, responsible, rational, and intentional action.

In this horizon, the artistic experience is an action of self-discipline, and only under this condition can it liberate its formative and shaping potential.

Second, it is necessary that the artistic experience is understood as an integral experience, encompassing the person. This means that it cannot liquidate corporeality in favor of a mere conceptual approach, nor vice

versa. Rather, if it is to become an experience of self-growth, it must be understood in its synesthetic dimension, uniting the whole of the human person in both its rational faculties and its bodily passivity.

Lastly, it seems to us that the artistic experience must be understood as a place not so much of the manifestation of need, in whatever form it may take, but rather as the “transparency of desire.” This desire, although revealed by the experience of lack typical of the needy profile of everyday life, manifests a fracture and testifies to an excess. Artistic action, in fact, has the task of offering itself in its value as a response to an experience of meaning and significance that precedes and challenges us. In order for it to liberate its formative value, the artistic experience must unfold within its responsive and responsive matrix, in its status of “attestation” of the sense that precedes us and reveals itself to our gaze through the wholly corporeal experience of the emotion of awe and wonder.

And if awe, as Plato reminds us in the *Theaetetus* (155d), is an emotion of excess and transcendence (*thaumazein*), wonder, as Aristotle recalls in the *Metaphysics*, is the attitude of the scholar who, with curiosity, patience, and method, investigates reality, deciphering its mysteries (*aporein*).

Thus, there will be no artistic experience in the Metaverse of computational and virtualized identity, assuming that the virtual is truly something other than the real. Only in the effort of “taking form,” spent in the search for one’s own identity made of body and flesh, can that dialogical relationship be attested to that will allow the artist to “in-vent” and “con-voke” meaning.

A dialogue made of body, but above all of flesh.

Fabio Togni

(Università degli Studi di Firenze)

Note:

[1] «Niente è più condizionale, diciamo anzi più ristretto del nostro senso del bello. Quegli che vorrebbe figurarselo, liberato dalla gioia che l'uomo causa all'uomo, perderebbe immediatamente piede. Il "bello in sé" non è che una parola, non è neanche un'idea. Nel bello l'uomo si pone come misura della perfezione; in alcuni casi scelti egli vi si adora. Una specie non può assolutamente fare a meno di affermarsi in questa maniera. Il suo istinto più basso, quello della conservazione e dell'espansione di sé, risplende ancora in simili sublimità. L'uomo s'immagina che è il mondo stesso sovraccarico di bellezze, – egli si dimentica come causa di queste bellezze. Lui solo lo ha colmato, ahimè! di una bellezza umanissima, nient'altro che troppo umana!... Insomma, l'uomo si riflette nelle cose, tutto ciò che gli riflette la sua immagine gli sembra bello: il giudizio "bello" e la sua vanità della specie». F. Nietzsche, *Il crepuscolo degli idoli* [1889], Adelphi, Milano 1973, p. 126.

[2] U. Eco (ed.), *Storia della bruttezza*, Bompiani, Milano 2018, pp. 8-22.

[3] R. Debray, *Vita e morte dell'immagine. Una storia dello sguardo in occidente*, Il Castoro 1999.

[4] G. Bertagna, *Dall'educazione alla pedagogia. Avvio al lessico pedagogico*, La Scuola, Brescia 2010, cap. III.

[5] F. Togni, *Fashion Pedagogia o Pedagogia Fashion?* in F. Magni, A. Potestio, A. Schiedi, F. Togni, *Pedagogia Generale. Linee attuali di ricerca*, Studium, Roma 2021, pp. 175-206.

[6] F. Desideri, *Forme dell'estetica. Dall'esperienza del bello al problema dell'arte*, Laterza, Bari 2004.

[7] Kant will carefully distinguish the enjoyment of taste from the production of Genius, a distinction that Benedetto Croce will skillfully overcome by introducing the famous thesis of the interpreter as the "re-creator" of taste. B. Croce, *Estetica* [1902], Adelphi, Milan 1990.

[8] F. Togni, *I dispositivi dell'educazione e la formazione della persona umana*, «Nuova Secondaria», XXXVII/2019, pp. 184-191.

[9] X. Lacroix, *Il corpo di carne. La dimensione etica, estetica e spirituale dell'amore*, EDB, Bologna 2016.

[10] A. Potestio, F. Togni, *Bisogno di cura e desiderio di educazione*, La Scuola, Brescia 2011.

[11] B. Leroy-Vielmon, *L'altérité fondatrice. Compréhension psycho.phénoménologique du processus de fondement du sujet psychologique*, L'Harmattan, Paris 1997. S. Zizek, *Il Grande Altro. Nazionalismo, godimento, cultura di massa*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1999. P. Sequeri, *L'umano alla prova. Soggetto, identità, limite*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2002, pp. 72-78.

[12] H. Langdon, *Caravaggio. Una vita*, Sellerio, Palermo 2002.

[13] G. Bertagna, *Lavoro e formazione dei giovani*, La Scuola, Brescia 2014. F. Togni, *L'uomo, l'agire lavorativo e il volere. Intorno e oltre i progetti di secolarizzazione dell'umanesimo del lavoro*, in Id (ed.), *Giovanni Gentile e l'umanesimo del lavoro*, Studium, Roma 2019, p. 107-132.

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