Aisthesis

Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico

Aesthetics and Therapeia: On the Therapeutic Value of Representation

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Aisthesis

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Foreword*

Filippo Fimiani, Daniele Guastini

Western modernity has long insisted on the separation between aesthetic experience and practical-and everyday-life. The Kantian legacy, reinforced by later formalist interpretations and philosophy of arts, carved out a conception of the aesthetic as autonomous, contemplative, disinterested, even elitist, and fundamentally detached from any concrete efficacy. Yet the broader history of Western culture, from the archaic to the digital, contradicts this epistemological narrative. Across very different epochs, images, performances, stories, and, more generally, symbolic forms have been repeatedly invested with therapeutic agency and value. The Platonic *pharmakon*, the Aristotelian *katharsis*, the Christian *agalma*, the incubation rituals and the devotional or apotropaic image traditions, all attest to the deep confidence in the iconic potentiality and power to intervene in bodies, souls and minds, to change the life of people and to transform a single or a collective destiny.

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Today, under radically different technological and socio-cultural conditions, these beliefs in iconic agency return with new intensity. We inhabit an iconosphere designed by digital infrastructures and algorithmic pre- and re-mediation, populated by ubiquitous and circulating images, shaped by micro-rituals and routines of equivocal forms of subjectivation and sociability, and driving fragile and precarious exercises of attention and care to ourselves and the world. Even in our contemporaneity, the link between aesthetics and therapy isn't dead or overcome, it is an anthropological persistence affecting our experiences and practices with and by the images as operational *pharmaka* – virtually both for good and for evil. Far from to being art-based or encrypted into solipsistic behaviours, aesthetic experience reappears today as a way of regulating and orienting our situated presence in world and with other beings and devices, of reorganising our embedded habits and embodied meanings, and of sustaining our ontologically inadequate capacities – externalized in, and supplied by, technical gestures and technological prosthesis.

This issue of *Aisthesis* explores this actual and vital intersection between representation and care, between image and health, through a set of contributions which aims to renew and remobilise a red line stretching from ancient poetics to contemporary digital therapeutics. The issue includes papers developed from the seminar organised by Daniele Guastini (PI of the eponymous PRIN PNRR 2022 project "Aesthetics and Therapeia") at the Sapienza University of Rome, held from 12 March to 9 May 2025, as well as additional contributions selected from proposals submitted to the editorial board, all evaluated through double-blind peer review. Read together, in chronological and thematical order, these essays outline a genealogy both hermeneutical and critical of aesthetic therapy that moves across classical philology, anthropology, philosophy, media theory, film studies, psychiatry, and political thought.

The opening essay by Daniele Guastini returns to Aristotle with philological precision, disentangling the long-standing confusion surrounding the notion of *katharsis*. Correcting the interpretative tradition rooted in Bernays, Guastini reconstructs tragic catharsis as a dianoetic pleasure belonging to the *bios theoretikos*: not a purgation of emotions, but a refinement of judgment and perception through poetic form.

Remaining within the ancient horizon, Francesco Valagussa revisits catharsis through the conceptual lens of Carlo Diano. He emphasises tragedy's anticipatory function: by staging misfortune at symbolic distance, it performs a work of elaboration that resonates with modern theories of trauma and repetition. Representation becomes a space where the unassimilated can be shaped and transformed.

Moving toward early modern philosophical anthropology, Cecilia Muratori explores physiognomics as a philosophical practice grounded in the Pseudo-

Aristotelian *Physiognomonica* in its Renaissance articulations. Through a nuanced analysis of Giovan Battista Della Porta and Abramo Colorni, the contribution shows that images – whether statues, mirrors, or the studied surface of the hand – serve as tools for diagnosing and actively modifying the dynamic sympathy between body and soul, offering a model of therapeutic intervention rooted in the materiality of images and gestures.

A shift into modern rationality is marked by Serena Feloj, who rereads Kant to illuminate the relation between rationality, illusion, and pathology. She shows how transcendental illusion is an inherent dynamic of reason, and how the critical method acquires a therapeutic dimension by regulating reason's self-transcending impulses and ensuring communicability.

From Kant to Leopardi, Antonio Valentini reconstructs the poet's critique of modern rationalism and his proposal of an "ultra-philosophy" grounded in imagination, sensibility, and embodied thought. Poetic writing reorganises perception, restores relationality, and reawakens an intimate contact with the world.

Focusing on another fundamental structure – and in a way not dissimilar to other interventions, including that of Fimiani and Sabatino –, Marina Montanelli examines the ambivalent power of repetition – from Freud's death drive to digital overstimulation. Against the exhausting rhythms of algorithmic cycles, she argues for an aesthetic capable of cultivating constructive repetition: rhythm, minimal variation, and forms of temporal coherence aligned with care.

These reflections converge in Paolo Vignola's reconstruction of Bernard Stiegler's philosophy of care – mentioned also in other contributions. For Stiegler, psychotechnologies can erode attention, memory, and desire; yet aesthetic practices retain the power to re-functionalise technics, regenerating the attentional forms necessary for individuation and collective life.

The genealogy then turns more explicitly anthropological with Andrea D'Ammando, who reinterprets Ernesto De Martino's concept of the crisis of presence. Symbolic practices – rituals, myths, communal narratives, artistic elaborations – function as cultural techniques that safeguard presence in moments of collapse, rendering crisis thinkable and shareable.

A decisive theoretical hinge is provided by Francesco Emilio Restuccia, who reconstructs Walter Benjamin's thought through the homeopathic paradigm of representation. By tracing a lineage that connects ancient debates on catharsis with Benjamin's theories of vaccination, shock, laughter, and perceptual training, Restuccia discusses Harun Farocki's operational images, the therapeutic architecture of *memofilm*, and the contemporary participatory dispositif of *Videopharmakon* to show how the homeopathic logic he reconstructs in Benjamin not only illuminates the past but also transits decisively into the contemporary, where audiovisual forms intervene in perception, memory, and care with renewed technological intensity.

The volume then moves to the contemporary media landscape with the extensive contribution by Filippo Fimiani and Anna Chiara Sabatino, who analyse comfort media and comfort cinema as therapeutic environments founded on perceptive, attentional and practical absorption, and on low-arousal rhythms and predictability. Discussing Jim Jarmush's *Paterson* and Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days*, their essay shows how minimal variation of ordinary rituals and routines remobilize the ancient and ambivalent dynamics of *pharmakon* within the everyday aesthetics' logic of "making special".

Building on this technological axis, Cavaletti and Terrenghi examine Virtual Reality as a paradigmatic modern *pharmakon*. Grounded in empirical research, their study clarifies how VR reorganises attention, modulates anxiety, and produces immersive therapeutic conditions, while also retaining the structural ambivalence of any potent perceptual device.

The dossier concludes with Sofia Pirandello, who investigates the use of Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, and Avatar Therapy in the treatment of schizophrenia. By externalising persecutory images and modulating them through digital interfaces, these therapeutic systems help patients renegotiate intrusive voices and restore symbolic mediation where fragmentation once prevailed.

Taken together, these twelve contributions compose a plural but coherent map of the therapeutic capacities of images. They show that therapy, in its aesthetic sense, operates not through sensory power or meaning's transcendence but through sensible form: through the structuring of attention, the shaping of rhythm, the cultivation of perceptual habits, the symbolic elaboration of crisis, and the maintenance of continuity.

If ancient tragedy refined judgment, contemporary media may soothe by sustaining perception. If ritual guarded presence, digital environments renegotiate the boundaries of imagination. If poetry restored the body's link with the world, comfort cinema restores the mind's link with time. In all these cases, representation is not an escape from life; it is a way of inhabiting it.

This issue of *Aisthesis* therefore proposes a broad, interdisciplinary reflection on aesthetics as a practice of care: a practice that helps us remain present to ourselves, to others, and to the world in a time when presence is increasingly at risk.

Aisthesis

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Cosa curava la rappresentazione? Sul valore terapeutico dell'antica catarsi*

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Abstract. The aim of this article is comparing the way in which antiquity and modernity have conceived the idea of care through representational forms (figurative, theatrical, musical, and later filmic). It achieves this by examining, especially, Aristotle's concept of catharsis, which is first analysed in detail in *Poetics* and Books VII and VIII of *Politics*, followed by a summary of its reception, which has continued uninterrupted into modern times. Such a reception, with few exceptions – one of which is mentioned in the paper: Walter Benjamin's – has ended up in the modern era by overlapping, to the point of identifying them, the dimension that Aristotle actually dealt with only in *Politics* and which has been defined as "medical" catharsis, with a completely original idea of therapy, also called catharsis – a term that evidently "could be said in many ways" – obtained through tragic representation, the most eminent genre of poetic art at the time. An idea of catharsis that made use, so to speak, of "cognitive" drugs, which provided forms of treatment on which it is still worth reflecting today and seeing if, thanks to the new

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possibilities of representing reality offered by today's poetic mimesis techniques, it is possible re-actualizing them, at least in part.

Keywords. Aristotle, medical catharsis, poetic catharsis, Jacob Bernays, Walter Benjamin.

Come e perché si riteneva in antico che le varie forme di rappresentazione di cui all'epoca era composta la *poiesis* umana, teatro e musica in particolare, ma anche le arti figurative, scultura e pittura, avessero la facoltà di curare? E in cosa questa possibilità di *therapeia*, vocabolo che in greco significava "cura", "trattamento", ma anche "rispetto" e "assistenza" – e quindi per certi versi anche "culto" – è diversa dalla *cura* che si riconosce ancora oggi a queste e a quelle in seguito comparse nel nostro tempo, come il cinema e poi le odierne pratiche elettroniche e digitali?

La differenza che salta agli occhi per prima riguarda un più complessivo cambio di paradigma gnoseologico intervenuto tra le pratiche della *therapeia* poetica antica e quelle della *therapeia* moderna, corrispondente a ciò che W.J.T. Mitchell ha mandato sotto la definizione, entrata ormai nell'uso corrente, di *pictorial turn*. Vale a dire, di quella *ikonische Wende* l'ha chiamata invece Gottfried Boehm, di quella "svolta iconica" cioè, alla base dei *visual studies* contemporanei, che hanno ripensato il tradizionale rapporto di subordinazione dell'*eikon* al *logos* stabilendo una sostanziale autonomia logica dell'immagine rispetto al discorso verbale sia orale sia scritto (cfr. Cometa [2008]).

Una svolta sotto la quale si muove, ancora più in profondità, quella crisi del *fonologocentrismo*, per dirla con Jacques Derrida, che ha progressivamente fiaccato la convinzione, resistita vigorosa per secoli, secondo la quale la parola, prima orale e poi scritta, meglio di altre forme di espressione, dell'immagine come anche del suono musicale, è in grado di avvicinarsi al *logos*. A quel principio d'ordine metafisico in base al quale, come scrive Eraclito, «accadono tutte le cose» (D.-K. 22 B 1) e che, potendo dire – a parlare in questo caso è Platone (*Crat*. 385b) – «gli enti come sono», mette l'uomo nella condizione in ultimo segnalata da Aristotele: quella di ζῷον λόγον ἔχον, di animale che *ha* il *logos* (*Pol.* 1253a 9-10), e che innanzitutto nel *discorso*, nella razionalità discorsiva, esercita questo suo possesso, pur fragile perché esposto a ogni "intemperie eristica". Discorso capace di attivare quella διά-νοια, quell'intelligenza, la quale, a partire dal presupposto secondo cui il *logos* si coglie soprattutto mediante l'intelletto, il *nous* – vale a dire, appunto, διὰ τὸν νοῦν – non può che privilegiare la parola rispetto all'immagine, considerata per questo solo un suo succedaneo, più debole poiché più sensibile, sul piano intellettuale.

Questo modello euristico, su cui naturalmente ci sarebbe da approfondire ben più di quanto non si sia in modo cursorio fatto ora qui – se non altro per confutare un fatale fraintendimento moderno circa il privilegio accordato dai Greci alla vista sugli altri sensi (cfr. Guastini [2023], in part. 299-304) –, si riverbera perfettamente nell'idea cardine della *Poetica* di Aristotele, secondo la quale le arti poetiche facenti uso della parola, teatro, *epos* e poesia, potevano raggiungere l'ἔργον, l'effetto proprio della *poiesis,* compresi gli aspetti curativi di cui ora si dirà, meglio della pittura, della scultura e del *melos*.

Vero e proprio manifesto dialettico delle concezioni greche intorno alle arti poetiche, imperniata, con tutte le ricadute teoriche e pratiche che ciò comporta, sull'idea della *poiesis* come *mimesis*, e quindi, di fondo, sull'idea di un'omologia sempre possibile tra *mythos* e *logos*, la *Poetica* non a caso pensava alla tragedia, la cui trama, il cui *mythos* appunto, al limite si poteva anche leggere, senza bisogno di vederlo messo in scena per raggiungere il suo effetto curativo, come al più efficace modello di cura mediante la rappresentazione cui le arti poetiche potevano aspirare.

Tutto, com'è noto, ruota intorno alla nozione di *katharsis*[1], di cui Aristotele, sulla scorta di una lunga tradizione che alla fine aveva coinvolto anche il maestro Platone, ha rielaborato il senso in varie direzioni, distinguendo da una pratica strettamente *medica* della catarsi, un tipo di catarsi, quello cui accenna in *Poetica* 6 e la cui eco è ben presente anche nel Libro VIII della *Politica*, ben diverso.

Ora, pur senza entrare nel ginepraio delle ipotesi e delle interpretazioni circa una delle più famose *cruces* di tutto il *corpus* aristotelico, relativa al significato esattamente conferito da Aristotele al termine κάθαρσις nell'ambito della μουσική – termine, va sempre ricordato, che in greco designava non solo le tecniche musicali in senso stretto, ma l'intero ambito delle tecniche patrocinate dalle Muse, finalizzate anch'esse alla διαγωγή, al tempo libero, base per la realizzazione del *bios theoretikos*, della forma di vita più alta per l'uomo (cfr. *Pol.* 1338a 10-32) –, si può senz'altro affermare, senza tema di smentita, che anche tale nozione può essere inserita tra quelle che "si possono dire in molti modi". Può essere inserita, cioè, nel novero di quel πολλαχῶς λέγεται, di quel *potersi dire in molti modi* di nozioni e concetti, a cominciare dalla nozione stessa di "essere", che è prerogativa metodologica fondamentale del "realismo" filosofico di Aristotele e della presa di distanze della filosofia aristotelica da quella platonica. A proposito della *mousike*, in particolare si deve distinguere – distinzione spesso mancata dagli interpreti, e in cui direi che viceversa si ritrova tutto il portato di quel paradigma metafisico cui si accennava sopra – tra una catarsi propriamente medica e una, invece, più latamente poetica.

Aristotele ne parla in passi famosi del Libro VIII della *Politica* (cfr. 1340b 11 sgg.), in cui si legge che, se la *mousike* incide indubbiamente su τῆς ψυχῆς ἦθος, sul «carattere dell'anima» e perciò serve per la *paideia*, per la sua formazione, tuttavia questa qualità non è di tutta la *mousike* come tale. Le armonie frigie, aggiunge poco dopo, quelle suonate con l'*aulos*, con il flauto originariamen-

1 Su cui una bibliografia sterminata. Per una ricostruzione puntuale del termine e della sua tradizione, cfr. Belfiore ([2003], in part. 349-488). Per una panoramica recente sulla catarsi nella *Poetica* si veda anche Travaglini (2023), con ampia bibliografia.

te usato dai pastori della Frigia, la zona più orientale dell'Ellade, considerate d'impedimento all'impiego del *logos* e adoperate per l'ὀργιαστικόν, per i riti orgiastici, si prestano a un tipo di catarsi purificatoria che qui Aristotele distingue esplicitamente dalla μάθησις, dall'apprendimento (1341a 24-25). Poco più avanti, associa tale tipo di *katharsis,* prodotta da armonie e ritmi che la tradizione definiva coribantici, cioè entusiastici, direttamente alla ἰατρεία, alla cura medica (1342a 10-11), mediante purificazione della frenesia che in taluni soggetti eccede patologicamente. Un'associazione che peraltro già aveva compiuto Platone nel *Sofista* (227d), designando con la parola καθαρμός l'attività di espulsione di stati dell'anima patologici perché troppo animosi, in vista del ristabilimento di stati virtuosi.

Ma se in Platone il senso della catarsi rimane solo questo, senza travasare in campo poetico, e senza mai smettere di contrapporsi a quello della *mathesis*, Aristotele, invece, intende gli effetti prodotti dalla *mousike* anche in un altro modo. Infatti, ancorché a proposito della musica entusiastica nella *Politica* contrapponga *mathesis* e *katharsis*, nella *Poetica* invece torna ad associarle, indicando nella *mathesis* e nel μανθάνειν, il fine principale dell'imitazione poetica (*Poet*. 4, 48b 7-17), e nella tragedia il suo genere più eminente, proprio in quanto capace di avvalersi della *dianoia* – che considera caratteristica sostanziale del *mythos* tragico, costitutiva di una delle sei parti che ne formano la qualità propria (6, 50a 7-10) – e, allo stesso tempo, di realizzare catarsi.

Ciò rende sostanzialmente imparagonabili il tipo di catarsi che ascrive alla musica orgiastica e il tipo di catarsi che ascrive alla tragedia, in merito al quale in *Poetica* 6 afferma – passo famoso inserito da Aristotele nella definizione stessa della tragedia (49b 24-28) – che «tragedia è dunque imitazione di un'azione seria e conclusa … la quale, attraverso compassione e paura, porta ad effetto la catarsi di siffatte passioni»[2]. Chiaro, infatti, che in un caso, quello dell'auletica, sta rapportando la catarsi agli aspetti più corporei delle emozioni, nell'altro, quello della tragedia, la sta ricollegando proprio con quella dimensione dianoetica non riconosciuta alla catarsi indotta dal *melos* frigio.

E ciò che nella *Poetica* è esplicito a proposito del genere più eminente di mimesi poetica, vale a dire la tragedia, non manca di essere richiamato a vario titolo anche nella *Politica*. Come tipico del procedere dialettico della sua filosofia, Aristotele, per corroborare le sue posizioni, nella *Politica* infila anche un gustoso racconto, ripreso dalla tradizione mitologica. Quello secondo il quale Atena, dopo aver inventato lo strumento dell'*aulos*, lo gettò via perché si accorse che suonarlo la imbruttiva, deformandole le guance, ma lo reinterpreta in senso filosofico, imputando la vera ragione di tale rigetto al fatto che la dea dell'*episteme* e della *techne* si era accorta che tale strumento «non si presta alla *dianoia*»

2 Per la traduzione e il commento del passo, si veda Aristotele ([2010]: 59, 160-172).

(*Pol*. 1341b 6-7) e dunque non è degno di uomini liberi, di ἐλεύθεροι; sia che la suonino, sia che semplicemente ne ascoltino le armonie.

Ma non per questo, aggiunge poi Aristotele, non esistono armonie di carattere etico; quelle che vanno a incidere anziché sulla salute oggi diremmo 'psichica' della persona, più complessivamente sulla sua virtù, sul suo "stato etico" potremmo dire, contribuendo alla sua *paideia* e addirittura, come aveva già detto (cfr. 1339a 26), alla formazione della *phronesis* dell'individuo. Esattamente quelle che nella *Politica*, a proposito della tecnica melodica, indica come armonie doriche e misolidie, ma il cui modello di stabilità e solennità, trasferito, come avverrà nella *Poetica*, in ambito teatrale, non può non richiamare la tragedia, che perciò si adatta anche ai giovani – cui invece, come si legge alla fine del Libro VII, non deve essere consentito di assistere a giambi e commedie finché la *paideia* non li avrà resi ἀπαθεῖς, insensibili, a quegli spettacoli (*Pol*. 1336b 19-21) –, oltre che agli uomini liberi e di buona cultura.

In definitiva, si può ben dire che tutte le distinzioni cui Aristotele si attiene nella *Politica* tra *paideia* e *katharsis* riguardano precisamente l'ambito di una catarsi che funziona esattamente come una purgazione medica in grado di liberare dagli umori nocivi coloro che sono «posseduti dall'entusiasmo» (1342a 7-11). Ma non si può di certo pensare che agli occhi di Aristotele la generalità degli spettatori che accorreva in massa alle tragedie potesse trovarsi nelle speciali condizioni, indotte da cause patologiche o dalla partecipazione ai riti misterici, proprie dei sovraeccitati κατοκώχιμοι – così li chiama: alla lettera "ammorbati di frenesia" – di cui parla in questo passo. Assai più plausibile è ritenere che Aristotele stia qui semplicemente facendo riferimento, come spesso aveva fatto anche Platone, a quel tipo di riti «coribantici», che, come attesta la tradizione (su cui Linforth [1946], cfr. anche Dodds [1978] 100-112), anche ippocratica, si avvalevano della musica come di una cura medica degli stati morbosi dell'anima. Un tipo di catarsi cui difficilmente si può pensare di ricondurre, se non come lontana discendente, la catarsi tragica e il suo ineliminabile tratto dianoetico[3]. Tutte questioni che, com'è noto, da secoli dividono gli interpreti e che non permettono, testi alla mano, risposte univoche, ma la cui incertezza non deve tuttavia oscu-

3 Mi è già capitato di dire (cfr. Aristotele [2010]: 171-172) che anche chi, per cercare di avvalorare una qualche continuità tra catarsi tragica e musicale, si affida al rimando che proprio in questo paragrafo Aristotele fa agli «scritti sulla poetica» (ἐν τοῖς περὶ ποιητικῆς: 1341b 38-40), non tiene nel debito conto il fatto che esso può essere variamente interpretato e che, ad ogni modo, è ben lungi dall'avere carattere risolutivo. Quali sarebbero questi "scritti sulla poetica" in cui si parlerà «più chiaramente» della catarsi? Siamo certi che è al testo della *Poetica* che noi conosciamo (e quindi a un suo eventuale II Libro) che Aristotele sta facendo riferimento qui? Chi ci dice che non si tratti invece di un riferimento interno a parti di *Pol.* VIII andate perdute? Così Lord ([1982]: 142-50), che cita almeno altri due passi del testo della *Politica* dedicato alla *paideia* musicale – VII, 1336b 24-6, VIII, 1338a 32-4 – in cui si fa riferimento a questioni che non sono rintracciabili nel testo rimastoci.

rare l'unico elemento che mi pare incontrovertibile: la differenza di significato che Aristotele conferisce al termine *katharsis* nel contesto della catarsi tragica, compreso quello della catarsi musicale di carattere etico, e in quello della catarsi musicale di tipo orgiastico; le une confacenti alla *paideia* mediante la *dianoia*, le altre sue antagoniste.

Ora, il primo grande interprete moderno della *catarsi medica* è stato, com'è noto, il filologo tedesco Jacob Bernays a metà dell'Ottocento[4], che invece le equiparò. E ciò è assai significativo delle differenze che si possono individuare tra l'idea di *cura* riservata alla rappresentazione poetica in antico e quella moderna.

Tutto ruota intorno al fatto che mentre Aristotele implica l'irriducibilità tra catarsi tragica – un tipo di catarsi che proprio sulla *dianoia* basa la sua principale efficacia e che è effetto di un genere di rappresentazione, il dramma attico, nel quale la musica è solo una componente dello spettacolo cui esso dà luogo, e nemmeno quella principale – e catarsi musicale effetto dei ritmi orgiastici, Bernays invece le sovrappone, di fatto mettendo fuori gioco l'idea di una dimensione *conoscitiva* della catarsi e in questo modo negando quanto di più peculiare era implicato nell'idea antica di una cura mediante la rappresentazione.

Il fatto che Aristotele abbia potuto parlare di un effetto catartico della tragedia, pur sapendo bene che non era nemmeno pensabile che le cittadinanze che accorrevano a teatro potessero essere considerate tutte "malate" nel senso strettamente *iatrico* del termine, è proprio ciò che lascia trapelare la questione fondamentale, quella misconosciuta da Bernays: tutta la differenza che in antico si poneva tra dimensione clinica e dimensione teatrale della *therapeia*. Infatti, nella dimensione clinica, l'oggetto della cura era fondamentalmente il corpo nella sua dimensione *fisica* – l'"anima sensitiva" l'aveva chiamata Platone –, nella dimensione teatrale era invece l'anima intellettiva, quella agìta dal *logos*.

Ora, mentre Platone teneva rigorosamente separate intelletto e sensazione – e in questo quadro la catarsi non poteva servire ad altro che a ricacciare nel corporeo gli umori prodotti dall'anima sensitiva quando invadevano lo spazio etereo, "divino", di quella intellettiva, e, di conseguenza, per Platone nessuna rappresentazione sensibile poteva, in quanto tale, servire al caso –, non così per Aristotele. Sebbene in modi assai complessi, Aristotele considerava invece anima sensitiva e anima intellettiva collegate. Nella valutazione della critica che il filosofo di Stagira muove al *korismos*, alla separazione, tipica del paradigma platonico di pensiero, non si può, infatti, commettere l'errore opposto, parlando di un'equiparazione, da parte di Aristotele, tra *aisthesis* e *nous*. Questa equiparazione la

4 Per tracciare una breve storia e preistoria della teoria di Bernays a proposito della catarsi tragica, che influenzò perfino gli studi di Sigmund Freud (su cui cfr. Ugolini [2020]: 43-102), si deve accennare almeno all'interpretazione medico-biologica della catarsi proposta già da Lorenzo Giacomini (*De la purgazione de la tragedia* nel 1586).

facevano i materialisti, Democrito ad esempio, che Aristotele critica aspramente nel Libro III del *De anima* in quanto tutti sostenitori della tesi secondo la quale, afferma, «il pensare e il comprendere [τὸ φρονεῖν] sono come una specie di sentire [αἰσθάνεσθαί τι]» (*An.,* III, 427a 17 sgg.).

Per Aristotele, non si tratta né di divaricazione, né di equiparazione tra sensibilità e intelletto, ma piuttosto, com'è tipico del suo pensiero, di due poli di uno sviluppo che procede dalla potenza all'atto. Di un processo di elaborazione intellettuale che si conclude in un atto separato dall'*aisthesis*, la quale, tuttavia, in potenza, è *già* l'oggetto sensibile che l'intelletto poi è chiamato a discernere. L'*aisthesis* è dunque un *tramite* mediante il quale l'intelletto può situarsi praticamente, e il termine "*katharsis"*, perciò, nel contesto di una prospettiva filosofica di questo tipo, non può designare ciò che, in definitiva, designava per Platone: l'espulsione dal campo intellettuale di ciò che è sensibile. Non può significare *purgazione* del *nous*, cioè.

E qui direi che sta esattamente l'errore commesso da Bernays. Errore che si riflette nella confusione che fa tra la catarsi tragica di cui Aristotele parla in *Poetica* 6 e la catarsi indotta dalla musica orgiastica di cui parla in *Politica* VIII. Mentre quest'ultima corrisponde all'espulsione di παθήματα, di passioni che altrimenti, quando in eccesso, diventano dannose, ed è perciò intesa come forma di scarico e di conseguente sollievo e alleggerimento della condizione patologica imposta da un eccesso passionale – vale a dire esattamente come una *purgazione* medica in grado di liberare l'anima aggravata da umori nocivi –, nulla di tutto ciò si riscontra nella *Poetica*. Nella *Poetica* i tratti che nella *Politica* non aveva ascritto alla catarsi, bensì, come si è visto, alla *mathesis* per mezzo della *dianoia* e in vista della *paideia*, torneranno a proposito della tragedia; stavolta, però, provvisti anche di un effetto catartico.

Semmai, quindi, si deve parlare di una discrasia – anch'essa naturalmente tutta da chiarire, ma più in linea con il carattere acroamatico dei testi aristotelici in questione –, ma non certo di una sovrapponibilità tra una *katharsis* antagonista della *mathesis*, adatta a quegli 'ammorbati di frenesia' che, squilibrati sul piano psichico per un eccesso di entusiasmo, vedono curata la loro sovraeccitazione per mezzo di tali musiche entusiastiche, e una *katharsis* operante sugli spettatori principalmente consapevoli e maturi della tragedia. Si deve parlare, appunto, di una nozione appartenente a pieno titolo all'ambito, ben ampio per Aristotele, del *pollakos leghetai*, il cui significato in un caso incrociava le attività relative a soggetti le cui condizioni patologiche autorizzavano riti che si servivano della musica come mezzo per intervenire sull'anima sensitiva, pre-logica – "antepredicativa", potremmo ancor meglio dire –, nell'altro incrociava un altro tipo di attività. Esattamente le attività di cui nei secoli successivi si è in gran parte perduta contezza, legate a quel *piacere intellettuale* di cui l'epoca classica è stata la grande fautrice – non è un caso che Aristotele in *Politica* VII e VIII, in un trattato dedicato all'individuazione del tipo di vita associata più adatto, più "naturale" per gli uomini, abbia parlato poi di *diagoge*, di riposo, di σχολή (cfr. 1334a 15), di tempo libero dalle occupazioni, di ἐλευθερία, di libertà dalle incombenze pratiche. Di attività, cioè, in grado tutte di facilitare, facendo spazio soprattutto alla filosofia (cfr. 1334a 23), il raggiungimento del *bios theoretikos*.

Questa è la questione storica della catarsi come emerge dai testi aristotelici, e su cui ci sarebbe ben più da dire. Ma in realtà, com'è noto, il discorso di Bernays, più che a interpretare le posizioni aristoteliche in senso stretto, è finalizzato a polemizzare con le teorie moralistiche di Gotthold E. Lessing, in particolare con la sua *Drammaturgia di Amburgo* del 1768, nella quale il grande intellettuale tedesco aveva interpretato la catarsi aristotelica in senso morale, finalizzata al perfezionamento etico dello spettatore. Un perfezionamento da attuarsi, appunto, mediante catarsi, mediante questa specifica prerogativa del teatro tragico, intesa come purificazione [*Reinigung*] delle passioni, vale a dire come una trasformazione di queste ultime, quando eccessive, in inclinazioni virtuose.

E proprio per questo suo anti-moralismo Bernays sarà apprezzato, com'è noto, da Friedrich Nietzsche, che ne riprenderà la definizione di *katharsis* come *Entladung*, «scarico», parlando di «scarica patologica» e condividendo con Bernays, senza, tuttavia, mai condividere anche tali tesi "mediche", l'idea che Aristotele avesse una concezione "purgativa" dell'effetto dell'azione tragica (cfr. in part. Nietzsche [1989^{11}]: 147-148). Anzi, ritenendo, ne *La nascita della tragedia* e altrove, che l'interpretazione medica, sostenuta anche a suo modo di vedere da Aristotele, sarebbe in realtà inadeguata per capire la tragedia. E che per questo Aristotele, già estraneo allo spirito più genuinamente greco, già filosofo "ellenistico", sarebbe stato il primo grande greco a non averne più compreso la vera essenza. Essenza che può essere compresa – e qui semmai si sentono su Nietzsche le influenze dell'estetica di Joahnn W. Goethe – solo rivolgendosi all'originario impulso artistico dei Greci, popolo particolarmente sensibile al dolore (esistenziale più che fisico, dolore "dionisiaco") trasfigurato in apollineo dall'arte, e quindi, anche per lui, non in termini strettamente medici, che alla fine imputa ad Aristotele e non alla tragedia attica.

Ma tornando a Bernays: per il filologo tedesco, Lessing sbaglia perché, influenzato dalle teorie teatrali del suo tempo, le quali, impregnate ancora di moralismo religioso – un moralismo che, peraltro, veniva da lontano, da interpretazioni cinque-seicentesche della *Poetica* di Aristotele, fortemente gravate dall'ipoteca controriformistica identificabile nella questione cosiddetta della "giustizia poetica", in Vincenzo Maggi, in Bartolomeo Lombardi, poi nel classicismo francese –, non avevano dato il giusto peso alla questione dell'ἡδονή, del piacere che, a modo di vedere di Bernays, invece costituisce il principio stesso della *poiesis* aristotelica.

Ma proprio qui, nella considerazione del piacere, sta, direi, il problema principale e il punto più debole dell'interpretazione di Bernays. Non è Lessing che sta tralasciando la questione del piacere nella *Poetica*, il problema è in Bernays stesso, che la sta interpretando anacronisticamente, senza tener nel debito conto ciò che Aristotele dice sull'*hedone* nella *Poetica* e altrove, in particolare nelle parti dedicate alla teoria dell'*hedone* presenti nell'*Etica Nicomachea*.

Ecco il punto di snodo di tutta la questione. La tematica è complessa e articolata, ma non se ne possono non toccare degli aspetti se si vuole comprendere in profondità la teoria aristotelica della catarsi tragica. L'*hedone* in Aristotele ha un cruciale ruolo conoscitivo, quello di cui si legge nelle parti che le dedica negli ultimi quattro paragrafi del Libro VII dell'*Etica Nicomachea* e soprattutto nei primi cinque dell'ultimo, il X. Il piacere, scrive lì, è ciò che intensifica la possibilità di raggiungere l'*energeia*, cioè l'atto, di ciò cui è connaturata, di cui è il piacere proprio (ἡ οἰκεία ἡδονή). Il piacere – aggiunge con parole famose (1174b 23 *et passim*) – perfeziona (τελειοῖ), l'atto, ne agevola il compimento. Come si legge alle linee 1175a 29-31, «coloro che in ogni campo agiscono con piacere [μεθ'ἡδονῆς] giudicano meglio e sono più precisi». Per spiegare questo piacere, diverso e proprio di ogni attività, fa l'esempio divertente di coloro che, spesso per colpa della cattiva rappresentazione cui stanno assistendo, a teatro mangiano dolciumi, facendo interferire un tipo di piacere con un altro (cfr. 1175b 10-3). Questo piacere improprio distrae. Invece quello *proprio*, nella fattispecie quello per la rappresentazione cui si sta assistendo, viceversa accresce la concentrazione e dunque la comprensione. Nella tragedia, ad esempio, accresce la comprensione di *come si deve vivere*, delle regole essenziali della *praxis*, affinché possa uscirne agevolata la pratica di una *vita buona* per l'uomo. C'è, quindi, un piacere *proprio* per ogni specifica attività. E l'insieme di questi piaceri concorre al perfezionamento della vita pratica, di quell'*energeia* che è il vivere stesso (τὸ ζῆν: 1175a 12 sgg.) e che Aristotele designa con il termine, tra i più complessi della lingua greca, εὐδαιμονία, felicità, intesa dal filosofo di Stagira come raggiungimento del fine stesso della vita, che, interpretando così la predilezione greca per la vita filosofica, individuava per l'uomo, come si è già detto, nel *bios theoretikos*.

L'*hedone* non è, dunque, in sé, una passione, come poteva pensare Bernays, ma, come Aristotele ripete spesso nell'*Etica Nicomachea,* nella *Retorica*, nei *Topici* (cfr. in part. *Top*. 125b 28-126a 17), una disposizione che «accompagna» le passioni, favorendo l'attività di quell'intelletto pratico che è condizione fondamentale perché l'uomo, pur nella precarietà della sua condizione, possa giungere all'atto delle proprie potenzialità e divenire εὐδαιμων, felice – sebbene, naturalmente, solo come può esserlo un uomo: ovverosia in modo parziale e mai deciso una volta per tutte. Di qui il ruolo etico e anche "politico" del piacere, il quale ha a che vedere con i tre aspetti fondamentali dell'etica: cioè la *praxis*, la possibilità umana dell'*eudaimonia* e i πάθη, le passioni.

Ebbene, in questo quadro, la tragedia giocava un ruolo “paideutico”, cioè educativo, di prim’ordine. E ciò spiega anche la centralità che per il mondo greco aveva il teatro – mondo che Platone arriva, ma nel suo caso spregiativamente, a considerare addirittura una *theatrokratia.* Ἔλεος e φόβος, compassione e paura, le passioni che Aristotele considera – come scrive ripetutamente nella *Poetica* – quelle tragiche per eccellenza, sono passioni che, per quanto mature, per quanto degne di una vera agnizione circa la contingenza e fragilità delle cose umane, sono però, *propter hoc*, passioni dolorose.

Ecco, allora, la possibile soluzione. Probabilmente – e dico probabilmente, perché, considerato che Aristotele ne parla solo nel suddetto passo di *Poetica* 6, nessuna ipotesi sulla catarsi tragica può andare oltre la plausibilità: ma questa mi pare quella davvero più plausibile – con il richiamo alla catarsi di sentimenti quali l’*eleos* e il *phobos*, Aristotele non sta facendo altro che connotare, sul piano dell’effetto diciamo così “psicologico” che produce, l’opera stessa della *mimesis*. Quella *mimesis* la cui funzione, come aveva già espressamente indicato in *Poetica* 4, sta nell’individuare la *morphe*, la forma, l’essenza, delle azioni e degli enti imitati, così da poter rendere piacevole, come scrive, «contemplare – il termine che usa qui è θεωροῦντες – le immagini di quelle stesse cose che nella realtà vediamo con pena» (*Poet*. 48b 10-11).

Questo, peraltro, spiegherebbe, almeno in parte, anche il riserbo osservato da *Poetica* 6 sulla catarsi, riferendo il passo a un fenomeno già ampiamente spiegato altrove. Quello della trasformazione di dolore in piacere realizzato dalla *mimesis* in quanto determinazione della forma delle cose: piacere appunto della conoscenza, in vista del *bios theoretikos*. Nel quadro di questo stretto legame tra *mimesis* e *katharsis*, “*katharsis*” non sarebbe, in questo caso, altro che il nome che Aristotele prende a prestito dalla tradizione medica e religiosa per indicare il risvolto, chiamiamolo ancora “psicologico” – ma legato alla ψυχῆ, all’anima in senso greco, e non alla *psiche* in senso moderno –, ritenuto tipico della mimesi tragica. Ovverosia, la purificazione delle passioni da quell’elemento che, pur loro connaturato, come il dolore – effetto ineliminabile di quel πάσχειν, di quel patire, subire passioni, che rende però anche possibile al *nous* situarsi nella realtà discontinua del divenire e attivarsi (in proposito cfr. *An*. II, 413b 3 sgg.) –, costituisce, tuttavia, un «impedimento» che lo trattiene dall’attività pratica. Come dirà ancora nell’*Etica Nicomachea,* se un’attività mi procura dolore, alla lunga smetto di dedicarmici – fa l’esempio dello scrittore cui diviene penoso lo scrivere e che perciò smette di scrivere o di farlo bene (cfr. 1175b 17-20). *Katharsis*, nella *Poetica*, starebbe così in definitiva a indicare il processo di trasformazione a fini conoscitivi, intellettuali, di sentimenti di per sé dolorosi in piacevoli.

Ora, molto altro ci sarebbe da dire, e ho cercato di dire nel mio commento alla *Poetica* (Aristotele [2010]: 160-172), ma già questi pochi elementi mi paiono sufficienti per poter porre una questione e rispondere a una domanda. La questione è quella che passa per l'interpretazione medica di Bernays, di cui ora possiamo vedere, direi, con chiarezza l'errore. Errore davvero significativo perché esemplare di un modo tutto moderno, *riduzionistico*, di intendere la catarsi e più in generale la cura mediante rappresentazione. Bernays commette l'errore di pensare che quando Aristotele parla di piacere stia parlando semplicemente di un impulso fisico; o al massimo di quel sentimento, di quel *Gefühl*, di cui ai tempi di Bernays stava parlando l'estetica, quella di Kant in particolare, come di una facoltà dell'animo che può eventualmente agevolare i processi conoscitivi, ma che in sé non ha alcunché di conoscitivo. Invece Aristotele sta parlando del piacere prodotto dalla catarsi di passioni dolorose in piacevoli nientemeno che come di una disposizione che perfeziona l'atto intellettuale, portandone a compimento gli stati potenziali ancora sensibili.

Quindi, la domanda che ci si deve porre a questo punto, e a cui forse ci sono finalmente gli elementi per poter dare una risposta, è la seguente: cosa curava la catarsi tragica, la catarsi teatrale? Non certo gli squilibri fisici, corporei. Curava, semmai, gli squilibri, chiamiamoli, "conoscitivi"[5]. Vale a dire l'incapacità, spesso mostrata dalla conoscenza umana, di andare al punto, all'essenza, delle cose. Fatto che i Greci, proprio in ragione della loro concezione *teleologica* dell'umano, finalizzata alla conoscenza e al "farsi divini per quanto è possibile all'uomo", come diranno Platone e Aristotele, consideravano però particolarmente grave, molto più grave di quanto non si faccia noi contemporanei, post-metafisici e finanche "post-moderni", che anzi spesso vediamo questo perdersi nell'eterogeneità del sensibile più come una risorsa che come un limite; come, per dirla ancora una volta con Nietzsche ([2008^6]: 430 sgg.), un «contromovimento» al «mondo vero» della metafisica.

Per Aristotele, curava, se vogliamo, invece la malattia più grave per il *bios theoretikos*: l'incapacità di vedere la forma essenziale, i principi, delle cose oltre la loro materia. Curava il difetto gnoseologico, affermerà nel Libro Alfa della *Metafisica* (981a 29-30) di fermarsi al solo τὸ ὅτι, al *che è* sensibile delle cose, senza pervenire a τὸ διότι, al loro *perché* soprasensibile.

La catarsi teatrale curava, insomma, gli scompensi conoscitivi del *bios theoretikos* e dunque costituiva un aspetto essenziale della ricerca dell'*eudaimonia* da parte dell'uomo, aiutandolo sia ad essere meno cedevole di fronte alla sua intrinseca fragilità, quella che, agli occhi di Aristotele, spesso lo portava a non essere all'altezza del proprio compito e perdere le sue prerogative conoscitive, teoretiche. Sia ad evitare il rischio opposto, anch'esso sempre incombente sull'uomo: quello di cadere, cosa altrettanto grave per Aristotele, nell'astrazione, nell'incapacità di mettere praticamente in atto l'intelletto, rimanendo, così al *korismos* platonico.

5 Su questo, cfr., tra gli altri, Fornari (2013).

Ecco l'orizzonte integralmente metafisico – ben prima che questa parola assumesse valore negativo – in cui si disponeva anche la dimensione poetica d'epoca classica e che, una volta tramontato, ha fatto inaridire il terreno sul quale era potuta fiorire la tragedia attica e la disposizione catartica tipica di quel genere di dramma, sostituita di sana pianta dallo spettacolo ellenistico e poi romano, fatti non più per conoscere le cose più alte, l'origine, la forma delle cose, ma per dissimulare e divertire secondo un'idea di piacere assai più vicina alla nostra che a quella dell'epoca classica[6].

A questo punto, un'altra domanda mi pare ineludibile: in relazione alle trasformazioni dell'idea antica di *therapeia* per mezzo della rappresentazione, il cristianesimo che ruolo ha avuto? Alle origini e per un lungo periodo, almeno fino a fine Medioevo, si può dire che il cristianesimo, avendo interrotto il rapporto con il piacere – che intanto era diventato, in epoca ellenistica e tardo antica, pura *delectatio* effetto del *ludus* –, ha quindi interrotto anche ogni rapporto con l'idea di una funzione catartica del teatro e, di fatto, rifiutato la tradizione teatrale stessa[7]. Quando questo rapporto riprenderà, e ciò è avvenuto nel Rinascimento, l'evoluzione in senso estetico della questione del piacere – evoluzione al cui sviluppo la cultura cristiana pure ha, per via negativa, concorso, contribuendo alla diffusione dell'idea di una valenza non cognitiva del piacere – avrà ormai fatto sì che il piacere e la catarsi abbiano perduto il loro ruolo conoscitivo e il teatro sia entrato, per l'appunto, in una dimensione soprattutto ludica e comunque abbia perduto ogni carattere curativo, "farmacologico" nel senso classico del termine[8].

Ciò è fuori di dubbio. Anche se non si può, però, dimenticare che la cultura cristiana sta anche alla base di due dei fenomeni più importanti che hanno riguardato la rappresentazione, in particolare scenica, nel passaggio dal medioevo alla modernità. Uno riguarda la riattualizzazione in termini religiosi del carnevale, che affonda le radici nelle feste sacrificali pagane, ma che il cristianesimo medievale collegherà con il rito religioso della quaresima, e che si avvarrà anche di spettacoli e messe in scena per l'espletamento dei propri cerimoniali liberatori, lasciando, come ha magistralmente fatto vedere Michail Bachtin, una visibile scia d'influenza sulla cultura e la letteratura moderne (cfr. Bachtin [1979]). L'altro, invece, del tutto autoctono, che ha riguardato la pratica del cosiddetto 'te-

6 Come ha autorevolmente sostenuto Bruno Snell (1963).

7 Il testo più completo sulla questione della considerazione che la cultura cristiana dei primi secoli ha riservato al teatro è senz'altro Lugaresi (2008), che sottolinea più volte la questione della *vanitas ludorum* e dell'agostiniano «qualunque cosa ripetuta è un gioco» presente in *Io. ev. tract.*, 11, 12.

8 In greco antico, il vocabolo φάρμακον stava per "medicina", "rimedio salutare", o per "veleno", "sostanza tossica", a seconda della dose che ne veniva assunta e si presta perfettamente a spiegare il carattere di *medietà* tra difetto ed eccesso di passioni indicato da Aristotele nelle *Etiche* come uno dei presupposti fondamentali per la riuscita dell'azione, per l'εὐπραξία, per l'agire bene.

atro della pietà', cioè delle Sacre Rappresentazioni che, sotto l'influenza della spiritualità francescana e della sua valorizzazione della dimensione corporea, sensibile, in particolare della Passione, ebbe uno straordinario sviluppo a partire dal XIII secolo, quando, fuori dalle Chiese e dai conventi, in ambito profano – va sempre ricordato che *profanum* in latino significa alla lettera "fuori dal tempio" –, si cominciarono a mettere in scena a scopo devozionale episodi della vita di Gesù Cristo, di Maria, dei santi, facendone una pratica, anche fisica, di *sequela Christi*. Primo tra tutti, vero e proprio archetipo, forse, di queste sacre rappresentazioni, com'è noto, il presepe di Greccio, nel quale Francesco d'Assisi nella notte di Natale del 1223 inventò letteralmente la messa in scena – «con gli occhi del corpo» ha scritto Claudio Bernardi – della natività (cfr. Bernardi [2005]: 55)[9].

Ora, ci sarebbe molto da dire anche su queste forme di teatralità, ma si capisce già a primo intuito come la logica stessa della fede cristiana, il suo tratto *carismatico* – quello cioè legato all'idea che il vero non è qualcosa che l'uomo può conoscere da sé, in base alle proprie capacità razionali, ma un mistero di cui è reso cosciente da Dio, attraverso un dono di grazia –, non può che svalutare il carattere catartico della rappresentazione, concedendo a quest'ultima soltanto un valore rievocativo. Il *teatro della pietà* diventa, infatti, strumento di rammemorazione di verità che, già rivelate dalle Sacre scritture, possono poi anche essere messe in scena, ma non per afferrarle intellettualmente, individuandone l'essenza aiutati dal carattere perfettivo detenuto dal piacere, bensì solo per poterle meglio "vedere", meglio "focalizzare", situandole nello spazio fisico e storico. E così poterle anche meglio trasmettere. Soprattutto agli illetterati, veri destinatari di queste immagini, fossero esse in movimento, come quelle teatrali, o fisse come quelle pittoriche e scultoree. Altro, quindi, che *bios theoretikos*, lo sfondo su cui si era potuta concepire la catarsi come *therapeia* conoscitiva; qui si deve parlare, a tutti gli effetti, di pratiche devozionali, che impiegano anche le forme della rappresentazione – e l'immagine qui diventa efficace almeno quanto la parola, il *logos* – come impiegano la liturgia, quella eucaristica, quella eucologica. Cioè, al fine, per quanto possibile, di *incorporare*, e così far rivivere, vivificare, tenere sempre vivo, l'evento della *Parousia,* con la Natività, la Passione, e poi con i suoi riflessi nella vita della Vergine e dei santi.

Ma successivamente la potente vocazione religiosa assunta dal teatro medioevale finirà per attenuarsi, e anche la rappresentazione teatrale subirà il processo di secolarizzazione che ha subito ogni aspetto della vita dell'Europa cristiana, lasciando riaffiorare, "rinascere" – nozione che, si tenga sempre presente, è nella definizione stessa di 'Rinascimento' – istanze, teorie e temi del passato, la presunta *pristina forma* dell'arte antica, ma ora concepiti in termini soprattutto classicistici e ormai ben lontani da quelli originari (su cui Quondam [2013]: 83 *et*

9 Sulla questione, decisivo anche Bino (2008), con ampia bibliografia.

passim). Tra questi, anche la questione della catarsi, di cui bisognerebbe seguire la storia, soprattutto nelle letture rinascimentali e seicentesche della *Poetica* di Aristotele, per vedere come al progressivo tramonto della metafisica corrispose il graduale farsi avanti di una cognizione medica e fisiologica della catarsi, fino ad arrivare, appunto, a Bernays.

Ma non c'è modo di dare spazio a questo pur fondamentale capitolo della questione relativa all'evoluzione in senso moderno della questione della catarsi[10], e saltando a piedi pari molti secoli della sua storia, vorrei concludere facendo in breve due esempi di come l'alternativa tra una prospettiva di tipo fisico sulla catarsi e una prospettiva che la mette in gioco in modo più articolato e complesso, si possa ancora ritrovare, per vie più o meno dirette all'interno di certe teorie dell'arte della contemporaneità, influenzandole in modo non secondario.

Il primo riguarda la teoria estetica di Lev Vygotskij, eminente psicologo sovietico, che a metà degli anni Venti del Novecento ha parlato dell'arte come catarsi, e in cui, di riflesso, si può vedere, livellata nel modo *riduzionistico* tipico della modernità, tutta l'incolmabile distanza dalla distinzione fatta da Aristotele tra catarsi teatrale e catarsi medica. In un testo intitolato *Psicologia dell'arte,* Vygotskij mette l'arte sotto l'egida del sentimento. Sentimento che, produttore di passioni, nel caso dell'arte costituisce un tale «dispendio d'energia psichica» da apparire, a prima vista, del tutto «antieconomico» per l'organismo (Vygotskij [1972]: 277 sgg.). Il sentimento artistico, infatti, tende non a tesaurizzare, ma viceversa a dilapidare le nostre energie nervose, a sprecarle, in cose apparentemente inutili. In una «reazione estetica», dice (289 sgg.), nella quale opera la fantasia, che risveglia sentimenti ed emozioni di straordinaria intensità, i quali, tuttavia, «non trovano espressione di sorta»; che, cioè, non si risolvono, non si sfogano, nell'azione, come avviene nella vita reale, ma restano confinati alla corteccia cerebrale e si sfogano solo «in immagini di fantasia». A prima vista, tale fenomeno appare quindi come del tutto inutile, fine a se stesso, ma invece riveste un ruolo fondamentale per l'equilibrio psico-fisico: un ruolo *catartico*, appunto, la cui nozione Vygotskij mutua esplicitamente dal modo in cui Bernays legge la catarsi aristotelica.

L'arte per Vygotskij è capace di suscitare emozioni contrastanti e, in questo modo, di neutralizzarle reciprocamente. La catarsi svolge esattamente tale ufficio: quello di depurare le emozioni per contrasto; di scaricare l'energia emotiva accumulata nel sentimento prodotto dalla fantasia in direzione contraria (293), provocando «un corto circuito» in grado di produrre l'annientamento, la neutralizzazione di entrambe (294), e così permettere l'alleggerimento delle emozioni più angosciose (*ibid.*). La catarsi consiste, in definitiva, in un «autobruciamen-

10 Su cui rimando, tra gli altri, a Zanin ([2012]: 55-83) con ampia bibliografia in merito alla questione dello sviluppo cinque-seicentesco della catarsi. Si veda anche il recente Chevrolet ([2025]: 499-536).

to», lo chiama, delle emozioni che porta ad annullare la «reazione esplosiva» che proviene dalla scarica emotiva (295).

Proprio come avviene con Bernays, anche Vygotskij, che pure si accorge che con il termine "catarsi" non va intesa un'espulsione delle passioni ma una loro trasformazione, in questo caso una trasformazione *per contrasto*, tuttavia rimane all'interno di un orizzonte, quello dell'estetica moderna, in cui l'arte e il suo effetto di piacere tendono non a produrre (e dunque, in qualche modo a "curare") conoscenze, concetti, pratiche – per Aristotele, abbiamo visto, determinazioni relative all'*eudaimonia*, alla *philia*, all'*hamartia*, cioè ammaestramenti su come vivere –, ma solo "stati d'animo", sentimenti. In particolare, un *Gefühl der Lust*, un sentimento di piacere, che – parafrasando il famoso paragrafo 49 della *Critica della facoltà di giudizio* di Kant, vero e proprio spartiacque tra l'estetica moderna e concezioni poetiche ancora in qualche modo legate all'antichità – può, vivificando l'animo, al massimo *dare da pensare*, *ma senza che alcun concetto sia da esso determinato*. Niente a che vedere, perciò, con la *catarsi tragica* e il portato direttamente cognitivo che le ha conferito Aristotele[11], ma a che vedere con ciò che Aristotele chiamava "catarsi medica" e che, in definitiva, rimane più compatibile con la traiettoria aconcettuale intrapresa dalla gran parte dell'estetica moderna.

L'altro esempio che invece, in conclusione, volevo portare riguarda la teoria dell'arte di Walter Benjamin, e in particolare ciò che il filosofo tedesco pensava del cinema. Ora, benché Benjamin non nascondendo mai l'ascendente, anche per-

11 Da questo punto di vista, nemmeno la scoperta dei cosiddetti "neuroni specchio" sposta di molto il tiro. Senza in alcun modo sminuirne l'importanza sul piano neurofisiologico (su cui Rizzolatti-Fadiga [1999]) – cosa che, peraltro, non si avrebbero neppure le competenze per fare –, si può però ben comprendere come essa, ancorché abbia fatto fare passi in avanti decisivi nella spiegazione dei processi biologici che supportano l'empatia umana e malgrado abbia non secondarie ricadute sul piano pedagogico ed estetico, soprattutto nel campo delle immagini (Freedberg-Gallese [2007]), ciononostante non risolve affatto la questione della catarsi posta da Aristotele nella *Poetica*. In questo stesso numero di *Aisthesis*, l'articolo di Valagussa (2025), con selezionata bibliografia di riferimento, coglie perfettamente il problema. Benché, infatti, la presenza dei neuroni specchio nella corteccia celebrale spieghi più che plausibilmente la capacità di identificazione dello spettatore con i personaggi sulla scena – spiegazione che, se ad esempio prendiamo la questione dal lato non deterministico in cui l'ha presa il bel libro di Virno (2013) sulla negazione, evita di incorrere negli eccessi deterministici in cui spesso incorrono le teorie di impianto neurofisiologico e dà conto della prerogativa tutta umana di *negare* deliberatamente la tendenza neurofisiologica all'empatia (e purtroppo ne abbiamo esempi quotidiani) –, tuttavia non spiega altrettanto plausibilmente la questione della catarsi tragica. Dato l'impianto neuronale "a specchio", perché, si chiede giustamente Valagussa (2026), la sofferenza nei casi della rappresentazione teatrale non genera sofferenza, ma sollievo? La risposta, direi che va trovata in quello che Aristotele lasciava intendere venticinque secoli fa, connettendo *katharsis*, *mimesis* e *hedone*: perché *noi sappiamo* che tale rappresentazione non è vera, che è *a imitazione* del vero, cioè che è vera e non vera allo stesso tempo. Che è vera quanto alla *forma*, ma non vera, reale, quanto alla *sostanza*, sinolo di materia e forma. E sta tutta qui quella dimensione cognitiva del piacere che difficilmente i processi neuronali possono di per sé spiegare.

sonale, che Bertolt Brecht e le sue teorie teatrali – le quali, com'è noto, rifiutavano la teoria aristotelica della catarsi teatrale in nome di un «teatro epico» che, per favorire la distanza critica dello spettatore, intendeva rompere con i meccanismi di verosimiglianza e immedesimazione di cui la catarsi era effetto – hanno esercitato sulle sue teorie artistiche, tuttavia, in relazione al cinema, per lui la più riproducibile e dunque la meno *auratica* delle arti, usa toni ben diversi[12]. Tra le varie versioni del saggio su *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità* prende forma l'attribuzione al cinema della funzione di vero e proprio dispositivo terapeutico. Dispositivo facente parte di quella più generale possibilità di «politicizzazione dell'arte» che Benjamin auspica dopo il declino dell'esistenza auratica dell'opera e, nella fattispecie, atto a garantire, sostiene, una sorta di autoimmunizzazione dalle psicosi di massa tipiche delle «pericolose tensioni» frutto della «tecnicizzazione» moderna. Tensioni che, aggiunge, «negli stadi critici assumono un carattere psicotico» (Benjamin [2019^2]: 64). Mediante il film, sostiene qui Benjamin, vale a dire, come fa precisamente notare, mediante «la stessa tecnicizzazione» – pensa in particolare ai film comici, a Charlie Chaplin, e cita addirittura i cartoni animati Disney, in cui «un forzato sviluppo di fantasie sadiche o di deliri masochistici può impedire una loro naturale e pericolosa maturazione nelle masse» –, si sono create le condizioni per, la chiama, una sorta di «vaccinazione psichica contro tali psicosi di massa» (*ibid.*). Una vaccinazione che funziona, aggiunge, come «un'esplosione terapeutica dell'inconscio». Ciò perché «il riso collettivo – conclude (*ibid.*) – rappresenta lo scoppio anticipato e salutare di simili psicosi di massa». In altre parole, perché tale riso, e per questo è terapeutico, previene simili psicosi, favorendo, aggiunge in nota, «la tendenza a mettere tranquillamente in conto bestialità e violenza come epifenomeni dell'esistenza» (101).

Ebbene, altrove, in un passo che si trova in quattro delle cinque versioni del testo, Benjamin parla di questo valore deflagrante, distruttivo, come di un valore «catartico», in grado di rompere con la tradizione, e quindi con l'originario valore cultuale, auratico dell'opera (6; 41; 71; 146).

È chiaro già da queste poche indicazioni, come qui si stia intendendo la catarsi in un senso non più interamente medico, fisico[13], ma neppure puramente intellettuale. Semmai, ne sta parlando in un senso che oggi, forse, si potrebbe definire *enattivo*, legato a un'idea incarnata della cognizione, in cui corpo e mente non

12 Cosa di cui, peraltro Brecht si rese ben conto, annotando sul proprio diario dopo la lettura nel 1938 del manoscritto de *L'opera d'arte nell'epoca della sua riproducibilità tecnica*: «tutto è mistica in questo atteggiamento contrario alla mistica. Tale è la forma in cui viene costretta ad adattarsi la concezione materialistica della storia! È piuttosto raccapricciante» (Brecht [1973]: I, 14).

13 Anche se poi va detto, a onor del vero, che negli appunti lasciati fuori dalla versione finale, riportati in un'altra meritoria edizione italiana di *Das Kunstwerk* (Benjamin [2011]: 98) aveva scritto, cedendo alle sue solite, a volte un po' incoerenti, oscillazioni: «distrazioni, come la catarsi, devono essere riscritte come fenomeno fisiologico».

sono qualcosa di separato, ma entrambi sono immersi nel mondo, quello tipicamente umano della *praxis*, e vi sono esposti.

Il senso che poi, a conti fatti, era quello stesso con cui, con altri termini, l'ha concepita anche Aristotele, maestro nel pensare le passioni come λόγοι ἔνυλοι, afferma nel *De anima* (I, 403a 25), cioè come *logos* involto nella ὕλη, nella materia, e quindi soggette a *paideia*, a educazione mediante una trasformazione di disposizioni dolorose in piacevoli. Esattamente il tipo di educazione "politica" che Aristotele riconosceva alla catarsi teatrale.

Ecco il punto a cui volevo arrivare: da tutto questo antico percorso si potrebbe trarre un insegnamento anche per l'oggi. Per dirla in estrema sintesi, l'alternativa tra quello che può essere considerato esclusivo appannaggio delle neuroscienze, vale a dire di un'idea di *therapeia* che tiene conto solo degli aspetti fisiologici della cura, e quello che può essere considerato, al contrario, esclusivo appannaggio di filosofie di provenienza spiritualistica, portatrici di una certa idea di *cura dell'anima*, oggi, grazie a una lettura più calzante di certe antiche vie del pensiero, si potrebbe arricchire di una nuova prospettiva. Una prospettiva – e il progetto *Aesthetics and Therapeia*, di cui si parla nel *Foreword* del presente numero di *Aisthesis* e a cui, a diverso titolo, si ricollegano molti degli articoli che lo compongono, in fondo si è immesso proprio in questo binario – nella quale sia del tutto ammissibile pensare che a beneficio di certe patologie neurologiche vada stabilita un'interazione tra cure di tipo diverso, che preveda, affiancata alla somministrazione di sostanze farmaceutiche specifiche, anche la somministrazione di farmaci di tipo, diciamo così, "conoscitivo", come quelli costituiti dalla rappresentazione, sia essa teatrale, cinematografica, digitale, etc., soprattutto se variati da persona a persona. Un tipo di "farmaci" che, peraltro, si sono dimostrati, soprattutto nelle prime fasi di certe malattie neurodegenerative, anch'essi efficaci – e ciò se può sorprendere certa mentalità riduzionistica moderna, non avrebbe sicuramente sorpreso Aristotele e forse, prima di lui, lo stesso Ippocrate – sia per ritardarne gli esiti, sia per permettere, almeno in certi specifici casi, una riduzione del carico farmacologico tradizionale della cura e perciò diminuire l'effetto delle sue ben note controindicazioni[14].

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14 In merito si vedano Savorani-Pini (2013), Grosso (2013). Sul problema della medicina personalizzata, cfr., tra gli altri, Centonze, Stampanoni Bassi (2021).

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The Healing Word Between Mimesis and Catharsis: The Real and "Its" Representation

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Abstract. The article begins by examining Carlo Diano's interpretation of Aristotle's theory of catharsis. According to Diano, the therapeutic dimension of this Aristotelian concept has deep roots in the thought of Hippocrates, with its influence extending as far as the works of Galen. At the core of the cathartic effect lies the idea of presenting representations that anticipate on stage the misfortunes one might encounter in life. In this sense, the mind itself can be conceived as a stage upon which we project situations, problems, and figures, in order to find words and expressions that allow us to share certain contents on a social level. In the second part, these theories are revisited in light of the contributions of Freud, Lacan, and Zupančič, with particular attention to the relationship between trauma, theatre, and memory.

Keywords. Catharsis, Aristotle, Freud, theatre, mind.

> False concept of mimesis. The figures of art are more real than reality itself; reality is the imitation of the figures of art. […] It is certain that the world must exist as representation: whereas we are merely the represented object.
>
> Fr. Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments*

In a text written in 1968, entitled *The Tragic Catharsis*, Carlo Diano claims to have discovered the exact meaning with which Aristotle uses the term *catharsis* in his *Poetics* (Diano [1968a]: 215).

The starting point is one that is all too familiar: in the course of life, we encounter a series of banes and misfortunes. This is a fact that requires no further explanation, as it is immediately comprehensible to all. One might say, with Chateaubriand, that misfortune is a resource we can always count on.

Diano addresses this issue by drawing on quotations from Euripides and Thucydides. When Pericles, for example, speaks of the plague that struck Athens in 430 BC, he states: «we must endure terrible things, realising their inevitability» (*Thuc.* II, 64, 2).

At the same time, this bitter acknowledgment is counterbalanced by an almost instinctive need to resist and oppose these banes. This need is expressed in several fragments by Euripides. In the *Cresiphon*, to mention just one of the examples cited by Diano, Euripides speaks of «pulling us out of sorrows» (fr. 449); and in the *Supplices* (vv. 949-954), he refers to putting an end to travails, overcoming perils and pains.

1. *The occurrence of misfortunes and the reaction of the intellect*

A preliminary question arises – one that also serves to clarify the broader theoretical framework of Diano's interpretation: if banes and misfortunes are sent by necessity or by the gods, how is it possible that Greek individuals could even conceive of putting an end to them? How is it possible to imagine escaping the dominion of necessity or divine will?

According to Diano, the words of Euripides and Thucydides are made possible – indeed, are only thinkable – within the cultural revolution initiated by Anaxagoras, who was also the teacher of Socrates. The genuine turning point represented by Anaxagoras lies in a radical inversion of the traditional Greek worldview: the gods are no longer many; there is only one god, and that god is *Nous*, the intellect. In human beings, the intellect can thus be considered as something divine.

Thanks to the intellect, we are able to infer the invisible from the visible. This thesis (DK 59 B21) – which, according to Diano, Anaxagoras shares with the Hippocratic tradition (Diano [1968b]: 292) – marks, in his view, the beginning of Western scientific thought. Many of the phenomena we observe on the empirical level become intelligible through the rational forms that the intellect allows us to "see": from what is visible, we move toward what is invisible, and through this movement we gain a better understanding of how visible phenomena are interconnected.

At this stage, the categories of gods and necessity are no longer operative. There is no longer an explicit connection between the rational forms grasped by the intellect and the empirical events themselves; rather, it is the intellect that *conjectures* their possible connection. In this gap between thought and reality, *Týche* – fate – can emerge: a form of fate that is neither good fortune nor misfortune, but simply what happens to us, what "touches" us without any specific reason.

Thus, by chance and without reason, banes may affect us; yet we possess the capacity to counteract them precisely by virtue of our faculty of reasoning. It is this capacity that enables us to distinguish among different forms of banes and misfortunes, and to confront them as if engaging in an act of valour – a *virtus* akin to that which, in warfare, allows one to attain glory. Through a series of philological corroborations (see Diano [1968a]: 220), Diano connects this *virtus* to the art that heals the soul from pain (the so-called *téchne álypías*), attributed to Antiphon the Sophist and mentioned in Plutarch's *Lives of the Ten Orators*.

At this point, attention is directed to the meaning of this technique aimed at healing the soul from suffering. Diano links it to the capacity for meditating in advance upon future banes – the so-called *praemeditatio futurorum malorum* – a practice attested in Galen's treatise *On the Doctrine of Hippocrates and Plato*, as well as in Cicero (see *Tuscolanae* III, 29). In particular, Diano cites a fragment from Euripides' *Theseus* (fr. 964 ed. Nauck), in which a wise man is described. He reflects upon every possible event, meditating on all the world's misfortunes, so that if, one day, any of those banes – already familiar to him through repeated mental representation – should befall him, it would not strike entirely unforeseen. In this way, we might say, misfortune proves far less painful than if it were to burst into one's life as something utterly unknown: to some extent, he has learned to recognise it in advance, to become familiar with it.

To this fragment from *Theseus*, Diano adds a passage in which Galen summarises the doctrine of the *Therapeutics* of Chrysippus, where it is recommended to "*proendeméin*" things and to consider them as though they were present, even when they are not yet so. The verb *proendeméin* means "to dwell in things in advance", "to imagine them before they happen", or, perhaps more precisely, "to pre-imagine" them – something very close to Cicero's *praemeditatio futurorum malorum*.

2. *Dwelling in things in advance*

Why must we imagine things before they happen? Why is it necessary to meditate on them before they become real and present? The answer is once again found in a work by Plutarch, *On the Tranquillity of Mind* (476D–E), which includes a passage from Menander that plays a significant role in Diano's interpretation[1]: «You cannot say, while you are alive: this will not happen to me». Each of us is exposed to banes and misfortunes, and no one can be certain that this or that misfortune will not occur during their lifetime.

At this point, all the essential elements are in place, and it is merely a matter of assembling them: misfortunes inevitably strike us over the course of life, and since they may occur at any moment, the most effective way not to succumb to them is to pre-imagine them – to foresee them in our thoughts – so that they do not arrive as a complete surprise and, as a result, cause greater suffering.

From this idea, one can trace a long tradition: beginning with Socrates' meditation on death (*meditatio mortis*, as the Latins would say), continuing through Cicero's *Tuscolanae*, and extending – at least, as Diano shows – as far as Dante's *Paradiso*: «ché saetta previsa vien più lenta» (*Par.*, XVII, 27), that is, «for slower comes an arrow when foreseen».

In this context, however, our focus is on the more concrete meaning of that technique capable of healing the soul from pain. We are concerned with understanding what this technique consists of, and how it functioned in ancient thought.

Already at the outset, an epistemological problem emerges: the effectiveness of this technique is closely tied to the development of a scientific mentality in the West. We must recall that capacity for conjecture that allows us to link visible, empirical, material things to invisible ones – that is, to rational forms or theories, which help us, so to speak, to bring order to the empirical world.

At the same time, we must also recall that death constitutes the individual event *par excellence*. Death captures the uniqueness, the singularity, and the unrepeatable nature of each person's existence. We can say that death is the *infungible* element of human life. I will die at that precise moment, in those specific conditions and circumstances, which will never be exactly those of anyone else. No one can replace me in the moment of my death, nor can I replace another.

And the same, albeit in a more attenuated form, applies to pain. I experience pain here and now, in a specific part of my body, at a particular point in my life, and under certain circumstances. Another person will experience pain for different reasons, at a different time. What we are facing here is the true singularity, the unrepeatability – and therefore the incommunicability – of what happens to us. Death and misfortune are the clearest and most definitive expressions of this: we know nothing of another person's pain or suffering; we understand nothing of their death.

1 On the relationship between Menander and Hippocratic rationalism see Simone (2007): 151.

3. *The pain of the individual and the universality of science*

We now return to the epistemological problem previously mentioned: how effective can science truly be in this context? Science relies on universal concepts through which it brings order to the empirical realm. It understands particular phenomena by interpreting them in light of general categories. Yet in this case, we are not dealing with particulars that can be subsumed under universals. Rather, we are confronted with radically singular, unique elements: death, misfortune, and the deeply personal manner in which each individual encounters and responds to such misfortunes.

Aristotle, followed by the scholastic tradition, had already observed that "*de individuis non datur scientia*": there is no science of the individual. How, then, can science grasp the absolute singularity of pain and death?

In response, Diano again turns to a verse from Menander: «doctor to man is speech when he feels sick inside. The word alone has the power to control the soul and heal it» (fr. 782 K). Similar formulations can be found in Aeschylus – «words are a physician to the ill soul» (*Prom.*, v. 378) – and in Euripides: «for mortals there is no medicine in sadness worth the animating word of a man worthy of esteem and friendship» (fr. 1079). All these passages, along with others from the *Iliad* and from Gorgias' *Helen*, are discussed by Diano in the central pages of his essay (see Diano [1968a]: 252-253).

In particular, by quoting Gorgias, Diano draws attention to a key passage from § 8 of *Helen*: «The word has the power to make fear (*phóbos*) cease, to remove sadness (*lýpen*), to engender gladness, to increase pity (*éleon*)» (see Diano [1968a]: 254).

This could hardly offer a more precise description of the *téchne álypías*, the technique that cures the soul's pain, specifically by dispelling fear and enhancing pity. The description is not metaphorical, but technical and exact. The word – through mechanisms we do not yet fully understand, and which demand further investigation – acts by extinguishing fear and effectively removing sadness.

This overcoming of pain and grief – this sort of "pleasure" produced by the word – operates precisely by intensifying pity. Pity, here, signifies the capacity to experience the banes and misfortunes of others, as witnessed on stage, as though they were one's own. We might translate this concept with another Greek term: *sympathy* – the ability to "suffer together" (*sym-pathein*) with others. If we now turn to Aristotle's *Poetics*, this framework becomes clearer. In the central passage, we read:

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Arist. 1449 b 25-29)

In other words, *mimesis* allows us to witness the suffering of others on stage. At the theatre, I observe the lives of others, distanced from myself – indeed, "theatre" and "theory" share the same etymological root. Confronted with this suffering, I initially feel fear at what I see unfold, and then pity for the protagonist of the tragedy: I suffer with him, I *sympathise*.

Yet all of this depends upon a specific use of language – an "embellished language". Through poetic language, tragedy transforms singular, individual suffering into something universal, something intelligible to all.

This "ability" of the word – of language – to universalise individual experience and make it shareable with others is precisely what transforms fear into a form of pleasure. It is what enables the purgation of emotions. Here, then, lies the true meaning of "catharsis": a purification achieved through the shared experience of bane, pain, and misfortune. We suffer and mourn together with others, and this collective experience allows us, in some way, to anticipate misfortune, to "dwell in things in advance": it is a form of meditation that prepares us for the banes that may come – or that are yet to come.

4. *Giving words to pain*

One of the fundamental operations made possible by language is the transformation of pain from a strictly individual experience into a shared and, to some extent, collectively recognisable one. In this sense, the well-known proverb "a problem shared is a problem halved" captures, in simplified form, an intuition that classical thought – and especially tragic literature – has long explored. Tragedy offers not only representations of suffering, but interpretive frameworks and cognitive models through which pain can be understood, anticipated, and, therefore, to some extent, mitigated. In particular, by narrating paradigmatic cases – those of Oedipus, Prometheus, Antigone – tragedy articulates forms of knowledge that allow the individual to recognise in advance the outlines of misfortune, and to find in those words, in those stories, a kind of protection when suffering arrives. The ability to name pain, to give it a form within language, is already a gesture of care: it is, in itself, a way of softening its impact.

At the heart of this process lies the therapeutic potential of narration and conceptual abstraction. The universalising function of language – its capacity to detach from the singular empirical case and trace general patterns – represents a fundamental condition not only for the development of scientific knowledge, but also for any technique of healing or treatment. It is precisely through abstraction that the singular experience of suffering can be translated into a form that others, too, may understand and, in part, share. While it is true that in the process of generalisation something is lost – namely, the unrepeatable uniqueness of each person's suffering

– it is also true that something is gained: the possibility of common understanding, of shared tools of resistance, and of a collective elaboration of pain.

In this sense, the word appears as the most powerful and irreplaceable means for transforming the otherwise mute experience of suffering into a communicable one. Where pain remains unspoken, it risks becoming incommunicable and thus unelaborated – confined to the private sphere of the unsaid. By contrast, when suffering is given form through language, it becomes a constituent part of culture and of the symbolic resources upon which individuals and communities rely. The word, therefore, plays a dual role: it creates the distance necessary for conceptual reflection, and at the same time opens a space of shared recognition. It allows individuals not only to express their pain but to locate themselves within a broader symbolic order that gives that pain meaning.

This dual function – at once analytical and relational – explains why language is not simply a means of communication, but an instrument of healing. The act of naming suffering does not merely externalise it: it integrates it into a structure of sense, making it available for reflection, narration, and – ultimately – transformation. In this way, the language of tragedy does not console by denying misfortune, but by offering models through which misfortune can be confronted. The word, as we have seen, "acts as a doctor to men" precisely because it enables a form of prefiguration, a mental rehearsal of what may come, thereby diminishing the surprise and the violence of unexpected events.

Thus, we return to the central insight already encountered in earlier reflections: the capacity to foresee suffering – by meditating on it, by imagining its forms in advance – is not a mere exercise in stoicism, but a deeply cultural and symbolic process, dependent on the availability of shared narratives. It is within this symbolic space that the therapeutic dimension of representation takes root: a space in which individuals learn not only to know misfortune, but to know that others have known it before them.

From this point of view, the word becomes the condition of possibility for any communal response to suffering. It is through language that the individual experience of pain ceases to be isolated, becoming instead a thread in the wider fabric of shared human experience. This passage – from singularity to narration, from isolation to community – opens the way to a reflection on how representation, and in particular theatrical representation, can act as a form of therapy. It is to this question that we now turn.

5. *Lucretius and psychoanalysis*

As we have seen, and as common experience confirms, knowing that one is not alone in suffering from a certain affliction can bring relief. On the other hand, it is also a common clinical observation that the ill person often asserts their uniqueness and separation from others who share the same clinical diagnosis, thereby generating a tension between the singularity and universality of suffering. The same tension can be observed when we look closely at contemporary medicine: evidence-based medicine is grounded in randomized clinical trials, where patients are treated as members of a well-defined population with homogeneous characteristics, whereas precision medicine aims to develop personalized therapeutic approaches that emphasize individual differences.

Since personalized medicine is still in its infancy, contemporary clinical practice remains largely oriented toward generalization, and the clinical interview is structured with the aim of highlighting what the patient has in common with others, rather than what distinguishes them, even within the same diagnostic category. It is therefore not surprising that certain disorders – otherwise inexplicable when considered solely from a biological perspective – become more understandable if we interpret them as a reaction of subjects to the universal and reductionist knowledge of medical science, in the name of their own individuality and complexity (see Centonze and Stampanoni Bassi [2020]).

Lucretius's answer to the question of where the relief comes from when we witness the turmoil of others is well known: it stems from the awareness that such turmoil does not concern us.

> Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis
> E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
> non quia vexari quemquam est iucunda voluptas,
> sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suavest.
> Suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri
> Per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.[2]

But what do neurophysiology and, above all, psychoanalysis teach us about humanity's capacity to "put oneself in another's shoes" and to feel their pain, perhaps to gain a certain relief from one's own? As is well known, the function of mirror neurons offers a particularly powerful model of the human ability to resonate with the mental and emotional state of another: in the brain of the observer, the same neurons are activated as in the brain of the person performing the observed action, thereby generating a shared neuronal substrate between agent and observer, a stable connection between the two, and a common feeling. While this

2 «It is sweet, when on the vast sea the winds stir the waters, to behold from land the great toil of another – not because it is a joy that someone suffers, but because it is sweet to see what evils yourself are free from. It is sweet also to observe great battles of war across the plains, so long as you take no part in the danger» (Lucr. *De Rerum Natura*, II, vv. 1-6).

model accounts for mechanisms of identification with the tragic hero that come into play in theater, it does not explain why the feeling of compassion (literally, "suffering with") might reverse itself into the kind of relief from suffering we are attempting to analyze in this essay.

6. *The real, reality and negation*

Watching someone undergo traumatic events may cause us to feel their same pain, and knowing that such events have already happened or might in the future happen to us does little to diminish its intensity. Nor can we be helped here by the fundamental considerations Paolo Virno makes in his essay on negation: language, far from prolonging and perfecting the empathy and mutual understanding enabled by mirror neurons (a hypothesis that seems plausible, given that these neurons are located in primates in the brain areas that in humans will develop into language regions), instead allows – precisely through the operation of negation – a crucial disarming of mirror neurons, thereby liberating humans from the neurophysiological determinism to which animals are fully subjected.

In a particularly striking example, Virno proposes in his essay that the monstrosities of which humans are capable toward their fellow beings are made possible precisely by negation: thinking "this is not a human being", the concentration camp guard deactivates in his cerebral cortex those mirror neurons that would otherwise naturally lead him to feel pain and pity toward the prisoners he torments. In other words, while mirror neurons can explain the audience's participation in the tragedy of the hero and linguistic negation can account for possible indifference to it, we are still left without an explanation for the feeling of relief, which is perhaps the most specific and deepest motivation behind tragedy.

To this end, Lacanian psychoanalysis and its concept of the Real – anguishing and without meaning – may offer insight. To explain how the subject can experience the Real more intensely in fiction than in reality, Lacan offers a particularly original commentary on a dream found in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*:

> A father had kept watch day and night beside the bed of his sick child. After the child's death, he went to rest in a nearby room, leaving the door open so he could glance into the room where the child lay in his coffin, surrounded by large candles. An old man has been assigned to keep vigil and sat beside the body, murmuring prayers. After a few hours of sleep, the father dreamed that the child was beside his bed, took him by the arm, and whispered reproachfully: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" He awoke to see a bright light coming from the mortuary room, ran in, and found the old man asleep, and the veils and one arm of the beloved corpse scorched by a candle that had fallen on them. (Freud [1913]: 403)

As noted by Alenka Zupančič in her recent essay on disavowal, the key question in interpreting this dream is: where do we locate the traumatic Real that wakes the subject – within reality or within the dream? Freud leans toward the former, positing that the light from the room where the child lay awakened the father momentarily, who then fell back asleep, incorporating that light into a dream that allowed him to continue resting. Lacan, however, observes that it is another kind of fire that wakes the father: the son's words of reproach, like a "live coal", touch a point of the Real that strikes deeply. The father wakes in order to escape the senseless Real of death and guilt, taking refuge in the comfort of waking life and its reassuring routines. That is, as Lacan puts it, some dreams can bring forth a Real more real and traumatic than anything encountered in waking life, such that we wake up in order to go on dreaming. In this sense, we might say that the difference between a dream and a nightmare lies not in their content, but in the fact that from the latter, we cannot wake up to flee into reality.

7. *What happens when we are at the theatre?*

How can these considerations help us understand the relief the spectator might feel in the theater? Once again, it is Zupančič who points us in the right direction. In another essay entitled *Comedy and the Uncanny*, Zupančič starts from Octave Mannoni's study of theater and theatrical illusion, in which the notion of a "thought experiment" is introduced as central to understanding its effects. Mannoni proposes the following scheme to explain the emotional participation of the spectator in the theater: the subject, although knowing that what they are witnessing is not real, delegates this belief – in a kind of thought experiment – to a hypothetical Other with whom they identify. That is, in some way, they step into the shoes of an imagined spectator who does not know that what they are witnessing is fiction and who therefore suffers alongside the protagonist on stage. Drawing on mirror neuron theory, we might say that in Mannoni's hypothesis, the real-life spectator synchronizes their mirror neurons with those of the tragic hero by proxy – that is, through a second spectator presumed unaware of the truth.

Once again, however, while this hypothesis is suggestive – and indeed helps explain certain comic effects produced in the theater – it still does not account for the relief the spectator may feel when witnessing a tragic performance. Zupančič's alternative configuration proposes that the subject does not delegate to the Other the belief that what they are witnessing is real; rather, they delegate the very awareness that it is fiction. This delegation would then allow the subject to fully immerse themselves in the representation and believe in what they see, suffering or rejoicing with the protagonists. In this different and more intriguing configuration, the spectator's relief would thus derive from the ever-present possibility of "escaping into reality" – that is, of always being able to exit the painful Real staged before our eyes and return to the familiar and domesticated reality of everyday life.

Drawing a parallel between the fiction of dreams and that of theater, we might therefore say that just as, in the father's dream, it is the possibility of returning to reality that manages to distance the traumatic Real and calm the anxiety, so in the theater it is the solid awareness that the performance will end that brings relief. The fiction of the theater and that of the dream are more real than reality itself.

8. *The suffering of others*

Let us now try to imagine how witnessing the suffering of others might help us heal our own, by turning to the neurobiology of forgetting processes. These processes are essential for overcoming trauma that we are unable to forget and that continues to cause us pain.

In Freud's theory on the origin of neuroses, real or imagined traumatic experiences permanently alter the functioning of the psychic apparatus. Therefore, some memories can be pathogenic. As Freud wrote in *The neuro-psychoses of defence* (1894): «I only know that such "oblivion" was not reached by the patients I analysed, but that instead it led to various pathological reactions» (Freud [1962]: 47). And in other essay he adds:

> Now hystericals and all neurotics behave like these two unpractical Londoners, not only in that they remember the painful experiences of the distant past, but because they are still strongly affected by them. They cannot escape from the past and neglect present reality in its favor. This fixation of mental life on pathogenic traumata is an essential, and practically a most significant characteristic of the neurosis. (Freud [1910]: 184)

How, then, can theatre be therapeutic if, instead of distracting us from our suffering, it actually brings it back and forces us to remember and relive it?

Over the past two decades, remarkable progress has been made toward understanding the process of forgetfulness, and the emerging scenario is particularly interesting because it is increasingly clear that forgetting does not simply result from the passive degradation of the plasticity associated with memory acquisition, but rather consists of a very complex process that actively counters the maintenance of memories.

Specifically, the so-called *inhibition of memory reconsolidation* refers to the ability to remove even old and stably stored memories, provided they are reactivated.

In fact, memory retrieval makes those memories fragile, and these discoveries have substantially contributed to revising the idea that long-term memories are irreversibly stored in the brain's wiring. Rather, this process indicates that memories can be continually updated, modified, and even erased – but for this to happen, it is crucial that they can be recalled and re-elaborated (Centonze *et al*., [2005a]). So, if the original memory traces become susceptible to change each time the memory is retrieved – and this is also true for those traumatic memories that cause us suffering – being able to recall and process them in the context of theatre has a therapeutic effect.

Notably, from the very beginning of his theorization, Freud recognized that memory reactivation and re-elaboration could be beneficial. In *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* (1914), he wrote: «We have learnt that the patient repeats instead of remembering […] From the repetitive reactions which are exhibited in the transference we are led along the familiar paths to the awakening of the memories, which appear without difficulty, as it were, after the resistance has been overcome» (Freud [1914]: 151-155).

In other words, the pathogenic effects of traumatic, conscious or unconscious memories that are responsible for our suffering can be overcome through a process of memory trace retrieval and re-elaboration – one that occurs not only during a psychoanalytic session but also in the theatre.

9. *Conclusion*

Let us return for a moment to the Nietzsche passage quoted at the very beginning: «False Concept of mimesis. The figures of art are more real than reality itself; reality is the imitation all the figures of art […] It is certain that the world must exist as a representation: whereas we are merely the represented object» (Nietzsche [1999]: 323). So far, we have almost taken for granted the presence of a "fundamental identity" as a solid foundation around which individuality is constructed – an individuality that then perhaps passes through various representations, anticipations and cathartic effects.

The passage we are now dealing with concerns precisely this capacity to represent, to anticipate the future, to meditate on impending evils: such representations can no longer be understood as something added on, something that somehow clings to a preexisting individual foundation, perhaps even with the ability to modify or slightly alter it. On the contrary, these representations, these anticipatory faculties over abilities to empathize with the fate of others, are constitutive moments of the subject itself: this subject is structured and literally takes shape around the words that heal him.

This theoretical framework entails a significant reconfiguration of the functions traditionally ascribed to art, language and catharsis. As the analysis has shown, the tragic world does not merely operate as a mimetic device, passively reflective empirical reality or reproducing the contingencies of lived experience. Rather, it constitutes a discursive space wherein the irreducibly singular experience of suffering is rendered translatable into a form that is symbolically intelligible and intersubjectively shareable. In this process suffering is not simply represented but subjected to a hermeneutic and symbolic elaboration that metabolizes, abstracts, and rearticulates it within a broader cultural and semiotic horizon.

The act of symbolic transformation is structurally constitutive of subjectivity. In this view, the subjectivity does not precede its own representation as a fixed or pre-discursive identity. Rather, it emerges precisely through those representational operations – such as anticipation, projection, identification and narrative construction – by which primal effect and contingent experience are rendered symbolically legible. In this sense, representation is not a derivative act imposed upon a sort of "pre-given self", but the very medium through which the subject is configured and brought into presence.

As clearly illustrated in the writings of Carlo Diano, watching a tragedy unfold is not merely an act of learning about misfortune, but a form of ethical and psychological training. It enabled us to confront suffering, to recognize it, and to live with its looming possibility. Tragedy becomes a space for active rehearsal rather than passive observation – a way of preparing yourself for the inevitable shocks of existence. And it is again Diano who points out that catharsis should not be reduced to a simple emotional release. Rather, it is a reconfiguration of experience that allows the subject to internalize pain without being shattered by it.

Psychoanalysis and neuroscience also show that the therapeutic power of tragedy lies in the reactivation and reworking of traumatic memories, much like in analytic therapy. Theatre quite literally allows us to "bring pain onto the stage", simultaneously exposing its devastating effects and prompting the spectator's awareness of it. As Lacan and Zupančič explain, this makes it possible to redefine the relationship between fiction and reality, since the Real is understood as that which, in a certain sense, resists every attempt at symbolization precisely because it is always already framed within a fiction.

Theater emerged – both from a historical chronological perspective and on a conceptual level – as a tool through which the deeply personal and therefore incommunicable experience of pain is literally transfigured, in the sense that it is given form, translated into symbols, and thus made shareable at the level of collective meaning. In particular, the word gives pain a kind of form and figure, allowing us to inhabit misfortune without being annihilated by it, and instead initiating the reciprocal constitution of subjectivity and community.

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Lo specchio e la statua: fisiognomica rinascimentale e terapia*

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Abstract. This essay compares the physiognomic works of Giovan Battista Della Porta (1535-1615) and Abramo Colorni (c. 1544-1599). While Della Porta's is well known, Colorni's treatise on the physiognomic reading of the hand, entitled *Nova Chirofisionomia*, was never printed and its circulation must have been limited. Della Porta and Colorni share an understanding of physiognomics as a deeply ethical practice. The key physiognomic principle, influentially formulated in the Pseudoaristotelian *Physiognomonica*, envisions a sympathy between the body and the soul. Traditionally, the physiognomist could use a variety of images, including statues, to diagnose another person in their absence. But by using a mirror, physiognomists could even diagnose themselves. Indeed, this essay shows that for both Della Porta and Colorni the main benefit of physiognomics is that it allows the practitioner not only to observe the body-soul interaction, but to actively modify it. Physiognomics is therefore conceived as a practice for healing the individual and by extension society more broadly.

Keywords. Giovan Battista Della Porta, Abramo Colorni, *Physiognomonica*, filosofia naturale, chirofisiognomica.

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1. *Giovan Battista Della Porta e Abramo Colorni: incontri a distanza*

«Il nostro corpo sta nel mezzo tra l'anima e il mondo restante, specchio degli effetti di entrambi»: il pensatore tedesco Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799) definiva in questi termini il campo d'azione della fisiognomica (Lichtenberg [1972]: 266)[2]. La fisiognomica – cioè la teoria secondo la quale è possibile leggere i segni esteriori per accedere alle caratteristiche interiori, ovvero l'anima, di una creatura – è stata a lungo considerata uno scandalo per la filosofia. Da fine Settecento in avanti, soprattutto grazie alla fortuna degli scritti di Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801), la fisiognomica è incorsa sempre più frequentemente nell'accusa di essere un approccio arbitrario, soggetto a pregiudizi che nulla hanno di filosofico: una magia nel migliore dei casi, un imbroglio nel peggiore, suscettibile di divenire un canale per la diffusione di pregiudizi senza alcuna base scientifica, e, dal ventesimo secolo in avanti, di ideologie fasciste, a partire dalla teoria della razza (Gray [2004]; vedi anche Hartley [2001]). Eppure, nella citazione tratta da Lichtenberg si intravedono le ultime propaggini di quello che la fisiognomica era a lungo stata, cioè un approccio che implica una teoria filosofica complessa della relazione tra corpo ed anima, ma soprattutto che prevede una sua applicazione pratica nel modellare il rapporto con il mondo. La fisiognomica, cioè, nella sua formulazione classica, ha una vocazione etico-pratica, a differenza di quanto potrebbe sembrare prendendo come punto di partenza le liste di segni ispirate a Lavater che hanno circolato in varie forme da fine Settecento in avanti (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Litografia stampata a Parigi, non datata, ispirata a Lavater. I punti indicati sul volto della giovane donna rivelerebbero aspetti salienti della sua natura, nonostante il suo gesto di coprirsi castamente. Fonte: Wellcome Collection (Public Domain).

2 Tutte le traduzioni sono mie, se non diversamente indicato.

In questo saggio propongo una lettura della fisiognomica rinascimentale come approccio filosofico utilizzato per applicare teorie del rapporto anima-corpo alla cura di sé in prima battuta, e degli altri in seconda battuta. I due oggetti del titolo – lo specchio e la statua – sono gli strumenti fisiognomici utilizzati a questo scopo dagli esperti rinascimentali della disciplina. Si considereranno in particolare i riferimenti allo studio dell'immagine propria e altrui nell'opera fisiognomica di due autori che possono apparire agli antipodi sotto diversi punti di vista: Giovan Battista Della Porta (1535-1615) e Abramo Colorni (c. 1544-1599). Il primo è forse l'esperto di fisiognomica più famoso ed influente della modernità, autore di un corpus fisiognomico vasto e sfaccettato[3]. All'estremo opposto, l'opera fisiognomica di Abramo Colorni è invece sostanzialmente sconosciuta. Si tratta di un unico trattato, dedicato interamente alla disciplina della fisiognomica applicata allo studio della mano, e intitolato *Nova Chirofisionomia*, databile intorno al 1586-87. Noto in due testimoni, che tramandano stadi diversi nella stesura del testo, il trattato era stato chiaramente preparato da Colorni per la pubblicazione, ma il progetto deve essere fallito[4]. A dispetto del nome poco noto dell'autore, e della scarsa circolazione del testo, si tratta di uno dei contributi più originali, oltre che ampi, sulla fisiognomica della mano nel Rinascimento.

In contrasto agli ambienti napoletani di Della Porta (su cui Verardi [2018]), Colorni era nato in area mantovana, e aveva frequentato importanti corti italiane ed europee. «Ingegnero» ai servizi degli Este a Ferrara, era stato poi inviato dallo stesso Alfonso II alla corte di Rodolfo II a Praga, dove era approdato grazie alla sua fama di poliedrico professore di segreti, e dove sarebbe rimasto quasi nove anni (Jütte [2015]: 125-126; Jarè [1891]: 263-265). Alle conoscenze ingegneristiche, Colorni affiancava l'interesse per la scrittura cifrata, oltre che per la fisiognomica; aveva inoltre acquisito fama di «disprigionatore», cioè di persona dotata di doti magico-illusionistiche, con le quali sarebbe in grado di fare uscire qualcuno di prigione[5]. Colorni aveva raggiunto Praga nella

3 I volumi più importanti dell'opera fisiognomica di Della Porta sono ora pubblicati all'interno dell'Edizione Nazionale delle opere. Si segnalano Della Porta [2024], [2013] e [2011].

4 I due testimoni sono: Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel; e Kaufmann A.257, Biblioteca dell'Accademia Ungherese delle Scienze, Budapest. Come sostengo nella mia edizione della *Nova Chirofisionomia*, in preparazione per la serie Micrologus' Library (SISMEL), il testimone di Wolfenbüttel è precedente rispetto a quello di Budapest. Quest'ultima è una copia chiaramente preparata per la pubblicazione.

5 Jarè [1891]: 275, dove un documento del 1588, indirizzato ad Ascanio Giraldini, Ambasciatore di Germania, definisce Colorni «giudeo che si dicea saper trarre di prigione quasi miracolosamente». Oltre a diverse lettere autografe, si segnala anche il manoscritto di un trattato intitolato *Euthimetria* (Cod. Guelf. 14.8 Aug. 4°, Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel). A Colorni è anche attribuita una traduzione della *Clavicula Salomonis* (Barbierato [2002]: 41; Jütte [2015]: 157-159). Per una panoramica sulla vita di Colorni si veda, oltre a Jütte [2015]: 116-223, anche Toaff [2010].

primavera nel 1588, quando vi era arrivato anche Giordano Bruno (Matteoli [2016]), e vi aveva soggiornato negli anni in cui anche John Dee frequentava la stessa corte (Bäcklund [2006]).

Oltre ad un certo eclettismo condiviso, un dettaglio sorprendente unisce l'opera fisiognomica di Colorni ad un testo di Della Porta: Della Porta e Colorni sono gli unici due autori di opere che portano il titolo di *chirofisionomia* per definire la branca della fisiognomica che si occupa dello studio della mano. Non dunque *chiromanzia*, termine molto diffuso per definire l'interpretazione dei segni presenti sui palmi delle mani. A partire da un testo falsamente attribuito ad Aristotele e stampato ad Ulm nel 1490, noto come *Chiromantia Aristotelis*, diversi testi di chiromanzia furono pubblicati tra la fine del XV e la prima metà del XVI secolo (Pack [1969], e Pack [1978]). Tra questi un ruolo particolarmente importante ebbero *De chyromantia* (1494) di Antioco Tiberti, che l'autore presenta come il primo tentativo di sistematizzare la disciplina, e *Chyromantie ac physiognomie Anastasis* (1504) del medico bolognese Bartolomeo Della Rocca, noto come Cocles, quest'ultimo stampato anche insieme ad un testo chiromantico a firma del filosofo aristotelico Alessandro Achillini (Achillini [1503]).

Colorni e Della Porta si distanziano da questa tradizione nella scelta oculata della parola chirofisionomia, che sottolinea l'innesto della lettura della mano nella tradizione filosofica della fisiognomica, segnando la distanza dalla mera divinazione (*manteia*). È difficile stabilire se ci sia stato un contatto diretto tra i due, ma la fama di Colorni doveva essere diffusa (Jütte [2015]: 149-150). Nel caso di Della Porta il titolo *Chirofisionomia* è in realtà una scelta di traduzione di Pompeo Sarnelli, che tradusse in italiano il trattato latino *De ea naturalis physiognomoniae parte quae ad manuum lineas spectat* (Della Porta [1677] e [2003]). Della Porta si riferiva al proprio trattato con i termini *chiromantia* e *chironomia*, dove quest'ultimo enfatizza la sistematizzazione della disciplina in principi fondanti, intento che è anche alla base del manoscritto di Colorni (Della Porta [2003]: xxi). Della Porta e Colorni lamentano l'inaffidabilità della lettura della mano tramandata tra gli altri proprio da Cocles, e intendono offrire un nuovo approccio alla disciplina, che non vada contro «ragione»[6].

In mancanza della prova di un legame diretto, ciò che unisce i due autori, come si cercherà di mostrare in questo saggio, è il fatto che entrambi concepiscono la fisiognomica, e la chirofisiognomica in particolare, come una teoria filosofica che – per usare l'espressione di Lichtenberg – media anima e mondo, cioè combina una teoria psicologica e una teoria etica. Nelle pagine che seguono si mostrerà come Colorni e Della Porta sviluppino una teoria secondo cui la fisio-

6 Della Porta [2003]: 119: «quanto hanno detto [Corvo, Tricasso e Cocle] tutto è contra la ragione e l'esperienza». Cf. Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 104r: «tutto quello che hanno detto delle Unghie il Tricasso, Cocle, et altri, come cose prive del fondamento della ragione, et della auttorità totalmente a bello studio, le tralasciamo».

gnomica, inclusa la chirofisiognomica, è uno strumento filosofico indispensabile attraverso cui i filosofi possono curare innanzitutto la propria anima, e in secondo luogo diagnosticare i mali delle anime altrui, e così facendo curare la società.

2. *Il meccanismo fisiognomico e la (de)costruzione del sé*

Il punto di riferimento obbligato per chiunque si occupasse di fisiognomica nel Rinascimento era un passo dei *Physiognomonica* pseudoaristotelici, testo tradotto in latino da Bartolomeo da Messina, e considerato pienamente aristotelico. Il principio cardine della fisiognomica è qui presentato in questi termini: «Videtur autem michi anima et corpus compati ad invicem, et anime habitus alteratus simul alterat corporis formam, et iterum, forma corporis alterata simul alterat anime habitum» (808b12-13; Aristotele [2019]: 20). «Compati ad invicem» rende il verbo *sympathein* nell'originale greco: c'è quindi una simpatia tra corpi e anime, o meglio un continuo simpatizzare tra i due. Ciò implica che la relazione è pensata come dinamica, e non fissata una volta per tutte. Inoltre, in questo dinamismo, la direzione è duplice. Le anime possono simpatizzare con i corpi, per esempio se il corpo è malato o alterato da qualche sostanza inebriante, come il vino: in questi casi è il corpo a mutare per primo e a trasmettere l'impulso all'anima, che reagisce all'alterazione fisica con un mutamento interiore. Viceversa, può essere l'anima a mutare per prima e a dare l'impulso per il cambiamento al corpo. Secondo lo Pseudoaristotele ciò può verificarsi nel caso di una passione forte, come l'amore, che è un sentimento interiore abbastanza potente da plasmare le apparenze esteriori.

Nel trattato *Della fisonomia dell'huomo* (1610), il principio è espresso in questi termini: «Prova Aristotele nella *Fisonomia*, che l'anima, mutando il costume, il corpo muta forma de' lineamenti et il corpo, mutando la sua forma, l'anima muta ancor ella i suoi costumi» (Della Porta [2013]: 15) – dove *anima* rende la coppia *psyche*/*dianoia* nel testo pseudoaristotelico, termini resi entrambi con *anima* anche da Bartolomeo da Messina[7].

Dal punto di vista diagnostico, la direzionalità è chiaramente dal corpo all'anima. Lo Pseudoaristotele porta ad esempio la finezza dei capelli: se è vero che c'è una relazione stringente tra esterno ed interno, utilizzando il principio della corrispondenza si potrà stabilire che una persona dai capelli fini avrà una certa finezza, o mitezza, di carattere. Nel definire questo rapporto tra finezza interiore ed esteriore, lo Pseudoaristotele utilizza programmaticamente il para-

7 Della Porta pubblica *De humana physiognomonia* per la prima volta nel 1586. Seguono una traduzione italiana, una seconda versione latina (in sei, e non più quattro, libri), e da ultimo l'edizione italiana del 1610.

gone tra esseri umani ed animali: nel mondo animale, le creature con pelliccia molto fine e delicata sarebbero anche delicate di carattere, come ad esempio i conigli (806b7-10).

L'utilizzo degli animali nel sillogismo fisiognomico è un aspetto fondante che connette la fisiognomica antica ai suoi sviluppi nella prima modernità. Lo Pseudoaristotele consigliava prudenza nel trasferire all'analisi fisiognomica dell'essere umano le associazioni tra corpo e anima valide nel mondo animale (805b11-16). Com'è noto, Della Porta ne fa invece un uso sistematico: per Della Porta il paragone tra esseri umani e animali è una via d'accesso privilegiata all'interiorità umana, che altrimenti rimarrebbe illeggibile, ma è necessario mappare con precisione il catalogo dei segni, per applicarli con precisione (Muratori [2017]). Sarebbe sciocco – sostiene Della Porta – aspettarsi che un essere umano assomigli interamente ad un solo animale. Si tratterà invece di costruire una rete complessa di corrispondenze, attraverso le quali l'essere umano apparirà come composto da una pluralità di tratti animali diversi (Della Porta [2013]: 44). Sopra la vignetta che mostra Socrate di fianco ad un cervo Della Porta appone la seguente spiegazione: «Abbiamo ancora depinto il naso simo di Socrate col naso del cervo, da paragonarsi a quello; la cui effigie abbiamo depinta dal museo del mio fratello, dalla sua statua di marmo» (Della Porta [2013]: 160) (Fig. 2).

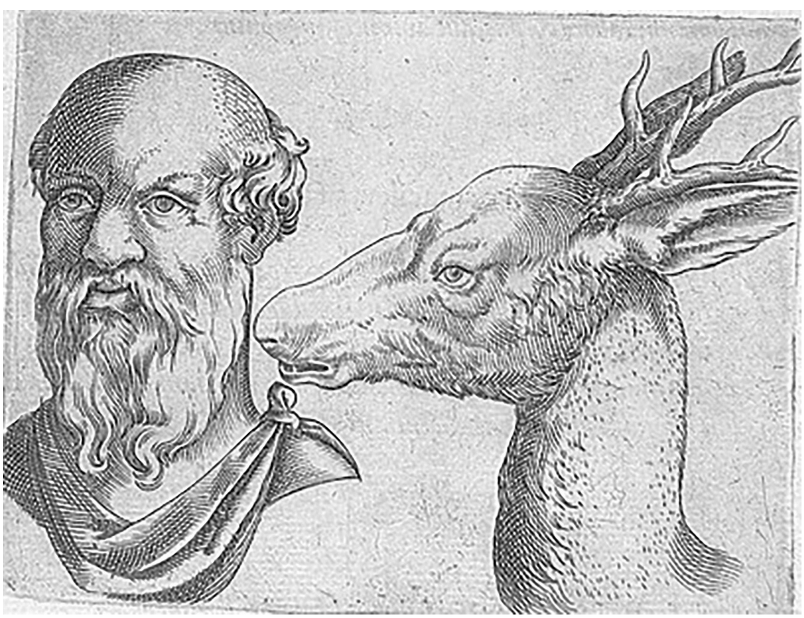


Fig. 2: Socrate e il cervo, tratto da G.B. Della Porta, *Della Fisonomia dell'Huomo*.
Fonte: Wikicommons (Public Domain).

Il fratello di Della Porta, Giovan Vincenzo era collezionista di arte antica, e aveva dato forma ad un museo di busti e altri oggetti, tra cui monete (Cooley [2022]: 209; Valente [2016]). In questo caso, la statua di Socrate diventa per Della Porta l'occasione per una diagnosi fisiognomica, incentrata in particolare sulla forma del naso. Della Porta scrive che nel *Secretum secretorum* «Aristotele [dice] ad Alessandro» che il naso schiacciato è il segno di «uomo impetuoso»[8]. Eppure, secondo Della Porta, la spiegazione deve necessariamente essere fallace per motivi tanto fisiologici quanto zoologici. Il naso schiacciato infatti sarebbe causato dall'umidità, e non dall'eccesso di calore (piano fisiologico), e non si troverebbero animali con il naso schiacciato che siano impetuosi (piano di analisi zoologica). Quindi la spiegazione deve essere errata, e la statua di Socrate è lo strumento che sigilla questa diagnosi. Paragonando infatti l'effigie di Socrate ad una serie di animali è possibile secondo Della Porta individuare a chi somiglia veramente il filosofo, ovvero al cervo, che non è un animale impetuoso, ma lussurioso, come già indicava lo Pseudoaristotele: «Nella sua *Fisonomia* infatti dice [*i.e. Aristotele*]: quelli che hanno il naso simo sono libidinosi, e si riferiscono al cervo, perché i cervi sono simi e sono tanto lussuriosi, che al tempo del coito divengono pazzi» (Della Porta [2013]: 159).

Da un punto di vista diagnostico, la statua fa le veci del filosofo in carne ed ossa, e viene idealmente posta a fianco a quegli animali che presentano caratteristiche esteriori simili ai tratti somatici rappresentati dalla statua stessa. Il motivo per cui è necessario questo passaggio attraverso il mondo animale è evidentemente da ricercarsi nel fatto che negli animali il rapporto tra anima e corpo è univoco e trasparente, o come scrive Della Porta: «Né mai la Natura fece un animal ch'avesse il corpo d'uno e l'animo di un altro animale: cioè un lupo, over agnello, ch'avesse anima di cane o di leone; ma il lupo, e l'agnello han l'anima di lupo e d'agnello. Onde per cosa necessaria ne segue che in tal corpo se gli conviene tal anima convenevole alla sua specie» (Della Porta [2013]: 15-16). La mappatura dei costumi degli animali è quindi più semplice di quella degli uomini, perché nei primi il rapporto tra esterno ed interno è costante, obbligato. Nel caso degli esseri umani, invece, il rapporto tra esterno ed interno è più complesso: la mobilità nel rapporto tra corpo ed anima è più pronunciata e quindi di fronte alla statua di Socrate non sarà possibile leggere immediatamente l'anima del filosofo se non passando attraverso il paragone con il mondo animale.

Ma le statue del museo del fratello diventano per Della Porta anche uno strumento di storiografia filosofica, per orientarsi nella storia del pensiero. Un'altra statua dalla stessa collezione rappresenta Platone. Della Porta paragona Platone al cane bracco, paragone che segnala una serie di caratteristiche interiori positive,

8 Della Porta [2013]: 158. Nella versione italiana del *Secretum* la sezione fisiognomica contiene un capitolo sul naso: Manenti [1538]: 110r.

e non negative come nel caso del cervo. I cani da caccia infatti sono «sagaci con l'odorato» (Della Porta [2013]: 103): la somiglianza tra Platone e il cane indica che il secondo aveva fiuto per la verità filosofica come il primo fiuta la preda. La visita al museo diventa il complemento alla visita in biblioteca: la diagnosi delle caratteristiche esteriori di Platone fornirà informazioni utili per giudicare il valore della filosofia platonica. La lettura fisiognomica è anzi una sorta di garanzia: prima ancora di aver letto i dialoghi platonici, lo studio della statua informa il potenziale lettore che il suo autore è meritevole di fiducia perché portava i segni esteriori del buon filosofo, cacciatore della verità (Fig. 3).

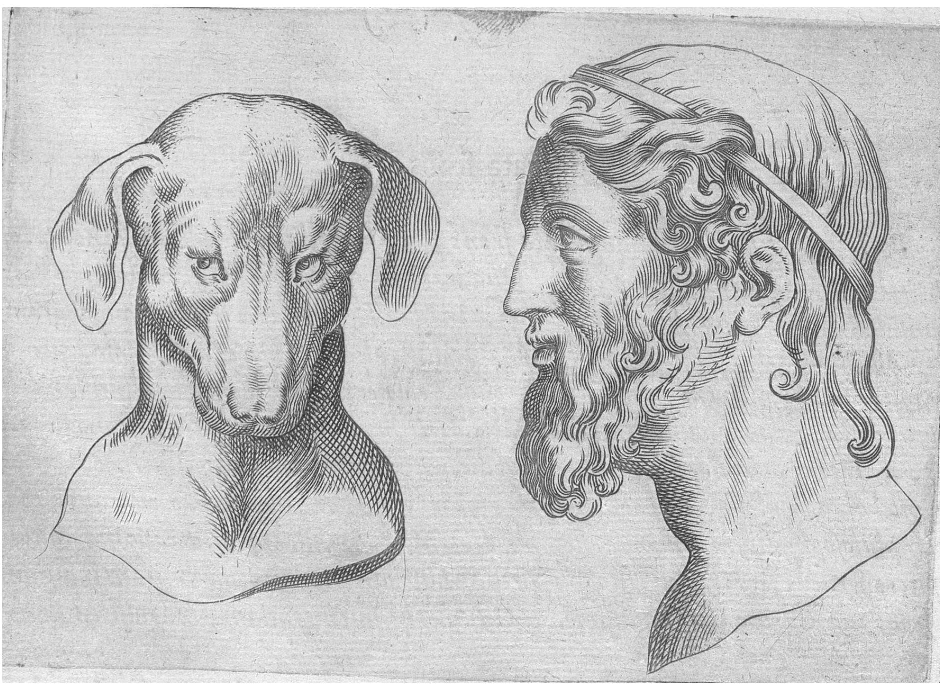


Fig. 3. Platone e il cane bracco, tratto da G.B. Della Porta, *Della Fisonomia dell'Huomo*. Fonte: Wikicommons (Public Domain).

Ma se questo ragionamento funziona nel caso di Platone, non funziona invece nel caso di Socrate, perché lo studio della statua fa sospettare la presenza di vizi gravi che il filosofo in realtà non possedeva. Il caso della diagnosi errata di Socrate sembrerebbe piuttosto la pietra tombale della fisiognomica come disciplina filosofica: il paragone con il cervo potrebbe infatti dimostrare che quando giudichiamo sulla base di caratteristiche esteriori cadiamo facili prede di pregiudizi, come quando crediamo che una persona che assomiglia ad un cervo debba condividerne anche il carattere, e in questo caso i vizi. Mentre nel caso dei cervi l'esteriorità sarà sempre all'unisono con l'interiorità, e quindi tutti i cervi saranno lussuriosi, nel caso del filosofo che somiglia al cervo, i segni esteriori non sono garanzia della presenza dei corrispondenti tratti interiori. Nonostante ciò, proprio l'esempio della diagnosi di Socrate viene sfruttato tanto da Della Porta quanto da Colorni per definire il campo della fisiognomica come terapia dell'anima.

3. *Fisiognomica come terapia*

Sia Colorni, sia Della Porta si riferiscono alla storia della diagnosi errata di Socrate tramandata ad esempio da Cicerone nel *De fato* (V.10) e nelle *Tusculanae Disputationes* (IV.37). Il fisionomo Zopiro avrebbe studiato i tratti somatici di Socrate, concludendo che il filosofo doveva essere libidinoso. Nel *De fato*, Alcibiade ride di questa analisi fisiognomica evidentemente erronea, per la quale viene poi offerta una soluzione: Socrate sarebbe stato davvero per natura libidinoso e poco intelligente, ma avrebbe imparato a superare questi vizi con la forza della filosofia. Nella *Tusculanae*, Socrate stesso ammette che la diagnosi di Zopiro era corretta, e che solo l'esercizio della ragione gli avrebbe permesso di superare queste inclinazioni naturali.

Colorni riporta invece una storia parallela leggermente diversa, secondo la quale non Zopiro, ma Filemone «eccellente professore di Fisionomia», avrebbe diagnosticato Socrate come «huomo lussurioso et ingannatore, per la qual risposta i detti discepoli sdegnati, lo volevano uccidere, se non che Socrate confessò e disse: "se egli ha detto ch'io sono lussurioso, ha detto la verità, né ha mancato d'un punto, alle qual cose io ho avuto riguardo, et ai tempi di tali Inclinationi, mi sono astenuto"»[9].

Il caso di Zopiro o Filemone è onnipresente nella letteratura fisiognomica come esempio positivo: il fisionomo aveva ragione nella sua diagnosi, e il fatto che corpo e anima non fossero più in rapporto simpatico tra loro non inficia la validità del principio fisiognomico. Della Porta sottolinea che Zopiro aveva giudicato bene, perché Socrate aveva effettivamente una tendenza alla libidine, ma l'esercizio della filosofia avrebbe permesso a Socrate di modificare una caratteristica innata dell'anima (Della Porta [2013]: 272).

9 Kaufmann A.257, 4r. Cf. Cod. Aug. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 4r-v, dove si omette il nome di Filemone: «come si può conoscere per quello esempio che si narra di Socrate, la cui imagine fu mostrata da suoi discepoli ad un eccelente professore de Fisonomia de suoi tempi». Nelle pagine che seguono cito generalmente dal codice di Wolfenbüttel, che è da considerarsi quello più vicino all'autore.

Subito prima di menzionare il caso di Filemone, Colorni aveva spiegato che la fisiognomica permette di identificare le inclinazioni naturali di una persona, prima che queste si rivelino pienamente nella formazione del carattere. Ad esempio, il fisionomo potrebbe leggere sul corpo di un fanciullo il fatto che egli è

> inclinato alli homicidii o a i latrocinii, over a qual si voglia altro vitio brutto, et che fosse per disgratia allevato et nutritto in parte dove si frequentano tali *odiosi vitii, non è dubio, che questo fanciullo riuscirebbe oltramodo pessimo in* quel vitio, et che li seria sempre poi più difficile l'astenersene, havendovi fatto oltra la sua propria inclinatione l'habito. Ma si per contrario, tal fanciullo serà allevato sotto buone discipline, et fatto essercitare in operationi diverse, et molto lontane dalla sua inclinatione, certo è [dico] che si vincerà facilmente la sua mala dispositione, anzi essendo assuefatto al bene, non saprà operare il male (Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 3v).

Non è un caso se Colorni porta ad esempio un fanciullo: l'utilità della fisiognomica riguarda la possibilità di identificare la sincronia corpo-anima, prima ancora che il carattere dell'anima si sia rivelato nella crescita di una persona. Questa procedura si rivela particolarmente importante qualora si diagnosticassero segni funesti sul corpo, che potrebbero fare presagire un carattere nefasto dell'anima. In questo caso la fisiognomica non serve semplicemente ad una diagnosi *ex post*, come nel caso di Socrate, ma permette di formulare una diagnosi che è orientata in senso terapeutico al futuro, perché servono sia inclinazione che opportunità affinché un certo tratto del carattere si possa rivelare. In seguito alla diagnosi fisiognomica, si deve mettere in atto un programma educativo tale da correggere il tratto negativo dell'anima. In questo contesto Colorni usa il verbo «domare» per istituire un parallelo tra l'animale irrazionale e il tratto dell'anima che va corretto: così come alleviamo e ammaestriamo le belve, saremo in grado di correggere sul nascere tratti caratteriali spregevoli:

> et che ciò sia vero ne vediamo spesso evidentissime dimostrationi, però che non tanto questo si vede riuscire negli Animali rationali, ma anco negli irrationali, poiché veggiamo, che co'i continui amaestramenti si domano et allevano i leoni, gli orsi, i tigri, et ogn'altr'animale ferocissimo, et oltra l'essere fatti domestici, si fano far loro opperationi piacevolissime, et totalmente contrarie alla loro ferocissima et indomita natura, ma che più? se vediamo che con tal continuo amaestramento si fanno sino parlare gli Augelli? Se adunque questo interviene facilmente ne' brutti animali che sono privi della raggione, quanto più maggiormente et facilmente si potrà fare riuscire nel genere rationale, che tiene in questo di più l'aiuto dell'intelletto, et della raggione (Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 3v-4r).

In questo caso il parallelo tra essere umano ed animale non serve a fini diagnostici, appoggiandosi alla teoria di un rapporto stringente tra anima e corpo di un animale. Serve invece per sottolineare che anche l'essere umano può essere domato, cioè liberato dai suoi vizi, proprio come ammaestriamo gli animali che sono tradizionalmente concepiti come privi di ragione. Per Colorni, la fisiognomica è quindi necessaria per dare forma alla società plasmando il carattere dei singoli individui. Il riferimento all'immagine di Socrate, e alla storia della diagnosi errata è quindi strumentale all'argomentazione che la fisiognomica è una terapia antropologica e sociale, grazie alla quale si può

> corregere, et vincere il suo [*i.e. dell'uomo*] apetito a quella guisa che fa l'amalato, che per dubbio de non alterare il male sopporta incomportabil sete, overo altra bramosa voglia che tiene de cibarsi d'alcun cibo che gli sia contrario, di modo che ancora ch'il sopradetto fanciullo non havesse havuto dirigenti o rettori che lo ammaestrassino, divenuto huomo, et fatto acorto della sua mala inclinatione potrà essere che si emendi, come si può conoscere per quel essempio che si narra di Socrate[10].

Colorni non spiega in che cosa consisterebbero queste misure educative, che dovrebbero essere implementate da padri di famiglia e precettori ma utilizza una semplice metafora: le inclinazioni negative devono essere corrette come si sforza un fuscello dalla parte opposta a quella verso la quale tende, in modo da fargli assumere una posizione diritta. Ma del resto non è delle misure di prevenzione che Colorni intende occuparsi, bensì solo della fase diagnostica, che permetterebbe di pianificare un intervento sull'originaria sincronia tra corpo ed anima, nel caso in cui il lato del corpo ci segnali un problema a livello dell'anima. La statua, o l'immagine, o figura, è qui monito morale e prova che la terapia è possibile.

Secondo Colorni, il fisionomo riuscirebbe dunque a vedere aspetti caratteriali che sono ancora sconosciuti alla persona che viene analizzata: quando il fisionomo rileva questo tratto preoccupante sul suo corpo, il fanciullo in questione non è ancora un omicida, e con tutta probabilità non sa che lo diventerà. Il grande vantaggio della fisiognomica, per Colorni, consiste proprio nell'essere in grado di individuare «i semi de costumi sparsi dalla natura né corpi nostri», quando questi semi «dormono ancora, e non producono frutto alcuno» (Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 3r). Anche Della Porta sottolinea che la lettura fisiognomica del corpo si rivela particolarmente utile quando mette in luce aspetti dei quali il paziente non è consapevole – soprattutto se questo paziente è il fisionomo stesso.

4. *Autodiagnosi fisiognomica*

Della Porta sottolinea l'importanza dello specchio come strumento diagnostico per leggere sé stessi, spiegando che anche Socrate avrebbe utilizzato lo specchio per dirigere lo sguardo diagnostico verso il suo proprio corpo, diventando quindi ad un tempo filosofo e fisionomo:

10 Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 4r; cf. Kaufmann A.257, 4r (dove si legge *incompatibil* invece di *incomportabil*).

> Abbiam letto appresso gli antichi Socrate filosofo aver usato lo specchio per la buona instituzion de costumi, il che fu ancora accettato da Seneca, che l'uomo possa specchiar se stesso, perché, conoscendo le nostre imperfezioni, ricorriamo al consiglio et all'emenda. Con ciò sia che, mirandosi alcuno in uno specchio e vedendosi ben formato dalla Natura, procuri per l'avenire che non imbratti la bellezza del corpo con la bruttezza de' costumi; così, veggendo il corpo brutto, procuri con ogni suo sforzo e diligenza, che con le virtù medichi, e risarcisca i buoni segni del corpo (Della Porta [2013]: 4).

L'enfasi è posta sul fatto che il soggetto stesso potrebbe non essere consapevole di possedere certi tratti dell'anima, siano essi positivi o negativi: è per questo che deve servirsi di uno specchio, che diventa lo strumento principe del fisionomo-filosofo. La fisiognomica serve qui all'autoanalisi per verificare quali tratti siano presenti nella propria anima, tratti che evidentemente non vengono rilevati per semplice introspezione, ma che possono essere disvelati utilizzando la fisiognomica come metodo che sistematicamente crea una mappa per connettere corpi ed anime. In questo senso la fisiognomica contiene una proto-teoria dell'inconscio: lo specchio è necessario perché il corpo e l'anima hanno una loro relazione che non è del tutto trasparente al soggetto stesso. La fisiognomica permette non solo di osservare la relazione tra corpo e anima, seguendo il principio cardine della fisiognomica, ma permette anche di entrarvi all'interno, e di modificarla. Nel proemio alla *Fisonomia dell'huomo* Della Porta scrive:

> Questa, dunque, da' segni che da lungi si scuoprono nell'uomo, così scopre i consigli, & i costumi fuori, che par che penetri ne' i più occulti e più reposti luoghi del cuore, donata dalla somma clemenza di Dio per un singolar presente, accioché ciascuno, da manifesti segni ammonito, sappia che elegger o fuggir debba: elegger l'amicizia de' fedeli, pietosi e buoni, e fuggir quella dei cattivi et empi (Della Porta [2013]: 1).

La promessa di penetrare i più occulti luoghi del cuore ha un evidente risvolto pratico nella selezione di amici e nemici: in questa veste, la fisiognomica è una scienza che permette di ovviare alla tendenza degli esseri umani a mentire, dando accesso al vero carattere di una persona (Rigoni [1974]). In questo senso la fisiognomica è un dono divino, che permette di orientarsi nella società degli uomini. Anche Colorni insiste sulle credenziali divine della fisiognomica: se è vero che la natura è «fedele ancella d'Iddio», e che tutti gli esseri viventi, incluse le piante e gli animali, esprimono nelle loro apparenze le loro qualità interiori, allora questo deve valere a maggior ragione per l'essere umano, che è l'animale più degno di tutti (Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 22r). Il fatto che i corpi umani siano leggibili dal fisionomo rientrerebbe da questo punto di vista all'interno di una più generale leggibilità di tutto il libro della natura.

Ma è nella autoanalisi che la fisiognomica dispiega tutto il proprio potenziale, perché in quel caso non si tratta solo di diagnosticare, per poi decidere di instaurare un legame o di rifuggirlo, o di fuggire da un animale che appare come pericoloso o da una pianta velenosa, ma anche di intervenire attivamente sull'anima sfruttando il corpo come punto d'accesso.

5. *Chirofisiognomica: la cura che passa dalla mano*

Sia Colorni, sia Della Porta, sostengono che i tratti caratteriali negativi sarebbero facili da curare: per Della Porta le infermità dell'anima si possono agevolmente curare, mentre Colorni paragona i ragazzi a fuscelli che possono essere facilmente modellati dall'educazione. La difficoltà della procedura risiede unicamente nella diagnosi, e nella comprensione del rapporto tra anima e corpo. In effetti non tutti i segni fisiognomici appaiono ugualmente affidabili – ed è anzi l'estrema variabilità dei segni fisiognomici che spiega, sia per Colorni, sia per Della Porta, il ricorso ai segni specifici della mano come particolarmente utili.

Colorni presenta la chirofisiognomica come la parte più nobile della fisiognomica, sia perché la mano può essere scoperta e analizzata facilmente senza dover visionare l'intera superficie del corpo, sia perché i segni della mano sono più stabili rispetto ad altri segni fisiognomici. La chirofisiognomica è per Colorni la «più bella et nobil parte» della fisiognomica, perché permette di formulare giudizi «più certi et men fallaci» rispetto a quelli delle altre branche della fisiognomica (Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 5v). Rispetto al volto, ad esempio, che è molto suscettibile di essere modificato da passioni più o meno temporanee, le linee della mano hanno una certa costanza. Dietro a questa affermazione apparentemente semplice si intravede chiaramente l'idea che la mano sia una parte del tutto particolare del corpo, una sorta di summa dell'essere umano, sulla scia della teoria aristotelica secondo cui l'anima è come la mano, perché la mano è lo strumento degli strumenti, così come l'intelletto è la forma delle forme (*De anima* III.8, 423a1-3).

In perfetta sintonia con questa posizione di Colorni, il testo chirofisiognomico di Della Porta comincia proprio con una sezione «de manuum dignitate», ricca di riferimenti aristotelici, utilizzati per sostenere che la mano è un organo diverso da tutti gli altri: un organo strettamente legato al possesso della mente da parte dell'uomo, e con cui l'essere umano domina la natura (Della Porta [2003]: 9-11). Rivendicare le radici filosofiche, e in prima istanza aristoteliche, della disciplina della chirofisiognomica serve a Colorni e Della Porta per distinguere tra approcci superstiziosi alla lettura della mano, e uno studio che deriva invece dalla chiara definizione dei vantaggi e dei limiti della disciplina. Cocles è per entrambi un esempio dell'applicazione superstiziosa e non scientifica dei principi fisiognomici alla mano. Non si tratta di andare «come per ischerzo a guisa di chiromanti», come sostiene Colorni nella lettera dedicatoria a Vincenzo Gonzaga (Cod. Guelf.

4.9 Aug. 4°, lettera dedicatoria non numerata), ma di applicare invece la fisiognomica come «subalternata alla Filosofia naturale» (Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 5r). La mano umana appare dunque come una delle parti più importanti, se non la più importante in assoluto, per l'analisi fisiognomica.

Considerando la questione dell'impermanenza dei segni dal punto di vista della sincronia corpo-anima, un segno stabile appare meglio ancorato al livello sottostante, quello dell'anima: questi sono i semi piantati originariamente dalla natura per formare il carattere. D'altro canto, i segni impermanenti, come il rossore di chi prova imbarazzo, sono il frutto di un ondeggiare rapido della sincronia, e se non sono diagnosticati prontamente svaniscono[11]. Le linee della mano fornirebbero quindi una mappa più stabile per l'indagine permettendo di entrare con più sicurezza all'interno di quella mobilità teorizzata nei *Physiognomonica*. Allo stesso tempo, Colorni sottolinea il fatto che le linee non devono essere concepite puramente come astratte, come fossero figure geometriche. Al contrario, devono essere indagate nel loro spessore naturale, valutandone quindi tanto il corso quanto lo spessore, la posizione e il colore:

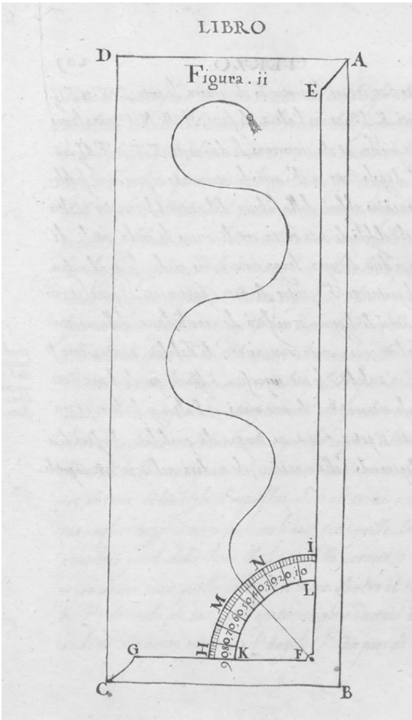
> Le linee della mano sono considerate in questa scienza non solamente come matematiche, cioè figurate in questa et quella maniera, ma etiandio come naturali fondate in materia, et soggette a molte qualità, et che hanno non solamente longhezza, ma ancora larghezza, et profondità, et oltre di ciò si considera ancora il loro sito, et il rispetto, et la relatione, e proportione, che hanno l'una a l'altra, et la moltitudine loro, dalle quali considerationi nascono molte differenze, et varii et diversi nomi di linee, le quali diversamente ci mostrano et significano quel che vogliamo sapere.[12]

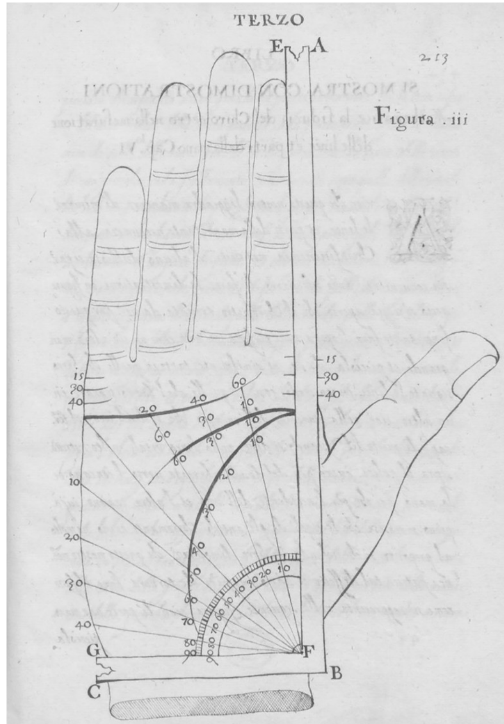
Colorni pensa alle linee della mano come a fiumi che scorrono, o come a piante che crescono: hanno quindi un inizio e una fine, e sono strutture dinamiche e profonde nella mano, non inerti e superficiali. Un altro vantaggio del leggere fisiognomicamente la mano, per Colorni, è che queste linee possono a suo avviso essere misurate, pur restando almeno in parte sfuggevoli, perché dinamiche. Colorni propone anche l'utilizzo di uno strumento apposito per misurare le linee: il chirometro, che nel testimone di Wolfenbüttel è addirittura inserito all'interno della rilegatura in legno (Figg. 4-5)[13].

11 Sui segni permanenti e impermanenti vedi Porter [2005]: 53-54 e 208. La distinzione tra segni permanenti e impermanenti in parte coincide con il tentativo di distinguere tra fisiognomica e patognomica, dove la seconda studia le espressioni del viso, e non i segni permanenti, oggetto proprio della fisiognomica. Bühler sottolinea però la permeabilità tra le due nella storia della fisiognomica, basandosi anche su Pollnow [1928] (Bühler [1933]: 6). Si veda anche Rodler [1991]: 5.

12 Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 41v-42r. Correggo *porpotione* in *proportione* e *maltitudine* in *moltitudine*.

13 Si ringrazia sentitamente la dottoressa Claudia Minners-Knaup della Herzog August Bibliothek di Wolfenbüttel per la preziosa assistenza nell'analisi tecnica dello strumento.





Figg. 4-5. Il chirometro ed esempio di misurazione, tratti da Kaufmann A.257 (digitalizzazione completa del manoscritto disponibile online: https://real-ms.mtak.hu/14561/)

Questo modo di intendere le linee fa della fisiognomica, per Colorni, una scienza naturale: per conoscere le varie «dispositioni et inclinationi» che gli uomini presentano «a diversi officii nella republica», è essenziale servirsi della (chiro)fisiognomica, che è quindi una disciplina imparentata con la medicina e con la politica: «da questo si può facilmente congeturare di quanta utilità sia questa scienza al mondo» (Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 5r-v).

A partire da un'analisi fisiognomica specifica – lo studio della mano – Colorni colloca così la fisionomica al centro di una complessa rete di discipline impegnate nella definizione dell'individuo, e del suo ruolo in società. Il corpo, ancora una volta, è il ponte tra l'anima e il mondo esterno. Il corpo può essere studiato sotto forma di immagine, come dice Colorni, o di statua: la fisiognomica funziona quindi anche utilizzando supporti fittizi al posto della persona in carne ed ossa, e questo è un evidente vantaggio perché in questo modo sarà possibile diagnosticare anche persone non più in vita, oppure che vengano mostrate al fisionomo prima di un incontro reale. Ma anche il proprio corpo può farsi immagine esterna attraverso l'uso dello specchio, che permetterà di fare emergere in maniera ancora più marcata la missione terapeutica della disciplina. La «fisionomia», scrive Colorni, «serve anco alla prattica» (Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 31v).

È in questo stesso spirito che, nel proemio al sesto libro della Fisionomia dell'huomo, Della Porta afferma: «A che dunque ci gioverìa quest'arte se, conosciuti i tuoi defetti, non potessi quegli convertigli in virtudi?» (Della Porta [2013]: 557). L'assetto teorico della disciplina assume così una valenza etica, ed è grazie a questa inflessione che la fisiognomica, anche per Della Porta, entra in un rapporto dialogico con tutta una serie di discipline naturali, tra cui la dietetica. Dove Colorni era rimasto vago riguardo alle linee concrete di intervento terapeutico, Della Porta invece sostiene che per eliminare un vizio è possibile non solo intervenire direttamente sull'anima tramite la filosofia, come fece Socrate, ma è possibile anche utilizzare il corpo come via d'accesso all'anima, attraverso la farmacopea erboristica, cioè «purgazioni, locali rimedii e natural virtù di erbe, pietre et animali et occulte proprietadi» (Della Porta [2013]: 557). Ad esempio, il vizio naturale di Socrate – la lussuria – potrà essere curato non solo intervenendo a livello dell'anima tramite la filosofia, come avrebbe fatto Socrate stesso, ma anche agendo a livello del corpo, contando sul meccanismo secondo il quale quest'ultimo trasmetterà poi il mutamento all'anima grazie alla sincronizzazione. In questo secondo caso, Della Porta suggerisce una dieta leggera, ovvero cibi di poco nutrimento, e il consumo di erbe e minerali come la portulaca o lo smeraldo (Della Porta [2013]: 573). La medicina, la farmacopea, la dietetica, entrano così in gioco come rami applicativi della fisiognomica.

È possibile che il criterio – non direttamente esplicitato – si quello secondo cui la modalità di intervento può dipendere dalla persona che deve essere curata: un filosofo potrà forse utilizzare il risultato dell'indagine fisiognomica per adattare il proprio carattere grazie alla sola forza della ragione, ma una persona meno suscettibile alle argomentazioni filosofiche potrà comunque seguire una serie di suggerimenti pratici forniti dal fisionomo-filosofo (ma anche medico e dietista) per intervenire sul proprio carattere utilizzando il corpo come ponte tra il visibile e l'invisibile. Colorni e Della Porta convergono su questa interpretazione della fisiognomica che intende la diagnosi dell'identità personale, cioè della sincronia corpo-anima, come momento preliminare per giungere a quello che Della Porta chiama «la cosa più mirabilissima e degnissima», cioè il poter levare i vizi o «scancellarli del tutto» (Della Porta [2013]: 557). In questo modo l'intervento attivo sull'equilibrio anima-corpo si trasforma in terapia. Colorni pone la questione in maniera ancora più netta: la fisiognomica (e la chirofisiognomica in particolare) considera l'uomo «in quanto egli è politico», nell'accezione più ampia del termine (Cod. Guelf. 4.9 Aug. 4°, 50v).

La fisiognomica si presenta così come un metodo per applicare una teoria filosofica alla cura del sé e alla cura della società. Il recupero di un aneddoto classico sulla bruttezza di Socrate diventa così materiale teorico per costruire un'apologia della disciplina della fisiognomica, utile ad identificarne il potenziale diagnostico e terapeutico, sulla base di una concezione precisa delle dinamiche di interazione, e di potenziale separazione, di corpo ed anima. Nonostante la diversità di contesti culturali e la disparità nella diffusione delle loro opere fisiognomiche, Colorni e Della Porta dimostrano di condividere perciò una visione simile – filosoficamente fondata, e socialmente orientata – della fisiognomica. Specchi e statue diventano così gli strumenti precipui del filosofo-fisionomo, essenziali per vedere e comprendere meglio, e per liberare dai vizi, sé stessi e gli altri.

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Illusione trascendentale e malattia mentale in Kant: la filosofia critica come terapia

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Abstract. L'articolo esplora il rapporto tra illusione trascendentale e malattia mentale in Kant, proponendo una lettura che supera la tradizionale opposizione tra ragione e follia. Se, come mostrato da Foucault, la modernità sembra relegare la follia a mera patologia separata dalla razionalità, l'analisi kantiana rivela invece una forma di continuità: gli errori del giudizio e l'illusione trascendentale descritti nella *Dialettica trascendentale* costituiscono il fondamento critico delle forme di malattia mentale descritte nell'*Antropologia pragmatica*. Seguendo la tesi di Michelle Grier che sostiene l'inevitabilità dell'illusione trascendentale, indago la malattia mentale non come semplice errore contingente, ma come deriva necessaria e inevitabile della ragione, che si traduce empiricamente in deviazioni patologiche delle facoltà cognitive. In questo senso, la malattia mentale non rappresenta ciò che si oppone alla ragione, ma la sua degenerazione interna. La filosofia critica, delimitando i limiti della ragione e impedendone le derive, assume così una funzione terapeutica: non elimina la follia, ma la integra nella comprensione illuminista di una ragione universale, fondata sul senso comune e sulla comunicabilità dei giudizi.

Keywords. Illusion, mental illness, Kant, Dialectic, Critique.

La follia è una condizione umana.
In noi la follia esiste ed è presente come
lo è la ragione.

F. Basaglia

Nel pensiero comune la follia viene opposta alla ragione, soprattutto nell'accezione di malattia mentale che comincia a definirsi nel XVIII secolo con lo sviluppo della psichiatria moderna. Uno dei più famosi promotori di questa idea è senz'altro Michel Foucault, che nella sua celebre *Storia della follia* ricorda come l'uomo moderno non comunichi più con il folle. L'uomo razionale, che trova la propria essenza nella ragione illuminata, delega il medico nel dialogo con il folle. Si compie dunque una rottura che va a costituire un'opposizione netta: da un lato il sapere scientifico, dotato di universalità astratta, dall'altra l'uomo di follia, l'uomo che sragiona e sfugge all'ordine e alla conformità sociali. Si interrompe così lo scambio tra follia e ragione (Foucault [1961]: 10).

L'interessante e documentatissima posizione di Foucault che denuncia l'assenza di un linguaggio al di sotto della ragione a partire dalla modernità non è però più quella dominante nel dibattito attuale e negli studi specialistici sulla malattia mentale nel XVIII secolo, a partire dalle critiche mosse da parte di Derrida (Derrida [1996]). Probabilmente è ancora possibile sostenere, come vuole Foucault, che la follia sia da intendersi come "assenza d'opera" (Foucault [1961]: 13) e che a partire dal Rinascimento la follia venga a poco a poco confinata nella malattia mentale (Foucault [1961]: 16). Tuttavia, come tenterò di dimostrare relativamente ai testi kantiani e in particolare all'*Antropologia dal punto di vista pragmatico*, il passaggio dalla follia alla malattia mentale non esclude molti elementi di contatto tra il sapere razionale e la definizione della psicopatia. Il confine tra ragione e assenza di ragione si rivela anzi molto più sottile di quanto si possa pensare. È entro questa prospettiva che vorrei collocare uno studio della malattia mentale in relazione agli errori dell'immaginazione. Mi limiterò in questo saggio soltanto ai testi kantiani e non considererò, se non come punto di avvio, gli studi foucaultiani.

Uno spunto in questa direzione teorica si trova, infatti, nella *Storia della follia*. Foucault riconosce il legame tra follia e sapere laddove troppo sapere o un sapere inutile portano a follia (Foucault [1961]: 50). Analizzando il dipinto di Hieronymus Bosch, *Estrazione della pietra della follia* o *Cura della follia*, Foucault sottolinea come il quadro mostri non soltanto il folle che si rivolge alla scienza per farsi estirpare il proprio male, ma anche il medico che, forse più folle del folle, è impegnato in un'operazione del tutto inutile (Foucault [1961]: 53).

Nel dipinto si dice molto relativamente alla follia: dice del passaggio alla sua medicalizzazione, dice di un sapere scientifico cieco e dogmatico, dice non tanto del folle quanto degli errori dei giudizi di una scienza che si crede vera. E questa riflessione emerge non tramite il linguaggio della ragione, ma attraverso il simbolismo che caratterizza il linguaggio dell'immagine (Foucault [1961]: 44), il linguaggio estetico che soltanto in parte può essere ricondotto alla conoscenza chiara e distinta e che rimanda piuttosto a una forma di conoscenza intuitiva.

Anche in questo caso non voglio analizzare la complessa relazione tra linguaggio dell'immagine e follia, ma considerare, all'interno del linguaggio kantiano, un'alternativa all'argomentazione intellettuale.

Lo stesso quadro è descritto in un recente, brevissimo saggio dello scrittore Benjamin Labatut:

> nel dipinto, la pietra che il chirurgo cinto d'imbuto sta cercando di rimuovere dalla testa del paziente è sostituita da un bulbo, con ogni probabilità un tulipano, dato che lo stesso fiore – color mandorla e già appassito – è bene in vista sul ripiano del tavolino su cui la stanca monaca appoggia le braccia stanche. A proposito di questo dipinto, nel suo libro *Storia della follia nell'età classica* Michel Foucault scrisse: "non dimentichiamo il famoso medico di Bosch, ancora più folle di colui che egli vuol guarire: poiché tutta la sua falsa scienza non ha fatto molto di più che deporre su di lui i peggiori stracci di una follia che tutti possono vedere tranne lui stesso. (Labatut [2021]: 47)

Prendendo spunto dal quadro di Bosch è possibile chiedersi in che modo il sapere che si sta costituendo a scienza, quantomeno a partire da Descartes, trovi il proprio limite nella follia. La follia in verità non sembra collocarsi al di fuori della ragione, secondo l'opposizione razionale/irrazionale. Piuttosto, la ragione si appropria della follia, ma non soltanto classificando la malattia mentale sviluppando un sapere scientifico dedicato. Oltre a ciò, la follia si annida nel funzionamento stesso della ragione moderna, nel dubitare cartesiano, nello scetticismo humeano, nelle invenzioni dell'immaginazione che preoccupano Montaigne, nella creazione di un'illusione estetica che per Lessing deve avvincere gli spettatori a teatro (cfr. Feloj-Giargia [2012]).

E naturalmente si insinua nell'errore del giudizio creando un confine sottilissimo e infine una complementarietà tra ragione e follia. In questo senso la follia trova un luogo nel progetto kantiano, a partire dai suoi fondamenti: riconoscere la finitezza dell'intelletto umano, affermare la necessità di stabilirne i limiti significa al tempo stesso riconoscere la possibilità dell'errore nel giudizio e il pericolo che il sapere si tramuti in follia. Lo stesso Foucault, in un testo molto distante dalla *Storia della follia*, ossia nell'*Introduzione* alla sua traduzione dell'*Antropologia* kantiana (Foucault [1964]: 11), associa gli errori dialettici discussi nella *Critica della ragion pura* ad alcuni paragrafi dell'*Antropologia pragmatica*.

1. *Il problema dell'illusione*

Qualora si decidesse di assumere questa posizione metodologica, ossia che sia riscontrabile una continuità tra la *Dialettica trascendentale* e i passaggi dell'*Antropologia* dedicati al giudizio e alla malattia mentale, viene a comporsi una sorta di costellazione di nozioni kantiane che stanno a fondamento del progetto trascendentale. Si compone un quadro in cui l'errore può investire, quantomeno, la percezione, l'immaginazione e la capacità di giudizio. Errori di percezione, illusioni e follia non sono quindi molto distanti tra loro nella trattazione kantiana delle facoltà, delle loro derive dialettiche e della possibilità della psicopatia. Procederò quindi con uno studio dell'illusione trascendentale nella *Dialettica* per poi indagare l'*Antropologia*, indicando quali elementi ricorrono in entrambi i testi e permettono di giustificare una tesi di continuità.

Tra gli studi kantiani recenti, il libro di Michelle Grier, *Kant's Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion*, sostiene con convinzione la «tesi dell'inevitabilità», afferma cioè l'idea che l'illusione sia una deriva necessaria della ragione (Grier [2004]: 4-8). E la stessa tesi è approfondita e sostenuta più recentemente da Nuria Sánchez Madrid (2023). Naturalmente occorre essere cauti e ricordare cosa è per Kant l'illusione trascendentale. È pur vero, tuttavia, che, se si guarda alla malattia mentale dalla prospettiva antropologica, la stretta connessione tra errori delle facoltà, illusione e follia è esplicita.

Si tratta allora di percorrere, con ordine, la via che dalla *Dialettica trascendentale* porta ai paragrafi dell'*Antropologia* dedicati alla follia. Nella *Dialettica* si legge:

> Questi raziocini, rispetto al loro risultato, sono dunque pseudo-razionali […] perché essi non sorgono nella finzione o a caso, ma derivano dalla natura della ragione. Sono sofisticazioni, non dell'uomo, bensì della stessa ragion pura, dalle quali il più saggio degli uomini non può liberarsi, e magari a gran fatica potrà prevenire l'errore, ma senza sottrarsi mai all'illusione [*Schein*] che lo tormenta e si prende gioco di lui. (Kant [1781/1787]: A339/B397)

Michelle Grier ricorda come Kant riconosca che le dottrine metafisiche derivano da un'illusione inevitabile e necessaria e la critica si costituisce come un rimedio agli errori metafisici. È l'illusione metafisica, l'errata convinzione di poter accedere all'incondizionato, il fondamento dell'errore. La tesi dell'inevitabilità sostenuta da Grier collega quindi l'illusione trascendentale all'unità sistematica e allo stesso intento critico (Grier [2004]: 268-279). Mi sembra di poter condividere la sua tesi, nonostante non sia unanimemente approvata, e di poter ugualmente affermare che la dottrina kantiana dell'illusione trascendentale vuole sia limitare le pretese metafisiche della ragione, sia definire il ruolo necessario e regolativo dell'illusione. La tentazione metafisica di andare oltre i limiti dell'esperienza è fondata nella natura stessa della ragione umana e dà origine a un'illusione che non può essere evitata (Kant [1781/1787]: A341/B399).

Gli errori del giudizio a cui l'illusione metafisica dà luogo possono naturalmente essere classificati in varie tipologie. Va detto però che la dottrina dell'illusione trascendentale ha lo scopo di fornire una visione unitaria degli errori metafisici nei termini di un'applicazione errata delle facoltà. Ciononostante l'illusione trascendentale non si identifica con l'errore nel giudizio, ma ne costituisce semmai il fondamento (cfr. Sezioni iniziali della *Dialettica*). Se gli errori del giudizio sono un'errata applicazione delle facoltà e in particolar modo dell'intelletto (Kant [1781/1787]: A296/B353), l'illusione trascendentale riguarda invece l'essenza stessa della ragione ed è un uso trascendentale delle idee, delle massime e dei principi razionali (Kant [1781/1787]: A297/B354).

> Illusione, che è affatto inevitabile, come non possiamo evitare che il mare nel mezzo non ci appaia più alto che alla spiaggia [ ] o come anche lo stesso astronomo non può impedire che la luna al levarsi non gli appaia più grande, quantunque egli non di lasci ingannare da tale apparenza. (Kant [1781/1787]: A297/B354)
> La dialettica trascendentale sarà paga pertanto di scoprire l'apparenza dei giudizi trascendenti, e di prevenire insieme che essa non tragga in inganno; ma che questa illusione si dilegui (come l'illusione logica) e cessi di essere un'illusione, questo è ciò che non può mai conseguire. (Kant [1781/1787]: A298/B355)

Gli errori del giudizio vengono esposti da Kant in numerosi testi, ma il riferimento principale è certamente l'*Analitica trascendentale* della prima *Critica*, alla quale farò un breve accenno. Per Kant esistono principalmente due tipi di errore nel giudizio: quelli che derivano dalla confusione di principi sensibili con principi intellettuale (le surrezioni) e quelli che derivano unicamente dall'intelletto. L'errore di surrezione, che porta a scambiare ciò che pertiene all'oggetto con ciò che appartiene esclusivamente al soggetto si fonda sul corrispettivo metafisico di confondere gli oggetti sensibili (fenomeni), con gli oggetti intellettuali (noumena). La surrezione, che comporta un collasso di fenomeni e cose in sé, è strettamente legata all'illusione trascendentale, anche se la modalità della loro connessione rimane sostanzialmente oscura (Grier [2004]: 70). È però chiaro che l'errore del giudizio deriva dalla tentazione razionale di andare oltre gli oggetti possibili dell'esperienza e di porre un oggetto metafisico a fondamento delle apparenze.

Nell'*Analitica trascendentale* Kant mette dunque in guardia dal rischio in cui può incorrere l'intelletto di fare un uso materiale dei propri principi puri e formali e di formulare giudizi senza fare distinzione fra gli oggetti, includendo anche oggetti che non ci sono dati o che nemmeno potranno mai esserci dati. L'*Analitica trascendentale* è dunque un'affermazione della limitatezza dell'intelletto che mostra come il suo giudizio non possa essere applicato in modo generale e illimitato se si vuole giudicare, solamente con il puro intelletto, in modo sintetico e a priori, altrimenti l'uso dell'intelletto diviene dialettico (Kant [1781/1787]: A63-64/B88). Il compito della *Dialettica trascendentale* sarà quindi quello di esporre le sofisticazioni metafisiche e gli argomenti da esse generate.

2. *Illusione, errori di giudizio e* Antropologia

Se accettiamo la posizione che ho brevemente ricostruito, ossia che gli errori di giudizio riguardano principalmente errori di surrezione o mere invenzioni da parte dell'intelletto e che questi errori si fondano sull'illusione trascendentale di poter accedere all'incondizionato, è possibile ora considerare i paragrafi dell'*Antropologia* dedicati alla malattia mentale. Nella sezione dell'*Antropologia da un punto di vista pragmatico* dedicata alla facoltà di conoscere, Kant dichiara che «un intelletto *corretto*, un giudizio *esercitato*, una ragione saldamente *fondata* costituiscono l'intero ambito della facoltà conoscitiva dell'intellezione; soprattutto nella misura in cui questa venga considerata come un'attitudine a promuovere la facoltà pratica, vale a dire a proporsi degli scopi» (Kant [1798]: 197). E ancora, Kant aggiunge che «un intelletto corretto è un intelletto sano in quanto comporta la conformità dei concetti al fine del suo uso», il giudizio è la capacità di pensare il particolare sottostante il generale, «procede in accordo con intelletto sano e fa da legame fra questo e la ragione», mentre «la saggezza, in quanto idea dell'uso pratico della ragione» è garantita dalle tre massime, pensare da sé, pensare al posto degli altri e pensare sempre in accordo con se stessi. A questi tre usi "sani" delle facoltà corrispondono le loro storture (Meo [1982]; Manganaro [1983]; Battistoni [2025]).

Come afferma lo stesso Kant in apertura al §52 dell'*Antropologia*, «è difficile introdurre una ripartizione sistematica in ciò che è essenzialmente e inguaribilmente disordine» (Kant [1798]: 214). La sezione intitolata «Delle debolezze e delle malattie dell'anima in rapporto alla sua facoltà conoscitiva» (Kant [1798]: 202) vuole portare ordine e classificare le devianze delle tre facoltà superiori del conoscere, riprendendo quanto già affermato negli scritti precritici e sulla base di un lungo e frequente confronto con il sapere scientifico del tempo. La prima distinzione intercorre tra deficienze delle facoltà e malattie dell'animo. Le manchevolezze delle facoltà sembrano corrispondere, sebbene non in maniera esatta, ad alcuni degli errori delle facoltà che già comparivano nella prima *Critica*. Le deficienze delle facoltà sono numerose e variegate nelle loro manifestazioni empiriche: ottusità, stupidità, semplicità, distrazione, imbecillità. Queste manchevolezze, assai comuni, possono degenerare in malattia, ad esempio l'incapacità a distrarsi da una rappresentazione dell'immaginazione può portare a delirio.

Le malattie sono poi suddivise in ipocondria e mania. L'ipocondria è l'illusione di essere malati quando si è sani, la mania corrisponde alla pazzia e può essere ridotta a quattro specie: l'*amentia*, in cui le rappresentazioni non corrispondono in alcun modo alle connessioni dell'esperienza e vengono comunicate in maniera incomprensibile; la *dementia*, in cui il malato è in grado di comunicare in maniera coerente ma le rappresentazioni prodotte dall'immaginazione vengono scambiate per percezioni; l'*insania*, in cui l'immaginazione dà l'illusione di una universalità e di analogie fra rappresentazioni incompatibili; la *vesania*, in cui il malato «scavalca ogni criterio dettato dall'esperienza» (Kant [1798]: 215) e si illude di comprendere l'incomprensibile.

Questi tipi di sragionevolezza si distinguono essenzialmente dalle deficienze in quanto non sono semplice mancanza di ragione, ma sono una forma positiva:

> non vi è solo un disordine e una deviazione dalla regola dell'uso della ragione, ma anche un'*irragionevolezza positiva*, cioè un'*altra* regola, un punto di vista del tutto diverso, nel quale, per così dire, l'anima viene dislocata, e dal quale vede altrimenti tutti gli oggetti; e si trova così trasposta in un luogo lontano da quel *sensorium commune* che si richiede per l'unità della *vita* (dell'animale) – dal che deriva l'espressione "*essere spostati*". (Kant [1798]: 216)

La pazzia si configura quindi in una definizione generale e corrisponde a un uso della ragione in cui la relazione fra rappresentazione e oggetto viene elevata a universalità. Lo afferma Kant esplicitamente: «l'irragionevolezza (che è qualcosa di positivo, non una semplice carenza di ragione), appunto come la ragione, è una mera *forma*, alla quale gli oggetti si possono adattare, ed entrambe si pongono dunque sul piano dell'universale" (Kant [1798]: 216).

Ciò che distingue la pazzia dalla ragione è quindi un solo tratto generale: l'assenza di comunicabilità. «L'unico segno generale che caratterizza la follia è la perdita del senso comune (*sensus communis*), e la sostituzione di esso con il *senso logico individuale* (*sensus privatus*): come, ad esempio, quando uno vede sul proprio tavolo, alla luce del giorno, una luce accesa, mentre altri che gli sta vicino non la vede; oppure quando ode una voce che nessun altro ode» (Kant [1798]: 219). Come ha ricordato Luca Fonnesu, riprendendo Onora O'Neill, la concezione kantiana dell'uso pubblico della ragione pone al centro la questione della comunicazione nella filosofia di Kant, poiché proprio la comunicabilità svolge in diversi contesti il ruolo di pietra di paragone o criterio per la distinzione tra privato e pubblico (Fonnesu [2019]: 11-23).

La definizione generale di pazzia e la sua distinzione dalla ragione che trova, dunque, luogo nel senso comune lasciano supporre una connessione con l'inevitabilità dell'illusione trascendentale della ragione. È possibile, così, leggere questi paragrafi alla luce dell'*Introduzione alla Dialettica trascendentale* nella prima Critica.

3. *Follia e illusione trascendentale*

Dopo aver restituito l'esposizione kantiana della malattia mentale nell'*Antropologia*, è possibile tornare al testo della *Dialettica trascendentale*. Nel definire la dialettica in generale come «logica dell'illusione» Kant si propone di smascherare le illusioni in cui incorre la ragione nel suo uso trascendente, ricordando che «tanto la verità quanto l'errore, e quindi anche l'illusione come seduzione all'errore, possono ritrovarsi soltanto nel giudizio, cioè solo nella relazione dell'oggetto con il nostro intelletto» Kant [1781/1787]: A 293/B 350). L'illusione della ragione si riferisce quindi a «proposizioni fondamentali, che ci spingono ad abbattere quelle barriere, e ad usurpare un territorio del tutto nuovo, che non riconosce da nessuna parte una linea di demarcazione» (Kant [1781/1787]: A 296/B 352). Nella sua traduzione empirica, questa tendenza richiama all'osservazione antropologica di Kant per cui la sragionevolezza consisterebbe proprio nel varcare il limite: folle è chi varca il limite della sensatezza.

Ciononostante, l'illusione trascendentale, che non scompare nemmeno quando svelata, «non può assolutamente essere evitata», allo stesso modo la follia nell'*Antropologia*, pur essendo una «degenerazione dell'umanità» è «del tutto naturale» e deve essere considerata in una trattazione empirica della ragione. La dialettica «naturale ed inevitabile» «inerisce in modo ineliminabile alla ragione umana, e che, anche dopo la nostra rivelazione della sua illusorietà, non cesserà tuttavia di adescare la nostra ragione, e di precipitarla incessantemente in momentanei errori» (Kant [1781/1787]: A 298/B 354).

Nella *Dialettica trascendentale*, noi abbiamo a che fare con «un'illusione naturale e inevitabile, che si fonda essa stessa su proposizioni fondamentali soggettive, facendole passare per oggettive» (Kant [1781/1787]: A 298/B 354). La ragione, nel suo uso trascendente, «cerca la condizione universale del suo giudizio» (Kant [1781/1787]: A 302/B 358), cerca cioè di dimostrare che il giudizio vale universalmente, senza la verifica dell'esperienza, né del concetto dell'intelletto. Il giudizio imbrigliato nell'illusione trascendentale scambia oggettivo e soggettivo rimanendo invischiato nella surrezione. Compito della *Dialettica trascendentale* sarà dimostrare se le proposizioni che si estendono all'incondizionato abbiano validità oggettiva e universale.

Ugualmente, nella pazzia, intesa come sragionevolezza, il giudizio scambia oggettivo e soggettivo, applica una regola nell'accostamento tra rappresentazione e oggetto che vuole far valere come universale. Il più importante mezzo per correggere i nostri pensieri è il confronto con gli altri (secondo la seconda massima del giudizio che indica di sapersi mettere nella posizione di ogni altro): «è infatti una necessaria pietra di paragone soggettiva della correttezza dei nostri giudizi in generale, e dunque anche della sanità del nostro intelletto, il fatto che noi rapportiamo quest'ultimo anche all'*intelletto degli altri*, anziché *isolarci* con il nostro e giudicare per così dire *pubblicamente* con la nostra rappresentazione privata» (Kant [1798]: 219).

E ancora, nell'*Antropologia* Kant prosegue nel definire la pazzia:

> in tal modo ci viene sottratto, se non l'unico, comunque il più grande e più potente mezzo per rettificare i pensieri che ci sono propri. Il che accade quando noi li enunciamo pub-

> blicamente, per vedere se essi si adattano anche all'altrui intelletto; perché, altrimenti, qualcosa di meramente soggettivo (ad esempio un'abitudine o un'inclinazione) sarebbe facilmente ritenuto oggettivo. È qui che sorge appunto l'illusione [*Schein*], di cui si dice che inganna, o dalla quale piuttosto si è sviati e indotti a ingannarsi nell'applicazione di una regola. (Kant [1798]: 219)

Come ricorda Kant citando Lawrence Sterne, «Lascia pure che ciascuno percorra le strade della città con il suo cavallino di legno, *purché non ti costringa a salirvi dietro di lui*» (Kant [1798]: 203).

Si tratta qui dello stesso meccanismo che governa l'illusione trascendentale, termine che del resto esplicitamente richiamato. Naturalmente il compito dell'*Antropologia* è ben diverso da quello della *Dialettica trascendentale*: non si tratta di delimitare l'uso della ragione ma di descrivere gli effetti empirici di un suo cattivo uso. Non voglio spingermi ad affermare una possibile identificazione tra sragionevolezza e uso trascendente della ragione (il rischio sarebbe affermare che chiunque cada nell'illusione trascendentale sia da considerarsi pazzo). Ciò che sostengo è che la *Dottrina trascendentale dell'illusione* costituisce il fondamento trascendentale della trattazione antropologica delle deficienze delle facoltà di conoscere e delle malattie mentali. Ciò che rende per Kant necessaria una trattazione della follia come sragionevolezza non è dunque soltanto un interesse in linea con i trattati del tempo, ma anche il bisogno di trattare la parte empirica delle storture della ragione.

Questa idea interpretativa ha almeno due conseguenze. Dice anzitutto di un legame fondamentale tra l'*Antropologia* e la prima Critica, dando un sostegno sistematico alle osservazioni empiriche di Kant. Non si tratta soltanto di fare ordine nelle classificazioni della follia, ma anche di motivare la sragionevolezza come cattivo uso della ragione nell'accostare rappresentazione e oggetto nel giudizio, scambiando oggettivo e soggettivo, pretendendo universalità per ciò che è privato.

Questa tesi ha però anche un'altra conseguenza, decisamente più generale. Se si accetta l'illusione trascendentale come inevitabile e se si condivide l'idea che la dottrina dell'illusione costituisca il fondamento degli errori del giudizio e anche della pazzia, allora Kant sembra decisamente sottrarsi all'opposizione tra razionale e irrazionale. Illusione, errore e persino pazzia sono comprese nella definizione stessa dell'uso della ragione. Ciò però non significa che l'Illuminismo propone una sottomissione della follia alla ragione secondo un processo di assimilazione alla malattia mentale. Piuttosto mi sembra si possa sostenere che il pensiero illuminista comprende anche le degenerazioni più oscure della ragione. Il pensiero illuminista rivela, forse più del pensiero contemporaneo, una capacità di far pace con il fatto che non esistono sani e malati in due mondi distinti. La follia, l'errore, l'uso malato delle facoltà sono invece teoreticamente inevitabili per la ragione e sono da porsi necessariamente come possibilità empirica. Ciò che costituisce questa condizione di possibilità e fonda l'errore è l'illusione trascendentale della ragione, naturale e inevitabile. In questa prospettiva, perdere il senno non è perdere la ragione, piuttosto la pazzia consiste nel perdere il senso che abbiamo in comune con gli altri, consiste nel perdere la capacità di comunicare agli altri il proprio giudizio, chiudendosi nel proprio mondo e andando contro all'idea illuminista di universalità della ragione. Ciò che si impone non è allora una ragione astratta e priva di oscurità, ma una ragione universale e condivisa da tutti, anche empiricamente. La follia, quindi, non è semplice malattia, ma è la perdita dell'universalismo e la filosofia critica, come delimitazione trascendentale della ragione, volendone impedire ogni degenerazione, si costituisce come terapia.

Come scrive Fabrizio Desideri, sullo sfondo della trattazione kantiana «sta l'idea (un'idea di matrice stoica e questo Kant lo esplicita a più riprese con rimandi a Posidonio, a Crisippo e al Cicerone della Quarta Tuscolana) di una intima connessione tra teoria e terapia: tra filosofia e salute della mente» (Desideri [1999]: 26). Ne è conferma quanto Kant scrive nel 1796 in cui la filosofia viene riconosciuta come terapia:

> L'effetto della filosofia è la salute della ragione (*status salubritatis*). Dato però che la salute umana […] è un continuo ammalarsi e guarire di nuovo, con la semplice dieta della ragione pratica (ad esempio con una ginnastica di essa) non è ancora risolto il problema di mantenere quell'equilibrio che si chiama salute e che sta sospeso sulla punta di un capello; perciò la filosofia deve agire (terapeuticamente) come un medicinale (materia medica) per il cui impiego sono necessari dispensatori e medici (questi ultimi [ossia i filosofi] sono anche i soli legittimati a prescriverne l'uso) (Kant [1796]: 74-75).

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La forza "morale" delle opere "poetiche". Estetica e terapia in Leopardi

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Abstract. The aim of the paper is to show the close connection that is established, in Leopardi's writing, between the properly aesthetic tenor of his style of reflection and the possible therapeutic function that his work is called upon to perform in relation to modernity. If the latter, in fact, is characterised by an increasingly marked tendency towards the negation of the body, and of the knowledge implicit in it, it is precisely in opposition to this tendency, that is, by way of remedy (or cure), that Leopardi elaborates his idea of "ultra-philosophy". In this perspective, the article emphasises the strategically crucial role played, on the one hand, by the recognition of the "moral force" pertaining to "poetic books" (as books capable of "moving the imagination") and, on the other, by the triple constellation "nature-body-mimesis".

Keywords. Aesthetics, therapeia, ultraphilosophy, imagination, mimesis.

1. *L'ultrafilosofia come spazio estetico: vocazione terapeutica e relazionalità*

In una serie di osservazioni contenute nello *Zibaldone*, Leopardi mette in rilievo la stretta connessione, confermata a livello etimologico, che originariamente lega l'idea della "pratica medica" e l'idea del "prendersi cura", l'idea (diremmo oggi) del *to care*[1]. Scrive, infatti, Leopardi: «Tengo per indubitato che *medeor* non è altro se non il verbo *mèdomai*, *curo*, *curam gero*; verbo greco antichissimo […]». E poi, ancora: «Il *medicare* è veramente *curare, aver cura, consulere, provvedere* (tutti significati di *mèdomai*) al malato. E infatti – aggiunge Leopardi – non s'usa egli in latino peculiarmente il verbo *curare* per *medicare*?» (Leopardi [1991]: 3352-3355, 1756-1757)[2]. Qui, in particolare, l'accento viene a battere su un'idea di "terapia" che innanzitutto si connota per il suo tenore affettivo, per il fatto cioè di appartenere non già all'ordine del *logos* ma piuttosto all'ordine del *pathos*.

Che la terapia, dunque, vada intesa nel senso di un *mèdesthai*, o di un *curam gerere*, significa che a caratterizzare una tale pratica è la sua irriducibilità al piano del concetto: a ogni lettura, cioè, in chiave astrattamente epistemica. Qui, infatti, a svolgere un ruolo determinante è proprio la *relazione*: è la costruzione di uno "spazio di gioco" all'interno del quale i due soggetti coinvolti, potendo essere ciò che sono solo *a motivo* della loro inclusione nella mobilità di quello spazio, si caratterizzano per il fatto di *co-costituirsi*. Il che è da intendersi, più specificamente, nel senso di un loro attento e sollecito "cor-rispondersi": di un loro "amoroso" accordarsi – dove l'accordo, tuttavia, implica sempre il salvataggio della differenza – nell'unità di un comune orizzonte di senso.

Questo nodo, allora, che si viene a stringere tra l'idea di "cura" e l'idea di "relazione" è già, di per sé, indicativo di una postura, al contempo teorica e pratica, che nel discorso leopardiano trascende di gran lunga il carattere in apparenza solo filologico – volendo però intendere, con ciò, una filologia praticata come mera azione storico-ricostruttiva, o come esercizio di pura erudizione – delle brevi notazioni appena riportate. L'ipotesi da noi avanzata infatti è che, in Leopardi, ad assumere una valenza terapeutica sia *il modo stesso* in cui la sua pratica di scrittura riesce a congiungere – ma in uno scenario, saturo di tensioni, dove è appunto l'idea di "relazione" a funzionare come principio formale di ogni possibile produzione di senso – il piano del *pensiero* (l'istanza logico-analitica espressa dalla "fredda e geometrica ragione") e il piano della *poesia* (l'istanza, invece, simbolico-immaginativa del "conoscere *sentendo*"[3]). È quanto Leopardi descrive, in un ben noto *hapax* risalente al giugno del 1820, come un'autentica "ultrafilosofia"[4]. Queste, dunque, le parole con le quali Leopardi tratteggia, pre-

1 Cfr. Curi [2017]: 53-73.

2 Per tutte le citazioni tratte dallo *Zibaldone*, a partire da questa, il primo numero di pagina indicato si riferisce all'autografo leopardiano.

3 In merito, cfr. Leopardi [1991]: 3242, 1700 («Tutto ciò ch'è poetico – osserva, qui, Leopardi – si sente piuttosto che si conosca e s'intenda, o vogliamo anzi dire, sentendolo si conosce e s'intende, né altrimenti può esser conosciuto, scoperto ed inteso, che col sentirlo»).

4 In merito, cfr. Bodei (2022). A questo proposito, Bodei parla di una «prosecuzione della filosofia con altri mezzi, con quelli cioè della poesia» (ivi: 13). Nel promuovere, però, l'interazione di poesia e filosofia (e anzi, addirittura, il loro cortocircuito), Leopardi ha di mira

sentandolo anzi come un compito da assolvere, il suo stile operativo: «La nostra *rigenerazione* – così scrive Leopardi – dipende da una, per così dire, ultrafilosofia, che conoscendo *l'intiero e l'intimo delle cose*, ci ravvicini alla natura. E questo dovrebb'essere il frutto dei lumi straordinari di questo secolo» (ivi: 115, 127, i corsivi sono miei).

Ogni terapia, però, è tale perché presuppone una diagnosi. Ma noi sappiamo che la diagnosi formulata da Leopardi è quantomai aspra, sostenuta com'è da quel suo lucidissimo sguardo che, in modo addirittura programmatico, "nulla detrae al vero"[5]. È l'idea cioè secondo la quale a caratterizzare la "modernità" – quello che, nella *Ginestra*, viene chiamato il «secol superbo e sciocco» (Leopardi [1993]: 449, v. 53) – è l'attitudine alla promozione di una sempre più marcata «spiritualizzazione delle cose, e della idea dell'uomo, e dell'uomo stesso». La malattia, dunque, che affligge l'uomo moderno è da rintracciare nella coltivazione di quelle "cattive" illusioni – di quegli «errori barbari» (Leopardi [2008]: 510) – che sono, da un lato, il *fideismo* di matrice cristiana (il suo impianto escatologico e provvidenzialistico) e, dall'altro lato, lo *scientismo* di matrice illuministica (la sua fiducia, non meno antropocentrica, nel potere salvifico della conoscenza: nella sua capacità di riscattare l'uomo dal non-senso della vita).

In entrambi i casi, comunque, e pur variamente declinato, il male da guarire è il medesimo: è l'affermazione di un *ethos*, di un modo di abitare il mondo, il cui tratto saliente è la tendenza a rimuovere il sensibile, a neutralizzare cioè la sua opacità, a esclusivo vantaggio dell'intelligibile. A vantaggio, dunque, della piena trasparenza che si ritiene debba competere a quest'ultimo. A tale proposito, nello *Zibaldone*, Leopardi arriva a parlare di una vera e propria «ribellione della ragione alla natura o dello spirito al corpo» (Leopardi [1991]: 435, 325)[6].

Ma è precisamente così che procede, a ben vedere, quella filosofia «inutile», e al contempo «dannosissima» (Leopardi [2008]: 509), contro la quale Eleandro – protagonista, insieme, a Timandro di una delle operette teoreticamente più dense – sente di dover orientare (ma con le armi, qui davvero affilatissime, del riso e dell'ironia) la sua azione critico-decostruttiva. Un'azione, questa, il cui obiettivo polemico sembra doversi ravvisare, più in generale, in ogni filosofia che abbia di

non già la riduzione del filosofico al poetico, ma piuttosto la ri-comprensione dello stesso statuto inerente al gesto filosofico. Ha di mira, cioè, l'esibizione, e la conseguente messa in esercizio, di quelle condizioni *non-logiche* (il piano della "natura") che sono il presupposto di ogni *logos*.

5 Il riferimento, qui, è naturalmente ai vv. 111-117 della *Ginestra*, dove a essere definita «nobile» è quella «natura» che, appunto, osa sollevare lo sguardo, «nulla al ver detraendo», verso il «comun fato».

6 Cfr. Rigoni [1985]: 11-53.

mira non soltanto l'innalzamento del concetto al rango di unica possibile verità[7], ma anche l'accreditamento della stessa concettualità, ossia dell'*epistème*[8], come fattore di redenzione:

> Dunque – osserva Eleandro – s'ingannano grandemente quelli che dicono e predicano che la perfezione dell'uomo consiste nella conoscenza del vero, e tutti i suoi mali provengono dalle opinioni false e dalla ignoranza, e che il genere umano allora finalmente sarà felice, quando ciascuno o i più degli uomini conosceranno il vero, e a norma di quello solo comporranno e governeranno la loro vita. E queste cose le dicono poco meno che tutti i filosofi antichi e moderni. (Ivi: 508)

A essere quindi giudicata non soltanto "inutile" ma anche "dannosa" è ogni filosofia che elegga a suo presupposto la perfetta coincidenza tra quelle due istanze, di per sé opposte e mai davvero dialettizzabili, che sono, da una parte, *l'idea di verità*, il raggiungimento cioè da parte del pensiero di un presunto senso finale (l'*in sé* delle cose: la loro forma logica) e, dall'altra, *l'idea di felicità*, il superamento cioè del dolore, da intendersi come completo appagamento del desiderio. Dove a essere in gioco, lo sappiamo, è quel desiderio (di per sé infinito) del piacere che, per Leopardi, è una «conseguenza spontanea dell'amor di se e della propria conservazione» (Leopardi [1991]: 181-182, 177)[9]. Ecco, dunque, sinteticamente esposti, i termini chiave da considerare per capire il modo in cui Leopardi imposta, declinandola a livelli diversi, la questione del rapporto tra terapia e filosofia. Da un lato, appunto, la *necessità* della "teoria", che in quanto tale è sempre forma e struttura – giacché a risuonare, nelle sue mediazioni, è ciò che Leopardi chiama l'«amor di sistema» (ivi: 948, 573) – e, dall'altro lato, la *contingenza* della "prassi", che di per sé, invece, è sempre evento, processo: materia che resta refrattaria alle pretese logico-appropriative del soggetto.

Se è vero, tuttavia, che «il corpo è l'uomo» (Leopardi [2008]: 592), come Tristano potentemente rivendica nel suo confronto con l'Amico, è anche vero che, oggi, quel corpo, almeno tendenzialmente, viene negato. Ma è lo stesso Tristano a rilevare, contestualmente, che oggi, in un mondo sempre più decorporeizzato, «*gl'individui sono spariti dinanzi alle masse*» (ivi: 597). Al trionfo quindi dell'astrazione, agli effetti regressivi che ne conseguono, è intimamente correlato un altro aspetto, non meno "tossico" sotto il profilo politico-culturale, e cioè: l'omologazione, la spinta all'uniformità. Di qui, allora, l'affermazione, contenuta nel

7 In questo senso, nei *Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia*, Leopardi parla di quella «forma di ragionar diritta e sana / ch'a priori in iscola ancora s'appella»: quella, cioè, che «per certo alcun principio pone, / e tutto l'altro a quel piega e compone» (cfr. Leopardi [2002]: 120).

8 Sulla critica che Leopardi rivolge a un sapere concepito (tradizionalmente) come *epistème*, come affermazione di nessi necessari, cfr. Severino (1997).

9 Cfr. Aloisi (2014).

Dialogo della Moda e della Morte, secondo la quale il nostro, quello cioè abitato da Leopardi (ma, forse, anche quello che, oggi, noi stessi abitiamo), può essere definito, legittimamente, come il «secolo della morte» (ivi: 135).

Ma è proprio a questo trionfo della morte, a questa sempre più diffusa desensualizzazione della vita, che Leopardi oppone – e a titolo, appunto, di "rimedio": a titolo di *phàrmakon* – la sua strategia "ultrafilosofica". Va detto, però, che quest'ultima trova il suo *ubi consistam* nella costruzione di uno scenario che, innanzitutto, spicca per il suo carattere "teatrale": per la circostanza, cioè, che al suo interno la forma (il modo d'essere del sensibile) è già, in quanto tale, la materializzazione del *suo* senso, e non invece il vettore di un qualche significato esterno pre-costituito. Non solo, ma a strutturare un tale scenario, ad animarlo e insieme a renderlo (permanentemente) inquieto, è il continuo interagire di polarità che, certo, risultano antitetiche, ma che al contempo si rivelano inseparabili.

Tra queste, come s'è detto, a occupare una posizione preminente è sicuramente la coppia "ragione geometrica"-"ragione poetica". Se è vero dunque che, a questo livello, il motivo dominante è costituito dall'idea del "nulla" – dalla consapevolezza che «tutto è nulla» (Leopardi [1991]: 72, 93) –, è anche vero che la presa in carico di un tale motivo si traduce, in Leopardi, nella volontà di dare corso alla sempre rinnovata perlustrazione della sua inestinguibile ambivalenza: del suo statuto ossimorico. Da un lato, infatti, abbiamo un "nulla" che viene *teorizzato* (ma anche *patito*) come concetto: ciò che Leopardi chiama il «solido nulla» (ivi: 85, 101), o l'«acerbo vero» (Leopardi [1993]: 340, v. 140). Dall'altro lato, invece, a emergere è l'idea di un "nulla" da noi *esperito* (ma anche *pensato*) come enigma, come «cosa arcana e stupenda» (Leopardi [2008]: 359). A ciò poi si aggiunga, ma nel contesto di una pratica (la scrittura leopardiana) che ha la virtù di articolarsi simultaneamente su più piani – si potrebbe anzi parlare, a questo proposito, di una pratica che si sviluppa traendo linfa dalla stessa disarmonia, ma una disarmonia paradossalmente consonante, esibita dall'incandescenza dei suoi innumerevoli materiali[10] – il rapporto di co-implicazione che si viene a intessere tra una serie di ulteriori polarità, strettamente connesse a quelle appena evocate. Polarità quali, ad esempio: l'antico e il moderno; la natura e lo snaturamento; l'illusione e il disincanto; la serietà del tragico e la «leggerezza», comunque solo «apparente», del comico (cfr. Leopardi [2014]: 368).

Che cos'è, allora, l'"ultrafilosofia"? È il farsi incontro di una drammaturgia, di un *laboratorio del sensibile*, dove il corpo – il corpo del poeta-filosofo – viene a configurarsi, nello stesso tempo, come il soggetto della rappresentazione e come il suo oggetto. Questo vuol dire che, nella scrittura leopardiana, il corpo dell'autore, il suo corpo *sensualmente intelligente*, diventa, in qualche modo, la superficie stessa dell'opera. Diventa, cioè, il corpo del testo. È anche vero, però,

10 In proposito, cfr. innanzitutto D'Intino (2021), ma anche Ferrucci (1989) e Secchieri (1992).

che quest'ultimo, il corpo del testo, può a sua volta diventare, se l'incontro "funziona" – se l'operazione terapeutica (a certe condizioni) "riesce" – il corpo del lettore. Resta comunque il fatto che, nel dispiegamento di quella rappresentazione, nel suo accadere come l'*azione riflessa di un corpo-che-gioca*, che gioca con se stesso al gioco dell'ultrafilosofia, il corpo non è mai qualcosa di pienamente riducibile al piano dell'identico.

Quel corpo, invece, che cos'è? È un autentico nodo di relazioni: è il luogo del convenire e dell'intramarsi – del reciproco corrispondersi e del risuonare-insieme – dei diversi aspetti che, operativamente, compongono la vita sensibile non già di un unico soggetto (l'io del poeta in quanto soggetto psicologicamente determinato), ma piuttosto di una indefinita molteplicità di possibili soggetti. Nella materialità, dunque, di quel corpo, Leopardi ci invita a leggere il risultato del progressivo sedimentarsi, e infine del raccogliersi *in figura*, di un insieme di forze – naturalmente inscritte nelle innumerevoli esperienze (tanto individuali quanto collettive) presupposte dall'accadere del corpo-scrittura – che si connotano per il loro carattere energeticamente attivo. Si connotano, cioè, per la loro attitudine all'espansione: per la loro permanente disponibilità non soltanto alla dilatazione, ma anche alla continua ri-articolazione, delle possibilità di senso che vi sono coagulate.

Tenendo allora conto degli elementi fin qui raccolti, si può arrivare a sostenere che l'idea di *ultrafilosofia*, la sua messa in esercizio come stile di riflessione, viene di fatto a coincidere, in Leopardi, con la stessa dimensione dell'*estetico*. Ma questo perché? Perché, in entrambi i casi, il senso non è mai qualcosa di inchiodabile al piano dell'empiricamente esistente. Non è, insomma, qualcosa di riducibile all'ordine della pura determinatezza. In entrambi i casi, piuttosto, il senso è qualcosa che si accende al confine, o al crocevia, tra polarità opposte ma, insieme, complementari. Da un lato, infatti, abbiamo la datità di quel luogo dove il vivente, come nell'*Infinito*, "siede" e "mira" (la limitatezza del *qui ed ora*: la sua circoscrivibilità spazio-temporale). Dall'altro lato, però, ciò che il pensiero non può astenersi dal chiamare in causa è quanto, nel dato, come nella celebre "siepe", rinvia al di là di sé: è l'eccedenza, cioè, dell'«ultimo orizzonte» (Leopardi [1993]: 300, v. 3)[11]. Un'espressione, questa, con la quale a essere designata è la totalità, di per sé irrappresentabile, dei possibili significati che ogni dato, l'essere-apparenza di ogni fenomeno, custodisce virtualmente al suo interno: gli «interminati spazi», i «sovrumani silenzi», la «profondissima quiete» (ivi: 300, vv. 4-6).

Qui, allora, il senso che cos'è? È qualcosa che noi, certo, *sentiamo*, giacché del suo sopraggiungere, come pure del suo declinare, noi non smettiamo di fare esperienza. Il che può avvenire, di volta in volta, nella gioia o nel dolore: nel pia-

11 Cfr. Guglielmi [2011]: 81-98.

cere o nel dispiacere. Di quel medesimo senso, tuttavia, non si può in alcun modo affermare che il suo darsi sia il darsi di un "essente": di un "fatto", cioè, o di uno "stato di cose", che possieda – e al modo di proprietà predicabili, a suo carico, nella sintesi del giudizio – gli attributi dell'assegnabilità e della localizzabilità, dell'identità (di sé con sé) e della oggettivabilità. Lungi dall'essere descrivibile, insomma, come un *tòde tì*, un tale senso è da intendersi piuttosto come la *presenza di un'assenza*. È ciò che, appunto, Leopardi, in quell'importante *hapax* del '20 di cui s'è detto, chiama "l'intiero e l'intimo delle cose": il piano, di per sé indicibile, dei presupposti. Ricompreso, dunque, come lo sfondo inoggettivabile di ogni nostra possibile esperienza[12], il senso è qualcosa che per noi, ogni volta, torna inspiegabilmente a fiorire – ma secondo una modalità che è, insieme, necessaria e contingente – *sull'orlo di un bilico*. Torna a fiorire, cioè, all'altezza di quella soglia, sempre oscillante, dove gli eterogenei, i diversi fili che vanno a intramare la nostra vita sensibile, si mostrano paradossalmente annodati. Come se a congiungerli, prima ancora però di ogni taglio recidente operato dal *logos*, fosse l'unità di un unico respiro[13].

2. *Natura, corpo, immaginazione: la forza* morale *dei libri* poetici

Che lo spazio però dell'ultrafilosofia sia da intendersi, in qualche modo, come un sinonimo, o come un equivalente, dell'estetico è qualcosa di cui lo stesso Leopardi sembra essere perfettamente consapevole. La facoltà, infatti, nella quale Leopardi ravvisa il luogo genetico del suo "pensiero poetante"[14] è costituita dall'*immaginazione*. Da una facoltà cioè che, per il suo carattere tipicamente "neutro"[15], non smette di esibire la sua ulteriorità: il suo sottrarsi a ogni possibilità di definizione. Resta comunque il fatto che, per Leopardi, è appunto l'immaginazione ad agire, in noi, come la «sorgente» della «ragione» (cfr. Leopardi [1991]: 2133-2134, 1182): come la sua fonte, certo inafferrabile, e nondimeno sempre capace di svolgere, preliminarmente, una funzione condizionante.

Si può allora senz'altro affermare che, per Leopardi, l'immaginazione è l'espressione più eloquente del nostro *essere-natura*. Dove la stessa "natura", però, esige di essere ri-compresa come un *groviglio di contraddizioni*: l'idea, ad esem-

12 Cfr. Garroni (1986).
13 Cfr. Desideri [2004]: 5-48.
14 Cfr. Prete (1980).
15 In proposito, cfr. Carchia ([1981]: 7-14). Con riferimento alla nozione kantiana di immaginazione, Carchia descrive quest'ultima come una «terra di nessuno»: come l'«orizzonte nomade della conoscenza». Sulle sorprendenti affinità riscontrabili, a questo livello, tra la prospettiva trascendentale di Kant e il tenore critico-estetico del discorso svolto da Leopardi, cfr. almeno Ferrucci [1987]: 20-24, 49-51, 134-135 e Gensini [1989]: 182-198.

pio, di un bene che di per sé include il male, o la stessa persuasione che il piacere desiderato, per noi, è sempre, simultaneamente, un piacere precluso. E poi, ancora: la cognizione del fatto che l'"esistenza", nella sua totalità, è al contempo principio di affermazione e principio di negazione del senso incarnato da ogni singolo "esistente"[16]. Una consapevolezza, questa, nella quale è implicita, in definitiva, l'idea di un essere che, nello stesso tempo, è infinitamente produttivo di senso (di nuovo, secondo il modello offerto dalla "siepe") e irrimediabilmente consegnato alla potenza distruttiva del nulla: quel «brutto poter che ascoso», come scrive Leopardi nella lirica *A se stesso*, «a comun danno impera, e l'infinita vanità del tutto» (Leopardi [1993]: 404, vv. 14-16).

E tuttavia, che la natura *sia* contraddizione, che l'«essere dei viventi» cioè si ponga «in contraddizione naturale essenziale e necessaria con se medesimo» (Leopardi [1991]: 4099-4100, 2223), è certificato ancora da un'altra circostanza. Dall'idea cioè secondo la quale perfino lo snaturamento, la caduta delle "buone" illusioni – la fine, insomma, della "favola antica" – è qualcosa di immanente, paradossalmente, allo stesso dispiegamento di quel "gioco" eracliteo nel quale Leopardi riconosce l'immagine forse più aderente, o (comparativamente) meno inadeguata, alla quale si può fare appello nel tentativo di *dare una forma* all'essere-natura della natura. È questa, comunque, l'immagine, al contempo chiara *e* confusa, ma proprio per questo vantaggiosamente espressiva, che ci viene consegnata dai vv. 154-172 della *Palinodia al marchese Gino Capponi*:

> Quale un fanciullo, con assidua cura, / Di fogliolini e di fuscelli, in forma / O di tempio o di torre o di palazzo, / Un edificio innalza; e come prima / Fornito il mira, ad atterrarlo è volto, / Perché gli stessi a lui fuscelli e fogli / Per novo lavorio son di mestieri; / Così natura ogni opra sua, quantunque / D'alto artificio a contemplar, non prima / Vede perfetta, ch'a disfarla imprende, / Le parti sciolte dispensando altrove. / E indarno a preservar se stesso ed altro / Dal gioco reo, la cui ragion gli è chiusa / Eternamente, il mortal seme accorre / Mille virtudi oprando in mille guise / Con dotta man: che d'ogni sforzo in onta, / La natura crudel, fanciullo invitto, / Il suo capriccio adempie, e senza posa / Distruggendo e formando si trastulla. (Leopardi [1993]: 433-434)

In questo passo, di sicuro tra i più illuminanti (sotto il profilo filosofico) della produzione leopardiana, la natura viene presentata come la messa in esercizio di un *fare* che si qualifica per il suo tenore non soltanto a-teleologico, ma anche autenticamente "poetico". Poetico, però, proprio perché a contraddistinguere quel fare è una creatività – una forza costruttiva, un'attitudine euristico-sperimentale – che molto ha in comune con l'idea del gioco. Che, anzi, condivide, con una tale idea, due aspetti non soltanto dirimenti ma anche reciprocamente solidali:

16 Sul nesso esistenza-esistente, cfr. Luporini (1947) e Biral (1974).

da un lato, l'inspiegabilità, la non-disponibilità cioè alla teoria (il fatto di essere *senza-perché*), e dall'altro, il carattere tautologico, ossia la perfetta intransitività (il fatto di avere unicamente *in sé* la ragione di sé). Qui, non a caso, il riferimento è a una "ragione" che, allo stesso "fanciullo", come scrive Leopardi, "è chiusa". Una chiusura, questa, che si rivela sintomatica del senso profondo incarnato dalla figura del *paìs paìzon*. Sintomatica, cioè, del suo farsi incontro, sulla scena del teatro filosofico allestito da Leopardi, come la metafora di una operatività a nulla costretta e da nulla fondata. Nell'adempimento allora del suo "capriccio", il fanciullo-natura[17] diventa il simbolo di ciò che ogni fenomeno, in quanto tale, esibisce: il «misterio grande» (Leopardi [1991]: 4129, 2253) di una *parousìa* senza *ousìa*[18]. L'enigma, insomma, di un puro e gratuito mostrarsi che eccede ogni possibilità di *darne ragione*.

Restituita così alla sua matrice originaria – matrice che è da individuare nel carattere, in fondo, retorico-finzionale e fabulizzante, simulativo e metaforico, che pertiene all'essere-gioco di ogni ente[19] –, ciò che Leopardi chiama "immaginazione", o "immaginativa", è il continuo ri-affiorare, nella mutevolezza della nostra vita sensibile, di quella contraddizione "naturale" e "necessaria" che, a ben vedere, è *nelle cose stesse*. Che è costitutiva, cioè, dell'idea stessa di "esistenza". Di qui, a voler essere conseguenti, la possibilità di leggere nell'immaginazione, leopardianamente intesa, una sorta di "tentacolo" della natura[20]: una specie di estensione, o di prolungamento, di quell'*essere-materia* che primordialmente compete a tutte le cose: a ogni forma determinata contingentemente assunta dall'esistenza.

Considerata, però, più specificamente, sotto il profilo funzionale, l'immaginazione viene da Leopardi descritta, innanzitutto, come la *facoltà delle similitudini*. «Similitudini», dice Leopardi, «astrusissime» e «ingegnosissime» (ivi: 1650, 967). Ciò che Leopardi, infatti, chiama "immaginazione" è la capacità che il vivente ha di cogliere, *ma all'interno stesso del dato*, una indefinita molteplicità di possibili relazioni: una trama, mai davvero traducibile in termini proposizionali, di somiglianze e differenze, di affinità e contrasti. È agli occhi, dunque, dell'immaginazione, è per il favore della sua messa in esercizio, che il dato si lascia ri-comprendere come una rete mobile di corrispondenze: come un intreccio di speranze e ricordanze, di significati espliciti ed evocazioni al-

17 L'immagine della natura-fanciullo è rintracciabile anche nello *Zibaldone* (Leopardi [1991]: 4421, 2504) e nell'*Inno ad Arimane* (Leopardi [1987]: 685).

18 L'espressione, tratta da Brandi ([1998]: 72), si riferisce alla nozione di "astanza": quella «presenza-assenza» che, nel sospendere l'«esistente», ossia il dato, «divide, stacca, incide». Ma quella di "astanza" è una nozione che presenta non poche affinità con l'idea leopardiana di un fenomeno ricompreso come "siepe": come soglia critico-immaginativa.

19 M.A. Rigoni arriva ad affermare, con riferimento al pensiero leopardiano, che «*se il mondo è materia, esso conta come fenomeno estetico*» (Rigoni [1985]: 40).

20 Cfr. ivi: 24.

lusive, di cose "esistenti" e «cose che non son cose» (ivi: 4174, 2296)[21]. È lo stesso Leopardi, del resto, ad ammettere che l'immaginazione è la «più feconda e maravigliosa ritrovatrice de' rapporti e delle armonie le più nascoste» (ivi: 1836, 1055). Se l'immaginazione, quindi, può essere pensata come la *facoltà del possibile*, è perché a caratterizzarla è la capacità di portare a manifestazione *l'inespresso di ogni apparenza*: quell'altro "del" dato che la superficie delle cose, insieme, rivela e nasconde.

C'è però in particolare un passo, tra gli innumerevoli luoghi leopardiani che si potrebbero citare a riguardo, che mostra – in modo flagrante – la valenza propriamente "terapeutica" ascrivibile al lavoro dell'immaginazione. Il passo è incluso in un testo che risale forse, e al pari di quell'*hapax* richiamato in apertura, proprio al 1820[22], e che è noto come *Frammento sul suicidio*. Scrive, qui, Leopardi:

> O la immaginazione tornerà in vigore, e le illusioni riprenderanno corpo e sostanza in una vita energica e mobile, e la vita tornerà ad esser cosa viva e non morta, e la grandezza e la bellezza delle cose torneranno a parere una sostanza […] o questo mondo diverrà un serraglio di disperati, e forse anche un deserto. (Leopardi [1988]: 275-276)

L'immaginazione, dunque, come risposta che l'ultrafilosofia oppone al trionfo del nichilismo: al prevalere, cioè, di quel "solido nulla", di quella condizione dunque di «indifferenza» e «insensibilità» (Leopardi [1991]: 261, 229), che è appunto l'esito prodotto dalla "spiritualizzazione" della vita. Da questo punto di vista, la terapia è da intendersi come una lotta che l'immaginazione coraggiosamente ingaggia, ma *dall'interno stesso del non-senso*, muovendo cioè dalla sua consapevole introiezione, contro l'avanzata del nulla: contro l'affermazione di un *ethos* – quello incarnato da chi, nella natura, vede *soltanto* un «perpetuo circuito di produzione e distruzione» (Leopardi [2008]: 288) – che finisce per paralizzare l'esistente. Finisce, cioè, per irretirlo nella raggelante inesorabilità di una logica astrattamente meccanicistica.

È in questa prospettiva, allora, che si può tornare a meditare sulla presa di posizione assunta, nelle *Operette morali*, da una figura come quella di Eleandro. È chiaro infatti che anche Eleandro, come il già citato Tristano, è da intendersi come una "maschera" di Leopardi: come un eteronimo di quell'io-non io, di quell'io cioè irrimediabilmente plurale, che è l'ultrafilosofo. Queste, dunque, le parole con le quali Eleandro rende esplicita l'aspirazione terapeutica, la vocazione "farmacologica", inerente alla sua opera: «Se alcun libro morale potesse giovare, io penso che gioverebbero massimamente i poetici: dico poetici, prendendo questo vocabolo largamente; cioè libri destinati a *muovere la immaginazione*; e intendo non meno di prose che di versi» (ivi: 496, cors. mio). E poi

21 In merito, cfr. Galimberti (2001) e Folin (1996).
22 Cfr. Damiani [1988]: 1382.

ancora, qualche pagina più in là, noi troviamo un'altra affermazione, proferita dallo stesso Eleandro, che viene a porsi coerentemente sulla stessa linea, e che anzi (nel ribadirla) ne offre un'articolazione ancora più chiara e analitica. Precisa, infatti, Eleandro:

> [Io] lodo ed esalto quelle opinioni, benché false, che generano atti e pensieri nobili, forti, magnanimi, virtuosi, ed utili al ben comune o privato; quelle immaginazioni belle e felici, ancorché vane, che danno pregio alla vita; le illusioni naturali dell'animo; e in fine gli errori antichi, diversi assai dagli errori barbari; i quali solamente, e non quelli, sarebbero dovuti cadere per opera della civiltà moderna e della filosofia. (ivi: 510)

Qui, allora, il tema è la *potenza etica*, ma per ciò stesso la *forza terapeutica*, di quelli che Leopardi contestualmente chiama i "libri poetici". A giustificare però questa diade, e cioè il nesso di "poesia" e "moralità", è un terzo termine, comune a entrambi, ossia il corpo. Sia l'etico che il poetico, infatti, sono l'espressione del nostro agire, sulla scena del mondo, come un corpo, insieme, senziente e desiderante: dolente e fantasticante, appassionato e immaginante. A rendere, dunque, possibile la congiunzione dell'etico e del poetico – a stringere questi due termini nell'unità di un unico senso – è proprio il carattere incarnato della nostra condizione: la sua intrascendibile fisicità. Che cos'è, infatti, per Leopardi, la parola poetica? È *materia che trasforma la materia*. È quel modo d'essere del corpo che, di per sé, e sia pure soltanto «per mezz'ora» (ivi: 496)[23], ha la virtù di introdurre una discontinuità – una cesura, una sospensione – non soltanto nella determinatezza della nostra condizione individuale (nella configurazione, cioè, *fino a quel momento* assunta dalla nostra vita sensibile), ma anche, e per ciò stesso, nella materialità dell'ambiente da noi abitato: nell'architettura delle relazioni che, storicamente e socialmente, lo innervano.

Così concepita, dunque, la poesia è un soggetto al quale Leopardi riconosce non soltanto la capacità di produrre nuove *opinioni*, e cioè nuove rappresentazioni (nuove modalità di lettura dell'esistente), ma anche la capacità di generare nuove *assuefazioni*, e cioè nuovi "abiti", da intendersi proprio come una "seconda natura": come un diverso stile di frequentazione dell'esperienza (un modo diverso, insomma, di abitare il mondo)[24]. Nel costruire quindi *nuova sensatezza*, la poesia ha anche, e nello stesso tempo, la capacità di costruire *nuovo essere*: nuove forme che vanno ad arricchire la tessitura dell'esistente, la sua trama relazionale[25]. È chiaro allora che, agli occhi di Leopardi, la parola poetica è una parola retoricamente "nobile". Si tratta, infatti, di una parola che, *illudendo*, ossia (alla lettera) "invitando al gioco" – invitando, dunque, al potenziamento dell'imma-

23 Cfr. Caesar (2002).
24 Sulle nozioni di "opinione" e di "assuefazione", cfr. Cervato (2016) e Malagamba (2014).
25 In merito, cfr. Negri (1987).

ginazione – ha la virtù di anticipare il non-ancora. Ha l'abilità, cioè, di indicare percorsi e di suggerire iniziative: di annunciare, alludendovi, la definibilità di nuovi programmi. Di nuove, possibili modalità di organizzazione della prassi.

3. *La mimesi come rimedio; la vita moderna come laboratorio del possibile*

A quei tre termini, però, che noi abbiamo appena richiamato – e cioè: l'*etico,* il *poetico* e la *corporeità* –, noi dobbiamo associare un quarto termine, funzionalmente non disgiungibile dalla promessa di futuro condensata al loro interno, ovvero: la *mimesi*[26]. Quel "trittico", dunque, diventa così una sorta di "quartetto". Ma è appunto a questo campo relazionale, è all'intervento fruttuosamente sintonico dei suoi fattori costitutivi che Leopardi affida il compito di garantire, almeno auspicabilmente, l'adempimento della funzione terapeutica implicita nel suo progetto. Qui, allora, a venire in primo piano è il riconoscimento, da parte di Leopardi, del tenore propriamente *mimetico*, del tenore quindi nient'affatto solipsistico o arbitrariamente proiettivo, che pertiene al lavoro dell'immaginazione.

Che l'uomo, infatti, sia un «animale imitativo» (cfr. Leopardi [1991]: 1553-1554, 919), e che lo sia davvero *sotto ogni profilo*, significa che l'uomo – così scrive Leopardi – è una «pasta molle» (ivi: 1452, 870): è un materiale che si qualifica non soltanto per la sua sorprendente elasticità e flessibilità, ma anche per la sua non meno marcata duttilità. Se è vero, dunque, che l'uomo si caratterizza per la sua *indefinita conformabilità*, è anche vero che proprio da ciò consegue la sua tipica attitudine a ri-disegnare, e quindi anche a rigenerare, nel tempo, l'orizzonte del senso. Leopardi, appunto, fa notare che quella "pasta" – quella pasta *nella quale* l'uomo consiste – è «suscettiva d'ogni possibile figura» e di ogni possibile «impronta» (*ibidem*). Nell'essere dunque corpo, da parte dell'uomo, è primordialmente inscritta la sua capacità di ri-negoziare e ri-strutturare, al variare delle circostanze, il suo rapporto con le "opinioni" che vi prendono dimora: con le molteplici "assuefazioni" che, via via, lo plasmano.

All'idea, però, di un'immaginazione mimeticamente intonata – di un'immaginazione, cioè, che trova nella mimesi un fattore funzionalmente determinante – è inestricabilmente intrecciata la consapevolezza che l'altro, ossia il non-identico (non importa se costituito da qualcosa di "vivente" o di "non vivente"), non è mai davvero *un oggetto*. Non è mai, insomma, il referente di una possibile attività orientata in senso definitorio e classificatorio. Questo vuol dire che, agli occhi dell'immaginazione, l'altro è sempre, per così dire, *un altro soggetto*. È quanto ad esempio attesta, in modo paradigmatico, la relazione insieme allo-

26 Sulla centralità, in Leopardi, della nozione di "mimesi", cfr. Donà [2013]: 177-233.

cutiva e interlocutiva che si viene a stabilire, nel *Canto notturno*, tra il pastore errante e la luna – «Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? dimmi, che fai, / Silenziosa luna?» (Leopardi [1993]: 368, vv. 1-2) – o quella, in fondo analoga, che si viene invece a instaurare, nella canzone *Alla sua donna*, tra quest'ultima, la donna ineffabile, l'*idea* stessa della donna, e l'uomo che alla sua inassimilabile alterità (dandole, però, del tu) si sta appunto rivolgendo: «Questo d'ignoto amante inno ricevi» (ivi: 332, v. 55).

Se nella mimesi, dunque, è l'altro *ad avere la precedenza* – è l'altro, cioè, a indicare al soggetto, ossia all'"imitante", il modo in cui è lecito rapportarsi alla sua estraneità[27] –, in questo caso, ciò si traduce nella consapevolezza che è ancora e pur sempre l'altro, il non-identico, a insegnare al soggetto il modo in cui quest'ultimo, rispondendo al richiamo del *fuori*, facendosi quindi carico dei bisogni e delle aspettative in esso latenti, deve avere la capacità di assolvere, nei suoi confronti (nei confronti della realtà "imitata"), a una possibile funzione terapeutica. Vale, infatti, anche per Leopardi, per il suo modo di impostare il rapporto tra "poeticità" e "moralità", ciò che più in generale può essere detto di ogni attività mimetica (propriamente pensata). E cioè che "imitare" significa rendersi disponibili alla messa in esercizio di quel movimento attraverso il quale l'altro riesce a imprimere in noi, nella nostra vita sensibile, la traccia della sua incommensurabilità: di quella inaccessibile lontananza che è implicita nel suo mostrarsi. Che nella mimesi, quindi, il soggetto (l'ultrafilosofo) *si faccia uguale*, che tenda cioè all'immedesimazione, è un altro modo per dire che la sua vita mentale finisce per essere ri-modellata dall'incontro con il non-identico: dalla stessa qualità che, sensibilmente, connota il suo apparire. Di qui, in Leopardi, l'idea di un "poeta" che, *in tanto* è "imitatore di se stesso" (della propria soggettività) *in quanto* è "imitatore della natura" (di ciò che, nel fenomeno, nella sua trama relazionale, fa segno verso l'irrappresentabile): «*I' mi son un che quando Natura parla*…» (Leopardi [1991]: 4372-4373, 2470).

Si tratta, allora, di chiedersi, nel momento in cui il tema diventa la forza terapeutica dei "libri poetici", quale sia il significato che, in questo caso, occorre attribuire all'idea di "alterità". Qui, insomma, l'"altro" chi è? È chiaro che l'altro, ciò *in cui* il soggetto è chiamato a immedesimarsi, è qui innanzitutto la realtà, ossia il mondo: è il modo d'essere dell'esistenza. Dove a essere imitato, per ciò stesso, è proprio quel carattere *relazionale* – quel carattere, dunque, *contradditorio* – che Leopardi ascrive all'idea di "natura". Questo, però, con la consapevolezza che la natura (l'esistenza *in generale*) include ciò che la nega,

27 Per una ri-lettura, filosoficamente imprescindibile, della nozione di "mimesi", cfr. Gebauer, Wulf (1998). Si può dire, del resto, che anche per Leopardi uno dei tratti salienti della mimesi è quella sua ambivalenza di fondo – quel suo carattere cioè, nello stesso tempo, attivo e passivo (intenzionale e a-intenzionale, spontaneo e ricettivo) – che appunto è al centro degli studi di Gebauer e Wulf.

ossia la storia. Ma se include la storia, allora include anche la stessa patologia del moderno: quella crisi di senso che, oggi, in modo radicale, lo investe, e che Leopardi descrive in termini di "spiritualizzazione".

Nel farsi quindi "uguale" alla realtà imitata, nel dare corso alla sua incorporazione, l'opera poetica è chiamata ad assorbirne i tratti qualitativamente salienti. Questo, però, non significa che lo "snaturamento", ossia l'aspetto "patologico", venga assimilato dall'opera come una morta datità: come un fatto incontrovertibile. Al contrario, ciò che di quello "snaturamento" viene imitato – ciò che la poesia, di quello "snaturamento", è chiamata a introiettare, e quindi anche (in qualche modo) a riprodurre – è proprio il suo "essere-natura", e cioè: *la sua stessa relazione con ciò che lo contraddice*. Questo, allora, vuol dire che, dello "snaturamento", di tutto ciò che nella vita moderna diventa il segno di una negazione del poetico, a dover essere imitato è il suo stesso *poter-essere-altrimenti*: è quel "più"[28] che, ogni volta, torna a risplendere nel rinvio, da parte del dato, alla totalità del senso.

Qui, però, a occupare la posizione dell'altro è anche, *e nello stesso tempo*, la materialità dell'opera: l'opera, appunto, prodotta dall'ultrafilosofo. Se è vero dunque che i "libri poetici" sono il risultato di un'attività mimetica, è anche vero che a essere intonata in senso mimetico è la stessa relazione che si viene a istituire tra la "poeticità" di quei libri, la forza "morale" in essi rappresa, e la moltitudine dei loro possibili lettori. La mimesi, dunque, come espressione di un *doppio movimento*. Da un lato, infatti, noi abbiamo un movimento che, dall'interno, procede verso l'esterno: dalla vita sensibile dell'autore (il poeta-filosofo) alla concretezza della realtà da lui esperita. Da lui riconosciuta, cioè, come il campo d'azione all'interno del quale è possibile, e anzi necessario, far valere il potenziale terapeutico dell'ultrafilosofia. Dall'altro lato, però, abbiamo anche un movimento che procede in senso inverso, ossia dall'esterno verso l'interno: dalla vita sensibile del lettore, dunque, alla materialità dell'opera.

Quella che l'opera, tuttavia, restituisce al lettore – quella che i "libri poetici" riconsegnano al loro possibile fruitore – è un'immagine della realtà che, ora, e per il favore stesso del lavoro svolto dall'ultrafilosofia, *non può non* includere il suo poter-essere-altrimenti. È l'immagine, cioè, di una condizione "patologica" che di per sé implica, ma proprio in ragione della sua ritrovata connessione con il carattere fisiologicamente relazionale della natura, la possibilità del suo trascendimento. Che i "libri poetici", dunque, possano "curare" è una conseguenza del fatto che, nella loro stessa fisicità – nel loro costituirsi come il risultato di un'attività mimetica –, il lettore è indotto a cogliere una rappresentazione, al contempo *fedelissima* e *radicalmente differente*, di quella che si potrebbe definire la sua

28 Ma proprio nel senso, ci sembra di poter dire, che Adorno (1970) attribuisce alla nozione di "*mehr*".

(dello stesso lettore) *naturale innaturalezza*. È indotto, cioè, a riconoscervi lo specchio deformato, ma tanto più aderente (proprio per questo) al "vero", di ciò che nel suo "essere-così", nella datità della sua condizione patologica, non smette di fare segno verso la trasformabilità dell'esistente.

Quella che viene, così, a profilarsi è l'idea di una "moralità" nella quale l'istanza normativa (da intendersi, però, come un'istanza concettualmente indeterminata) è qualcosa di immanente alla sua stessa matrice poietico-performativa. Si tratta, infatti, di una "moralità" il cui terreno di coltura è da ravvisare nella messa in atto di un *doppio vincolo mimetico*: nel dispiegamento, cioè, del potenziale di senso implicito, da un lato, nel rapporto tra natura e opera (dove l'opera "imita" la natura attraverso la mediazione dell'autore), e dall'altro lato, nel rapporto tra natura e lettore (dove il lettore è indotto a "imitare", a sua volta, lo stesso essere-natura dell'opera).

A rendere comunque possibile l'adempimento, da parte dell'opera, della sua prestazione farmacologica è il fatto che la stessa caduta del senso, la spoetizzazione della realtà, viene da Leopardi ri-considerata come un autentico *materiale inventivo*. Se oggi, dunque, «si muore» anche «vivendo» – laddove l'uomo antico, «anche morendo», restava vivo (cfr. Leopardi [1988]: 277) –, allora è proprio *questo* il campo d'azione che l'ultrafilosofo sa di dover eleggere a officina, o a laboratorio, del possibile non-realizzato: a terreno di sperimentazione della propria vocazione terapeutica. Qui, anzi, a favorire il lavoro dell'immaginazione, a fare in qualche modo da leva, o da fattore di innesco, del suo risveglio, oltre al desiderio di impedire – a fronte del nichilismo trionfante – la negazione del corpo, è anche un'altra caratteristica, non meno decisiva, della vita moderna. Si tratta, cioè, della compresenza simultanea, al suo interno, di polarità reciprocamente opposte.

Da un lato, infatti, non si può non tener conto di quella "spiritualizzazione" della vita che il corpo stesso dell'ultrafilosofo, nella sua estrema ricettività, è continuamente indotto a registrare, essendo peraltro coinvolto, e in prima persona, negli effetti al contempo alienanti e reificanti che ne conseguono. Dall'altro lato, però, ciò verso cui l'ultrafilosofo è chiamato a volgere il suo sguardo è anche la caduta degli Immutabili. È la dissoluzione, cioè, degli Eterni. Qui, allora, il tema da affrontare è la perdita di quel fondamento che, invece, tradizionalmente, poteva essere ancora individuato nella triade "classica" del Vero, del Bello e del Bene: nella possibilità, per ognuno, di partecipare, per via contemplativa, all'armonia di un senso esperibile come totalità. Si trattava, però, nel caso dell'uomo pre-moderno, di una totalità da intendersi come connessione *logicamente* motivata. Come l'espressione, cioè, di un *kòsmos* nella cui universalità il particolare era chiamato a rispecchiarsi, fino a trovare nella sua evidenza – nella perfetta trasparenza di quell'ordine – il punto di ormeggio più saldo: l'ancoraggio più sicuro.

È dunque proprio dall'interrogazione di questo secondo aspetto, dalla comprensione cioè del potenziale emancipante insito nel declino degli Immutabili, che l'ultrafilosofia può trarre un ulteriore impulso alla *rammemorazione dell'apparenza*. Alla rammemorazione, cioè, della necessità di "renderle giustizia". Al tramonto, infatti, degli Immutabili corrisponde il rilancio di quel *sapere della superficie* nel cui orizzonte il sensibile viene riabilitato in quanto dimensione che esige di essere apprezzata e difesa nella sua stessa autonomia, e non più invece in funzione di logiche che le siano gerarchicamente sovraimposte. Nel *Dialogo della Moda e della Morte*, non a caso, una delle battute più dirompenti (e anche, filosoficamente, più promettenti) è quella che suona come una ripresa, parzialmente modificata, di un verso del Petrarca: «Passato è già più che 'l millesim' anno – proclama, infatti, Morte – che sono finiti i tempi degl'immortali» (Leopardi [2008]: 129). Che i "tempi", dunque, "degl'immortali" siano "finiti" significa che, nella modernità, è la stessa dimensione della superficie, è la stessa fugacità e frammentarietà dei rapporti costruiti al suo interno, a valere come l'unica possibile misura del senso.

È quanto in particolare testimonia, nel *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degli Italiani* (1824), la messa a fuoco di quella nozione di "società stretta"[29], da intendersi come società basata sull'intimità del commercio intersoggettivo, con la quale Leopardi indica la forma di vita espressa dalle "grandi città". Tra le figure allora che, in questo contesto, tendono a rivendicare per sé, più incisivamente, la capacità di istituire una nuova regola, una nuova modalità di grammaticalizzazione dell'esperienza, noi troviamo, innanzitutto, oltre alla "moda", ma a questa intimamente correlata, l'idea di "opinione pubblica". Una «cosa», quest'ultima, da giudicare senz'altro «di niun conto» (Leopardi [1988]: 450), la cura della quale diventa tuttavia essenziale, per ciascuno, allo scopo di nutrire la vivificante, piacevole illusione di poter agire nel mondo, malgrado tutto, in quanto soggetti degni di stima. Né si può dimenticare, in questo quadro, il ruolo immaginativamente fecondo che viene giocato dalla dimensione dell'"esempio": il suo agire, nello stesso tempo, come principio di autorità e come forza irresistibilmente attrattiva.

Accanto poi a queste tre figure – accanto cioè alla "moda", all'"opinione pubblica" e all'"esempio" – ne compare una quarta, che pure si rivela capace di operare in modo sinergico, e altrettanto produttivo, con le prime tre. Si tratta del cosiddetto "*bon ton*" (il «buon tuono»): quel principio per il quale si rifugge da una «mala azione» come da una «brutta riverenza», o per il quale, fa notare ancora Leopardi, ci si vergogna di «fare il male come di comparire in una conversazione con una macchia sul vestito o con un panno logoro o lacero» (ivi: 451). Che cos'è, dunque, il *bon ton*? È quell'istanza che, nelle "grandi città", finisce di

29 Cfr. Colaiacomo [2013]: 83-131.

fatto per sostituire il senso che un tempo, nelle repubbliche antiche, era garantito – ma garantito, pur sempre, nella sua declinazione più fruttuosa, come principio di trascendimento dell'esistente – dalle "buone" illusioni: da quei "fantasmi", o da quelle "larve", dei quali Leopardi parla nella *Storia del genere umano* (la "giustizia", la "virtù", la "gloria", la "sapienza", lo stesso "amore" inteso, platonicamente, come virtù dello spirito).

Con riferimento allora a questo scenario, per molti versi inedito, il tema sul quale Leopardi ci invita a riflettere è il carattere, insieme, *decentrato* e *desostanzializzato* della vita moderna. È la sua attitudine, cioè, a risolvere il permanente (la profondità, l'essenza) nell'effimero (l'apparente, il puramente esteriore). È a queste condizioni infatti che, ora, l'immaginazione viene sollecitata a ri-affermare i suoi diritti: la sua capacità di leggere, in ogni dato, una possibile "siepe". Questo vuol dire che, adesso, il lavoro dell'immaginazione può essere innescato – può essere, anzi, addirittura stimolato e catalizzato – dalla stessa incorporazione, dalla stessa introiezione mimetica, di quel rapporto fruttuosamente tensivo che si viene a stabilire (per dirla con Benjamin) tra i diversi "estremi", tra i differenti punti luminosi, operativamente coinvolti nella "costellazione" del moderno.

La riabilitazione dell'apparenza, la valorizzazione cioè del fuggitivo e dell'accidentale, è un aspetto che, in questa prospettiva, non soltanto coesiste, ma non smette anche di interagire – il che può avvenire, di volta in volta, nella forma del contrasto (quando l'apparenza funziona come espressione di un oltre) o della reciproca conferma (quando l'apparenza viene ridotta a idolo, o a feticcio, di un rituale consacrato alla ripetizione dell'identico) – con la "spiritualizzazione" della vita. Non smette, cioè, di interagire con la tendenza a rimuovere quel sapere che, invece, avrebbe proprio nel corpo, nel suo darsi come superficie sensibile, il luogo eminente della sua manifestazione.

Posto dunque al cospetto di un mondo, quello moderno, in cui gli opposti, paradossalmente, coesistono – un mondo, cioè, all'interno del quale il sapere del corpo viene, sì, svilito e depotenziato (il "secolo della morte"), ma insieme anche ri-accreditato come forza autonomamente significante –, l'ultrafilosofo si accorge che proprio da ciò, dalla capacità che i "libri poetici" hanno di *trasformare in immagine* quella stessa dualità, il presente può trarre non soltanto nuova energia, ma anche nuova speranza. Quella che sorge, infatti, dal fondo stesso della disperazione è la speranza in una "rigenerazione" (in un "ravvicinamento" alla "natura") che Leopardi legge come l'esito – come il risultato, cioè, tanto più desiderato (tanto più meritevole, ma *realisticamente*, di essere "sognato") quanto più la "fredda ragione" ne decreta l'irraggiungibilità – di un'azione emotivamente intelligente. Un'azione, questa, che consiste nel ricomprendere *sub specie possibilitatis*, nel "fingere" dunque come immagine del "nulla" (di un "nulla" che, però, è "tutto": è l'infinito *nel* finito), lo stesso volto ancipite esibito dalla vita moderna.

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The Reverse of *Thanatos* and the Art of Repetition

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Abstract. This contribution investigates the link between aesthetics and therapy, starting from a notion that is central to psychoanalysis, philosophy and anthropology: that of repetition. The starting point is the metapsychological definition arrived at by Sigmund Freud – obviously passing through the clinical definition – with the elaboration of *Todestrieb*. But already in Freud, an ambivalence intrinsic to repetition emerges: it can be the negative compulsion to repeat, but also the positive source of childhood activity, particularly play. The article then explores the relationship between childhood play and repetition through an author who has devoted important pages to this problem, albeit never in a systematic way: Walter Benjamin. With Benjamin, starting from the fundamental polarity between ritual and play, and therefore between repetition of the same and repetition of the new, other authors are then called upon, such as Jean Piaget, Johan Huizinga, Émile Benveniste and Roger Caillois. Playful repetition emerges as a constructive and profane principle with respect to the sphere of the sacred, of myth, but also to that of biological-adaptive behaviour; as the primary source of human experimentation and creativity. Play and its repetition – the opposite of *Thanatos* – have to do with the perfective mimesis of Aristotelian memory. In conclusion, the article addresses the problem of the transformation of our perception from modernity and the advent of technical reproducibility to the present day, with the challenges posed by digital technologies. Contemporary alienations, the affirmation of a psychotic paradigm through widespread processes of hypersensorialisation and disconnection of sensory data, through mechanisms of decoupling between language and imagination – and recent studies in phenomenological psychiatry provide fundamental tools in this regard – once again call into question the repetition of *Thanatos*, of an unbridled Id. The essay then closes with a question addressed to aesthetics as a theory of perception: what is the revolution of sensibility that we need to think about today in order to reaffirm not only an aesthetic, but also a politics animated by *Eros* and not by *Thanatos*?

Keywords. Repetition, eros/thanatos, play, theory of perception, symbolic mediation.

Introduction

The centrality of repetition, of the compulsion to repeat trauma – or the compulsion of trauma to repeat itself – is well known in psychoanalysis. Freud saw in it a *beyond the pleasure principle*: *Thanatos*, the death drive, as counterpoint or even as a drive more original than *Eros*. Repetition, therefore, as a deep seated principle that calls into question the human, the organisation and functioning of our psyche – as we will see, not only our unconscious, but also, and not secondarily, our *aisthesis*, our perception, the acquisition of habits.

Walter Benjamin is one of the most useful authors when attempting to address the problem of repetition (see Montanelli [2017] and [2018]). Benjamin is, indeed, an important thinker of repetition, not only of its infernal version – the eternal return of the same (the conceptual constellation of myth, destiny, late capitalism) – but also and above all, though never systematically, of a *differential* version, of a constructive, innovative repetition, a source of possible alternative anthropological forms. More specifically, Benjamin is among the great thinkers who investigated the constitutive ambivalence of the human animal.

Focusing here on the aesthetic–anthropological side of the question, I will draw first on some reflections by Benjamin – and then call upon other authors – that link repetition to a fundamental *polarity*, that between play and appearance, or rather, following the wording of the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (third version), between *play* and *ritual* (or myth, that which hides behind appearance). Here these two categories emerge as paradigmatic: as two connected yet different ways of relating to being as a whole; again, as two constitutive phenomena of the human, where both are bound up with the human need for orientation and protection, with the institution of what we call "world". The prevailing of one pole over the other brings with it antithetical responses to such a need, a different relationship with nature, with technology, with one's fellow human beings, with time, a different way of shaping the world.

1. Before we begin, let us recall that the mythical dimension appears to Benjamin as a totality of meaning that absorbs everything, that admits no outside, and that because of this constitutes the immediate dimension of destiny. The rule of *anánke* governs the world of myth (Benjamin [1915]: 22). It is this binding character that forms the violent aspect of the mythical structure: among beings, what dominates is the «chain of guilt and atonement», which condemns them to the eternal repetition of the same (Benjamin [1919]: 203). It is not a dead structure, typical only of archaic societies, on the contrary, its remains are visible in the contemporary world. According to Benjamin, moreover, law is mythical in that, by setting its boundaries, it always assigns a destiny (see Benjamin [1921a]), as in the infinite circularity triggered by the *dispositif* of debt and commodity production in advanced capitalism (see Benjamin [1921b]).

As for play, the conceptual range of this notion in Benjamin is quite broad: it stretches from childhood to the scenes of the baroque *Trauerspiel*, to gambling in capitalist modernity. What is of interest here is children's play, considered as the keystone for understanding how the mythical compulsion to repeat can be reversed into differential repetition. The writings on childhood, composed mostly in the second half of the 1920s (thus prior to *Berlin Childhood around 1900* itself), must be read in the context of a reflection on the possible foundation of a new «Marxist dialectical anthropology» (Benjamin [1929a]: 275).

In the more general *impulse to play*, Benjamin envisages something that is decisive for the comprehension of humanity in his entirety (see Benjamin [1928a]: 28). The teaching comes from Friedrich Schiller: «Man plays» – this is from his letters collected in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* – «only when he is a man in the full sense of the word, and *he is only a complete man when he plays*» (Schiller [1795]: 85)[1].

What matters to Benjamin in children's play is its intrinsically constructive quality. More precisely, the destructive and, at the same time (or perhaps precisely for this reason), transformative capacity which operates in its purest and most powerful form in children's play. In play what unfolds is a combinatory capacity, an ability to assemble, to continuously break down and reconfigure objects. Its essence lies in this very *constructive principle*: not a simple imitation of the adult world, but a creative *mimesis* that, by incorporating things, simultaneously learns to know them in their variegated characteristics and boundaries[2].

1 In Schiller, the drive to play holds a central role precisely because it serves to connect and unify the other two drives, the sensuous and the rational, thereby defining that *intermediate space* (which is above all an aesthetic space) between matter and form, necessity and freedom, nature and history, in which what is properly human takes shape; on this, see also Desideri (2013a): 185-196.

2 In the essay *On the Mimetic Faculty* Benjamin defines childhood play as the «school» of the mimetic faculty (see Benjamin [1933]: 720).

When children play, they create «a world appropriate to their size» (Benjamin [1928a]: 100); they are attracted by «detritus generated by buildings, gardening, housework, tailoring», by waste products, by «things that are being visibly worked on» (Benjamin [1926]: 449), so as to create a relationship between these materials in ways that are always new and unforeseeable.

What is at issue here is neither individual genius nor the «false analogies with the creativity of adult artists». Children have not yet constructed their own subjectivity, because there is still no clear separation between self and the world. Things are expressed «through the self», each time dismantled, reassembled, and thus learned and defined in their multiple facets (see Benjamin [1929b]: 229). Play is therefore what makes possible the very constitution of subjectivity and of the world of objects.

However, Benjamin also writes: «the great law that presides over the rules and rhythms of the entire world of play» is «the law of repetition (*das Gesetz der Wiederholung*)» (Benjamin [1928b]: 120).

> We know that for a child repetition is the soul of play, that nothing gives him greater pleasure than to "Do it again!" The obscure urge to repeat things is scarcely less powerful in play, scarcely less cunning in its workings, than the sexual impulse in love. It is no accident that Freud imagined he could detect an impulse "beyond the pleasure principle" in it. (Ibid.)

Repetition is *the* rule, the essence, the «inner structure» – as Huizinga (1938: 10) also claimed – of the ludic gesture. As the principle that underpins *Spielen*, it does not appear as a negative *compulsion to repeat*, not as a *death drive*, but rather as something bound up with what makes life possible: with the construction of experience, of all those habits that form the condition of possibility of all types of orientation within existence. «For play and nothing else is the mother of every habit» Benjamin writes in *Toys and Play* (Benjamin [1928b]: 120).

And toys, for every man or woman, are precisely the «things which occasioned more lasting habits than other things», thanks to which «those capabilities which helped to determine the course of his [or her] life» are formed (Benjamin [1938]: 395-396). The repetition of children's play does not, in this sense, repeat the identical, on the contrary, it is a movement that entails variations within itself, *clinamina*. Jean Piaget's reflections on this point are helpful: if at first sight play seems to repeat in a mechanical way «part of the adaptive behaviours», it actually goes «beyond the limits of adaptation». It repeats «schemas already established for a non-ludic end», but it applies them to new objects, which are not necessarily connected to the contingencies of the surrounding environment, thus producing continuous deviations in the repetition, series of combinations that are always different. Play enacts a kind of *ritualisation* of subjective patterns, but at the very moment in which it *repeats* them outside the physiological sphere, *it separates from ritual*: it gives rise to the symbolic process (Piaget [1945]: 89, 95). The deviations it produces, which coincide with the formation of habits, are therefore not only concerned with the acquisition and consolidation of biological-adaptive functions, but above all with the construction of the symbolic sphere.

What children's play enacts is a virtuous relationship between repetition and the *novum*. The repetition of the same gesture, performed by the child's hands, becomes the repetition of the *unicum*: «doing the same thing over and over again ([*das*] [*N*]*och einmal*)» is «a doing anew (*ein Immer-wieder-tun*)» (Benjamin [1928b]: 120), guided by the «genius of variation» (Benjamin [1929c]: 205).

2. Benjamin writes that certainly Freud was the first to provide a «grand interpretation […] of childhood superiority» (Benjamin [1930a]: 294), offering the «scientific premises» for understanding the nature of the experience of play (Benjamin [1930b]: 292). Above all, he was the first to bring to light repetition as a fundamental law not only of children's play, but of the psychic unconscious itself.

Freud presented the first formulation of the concept of compulsion to repeat in 1914, in *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*. Clinical observation had brought something peculiar to his attention:

> the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it. […] As long as the patient is in the treatment he cannot escape from this "compulsion to repeat". (Freud [1914]: 150)

The trauma or the repressed is continually repeated in present action. The *illness* is precisely this «present-day force», endlessly repeating what was (and still is) a source of pain (Ibid.: 151). The analyst should therefore attempt to «curb» such a «compulsion to repeat», bringing the patient's past back into the psychic sphere of «remembering in the old manner» (Ibid.: 153). Such *working-through* is only possible if two processes succeed: *transference*, which, by replacing «ordinary neurosis» with «transference-neurosis», should ensure that the symptoms, though *repeated*, acquire a new *meaning* precisely through transference; and secondly, «one must allow the patient time to become more conversant with this resistance with which he has now become acquainted, to *work through* it, to overcome it, by continuing, in defiance of it, the analytic work» (Ibid.: 155). The possibility of deactivating the compulsion to repeat therefore lies in the very same repetitive mechanism: only by *persisting* in the place of origin of the resistance, only by re-enacting the symptoms in the context of the analytic work, can variations in the repetition occur and the trauma be displaced into the sphere of memory.

If in this text Freud is still operating solely within the clinical sphere, later, in *The Uncanny* (1919) and in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921), the order of discourse becomes *metapsychological*. This marks a decisive shift for psychoanalytic science as a whole: its very foundations are profoundly redefined. Already in the 1919 essay the question is reformulated in the following way:

> […] For it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a "compulsion to repeat" proceeding from the drive impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the drives – a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle. (Freud [1919]: 238; transl. mod.)[3]

The compulsion to repeat is now situated within the sphere of the drives, where its importance in the psychic economy is such that it calls into question the primacy of the pleasure principle. Neurotics who constantly «repeat all of these unwanted situations and painful emotions», as noted in the 1921 essay, are a striking example (Freud [1921]: 21). Their dreams, which simply lead them back to the situation in which the trauma occurred, do not in fact respond to the function assigned to them by the pleasure principle, «the fulfilment of wishes», brought about in a «hallucinatory manner» (Ibid.: 32). Again, it is «in the impulses of small children», and in particular in *play*, that the compulsion to repeat is «very clearly expressed» (Freud [1919]: 238): a well-known example is that of Freud's grandson and his «tirelessly repeated» game of throwing a reel and making it disappear, only to pull it back again shortly after, with which the boy was reiterating (and symbolising) a distressing experience – his mother leaving (Freud [1921]: 14-15). All these cases reveal a psychic sphere not governed by the pleasure principle, but by a «more primitive» drive (Ibid.: 28), the death drive, aimed at restoring an «earlier state». Freud's conclusion is well known: «the aim of all life is death» (Ibid.: 38). The common reading holds that what is at stake in the compulsion to repeat is the mastering of loss, but the most radical psychoanalysis confronts something else: a *drive satisfaction* that is *immediately pleasurable* and that arises from the continual return to the site of trauma (see Ibid.: 23). An unrelenting push to reach, through the medium of the symptom, the «source of the wound», that is, the separation from the first Other (the maternal; which brings into play the relation to the feminine), brought about by entry into the symbolic universe. A push that thus seeks to «restore a mythical absolute enjoyment» (Cimino [2020]: 66). What is ultimately disquieting is the fact that *Thanatos* turns out to be the extreme version, the most obstinate face, of *Eros*. If pleasure, as its *Prinzip* dictates, is the reduction of tension, of stimuli, then the *Todestrieb* seeks the greatest pleasure of all: the definitive annulment of

3 James Strachey translated *Trieb* as "instinct", here I have chosen to use the more appropriate "drive".

every excitation. It is the «desire for an impossible reunification with an absolute Other» (Ibid.: 64). Not a desire for death as such, but a desire for «non-life», a return to the primordial One (Ibid.: 65). *Thanatos*, like every mythical and ritual repetition of the same, thus takes on the role of protecting against life exposed, life open to variation, life that therefore leans into the abyss. Symptoms, after all, also provide a niche – a painful one, which is, however, a shelter. The task of clinical work, but also more broadly of the aesthetic, social, and political sphere, will be to stimulate and sustain the work of *Eros*, to support its playful deviations, its multiple possible variations, contrasting the replication of the identical, while never ceasing to gaze into the abyss. To quote Rilke, we might say that the task is to sustain «an ecstatic openness to the world» (Ibid.: 31). To dwell in the in-between, where «All other creatures look into the Open / with their whole eyes» (Rilke [1923]: 55).

If Freud, in the compulsion to repeat, envisaged a drive that is a directed «expression of the *conservative* nature of living substance» (Freud [1921]: 36), with children's repetition Benjamin sought above all to highlight the human impulse towards innovation. Repetition, in the words of Jacques Lacan, who revisited both the theme and the notion, «demands the new», and does not reside «in the natural», within the realm of need or the magical circle of myth, but opens an escape route from both: «the […] radical diversity constituted by repetition in itself» is «the true secret of the ludic» (Lacan [1964]: 61). In other words, it entails thinking of the unconscious itself as a potential dimension, where something other, something not yet realised, «demands to be realized» (it pulsates in dreams, in slips, in puns, in symptoms) (Ibid.: 25). The investigation of this unconscious and of the questions raised by its repetition is a challenge in the context of the *repressive desublimation* (Marcuse [1955]) that governs our societies: that is, in the context governed by the *compulsion to discharge-enjoy*, by the infernal repetition of the *unbridled Id*, which entails the *annihilation of desire* and its intrinsic constructive power, as well as of symbolic mediation itself.

3. From an ontogenetic perspective, Benjamin sees the principle of montage at work in childhood. Let us then return to his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* and to the polarity between appearance and play inherent in *mimesis* as the «primal phenomenon of all artistic activity» (Benjamin [1936]: 127).

The auratic work of art, in which the pole of appearance prevails, is based on cult. Such a work therefore has a ritual function; it serves as an instrument for transmitting tradition (ritual serves to establish and consolidate communities, institutions, and symbolic systems, ensuring their continuity over time). Within this framework, technique exists «only in fusion with ritual» (Ibid.: 107), its primary purpose being to tame and dominate the forces of nature, perceived, in the words of Ernesto De Martino (1948), as a threat to one's own «presence». Forms of exorcism against nature – from the earliest creations «in the service of magic» (Benjamin [1936]: 106), to the most brutal and destructive acts of war and the worst environmental and human exploitation (the aestheticisation of politics is linked to the resurgence of cultic value). This technique and the cult-based artistic production present a temporal paradox: the unique, singular, unrepeatable work is inscribed within the temporal paradigm of myth, ritual, the cycle of eternal return, or secularised infernal repetition; it functions as a means of legitimising this circularity and its structural relations.

With the advent of technical reproducibility, «for the first time in world history» the work of art becomes emancipated «from its parasitic subservience to ritual» (Ibid.). Artworks, exposed to an «ubiquitous and non-linear actualization», are no longer characterised by the here and now of their origin (Desideri [2013b]: 39; see also Desideri [2018]: 75-99). This brings about a shift of the centre of gravity towards the pole of play, away from that of appearance (see Benjamin [1936]: 127-128, *note* 22). A shift that leads to a «qualitative transformation» not only of the relationship between human being, nature and technique, but of humanity itself as well as nature: it is an anthropological passage, because what corresponds to a «second technology» (Ibid..: 107) is itself a «second nature» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 63). What characterises this second technology is not an attempt to dominate, but «an interplay» – *harmonien*, *passionnée*, following the Fourierian inspiration – «between nature and humanity». Moreover, for the first time we witness *human beings distancing themselves from nature*. From nature understood as danger to be tamed and domesticated, conceived of in dichotomic terms with respect to history, to technical artefacts (Benjamin [1936]: 107, 124-125; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 173-174). Technique becomes a means of potential human and social emancipation, as well as emancipation of nature itself. The «nature […] of the second degree» that emerges with technical reproducibility, the result of the montage principle, well exemplified by the film editing process, is located on the threshold between natural and artificial, at the point of continuous passage from one to the other (Benjamin [1936]: 115).

We now understand the intrinsic political nature of Benjamin's reflection on childhood: in childhood ludic activity, the *profanatory* gesture is already present, able to tear objects from their traditional and auratic context, in order to return them to the sphere of *use*, experimentation and emendation. Play is «the inexhaustible reservoir of all the experimenting procedures» of the second technology (Benjamin [1936]: 127; on this, see also Leslie [2018]), its *mimesis* is «perfective» (*eine vollendende Mimesis*) (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 155), it improves nature (where what resonates here is the Aristotelian interpretation of the concept).

After all, from a historical perspective, Benjamin tells us in *Toys and Play that* «the oldest toys […] are in a certain sense imposed on […] [a child] as cult implements that became toys only afterward» (Benjamin [1928b]: 118). The idea that some games are what remains of the most ancient magical practices is the starting point of almost all studies dedicated to the relationship between play and ritual (see e.g. Huizinga [1938]; Benveniste [1947]; Fink [1957]; Caillois [1958]). In particular, Roger Caillois and Émile Benveniste insisted precisely on the profanatory element of play in relation to ritual. In other words, play alienates the ritual from its function: that of being an institution and re-legitimation of an order, whether cosmic, religious, social, or political. What in the cultic sphere is treated with reverent subjection, in playful activity is not only experienced with enjoyment but, above all, is subjected to a process of radical *dis-simulation*, *de-sacralisation*, and *consumption* (see Caillois [1967]: 3-10). Benveniste, in his *Le Jeu comme structure*, described play as an *inverted ritual*: although play originates in the sacred sphere of ritual, it nonetheless reflects an «inverted image» of it at its essential point. The effectiveness of ritual is in fact founded on myth, that is, on the «storytelling of resonant words that provide actions with meaning», with legitimacy; the power of sacred action lies «precisely in the conjunction between the *myth* that recounts the story and the *ritual* that reproduces it». The playful gesture shatters this very mythological fabric; play is essentially a radical «desacralizing» activity, which brings transcendence back into the *human sphere* – the sphere of *use*, of variation (Benveniste [1947]: 165; on play as profanation and use, see also Agamben [2005]). *Das Einmal ist keinmal*, is an expression belonging to children's play as much as it belongs to the second technology (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 108; Benjamin [1936]: 107). Childhood is the first opening of «scope for play (*Spiel-Raum*) […] which is allied to the second technology» (Ibid.: 127, *note* 22; Benjamin [1935-1936]: 121).

4. One should not, however, take this polarity between play and ritual as a rigid opposition. The historical shift that brought play to the fore as the predominant pole did not in itself entail the condition of liberation, as demonstrated by the aestheticisation of politics in its most horrible historical forms. The potential of the second technology may also be harnessed in the direction of the first.

In this respect, when looking at the upheaval of the human sensorium brought about by technical reproducibility, I would like, in conclusion, to dwell on a crucial passage from the essay on *The Work of Art*, where Benjamin – anticipating both philosophical poststructuralism (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) and psychoanalytic poststructuralism (Jacques Lacan) – understands that the psycho-sensorial configuration of the subject of the so-called second modernity (that is, the modernity inaugurated by large-scale industry and, therefore, by capitalism at the onset of its advanced stage) is not so much (or not primarily) neurosis, but psychosis. This is the well-known chapter on the *optical unconscious*, where he writes that the camera, besides having torn to pieces the familiar «prison-world» and unleashed a gnoseological revolution, profoundly altered the *normal* functioning of human perception:

> […] in most cases the diverse aspects of reality captured by the film camera lie outside only the *normal* spectrum of sense impressions (*ausserhalb eines* normalen *Spektrums der Sinneswahrnehmungen*). Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. (Benjamin [1936]: 117-118; see also Benjamin [1935-1936]: 130-131; author's italics)

In this metamorphosis, what is at stake is a process of *hypersensorialisation* and, at the same time, of fixation and domination of *unrelated perceptual data*. Here the notes for the *Arcades Project* are illuminating: in describing the reconfiguration of the collective sensory dimension of the nineteenth century – brought about by the invention of new devices for vision and observation (see Crary [1990]), by the transformation of modes and relations of production, and by the rise of metropolitan life – Benjamin speaks of a «sharpened receptivity (*geschärfte Aufnahmefähigkeit*)», as when in the dream world or in psychosis parts of the body, organs, noises – «blood pressure, intestinal churn, heartbeat, muscle sensation» – dissociate, become autonomous, and «become individually (*einzeln*) perceptible». Which means *the connections break down* (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 842). The other pathological reference for Benjamin is that of trauma: an intensification of nervous activity caused by shocks, tears, ruptures, «intermittence» – which, in fact, is also «the measure of time in film» (Ibid.: 843; on shock, see also Benjamin [1939]). The fact is, as we have seen, that the rhythmic register of shocks and trauma is repetition. We thus return to the unconscious and to repetition – that of the unbridled Id, where symbolic mediation collapses. Which seems highly relevant from the point of view of *aisthesis*, of aesthetics understood as a «theory of perception» (Benjamin [1936]: 120).

We are assisted here by some decisive studies in phenomenological psychiatry: in psychosis what emerges is the awakening and violent predominance of an «original sensory trace» – that is, one referring back to the very earliest object relations – so powerful it obstructs its own «representative-mental duplication» and its location within a context of shared meaning. It is a «basic level of perception» that precedes both internal representation (the fantasme) and the symbolic mediation of language (Correale [2021]: 22, 27)[4]. We consider this to be a highly political matter, one that forces aesthetics to confront particularly complex challenges: digital technologies, in fact, not only substitute the synthetic activities with which we organise sensory data – in line with the well-known pages of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno, Horkheimer [1944]: 98-100) – with algorithmic production, but, more importantly, appear to be moving ever further towards the decoupling of imagination and language, not in order to renew the relationship between the two, but rather enhancing the crystallisation of this divergence.

To rethink repetition, play, and emancipation within this framework means asking what kind of revolution is required today in the realm of sensibility: a return to the "roots" of the human (Marx [1843-1844]: p. 251)[5], to the roots of the psyche and of desire, in order to renew both the theory and practice of a politics animated by *Eros* (Marcuse [1955]; see also Marcuse [1969]). It means contacting, in a different way, the originary dimension of sensoriality, re-establishing broken connections. Extending the references further, we could say it involves reconnecting with what Donald Winnicott (1971), in speaking of play, called the «transitional area», the «potential space» – the place of origin of human creativity: the area in which, through play itself, the infant first transitions from one to two; two, as in the two poles of the primary relationship; two, as in the separation and connection between self and world; ontogenetically, once again, the beginning of symbolic activity. This is the kind of play able to dissolve fixed, hallucinatory, "sacralised" images. It is not the relativistic play of the postmodern *collage*, but one capable of reconstructing connections, of giving *form* to sensory data, reinserting them in a shared context of meaning, setting them in motion again.

From the standpoint of aesthetics, this is precisely the problem of form, of the relation between pleasure and critique, or, in Aristotelian terms, between *mimesis* and knowledge.

4 Pietro Montani has recently shed important light on this aspect by analysing the activity of dream imagination: in dreaming, imagination regresses to a stage prior to its encounter with language; to a level he also describes as «more primeval», namely the «perceptual». Borrowing from Kant, we may say this corresponds to *schematising without a concept* (since conceptualisation is governed by language). It is an activity of fundamental regeneration – from the standpoint of the organism and of the functioning of our faculties – of the very relation between imagination and verbal language; a return to the *in-fancy* of imagination, a process of de-structuring and de-autonomising acquired schemas, so that the very capacity to combine images and words can be revitalised, renewed (Montani [2017]: 58-97). The possibility of such a continuous «unprecedented re-assortment» (Ibid.: 77) is the very condition of human creativity.

5 I am referring here to the well-know claim by Marx, according to whom radical politics consists in grasping «things by the root», where «the root is man himself» (Marx [1843-1844]: 251).

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Il *prendersi cura* di Stiegler tra tecnica, estetica e politica

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Abstract. The paper aims to reconstruct the development of Bernard Stiegler's therapeutic perspective, with particular reference to the relationship between aesthetics, technology and politics. Although the dimension of care is very present in at least two of the three phases of Stiegler's philosophy, there still seems to be a lack of a detailed and reasoned reconstruction of its evolution, i.e. one that investigates its theoretical necessities as well as its relationship with technology, sensibility, imagination and social metamorphoses. The paper therefore proposes an analytical scan of this evolution and a series of reflections on the relationship between technology and society with respect to the three phases of Stiegler's thought. The analysis of care moves from symptomatology (symbolic misery) to pharmacology (politics of memory) and the concept of archi-cinema as an aesthetic and transcendental device, up to identify the task of thought with the care of memory and the planet.

Keywords. Psychotechnologies, symptomatology, pharmacology, taking care, cinematographic consciousness.

Per quanto Bernard Stiegler non sia stato propriamente uno studioso di estetica, nei suoi testi sono presenti, con una certa costanza, sia i temi fondamentali dell'estetica come scienza dell'*aisthesis*, del sensibile, sia gli oggetti della filosofia dell'arte, dunque le opere, dalla musica al cinema, dalla poesia alla performance o alle installazioni. L'esempio più chiaro di questa articolazione delle due grandi declinazioni dell'estetica è dato molto probabilmente dai due tomi di *La miseria simbolica*, ossia *L'epoca iper-industriale* (Stiegler [2021]) e *La catastrofe del sensibile* (Stiegler [2022]). In questi testi Stiegler sviluppa una sintomatologia tesa tra l'estetica e la politica, focalizzata sugli effetti antisociali e tossici delle tecnologie cognitive o psicotecnologie, da quelle analogiche come la televisione ai dispositivi digitali (all'epoca ancora in una fase non così ipertrofica come quella attuale), i cui effetti consistono in fenomeni di iper-sollecitazione estetica e pulsionale tali da coinvolgere e saturare le funzioni superiori del sistema nervoso. Ad essere affette sono dunque tanto la vita cognitiva e intellettuale, quanto quella affettiva e sociale, fino a provocare uno stato di «miseria simbolica» generalizzata che il filosofo francese vede riflettersi nelle sfere dei saperi, dei linguaggi, del desiderio, degli affetti e dell'immaginazione.

Volendo utilizzare il suo stesso lessico, diremmo che Stiegler *si prende cura* della società attraverso l'estetica e pensa a sua volta l'estetica, quella degli artisti, come un *prendersi cura* della tecnica, della tecnicità dell'umano e della stessa estetica, nella misura in cui, se il lavoro dell'artista «è originariamente impegnato nella questione della sensibilità dell'altro», la con/divisione del sensibile analizzata da Rancière (2000) è in realtà sempre mediata da artefatti o supporti tecnologici la cui relazione con la produzione simbolica o con il suo impoverimento diviene la questione politica principale (Stiegler [2021]: 28-29). *Prendersi cura* è del resto il titolo di un altro libro fondamentale del filosofo francese, in particolare perché rappresenta, assieme a *Della farmacologia*, il compimento della seconda fase del suo pensiero, quella definita appunto farmacologica, innescata proprio da *La miseria simbolica*.

La tappa farmacologica si sovrappone dunque alla prima[1], comunemente riconosciuta come tecno-logica. È comunque già a partire dalla prima tappa, dedicata a edificare lo statuto della tecnica oltre la visione strumentale o antropologica, in quanto «materia inorganica organizzata» (Stiegler [2023]: 95) costitutiva della memoria, dell'intelligenza e della temporalità umane, nonché co-partecipante alla costituzione dei fini dell'uomo, che Stiegler orienta il suo pensiero verso «una politica della memoria» (ivi: 312). Si tratterebbe cioè di una politica focalizzata su quel particolare tipo di memoria esteriorizzata, dunque tecnica e artificiale, o più precisamente tecno-sociale, che in qualità di «ipomnesi» – supporto della memoria "viva", dell'anamnesi – accompagna l'umanità da sempre, dalle pitture rupestri alla scrittura alfabetica, fino alle tecnologie di informazione e comunicazione e ai Big Data, orientando o condizionando sia l'evolversi dei sa-

1 Per una ricostruzione delle tappe del pensiero di Stiegler cfr. Ross (2018).

peri e la loro trasmissione, sia il divenire sociale. Stiegler ([2021]: 27) realizzerà tale politica precisamente a partire da *La miseria simbolica*, in cui la questione estetica è una questione politica e viceversa.

La nostra analisi prende perciò avvio dal primo tomo di questo libro in cui compaiono quasi tutte le poste in gioco della politica della memoria, mentre nel prosieguo del testo osserveremo la torsione interna alla prospettiva terapeutica stiegleriana, che comprende una rifunzionalizzazione dello stesso pensiero in generale. Se infatti lungo l'intera fase farmacologica il prendersi cura denota un aspetto specifico del pensiero, ossia la connessione tra la filosofia morale e la filosofia della tecnica, nella fase successiva la cura abita al cuore del pensiero tout court, come la funzione stessa della ragione. Prendersi cura della società attraverso l'estetica è anche il prendersi cura *dell*'estetica (genitivo oggettivo e soggettivo) che, nell'ultima fase del suo pensiero, diventerebbe *panser la société par l'esthétique*, dove *panser*, termine piuttosto desueto per indicare il curare, non solo sostituisce sul piano semantico il *«prendre soin»* (prendersi cura), ma giunge a definire la funzione stessa del pensare (*penser*) filosofico nei confronti dei saperi, della società, del Pianeta e delle nuove generazioni.

1. *Sintomatologia: la miseria simbolica*

Si è detto poc'anzi che nei due tomi della *Miseria simbolica* Stiegler sviluppa una sintomatologia sociale relativa all'impatto delle psicotecnologie sugli individui e sulla società. Più in particolare, i sintomi evidenziati dall'autore sono innanzitutto la perdita di motivazioni per credere nel futuro, il disorientamento esistenziale, il consumismo pulsionale, la perdita d'attenzione, l'atomismo sociale, la perdita del senso dell'esistenza. Sintomi riconducibili appunto a una sorta di «miseria simbolica», che consisterebbe nell'impoverimento delle capacità cognitive e affettive, effetto a loro volta della «*perdita di partecipazione* alla *produzione di simboli*, designanti, questi, tanto i frutti della vita intellettiva (concetti, idee, teoremi, saperi) che quelli della vita sensibile (arti, saper-fare, costumi)» (Stiegler [2021]: 38). A monte di tutto ciò Stiegler individua il connubio del capitalismo neoliberale e delle sue psicotecnologie, che agiscono direttamente sul piano della cognizione, della sensibilità, dei saperi, degli affetti e dei desideri. «L'epoca iperindustriale» è in tal senso l'epoca in cui il calcolo si estende oltre la sfera della produzione, mentre il regime industriale penetra in ogni aspetto dell'esistenza.

L'autore fa comprendere sin dalle prime pagine che *L'epoca iper-industriale* può essere concepito come un commentario del *Poscritto sulle società di controllo* di Deleuze (2000), e più precisamente come un suo aggiornamento all'alba dei social networks. Quella infatti che per Deleuze era l'anima emergente del potere di fine secolo, il *marketing* come inedita figura del controllo sociale, con il maturare del capitalismo cognitivo e computazionale mostra la sua principale vocazione nella cattura e modulazione dei desideri e delle condotte attraverso la sollecitazione continua di input sensibili, mentre le facoltà cognitive vengono impoverite dal controllo tecnologico esercitato su di esse, fino a tendere appunto verso una miseria simbolica. Se Deleuze aveva già preventivamente messo al cuore della mutazione in corso delle forme del potere il ruolo delle tecnologie informatiche, per Stiegler, la maturazione delle società di controllo giunge oggi a «*controllare i tempi di coscienza e d'inconscio dei corpi e delle anime* che li abitano, *modulando*, con il controllo dei flussi, questi tempi di vita» (Stiegler [2021]: 29). Se cioè la società come comunità politica è innanzitutto «la comunità di un sentire», il sensibile che fa da comunione è oggi interamente mediato dalle tecnologie dell'audiovisivo sempre più digitalizzate che controllano direttamente l'*aisthesis* in quanto tale.

Nel produrre questa sintomatologia del controllo, *La miseria simbolica* mette all'opera quasi tutti i concetti che rientrano in quella che lo stesso Stiegler ha definito, fin dal suo libro d'esordio, una «politica della memoria» per il XXI secolo: grammatizzazione, ritenzione terziaria, individuazione psichica e collettiva, milieu preindividuale e organologia. Tutti tranne uno, quello di *pharmakon*, che comparirà solo nei testi successivi, ma le cui condizioni di possibilità risiedono proprio nell'intreccio di tali concetti, che per questa stessa ragione passeremo velocemente in rassegna per quanto riguarda il loro valore diagnostico.

Immediatamente connesso a tale politica è innanzitutto il processo di *grammatizzazione*, poiché da intendersi come «la storia tecnica della memoria» (Stiegler [2014]: 89), che consiste nella discretizzazione e archiviazione materiale dei gesti e dei flussi temporali individuali e collettivi attraverso cui prende forma la memoria tecno-sociale, che Stiegler, con un neologismo, battezza «epifilogenetica» (Stiegler [2023]: 200) in quanto archivio di esperienze individuali trasmissibili attraverso le generazioni al di là del programma genetico. L'aspetto economico politico di tale "storia" risiede nel fatto che mediante la grammatizzazione si veicola e trasmette ogni forma di sapere ma si controlla anche ogni aspetto dell'esistenza: «La grammatizzazione è la storia dell'esteriorizzazione della memoria in tutte le sue forme: memoria nervosa e cerebrale, memoria corporea e muscolare, memoria biogenetica. Così esteriorizzata, la memoria può divenire l'oggetto di controlli sociopolitici e biopolitici attraverso gli investimenti economici delle organizzazioni sociali» (Stiegler [2015]: 40), dall'epoca industriale fino ai giorni nostri.

Sebbene la grammatizzazione nasca come un concetto tecnologico e linguistico[2], viene ricompresa da Stiegler all'interno della sfera fenomenologica,

2 Cfr. Auroux (1993).

per cui l'unità minima di tale processo è quella che il filosofo francese, in una rilettura della *Fenomenologia del tempo interno alla coscienza* di Husserl, definisce come *ritenzione terziaria*, che indica la forma esteriorizzata e pubblica della memoria in quanto traccia materiale esterna alla coscienza. Rispetto a quest'ultima, la ritenzione terziaria ne rappresenta la condizione di possibilità, in quanto sovradetermina la composizione delle ritenzioni primarie del presente (percezioni) e di quelle secondarie provenienti dal passato (i ricordi propriamente tali). È attraverso il supporto delle ritenzioni terziarie, dalle pitture rupestri alla scrittura e alla stampa, dalle macchine industriali alle tecnologie audio-visive, fino al digitale e all'IA, che la grammatizzazione può orientare i comportamenti dei gruppi umani, funzionando come supporto dei processi d'individuazione, oppure come un elemento inibente questi stessi processi, come il caso del suo stadio iperindustriale, ipertrofico e totalizzante, in cui il «malessere» si esprime nell'arresto o nella perdita dei processi di individuazione che nella teoria di Gilbert Simondon caratterizzano la realtà umana e tessono la maglia sociale delle società.

La teoria simondoniana dell'individuazione psichica e collettiva concepisce l'individuo come il risultato parziale e provvisorio di un processo che avviene nella dimensione collettiva e attraverso di essa, sempre sostenuto da un «ambiente associato», ossia da un fondo preindividuale simbolico, tecnico e sociale. Tale milieu accompagna l'individuo conservando i saperi e gli strumenti culturali accumulati nel corso della storia di una società – dal linguaggio alle istituzioni – che consentono l'interazione tra l'individuazione psichica e quella collettiva. (Simondon [2004]). In questo senso, ogni fase della grammatizzazione, riconfigurando tecno-logicamente l'ambiente preindividuale, condiziona di conseguenza lo sviluppo delle individuazioni, rendendo possibile la trasmissione delle memorie e delle conoscenze dal collettivo all'individuo e viceversa, così come le loro perdite, regressioni o cortocircuiti. Ora, se per Simondon «l'individuazione psichica e collettiva» è un processo inesauribile in cui l'*io*, in quanto *individuo psichico*, può essere pensato solo nella relazione d'individuazione reciproca che intrattiene con un *noi*, ossia un *individuo collettivo* a cui il primo appartiene, secondo Stiegler ([2021]: 98) «il mal-essere che colpisce l'epoca attuale è caratterizzato dal fatto che *io posso sempre meno* […] se non addirittura non posso affatto proiettarmi in un *noi* […]. Il *noi* è *gravemente malato*: la subordinazione dei dispositivi ritenzionali, senza cui non c'è individuazione psichica e collettiva, a una criteriologia totalmente immanente al mercato, e ai suoi imperativi divenuti egemonici, rende praticamente *impossibile* il *processo di proiezione*, attraverso cui un *noi* si costituisce *individuandosi*». L'impossibilità di tale proiezione determina una perdita d'individuazione o una disindividuazione, nel senso di uno sganciamento dell'individuo dal collettivo e di un esaurimento dei saperi in tutte le loro forme – saper-fare, saper-vivere, saperi teorici.

Sebbene la partecipazione estetica, ossia il sentire condiviso o, con la bella espressione di Sara Baranzoni ([2016a]: 33), «il noi che sente» è sempre in rapporto a un ambiente tecnico, e in co-evoluzione con esso, la brutale accelerazione dell'innovazione tecnologica rappresentata dal digitale cortocircuita la stessa sensibilità e ciò impatta sulle individuazioni psichiche e collettive, che invertono il loro processo. Per mostrare, in modo certamente distopico, l'effetto della disindividuazione, ossia «il noi che diventa un *si*» (Stiegler [2021]: 99), dunque una massa amorfa e gregaria, Stiegler usa l'immagine etologica del formicaio e dei feromoni digitali. Il formicaio esprime il «*divenire-artropode della società*», i cui dispositivi economici e politici tendono a sincronizzare i milieux preindividuali e a omogeneizzare gli individui, riducendo le loro differenze singolari a particolarità calcolabili e relativizzabili, precisamente come i ruoli intercambiabili delle formiche nel formicaio, guidate dall'informazione veicolata dai feromoni: «Non vi è più individuo, ma dei particolari gregari e tribalizzati, che sembrano condurre verso un'organizzazione sociale artropomorfa di agenti cognitivi, perfino reattivi, e tendenti a produrre, come le formiche, non più dei simboli, ma *feromoni digitali*» (Stiegler [2021]: 114). Nel formicaio digitale le relazioni sociali sono cioè automatizzate e adattate più allo schema stimolo-risposta che alla simbolizzazione e riflessione – ed è in questo tipo di milieu che prenderanno corpo i social network e le piattaforme digitali.

La miseria simbolica è anche il primo testo in cui Stiegler definisce la sua prospettiva organologica, e lo fa proprio a partire dall'estetica: «La storia estetica dell'umanità consiste in una serie disallineamenti successivi entro tre grandi organizzazioni che formano la potenza estetica dell'uomo: il suo corpo con la sua organizzazione fisiologica, i suoi organi artificiali (tecniche, oggetti, utensili, strumenti, opere d'arte) e le sue organizzazioni sociali che risultano dalla articolazione degli artefatti e dei corpi» (Stiegler [2021]: 31-32). In tal senso, Stiegler ([2021]: 32) auspica lo sviluppo di «una organologia generale che studi la storia congiunta di queste tre dimensioni dell'estetica umana e delle tensioni, invenzioni e potenziali che ne risultano. […] Solo un tale approccio genealogico permette di comprendere l'evoluzione estetica che conduce alla miseria simbolica contemporanea».

L'organologia generale è un sistema aperto e processuale di relazioni trasduttive tra i tre tipi di organi che definiscono la realtà sociale: gli organi psicofisiologici degli individui, gli organi artificiali (le ritenzioni terziarie) e le organizzazioni sociali, intendendo queste ultime all'interno di un bacino semantico che comprende le istituzioni vere e proprie, le legislazioni, i linguaggi, ecc. Per "relazioni trasduttive" Stiegler intende non solo che la variazione di un organo si riflette sulle altre tipologie di organi, ma anche che gli organi in generale acquisiscono il loro senso e le loro funzioni solo all'interno di tali relazioni, che li costituiscono. La ritenzione terziaria di cui consiste l'organo artificiale, con il proprio processo d'individuazione tecnica, rappresenta l'anello di congiunzione tra gli altri due organi che influisce sui loro rispettivi processi d'individuazione psichica e collettiva, ed è per tale ragione che le tecnologie cognitive rinviano sempre a una questione politica, dalla scrittura nella polis greca alla stampa nella modernità, fino alle piattaforme digitali del XXI secolo. Anello di congiunzione tra gli altri due organi, la ritenzione terziaria è ciò che nei testi successivi a *La miseria simbolica* diverrà il *pharmakon*, ossia ciò di cui *prendersi cura*.

2. *Farmacologia: la memoria dal* Fedro *al digitale*

Seguendo Riccardo Fanciullacci, possiamo ritrovare alla base del pensiero di Stiegler una «*tonalità emotiva fondamentale*» volta a rispondere al disagio o al malessere di un'epoca, quella iper-industriale, che chiama a un ripensamento radicale del rapporto tra tecnica e società: «Tutta la sua opera può essere letta come un tentativo di pensare e rendere pensabile questo malessere. Pensarlo significa comprenderlo nelle sue cause prime e remote, […] retrocedere fino alle più profonde condizioni che lo hanno reso possibile» (Fanciullacci [2025]: 90). Tali condizioni sono sempre tecno-logiche, senza però rinviare a un determinismo tecnologico, bensì appunto a un'organologia generale che prevede una continua co-individuazione tra il vivente, l'inorganico artificiale e le organizzazioni sociali. Vedremo ora che, nei testi successivi a *La miseria simbolica*, le condizioni tecno-logiche e organologiche si precisano come «farmacologiche», dunque mai unidirezionali (ossia unicamente verso l'individuazione oppure la dis-individuazione) ma sempre ambivalenti. Sono condizioni perciò che non causano un malessere «"senza alternative" e che dunque rendono forse possibile anche introdurre un avvenire» (*ibidem*). Obiettivo della farmacologia in un'epoca «in cui le tecnologie industriali sono divenute armi di distruzione degli ecosistemi, delle strutture sociali e degli apparati psichici» (Stiegler [2025]: 39), è infatti inventare terapeutiche volte alla ricostituzione delle facoltà umane e del sociale, riducendo la tossicità delle tecnologie e scoprendone il carattere ricostituente o di rimedio, atto a «produrre più individuazione che disindividuazione» (ivi: 158).

Se *La miseria simbolica* non indica ancora il lato farmacologico delle tecnologie contemporanee, come abbiamo visto, tuttavia, in questo testo Stiegler definisce già tutti i concetti necessari alla svolta farmacologica che prenderà corpo immediatamente dopo. Tra i testi di tale svolta, *Anamnesi e ipomnesi* (2006), *Prendersi cura* (2008) e *Della farmacologia* (2010) sono i più chiari nel mostrare sia le poste in gioco «psicopolitiche» del *pharmakon*, sia la postura etico politica della farmacologia positiva, ossia di una terapeutica sociale in grado di contrarrestare gli effetti tossici della grammatizzazione mediante progetti sociali di condivisione di saperi e di ricapacitazione tecnica, pratiche collettive di rifunzionalizzazione dei dispositivi per il bene comune e sperimentazioni socioeconomiche di ridistribuzione del valore generato in rete.

Ora, la grammatizzazione può funzionare come supporto dei processi d'individuazione, oppure come un elemento inibente per questi stessi processi, che provoca cioè una perdita sistematica di sapere, da Stiegler definita «proletarizzazione» come esteriorizzazione dei contenuti di memoria senza ritorno, vale a dire senza reinteriorizzazione (Stiegler [2015]: 33-48). È infatti il sapere nelle sue diverse forme – saper vivere, saper fare, saperi teorici – ciò «che le industrie di programmi distruggono mediante le psicotecnologie» (Stiegler [2014]: 141). Dal punto di vista farmacologico, tuttavia, «la questione non è, in fin dei conti, quella di opporsi alla grammatizzazione, […] bensì di comprendere la misura delle nuove questioni» (ivi: 182) che essa pone sul piano organologico, quindi economico, sociale e giuridico-politico. In tal senso, alla grammatizzazione occorre «rispondervi con una terapeutica – il che si deve realizzare mediante l'invenzione al tempo stesso di un nuovo modello industriale e di una nuova era dell'educazione, dell'apprendimento e dell'insegnamento come formazione della responsabilità» (*ibidem*).

La svolta farmacologica annuncia perciò la necessità di una «terapeutica» sociale di fronte ai rischi di dis-individuazione causati dalle tecnologie nel contesto neoliberale, e tale terapeutica consiste innanzitutto nel «prendersi cura» degli oggetti tecnici, organi artificiali o appunto *pharmaka*, ossia di adottare le innovazioni tecnologiche nelle diverse sfere della vita sociale al fine di promuovere lo sviluppo e la condivisione dei saperi, o in altre parole una intelligenza collettiva a misura della nuova epoca tecnologica che si sta aprendo: «Vivere intelligentemente in società è prendersi cura del sociale in modo tale che il sociale stesso sia anche una cura offerta all'individuo […]. Ciò significa articolare il sociale e l'individuo e superare la loro contraddizione apparente attraverso una politica dei *pharmaka*» (ivi: 91).

Anche se il primo riferimento della farmacologia è *La farmacia di Platone*, in cui Derrida (1978) decostruisce la metafisica platonica della presenza mostrando come nel *Fedro* si verifichi la rimozione del carattere originario della scrittura – intesa come traccia – rispetto alla voce e al logos, nella prospettiva stiegleriana il *pharmakon* non è solo la chiave per decostruire le opposizioni metafisiche di *techne* ed *episteme* o di voce e scrittura, dentro e fuori, ecc., bensì innanzitutto il motore di un ripensamento radicale della filosofia, dell'epistemologia, della politica e dell'economia, in funzione dello sviluppo di saperi che contrastino la tossicità cognitiva e sociale della tecnologia nel contesto dell'economia neoliberale. In questo senso, invece di decostruire la metafisica, Stiegler applica l'ambivalenza del *pharmakon*, quale vettore al contempo destituente e costituente della realtà umana[3], alla società nel suo complesso, orientando così la politica della memoria verso una nuova critica dell'economia politica. Per Stiegler ([2025]: 51), se è «Derrida ad aver aperto la questione farmacologica – dove l'ipomnestico è apparso costituire la condizione dell'anamnestico», egli «non ha mai preso in considerazione nemmeno la possibilità di una tale farmacologia – cioè un discorso sul *pharmakon* colto con lo stesso gesto nelle sue dimensioni curative e in quelle tossiche» (ivi: 34) – poiché «la decostruzione è sempre rimasta accampata nella logica indecidibile del supplemento» (ivi: 82). Lo scarto di Stiegler nei confronti del suo maestro si dà allora proprio rispetto a tale indecidibilità, alla quale il primo preferisce la questione dell'individuazione e della normatività organologiche, facendo del *pharmakon* una questione politica.

Con l'approdo alla farmacologia diviene chiaro che quella di Stiegler non è né un'applicazione né una variante della decostruzione, e non è nemmeno semplicemente una filosofia della tecnica, che tratta cioè la tecnica come oggetto di analisi, bensì una filosofia che denuncia la rimozione della tecnica da parte del logos filosofico e che di conseguenza pone quest'ultima al centro del discorso. In questa prospettiva la tecnica, come ciò che allo stesso tempo mette *in moto e in questione* il pensiero, pone così in discussione il proprio dell'uomo, la sua origine e la sua essenza, rivelandosi condizione originaria e continua di possibilità dell'umano. Più che una filosofia della tecnica, quella di Stiegler è una farmacologia dello spirito[4] inteso come noesi individuale e collettiva, un discorso che pensa a partire dalla presa di coscienza della situazione farmacologica che definisce l'umano e il suo ambiente.

Inoltre, la farmacologia di Stiegler implica uno spostamento rispetto al rapporto tra il soggetto della cura e il suo oggetto, nella misura in cui se nella medicina occidentale l'organismo è sia il soggetto – ciò che può possederla o perderla – che l'oggetto – ciò su cui si interviene – della salute, nella farmacologia l'organo artificiale, il *pharmakon*, manifesta la proprietà di essere tanto l'oggetto quanto il mezzo della cura, in vista della salute di un soggetto che non è più semplicemente un organismo o una coscienza, ma un complesso organologico, dunque un composto organico, inorganico e spirituale o noetico. Tale composto – che nell'ultima fase del pensiero di Stiegler (2016) verrà definito «exorganismo» – si costituisce all'interno di un'organologia, attraversando le soglie dei processi di individuazione psichica, collettiva e tecnica delle diverse tipologie di organi. Questo spostamento ribalta a sua volta il rapporto "tradizionale" tra il farmaco e i suoi effetti fisiologici, che si potrebbe schematizzare con la formula Malattia-Terapia farmacologica-Salute. Nel caso della farmacologia si passa invece a una catena più complessa: Farmaco-Patologia-Terapia farmacologica-

3 Per un'analisi del *pharmakon* da Derrida a Stiegler cfr. Vignola (2024).
4 Cfr. Fanciullacci (2024): 61-64.

Salute. In questa catena diagnostica e terapeutica, dunque, la salute e la malattia riflettono i processi di individuazione e disindividuazione in relazione alla tecnica. Si comprende allora che la sintomatologia presente in *La miseria simbolica*, al pari di quelle successive, riguarda essenzialmente ed esclusivamente i sintomi causati dalle interazioni con gli organi artificiali, che diverranno *pharmaka*, tenendo presente il peso economico e politico di tali interazioni, dunque il loro valore organologico.

Ora, sul piano politico, la diade di individuazione e disindividuazione si traduce nella dialettica tra autonomia ed eteronomia, il cui discrimine è ancora una volta nelle mani della cura, ossia della capacità di «adozione» sociale, economica e culturale della tecnologia da parte delle organizzazioni sociali, senza la quale gli individui e la società finiscono per *adattarsi* al divenire tecnologico e alle sue innovazioni disruptive, che riducono sistematicamente lo spazio d'azione del pubblico e della collettività, dunque la loro normatività sociale così come i potenziali di individuazione. Ed è proprio l'articolazione dei processi di individuazione e della normatività cognitiva e sociale qua autonomia a definire il concetto stiegleriano di salute. Secondo la diagnosi politica di Stiegler ([2025]: 66), allora, «il *phármakon*, non essendo messo al servizio dei saperi terapeutici coltivati da ciascuno dei sistemi sociali, non sostiene alcuna autonomia – né degli individui, né dei gruppi che formano il sociale –: al contrario, li sottomette alla propria eteronomia, la quale viene sistematicamente alimentata e sfruttata dal marketing e dalla società della dipendenza» e di conseguenza la società «rinuncia alla normatività e all'individuazione» (ivi: 67). A tale diagnosi Stiegler affianca l'idea di una prassi sociale capace di rovesciare il processo di dis-individuazione. Se socializzate con consapevolezza farmacologica, le psicotecnologie possono innescare nuove forme di individuazione e quindi nuovi saperi. Da psicotecnologie quindi, ossia tecnologie di controllo delle coscienze e delle facoltà cognitive, gli artefatti tecnologici contemporanei possono diventare «nootecnologie», finalizzate a potenziare il *nous*, dunque il pensiero, i saperi e i legami sociali, contribuendo così all'accrescimento dell'autonomia degli individui e dei collettivi. «Quel che tende a produrre dipendenza deve allora divenire ciò che permette di emanciparsi da questa stessa dipendenza» (Stiegler [2014]: 167): quest'affermazione sintetizza l'obiettivo generale della farmacologia.

3. *Archi-cinema terapia*

Il malessere che Stiegler analizza in *La miseria simbolica* era già stato oggetto di diagnosi nel terzo tomo della serie *La technique et le temps*, ossia *Le temps du cinéma et la question du mal-être* (2001), in cui le poste in gioco, prima di essere politiche, sono innanzitutto teoretiche e hanno contribuito a un approfondimento in chiave tecnologica dell'estetica trascendentale, anche in dialogo con i lavori sulle tecnologie della sensibilità di Pietro Montani (2014)[5]. Come indica Dario Cecchi, tale spazio euristico di condivisione si dà nel tentativo di «ripensare lo statuto e la funzione dell'immaginazione nella prospettiva della filosofia critica di matrice kantiana» (Cecchi [2025]: 39). La valenza teoretica del saggio può evincersi del resto sin dal significante «mal-essere» del titolo, il quale rinvia a un disagio dell'ontologia e più in generale della stessa filosofia, che Stiegler rende esprimibile attraverso un'analisi fenomenologica della temporalità del cinema che diviene a sua volta una critica cinematografica della coscienza, in cui il focus viene posto sull'immaginazione nel senso propriamente estetico e trascendentale.

Al centro dell'analisi si ritrova una sorta di decostruzione del capitolo sull'industria culturale di *Dialettica dell'illuminismo*. In questo testo, Adorno e Horkheimer descrivono il manifestarsi di un dominio letteralmente trascendentale sugli individui, esercitato attraverso il nascente sistema dell'industria culturale capace di pervadere sempre più piani della vita privata e sociale. Tale sistema promuoverebbe un'ideologia della razionalità efficiente e stimolerebbe il consumo compulsivo di merci da parte dei cittadini, ridotti a docili consumatori. È così che per i due esponenti della Scuola di Francoforte «la tecnica diventa psicotecnica, tecnica della manipolazione degli esseri umani» (Horkheimer, Adorno [1997]: 177) – da cui Stiegler deriva il termine di psicotecnologie:

> Il compito che lo schematismo kantiano aveva ancora lasciato ai soggetti, e cioè quello di riferire in anticipo la molteplicità dei dati sensibili ai concetti fondamentali, è levato al soggetto dall'industria. Essa attua e mette in pratica lo schematismo come primo servizio del cliente. Nell'anima era all'opera, secondo Kant, un meccanismo segreto che preparava già i dati immediati in modo che si adattassero al sistema della ragione pura. […] Per il consumatore non rimane più nulla da classificare che non sia già stato anticipato nello schematismo della produzione. (Ivi: 131)

L'industria culturale, grazie alla complicità del marketing e di Hollywood, sarebbe riuscita a modellare massivamente la coscienza dei cittadini occidentali, iniettando loro l'intrattenimento di massa e colonizzando in tal modo quello che Kant definiva lo schematismo dell'immaginazione. L'immaginazione trascendentale verrebbe anticipata e assoggettata dalle tecnologie audio-visive, il cui esito consisterebbe nel sottrarre allo spettatore la facoltà di distinguere tra realtà

5 A tal proposito, Dario Cecchi (2025: 35) evidenzia che «la discussione dello statuto della filosofia trascendentale kantiana, […] attraverso una rilettura critica dello schematismo dell'immaginazione nella *Critica della ragione pura*, consente peraltro di mettere a confronto il pensiero di Stiegler con una tradizione di pensiero dell'estetica italiana del secondo Novecento, che trova in Emilio Garroni il principale rappresentante e in Pietro Montani un filosofo attento alla questione della tecnica e un interlocutore di Stiegler».

e finzione attraverso una cinematograficizzazione della coscienza, ossia un adattamento di quest'ultima alla "logica" cinematografica e ai contenuti dell'egemonia culturale. Per Stiegler, tuttavia, Adorno e Horkheimer non sembrano comprendere che lo schematismo kantiano è già una forma primordiale di cinema, in quanto capacità di proiettare i dati dell'esperienza sul piano dei concetti puri dell'intelletto. Inoltre, in quanto sprovvisti di un pensiero della tecnicità originaria dell'umano, gli autori di *Dialettica dell'illuminismo* non possono vedere che la coscienza è da sempre il prodotto di una strutturazione e di un modellamento esercitato dalle ritenzioni terziarie che assumono varie forme possibili di "cinema", ossia di immagini riprodotte tecno-logicamente, dai graffiti rupestri in poi. Stiegler sottolinea inoltre che non occorre attendere l'industria della riproduzione automatica di immagini per comprendere l'artificialità dello schematismo, dal momento che una realtà elementare come la numerazione presuppone già degli schemi grafici – i numeri – costituiti attraverso la loro esteriorizzazione, dunque attraverso la ritenzione terziaria. Schematizzare e rappresentare la molteplicità dell'intuizione attraverso una sua classificazione numerica implica infatti la spazializzazione dei numeri – il loro essere simboli visibili e discreti – prima di essere interiorizzati dall'intelletto. Alle tre sintesi dell'immaginazione, ossia l'apprensione, la riproduzione e la ricognizione, per Stiegler occorre perciò aggiungerne una quarta, vale a dire la sintesi tecnologica della ritenzione terziaria (Stiegler [2001]: 82-91).

In altri termini, l'immaginazione trascendentale presuppone un'esteriorizzazione primordiale e costitutiva dei contenuti dello schematismo, dunque una loro spazializzazione. In quest'ottica, il problema dell'industria culturale non è la tecnica di composizione delle immagini che, in quanto risultato dell'esteriorizzazione, è precisamente una delle condizioni dell'immaginazione, bensì «il cortocircuito che risulta inevitabilmente dall'egemonia della de-simbolizzazione, della disindividuazione e del consumismo culturale che distrugge l'immaginazione, in quanto rinforza gli stereotipi e reprime i traumatipi» (Stiegler [2018b]: 166). Per il filosofo francese il vero problema risiede negli automatismi, nei cliché e degli stereotipi veicolati dall'industria culturale attraverso le ritenzioni terziarie audio-visive, che disciplinano gentilmente gli individui ed edulcorano le contraddizioni presenti nella società. Farmacologicamente poi, il cinema e le tecnologie di riproduzione delle immagini sono anche rivelatori fenomenologici del funzionamento della coscienza e del pensiero, ed è per questo motivo che possono trasformarsi in strumenti di analisi critica radicale della stessa industria culturale (Stiegler [2018b]: 166-171).

Ora, nella prospettiva stiegleriana, accogliere l'idea di una quarta sintesi, tecnologica, dell'immaginazione significa riconoscere che quest'ultima e la coscienza in generale hanno una storia tecnica, che dipende dalle interazioni con i supporti materiali della stessa immaginazione. Si tratta di una storia che affonda le sue radici nel paleolitico superiore, in quella che l'antropologo Marc Azéma (2011) ha definito «la preistoria del cinema». Nelle grotte di Lascaux o di Chavet, per esempio, si avrebbe la testimonianza di una origine del cinema, «nel senso che porta con esso la discretizzazione e la proto-riproduzione del movimento; il cinema che nasce nella sua forma industriale nel 1895 sarebbe il culmine meccanico di tale movimento» (Stiegler [2018b]: 160). Come se, prima della nascita del cinema, esistesse non solo un proto-cinema sulle pareti rupestri, ma anche un *cinema della coscienza* in continua costituzione attraverso le immagini su tali pareti. È ciò che Stiegler nomina «archi-cinema», riprendendo in un certo senso l'archi-scrittura di Derrida, ma anche differenziandone la portata semantica[6]. L'archi-cinema ha cominciato a concretizzarsi con la prima forma preistorica di cinema, incarnata dai sistemi grafici ritenzionali che proiettano e spazializzano il movimento sui muri delle grotte preistoriche:

> Vi è archi-cinema nella misura in cui per qualsiasi atto noetico – ad esempio, in un atto di percezione – la coscienza proietta il suo oggetto. Questa proiezione è un montaggio, di cui le ritenzioni terziarie (ipomnesiche) formano il tessuto, oltre a costituire sia i supporti che la sala di postproduzione. Ciò indica che l'archi-cinema ha una storia, una storia condizionata dalla storia delle ritenzioni terziarie. […] I supporti mnemo-tecnici rupestri, le pitture nelle caverne, compaiono circa trentamila anni fa e proiettano verso l'esterno i contenuti mentali, costituiscono le ritenzioni terziarie ipomnesiche e avviano un processo di grammatizzazione. (Stiegler [2018b]: 154, 156)

In questa prospettiva, lo schematismo dell'intelletto non è più un'arte nascosta nel profondo dell'animo umano, poiché è sottoposto alle condizioni espresse storicamente dai supporti tecnologici che funzionano come la quarta sintesi dell'immaginazione e che condizionano le altre sintesi. È precisamente questa quarta sintesi ciò di cui occorre prendersi cura nell'ottica di una farmacologia dello spirito, poiché condizione di quest'ultimo. Ora, per prendersi cura di questa sintesi tecno-logica, che è poi il *pharmakon* della ritenzione terziaria, occorre innanzitutto *pensarla*, ed è così che giungiamo all'ultima piega semantica della terapeutica di Stiegler, relativa alla terza fase del suo pensiero, in cui pensare (*penser*) radicalmente la tecnica è già una forma di curare (*panser*) tanto il *nous* quanto il Pianeta.

6 Analogamente alla tesi derridiana dell'archi-scrittura come la traccia che precede l'opposizione tra voce e scrittura, Stiegler pensa che nella coscienza sia all'opera un cinema primordiale che anticipa l'opposizione tra le ritenzioni e le protensioni. Tuttavia, l'archi-cinema di Stiegler differisce dall'archi-scrittura a partire dalla considerazione di quest'ultimo secondo la quale, in Derrida, la traccia e la *différance* – di cui l'archi-scrittura è un caso – rinviano alla storia della vita in generale (Stiegler [2023]: 179), mentre per lo stesso Stiegler l'archi-cinema è la traccia che è diventata tecnica umana in quanto capacità di proiezione.

4. Panser *o il pensiero come cura (del* pharmakon*)*

Nella terza fase della sua filosofia, in cui si mette al centro la doppia crisi ambientale e sociale sintetizzabile nel concetto dell'Antropocene, Stiegler estende la questione del *pharmakon* all'opposizione di entropia e neghentropia che investe tanto la sfera fisica e biologica quanto quella cibernetica e sociale – comprendendo l'entropia come il fattore che tende a ridurre la diversità in tutti i sistemi (Stiegler [2015]: 40-44). In quest'ottica, non si osserva solo un parallelismo tra la riduzione della biodiversità e un'omogeneizzazione delle diversità culturali, idiomatiche e noetiche, ma anche un loro intreccio negli effetti dell'economia politica vigente. È in questa situazione in cui i tassi di entropia si innalzano in ogni contesto che il *penser* si trova a dover equivalere a *panser*, ossia che il pensiero, compreso quello più teoretico, deve volgersi in una forma di cura neghentropica e negantropica, nel senso di un rovesciamento dell'entropia causata dalle attività antropiche sul Pianeta e dalla tossicità sociale provocata dagli ultimi stadi della grammatizzazione, ossia il digitale e l'Intelligenza Artificiale. Facendo proprie le analisi di Antoinette Rouvroy sulla governamentalità algoritmica (Berns, Rouvroy [2012]) e il *Data Behaviourism* (Rouvroy [2013]), Stiegler evidenzia che nell'epoca dei Big Data e del *machine learning* la ritenzione terziaria intraprende un'inversione di marcia organologica, per cui, da condizione dello sviluppo e trasmissione dei saperi, della sfera pubblica, dell'autonomia e dello stato di diritto, nella sua versione algoritmica attuale sta favorendo uno «stato di fatto» globale – che cioè bypassa le norme e le legittimazioni dello stato di diritto –, *condizionato* dal calcolo automatico e predittivo, nonché guidato da una governance trans-privata che annichila lo spazio pubblico e le sue istituzioni, svuotandole di senso, legittimazione e potere.

Di fronte al tendenziale prevalere del fatto sul diritto nella società automatica, che precisamente per tale ragione diviene una «dis-società», Stiegler auspica che la filosofia comprenda il proprio *dovere*, vale a dire lottare per l'instaurazione di un nuovo stato di diritto, contribuendo a colmare il ritardo sociocognitivo e normativo nel quale la disruption tecnologica ed economica ha spinto la società. Alla filosofia spetta cioè il compito di realizzare una «invenzione categoriale» (Stiegler [2019]: 107) adeguata al divenire tecnologico, «un cambio epistemico fondamentale che apra a sua volta alla reinvenzione delle istituzioni accademiche e dell'industria editoriale» (ivi: 170), puntando sulla sperimentazione e sulla condivisione di saperi e pratiche in grado di adottare normativamente le innovazioni del sistema tecnico per il bene comune e la giustizia sociale. Nel lessico stiegleriano, lo stato di diritto significa infatti, essenzialmente, una nuova epoca dei saperi, in cui all'«intelletto automatizzato» e alla razionalizzazione economica che si afferma con lo stato di fatto algoritmico si oppone una «razionalità integrante» e «una nuova epoca della cura» (ivi: 190), ossia una nuova volontà politica.

Se *panser*, omofono francese di *penser*, significa "curare", strategicamente si traduce in una lotta del pensiero per il differimento dell'entropia a tutti i livelli e, di conseguenza, per la fioritura della biodiversità, della noodiversità e della tecnodiversità. L'importanza di questa opzione "guaritrice" della filosofia, che ne fa una filosofia della cura sui generis – in quanto il primo oggetto della cura è lo stesso *pharmakon* della tecnica – si manifesta nel titolo dell'ultima serie di libri firmati da Stiegler (2018; 2020): *Qu'appelle-t-on panser?*[7]. L'obiettivo di questa serie è ripensare la storia filosofica e scientifica come conseguenza dell'esteriorizzazione tecnica o più precisamente dell'esosomatizzazione e della sua sistematica e catastrofica rimozione, per poi cercare di fornire i tratti essenziali di un pensiero della cura atto a invertire i processi entropici e antropici in nome della negantropologia – è in tal senso che questa terza fase viene comunemente definita negantropologica.

Ancora più radicalmente, ciò che il volto algoritmico dell'Antropocene simboleggia è la crisi della facoltà della ragione, del pensare, del produrre simboli, dell'immaginare – in una parola, che in questa terza fase diviene centrale, del *sognare*. Se l'immaginazione, l'attenzione, l'esperienza estetica, il sogno e la ragione sono i bersagli più colpiti dalla disruzione algoritmica, la funzione del *panser* diviene quella di ristrutturare tali facoltà, comprendendone al contempo la natura intrinsecamente tecno-logica o artificiale. Stiegler riprende allora la diagnosi di Jonathan Crary sull'"assalto al sonno" da parte del capitalismo 24/7 per farne il punto d'avvio della propria inversione farmacologica, riprendendo il concetto di archi-cinema e radicalizzandone sia la funzione teoretica che quella politica. Se l'archi-cinema, nelle sue varie attualizzazioni storiche, è sempre l'espressione di un sogno la cui concretizzazione o realizzazione lo fa passare dalla sfera individuale a quella collettiva, e se il sogno, che è «all'origine di ogni pensiero» (Stiegler [2019]: 145), è sempre organologico (ivi: 159), l'organologia dei sogni attuale non è più quella dell'epoca di *Dialettica dell'illuminismo*, in cui il cinema rappresentava «l'industrializzazione del sogno» tesa a disciplinare e incanalare i processi onirici notturni come diurni verso gli obiettivi del Mercato o della politica. Oggi l'organologia colonizzata dall'automazione rappresenta piuttosto un appiattimento dei sogni, dei desideri e dell'immaginazione in generale sul calcolo algoritmico predittivo: «Una delle forme di depotenziamento che si sperimentano all'interno degli ambienti 24/7 è la completa compromissione

7 Il titolo è un *détournement* del titolo della traduzione francese di *Was heißt denken?* (Heidegger [1954]). Da ricordare che *Prendersi cura* [*Prendre soin*] rinviava già alla traduzione francese del verbo tedesco *Besorgen*, a cui Heidegger si riferisce per indicare la preoccupazione mondana, il modo in cui il *Dasein* si rapporta a ciò che è a portata di mano, dunque alla tecnica; in tal senso esprimerebbe una forma di cura inautentica. Ora, mentre Heidegger oppone la *Sorge*, ossia la cura autentica, al *Besorgen*, per Stiegler la *Sorge* scaturisce dal *Besorgen*: solo prendendosi cura della tecnica si accede al senso della *Sorge*, come cura autentica.

della capacità di sognare a occhi aperti o di perdersi nei propri pensieri» (Crary [2013]: 93). La conseguenza più grave consiste così nell'annichilimento della «possibilità stessa di sognare in quanto forma primordiale e più comune di fare esperienza dell'improbabile» (Stiegler [2019]: 221), ossia di quel che può e deve essere immaginato perché dal divenire tecnologico e dalla sua razionalizzazione automatica delle esistenze possano sorgere le condizioni epistemiche, noetiche e giuridiche per l'avvenire razionale e ragionevole della società.

Nell'analisi di Stiegler la ragione non scompare tout court, ma viene appiattita sulla logica statistica e computazionale, per cui si assiste a un «*divorzio disruptivo* di un intelletto computazionale e della ragione a sua volta divenuta, in quanto razionalizzazione, una sragione computazionale» (Stiegler [2016]: 145). Curare la ragione significa allora, da un lato, ripensarne lo statuto innanzitutto come capacità di rispondere all'esteriorizzazione tecnica mediante la reinteriorizzazione simbolica, e dall'altro lato liberarne il potenziale immaginativo, dis-automatizzante, finzionale e quindi onirico. Seguendo Sara Baranzoni ([2016b]: 65), tale «operazione consisterà nell'opporre alla *razionalizzazione* capitalistica il *ragionevole* e il *razionale*, sia come risposta alle finzioni menzognere che limitano la possibilità di agire, sia come apertura a "la possibilité et la nécessité de fictionner", ossia al sogno».

Ecco allora che di fronte allo stato di fatto dell'Antropocene, causato da un *anthropos* che ha trasformato il sogno tecnologico nell'incubo entropico dell'umanità, la funzione della ragione deve immaginare il suo superamento. È ciò che Stiegler nomina *Negantropocene,* precisamente in quanto sogno collettivo, ossia immaginazione sociale capace di inventare un nuovo rapporto politico tra gli organi artificiali e le organizzazioni collettive, dunque una nuova epoca dei saperi e della sensibilità: «La posta in gioco nella nuova organizzazione sociale che bisogna sognare, concepire e realizzare – vale a dire instaurare e istituire come *therapeia* del nuovo *pharmakon* – è il tempo del sapere, così come può e deve essere guadagnato grazie a e sull'automatizzazione, per poi essere ridistribuito» (Stiegler [2019]: 170).

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Fine del mondo e dramma della presenza: il riscatto estetico della crisi in Ernesto De Martino

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Abstract. In his great unfinished project on the "end of the world" (*La fine del mondo*), Ernesto De Martino reformulates his perspective on the concept of "presence" and the role of cultural institutions. Faced with the crisis of modernity, the salvific and reintegrative function of mythical-ritual and religious practices (explored in his most famous writings, from *Il mondo magico* to *La terra del Rimorso*) is extended to cultural and symbolic activity as a whole. The conquest of a stable "presence" thus refers to the need to establish a "world" as a horizon of making sense: an establishment that passes through the aesthetic dimension as a privileged and exemplary space.

Keywords. De Martino, presence, aesthetics, crisis, culture.

1. *Mondo magico e modernità occidentale: il dramma della presenza*

Il possibile riprodursi della realtà magica anche per l'uomo occidentale colto indica come la presenza decisa e garantita è un bene storico e in quanto tale, in determinate condizioni, revocabile. Tutto, nella vita dello spirito, può essere rimesso in causa, anche quelle conquiste che sembravano messe al riparo da qualunque rischio, e quindi anche la conquista fondamentale di esserci nel mondo. In una situazione di particolari sofferenze e privazioni, nel corso di una guerra, di una carestia ecc. l’esserci può non resistere alla tensione eccezionale, e può quindi di nuovo aprirsi al dramma esistenziale magico. (De Martino [1948]: 129)

La citazione da cui ho scelto di partire è abbastanza nota, almeno per chi abbia una certa confidenza con il pensiero di Ernesto De Martino. Si tratta di un passo tratto da *Il mondo magico*, il testo che si incarica di annunciare e giustificare, per la prima volta in modo compiuto, la sua “scoperta” teorica più importante, destinata a essere ripresa e approfondita in tutti gli scritti successivi, e cioè la «scoperta della crisi della presenza come rischio di non esserci nel mondo» (De Martino [195]: 7). La peculiarità di questo passo, tuttavia, non sta tanto nel riferimento a una simile scoperta, alla “presenza” come «conquista fondamentale di esserci nel mondo». All’interno de *Il mondo magico*, del resto, di passaggi su questo tema se ne potrebbero individuare (e citare) molti, e ben più significativi. È un passo importante, al contrario, perché in poche righe – affidate a una nota che compare nel capitolo centrale, quello più denso e rilevante, dedicato al “dramma storico del mondo magico” – De Martino sembra mettere in questione uno degli assunti centrali su cui poggia quella stessa scoperta. Il mondo magico, caratterizzato da una dinamica di crisi (della presenza) e riscatto (favorito, appunto, dall’istituto culturale della magia), è infatti un mondo storico e culturale distante e radicalmente differente dal mondo della modernità occidentale: «un’altra epoca, un mondo storico diverso dal nostro», impegnati nello sforzo di fondare «ciò che per noi è un dato o un fatto» – l’individualità e l’esserci nel mondo – e che, in quell’epoca, «stava come compito e maturava come risultato» (De Martino [1948]: 161). Costantemente esposta al pericolo di disgregazione davanti alla pressione di una realtà esterna non ancora pienamente controllata (e controllabile), la presenza di cui parla De Martino è una presenza “arcaica”, legata a forme di vita “primitive” o comunque “altre” rispetto a quelle della civiltà occidentale. Da una parte, insomma, «una civiltà come la nostra, in cui la decisione di sé e del mondo non forma più problema culturale dominante e caratterizzante, noi siamo dati a noi stessi senza rischio sostanziale, e gli oggetti e gli eventi del mondo si presentano alla coscienza empirica come “dati” sottratti al dramma dell’umano produrre»; dall’altra, una dimensione storica e sociale “drammatica”, in cui «la presenza è ancora impegnata a raccogliersi come unità in cospetto del mondo, a trattenersi e limitarsi, e correlativamente il mondo non è ancora allontanato dalla presenza, gettato davanti ad essa e ricevuto come indipendente» (ivi: 128). Ebbene, il passo citato in apertura indebolisce e, in qualche modo, sovverte questa contrapposizione. La presenza «decisa e garantita», sostiene lì De Martino quasi di sfuggita, è un bene, sì, «storico» – un risultato mediato, frutto di lotte, compromessi e decisioni –, ma soprattutto «revocabile», almeno «in determinate condizioni», anche «per l'uomo occidentale colto». Come dire: il rischio di disgregazione della presenza (e del mondo stesso) non riguarda solo il dramma storico del mondo magico, ma è un rischio costitutivo e ineliminabile dall'orizzonte umano, che richiede, in quanto tale, uno sforzo culturale da rinnovare costantemente da parte del singolo e della comunità.

La prospettiva aperta da questo passo non toglie nulla alle acquisizioni teoriche fondamentali de *Il mondo magico*. Da un certo punto di vista, anzi, quasi rafforza il carattere innovativo e dirompente di un testo che, nel denunciare «la ipostasi metafisica di una formazione storica», restituisce valore culturale e storico al mondo magico, ponendo le basi per quell'"etnocentrismo critico" volto a ricavare dal confronto con l'alterità (magica ed extraoccidentale) una maggiore e più ampia coscienza delle peculiarità, dei limiti e del ruolo della civiltà occidentale. È in questo senso, d'altronde, che De Martino, nella prefazione alla prima edizione del libro, presenta la sua interpretazione «storicistica» del magismo come «un contributo alla formazione del neoumanismo moderno», e cioè di «un più ampio umanesimo» (ivi: 3-7), capace di superare sia l'etnocentrismo eurocentrico (e la sua controparte, il relativismo culturale) sia il ritorno di ogni forma di irrazionalismo (che la generazione di De Martino aveva visto concretizzarsi drammaticamente nell'Europa dell'epoca).

È suggestiva, d'altra parte, anche la lettura proposta da Cesare Cases, che in quella nota sull'"uomo occidentale colto" individua il segno di una sorta di «*transfert*», una proiezione dell'angoscia provocata dalla crisi dell'Occidente sul mondo magico che influenza la struttura e il tono stesso dell'analisi di De Martino («l'accento di profonda partecipazione, l'intensità esistenziale che permea la descrizione della crisi del riscatto della presenza»). Sulla base di questa proiezione, «la labilità e la precarietà vissute nel presente diventano le costanti essenziali del mondo magico», e, «per converso, la crisi del presente appare come una ripetizione, un ritorno della situazione dell'età magica» (come indicherebbe, appunto, il passo sul possibile ritorno del dramma magico nel mondo moderno e "colto"). *Il mondo magico* costituirebbe così «un "riscatto della presenza" del mondo occidentale», qualcosa di riconducibile al «processo di autocritica» (Cases, in ivi: XXV-XXVI) che si impone all'interno di una civiltà sconvolta dalla catastrofe della Seconda guerra mondiale.

Ora, tutto questo è vero, almeno in linea generale. È vero, cioè, che, nel ricondurre la presenza umana alla sua dimensione storica, *Il mondo magico* getta un'ombra sulla tenuta e la presunta inattaccabilità delle strutture esistenziali e culturali del mondo occidentale. E tuttavia, al tempo stesso, è difficile non riconoscere nelle poche righe di quella nota i tratti essenziali di una prospettiva destinata a trovare spazio e a essere approfondita da De Martino solo negli anni successivi. È nelle ultime opere degli anni Sessanta, in particolare – *Furore, sim-*

bolo, valore e il grande progetto, lasciato incompiuto, sulla *Fine del mondo* – che la distinzione netta tra mondo magico e civiltà occidentale viene messa in questione, ridefinita e, sostanzialmente, superata, quantomeno in relazione al tema della presenza e della sua difesa attraverso determinate "tecniche culturali". Qui, infatti, il rischio di una crisi della presenza e l'esigenza di una reintegrazione simbolica e rituale non riguardano più soltanto una realtà «in decisione» che ancora «cerca di costituirsi» (ivi: 129) come quella magica, ma anche, e in prima istanza, la realtà della modernità occidentale.

Si tratta di un passaggio fondamentale, a cui De Martino giunge intrecciando e saldando, via via in modo sempre più originale e produttivo nel corso degli anni (con la cosiddetta "trilogia meridionalista": *Morte e pianto rituale*, *Sud e magia*, *La terra del rimorso*), ricerca etnologica, comparativismo storico-religioso, impianto teorico-filosofico e studi psicopatologici. Da questo punto di vista, il progetto di un "più ampio umanesimo" prospettato nel *Mondo magico*, passando attraverso le indagini sul rapporto tra razionalità e magia, lamento funebre e tarantismo – che estendono la funzione salvifica dei dispositivi magici agli istituti religiosi e, insieme, approfondiscono il confronto tra la dialettica crisi-reintegrazione e i fenomeni psicopatologici – trova un approdo e una riformulazione proprio nelle ultime opere. Nel suo libro sulle *Favole del reincanto,* Stefania Consigliere ha interpretato questo cambio di prospettiva come l'indice di un mutamento di sguardo sulla "modernità egemone", evidenziandone il carattere politico. Se «per larga parte della sua vita, passata a difendere il mondo magico dal disprezzo dei contemporanei», sostiene infatti Consigliere, De Martino «ha ritenuto che il mondo moderno fosse quello più alto e desiderabile», nei primi anni Sessanta «fissa gli occhi su qualcosa che i francofortesi già avevano visto sulle coste dell'America del nord, e comincia a nutrire dubbi sulla tenuta e sull'implicita superiorità della civiltà che lo circonda». Sono proprio i materiali preparatori per il libro su *La fine del mondo* che «segnano questo limite: la crisi non è più il barcollare di una presenza arcaica e fragile, ma eventualità ineliminabile per tutti, rischio radicale dei singoli e dei collettivi» (Consigliere [2020]: 125-126). Apertamente "militante", perché orientata a ricollocare il pensiero maturo di De Martino al centro del dibattito contemporaneo sul tema del "disincantamento" e del "reincantamento" del mondo, l'interpretazione di Consigliere ha il merito di porre l'accento sulla svolta che ridefinisce i caratteri e la portata stessa dell'"umanesimo etnografico" di De Martino: la possibilità che il mondo finisca – il mondo come ordine culturale intersoggettivo, entro cui la presenza si instaura e trova protezione – «prende forme e nomi diversi a seconda delle circostanze, ma non è mai scomparsa dall'orizzonte neanche alle nostre latitudini» (ivi: 126).

Come il disagio per Freud, insomma, il rischio che la presenza vacilli e il mondo collassi è un rischio *della* civiltà, non *di una* civiltà, che si estende ben oltre i confini del mondo magico, primitivo o subalterno, coinvolgendo la soggettività in quanto tale, nel suo costituirsi e mantenersi stabile e autonoma. Spogliata di strumenti protettivi, la presenza umana corre costantemente il pericolo di perdersi, e cioè di perdere il legame con l'orizzonte di un mondo domestico, operabile, e "sensato". Di qui, la necessità di elaborare strumenti culturali e sociali in grado di scongiurare questo rischio, favorendo una reintegrazione e uno slancio valorizzante che trascenda la crisi: è il caso dei dispositivi mitico-rituali e religiosi, incaricati di arginare le crisi esistenziali e l'angoscia legata al divenire attraverso una "destorificazione istituzionale" (cfr. Massenzio, in De Martino [2019]: 36-43; De Martino [2025]); ma anche, più in generale, degli apparati simbolici – della cultura come simbolo ed ethos –, capaci di costruire un "mondo" come orizzonte di sensatezza e di mediare culturalmente tra crisi e riscatto, tra "furore" e "valore".

La crisi della modernità occidentale su cui De Martino fissa lo sguardo negli ultimi scritti degli anni Sessanta è, appunto, una crisi della capacità di elaborare tecniche culturali di controllo efficaci, in grado di favorire quell'"ethos del trascendimento della vita in valori intersoggettivi" che costituisce il fine ultimo del suo umanesimo, fondato su un simbolismo laico e civile. Anche gli istituti culturali e simbolici sono soggetti alla precarietà e al logorio. La fine del mondo – del mondo presente, e, in realtà, di ogni mondo – coincide con la crisi di questi istituti, e cioè con un'"apocalissi culturale" che porta al crollo di quell'ethos e alla conseguente perdita di familiarità e operabilità del mondo. In questo senso, la perdita del mondo comporta uno spaesamento esemplificato dai due casi-limite del "campanile di Marcellinara" e delle "apocalissi psicopatologiche": da un lato, l'angoscia e il terrore di un vecchio pastore della provincia calabrese che dal finestrino della macchina vede scomparire progressivamente il campanile del proprio paesino, punto di riferimento del suo mondo familiare e della sua "patria culturale" (De Martino [2019]: 364-365); dall'altro, le crisi psicopatologiche – a cui De Martino dedica ampio spazio e una ricca documentazione nella *Fine del mondo* –, in cui si manifesta nel modo più radicale il crollo di ogni slancio valorizzante e normativo e, perciò, il rischio di una "nuda crisi", priva di un orizzonte di riscatto e sensatezza (ivi: 155-242).

2. *La fine del mondo come crisi della cultura*

Nel 1964, chiamato a partecipare al convegno internazionale "Il mondo di domani" organizzato da Pietro Prini, De Martino espone i temi e le coordinate principali della ricerca sulla fine del mondo e le apocalissi culturali che lo stava impegnando dall'inizio del decennio. E, difatti, al centro del suo intervento, solo apparentemente «impertinente» e «*iettatorio*», non sta tanto il problema del "domani", ma quello preliminare dell'"oggi", e cioè della coscienza culturale

– giunta a piena maturazione nel corso del Novecento – che il rapporto uomo-mondo si articola in due momenti «distinti e congiunti»: il mondo umano, come orizzonte di senso e operabilità, non *deve* finire – nonostante la finitezza dell'esistenza dei singoli individui, e anzi, proprio per questa ragione – e, al tempo stesso, *può* finire, «nel senso che l'umana civiltà può autoannientarsi, perdere il senso dei valori intersoggettivi della vita umana, e impiegare le stesse potenze del dominio tecnico della natura secondo una modalità che è priva di senso per eccellenza». Secondo De Martino, il carattere «fondamentale» dell'epoca contemporanea è proprio «che essa vive come forse non mai è accaduto nella storia nella drammatica consapevolezza di questo *deve* e di questo *può*, nell'alternativa che il mondo *deve* continuare ma che *può* finire, che la vita deve avere un senso ma che può anche perderlo per tutti e per sempre, e che l'uomo, solo l'uomo, porta intera la responsabilità di questo deve e di questo può». Nei riferimenti all'autoannientamento e alla perdita di controllo sulla tecnica c'è il richiamo, evidente – ed esplicito, poco più avanti nel testo –, alla tragedia dei campi di sterminio nazisti e del disastro nucleare. Questi eventi, tuttavia, costituiscono per De Martino la manifestazione concreta di una crisi che ha radici più profonde. La coscienza culturale del rischio di una "fine del mondo", infatti, va ricondotta all'impatto di fenomeni e mutamenti di carattere più generale: «le rapidissime trasformazioni nei generi di vita introdotte dal diffondersi del progresso tecnico, le correnti migratorie dalla campagna alla città, da regioni sottosviluppate a regioni industriali, il salto improvviso da economie più o meno arretrate o addirittura da società tribali a economie e società ormai inserite nel mondo occidentale». Sono questi processi ad aver provocato «le lacerazioni e i vuoti» che hanno condotto alla crisi i modelli culturali che guidavano il rapporto uomo-mondo e «un gran numero di patrie culturali tradizionali senza che tuttavia la integrazione nella nuova patria culturale avesse avuto il tempo di maturarsi» (De Martino [1964], ora in De Martino [2019]: 70-71). Già in *Furore Simbolo Valore*, d'altronde, De Martino aveva interpretato l'esplosione di violenza distruttiva del capodanno di Stoccolma del 1956 – con la strada principale della città messa a ferro e fuoco da bande di giovani in preda a un "furore" irrefrenabile – come «la realtà *psicologica* di cui la bomba a idrogeno costituisce l'equivalente sotto forma di *simbolo* materiale», rintracciando in questa aggressività cieca e senza scopo il segno di un "istinto di morte" freudiano non controllato, «una forza che non trova adeguati modelli di risoluzione culturale, e che non si disciplina in un alveo di deflusso e di arginamento socialmente accettabile e moralmente conciliabile con la coscienza dei valori umani faticosamente conquistata nel corso della millenaria storia d'Occidente» (De Martino [1962]: 190-191). Se le società arcaiche offrivano uno schema e una reintegrazione culturale per questa aggressività – attraverso feste e cerimoniali ufficiali come il capodanno babilonese, i Saturnali romani o i riti di iniziazione, che incanalavano l'impulso di eversione e distruzione all'interno di una cornice mitica e simbolica – il capodanno di Stoccolma si presenta come un rito svuotato di ogni senso e di ogni funzione sociale, mostrando la crisi dei modelli tradizionali e la debolezza delle forme istituzionali contemporanee. Anche in questo caso, la diagnosi si concentra sull'improvviso rinnovamento delle strutture culturali del mondo occidentale e sulla «crisi di crescenza» di un nuovo umanesimo che, pur «incamminato verso la democrazia laica e verso il riconoscimento di ideali integralmente mondani», non ha ancora trovato il suo equilibrio:

> Si è verificata una crisi delle credenze tradizionali, ma gli individui non trovano ancora nella società i modi adatti per partecipare attivamente all'esperienza morale che alimenta la democrazia laica, e per sentirsi protagonisti del suo destino. A una falsa libertà fondata sulla miseria si è creduto troppo spesso contrapporre una democrazia fondata esclusivamente sul benessere, mentre il problema centrale resta la partecipazione a un certo ordine di valori morali, un piano di controllo e di risoluzione culturale della vita istintiva. (ivi: 192)

Insomma, l'acuirsi della percezione della possibilità di una "fine del mondo" è legato direttamente alle trasformazioni epocali che interessano la società occidentale nei decenni successivi alla fine del conflitto mondiale. È il tema della "crisi della cultura" novecentesca, affrontato in quegli anni da molti intellettuali europei e americani – i francofortesi (con *La dialettica dell'illuminismo*, ovviamente, ma anche, ad esempio, con lo scritto di Adorno sulla *Halbbildung*), nonché, tra gli altri, Günther Anders, T.S. Eliot (*Notes towards the Definition of Culture*), Hannah Arendt (*La crisi della cultura: nella società e nella politica),* Clement Greenberg su kitsch e arte astratta e Dwight Macdonald sul *Midcult* – che si confrontano con i traumi del conflitto mondiale, la rottura con la tradizione, l'accelerazione dei processi tecnologici ed economici e l'emergere di una società (e di una cultura) di massa. "Crisi della cultura", intesa come svolta radicale connessa al processo di modernizzazione della società occidentale, significa dunque, in prima istanza, crisi di una struttura culturale incapace di stabilizzarsi e farsi ethos. Ebbene, l'apocalisse culturale del mondo contemporaneo indagata da De Martino ha a che fare proprio con la crisi dei rapporti istituzionali tra individuo e società e con l'assenza di un ethos culturale intersoggettivo, condiviso e accettato spontaneamente (un "mondo" o una "patria culturale"). Ed è una crisi che trova riscontro nella produzione artistica contemporanea, in cui si manifestano i sintomi dell'"apocalissi senza escaton" che incombe sulla società occidentale.

Le riflessioni e gli appunti della *Fine del mondo* dedicati a questo tema – raccolti in un capitolo organico solo nell'ultima edizione critica del testo ("L'apocalisse dell'Occidente", ivi: 347-412) – segnalano in modo chiaro l'ampliamento della prospettiva di De Martino, che dopo le ricerche sul mondo magico e religioso delle società arcaiche e delle classi subalterne del Mezzogiorno rivolge la propria attenzione ai prodotti della cultura "alta" e "borghese". Lo spazio più ampio è riservato alla letteratura e quella "malattia degli oggetti" che emerge attraverso le questioni della nausea, della noia, dell'assurdo e dell'incomunicabilità (principalmente in Sartre, Camus, Moravia e Beckett): il mondo "indigesto", "vuoto" e "assurdo" è un mondo segnato dalla «catastrofe del mondano, del domestico, dell'appaesato, del significante e dell'operabile [...], che narra con meticolosa e talora ossessiva accuratezza il disfarsi del configurato, l'estraniarsi del domestico, lo spaesarsi dell'appaesato, il perder di senso del significante, l'inoperabilità dell'operabile». Tuttavia, i passaggi più significativi riguardano la crisi generale delle arti, che si rivela esemplarmente in un'insofferenza formale e simbolica che investe anche la produzione artistica plastica e figurativa. La crisi delle arti, infatti, è tale proprio perché «la rottura con un piano teologico della storia e con il senso che ne derivava [...] diventa non già stimolo per un nuovo sforzo di discesa nel caos e di anabasi verso l'ordine, ma caduta negli inferi, senza ritorno, e idoleggiamento del contingente, del privo di senso, del mero possibile, del relativo, dell'irrelato, dell'irriflesso, dell'immediatamente vissuto, dell'incomunicabile, del solipsistico» (ivi: 355 e 357-358). La "malattia" delle arti e della cultura occidentali sta tutta in questa «catabasi senza anabasi»: che in epoca di crisi, dice De Martino, le arti – proprio le arti figurative, ad esempio, interessate in quegli anni da una svolta performativa e "oggettuale" – sentano l'esigenza di «un bagno nella vita», è comprensibile; ma, anche se «non si può prescrivere in astratto di quanto occorra perdere il mondo ordinato per ricondurlo all'ordine», ciò che più conta «è che la ripresa avvenga, quale che sia il livello cui si deve scendere per tale riprendere: avvenga, cioè, la ripresa verso la forma, verso i valori, verso l'ordine intersoggettivo, comunicabile, umano» (ivi: 358).

Nella sua analisi, De Martino costeggia pericolosamente un conservatorismo culturale di stampo (non a caso) apocalittico e, sotto certi aspetti, reazionario, incline a ridurre senza resti la rottura della modernità artistica alla semplice espressione dell'assurdo e dello "stravagante", nonché, in alcuni casi – come ricorda anche Daniel Fabre (ivi: 352-353) –, a cedere alla tentazione di una lettura "clinica" e "patologica" di quelle stesse produzioni. Nel caso delle arti figurative, d'altronde, l'unico riferimento esplicito all'interno del testo riguarda Hans Sedlmayr e il suo celebre scritto sulla "perdita del centro". Non è facile indagare e definire questo aspetto del pensiero di De Martino. Tanto più che, oltre al carattere provvisorio e incompleto degli appunti raccolti ne *La fine del mondo*, il clima intorno alle arti in quegli anni è effettivamente un clima da "apocalissi culturale", almeno nel dibattito italiano: basti pensare, in proposito, a Giulio Carlo Argan, che parla di *Crisi dei valori* (1957) e di *Salvezza e caduta dell'arte moderna* (1961); a Cesare Brandi, che in *Segno e immagine* descrive la «traiettoria fatale» di una civiltà «che produce Hartung, Pollock, Fautrier, Burri» (Brandi [1960]: 85-86); o ancora, a Emilio Garroni, che nei suoi primi scritti degli anni Sessanta si occupa del problema di una crisi semantica delle arti (una crisi di istituzionalità e della capacità simbolica delle arti contemporanee), rivendicando, con esplicito riferimento proprio a De Martino, la funzione "magica" dell'artista come «amministratore e dispensatore di garanzie esistenziali e culturali», a cui spetta il compito non «di raddoppiare il senso del rischio suo e nostro», ma di «"esorcizzarlo"» (Garroni [1964a]: 41; cfr. anche Garroni [1964b]). Come che stiano le cose, ciò che interessa è che in tutti questi autori – secondo prospettive certamente differenti, ma affatto inconciliabili, almeno su questo punto – il problema principale è rappresentato dalla progressiva scomparsa di ogni ambizione formale nelle arti contemporanee, che si riflette nella perdita di efficacia e rilevanza culturale. È così anche per De Martino, che, in un certo senso, trasferisce queste preoccupazioni all'interno della sua visione di un più ampio e nuovo umanesimo fondato su un simbolismo civile:

> L'arte è un modo di recuperare gli eventi minacciati dall'irrigidimento e dal caos, ed è quindi un modo di curare e di guarire il sempre possibile ammalarsi degli oggetti. Ma questo recupero, secondo le varie temperie storiche e secondo le varie congiunture culturali, si compie a vari livelli: se nell'arte vi è sempre un momento di discesa agli inferi, cioè sino al piano in cui l'oggetto è in crisi, non può essere stabilito una volta per sempre di quanti gradini è lecito scendere per compiere poi la anabasi. Ciò che importa è che il piano sia raggiunto e che l'anabasi si compia (sia comunicabile, intersoggettiva, reintegratrice) […]. Ciò che importa è che il momento della discesa non sia scambiato con la liberazione, e che la caccia spietata alla "malattia degli oggetti", non sia esibita come guarigione o idealeggiata proprio in quanto malattia. (De Martino [2019]: 358)

Il "sempre possibile ammalarsi degli oggetti" rimanda, come è evidente, allo spaesamento e alla fine o crisi del mondo (e della presenza), e cioè al duplice rischio di "perdere il mondo" e di "essere perduti nel mondo". È in questa prospettiva e, forse, solo in questa prospettiva, dice De Martino, che «è possibile giudicare la cosiddetta "arte contemporanea", che non è da condannare perché si è allontanata dal naturalismo e ha consumato la catastrofe della figura». Se l'arte figurativa rinascimentale, ad esempio, «non aveva bisogno di scendere molto in basso per recuperare oggetti ed eventi, e per compiere l'anabasi verso la forma», l'arte contemporanea «deve raggiungere livelli molto più profondi per tentare la catarsi». Il problema, appunto, non è la discesa, ma la risalita, che porta – può e deve portare – alla costruzione di un ordine culturale intersoggettivo e condiviso. La "funzione magica" dell'arte è legata alla sua capacità di elaborare segni e simboli dotati di sostanza e necessità culturali, in grado di far fronte al rischio – sempre presente – di una perdita di senso e della presenza nel mondo. L'arte, dunque, è un modo di fondare un mondo e di legittimarne culturalmente la tenuta e la validità. In questo senso, dice De Martino, la cultura «è ethos ordinante: e il disordine, la indeterminazione, ecc. stanno non come ideale ma come limite interno e come ironia di ogni progetto culturale di unificazione del mondo, limite e ironia che garantiscono la storia, cioè la inesauribilità della progettazione ordinatrice» (ivi: 358-359).

3. *Il "mondo" come orizzonte di sensatezza*

Nel percorso che dal *Mondo magico* porta De Martino alla svolta degli ultimi scritti degli anni Sessanta, anche il concetto di "presenza" subisce variazioni di tono e aggiustamenti teorici. Ancora una volta, come nel caso della prospettiva (più o meno reazionaria e apocalittica) sulle arti contemporanee, non è facile individuare con precisione le coordinate di questo sviluppo. Solo che qui la difficoltà non sta tanto nel difetto di riferimenti e materiali a cui fare appello, ma, al contrario, nell'eccesso e nella difficoltà di sbrogliarli e comporli. Fin dagli esordi, infatti, De Martino prende a piene mani da diverse discipline, forzandone confini, concetti e metodologie: l'etnologia, l'antropologia e la storia delle religioni, ovviamente; ma anche, in larga parte, la psichiatria e la psicoanalisi (Freud, naturalmente, ma anche Jung e la sua concezione del simbolo) e, soprattutto, la filosofia, con lo storicismo crociano – da cui muovono i primi scritti – su cui si innestano via via prospettive e suggestioni riconducibili più o meno esplicitamente all'esistenzialismo (italiano ed europeo, da Abbagnano e Paci a Merleau-Ponty, con Heidegger e il *Dasein* sempre sullo sfondo) e al confronto critico con il marxismo (incapace di comprendere, almeno nella sua versione più povera e riduzionista, la natura e la funzione dei fenomeni religiosi).

Nel corso di questo sviluppo, d'altra parte, il concetto di "presenza", insieme al dramma legato al rischio di una sua disgregazione e all'esigenza di un riscatto, è soggetto a una doppia oscillazione. Da un lato, infatti, la presenza ha un carattere individuale e, al tempo stesso, collettivo e sociale; dall'altro, la sua crisi ha che fare con l'angoscia connessa all'irruzione del futuro e di una storicità insostenibile (con i dispositivi mitico-rituali che hanno un compito di destorificazione e "dissimulazione" del divenire), ma anche – soprattutto negli scritti della maturità – con un passato che "non passa" e che blocca la vita psichica (e qui il rito e il simbolo diventano ripetizione che mima la crisi per superare e reintegrare culturalmente il sintomo).

Non mi posso soffermare su questa oscillazione, che pure meriterebbe un'analisi attenta e approfondita. È bene, comunque, prendere le mosse da una qualche definizione del concetto di "presenza" che ne rispetti la ricchezza e la complessità. Consigliere, ad esempio, ne fornisce una molto produttiva e ben calibrata, che rimanda alla «profonda *implicazione*» tra soggetto e mondo e al problema di una sensatezza di fondo legata a quell'implicazione:

> un modo di stare al mondo e di essere umani, elaborato da un collettivo nel corso della sua storia e depositato nei singoli; una certa temporalità, una certa spazialità, una certa consuetudine; la possibilità di rispondere ai problemi con strumenti rodati; la capacità di lavorare i margini dell'esistente a fronte di situazioni inedite. (Consigliere [2020]: 123)

Proseguendo nella sua argomentazione su questa relazione reciproca tra individuo e ambiente, Consigliere fa riferimento al concetto di “individuazione” di Gilbert Simondon e al preindividuale come «fondo comune» e «strato potenziale» da cui emergono sia la presenza che il mondo (secondo un nesso che è insieme biologico, psichico e storico-culturale). Ma si potrebbe citare, in proposito, la nozione di “forma di vita” di Wittgenstein, anch’essa legata a una duplicità di fondo (trascendentale ed empirica, biologica e culturale). Oppure – ed è questa l’alternativa che più mi interessa evidenziare – si può chiamare in causa il “senso comune” della *Critica della facoltà di giudizio* di Kant.

De Martino, in realtà, non cita mai Wittgenstein o Simondon (all’epoca, d’altronde, molto poco conosciuto e studiato), né, tantomeno, Kant; o, almeno, non il Kant della terza Critica. Nel *Mondo magico*, infatti, Kant viene tirato in ballo in uno dei passaggi più significativi, quando De Martino, con una mossa filosoficamente azzardata – che gli valse la celebre critica di Croce (De Martino [1948]: 240-253) – accosta la presenza all’unità sintetica dell’appercezione, rivendicandone la storicità contro ogni garanzia trascendentale (ivi: 159). Ma si tratta, appunto, del Kant della *Critica della Ragion Pura* (Kant [1781]: § 16 e § 17, 162-166).

Nella *Fine del mondo*, il “progetto comunitario” di un mondo “domestico” e “utilizzabile”, plasmato dalla valorizzazione culturale e simbolica (l’“ethos del trascendimento della vita nel valore”), rimanda, come notato giustamente da Giordana Charuty (De Martino [2019]: 475-479), al confronto con Heidegger – filtrato dall’esistenzialismo “positivo” di Abbagnano – e con la filosofia delle forme simboliche di Cassirer. In questa tensione tra simbolico e trascendentale, tuttavia, emergono questioni e formulazioni che richiamano molto da vicino il “senso comune” kantiano quale condizione della capacità creativa umana e della stessa sensatezza dell’esperienza, principio ed effetto di una facoltà del giudizio «originaria e naturale» e insieme «da acquisire e artificiale» (Kant [1790]: § 22, 75) legato a un dover-essere etico (un dovere come *Sollen*, distinto dal *Müssen* teoretico). Proprio il dover-essere del senso, d’altronde (e cioè il dover-essere di un mondo sensato che accoglie e nutre la presenza), riecheggia nell’interpretazione dell’*esserci* heideggeriano sostenuta da De Martino, che evidenzia la necessità di considerare «l’*in-der-Welt-sein* come un *sein-sollen*, dover essere primordiale della presentificazione e quindi dell’esserci in un mondo culturale» (De Martino [1948]: 523). Il principio dell’ethos del trascendimento della vita nel valore è, insomma, un dover-essere trascendentale, «il principio che rende intellegibile il distacco del culturale dal naturale, innanzitutto nel trascendimento inaugurale della produzione della vita materiale, […] e quindi nel trascendimento del progetto comunitario dell’utilizzabile mediante altri trascendimenti culturali (diritto, politica, morale, arte, religione, filosofia, scienza…)». Ed è proprio il mancato riconoscimento di questo principio – per citare un altro passaggio significativo – a caratterizzare secondo De Martino il materialismo marxista, che per questa ragione si configura come «ethos del trascendimento che ha vergogna di sé», comprensibile solo «come *sollen* mascherato [...]: mascherato per ragioni polemiche verso gli idealismi, i teologismi, gli utopismi, i moralismi, i “dover essere” astratti del suo tempo» (ivi: 455-456).

L’insistenza di De Martino su questa dimensione del dover-essere, d’altra parte, si inserisce all’interno di una prospettiva generale che, per quanto frammentaria e non sistematica, rimanda ad alcune delle istanze principali che animano – su un piano, appunto, molto più formato e definito filosoficamente – la riflessione kantiana sul senso comune come principio (estetico) della costruzione e del controllo pratico-conoscitivo di un mondo sensato. La crisi del “domestico”, dell’“appaesato”, del “significante” e del “mondano” si configura infatti, a tutti gli effetti, come una crisi di sensatezza di un mondo “non operabile”, e cioè incapace di accogliere e alimentare una presenza umana votata – per costituzione ed esigenza trascendentale – alla progettazione creativa e valorizzante.

“Presenza” e “mondo” sono legati all’idea di un orizzonte di sensatezza ineliminabile. Da questo punto di vista, il valore euristico delle crisi o “apocalissi” psicopatologiche analizzate da De Martino sta proprio nel mostrare il rovescio di questo senso comune come perdita di un mondo domestico e operabile e, in realtà, di ogni possibile ordine culturale sensato e intersoggettivo. La patologia psichica segna infatti uno spaesamento estremo che coincide con la crisi dello slancio valorizzante e della capacità di essere normativi, e cioè di “fare senso” e dare senso alla realtà.

4. *L’attività culturale e simbolica come esigenza di senso*

Nel grande progetto incompiuto sulla *Fine del mondo* la teoria sugli istituti culturali che De Martino è andato via via costruendo nel corso degli anni intorno ai concetti di “presenza” e “mondo” trova una riformulazione e un parziale compimento (parziale, appunto, data la natura incompleta del testo). Davanti alla crisi della modernità, la funzione salvifica e reintegratrice delle pratiche miticorituali e religiose viene estesa all’attività culturale e simbolica nel suo complesso, investita del compito di costruire e preservare un mondo sensato e un ethos (del trascendimento) condiviso. Il problema non è la fine di *un* mondo, che è qualcosa di legato alla storicità della condizione umana, ma la fine *del* mondo come orizzonte di valorizzazione culturale e di “sensatezza”. Il passo che segue riguarda principalmente l’esperienza limite del vissuto psicopatologico, ma si presta bene a spiegare la prospettiva generale di De Martino:

> Il mondo degli animali “non può finire”, e la sua “fine” è la catastrofe della specie: l’uomo invece “passa” da un mondo all’altro, appunto perché è l’energia morale che sopravvive

> alle catastrofi dei suoi mondi, sempre di nuovo rigenerandone altri. Ma questa energia è sottesa dal rischio della caduta, dal vissuto della "fine del mondo" (non "di un mondo"): tale vissuto, che accenna alla fine dell'esserci, alla depresentificazione, alla demondanizzazione, alla crisi della presenza e ai modi dell'assenza, è *normalmente* coperto nel senso che deve essere sempre ricoperto, tale copertura costituendo la vita culturale. Lo sforzo culturale può soltanto scoprire nella riflessione la necessità di questo momento negativo, eccentrico che dà rilievo al proprio sforzarsi e che è messo a nudo dalla follia. (Ivi: 210)

Come l'esser sano è un farsi sano – non una condizione, ma un lavoro costante e mai del tutto concluso –, così l'esser sensato e operabile del mondo e l'esser stabile della presenza è un fare sensatezza, operabilità e stabilità che si presenta come un compito da assolvere: un compito che è anche un'esigenza – legata alla condizione umana, plastica e instabile – e che passa necessariamente attraverso l'attività culturale e simbolica. Da questo punto di vista, l'oscillazione tra la dimensione individuale e quella sociale (il dramma della presenza singola, che nel *Mondo magico*, ad esempio, viene riscattata da uno sciamano che media con la comunità) viene riassorbita e riportata all'interno di una sfera intersoggettiva (che è, appunto, quella del senso comune kantiano). La conquista della presenza come "esserci nel mondo" è così la conquista di una sensatezza mai garantita e sempre da costruire e rinnovare collettivamente. Ed è proprio in merito a questa conquista che il progetto di un umanesimo civile di De Martino, animato da una forte tensione etica, trova nella dimensione estetica – la dimensione del rito e del simbolo come "costanti antropologiche", ma anche delle pratiche artistiche come "specializzazioni culturali" – uno spazio privilegiato per la fondazione del mondo umano: il mondo "di oggi" e "di domani", sempre a rischio di crollo e disgregazione.

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Walter Benjamin and the Homeopathic Paradigm*

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Abstract. This article explores Walter Benjamin's theories on the therapeutic value of representations, revealing a homeopathic paradigm. Benjamin's notions of psychic vaccination and training can be clarified through the debate on Aristotelian catharsis, which distinguished homeopathic («like cures like») and allopathic («opposite cures opposite») readings. While most scholars accept a homeopathic interpretation of classical catharsis, the principle is largely absent from modern aesthetics. Joachim Ritter explains the allopathic dimension of aesthetic experience, arising from the separation of *veritas logica* and *veritas aesthetica*. Autonomous art compensates for science's limits but, as something external to life, cannot act homeopathically. By reintroducing a homeopathic dimension, Benjamin departs from traditional aesthetics of disinterestedness, reconceiving art in a mimetic and playful sense. He reimagines catharsis in relation to the shock effect of laughter, framing it as training of perception in the technological age. Finally, three

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case studies illustrate how contemporary audiovisual practices inherit and actualize Benjamin's homeopathic model.

Keywords. Therapy, catharsis, mimesis, Joachim Ritter, immunization.

1. *The Therapeutic Value of Representation in Walter Benjamin*

Walter Benjamin's work contains several references to the therapeutic value of aesthetic experience, from narration to photography and film. In the *Thought Figure* «Storytelling and Healing», he compares the stories mothers tell their sick children with those patients recount to their doctors, suggesting they «can become the first stage in the healing process» (Benjamin [1933d]: 724). Whether narrated or heard, a story provides «the right climate and the most favorable precondition» (*Ibid.*) for processing distress.

How does Benjamin conceive healing? In fragment L 2, 6 of the *Arcades Project*, he defines it as «a *rite de passage*, a transition experience» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 409). Both in *Storytelling and Healing* and in this fragment, healing is associated with images of water: the flow of a river or a watering place. It is a fluid process, and Benjamin pointedly describes it in the same terms he uses for the concept of threshold (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 494).

In another fragment, *Soteriologie und Medizin* (Benjamin [1922]: 87-88), he compares health with salvation – concepts that in Latin share the same term, *salus*. For Benjamin, complete healing is only possible in the context of soteriology: the redemption from social conditions. Medicine, by contrast, operates through healing, but its true achievement is help. Thus, «not everything that is ill requires healing – let alone can be healed» (*Ibid.*)[1]. In line with the *Theological-Political Fragment* (likely from the same period), complete healing, like redemption, cannot be realized within the profane world. What remains available to us is only the therapeutic process, understood as the elaboration of the conditions of healing within a transitional space: a threshold between illness and health, pain and oblivion, but also body and spirit, individuality and collectivity. This elaboration unfolds not only through self-narration but also through certain forms of art.

On a few occasions, Benjamin refers to a therapeutic dimension in surrealism. In the *Pariser Tagebuch* (Benjamin [1929-1930]: 585), the esotericism of surrealist poetry is seen, in contrast to *l'art pour l'art*, as a «salutary practice», akin to a «medical recipe». Surrealist photography, too, appears to have a healing

1 All quotations from works in the original language have been translated by me.

effect, producing «a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings» (Benjamin [1931a]: 519).

Cinema, however, is the art form whose therapeutic dimension Benjamin most strongly emphasizes. In the chapter on Chaplin and Mickey Mouse in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility* (3rd version *WuN*), he asserts that «American slapstick comedies and Disney films trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 118).

Benjamin describes this effect in terms that could be called pharmacologic or homeopathic. He uses the term *Impfung*, often translated as «immunization» but literally meaning «vaccination»: the deliberate induction of infection to activate the natural immune system (Lindner [2004]: 152). In this sense, Chaplin and Disney's films might exert a therapeutic power against the mass psychoses of contemporary society. What particularly interests Benjamin is that the very phenomenon causing these social pathologies – technologization (*Technisierung*) – also provides the means through which therapy becomes possible.

> If one considers the dangerous tensions which technology and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large-tendencies which at critical stages take on a psychotic character – one also has to recognize that this same technologization has created the possibility of psychic immunization [*psychischer Impfung*] against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced development of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis. (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 118)

Benjamin identifies a connection between the psychic unconscious and what he calls the optical unconscious – that sphere of the sensible world not perceived, or at least not noticed, by the natural human eye, but which film can reveal through techniques such as slow motion and close-ups. This connection enables the therapeutic use of films in addressing mass psychosis: «Many of the deformations and stereotypes, transformations and catastrophes which can assail the optical world in films afflict the actual world in psychoses, hallucinations, and dreams. Thanks to the camera, therefore, the individual perceptions of the psychotic or the dreamer can be appropriated by collective perception» (*Ibid.*).

The metaphor of vaccination recurs throughout Benjamin's work. In an early fragment of the *Arcades Project* (H°, 18) he writes of a «vaccination with apparitions» and of optical illusions [*Trugbilder*] as «the other prophylaxis [*Schutzmittel*]» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 845)[2]. In his essay *Toys and*

2 Casetti identifies *phantasmagoria* – ghostly apparitions and hallucinations – as «protective media». He also describes Benjamin's model of immunity as a «strategy of mitigation» and notes a similar principle in McLuhan's conception of art (Casetti [2023]: 154-158). On the

Play (Benjamin [1928b]: 120) he emphasizes the pedagogical value of play, through which habits are «instilled» (*eingeimpft*, literally «injected like a vaccination»). On one occasion, he recounts of a practice of «dream vaccination» [*Traumimpfung*] from an Irish farmer who learned it from the Fang people in Africa: the habit of visualizing frightening images before sleep to prevent nightmares (Benjamin [1933a]: 750). Benjamin himself practiced a similar technique of self-immunization through imagery: in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* he describes how, as a German refugee in France, he deliberately recalled nostalgic childhood memories to mitigate his homesickness.

> Several times in my inner life, I had already experienced the process of inoculation as something salutary. In this situation, too, I resolved to follow suit, and I deliberately called to mind those images which, in exile, are most apt to waken homesickness: images of childhood. My assumption was that the feeling of longing would no more gain mastery over my spirit than a vaccine does over a healthy body. I sought to limit its effect through insight into the irretrievability – not the contingent biographical but the necessary social irretrievability – of the past. (Benjamin [1938a]: 344)

Like the painful images of the past, the shock experiences produced by new technological apparatuses in industrial society can be addressed through a form of immunization. In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire*, Benjamin introduces the concept of *training*: the idea, inspired by Freud's theory of traumatic neurosis, that certain experiences must be inoculated as habits to organize the reception of new stimuli. Just as the body is trained to bear greater weights, perception and imagination must be trained to elaborate and internalize radically new experiences.

> The reception of shocks is facilitated by training in coping with stimuli; if need be, dreams as well as recollection may be enlisted. As a rule, however – so Freud assumes – this training devolves upon the wakeful consciousness, located in a part of the cortex which is «so frayed by the effect of the stimulus» that it offers the most favorable situation for the reception of stimuli. That the shock is thus cushioned, parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of an isolated experience [*Erlebnis*], in the strict sense. If it were incorporated directly in the register of conscious memory, it would sterilize this incident for poetic experience [*Erfahrung*]. (Benjamin [1940]: 318)

This training can operate through poetry, but film produces a stronger effect, as its rhythm mirrors the «rhythm of production on a conveyor belt»: «thus,

prophylactic function of ludic illusions against demagogic deception, see the artistic research project ESCI – *Exoterical Society of Critical Illusionism* by the collective ATI (Tomatis [2022]; Agati *et al*. [2022]).

technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training» (Benjamin [1940]: 328)[3].

Like psychic vaccination, the paradigm of training has a pharmacologic dimension, in the Greek sense of *pharmakon*, which denotes both poison and medicine[4]. In the *Laws*, for example, Plato describes wine as a pharmakon: it can induce drunkenness but also serve as a beneficial educational aid by rendering the mind more ductile. Yet, a further distinction can be made: a pharmakon is *homeopathic*[5] when it acts on the same pathology it can induce, and *allopathic* when its therapeutic effect targets a different pathology. Wine, for instance, is homeopathic if used to train against the negative effects of drunkenness, and allopathic if employed to counteract overthinking.

This distinction first arose in debates on the therapeutic value of Aristotle's tragic catharsis. This is significant given Benjamin's reference to the «cathartic» effect of film, without which its social significance «even – and especially – in its most positive form, is inconceivable» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 104). In this sense, a homeopathic dimension may be discerned in Benjamin's theories of immunization and training, suggesting that engaging with the debate on homeopathy and allopathy could be fruitful.

2. *The homeopathic interpretation of tragic catharsis*

The terms homeopathy and allopathy were not used in ancient Greek thought; they were introduced only in modern scholarship to describe the positions of Italian Renaissance humanists in the debate on Aristotle's theory of tragic catharsis (Belfiore [1992]: 261). In his *Poetics*, Aristotle mentions catharsis only once, in his definition of tragedy: «a representation of an action […] through the arousal of pity and fear effecting the *katharsis* of such emotions» (Aristotle [1987]: 37). *Katharsis* was a common term in Greek medical and ritual vocabularies, with varying meanings, but Aristotle does not clarify whether he employs one of the traditional senses or introduces a new one. The debate remains open today, and scholars only agree on one point: Aristotle's precise meaning cannot be known for certain. Key issues concern the *process* – whether catharsis is a purgation (medical tradition) or a purification (ritual

3 Benjamin appears to suggest a dialectical dimension of this training: on the one hand it has a salutary, prophylactic value; on the other, it serves a functional role within the economic apparatus.

4 In this sense, the term has been used in contemporary thought by Derrida (1968) and Stiegler (2008); see Vignola (2024).

5 This specific meaning should not be confused with modern homeopathic medicine, developed in the early 19th century by Samuel Hahnemann.

tradition) – and its *object* – whether pity and fear effect catharsis of themselves, of similar passions, or of entirely different ones.

In 1548, Francesco Robortello interpreted catharsis homeopathically, as a form of inoculation against pain: experiencing negative passions such as pity and fear allows us to «get accustomed to grieving, fearing and pitying» (Belfiore [1992]: 274). By exposing ourselves to the suffering of others, we reduce our sensitivity to pity and fear in our own lives. Lionel Trilling compared this interpretation to Freud's theory of traumatic neurosis, describing it as a «mithridatic function», like the king who drank small doses of poison to immunize himself. In this view, «tragedy is used as the homeopathic administration of pain to inure ourselves to the greater pain which life will force upon us» (Trilling [1948]: 181).

Halliwell ([1986]: 350-356) identifies three main conceptions within this homeopathic tradition. The first, from Robortello and Minturno to Batteux, holds that only an excess of passions is pathological, and the aim of tragedy is to cultivate resistance to passions, ideally leading to an almost Stoic – rather than Aristotelian – indifference. The second conception, advanced by Lessing and supported by Halliwell, treats both excess and deficiency of passion as pathological. Here, tragic catharsis aims at *attunement* rather than *reduction*. Drawing on Aristotle's notion of the «mean», this interpretation sees the arousal of fear and pity as a way to purify the same passions: not to eliminate or purge them, but to regulate and process them. One becomes immune to the harmful effects of passions, not to the passions themselves.

A third homeopathic conception, developed in the early 19th century by Jacob Bernays, was highly influential, though now largely rejected. In contrast to the didactic and moralistic views of the Renaissance and Neoclassicism, Bernays understood catharsis as a strictly medical process of emotional release. Only the accumulation of emotions was considered problematic; catharsis thus functioned as a means of satisfying a physiological need, with tragic pleasure arising primarily from physical relief.

Vincenzo Maggi (1550) can be considered the originator of the allopathic interpretation. He argued that pity and fear are useful social passions meant to purge dangerous ones, such as wrath, avarice, and lust. The allopathic view is primarily moralistic or didactic, though it can incorporate medical elements. This conception, widespread in the Renaissance and Neoclassicism, is now supported by a minority of scholars (Belfiore [1992]: 260). In *Tragic Pleasures*, Belfiore strongly defends an allopathic reading of catharsis based on three arguments. First, most examples of homeopathic therapy can also be interpreted as allopathic if one considers that similar things invariably differ in certain respects. Second, Aristotle's phrase *ton toiouton pathematon* («of such emotions») seems to refer to passions other than pity and fear. Third, Greek medical tradition is largely founded on the principle of opposites, an allopathic principle.

Belfiore not only interprets tragic catharsis as allopathic, in contrast to other forms of therapy, but also questions the very existence of a homeopathic principle[6]. Yet interpreting tragic catharsis as allopathic or homeopathic only makes sense relative to an alternative mode.

In the allopathic interpretation, pity and fear act on other emotions precisely because they are opposed to them: fear compensates for fearlessness, and pity counteracts indifference. According to Carnes Lord, the term *toiouton* might encompass other emotions as well, but pity and fear influence them due to their affinity. The training in fear and pity provided by tragedy enables mastery over other *spirited passions* – those based on *thymos*, such as indignation, anger, competition, and shame – which are essential to social life yet potentially harmful if lacking due measure. Thus, even though pity and fear act on different emotions, «tragic catharsis can be regarded as loosely analogous to a homoeopathic catharsis by the fact that passion is cured by passion» (Lord [1982]: 164). Similarly, Guastini notes that *toiouton* typically denotes a genus; thus Aristotle does not only refer to pity and fear, nor to their opposites, but to passions of the same genus: those that admit a mean (*mesotes*) and can be trained – unlike wholly negative affects (Guastini [2010]: 173-174).

Belfiore's strongest argument for allopathy is its continuity with the Greek tradition. Unlike Plato, Aristotle rarely opposed tradition, and Greek medical culture appears predominantly allopathic. According to the principle of opposites, an excess of a warm element can be countered with a cold one, and vice versa. Even proponents of the homeopathic interpretation acknowledge that Greek medicine is largely allopathic (Lord [1982]: 124; Halliwell [1986]: 193). However, according to Lord, the main source of tragic catharsis lies not in medicine but in the religious-ritual tradition, which was primarily homeopathic: «If it is Dionysus who visits men with the madness of bacchic frenzy, it is also Dionysus who can best release men from that madness: Dionysus Baccheios and Dionysus Lysios are aspects of the same godhead» (Lord [1982]: 124). Just as blood was used in ancient rituals to purify blood-pollution, frenetic corybantic music could purify frenzy, and tragic passions could purify civic passions. This does not imply that Aristotle considered tragic catharsis a religious ritual, but that rituality and poetics shared the same underlying principle.

Conceiving tragic catharsis as distinct from a medical process does not imply it was purely spiritual or psychological. In the Aristotelian view, body and soul, matter and form, are inseparable: a psychological process necessarily has a physiological dimension[7]. Lord's critique of Bernays' medical interpretation does not

6 For instance, Belfiore argues that even vaccination is allopathic, as it aims «to produce antibodies that combat the disease» (Belfiore [1992]: 268).

7 Gadamer sought to account for the haptic dimension of catharsis through unorthodox translations of *phobos* (fear) and *eleos* (pity), rendered respectively as «cold shudder» (*Kälteschauer*) and «misery» (*Jammer*) (Gadamer [1960]: 126; see Cecchi [2025]: 148).

deny catharsis' therapeutic and haptic aspects, but emphasizes that it should not be limited to a physiological process addressing only pathological cases. Unlike musical catharsis (Aristotle [1984]: 240), intended solely for those suffering from «enthusiasm», tragic catharsis was universal, with ethical, pedagogical, and political implications. While it may have had a strictly therapeutic impact for those with pathological imbalances of passion, its primary effect was preventive or prophylactic, an attunement we might loosely describe as social therapy.

One final objection to the homeopathic interpretation, at least in its «attunement» version, concerns the apparent tension between the long-term nature of training and the suddenness of cathartic pleasure, which seems more consistent with the relief of a purge or a compensation (Belfiore [1992]: 371). This tension may be resolved if we consider catharsis as a condition for training. According to Guastini ([2003a]: 108-110), catharsis should be understood through Aristotle's theory of *mimesis*: the re-presentation of an *eidos* – the essential form that makes something what it is – within a context that facilitates its apprehension. We are more inclined to study a corpse or a hideous animal in representation than in reality (Aristotle [1987]: 34), as the distance reduces the discomfort that would otherwise impede attention[8]. Mimetic pleasure perfects activity, playing a cognitive role in the practical sphere and intensifying lived moments, which fosters mastery and progress in that activity (Aristotle [2019]: 188). If mimesis produces pleasure even when imitating harmful or painful things, tragic catharsis can be understood as the conversion of pain into pleasure (Guastini [2010]: 160-171)[9]. Only this change in disposition enables spectators to engage with tragic passions and re-elaborate them, achieving a training that has practical effects in real life.

3. *Art as allopathic therapy in the modern age*

If we follow Lord and Halliwell, the homeopathic principle played a central role in the therapeutic dimension of Greek poetics. Can a similar principle be traced in later poetic and visual cultures? According to church historian Luigi Canetti, instances of homeopathic use of representations appear in early Christianity, both in biblical texts and in folklore (Canetti [2024]: 18-19). Certain healing rituals of the Middle Ages involved the incorporation of negative alterity: poisonous snakes and demonic possessions were not only expelled but at times

8 In his 1969 experimental film on the effects of napalm in the Vietnam War (*Nicht Löschbares Feuer*), Harun Farocki poses a similar question: How can I show you a painful story without prompting you to close your eyes? (min. 1:17-2:02).

9 For Guastini, Aristotelian catharsis is neither allopathic nor strictly homeopathic, as it acts not upon the passions themselves but upon their attendant pleasure or pain (Guastini [2010]: 168; [2003b]: VIII).

integrated into the healing process. For example, the protector against the plague was Saint Roch – himself afflicted by the plague and depicted with a sore on his leg – rather than the angel who healed him (Mâle [1908]: 181-185).

This homeopathic dimension was possible because images, performances, and poetics remained closely tied both to religious ritual and to science and knowledge[10]. In the modern age, science and medicine gradually separated from religion and art, which became autonomous. In this new context, spiritual salvation, physical healing, and aesthetic pleasure came to belong to distinct realms, each governed by different logics. But does this mean that modern art has lost all therapeutic potential?

In a series of lectures, Joachim Ritter (1946-1962) examined the differences between the ancient and modern worldviews regarding the relationship among art, science, and metaphysics. Categories such as creativity and imagination belong to a modern, subjective approach to aesthetic experience and were unthinkable in antiquity. In ancient times there was no aesthetics in the modern sense: beauty was ontologically grounded and thus studied by metaphysics, while art was treated within practical philosophy, as it was not yet distinguished from other artisanal activities. Until the Late Middle Ages, art and philosophy shared the same object: *veritas una stabilis*, the one stable truth. Philosophy sought to acquire it, while art sought to represent it; the same content could be expressed in poetic, metaphysical, or theological form.

In the modern age, scientific thought assumes responsibility for knowledge. Yet, in order to attain maximum clarity and certainty, rational thought must renounce certain dimensions of reality – its efficacy depends on reduction and self-limitation. This renunciation created a void that called for compensation[11], leading to a reorganization of the traditional roles of philosophy and art. The result was a separation (*Entzweiung*) of ancient metaphysical truth into two complementary modern spheres: a scientific truth (*veritas logica*) grounded in intellect, and an aesthetic truth (*veritas aesthetica*) grounded in sensibility. Science can represent aspects of the world inaccessible to art, while art can express perspectives and experiences that lie beyond the reach of science. Thus, landscapes belong to a different order of knowledge than the objects studied by the natural sciences.

Autonomous art and modern aesthetic experience cannot exert a homeopathic therapeutic effect, since homeopathy presupposes similarity between the cure

10 In the early 16th century, Paracelsus's principle of *similia similibus* («like cures like») remained rooted in the ancient idea that everything in the universe was interconnected, and that practical medicine could not be separated from philosophy, virtue, alchemy, and astronomy (Cosmacini [2011]: 242-244).

11 For a Ritterian reading of the concept of compensation, see Marquard (1989) and Griffero (2021).

and its object, whereas autonomous art always presents the other side – what is absent from the functional order of life. In ancient Greek tragedy, passions could serve as the medium of catharsis because they were central to political, ethical, and even contemplative life. By contrast, in modernity, feelings became the domain of art precisely because they were excluded – or presumed irrelevant – in the judgments of science, administration, and work. Ancient poetics, grounded in mimetic repetition, were thus compatible with a homeopathic model; modern art, grounded in creativity and originality, necessarily addresses what is lacking and compensates for it. In this sense, autonomous art is ill-suited to a homeopathic therapy, but it may still carry an allopathic therapeutic value.

Several modern artists and thinkers have recognized the salutary role of aesthetic experience as compensation. Ritter highlights philosophers who advocated for a healthier balance between intellect and sensibility – most notably Kant[12] and Schiller – as well as those who lamented the loss of unity and longed for a forgotten era in which a sense of wholeness remained accessible, from Vico, Herder, and Schlegel to Bachofen and Nietzsche. In the Romantic age, art was conceived as the aesthetic *restitution* of what had been lost: the sacred, the metaphysical, or even the primordial sense of nature.

In his review of the Salon of 1767, Diderot argued that gardens and landscape paintings compensate for our loss of nature: «There, for a moment, we will play the savage; for a moment, we […] will enact the pantomime of natural man» (Diderot [1767]: 139). A similar compensatory function of art appears in the writings of Carus, physician and painter, who saw his landscape practice as a form of recreation that enhanced his psychic stability (Carus [1831]; Bätschmann [2002]). Leopardi viewed poetry – and poetic thought more broadly – as a remedy against the primacy of cold, geometric reason and the suppression of sensibility in our «foolish century» (Valentini [2025]). Goethe likewise promoted the cultivation of an «exact sensory imagination» (*exakte sinnliche Phantasy*) as a counterbalance to the dominance of the exact sciences (Goethe [1824]). Even in the 20th century, Adorno, engaging with the concept of exact phantasy (Nicholsen [1997]), maintained that «art completes knowledge with what is excluded from knowledge» (Adorno [1970]: 54).

The therapeutic potential of art against the excesses of rationality is even more explicit in the writings of Vilém Flusser, who described the pathological effects of modern logocentrism as «textolatry» (Flusser [1983]) or «paranoia» (Flusser [1979]), understood as a distortion of the intellect (nous).

12 Among the philosophers of modernity, Kant is perhaps the one who most persistently sought to integrate intellect and sensibility – well beyond mere compensation – through his theory of imagination, which plays a role in both aesthetic experience and scientific inquiry. It is no accident that, for Kant, «the errors of the imagination» (Feloj [2015]; Desideri [1999]) are to be corrected through an almost homeopathic cultivation of the imagination itself.

Photography, film, and other «technical images» owe part of their success to the therapeutic role they play rebalancing the conceptual and imaginative faculties. Yet technical images do more than compensate for the dominance of conceptualization fostered by written culture – they tend to replace it. The compensatory role of traditional autonomous art, confined to museums, was insufficient. To avert the risks associated with the predominance of scientific reason, a profound reorganization of its relationship with sensibility is needed – an integration of science and art[13]. In other words, this requires overcoming the autonomy of art. According to Flusser and Benjamin, something akin to this reintegration appears to have taken its first steps during the 20th century. In parallel, the emergence of scientific psychology in the late 19th century led to a new interest in homeopathic therapeutic practices[14]. It is within this context that the resurgence of a homeopathic potential of representation can also be understood.

4. *The retrieval of the homeopathic principle*

In *The Author as Producer*, Benjamin evokes an earlier, happier age when science and *belles-lettres* «fertilized one another» (Benjamin [1934b]: 771). He laments that, in the modern era, they have become «insoluble antinomies», yet he notes a tendency in contemporary avant-garde literature to bridge the gaps between researcher and popularizer, author and audience, politics and culture, writing and image. As Benjamin writes in the *exposé* of the *Arcades Project*, «the new» distances itself from the «recent past» and interpenetrates with the «primal past» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 4), suggesting that antiquity may be closer to the present than modernity. In the final version of *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, he observes that the increased analyzability of film «tends to foster the interpenetration of art and science» (Benjamin [1936-1939]: 265). Architectural historian Sigfried Giedion noted a similar phenomenon: «Where does science end, where does art begin, what is applied technology, what belongs to pure knowledge? Fields permeate and fertilize each other as they overlap» (Giedion [1928]: 87).

13 According to Flusser, images can rebalance our cognitive faculties only if they become capable of performing the same functions ordinarily carried out by texts – that is, only if we can do science, medicine, politics, and philosophy with images. Technical images make this possible because they are conceptually manipulable yet sensibly experienceable. See Montani ([2024]: 17-26).

14 In the field of somatic medicine, only Samuel Hahnemann's pseudoscientific theories pursued this direction. A homeopathic dimension, however, can be found in both the psychoanalytic concept of working-through (Freud [1914]) and the behaviorist method of exposure therapy (Foa, Kozak [1986]).

The tendency to overcome the autonomy of art, which Benjamin observes in film and appears to endorse, was rejected by Adorno (Bürger [1974]). Significantly, Adorno also opposed the homeopathic aspects of Benjamin's thought, such as the use of concepts like «test» and «distraction», or the role assigned to audience laughter in Chaplin's films (Adorno [1935-1938]: 123). While Adorno views autonomous art as an allopathic remedy against the culture industry, Benjamin seems to argue that only art capable of appropriating the techniques of the mass culture can effectively counteract the alienation generated by that very apparatus. The shock experiences depicted in films and produced through montage mirror those endured in factories and public transportation, which lead to an «intensification of nervous stimulation» (Simmel [1903]: 410). Similarly, the dreamlike sequences of surrealist cinema elaborate on the same images present in the phantasmagoria of advertisements and commodities.

Is this homeopathic affinity enough to suggest that Benjamin endorses a return of classical tragic catharsis? In one of his essays on Brecht, Benjamin explicitly distances himself from tragic catharsis, which he defines as «the discharge of affects through empathy with the emotional fate of the hero» (Benjamin [1938b]: 331). From one perspective, Benjamin's distrust may stem from a misunderstanding of Aristotelian catharsis, possibly influenced by Brecht. In this definition, and in some anti-Aristotelian passages of the *Trauerspielbuch*, Benjamin appears to read tragic catharsis as a sentimentalist theory of empathy. The celebration of passion and identification was particularly strong in the tradition of aesthetics from the 16th to the 19th centuries, where appeals to Aristotelian catharsis justified a theater conceived as a «factory of affects», designed to compensate for the dominance of rationality in modern society. In other words, Benjamin associates empathy with auratic art, which, with questionable pretension, aimed to replace ancient metaphysics or religion – Ritter's notion of art as *restitution*.

Although Benjamin uses the concept of catharsis positively in other texts, he clearly does not center his concern on the passions of pity and fear. According to both Lord and Belfiore, fear and pity were specific to the political culture of the classical Greek polis, linked to fundamental concepts such as *thymos* (the desire for honor and superiority) and *aidos* (the fear of wrongdoing and loss of reputation). What later traditions interpreted as universal, supra-historical values were in fact tied to a specific cultural and social context. *Phobos* and *eleos* served as a pharmakon for the citizens of the classical Greek *poleis*; a different society, with different dysfunctions, requires a different remedy. It is therefore fitting that Benjamin focuses on the transformation of perception in the age of Fordist capitalism. His conception of a homeopathic potential in representation does not entail a direct revival of Aristotelian tragic catharsis, but rather reflects his engagement with the social pathologies of his own century.

Nonetheless, a cathartic dimension is present in Benjamin's thought, even if it cannot be equated with Aristotelian tragic catharsis. According to Halliwell, classical Greece knew multiple forms of catharsis – medical, ritual, Pythagorean, Corybantic, tragic, and possibly even comic (Halliwell [1986]: 274-275)[15].

In some respects, the category of comic catharsis aligns closely with Benjamin's description of Chaplin and Disney films, which «trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 118). Rather than arousing pity and fear, these films evoke a «collective laughter»[16], conceived as a «preemptive and healing outbreak of mass psychosis» (*Ibid.*). Comedy functions here as a dialectic, subversive incorporation of the negative, producing a form of immunization. In an unpublished essay in which he compares Hitler to Chaplin, written six years before *The Great Dictator*, Benjamin writes: «Chaplin has become the greatest comic because he has incorporated into himself the deepest fears of his contemporaries» (Benjamin [1934a]: 792). Mickey Mouse is repeatedly described by Benjamin, in analogy with surrealist poetry and cinema, as embodying the paradoxical fusion of organic body and inorganic machine produced in the factory (Salzani [2014]). As Miriam Hansen observes, Disney films enact «an emancipatory incorporation of technology» or a «self-sublation of technology», condensing the «homeopathic relation between the technical media and other technologies» and prefiguring «the utopian potential of technology for reorganizing the relations between human beings and nature» (Hansen [1993]: 42).

Ernst Bloch similarly recognized an emancipatory potential in comedy. In his book on Hegel, *Subjekt-Objekt*, he suggests that comedy, rather than tragedy, may be the most dialectical genre. Bloch views humor as an art of dissolution, capable of freeing humanity from the illusory world of beauty. While irony merely destroys claims to objectivity to assert subjective wit, true humor enacts a dialectical negation: the «annihilation of what is nothing before the idea» (Bloch [1949]: 293). Humor possesses a destructive power toward outdated figures, «so that mankind may take leave of its past gaily» (*Ibid.*). Notably, in this sentence Bloch quotes Marx on comedy – a passage also cited by Benjamin in fragment N 5a, 2 of the *Arcades Project*, where he adds: «A reconciled humanity will take leave of its past – and one form of reconciliation is *gaiety*. […] Surrealism is the death of the nineteenth century in comedy» (Benjamin [1927-1940]: 467). It is likely in this sense that Benjamin's notion of destructive catharsis in film should be understood: «The social significance

15 Lord ([1982]: 175-176) mentions the possibility of an Aristotelian theory of comic catharsis in the supposedly lost second book of the *Poetics* but considers it unlikely. On laughter in the Greek tradition see Halliwell (2008).

16 In the first version of his essay, Benjamin referred to it as «revolutionary laughter» (Ibarlucía [2019]: 137).

of film, even – and especially – in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 104)[17].

Alongside the comic form of catharsis, some elements in Benjamin's thought point toward a medical dimension. The phrase «therapeutic release [*Sprengung*] of unconscious energies» evokes Bernays' outlet theory. A prevalent 19th-century psychological theory explained the impulse to play as a means of relieving surplus energy (Groos [1899]: 362)[18]. In an unpublished fragment, Benjamin similarly notes that «distraction, like catharsis, should be conceived as a physiological phenomenon» (Benjamin [1936]: 141). The corporeal dimension is central for Benjamin: in the *Kunstwerk* essay, he contrasts the stronger «physical shock effect» of film with the milder «moral shock effect» of Dadaism (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 119). However, Halliwell notes that other interpretations of catharsis may also carry physiological and medical implications. The distinctiveness of Bernays' medical reading lies in its exclusive focus on the physiological, neglecting pedagogical, ethical, or political dimensions – a view Benjamin would not endorse. For him, the therapeutic potential of representation integrates ethical, political, aesthetic, and physiological aspects. It is precisely in opposition to auratic conceptions, which separated the sentimental and medical dimensions, that Benjamin emphasizes the bodily dimension of the process.

The haptic dimension of film perception is closely linked to Benjamin's concept of innervation, drawn from Freud's early writings (Freud [1899]: 539). The term refers both to the distribution of nerves throughout the body and to the stimulation of activity in an organ. Benjamin, however, adopts a social perspective, speaking of «efforts at innervation» to describe revolutions and the way in which «the new, historically unique collective» integrates new technologies as its organs (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 124). This concept entails both a sudden jolt and the repeated playful training that renders a learned bodily gesture natural. To conceive of revolutions as innervations is thus to suggest not only that they involve a reorganization of technological relations, but also that this reorganization operates as a form of homeopathic training.

It is now clear that Benjamin's «destructive» catharsis should not be understood as a purge or reduced to a medical form. Its aim is not to channel our technological impulses into cinema in order to live in a world free from technology. Rather, it seeks to dismantle the current configuration of technology, based on

17 For the destructive character, see Benjamin (1931b) and Costa (2008). For discussions of laughter in Benjamin, see also Vidauskytė, Sodeika (2018) and Beasley-Murray (2007), where his theories are compared to Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais.

18 For Groos, however, the physiological explanation must be complemented by an aesthetic one grounded in the mimetic principle. Groos' *The Play of Man* is cited by Benjamin (Benjamin [1928b]: 119).

domination, and transform it into a new arrangement grounded in play – what Benjamin calls «second technology». In the same chapter, he writes: «The most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus» (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 117). Just as, according to Halliwell, Aristotelian catharsis attunes passions by restoring them to the proper mean rather than silencing them, Benjamin's catharsis attunes technical forms of life within a liberated collectivity, whose organs reside in second technology. However, a crucial difference remains: in Aristotelian catharsis, the proper mean is ontologically grounded – restoring what is already given – whereas in Benjamin, it is a configuration yet to be constructed.

The analogy between catharsis and distraction, proposed in a preparatory fragment[19], helps clarify its destructive character as a form of conversion. Film distracts us from the train of our thoughts and surprises us. Distraction here is not understood allopathically, as a temporary relief from our concerns, but as a derailment that compels us to immerse ourselves homeopathically in the representation of the disturbance. Like catharsis, distraction operates at the deeper level of involuntary memory, habit, and automatic associations – realms beyond rational control. Yet we can choose to watch a film and expose ourselves to these disruptions, much like taking a drug to alter perception. Significantly, Benjamin uses the term catharsis twice to describe his own experiments with drugs (Benjamin [1927-1932]: 561, 606)[20].

Finally, as is Greek catharsis, Benjamin's homeopathic approach is connected to a mimetic dimension. He writes of a «mimetic faculty», which he defines as the ability to discern and produce «nonsensuous similarities» (Benjamin [1933c]: 722) – a capacity that is trainable, since Benjamin describes play as a «schooling in mimetic» (Benjamin [1933b]: 694). Yet Benjamin's mimetic faculty should not be confused with Aristotelian *mimesis*: whereas the latter rests on the identity between the essence of what is represented and that of the representation – differing only in matter, not in form – Benjamin's conception relies on a notion of similarity grounded in correspondences between singularities that remain ultimately irreducible to one another. In this sense, Benjamin's *mimesis* has been associated with the doctrine of similarities in magical and Renaissance traditions, more specifically with Frazer's theory of sympathy (Halliwell [2002]: 371)[21] and

19 «The values of distraction should be defined with regard to film, just as the values of catharsis are defined with regard to tragedy» (Benjamin [1936]: 141).

20 Drugs, when taken as medicine, operate allopathically; here, however, they are used in experiments on perceptual alteration as part of a homeopathic strategy for mastering the social and historical transformations of perception.

21 In his *Aesthetics of Mimesis*, Halliwell mentions Benjamin's theory of mimesis among the broader modern interpretations. His «quasi-anthropological view» would be closely linked to a «homeopathic-imitative-mimetic» approach, which also appears in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (*Ibid.*).

to Böhme's doctrine of *signatura rerum* (Agamben [2008]: 71): a non-semiotic element through which two entities – interpretable as sign and referent – mutually qualify one another and thereby confer reality upon each other[22]. Without entering into the details of the differences among these various forms of *mimesis*, which would fall outside the scope of this study, it can be observed that both ancient and medieval or Renaissance mimetic forms implied a metaphysical stance and a holistic view of the universe in which everything is interconnected – including the domains of knowledge such as science, poetics, and philosophy. Even in Benjamin, the mimetic faculty appears grounded in a conception of the world that seeks to overcome rigid disciplinary boundaries, where the poetic arts and the sciences interpenetrate and mutually fertilize one another.

For this reason, ancient, early modern, and contemporary forms of *mimesis* alike enable a homeopathic process by revealing – or producing – the similarity between illness and cure: the mimetic re-presentation of a problematic situation allows it to be elaborated within a safe and distanced context. In ancient *mimesis*, this protective space is the ritual space of *poiesis*; in modern *mimesis*, it is play (Benjamin [1935-1936]: 127). Ritual and play share a comparable separation from the functional contexts of life while still mimetically repeating them (Montanelli [2018]; Huizinga [1944]). Many modern games can be seen as secularized outcomes of ancient rituals (Caillois [1958]: 57-59; Benveniste [1947]). Although the connection between representation and ritual that once underpinned homeopathic treatment in antiquity has been lost, a ludic conception of representation now provides a new foundation for homeopathy.

5. *The homeopathic approach in contemporary therapeutic audiovisual practices*

Benjamin's homeopathic approach can be considered therapeutic only in a broad sense, as it primarily addresses social pathologies. The rarity of the term «therapy» likely reflects his distrust of psychotherapy's individual focus; for him, personal problems cannot be resolved outside one's relationships within the collectivity. Nevertheless, his reflections are useful for understanding the homeopathic use of representations in contemporary psychotherapeutic practice. In recent decades, performative and visual storytelling, along with self-narrative methods, have increasingly been integrated into therapy (Cohen &

22 Benjamin refers to Böhme in the *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* ([1928a]: 217-220). The doctrine of signatures was first elaborated by Paracelsus, who also defended a homeopathic conception of medicine. For discussions of Böhme and his reception, see Muratori (2012). It is also significant that both Böhme's *signatures* and Benjamin's *nonsensuous similarities* (or *historical indices*) have an operational dimension: they do not merely represent correspondences but establish them.

Johnson [2015]). Most of these methods are not intended to allopathically counteract symptoms with their opposites but to provide a safe space for elaborating experiences, emotions, and conflicts. Patients – or clients, as in art therapy – may take on the roles of spectators, actors, or authors in these enactments (Sabatino, Saladino [2024]: 42-68). In conclusion, I intend to briefly present three cases – VR-based therapy, documentary videotherapy, and therapeutic filmmaking – to highlight their homeopathic character. In each one of the examples presented here, we can recognize many of the elements identified in Benjamin's homeopathic paradigm – a paradigm that can now be reduced to four main features: (1) a mimetic connection between the problem to be addressed and its remedy; (2) a playful space that ensures distance and safe dosing, allowing for controlled exposure; (3) a form of training that acts on habit through repetition, enabling the elaboration and internalization of traumatic experience; and (4) participation within a relational context that takes into account the collective dimension of healing.

The first case is *Virtual Iraq*, a software program developed to treat American soldiers suffering from post-deployment trauma (Rizzo *et al*. [2014])[23]. In Harun Farocki's *Immersion*, part of the *Serious Games* series (2010), we see a patient[24] wearing a head-mounted display while revisiting a 3D simulation of a street in Baghdad, co-narrating (4) the traumatic events that took place there in response to the therapist's questions (Frohne [2016]). Here the mimetic dimension (1) appears in the form of virtual simulation, while the clinical setting and the framing typical of VR – the removable headset and the "magic circle" that limits the participant's movements – provide a playful, ritualized framework (2) in which exposure is contained and modulated. Notably, a similar software is used to train (3) soldiers for their mission to Iraq, as shown in the first episode of *Serious Games*. More than the connection between virtual space and memory space, it is the overlap between training and therapeutic software that exposes the pharmacological, homeopathic character of gamification. In the fourth episode, *A Sun with No Shadow*, Farocki himself pointed out a small yet telling difference: in the therapeutic version, shadows are absent. «The system for remembering is a little cheaper than the one for training», reads the caption. Yet perhaps this absence is

23 The 2007 project was redeveloped in 2011 in a new version titled *Bravemind*. On the therapeutic use of VR, see Cavaletti (2023: 217-226) and Cavaletti, Grossi (2020), who distinguish between programs based on *isolation* from the distressing environment and those based on *exposure* to it. The former can be read in allopathic terms – for instance, immersing oneself in a calming underwater simulation to counteract stress (*Deep*, 2014) – whereas the latter recalls the homeopathic tradition, as in simulations that treat acrophobia by gradually exposing the patient to challenges of increasing difficulty (*ZeroPhobia – Fear of Heights*, 2019).

24 At the end of the film, we discover that the supposed veteran is in fact another therapist, role-playing as a patient in order to demonstrate the new software.

not merely economic: by leaving something unbuilt, the system opens a space for imagination to intervene, reactivating a process that trauma had arrested.

The second case is the documentary videotherapy project *Memofilm*, carried out in Bologna between 2007 and 2013 to support individuals affected by dementia. The films are written and produced with the help of family members, combining new footage with old home movies, and then «administered» to patients. Rather than simply showing reality to counteract delusions, these films attempt to weave present experiences together with the fragments of memory to which patients cling. They homeopathically engage images already charged with symbolic investment, selected for their emotional rather than cognitive value (Feyles [2017]: 4). One *memofilm* was made for a woman who persistently searched for «her home», despite having lived in the same apartment for 25 years. It interlaced a family lunch with found footage, photographs, and interviews, intertwining present moments with past memories. Instead of insisting that she acknowledge she was already home, the film helped her recognize that her current home was not her «true home» – her «house of memory» – yet still a place worth inhabiting (Grosso [2013]: 70-73). This can be considered an instance of Benjamin's mimetic *repetition of the new*, where the very images that expressed distress acquire renewed meaning through representation (1). The home video setting allows the films to be playfully enjoyed as entertainment, ensuring a safe distance that does not trigger defense mechanisms (2). The memofilms are administered repeatedly over the course of a month, as they are meant to act on the level of habit (3). Finally, the project involves the entire family, as well as carers and medical staff, taking into account the collective dimension of the therapeutic process (4).

The third case is *Videopharmakon*, a therapeutic filmmaking project for adolescents on the autism spectrum, in which participants become authors, actors, and ultimately spectators of their own filmic narratives (Sabatino, Saladino [2024]: 119-161). The practice usually involves two adolescents working together on a film, alongside their families in a context of collaboration and inclusion. In one such experiment, two boys who struggled to describe themselves in preliminary interviews were able to share their stories and expectations while developing the storyboard of their film. The playful setting enabled them to reenact situations they found most difficult – such as sleeping alone in the dark – and to confront these challenges while linking them to visualizations of their desired selves. The enjoyment of play, together with the self-esteem fostered by their new authorial role, provided a cathartic pleasure that helped them process unease and elaborate even their most painful experiences. Once again, the working-through of the problematic situation occurs through its reenactment (1), made possible by a playful setting (2) and sustained by long-term training involving multiple sessions, including follow-ups (3). Significantly, alongside the film made by the two adolescents, a second film is produced by the videotherapeutic team, documenting the entire process and incorporating all types of collected footage through intermedial editing. Here the dynamics between the adolescents, their families, and the team come to the fore, attesting to the intersubjective nature of the therapeutic process (4).

The extraction of a theory of therapy from Benjamin's scattered reflections on vaccination, training, distraction, catharsis, and laughter has thus allowed us to develop both a historical and an operational argument. On the one hand, it enables a reconsideration of the relevance of the premodern homeopathic paradigm within contemporary society, in which new technologies – and the epistemological contexts they generate – are contributing to the overcoming of the predominance of the artistic function of images. On the other, it provides criteria for the design of therapeutic media that are homeopathic in the sense that they engage the very disturbances they seek to treat, but only under conditions that render the representations of those disturbances imaginable, repeatable, and shareable.

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Imperfect Everydays Beauty: Comfort Movies and the Healing of the Ordinary*

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Abstract. Arguing from everyday aesthetics, media studies, and visual culture, this article investigates the aesthetic and therapeutic virtuality of movies focused on everydayness' absorption in modest and mundane routines and rituals. Rather than providing alienated and solipsistic escapism or offering illusory and fanciful counter-narratives to the hyper-intensification of digital life, the examined films – Jim Jarmusch's *Paterso*n and Wim Wenders' *Perfect Days* – are considered as comfort movies: as homely healing practices that, through low-arousal form and narrative

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predictability, sustain a sense of continuity and safety and enable processes of self-regulation and attunement with the prosaic rhythms of life. They exemplify for viewers a restorative normalcy and an embodied and embedded daily care and aesthetic labour that can be engaged in without effort or twists, but through the subtle recalibration of attention to things, places, beings, gestures, perceptions, states of mind, and moods, and through the weak artification, or imperfect "making special," of working and domestic activities and daily routines.

Keywords. Comfort movies, absorption, everydayness, artification.

Just a perfect day, drink Sangria in the park
and then later, when it gets dark, we go home.
Just a perfect day, feed animals in the zoo.
Then later, a movie too and then home.

Lou Reed

1. *Forms of absorption*

The modern Western tradition has often construed aesthetics as a domain detached from practical life, restricting its efficacy to the disinterested contemplation of artworks. Yet this detachment is historically contingent, rather than intrinsic. Ancient practices – from the Platonic notion of *pharmakon* to Aristotelian *katharsis*, and from Christian *agalma* to ritual healing images – bear witness to a longstanding belief in the transformative, even therapeutic, capacity of representation. Cultural history abounds with examples of such agencies: apotropaic images warding off harm, tragic and comic theatre reconfiguring affect, epic narration binding communities, or musical rites intensifying collective trance. In each case, the aesthetic does not merely mirror life; it intervenes in it, shaping perception, emotion, and relationality (Di Stefano [2017]; Giombini, Kvokačka [2021]; Saito [2022]).

The modern separation of art from religion, aesthetics from praxis, and the humanities from the natural sciences created an enduring epistemic regime in which images appeared incapable of acting concretely upon and with the world. The consequence was a disqualification of representation as an operative force: at best, it was seen to unify fragmented experience through symbolic mediation, but not to alter the conditions of embodied existence. Against this backdrop, the rediscovery of everyday aesthetics marks a decisive reorientation. It suggests that aesthetic experience is not confined to extraordinary artworks or events but permeates the gestures, rituals, and repetitions of daily life, characterized by normalcy, routine, habituality, and ordinariness (Saito [2007]; Leddy [2012]; Melchionne [2014]; Naukkarinen [2017]).

This reorientation has far-reaching implications. If aesthetic value can be found in practices such as cleaning, commuting, or preparing food, then the boundary between art and life becomes porous. Everyday aesthetics thus challenges the reduction of the aesthetic to a rarefied category of judgment, proposing instead a broader ecology of sensibility where perception and valuation co-operate in all domains of living experience (Matteucci [2016]). Such a shift does not trivialize aesthetics; rather, it underscores the possibility that what appears prosaic can become "special" through forms of attention and awareness (Saito [2007]; [2017]).

In contemporary culture, this insight encounters an environment saturated with media technologies. Mobile phones, wireless infrastructures, and social platforms ensure that the ordinary is constantly mediated, recorded, and circulating (Goggin [2006]; Penz, Schupp [2022]). The everyday has become inseparable from images: a ceaseless stream of selfies, micro-videos, and snapshots configures a "hyper-ordinary" condition, where the very texture of life is both intensified and standardized by (pre- and re-) mediation. Scholars of visual culture have described this environment as postmedial or post-cinematic, even post-digital, stressing how the categories of professional versus amateur, or artistic versus vernacular, collapse into a continuum of mediated practices (Coleman, [2011]; Eugeni [2015]).

The implications for aesthetics are profound. Experiences that once unfolded silently or remained unmarked are now framed, filtered, and shared in real time. These practices are not merely expressive; they generate new forms of subjectivity, relationality and sociability, and even ethical orientation (Duncum [2002]). To theorize everyday aesthetics today is therefore to address the entanglement of embodied routines with digital regimes of visibility and circulation: the living everyday experience is embodied, embedded and situated, but also by the devices, platforms, and infrastructures that shape how perception is distributed and how significance is attributed (Lehtinen [2020]). This double articulation – embodied and mediated – places everyday aesthetics in a productive dialogue with the long history of therapeutic and transformative functions attributed to representation. As Stiegler has shown on several occasions (see Stiegler [2013]), the pharmacological model is particularly resonant: images, like drugs, can heal or harm depending on dosage, context, and mode of reception and incorporation. In the digital environment, where images of mourning, illness, ecological disaster, or intimate ritual are endlessly posted and shared, one witnesses the reactivation of ancient dynamics under new technological conditions (Hjorth, Burgess [2014]; Pardo, Morcate [2016]). Representation is not merely contemplative; it is affective, relational, and at times therapeutic, though also potentially alienating or toxic.

Although not interested in new technologies, digital devices and the experiences they enable, everyday aesthetics brings to this debate a vocabulary for describing how ordinary practices – rituals of care, repetitions of labour, attentiveness to minimal variations – can acquire aesthetic and therapeutic valence without being subsumed under the category of high art. The cleaning of a space, the preparation of a meal, or the repetition of a daily walk are not merely functional acts; they may generate a sense of fullness, presence, or consolation. When mediated through film or digital images, such acts can become communicable, sharable, and pedagogical by an informal way of learning-by-seeing, training others in modes of attention that counteract the fragmentation of contemporary experience (Highmore [2011]; Naukkarinen [2017]). In this sense, everyday aesthetics converges with the concerns about the therapeutic dimensions of images and representations, which requires precisely a focus on the ordinary, where the line between aesthetic pregnancy and practical efficacy can blur. The everyday is where *pharmakon, katharsis*, and *agalma* persist, or return in contemporary (and no less ambivalent) forms: in the aestheticization or artification (Naukkarinen and Saito [2012]) of routine, in the cathartic repetition of gesture, in the small things or artifacts and images that acquire symbolic resonance. Far from being irrelevant, these practices may reconstitute and reactivate the potentialities of perception, imagination, and relation that modern epistemologies and discourses had declared inaccessible to the aesthetic domain.

The task of contemporary aesthetics and media theory is thus to recognize the pregnancy of the everyday repetitiveness and monotony as an existential, aesthetic and ethical value for the person who engages with them. This does not entail romanticizing ordinary life, nor collapsing it into spectacle, but recognizing its ambivalent or pharmacological potential. As digital media saturate daily existence, the challenge is to discern how the representation of anonym ordinary and unassuming routines can mobilize absorptive motifs in the sphere of life, how can interest and engage us and support attention rather than distraction, relation rather than isolation – and denial of the beholder –, care rather than commodification. It is here that cinema, with its capacity to render visible the subtle textures of time, repetitions, and gestures, provides an excellent lens. By attending to the minimal and monotone, films that dwell on the everyday can reactivate attention and care and be therapeutic.

Inspiring by Michael Fried (2008) and Stanley Cavell's (1979) well know thesis about absorption, the everyday and painting, photography and cinema, and literature, we can say at some length that the ordinary world in which we live is naturally disclosed to us while we are engrossed or attentively absorbed with it during an action, a feeling, a state of mind. Even more important for the consequences on how we understand experience is what wrote Benjamin (1935-1936) in his seminal writings on the work of art and the mechanical reproduction of the images. The repetitive, flat and low-arousal everyday experience depicted produce absorption – *Sammlung, kontemplative Versenkung, Aufmersksamkeit, Einverleibun*g, namely concentration, contemplative immersion, attention, absorption, or the perceptual and physiological situation that Benjamin linked to the experience of canonical art, particularly landscape painting or lyric poetry. Benjamin contrasts this phenomenological palette with that of the mundane experience of architecture or cinema, and Dadaist poetry, designed as *Zerstreung* and *Ablenkung,* as distraction and diversion, and as habits and casual glances too.

The switch from aesthetic absorption facing a work art to absorption by the everyday is important: the entire model of experience as hypersensitivity can be questioned. This model is the true historical signature of Modernity and Postmodernity and it is based on excitement and intensification, electrification and acceleration, on surprise, shock, trauma and disruption. What once concerned the aesthetic experience of art now engages a living aesthetic experience of the world, and repetitiveness, routines, habits, even boredom, can be special and activate absorption and attention – a variable attention multifaceted and multidirectional, neither specifically thematic nor meta-operational, at once technical and instrumental, object-oriented and environmental.

The consequences and prospects opened by this shift are significant, and we will try to follow some of them that are useful for discussing the relationship between aesthetics and therapy.

2. *Comfort media*

Approaching comfort as an aesthetic and media category means examining the micro-ecologies of reassurance that underpin contemporary viewing. Comfort is not sentimental sedation; it is an active modulation of affect. Within the emotional spectrum, it lies between sorrow and relief-steadying what the first agitates and what the second releases. If catharsis purifies and refines perceptions and judgment, comfort restores through duration, functioning as a *pharmakon* that heals by repetition, dosage, and rhythm rather than rupture.

Aesthetically, comfort relies on patterned recurrence and recognisable rhythm – a ritournelle (Deleuze, Guattari [1980]; Grosz [2008]). Repetition here is not mechanical but musical: it transforms monotony into pulse and re-aligns perception with temporal continuity. In this perspective, repetition disciplines attention, as well as it trains perception to find balance in continuity rather than climax. Comfort, in this sense, is the art of staying more than of moving, and it is a relation category.

Media studies demonstrate how such concept operates in practice. Viewers often return to familiar films or series to regulate stress, using predictability to restore equilibrium. Re-watching well-known narratives reduces cognitive effort and produces affective rhythms that can be trusted (Grady, Eden, Wolfers [2025]), a gesture that resembles reaching for comfort food as a way to seek reassurance (Troisi, Gabriel [2011]; Russell, Levy [2012]). Comfort viewing becomes a micro-ritual of control, adjusting emotional temperature through familiar forms and atmospheres.

Communication psychology extends this intuition by describing *comfort media* as experiential triggers intentionally chosen to reduce arousal, mitigate negative affect, and foster a perceived sense of safety (Wolfers, Schneider [2021]). Such experiences are positive in valence and low in intensity; their effect depends on coherence between viewer and environment (Kiknadze, Leary [2021]). Rather than passivity, they involve recalibration – a perceptual synchrony between external order and inner pulse (Jones, Wirtz [2006]).

Because media are accessible, inexpensive, and solitary, they have become one of the most common tools of affect regulation (Nabi *et al*. [2022]; *NECSUS* [2024]). During the pandemic, predictable series and nostalgic reruns functioned as companions that helped viewers re-create continuity amid uncertainty (Fingerman *et al*. [2021]; Yu, Alizadeh [2024]). Such turn to repetition has been described as a practice of self-care, a gesture that is less a deterritorialising escape than a ritual of maintenance, a way to re-territorialize and re-inhabit the present through predictable rhythm (Castle [2019]).

From such theoretical reflections arise a cinematic articulation of comfort: the comfort movie. The "comfort watch" (used interchangeably with comfort film or comfort movie) provides a sense of safety and security by distracting the viewer from unpleasant emotions or situations (Kaurr [2021]). Predictability and familiarity, often dismissed as anti-artistic, here gain aesthetic fitness as potential for an existential and ethical happiness. Their cyclical patterns – reconciliation, procedural closure, domestic routine (Miller [2008]; Saito [2017]) – organise feelings and moods as much as narrative. Through these repetitions, spectators experience what Stevens (2020) calls narrative homeostasis: the restoration of order through recurrence. In romantic comedies, cooking or renovation shows, or lifestyle formats, the rhythm of repetition operates like a metronome for feeling, affirming that chaos remains containable.

Comfort also explains the enduring appeal of formulaic genres. Disney romances, for example, reaffirm emotional order through predictable moral structures that offer stability in uncertain times (Chatraporn, Handrich [2012]). Holiday films rely on the same principle. Their cyclical return and moral clarity create what Rutledge (2020) describes as the *homecoming effect* – a ritual reassurance that goodness will prevail. Such predictability is not a flaw but an aesthetic feature that encodes safety and recognition.

Comfort media, however, are not confined to these genres. Their logic extends across platforms and forms: the deliberate choice of slow pacing, ambient sound, and repetition provides the low-arousal stability associated with recovery experiences (Reinecke [2016]). Puijk's (2021) study of *Slow TV* demonstrates how minimal editing and real-time observation transform everyday actions-train rides, knitting, dishwashing-into collective rituals of attention. The pleasure derives precisely from uneventfulness: an expanded temporality that lets perception breathe.

The passage from comfort media to comfort movies marks a shift from psychological function to aesthetic and existential form, echoing Francesco Casetti's recent reflections on cinema as an environmental device that reorganises experience which implies an ambivalent concept of *comfort*: as exoneration implies a departure from an anxious or repetitive situation, compensation implies some kind of loss or deficit that must be rewarded. Both provide relief by reacting to worries and threats, namely linked to the everyday (Casetti [2023]).

In the perspective adopted here, comfort movies are neither escapist fantasies nor austere minimalisms. They create environments of perceptual steadiness where rhythm, familiarity, and repetition generate composure. Narrative conflict is muted; continuity prevails. Long takes, stable compositions, warm or muted light, and environmental soundscapes replace dramatic crescendo with ambient presence. Time unfolds on the scale of breathing-measured, cyclical, humane. In these films, attention relaxes without losing focus; repetition becomes ritual, and ritual becomes care.

Pleasure lies not in flight but in re-entry. The predictability that once seemed banal becomes a condition of safety: it allows viewers to loosen vigilance while remaining engaged. In this state, cinematic rhythm performs a therapeutic function. Low arousal and recognisable repetition regulate perception and emotion, offering viewers a gentle rehearsal of stability in a culture that rewards overstimulation.

Comfort movies thus extend the theory of comfort media into an aesthetic practice. Their slow temporality and subdued dramaturgy create the right conditions for attentional recovery. They demonstrate that repetition can heal perception by synchronising it with the world's rhythm. At a time when speed is valorised as self-efficacy and vitality, such films teach the value of calm: an ethics of attention grounded in form. Through their quiet persistence, they recover the ancient promise of images – the capacity to act upon and with life, not through excess but through grace.

3. *Poetics of Attention:* Paterson

The aesthetic-therapeutic framework sketched so far finds its clearest cinematic expression in works that elevate routine to revelation. Both *Paterson* and *Perfect Days* belong to a minor, contemplative lineage of cinema that refuses spectacle and seeks embodied meaning in repetition. They are not films about events but about continuities – about what persists when nothing happens. Through their quietly patterned rhythms, these films enact the logic of comfort cinema: they soothe not by sentimental reassurance but by rehabilitating perceptual attention, by teaching the spectator to see again, and be alive.

Jim Jarmusch's *Paterson* (2016) opens with the rhythm of waking. Each morning the titular bus driver rises, kisses his partner, walks to work chewing and mulling over words to write, drives his route through the New Jersey city that shares his name and the title of the William Carlos Williams's eponym five-volume poem (1946-1958), writes-like Frank O'Hara (1964) – a few lines of his "lunch poems" during the pauses, and returns home. The film repeats this sequence across seven days, with only micro-variations – shifts of light, fragments of overheard dialogue, subtle changes in Laura's domestic experiments and homely techniques. The repetition is neither (too much) ironic nor oppressive; it constitutes the film's structure, its slow heartbeat.

What distinguishes *Paterson* from earlier depictions of the everyday in cinema (from Ozu's ordered domesticity to Kiarostami's meditative drives) is its refusal of transcendence (Krause [2024]). The routine does not lead to crisis or enlightenment and a consequent existential and narrative twist; it remains intact, dignified in its ordinariness. The cinematic metronome synchronising viewer and character and his viewed world is the day-by-day rhythm of working, eating, walking and writing sitting on a bench facing in a public garden-just like Hirayama, the protagonist of *Perfec Days*, using this visual *dispositif* enabling both deliberate and contemplative, or lazy and inattentive, isolation and presence in the public arena (Jakob [2017]). We should point out that the bench corresponds to the motor vehicles used by the main characters of *Paterson* and *Perfect Days*: the bus and the minivan are mobile medial prostheses that enable protected horizontal observation and contemplation, a true technological embodiment of the ancient scopic desire to immerse oneself in the viewed world (Eugeni [2023]). Jarmusch's long takes, minimal camera movement, and sparse sound design establish an ambience of attention. The bus engine, the city hum, the murmurs of passengers form a soundscape of gentle continuity. The viewer's breathing seems to match the film's tempo – a physiological correspondence at the root of comfort aesthetics.

Paterson's genius loci poetry, inspired by William Carlos Williams's poem about the New Jersey town, mirrors this form. His verses, projected on-screen in handwriting (penned by Ron Padgett, an award-winning member of the New York School), resemble mindfulness exercises: simple observations transmuted by rhythm.

«I'm in the house. / It's nice out: warm / sun on cold snow. / First day of spring / or last of winter. / My legs run down / the stairs and out / the door, my top / half here typing». The act of writing becomes an analogue to the spectator's perceptual statement and act of seeing: both are embodied and situated exercises in patient noticing. This slow pedagogy of attention, central to the aesthetics of the everyday, functions as a therapeutic process. The film trains the mind to dwell on minimal difference – the slight deviation that keeps repetition alive. The huge recurrence and variety of the twin motif in Paterson invites viewers to recognise patterns formed by repetition and to appreciate differences between individual occurrences, becoming more skilfully slowed down and increasingly sensitive to nuances and comfortable with them. Furthermore, it displays that this phenomenological logic lies at the core of life, vision and poetry: repetition is the fundamental organising principle, from the regularities of rhythm and rhyme to structures based on recurring and unfolding perceptions, actions, images and words (Szlukovényi [2023]).

The structure of *Paterson* literalises the dynamics of comfort media outlined earlier. Predictability provides safety; micro-variation maintains interest. The daily recurrence of gestures – tying shoelaces, opening the lunchbox, walking the same streets, go the same bar – creates a comforting narrative homeostasis, the maintenance of equilibrium through patterned return. The spectator experiences reassurance not through resolution but through continuity, made up of nuances and variations.

Yet comfort here is not complacency. The film's gentleness contains vulnerability. The loss of Paterson's notebook, chewed by his dog, Marvin, momentarily shatters the fragile equilibrium – and it seems to parody the infamous song *I wanna be your dog* of Iggy Pop (*Funhouse*, 1969, descripted by Lester Bangs as «fairly monotonous – [but] the new monotony is so intensely sustained that you can't get bored»), evocated in the movie as the "Sexiest Man Alive" (and subject of the magnificent Jarmusch's documentary *Gimme shelter*, also from 2016), and to invert the myth recounted by Pliny the Elder about Apelles (*Nat. Hist.*, XXXV, 36, 102-104), who throws a sponge over the foaming mouth of a dog he is unable to paint, but, by chance, this gesture of anger and failure leads to completion of perfect mimetic art. Paterson's silence and subsequent acceptance recall what Burleson and Goldsmith (1996) describe as comforting reappraisal – the emotional shift that restores coherence after disruption. The following encounter with a Japanese poet, who gifts him a blank notebook, functions as narrative and affective reset. The circle closes; rhythm resumes. To put in commonplace – every ending is a new beginning.

The film's attentive care for detail and the ordinary includes neglect, dirt and muck too. The poem read by the 10-year-old little girl (written by Jarmusch himself, echoing an infamous William's poem, "Rain") to Paterson says: «Water falls, / making pools in the asphalt, / dirty mirrors with clouds / and buildings inside. / It falls on the roof of my house. / It falls on my mother, and on my hair. / Most people call it rain». The child-like poem depicts a kind of a miniature *effet-tableau* of a prosaic ontological narcissism in which humans, the natural beauty of weather phenomenon – rain and the Great Falls – and the industrial grit of the ex-“silk city” streets coexist in a troubled surface of a natural reflecting medium, and one cannot distinguish between seeing things and being seen by them. This naïve poetic melody captures a gentle indifference between domestic and urban spaces and landscapes, and between beings and things. And it sounds like a light-hearted variation on the melancholic ending of Joyce’s *The Dead*, the last terrific short story of *Dubliners* (1914): «Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. […] His soul swooned as he heard the snow falling through the universe and falling, like the descent of their end, upon all the living and the dead».

Visually, Jarmusch deploys symmetry and balance to translate comfort into form. Framing is centred; editing is minimal. Light diffuses softly across the screen, creating a visual analogue of the film’s modest emotional tone. The absence of musical score emphasises the everyday acoustics of footsteps, engines, rain. This sonic minimalism – common to both *Paterson* and *Perfect Days*, which we will focus on later – embodies the shift from dramatic spectacle to sensory environment. The field sound, mixed with the ambient music created by SQÜRL (Carter Logan and Jim Jarmusch), does not illustrate emotion; it regulates it.

From this point of view, the movie presents also a poietic – from the Greek *poiein*, ‘‘to make’’ – of care as therapy. The protagonist’s partner, Laura (Golshifteh Farahani), personifies a complementary idea of artification as craft: her way of making things special by repetitions and variations does not involve the linguistic transcoding of the poetry, as the man does, currently paying attention to small individual things – a box of matches Ohio Blue Tip, metaphoric topic of a “Love poem” – without changing them materially, and then translating and transcribing them into poetic ekphrastic miniatures of tiny epiphanies and raw materials. She, on the contrary, literally writes on the things of the world, which become supports for an expanded, invasive and parasitic decorative writing, like the polka dots and repetitive patterns of the Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, which create immersive and surrounding environments and experiences of self-obliteration and mantric therapy.

If Paterson writes about ephemeral and routinary phaenomena, Laura overwrites mundane things: if the male poetic care shifts the artification from the *making of* to the *meaning about*, the female poietic manufacturing embodies a *making over* which entangle the differences between subject, objects and environment and abolishes the distinctions between monotony and creativity, self-expression and comfort, repetition and regeneration, between amateurism, vernacularism and fetichism. Marvin’s portraits, cupcakes, fabrics and all everyday objects shaped and decorated by Paula are unpretentious but healing agents that affirm the functional and existential potentiality of the lack of beatification – a milieu hand-made where the ordinary kitsch can be a mean for care and well-being, a comfort medium for projection and protection. Focused observation of and about the world and expanded expression over it are two sides of the same coin, or rather two complemental low arousal modalities of the same prosaic and homely poetic of comfortable care.

4. *Care labour:* Perfect days

If *Paterson* locates comfort in routine's rhythm, *Perfect Days* (Wenders, 2023, co-written with Takuma Takasaki) radicalises it through every day's ritual. Hirayama, a Tokyo janitor who cleans public toilets, lives alone, reads Faulkner (*Wild Palms*), Highsmith (*Eleven*, and *Terrapin*, a short story of cruelty in family relationships, is evocated by his niece) and Aya Kōda (*Tree*), listens to cassette tapes (see the list on the movie's site[1]), while driving to work, eats in the same restaurant, photographs trees sitting on a bench, waters plants, washes at home or in traditional public baths, always celebrated in the classic book of Junichiro Tanizaki, *In praise of shadows* (1933).

Perfect Days reports and repeats the daily routines with obsessive fidelity, using the pattern itself as narrative. Wenders's camera, mostly handheld, observes Hirayama's gestures with devotional patience each movement – wringing a cloth, folding a towel, aligning a toilet brush – is executed with quiet precision. The repetition converts labour into liturgy; cleaning becomes a practice of care. Comfort here is inseparable from attention. The viewer, like Hirayama, learns to perceive subtle variations in light and sound: the reflection of the sun in a bucket, the rustle of leaves above the toilet roof. The film's rhythm aligns with the low-arousal continuum or eventlessness identified in comfort media as we have outlined them so far. Scenes unfold in near-real time; cuts are few; the score is minimal. Ambient sound – running water, sweeping, traffic background noise – provides a sonic equivalent or correlative of calm and shapes a contemplative auditory ecology. Hirayama's routine is not mechanical or alienated; it is mindful. Each repetition contains minor deviation: a smile exchanged, a new encounter, a shift in weather. These micro-changes sustain and arrange vitality within stability.

If we can say that the aesthetic quality of everyday environments – all anthropized, from his home, to the roads travelled by van, from to public toilets and gardens, from the restaurant to the second-hand bookshop, in short, to the practiced places frequented every day by the protagonist – is inseparable from the moral quality of daily life of Hirayama, we can notice too that his

1 https://www.perfectdays-movie.jp/en/collection/

ordinary engagement with the world, clarifying how the micro-perceptions of film – light, surfaces, noises – constitute a form of continuous sensory tuning and accordance. The film's title, *Perfect Days*, signals this philosophy of sufficiency.

The film was provisionally titled *Komorebi*, a Japanese term for the light that filters through trees (Müştak Sevindik [2025]). This variation of light and shadow is what Hirayama photographs during lunch breaks with a vintage and inexpensive, non-professional analogue camera (an Olympus of the iconic XA series, designed by Maitani Yoshihisa), sometimes not looking through the lens and shooting, thus relying on chance – of the embodied and situated simple technique, of the optical unconscious of the technical instrument, and of the changing subject and environment – to capture the transitory. This choice isn't a *sprezzatura* but rather a self-obliteration and it is both ethical and aesthetic: a digital device, such as a smartphone, thanks to the automatic corrective assistance of algorithms and software, would have produced better and embellished images, perhaps technically perfect, but lacking in the sense of the imperfect beauty of the ordinary situation. Every week, the amateur photographer accurately selects and stores the printed picture in b/w in boxes. Hirayama's posture, pre-digital and technologically outdated and obsolete but not nostalgic, testimonies the deep affinity between the protagonist's way of seeing and the contemplative documentary as a practice of archiving to preserve ordinary memory (Purvis [2024]), not to fetichise but potentially to re-enact it just as the audiocassettes and the second-hand handbooks.

Perhaps, the production title *Komerobi* isolated the profane illumination sought by the protagonist as the heart and key event of the film and also ran the risk of emphasising aestheticisation or exoticism, even escapism. The final title clearly echoes that of infamous Lou Reed's song (*Transformer*, 1972), which, as we read in many interviews, was listened on the set during filming as all the other songs and was therefore radically diegetic. Not by chance, an instrumental piano version, "Perfect day (Komerobi version)" executed by Patrick Watson, can be heard during the closing credits; this separation (diegetic cassette music vs non-diegetic credits music) is crucial: diegetic songs create the character's intimate sonic world and then the viewers consonance and sympathy, while the closing non-diegetic piano version performs a reflective coda for the audience. However, and that's is capital, the plural form of the movie's title, *Perfect Days*, serves two purposes: it serialises the ephemeral and the non-extraordinary ordinary, always on the verge of turning into its opposite in Reed's raw and transgressive sublime and – at least for us, Western viewers (Saito [2014]) – in the aesthetized escapism of *Komerobi*, and highlights non-exceptional repetitiveness as the core of the aesthetics of comfort experienced everyday by Hirayama, driven and practised by his routine.

Perfection here is not transcendence or transgression but adequacy: the fullness of a day lived attentively. Ordinary existence isn't here project, construction or adventure; it is not seeking an expansive achievement, but it regulates a protective attitude for the reality and the rhythmical being in the world and the being with others, not only human beings but natural entities, things and technical objects.

Mobilizing Greimas's *De l'Imperfection* (1987) within the contemporary framework of comfort media theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of how Hirayama and Paterson perform what we might call a therapeutic poetics of comfort. Greimas famously argues that the sensible dimension of experience is linked with imperfection: imperfection resists closure and totality and embraces both the unfinished and the recurring and is like a springboard that projects us from insignificance to meaning. Hirayama's daily routine is not an escape from the world but a disciplined openness to micro-ruptures and variations – the unpredictable gestures of strangers, light filtering through leaves, the uneven texture of analogue photography. The comfort the film generates is therefore neither passive nor regressive, but it is active comfort, a state produced not by eliminating disturbances but by attending to them with gentleness and ethical grounding, at work in all ordinary activities. Paterson articulates a related yet distinct structure of imperfection: his life is equally repetitive and soothing, but his attuned attention to little things, creatures and events transforms the everyday imperfection into linguistic form and in the embodied meanings of the poetry. In *Perfect Days*, Hirayama's job exemplifies a practice of sustained and embodied attention, where care becomes a quotidian aesthetics of ritual maintenance rather than a teleology of efficiency. Similarly, Paterson's routine care for his environment and relationships reflects a poetics of the ordinary in which repetition generates subtle variation – an imperfect and persistent texture of life rather than a perfectible project.

Across both films, care labour is a form of agencement of the everyday repetitive incompleteness, aligning with comfort media theory's emphasis on low-intensity affect and the soothing recognition of the world's unresolved, ongoing nature. Where comfort-media theory often emphasizes predictability as its core logic, integration of Greimas' imperfection reveals a more nuanced possibility: comfort as ethical and aesthetical dwelling in the reality's minor dissonances and fissures. This shift helps think of comfort not merely as emotional management and self-regulation or a surreptitious neo-liberal subjectification (Illouz [2008]; Han [2015]), but as an aesthetic encounter with vulnerability – a quiet but resilient attention, a fragile but persistent attunement to the imperfect.

Perfect Days transforms maintenance into meaning, echoing feminist discussions of care labour as a form of creative attention and potential emancipation (Tronto [2013]; Puig de la Bellacasa [2017]); however, the risk of aestheticisation, which removes the social invisibility of the humble workers and marginalised people, and the difference between working time and leisure and private time, remains and has been noted (Oliveira [2025]).

Hirayama's ritualised gestures are enactments of attentional dwelling and his sanitation work is a form of maintenance phenomenology, bridging care practices, aesthetic sensibility non-art oriented and artification, understood as fabrication and application of special tools for mundane and ethical tasks concerning the public and the personal well-being. The reduction of narrative to gesture recalls the spiritual minimalism of Bresson and Ozu (the square format of the 4.3 aspect ratio is an homage to him), but inflected by the ecological consciousness of our time. The public bathrooms Hirayama cleans – designed by leading architects of the Tokyo Toilet Program, as Tadao Ando, Kengo Kuma, Shigeru Ban, Toyo Ito[2] – become places where beauty and functionality meet. And where the pharmacological ambiguity of reception and perception is renegotiated: for a citizen, they are simple apparatuses just to use, but for those who look and learn to observe and maintain them, they become assemblages unique of nature, technology, intimacy and environment, even of gaming from afar. Each surface polished to reflection affirms the film's ethics of attention: that care is itself a form of creation without a product, but a dwelling for the others (Sevgi, Özeren [2025]).

5. *Play it again (or by way of conclusions)*

Both *Paterson* and *Perfect Days* translate the logic of comfort media into cinema, yet their comfort is never escapist, exotic or aestheticised and an end in itself, merely beautiful or appreciable as such: the comfort demands the spectator's patience, even discipline; it is typically well-known, safe and reliable, but it may be monotonous and square, grey, even boring (Naukkarinen [2017]). The low-arousal experience they produce is not distraction but absorption, as we discussed before with Fried (2008), and as Saito (2022) also comments on Japanese care activities for objects and places, for whom the everyday includes homework and occupational or maintenance work and what routinely and inconspicuously happens in a private or publicly available space – if Fried's exemplary case study is a lightbox by Jeff Wall, *Morning Cleaning, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona* (1999, 187×351 cm. Walker Art Centre, Minneapolis), Saito evokes the documentary *Koolhaas Houselife* (directed and produced by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, 2013) for discuss the resilient task for clean the unusual house designed by the architect for a French

2 https://tokyotoilet.jp/en

family. Both movies propose a pedagogy of perception – a comforting aesthetics where repetition becomes a method of seeing, doing and living.

Seen together, the two films articulate complementary aspects of the comfort aesthetic. *Paterson* is structured by rhythm; *Perfect Days* by ritual. The former explores internal equilibrium through creative repetition; the latter externalises it through manual care. Both stage comfort as active attention – a discipline of the senses rather than a refuge from them.

Formally, their similarities are striking. Both use long takes, soft natural lighting, subdued colour palettes, and diegetic sound. Both centre solitary men whose work connects them to anonymous others: passengers, strangers, clients – and to more-than-human beings and entities, things and environment. Both end where they begin, closing the loop without closure. The cyclical structure itself embodies the aesthetic of comfort: a return that neither resolves nor transforms but confirms.

In our opinion, Jarmusch and Wenders' movies restore to cinema the agentive capacity that modern aesthetics had exiled – the ability of images to act upon and with life. In *Paterson*, comfort arises from the steady observation of the quotidian; in *Perfect Days*, from the ethical grace of repetition. In an era of acceleration, *Paterson* and *Perfect Days* slow perception and attention to a human scale. They invite the spectator to share the measured vision and pace of their protagonists, to rediscover continuity as a form of aesthetic and existential solace. Their therapeutic power does not lie in content but in form: in the modulation of time, sound, and gesture that re-entrains and re-arrange the viewer's body to the world's rhythm. The comfort they provide is not escape but re-alignment – a cinematic re-education of absorption that transforms routine into revelation without surprises but relief and regeneration.

To speak of comfort in aesthetic terms is to return to one of the oldest intuitions of Western thought: that representation – namely here, cinematographic – can be agent of aesthetic and ethical transformation of the ways of seeing and being in the world. Yet in the contemporary mediascape – permeated by screens, algorithms and techno-habits and micro-rituals of gestural repetitions – such pharmacological function can be reframed within the linguistic and stylistic category of comfort movies.

Across everyday practices, digital media, and cinema, comfort operates as a counter-narrative to the contemporary culture of acceleration and of the attention economy. Featuring continuities and patterns rather than crises and breaks, comfort temporal agency is restorative rather than productive.

Paterson and *Perfect Days* offer exemplary enactments of this aesthetic ethics: routines and rituals, do not close meaning but keep it open through duration, reiteration and repetition. Jarmusch's bus driver and Wenders's janitor are not ascetics withdrawing from life; they are practitioners of artification or, in other words, of making special by mundane attention. Their gestures – writing, cleaning, walking – model an everyday form of (self) care that operates through unexciting absorption. The viewer, drawn into these recursive actions, experiences comfort as recalibration, a form of perceptual attunement that quietly contests the overstimulation of digital culture and algorithmic life.

In this perspective, the comfort movie acquires an ethical and ecological dimension that operates through the audiovisual *dispositif*, generating safety, resonance, and rhythmic coherence. Its force lies in its resistance to fragmentation and distraction, in its modest defence of slowness and presence as forms of care. Against the background noise of endless novelty, comfort cinema teaches the radical gesture of staying-with things and beings, with images, with gestures, with places and time.

In this sense, the aesthetics of comfort converges with the ancient therapeutic paradigm of the *pharmakon*. Images soothe not by removing discrepancy or discomfort but by giving it rhythm, not by fixing the ontological and existential imperfection but by rendering it bearable and significant. The comforted spectator emerges neither distracted nor purified, but re-attuned – an absorbed subject capable of attention and presence in and with the world.

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Aesthetics Meets Oncology: A Participatory Design Project to Speed Up Time Passage in Chemotherapy Through Virtual Reality*

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Abstract. Virtual images are often conceptualized as fascinating and powerful but also possibly harmful. In this article, we introduce the theoretical framework and the first operational steps of a research project, TIMELAPSE, which deploys virtual images in their *therapeutic* potential. TIMELAPSE aims at developing, testing, and launching a virtual reality (VR) application to speed up time passage perception during chemotherapy. TIMELAPSE adopts a strongly user-centered methodology, involving from its early stages the invaluable standpoint of the cancer patients. In this article, we present and discuss the results of the project's first participatory design lab with the patients. In addition to informing further stages of TIMELAPSE, these results provide more general suggestions concerning the therapeutic usage of images. Specifically, they underline the importance of visually appealing stimuli; they remark the need to assess carefully technological accessibility; and they suggest the relevance of using images as gateway to the domain of play.

Keywords. Time perception, immersive media, chemotherapy, participatory design, empirical aesthetics.

1. *Introduction*

In a cold police station, a run-down computer expert is trying to convince the detectives that the small creatures populating his favourite videogame are fully sentient and eager to transmit an important message to humanity. Exasperated, the detectives allow the man to draw a QR code, which he shows to the security camera. Through the camera, the videogame creatures infect the government's servers, and send out a signal that reprograms every human's brain.

Those who are familiar with British TV series *Black Mirror*, may have recognised the plot of last season's episode 4, «Plaything». Those who are not, may have feared that this story was more than mere fantasy.

Contrary to a longstanding conception of images as inert pictorial objects, nowadays we receive more and more hints that images – to use Trevor Paglen's notorious expression – do not represent the world, as much as they «"do" things in the world» (2014: 1). As it is well-known, Paglen was commenting on Harun Farocki's three-part installation *Eye/Machine* (2001-2003), concerned specifically with most recent image-making techniques. While other authors have stressed that images started «acting in the world» way before becoming automated or even digital (Parikka [2023]; Manovich [2001]; but see as well Freedberg [1989]), it is also plausible to argue that contemporary images express a distinctive agentive power. A relevant field in this sense is virtual reality (VR)[1].

With reference to virtual images, the issue is not much that their impact on our life and the world is not acknowledged, but rather that such impact is mostly seen as problematic. If VR tends to be glorified – often uncritically – by producers

1 For a discussion of the operativity of VR's "sister", augmented reality (AR), see Pirandello (2024).

and practitioners[2], it is often surrounded by variable degrees of concern in the scientific discussion – a path notoriously paved by authors addressing critically the notions of simulation and virtuality, such as Jean Baudrillard (1995, 2004) and Paul Virilio (1995).

However, precisely where *harm* is feared, *therapeutic* possibilities can emerge.

In fact, VR has gained a prominent role within the growing domain of *digital health* (World Health Organization [2021]), which explores fruitful applications of digital and virtual technologies in medicine and healthcare more broadly. Years ago, VR had already proved successful in the treatment of several mental disorders, including specific phobias, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, eating disorders (Freeman *et al*. [2017]; Park *et al*. [2019]). VR finds therapeutic applications with regard to organic conditions too: e.g., in post-stroke rehabilitation (Demeco *et al.* [2023]).

One reason why VR is effective in all these cases is that it acts on multiple aspects of our perception of the world and/or of ourselves. For instance, in the treatment of eating disorders VR images intervene on our body image; in the treatment of phobias, they modify the emotional and behavioural responses associated with specific stimuli in the environment.

Among the perceptual skills not as often discussed in the field is *time perception*. The study of time has a long-standing tradition in philosophy. To limit oneself to contemporary reflection, one can easily think of cornerstones like Bergson's *Matter and Memory* and *Creative Evolution* on the side of continental philosophy, and to what have become classics in analytic philosophy (e.g. Dainton [2010]; Le Poidevin [2003; 2007]).

In cognitive psychology, time perception is conceived in more operational terms as a complex ability comprising (among several others) the two related yet not overlapping aspects of duration estimation and time passage perception (Wearden [2015]; Droit-Volet, Wearden [2016]). While duration estimation refers to the process of quantifying the amount of time elapsed during a certain interval, usually in conventional units like seconds or minutes, time passage perception designates the qualitative impression of how fast or slow time seemingly passes in a given situation.

Both aspects of time perception are elastic constructs prone to modulations depending on manifold factors. Variations in time passage perception, in particular, tend to have clear emotional correlates. For instance, Wearden and colleagues (2014) investigated empirically time passage perception in relation to different

2 Think of the mythology of the Metaverse propagated by Marc Zuckerberg in 2021, but also the equally disconcerting rhetoric of other and less visible exponents of the Silicon Valley environment. See for instance Tony Parisi's "Seven Rules of the Metaverse", https://medium.com/meta-verses/the-seven-rules-of-the-metaverse-7d4e06fa864c (last accessed 12/07/2025).

psychological states and everyday activities. Confirming what is often observed intuitively in daily life, the impression of «Time flying» was associated with being happy, concentrated, and engaged in pleasant social activities. The impression of «Time dragging», instead, was paired with boredom, sadness, and tiredness.

A psychological construct known for combining temporal acceleration (or even disappearance) with positive emotions is flow (Csíkszentmihályi [1975a], [1975b], [1990], [2014]). Flow is a psychological state ideally placed between the extremes of anxiety and boredom, which results from being happily and continuously engaged in an activity that challenges but does not exceed one's skills. Examples of situations found by Csíkszentmihályi to easily elicit flow are climbing, playing chess, but also working (when the job has the appropriate features).

Time passage acceleration and flow can be *induced.* Since these two phenomena are typically associated with positive emotions, this opportunity can prove relevant to improve situations typically characterised by unpleasantness and unease. Among them, there can be situations related to illness. One's sense of the speed of time can be modulated by creating *ad hoc* those conditions that the literature indicates as relevant in this regard. However, real life can be hard to manipulate at one's will. A valuable alternative is thus working on *representations*, paving the way to an innovative operational and in a sense *therapeutic* use of images.

In this article, we present TIMELAPSE, a project that – building on this intuition – aims at creating a VR app to speed up or even dissolve time passage in the context of chemotherapy. More in particular, we will delve into the participatory design phase of the project, which hints at one of TIMELAPSE's signature features: the decision to involve, from the earliest stages of its development, the very specific end users of the desired VR app, i.e. the cancer patients.

2. *The project*

TIMELAPSE[3] attempts to systematically combine the above constructs: the therapeutic value of images and the desire to create conditions that foster positive emotions associated with time passage perception.

It is important to clarify here the sense in which TIMELAPSE's scope is "therapeutic". On the one hand, the project *operates* in a context that is certainly therapeutic in a strict, clinical sense: i.e., cancer care. On the other hand, the project's methods and tools are not "therapeutic" in the same sense. In fact, TIMELAPSE's VR application is *not* a medical device. At the same time, TIMELAPSE does not position itself as a psycho-therapeutic intervention. Its theoretical foundations are

3 https://timelapse.unimi.it/it/

in *cognitive* rather than *clinical* psychology. Hence, borrowing from an understanding of "therapeia" that is familiar to the philosophical reflection, TIMELAPSE sets the goal to act on the patients' well-being in a broader sense than the clinical one.

Within the context of diseases with high societal impact, cancer nowadays represents a major public health issue. Chemotherapy has significantly improved patient outcomes in terms of survival and potential recovery (El Mathari [2024]). Nonetheless, alongside its physical burden, this treatment often entails psychological distress, partly attributable to the prolonged duration of each session (Chirico *et al*. [2015]; Krebber *et al*. [2014]). The latter engage the patients for up to several hours: spending this amount of time in a highly medicalised context can cause the patients to hyper-focus on their condition, which can lead to a significant emotional burden. Avoiding this outcome is crucial for promoting the patients' mental well-being and, consequently, fostering and increasing their adherence to treatment (Chirico *et al*. [2020]). TIMELAPSE aspires to make chemotherapy sessions more bearable, particularly by influencing the patients' perception of time.

TIMELAPSE originated as a spin-off from the ERC Advanced project AN-ICON[4] and aims to develop, test, and launch a virtual reality application that can accelerate time passage as perceived by patients during chemotherapy. VR, in fact, plunges the users into 360-degree environments, excluding contact with their physical surroundings (Loetscher [2023]). In relation to chemotherapy, this has a high potential in terms of distraction (Rutkowski *et al*. [2021]). However, by using content specifically selected for this purpose, the isolating nature of VR can also be used to redirect the patients' attention and resources so as to bring about an impression of accelerated time passage (Cavaletti [2021]).

The TIMELAPSE project relies on an international research team coordinated by the University of Milan, and including a clinical partner (Fondazione IRCCS San Gerardo dei Tintori, University of Milan-Bicocca), who contributes expertise in clinical organization and trial management, and an industrial partner (KHORA), who is directly responsible for the production of the planned VR application. All staff members are working together at different levels on interrelated objectives: 1) to formulate a theoretical hypothesis on the types of VR content that could subjectively accelerate the passage of time during chemotherapy; 2) to specify and refine the hypothesised VR content, taking the users' point of view into high consideration; 3) to concretely develop the content for the VR application, thus obtaining a prototype ready for testing; 4) to assess the tolerability and effectiveness of the VR application prototype, and 5) to launch on the market the VR application. Table 1 illustrates how each objective gives rise to a specific implementation phase, each with its own purpose and methodologies.

4 https://an-icon.unimi.it/

Phase	Aim	Methodology
1) Theoretical Elaboration	Developing a solid theoretical framework to identify which types of VR content may effectively influence time perception and potentially make chemotherapy sessions feel shorter	Literature review and prior studies carried out by AN-ICON group members, complemented by practice-oriented insights emerging from the partially concurrent Phase 2
2) Participatory Design	Enhancing the proposed VR content by integrating feedback and insights from the users' point of view (i.e. cancer patients, with caregivers and clinical staff)	A combination of experiential didactics, design-thinking activities, and interviews; in addition, integration of the theoretical directions from Phase 1
3) Production	Concretely developing the content for the planned VR application, thus obtaining a prototype ready to be tested	Design and development of the product guided by the principle of a balanced trade-off between functional complexity and economic sustainability
4) Assessment	Assessing the VR application's tolerability and its potential effectiveness through empirical testing	Validated methods for clinical research, with the primary aim of safety and tolerability
5) Pre-Commercialization	Launching the VR application on the market	Planning and implementation of dissemination events–featuring demonstrations and hands-on testing–targeted at potential stakeholders

Table 1 – Phases, aims, and methodologies of the TIMELAPSE project

A crucial element of the project concerns the willingness to include patients in imagining and designing the VR application. TIMELAPSE adopts a participatory and patient-centred design approach, which innovatively incorporates in the conception of the VR application the irreplaceable perspective of its specific end-users; these include firstly the cancer patients, but also their caregivers and the clinical staff taking care of them.

Participatory research is an umbrella term including practices that have at their core the direct involvement of those affected by the issue being studied, which is typically of societal and/or political relevance[5]. Participatory research is oriented towards the concrete and operational goal of affecting positively a given situation or context, and thus it strives to transform knowledge into guidelines,

5 It could very well be an issue of societal relevance within the clinical domain. See for instance Faisal *et al*. (2025).

policies, and ultimately action and change (Vaughn & Jacquez [2020]). Participatory design (Bødker *et al*. [2022]), more in particular, is a well-established methodological framework to incorporate elements of user engagement in the design of computer-based technologies, and virtually any device or object of use. This approach is particularly advised when the needs of the target users are scarcely known or visible. We decided to adopt a participatory approach based on the acknowledgment of our difficulty to fully understand and anticipate the necessities of cancer patients, without any first-person experience of their health condition and of the chemotherapy treatment they undergo.

TIMELAPSE's participatory design phase comprised two sessions, held approximately two weeks apart. This article will focus in particular on the first of these sessions.

3. *State of the art and existing literature*

As anticipated, subjective time passage acceleration – and flow more in particular – can be *induced*. This can be done by studying what psychological factors ground these phenomena, and then creating the appropriate conditions for these factors to come into play. One of the most complete models to do so – the Dynamic Occupation in Time model – was put forward in the domain of occupational therapy by Elizabeth Larson and Alexander von Eye ([2006], [2010]). According to these authors, factors facilitating time compression or even flow are high, but not overwhelming, levels of novelty, complexity, skill demand, engagement, and focus on the activity being performed. One of the authors of this paper used Larson and von Eye's insight to formulate starting hypotheses as to how to create a VR application to speed up or dissolve time passage with pleasant emotional implications during chemotherapy (Cavaletti [2021]).

During the first phase of the TIMELAPSE project, we expanded on this preliminary work by conducting a further mapping review of the literature. Since flow is always associated with pleasant emotions, while time passage acceleration may not (think of the feeling of running out of time during a written exam), we decided to focus primarily on flow. Thus, the leading research question in our mapping review was how to induce flow by means of VR. Operationally, however, we decided to extend our mapping to time passage manipulation more broadly too, as works on this topic could contain information to be extrapolated and adapted to our goal. Search was done by keywords on Google Scholar, and inclusion was based on pertinence and, in case of empirical studies, methodological rigour. We explored studies pertaining to three thematic axes: foundational works on flow (Csíkszentmihályi [1975a], [1975b], [1990], [1997], [2014]); studies on flow or time perception manipulation in videogames (Tobin, Grondin

[2009]; Takatalo *et al*. [2010]; Sweetser *et al*. [2012]; Moon, Anderson [2013]; Michailidis *et al*. [2018]; Alvarez Igarzábal [2019]; Bogon, Halbhuber [2023]); and studies on flow or time perception manipulation in VR (Read *et al*. [2021]; Lemmens, Freiherr von Münchhausen [2023]; Micillo *et al*. [2023]; Mioni, Pazzaglia [2023]; Picard, Botev [2023]). Three studies compared flow in VR and its 2D counterpart (Pallavicini, Pepe [2019]; Mullen, Davidenko [2021]; Rutrecht *et al*. [2021]).

The review had two main outcomes. First, it allowed to identify with greater precision the preconditions of flow as described by Csíkszentmihályi: namely, being engaged in an activity that challenges without exceeding the person's skills; that expresses clear goals and feedback; and that allows concentration on the task to be performed, and an overall sense of control. Second, the review suggested ways to operationalise such preconditions in the form of content, UX, and/or UI features of the VR app to be designed. For instance, Rutrecht and colleagues (2021) provided the idea of designing the gameplay so that challenge (a precondition of flow) is inevitable. Alvarez Igarzábal (2019) and Lemmens, Freiherr von Münchhausen (2023) pointed out the usefulness of adjustable difficulty, to match different users' skills. All these possible features were to be tested with our patients.

Additionally, some studies offered even more concrete ideas of commercially available VR apps to be tested with our patients. We were particularly interested in the game *Thumper* (see below), which proved particularly effective in eliciting flow in the study by Rutrecht and colleagues (2021), and seemed plausible to be tested with our patients too.

4. *A laboratory on VR to speed up time perception*

The desire to include cancer patients, as well as their stated expectations and needs, translated into the organization of a participatory design phase (Phase 2). The main goal of this stage, which was conducted by researchers from the University of Milan together with collaborators from the SEGE group (a company specialising in design-thinking)[6], was to ensure that the final VR application is user-centred. The group used design thinking approach and techniques to engage participants in participatory design and testing (Ku *et al*. [2022]; Pfannstiel, Rasche [2018]). The expected outcome of this phase was a clearly defined concept for the desired VR application, ready for KHORA to start production.

6 This phase was carried out by Federica Cavaletti (Head of Research Unit), Ilaria Terrenghi, and Irene Magrì from the University of Milan; Stefano Cribellati, Michele Crippa, Livia Gamondi, and Agata Regeni, from the SEGE group; and professor Marina Elena Cazzaniga (Head of Clinical Unit), Cristina Tagliabue, and all staff members of the Oncology Department of the IRCCS San Gerardo dei Tintori Foundation, University of Milano-Bicocca.

Participatory design took the form of two meetings, or “labs” (Figure 1). The first one was introductory and experiential (Lab 1), while the second aimed to supplement the initial data with further field observations (Lab 2).

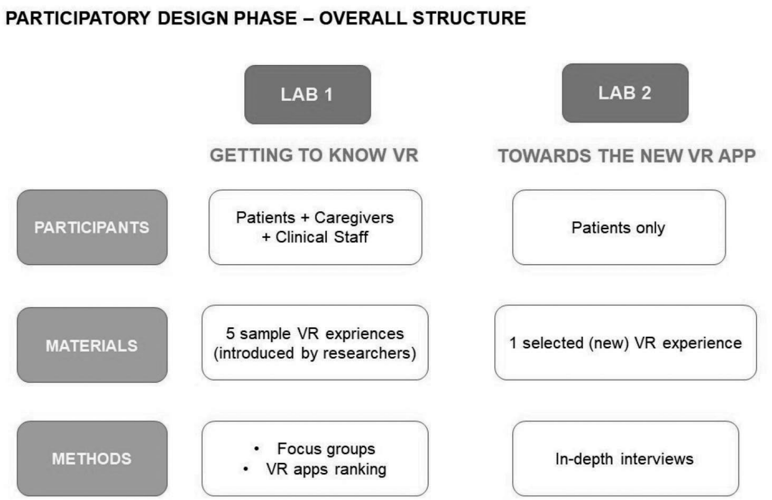


Figure 1: Participatory design Phase: overall structure

Now, let us take a closer look at the first meeting[7]. Lab 1 was held at IRCCS San Gerardo dei Tintori Foundation in Monza, the institution of the project’s clinical partner. Twenty-four people attended the meeting, including nine patients, twelve clinical staff members, and three caregivers.

The workshop comprised two distinct moments:

1. The first involved an introductory plenary seminar to familiarise patients with VR technology (its features, how it is used, the types of content and experiences available), as well as the concept of subjective time and the fact that it can be altered.

2. The second moment was more experiential: patients, caregivers, and healthcare staff were able to experience short VR sessions offering different immersive experiences, which were chosen by the researchers. The catalogue of experiences was systematically constructed to offer subjects a wide variety of experiences in terms of the proposed content, the duration of the experience, and its degree of interactivity. Table 2 shows the proposed catalogue of experiences. This moment included subsequent discussion and assessment activities, facilitated by SEGE.

7 Data from the Lab2 will be discussed in a forthcoming publication.

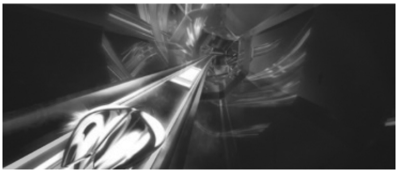
Immersive Experience	Description	Key features
David Attenborough's First Life 	In this documentary, the voice of British science populariser and naturalist, David Attenborough, guides the user on a 3.5 billion-year journey to discover the origins of life on Earth.	• Degree of interactivity: nil • Genre: documentary • Duration: approx. 11 minutes • Comfort level: medium • Language: ENG • Other notes: sea creatures come a little close to you
Lego Bricktales 	This virtual version of the popular Lego bricks game engages the players in building activities on a guided route alongside other characters.	• Degree of interactivity: high • Genre: construction • Duration: as desired • Comfort level: good • Language: ITA
Mare 	Playing as a mechanical bird, the player must accompany a mysterious little girl through the ruins of a city, solving mysteries and unlocking mechanisms to open subsequent gates.	• Degree of interactivity: high • Genre: adventure, puzzle • Duration: from 10 minutes upwards • Comfort level: good • Language: – • Other notes: slight risk of dizziness
Thumper. A Rhythm Violence Game 	In this music-based game, the player becomes a metallic beetle racing along a track, and has to overcome and smash obstacles following the soundtrack beats.	• Interactivity level: high • Genre: rollercoaster, musical • Duration: as desired • Comfort level: medium • Language: ITA • Additional notes: very impactful
Tripp 	This experience introduces the users to meditative practice and guided breathing by immersing them in captivating and relaxing virtual scenarios.	• Degree of interactivity: low • Genre: wellness • Duration: as desired • Comfort level: good • Language: ENG

Table 2 – The five immersive experiences proposed in Lab 1, with a brief description and their main features.

The experiential moment was designed so that all subjects could share their personal views and thoughts on VR technology and their chosen experiences. This moment was constructed in two distinct stages (Figure 2).

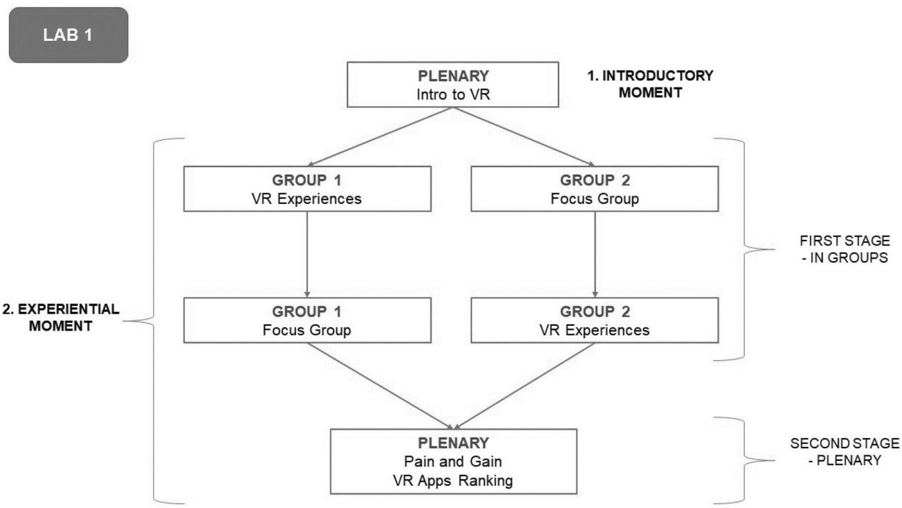


Figure 2: Structure of Lab 1

The first stage was conducted with the participants being split into two groups and involved gathering subjective contributions from participants through focus group techniques (Zammuner [2003]) and in particular guided brainstorming. To enrich and diversify the data collected, one group completed this activity before having the VR experiences, while the other group completed it afterwards. This produced interesting results in terms of the timing of the input and insight, as it allowed for the collection of thoughts and suggestions before (first group) and after (second group) the VR experiences. Participants were asked to identify themes of interest in three areas: 1) technology, 2) emotions and feelings, and 3) expectations.

The second stage, in which all participants regrouped after having tried the VR experiences, involved a "pain and gain" mapping activity and a voting activity, with the intention of identifying useful items following the testing phase. During the mapping activity, participants were asked to write down the positive and negative aspects they had experienced during the VR device testing phase on Post-it notes. Different coloured Post-it notes were given to patients, caregivers and clinical staff to allow the information collected to be clustered. In the final voting phase, subjects were asked to “rate” the applications they had tried by affixing stickers to billboards.

Throughout the Lab, researchers from the SEGE group collected useful information to be integrated with the data collected from the activities as well. They conducted direct observations in the field using a checklist that proposed several items[8] to be rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

5. *First insights and discussion*

The structure of Lab 1 enabled us to collect interesting data on the participants’ initial perceptions and their subsequent general evaluations of the immersive experiences. This data can help us build a relevant and diverse picture, enabling us to compare participants’ opinions at different stages of the process.

Before carrying out the VR experiences, the first group of participants were able to share their expectations with the researchers. Initially, they said that it was important to them to explore new and unfamiliar places with VR, as this would help them to escape the reality of the hospital through relaxing, natural, brightly coloured scenarios. They expressed a desire for open spaces, nature, music, and colours. Then, they mentioned some potential concerns as well, mainly relating to two areas: on the one hand, they were worried about not having enough expertise to use the immersive technology (technical level), and on the other hand, they were concerned about losing control over their surroundings, themselves, or their bodies (perceptual level).

Among participants who had tried the VR experience in the first stage of the lab, interesting data emerged regarding their evaluation of the experiences, partly consistent with previous descriptions. Firstly, the aspects that were liked the most concerned the sense of escapism and distraction that VR can provide, which is considered particularly important for cancer patients. Another aspect that was appreciated was the immersive imagery: the participants rated highly the graphic quality of the experiences and their visual features, which they deemed very pleasant and involving.

In general, the participants liked being able to choose and model their experiences. Indeed, the patients in particular said they really valued being able to select both the contents of the immersive experience and the level of interaction required. Many appreciated the opportunity to simply observe the environment and enjoy the graphics and images, while others were motivated by the prospect

8 Below is an exhaustive list of the items: Approach to technology; User-friendliness; Restraint; “Wow” effect; Immersion; Effective Interaction; Use of controllers; Engagement; User’s ease; Experience completion.

of interaction. This appeared related not only to personal tastes and inclinations, but also to the patients' current well-being. This may be a particularly significant element, given that in our target population physical and mental conditions can vary considerably not only across participants, but also for each participant within very short time spans.

On the other hand, the difficulties expressed were particularly related to the risk of isolation and loss of human contact, especially between patients and caregivers. Many did not expect that the VR experience could make them feel "alone" in the therapy process, and this is undoubtedly something that needs to be reflected upon. Another issue raised was the discomfort caused by technology, particularly for those who wear glasses or suffer from headaches and dizziness. Although no participant experienced severe discomfort, the possibility of this was emphasised.

In sum, taking into account what participants said and what emerged from observations of the activities proposed in the workshop, we can see that the data collection provides important insights. On the one hand, it highlights the need to personalise the experience based on the patient's preferences. On the other hand, it stresses the relevance of ensuring accessibility and comfort through technology. These two overarching themes can be broken down as follows.

Personalization of the experience:

– offering options for relaxing or more active experiences, allowing patients to choose based on their mood and physical condition;

– providing a wide catalogue of experiences to choose from, including natural environments (sea, mountains), cultural experiences (museums, cities), nature and historical documentaries;

– allowing customization of elements such as music, light level and colours.

Comfort and accessibility:

– optimizing the VR experience to reduce fatigue, dizziness and anxiety; avoiding excessive movement, significant vibration, excessively loud lights and sounds;

– developing user-friendly interfaces with clear instructions;

– using a single controller to facilitate interaction.

Finally, when we looked at the overall evaluation of the experiences, we found that the one that participants liked the most was David Attenborough's *First Life*. This was the case even though, notably, due to a connection problem, participants only viewed this experience on desktop (and thus not in immersive mode). This clearly deserves some reflection since, apparently, the participants did not perceive the impossibility of experiencing *First Life* in VR as an important loss.

What does it suggest in terms of the specific potential of VR, as opposed to non-immersive alternatives? Through the observation tools specially designed for this experience, we noted that the participants were so excited about *First Life*'s *content* that its *medium* temporarily faded into the background. However, we had at least as many hints that, in other cases, it was precisely the immersive nature of VR to keep our participants hooked to the experience. Indeed, the second place in our ranking went to the meditative app *Tripp*. In this case, participants were fascinated by the feeling of being surrounded by very relaxing scenarios – a specifically VR-related possibility. Thus, we may even speculate that participants rated highly *First Life* by imagining how charming it would be if it were in VR, based on the comparison with the experiences they could actually have in this medium. This view is reinforced by the fact that some participants concretely asked us whether in the future it would be possible for us to bring them again *First Life*, this time in VR. Proceeding in our ranking, *Mare* and *Lego* were generally less popular, though to some extent still appreciated by some participants. This may have been due to the participants' personal preferences and level of skill. Ultimately, *Thumper* was the least appreciated among the proposed experiences. Many of the participants struggled to understand the purpose of this rhythm game and how to actually complete it. Many complained about the too strong colours and the unfamiliar music.

This last result, far from being the expression of a simple personal preference, seems to us to deliver an important methodological consideration, which must necessarily be carefully considered if the project is to be set up correctly. While some studies suggest that this particular application, *Thumper*, is widely appreciated and linked to the experience of flow (Rutrecth *et al*. [2021]), it appeared less effective in relation to our specific sample. In experiencing *Thumper*, patients, their caregivers, and clinical staff members frequently interrupted the session well before reaching the more advanced stages of the game. In some instances, the experience was discontinued after only a few seconds. This initial finding underscores the need for further investigation, particularly to evaluate the applicability and transferability of existing scientific literature to different target populations.

6. *Take-home messages for the app design*

The initial findings emerging from Lab 1 represent highly valuable data for effectively advancing the TIMELAPSE project, particularly in guiding the second meeting of participatory design.

To facilitate the progression through the subsequent steps and to identify essential guiding elements for the effective development of the immersive VR application, the research team outlined several key aspects corresponding to specific focal points.

Lower standards for manageable and enjoyable interactivity

The first point to consider concerns the possibility for patients to choose the degree of interaction within the experience. This may be structured along a continuum, ranging from a merely contemplative mode – in which the patient simply observes the environment in a relaxed state without actively intervening on objects or scenarios – to a medium or high level of interactivity. This approach is important because, ideally, patients would like almost no level of interaction (following the model of *Tripp* or the documentary), but still the opportunity for activation for those occasions in which they feel good enough.

"Catalogue" and customizability

Patients expressed a high level of satisfaction regarding the aspect of choice: having access to a catalogue of experiences enables individuals to make decisions that are especially aligned with their physical and mental states at a given moment. Additionally, the possibility of adjusting elements such as color intensity, music, and other primarily visual aspects within the chosen experience generated particular interest.

Pausing and resuming across sessions

Patients appreciated the possibility of resuming the session from the point at which it was previously interrupted. This feature was valued for two main reasons: first, it allows users to continue the narrative or experiential journey without losing their progress; second, it enables the continuation of the experience in settings beyond the hospital environment, thus supporting greater flexibility and integration into daily life.

Great desire for sharing

The final key-aspect relates to the patients expressed desire to maintain a sense of connection with the physical environment–particularly with the caregivers who accompany them during therapy. This highlights a broader need to foster interpersonal connection and avoid complete isolation within the VR experience. To address this need, a twofold strategy could be implemented. First, moments of shared reflection could be integrated after the immersive experience, such as structured storytelling sessions or guided discussions and evaluations. Second, from a design perspective, the application could incorporate features like tournaments, where users can share scores or outcomes – encouraging social interaction and strengthening interpersonal bonds.

In conclusion, these key elements will be carefully considered in the development of the VR application and will be shared with our colleagues at KHORA, along with the findings from the second laboratory phase, which will further enrich and build upon these initial results. The project will therefore continue with the implementation of the next steps, which will lead to the development of the application. Thanks to the participatory phase, the application will be designed with the wishes, needs and perspectives of the patients in mind, thus bringing a very important added value for us.

7. *Concluding remarks: therapeutic insights, within and beyond TIMELAPSE*

Until now, we have illustrated the implications of the outcomes of Lab 1 for the subsequent steps of TIMELAPSE. In this final paragraph, we would like to develop some more general reflections about what the experimentation conducted could suggest concerning the broader topic of the therapeutic value and usage of images.

Though the concrete TIMELAPSE app is yet to come, our image-based intervention, we claim, was already therapeutic in the crucial sense that people variously dealing with a serious illness (i.e. patients, but also their caregivers and clinical staff) could enjoy a positive break from the aggravating feelings and thoughts usually connected to their condition or role. Notably, as we will see, this was true not only for the patients, but also for their caregivers and clinical staff[9]. Moreover, the described break was not a mere and self-referential distraction. On the contrary, our observations and data suggest it was a stratified and deep experience, with possibly longer-term impact on the parties involved. Three aspects in particular are noteworthy.

Concerning their encounter with the VR *content*, the participants were spontaneously drawn towards visual and auditory stimuli that proved sensorially appealing. Often, appreciation was shown at plastic level, for instance regarding bright or vivid colours. At the figurative level, the participants' positive remarks tended to apply to natural scenarios, mostly recalling the aesthetic category of beauty, but with some interest in sublime inflections as well. The therapeutic potential of nature is deeply felt in our society, in both a broad and more strictly medical sense. Especially since modernity, nature was reinterpreted as a healthy haven to escape industrialisation. In this regard, the more untamed the nature, the more powerful its effects – an idea condensed in the concept of *wilderness* exemplarily pursued, for instance, by Henry David Thoreau (1854). More recently, the connection between being in nature and well-being has been addressed more

9 Deploying the therapeutic potential of VR to benefit not only the patients, but also the clinical staff constitutes a promising direction, which has been explored particularly during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic – in which doctors and nurses were at high risk of burnout. See for instance Nijland *et al*. (2021). The field is starting to map this usage of VR systematically. See for instance Shankar *et al*. (2025).

systematically, as in the studies surrounding the so-called «biophilia hypothesis» (Kellert, Wilson [1993]), and in a rather domesticated, literally «gardened» version (Stuart-Smith [2020]). During Lab 1, participants were reminded of a relatively easy way of improving their well-being – i.e., engaging with nature – which can remain accessible even during the difficult time of the illness, either inside or outside the VR headset. This is in line with previous findings in the literature, attesting to the stress-reduction effects of virtual reality (VR) representing natural environments (Gentile *et al*. [2023]).

Taking advantage of two well-known medium-specific illusions associated with VR, namely transparency and presence (Pinotti [2025]; Slater *et al*. [2022]), participants *transported* themselves into the natural places they liked. In spite of its seeming disappearance, however, the VR medium is very much there (Bolter, Gromala [2003]). This brings to a second noteworthy aspect of our observations and data.

Nowadays, many types of image are mediated by *technology*. This state of affairs requires adequate competence on the user's side, and sufficient friendliness on the device's side. As Lab 1 has shown, this is even more crucial in therapeutic settings, for at least two reasons. First, compared to other population groups (for instance, students), patients are a rather unpredictable sample when it comes to technological literacy. With mixed ages, backgrounds, and interests, there is no reason to expect for this group a specific average expertise in the use of technology. Second, cancer patients in particular, due to possible chemotherapy-induced fatigue and generally higher levels of stress compared to the general population, have proved particularly prone to that frustration that typically sets in when struggling with an unfamiliar device. Thus, our experimentation may be taken as indication of the even greater importance of media and technological accessibility when deploying images and representations in the therapeutic domain.

Lastly, we gathered some relevant *relational* notes from our activities in Lab 1. To start with, as already mentioned, the participants voiced a concern related to the risk of isolation deriving from the usage of VR, and stressed the importance of finding ways to share their "intra-headset" experience. Such concern resonates with a broader set of critical stances toward immersive technologies that, following Baudrillard, Virilio, and like-minded thinkers from the last century, today coalesce in mass culture in productions like the show *Black Mirror* with which we opened this article. Undoubtedly, the existence of anxieties and fears surrounding digital and virtual media has to be taken into account when employing or devising representation with a therapeutic aim, to avoid that the means sabotage the goal.

In relational terms, however, we also observed something more unexpected and exciting. In fact, as soon as we let the participants try out the VR apps, the room quickly turned into a *playground*. Patients, clinicians, and caregivers experimented playfully with novel perceptions and feelings, but also – as it often happens in these settings – they were laughing at the bizarre behaviour of their playmates using VR as seen "from the outside". This gave rise to the otherwise inconceivable situation of a patient making fun of another patient (who normally shares a dramatic life circumstance, and the discomfort and pain of the treatments), or a clinician (who normally administers their therapy and is seen as a guide through the therapeutic path). In other words, soon after starting the hands-on session with the VR apps, our group of participants, at first implicitly reflecting the everyday power dynamics between patients, clinicians, and caregivers, was undergoing a transformation that made its structure much more flexible and horizontal. Among other factors, we believe that what triggered the described transformation was the exceptional situation of Lab 1, together with its clear delimitation in space and time. In this regard, a key-role was arguably played by the venue of Lab 1: a conference room far away from any clinical space, and that happened to be quite isolated due to unstable Internet connection.

On this grounding, we could read Lab 1 with reference to the classic account of *play* developed by Johan Huizinga (1939): a situation of departure from everyday life, facilitated by a space of its own, and allowing the emergence of rules and dynamics of its own; further, an unconstrained and fun situation, but with its particular seriousness.[10]

The positive effect on the participants can be defined with no hesitations therapeutic. While the patients had the chance to detach from their main characterization of "people with an illness", caregivers and clinicians could temporarily leave aside the heavy responsibility that comes with their task or job. What is more, we had concrete suggestions of a longer-term therapeutic effect of such an experience of play. A debriefing session that we conducted with the clinicians upon their request highlighted that they were benefitting from the continuing positive impact of Lab 1, and that they were eager to repeat similar activities in the future. In fact, play may constitute an important additional ingredient in future aesthetic experimentations in the therapeutic field. The power of play has already been widely explored in psychotherapy – resulting in systematized approaches (e.g. Schafer [1979], [2011]), which sometimes even include digital and virtual media (Bocci *et al*. [2023]). Aesthetics, with its long-standing tradi-

10 Another account that could be evoked here is Callois' (1958). This is so, even if the author's stress on the *classification* of *games* makes his insights not perfectly fitting here. In fact, arguably, the activities of Lab 1 do not fall obviously in any of his categories. The deliberate alteration of perception induced by VR would induce us to see Lab 1's activities as instances of *ilinx*, the «pursuit of vertigo»; however, it is not this aspect of Lab 1 that we were primarily concerned with in this article.

tion in the understanding of images and representations, is likely to provide a valuable contribution in this regard.

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Interactive Hallucinations. Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and AVATAR Therapy for Disordered Imagination in Schizophrenia

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Abstract. This article explores the potential of digital and interactive images as therapeutic tools for alleviating the most debilitating symptoms of schizophrenia. It discusses virtual reality (VR) images, which have been shown to be effective in treating delusions and simulating real-life scenarios, as well as augmented reality (AR) images, which raise awareness about this condition and soften the associated stigma. Finally, it covers AVATAR Therapy images, which are primarily employed to reduce or eliminate auditory hallucinations. The article will explain how using interactive images can strengthen the «narrative self» of schizophrenic people and their interactive bond with the outside world, by approaching schizophrenia as a disorder of the imagination.

Keywords. Schizophrenia; imagination; VR/AR; avatar therapy; operative images.

1. *Schizophrenia simulator*

On his TikTok page (@xoradmagical), artist Christopher Grant shares videos depicting his daily life living with schizophrenia. In some videos, he talks about his condition while he draws complex mosaics of faces[1]. Others are labelled by the artist as «schizophrenia simulator». In these videos, Grant films interior scenes, such as his home or a shopping centre, and natural settings, to which he digitally adds the faces he usually draws. Similar to the more common augmented reality filters applied to filmed scenes to modify the appearance of the subject, Grant's hallucinatory faces follow him tirelessly throughout his activities, whispering or screaming, sometimes friendly, sometimes disturbing, sometimes downright persecutory[2].

Grant's simulator aims to raise awareness among other users of the platform about conditions like his own. His decision to use TikTok for this purpose is undoubtedly successful (@xoradmagical has 1.6 million of followers), and by no means an isolated case. This article will explore how certain digital technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and AVATAR Therapy can be used to provide information about schizophrenia and treat those with the condition. Indeed, these technologies produce «operational images» aimed at a therapeutic function: engaging with one's own imaginative process, they can alleviate the distress caused by certain symptoms, particularly delusions, hallucinations, and stigmatization. But what does the imaginative process have to do with schizophrenia? And how can a «simple» digital image be an effective therapy?

2. *Schizophrenia and disordered imagination*

According to a rich philosophical tradition, imagination is the core process through which one interacts with their environment (Pirandello [2025]: 45-48). It plays a fundamental role in interpreting the potential of daily experiences, enabling human beings to creatively overcome their deficiencies in order to survive. To this end, the human body is constantly connecting with found and constructed elements: we are born «*homo faber*» because we naturally seek to expand ourselves within a material techno-culture.

This coupling is neither neutral nor mechanical. While other animals also build tools, human beings are unique in that their senses are reconfigured by their artefacts (Ihde, Malafouris [2019]). Individuals develop precisely through the process of hybridisation with the outside world, including inanimate objects (Parisi [2019]: 17). We are constantly negotiating the boundaries of our mind, which do not coincide with those of our body. Inert materials, objects and tools certainly do not think for us. However, every aspect of the mind, including the

1 https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8BqxQw4/.
2 https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8BqypHK/.

emotional and affective dimensions in the broad sense, results from interactions with them (Gell [1998]).

From this perspective, the mind emerges from the synergistic process of internal and external resources, both of which are equally decisive for its constitution (Malafouris [2013]). This harmony consists of friction, resistance and stiffness, but not open conflict or total estrangement. The environment does not merely present opportunities for thought; it resists and responds to us. Like an electric current that is activated only when distinct elements come into contact with each other, the mind exists only in relation to something else. The brain and the body alone are insufficient for the formation of thought. Without individuals, an environment is merely a space. The activity of the imagination is produced through the constant integration of human and non-human, animate and inanimate elements.

Emphasising the role of imagination in our everyday perception of the world highlights its material quality, rejecting the idea that it is instead ephemeral and purely representational (Koukouti, Malafouris [2020]: 30). On the contrary, it is the creative act through which we «grasp» the world: a form of understanding anchored to the specific situation in which it develops. Although it can certainly foreshadow potentialities that are not yet in place, it does so at the very moment of perception. Rather than thinking about things, we think *with* and *through* them, by effect of a sort of «material engagement» (Malafouris [2013]). Indeed, without things and before things, there is no thought.

Often confused with memory, imagination is also made of «expectation, planning» (Gehlen [1950]: 309). It is necessary for exploring space, combining material from different perception modalities, and enabling us to plan for the future and recreate the past. This allows us to understand the present context while travelling through time without physically moving.

Numerous studies have identified a neural system dedicated to it. Known as the «default network», this system comprises several brain subsystems that are particularly active when we are at rest, asleep, daydreaming or planning, or when we are trying to understand the thoughts behind another person's actions (i.e. mentalising) (Gerrans, Mulligan [2013]). It is widely believed that the default network alternates its activity with that of areas involved in executing tasks within the environment and that it alleviates boredom by filling empty moments with recollections of personal experiences or thoughts about interacting with others, whether actual or hypothetical (Raffaelli, Wilcox, Andrews-Hanna [2020]). However, it is also referred to as a «mental time travel» because it enables us to virtually relive the past and experiment with the future. Memory and imagination share many cognitive resources and are closely linked, to the extent that they cannot easily be distinguished (Beaty *et al*. [2018]; Schacter, Addis [2020]; Berninger, Vendrell Ferran [2023]). They are both creative and recreational: every time we remember something, we imagine it; imagination involves reproducing content, but also creatively reconstructing it, each time in a different way. Furthermore, some studies that have not received much attention in the literature on this topic suggest that the default network is active during perceptual tasks (Greicius, Menon [2004]) and indeed underlies our entire experience. Its main functions include understanding space as we move through it (Alcaro, Carta [2019]), and the integrated systematisation of multimodal sensory information. Past experience is constantly investigated and searched through in continuous comparison with present information. It has therefore been suggested to consider this network as a form of attentiveness that extends to the entire environment, aimed at recognising the relationships between things within it. From this perspective, the default network is a kind of «watchfulness» interested in integrated patterns of relationships between different elements (Buckner, Andrews-Hanna, Schacter [2008]).

Thus, from the perspective of philosophy and cognitive science, body extension does not necessarily involve physical continuity. Instead, it is realised as a virtual location beyond the skin, an invisible hybridisation with the visible world (Merleau-Ponty [1945]: 82). As we constantly reach beyond the boundaries of the body in terms of both time and space, the rest of the environment falls fully within the realm of thought.

The imaginative and interactive relationship between people and objects is essential for adaptation. This is made evident by circumstances in which, by contrast, this relationship does not exist anymore. What happens when it is no longer possible to project oneself towards potential actions? The surrounding environment is deprived of its affordances. When confined to the strict dimension of the present, one's practical sense is lost, as is full awareness of the context.

One possible cause of this is schizophrenia. In fact, defining schizophrenia is the first difficulty encountered by those approaching the study of this condition. Despite having been diagnosed in the late 19th century and being widely studied today, schizophrenia remains difficult to classify. To start with, it is more accurately described as a spectrum of disorders (American Psychiatric Association [2022]). Secondly, it cannot be traced back solely to a pathology at the cellular level. Its triggering mechanisms are also environmental, social, familial and often traumatic, and cannot be clearly identified (Bollas [2015]; Kolker [2020]).

Typical symptoms of schizophrenia include altered thinking and perception, as well as an inadequate or absent emotional response. Patients often exhibit paranoid delusions of grandeur or persecution, and some may be convinced that their reasoning is being influenced, stolen, or controlled from the outside, or that it can be perceived by others. Other common symptoms are hallucinations (particularly auditory), confused and impoverished speech, and catatonia (McCutcheon, Reis Marques, Howes [2020]; American Psychiatric Association [2022]).

Contrary to popular belief, schizophrenia does not mean that a person has multiple personalities. The term «schizophrenia», coined by the psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, rather refers to «a splitting of the various psychic functions» (Arieti [1955]: 13). People with schizophrenia live «on the edge of human perception» (Bollas [2015]: 3), which is normally guided by a series of «paradigms of perceptual organization» (ibid.: 181). One such paradigm is the ability to balance our interactive relationship with objects around us, which we are both autonomous from and influenced by. The schizophrenic condition radically challenges the common experience of the world, representing «another form of being human» (ibid.: 181). This is why the phenomenon is so difficult to fully understand: it is not a matter of considering patients *with* schizophrenia, but people who *are* schizophrenic (Laing [1959]). In short, the main structural disorders, which occur even before psychotic symptoms manifest, affect the following: «(a) the relationship between action and cognition; (b) the relationship between immediate and reflective givenness; (c) the implicit preconditions of experience, which are normally taken for granted; and (d) the intersubjective relationships» (Summa [2014]: 485-86).

For all these reasons, schizophrenia can be seen as a disorder of the imagination[3]. People with schizophrenia find it difficult to remember the past and adapt to their environment. Their relationship with their cognitive resources, including the outside world and their own body, changes radically. Consequently, they feel isolated, alone and fragmented. Their sense of precariousness is reinforced by the transformation of objects and people into strangers and threats that turn against them. Things lose their meaning and function (in other words, their affordances) and cannot be incorporated. Renée, the protagonist of *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic Girl*, claimed «things were tricking» her and said that she could no longer perceive them in relation to each other (Sechehaye [1950]: 55). Everything suddenly became «artificial, mechanical, electric» to her (ibid.: 31). Schizophrenic people lose the ability to use their imagination to mediate contact with their environment. Consequently, things become silent and meaningless, as if they are endowed with a mysterious and monstrous life, disconnected from each other and from the individual. Indeed, the «"reality" of the physical world and other persons ceases to be used as a pabulum for the creative exercise of imagination, and hence comes to have less and less significance in itself» (Laing [1959]: 85). The ability to feel sensations, such as pain, is still present, but the full perception of objects is lost. The lived environment becomes an aseptic, geometric space, where one's virtual projection is impossible.

3 For reasons other than those discussed here, also Gregory Currie and Ian Ravenscroft attribute schizophrenia to an imaginative alteration from a philosophical perspective ([2002]).

To a certain extent, the imagination always operates with absent objects; a minimal degree of derealisation is useful for reflection, understanding and planning. In people with schizophrenia, however, this process has gone too far[4]. While imagination usually involves «grasping» the environment, schizophrenic imagination fails to do so. Unable to «catch» it, it also fails to understand it. However, as the relationship with material things is essential for cognitive development, the world and the person fade simultaneously. By losing the vital relationship with part of their mind (namely, the environment) individuals also lose themselves. Reality can only become «warm, alive, affectively charged» (Sechehaye [1950]: 152), once the interactive link between one's internal and external cognitive resources has been restored. If imagination is fundamental to adapting to the environment, then psychosis can be interpreted as a serious form of maladjustment resulting in genuine disorientation (Summa [2014]: 479). As will be seen later, therapy should therefore attempt an imaginative rehabilitation.

Even individuals with schizophrenia who recognise the fictitious nature of their auditory and visual hallucinations cannot help but behave in response to them, as they are often terrified by what they see or hear (Bollas [2015]). As a matter of fact, we usually develop many hypotheses about the potentialities of our environment based on our experiences of what is and what isn't present in it, which both significantly influence the direction of our thinking. For example, a child who is afraid of the dark will remain so even if their parents assure them that there is nothing to worry about. Similarly, if a parent does not see their teenage child come home late at night, they may become anxious and assume that their child has had an accident. Despite having no proof that their child has actually been injured, they may call their child's friends and even alert the authorities (Gerrans, Mulligan [2013]). Anxiety, phobias, paranoia are not exclusive to people with schizophrenia, we all evaluate hypotheses about possible future situations in relation to our fears.

Therefore, schizophrenia exacerbates a tendency that is typical of human perception in general. Worldly experience is «strange» in that when we interact with objects in our environment or parts of our own body, we do not merely experience the object itself (Garroni [2005]). Rather, we perceive it in relation to other objects, what we know to be nearby but hidden, what has been and what could be, as well as what we desire or fear. In short, as Emilio Garroni wrote, the difficulty of the experience is that we are «essentially involved in things themselves or in the world» (ibid.: 6). This contact is so intense that we are as if «possessed» by it. As it is unintentional, it also often escapes us (ibid.: 99). For this reason,

4 Significantly, cases of «disordered» imagination are also characterised by hyperactivity in the default network (Whitfield-Gabrieli *et al*. [2009]; Buckner, Andrews-Hanna, Schacter [2008]; Buckner [2013]).

we all experience episodes of «non-recognition», when we are unable to make sense of our surroundings. Even parts of our own bodies can seem foreign to us, almost like hallucinations. For instance, upon waking in the morning, we might see our foot protruding from beneath the sheets and perceive it as an alien entity (ibid.: 33). Imagination is therefore a malleable process that unites the various aspects of the mind, which are scattered between the animate and the inanimate.

This process provides a consistent organisation of the experience, yet continually reconfigures itself. In order to prevent our rich and vital material «possessions» from becoming a malignant haunting, we tend to construct patterns that provide certainty and unity to the fragmented nature of our experience. In short, we build up a «narrative self» (Summa [2014]): the protagonist of interconnected events that we perceive as part of a sequence (Papineau [2016]). Like a reader who cannot immediately comprehend a text as a unified whole, the subject experiencing the world maintains a «wandering point of view» (Montani [2014]: 69) and processes what they encounter through progressive syntheses that become «a correlative of their consciousness» (ibid.). Just as we never have a conclusive view of a text, we will never have a conclusive view of reality: new syntheses are added to previous ones, reconfiguring them: «The past remains as a backdrop to the present, influencing it; at the same time it is itself modified by the present» (ibid.: 70). While reading, the subject constructs a new *Gestalt*, which they consider objective, but which is in fact the result of a continuous interaction with the text. And the other way around. Out of all the elements present, each reader selects those that seem most relevant, thus hypothesising certain future events. These expectations influence how we interpret what happens next, but they are also modified and reoriented by the text itself. Something similar happens in everyday perception. Thus, although some elements remain unchanged, the overall structure of our knowledge evolves. It is precisely this tendency that makes it possible to develop a therapy for some of the most debilitating symptoms of schizophrenia.

As we will see in the next paragraph, since we are predisposed to relating to things and objects, certain technologies are now being used to intervene in the schizophrenic imaginative processes, and reorient them towards the interactive relationships with the environment. Specific digital images are used to this aim. What kind of images are these? And how can the imagination of a person with schizophrenia enter into a therapeutic relationship with them?

3. *From technical delusion to technical therapy: VR, AR and AVATAR therapy*

The relationship between technology and schizophrenia is a much-discussed topic. Nevertheless, this bond is rarely perceived in a favourable way: the mass media, in particular, have frequently been criticised for being the primary cause of dissociation within society. Based on the observation that electronic media increasingly control the environment and users, some individuals develop paranoid delusions of persecution directed against radio, television and computers (Sconce [2019]). While it is not possible to directly link the invention of certain technologies with the emergence of specific pathologies, it is worth considering their impact on mental health. After all, the existence of «technical delusions» should not be dismissed outright, given that a defining feature of modernity is «a constant inundation of delusional materials by television, radio, and the Internet» (ibid.: 18).

Indeed, as Marshall McLuhan noted in his classic distinction between «hot» and «cold» media (i.e. those requiring a low or high degree of interactivity, respectively), «the cooling of all senses tends to result in hallucination» (McLuhan [1964]: 32). So why not exploit this phenomenon to create interfaces through which the «hallucinator interacts with their imagined world, which has the character of reality for them» (Parisi, Sartori [2021]: 37)? Users could relate to synthetic environments or objects to reconfigure their experience as a result of what could be termed «operational immersiveness», which stimulate them «both cognitively and physically» (ibid.: 37), similar to that experienced when reading a text or exploring an environment in everyday life.

As schizophrenia is a spectrum of conditions, it is important to bear in mind that these are only partial solutions which often need to be accompanied by other therapies, both pharmacological and non-pharmacological, tailored to the individual's needs. However, antipsychotic drug therapies are often ineffective or have equally debilitating side effects. Digital therapies, on the other hand, have produced promising results in alleviating specific symptoms, with no significant adverse effects.

One such technology is virtual reality (VR), which helps to reduce hallucinations and delusions. Experienced through wearable devices, VR surrounds the user with a 360° synthetic environment that replaces the physical one. VR immersive habitable digital images allow users to look around and often move to interact with avatars and digital objects. Initially, VR can be used as a diagnostic tool for schizophrenia (Lan *et al*. [2023]). In therapeutic contexts, it is often employed alongside other interventions, such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, providing a context in which to perform exercises under the guidance of a digital coach or to gradually confront real-life scenarios that the patient perceives as less risky or more manageable (Spark *et al*. [2025]: 2). This enables patients to let their imagination engage with other individuals and things, and occasionally with their own perceptual distortions. «Reducing hallucination severity, persecutory beliefs, paranoia, depressive symptoms, negative affect, and anxiety» (ibid.), compared to other types of treatment VR produces significantly better results, especially for delusions (ibid.: 7; Lan *et al*. [2023]). In this sense, VR appears to be a valuable tool for supporting Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, significantly enhancing its effects. Recently, it has also been suggested that VR could address movement abnormalities associated with schizophrenia, as has already been successfully achieved for certain neurological disorders (Pavlidou, Walther [2021]).

However, not only do schizophrenic people experience the symptoms of their condition, they are also often stigmatised, which considerably worsens their quality of life. As the artist Christopher Grant insightfully observed, certain technologies can accurately convey the experience of schizophrenia, thereby raising awareness of the condition. Healthcare professionals are among the main sources of judgement (Krogmeier *et al*. [2024]). To address this critical issue, augmented reality (AR) applications have been developed to improve public understanding of the disease and enable medical staff to experience the issues patients face first-hand (de C. Silva [2017]; Krogmeier *et al*. [2024]). Unlike VR, AR does not replace the physical environment, it rather integrates it with various types of digital content (such as interactive images, videos, texts, and audio tracks). This content can be enjoyed using portable devices, such as smartphones and tablets, or wearable devices, such as smart glasses or visors, which allow users to continue to see their surroundings. AR therefore applies to reality, inhabiting it with «ghostly» entities that are only visible to its users. A well-known example is Pokémon Go (released in 2016). Players aim to locate and capture as many Pokémon as possible, which are geolocated around the world and visible through the phone's camera. Players can then challenge each other in battles, either individually or in teams. The playing field is the everyday environment, to which new layers of reality are added that are only visible to players. Everyone else is a «Muggle», a term borrowed from the famous Harry Potter saga that refers to people without magical powers (Liberati [2018]: 217-18). Just as Grant's world (as well as the one of people with schizophrenia in general) cannot be shared intersubjectively, the world of Pokémon GO players is exclusive to participants. Although players know that digital Pokémon are fictional, they still attribute a certain degree of reality to them, modifying their movements and routines around the city accordingly. Players must reach locations where Pokémon are found, frame the indicated portion of space with the camera, and then throw a digital ball to capture them. AR entities are therefore complex images that can simulate peer communication and encourage users to move, act and react, even in other applications, whether they are video games or not.

Obviously, the experience of a player (or a social media user employing augmented filters) is not comparable to that of someone who is unable to control the entities that haunt them. Since «hallucination» is defined phenomenologically as perception without an object, it is more accurate to describe the situation generated by AR as «para-hallucinatory» (Malaspina, Pinotti, Pirandello [2022]: 106). However, precisely because of this para-hallucinatory characteristic, some research groups have chosen to use AR to develop apps that simulate psychotic symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations. Medical students can use these apps to experience the daily lives of their schizophrenic patients as accurately as possible, while still being able to see their physical surroundings. For instance, *Live-It*, an educational tool for graduate-level healthcare students, provides simulations of auditory hallucinations, delusions, thought broadcasting, thought theft, self-neglect and lack of energy (Krogmeier *et al*. [2024]: 2). Significantly, the app's content is inspired by social media accounts of people with schizophrenia who share their experiences, including Grant's channel on YouTube, which mirrors his TikTok account.

VR is often referred to as «the ultimate empathy machine» (Milk [2015]). Wearing the headset transports you to places that are geographically, culturally and perceptually distant, enabling users to understand their potential and critical issues and gain insight into the perspectives of the people who live there, they say. However, complete immersion in an environment perceived as absolutely «alien» can sometimes create the traumatic impression of being attacked by frightening circumstances, generating the opposite effect to that desired. This can lead to a need to distance oneself from the stigmatised group, potentially reinforcing stigma and stereotypes (Krogmeier *et al*. [2024]: 2-3). On the other hand, AR offers the possibility of creating mixed scenarios that are not entirely simulated, making them more realistic for the user and eventually allowing them to engage with different situations in a more nuanced way. By offering a simulation that is at least partially similar to the user's everyday experience, AR can lead to greater empathy with others, while at the same time avoiding the effects of social distancing (ibid.).

AVATAR therapy is also based on this «cold» and interactive approach. As previously mentioned, many schizophrenic patients continue to experience auditory hallucinations, which are often aggressive and derogatory, even when the person is taking medications (Leff *et al*. [2014]: 166). AVATAR therapy enables patients to re-establish a dialogue with their voices through visual and auditory representations[5]. Although it is occasionally delivered via VR (Rus-Calafell [2020]), the most common setting is more akin to AR. Patients are invited to create an avatar representing the persecutory voice using a face generation programme on a computer. If they hear more than one voice, they are asked to select the most debilitating one. They then customise the avatar's appearance, clothing, expressions, background and tone with the therapist until they consider it to be faithful to the voice they hear. During dialogue sessions, the therapist moves

5 https://www.avatartherapy.co.uk/index.html.

to an adjacent room, leaving the patient to interact with their avatar on a computer screen. By pressing two different buttons in turn, the therapist can choose to speak either as the avatar or in their own voice, thereby guiding the patient through a series of exercises.

Without interrupting any ongoing treatment, the therapy involves a cycle of thirty-minute sessions over a period of at least six weeks. This gives patients the opportunity to build an interactive relationship with the avatar, which they can control to some extent. The avatar is presented as such, without deceiving the patient: for instance, «patients […] who are very timid in their first encounter with their avatar […] are reminded that the avatar is only a representation of their persecutor that they themselves have created» (Leff *et al*. [2014]: 173). However, during the sessions, patients become accustomed to addressing the persecutory entity directly and seeking strategies to deal with the problem. For instance, they explain their reasons and ask the hallucination to step aside, something they would not normally be able to do, as they lack the possibility to engage in confrontation. Conversely, during these exchanges, the avatar (who is actually the therapist) addresses the patient in an increasingly less aggressive manner, eventually becoming encouraging. The sessions are also recorded so patients can listen to them again at home, thereby strengthening their awareness of their ability to deal with their persecutor. In many cases, even after just a few sessions, patients report that the hallucinated voice appears less frequently, at lower volumes, and with gentler content until it disappears completely (ibid.: 168). For example, one patient, who had worked for a company for many years, was woken up every morning at 5 a.m. by the female voice of another executive, who discussed work matters throughout the day. Following his therapist's advice during AVATAR therapy, the patient began asking the voice to behave more professionally, to limit its appearances to working hours, and to prevent the disclosure of confidential company information. At first, the voice continued to appear, but only from 8 a.m. onwards. When it was requested to only appear in the afternoon to allow the patient to carry out his activities, it stopped appearing altogether. When asked what had happened, the patient said that «she» had simply left the room (ibid.: 169).

As we have seen, constructing stories is essential for understanding the world. In order to produce our «narrative self», the imagination needs to engage with perceptual data to create coherent patterns of meaning. However, with regard to auditory hallucinations, those who hear voices are normally unable to engage their imagination with a perceptual environment since they lack the interaction with an actual material object. Consequently, their experience of the voice remains static and offers no alternative stimuli. The schizophrenic patient is frozen in the present; their imagination is closed within itself, forced to repeat paranoid thoughts. AVATAR Therapy, on the other hand, provides an objective point of reference, encouraging the patient to interpret the unexpected content it delivers (such as the voice's positive attitude towards them). The avatar enables the voice's presence to be perceived as real, shared and validated intersubjectively, ultimately allowing the patient to confront it face-to-face. Consequently, the patient's relationship with the voice itself changes: if the last time we spoke, the voice that used to offend me told me that it doesn't think I'm so bad after all, how will it reappear? Using structured narratives in therapy can therefore be very helpful. The individual incorporates previous instances in which the voice was supportive rather than aggressive as parts of their experience. In this way, their entire story is reoriented. The «narrative self as designating a higher and richer form of self-awareness […] presupposes the possibility of recognizing oneself as actor within a life history» (Summa [2014]: 478): with AVATAR Therapy, patients experience situations in which they are not victims of their own voices, but active interlocutors.

I propose considering this type of rehabilitation as «imaginative rehabilitation», based on the idea that «the more the virtual experience matches people's real-world experiences, the more likely they will be able to generalize the learned responses to their daily life […] focusing on associated meanings with the voice experience» (Rus-Calafell [2020]: 2). AVATAR Therapy's effectiveness demonstrates that, in order to be part of our mind, which is eminently interactive, others – whether they be things, people, materials, or malevolent entities – need to be autonomous. As the case of people with schizophrenia shows, without interaction, imaginative exploration literally loses its grip on the world. Since imagination holds together the various parts of the environment, mediating and modulating their collaboration, none of them is sufficient for its action when taken separately. While we might be more inclined to deny things an imagination without a human counterpart, the opposite is also true: it is the engagement with an object that triggers the opportunity to imagine, leaving very little (or nothing) for human beings to imagine outside of a relationship with matter.

4. *Conclusion*

Digital technologies have revived forms of animism towards images and objects that have always existed in various cultures (Freedberg [1989]). As we saw in the first paragraph, images and objects demand an interactive and reciprocal exchange, even when they do not resemble us physically. Given our daily involvement with material things, human perception and cognition are the result of constant interaction with artefacts. Since objects can be considered true social agents whose actions can have significant consequences, no image has ever been «just» an image. However, in the scientific literature on the subject, it is frequently suggested that contemporary images have gained access to the human world in a different, more radical way. While images have always had a certain degree of agency, the defining feature of many of those produced in the last twenty years is their capacity to directly impact the physical world. In the contemporary media landscape, therefore, the autonomy and vitality of images have taken on an operational significance.

Many of the images used today in warfare, industry and medicine not only document processes and phenomena, but also act directly upon them: «These are images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation» (Farocki [2004]: 17). The main innovation introduced by operational images is therefore their reversible agency: while they provide information through visualization, they also perform practical functions in the real world.

Some types of interactive digital image are also used in the treatment of patients with schizophrenia, exploiting mechanisms typical of everyday imaginative action. Interactive VR images are immersive representations that allow patients to explore synthetic environments where they can gradually confront real-life scenarios without perceiving the usual risks. On the other hand, responsive AR images confront others with conditions that they find difficult to truly understand. Finally, AVATAR Therapy uses representations of hallucinatory voices to insert itself directly into the patient's imaginative process and redirect it in order to restore their material involvement with the world.

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The Phenomenological Experience of Contemporary Painting in the Triangle of Artist, Artwork, and Viewer

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Abstract: This article explores the triangular relationship between artist, artwork, and viewer through a phenomenological analysis of Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51), positioning the painting as a dynamic site of embodied, affective, and cognitive exchange. Drawing from contemporary aesthetics, visual semiotics, and reception theory, the study argues that meaning in abstract painting is not transmitted unilaterally from the artist but co-constructed in an experiential encounter mediated by the artwork. Newman's formal strategies – monumental scale, chromatic saturation, and spatial segmentation through "zips" – are examined not merely as aesthetic choices but as deliberate mechanisms for activating perceptual and emotional immersion. The viewer is conceptualized as a co-creator whose embodied responses and interpretive acts contribute to the aesthetic event, transforming static visuality into a living, participatory field. The article engages interdisciplinary research, including neuroaesthetics and post-phenomenology, to illuminate how spatiality, cultural memory, and sensory modalities inform viewer reception. In doing so, it proposes a relational model of meaning-making that reframes abstract painting as a shared ontological space rather than an autonomous object. The analysis ultimately challenges modernist assumptions of artistic autonomy, offering instead a dynamic structure in which affect, presence, and interpretation unfold simultaneously. This model is especially relevant in post-digital contexts, where the relational fabric of art continues to evolve across physical and virtual environments.

Keywords: Art history, phenomenology, contemporary painting, embodied perception, aesthetic experience.

Introduction

Contemporary painting, situated within an evolving landscape of visual culture, increasingly emphasizes dialogic encounters rather than static presentation. In contrast to the modernist conception of art as self-contained and autopoietic, contemporary works often seek to provoke relational, participatory, and interpretive experiences in the viewer (Kraner [2019]). This shift underscores the importance of aesthetic co-creation, where the artwork becomes a site for engagement rather than contemplation (Scott [2020]). Viewers are no longer passive recipients but become interpretive agents whose experiences, knowledge, and emotions shape the meaning of the artwork (Szubielska *et al*. [2020]). The transformation of the viewer's role corresponds with the emergence of new aesthetic frameworks that prioritize subjectivity, interactivity, and embodied perception (Sadia [2021]). In this respect, the meaning of a painting today is not produced in isolation but within a triangular dynamic among artist, artwork, and viewer – each an essential participant in the aesthetic process (Dolese, Kozbelt [2020]).

Recent studies in empirical aesthetics and art theory emphasize that aesthetic engagement is shaped by cognitive, emotional, and social factors, many of which are rooted in the viewer's interaction with contextual cues and the artwork's formal properties (Darda, Chatterjee [2023]). Empirical work reveals that artist background, biography, and perceived intention significantly influence the viewer's evaluation of artworks, especially when the visual language is abstract or ambiguous (Xu [2021]). These findings align with reception theory, which posits that the interpretation of art emerges from the encounter between the viewer's expectations and the artwork's cultural signs (Kuehn [2023]). Moreover, phenomenological and neuroaesthetic perspectives have highlighted how the bodily presence of the viewer – movement, spatial orientation, affective response – plays a critical role in shaping aesthetic experience (Kayser [2019]). Interactivity, in both digital and analog forms, further reconfigures this aesthetic triad by making the viewer a co-performer of meaning, especially in immersive or large-scale works (Szubielska, Imbir [2022]). Thus, the aesthetic experience today emerges not merely from perception but from interaction, interpretation, and embodied cognition (Koblížek [2023]).

This article contributes to the expanding discourse on relational aesthetics and affective perception by focusing on a single painting – Barnett Newman's monumental *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51). Positioned at the intersection of abstract expressionism and phenomenological aesthetics, Newman's work exemplifies a shift in modern painting from the pictorial to the experiential. Its immersive scale and chromatic intensity do not merely demand visual attention but invite bodily and emotional engagement, positioning the viewer within the painting's spatial logic (Stefańska [2021]). This paper analyzes Newman's painting as a mediating object that facilitates emotional resonance, perceptual immersion, and conceptual reflection – demanding the viewer's presence as a co-creator of meaning (Na [2023]). By engaging with recent scholarship in aesthetics, art psychology, and visual semiotics, this study proposes that the meaning of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* arises from a triangular dialogue – an aesthetic event where artist, artwork, and viewer are continuously engaged in shaping affective and cognitive experience (Song *et al*. [2021]). In doing so, the paper aims to illuminate how the material conditions of painting, the intentionality of the artist, and the subjective constitution of the viewer coalesce into a dynamic system of contemporary aesthetic meaning.

To clarify the methodological focus, the decision to center the analysis on a single artwork – Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* – rests on its paradigmatic status within phenomenological aesthetics. This painting encapsulates key formal and experiential parameters – monumental scale, chromatic intensity, and embodied spectatorship – that typify the phenomenological condition of post-war abstraction. By closely examining one emblematic case, the study can trace how perceptual, affective, and cognitive dimensions coalesce in the aesthetic encounter with far greater precision than a broad survey would allow. Although the argument arises from this single work, the interpretive model developed here applies more generally to contemporary paintings that foreground spatial immersion and viewer participation. Thus, the case of *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* functions both as an empirical anchor and as a theoretical lens through which the dynamics of the artist–artwork–viewer triad can be understood in wider contexts.

This study adopts a theoretical-interpretive methodology rooted in visual analysis, phenomenological aesthetics, and reception theory to investigate the dynamic relationship among the artist, artwork, and viewer in Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*. Rather than employing empirical or quantitative techniques, the paper engages in a close reading of the painting's formal and material features – color, scale, spatial tension – and interprets how these elements shape affective and cognitive viewer responses. The methodology is informed by recent interdisciplinary research emphasizing the centrality of embodied perception and viewer subjectivity in contemporary art experiences (Szubielska, Imbir [2022]), as well as scholarship advocating for the role of contextual knowledge and emotional resonance in shaping aesthetic judgments (Darda, Chatterjee [2023]). In line with reception-oriented frameworks, the viewer is approached not as a passive observer but as an active co-creator of meaning whose cultural background, psychological disposition, and spatial interaction with the artwork deeply inform the interpretive process (Dolese, Kozbelt [2020]). By integrating these frameworks, the paper develops a triangulated perspective on aesthetic experience, using *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* as a focused case to explore how visual language and viewer response intersect in contemporary painting.

1. *Artist as a subject*

In the evolving discourse of contemporary aesthetics, the artist is increasingly reconfigured not merely as a producer of objects but as a constructor of sensory, cognitive, and emotional experience. This paradigm shift stems from phenomenological aesthetics and affect theory, which recognize the artist's capacity to encode embodied meaning into material forms (Freedberg, Gallese [2007]; Magada-Ward [2019]). Barnett Newman's work offers a profound articulation of this framework. Rather than adhering to formalist abstraction for its own sake, Newman conceptualized the painted surface as a site of metaphysical encounter. His monumental *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51) exemplifies this approach through its commanding scale, chromatic intensity, and structured "zips," elements that are not mere compositional devices but portals to experiential immersion (Silver, Baskind [2024]; Zou [2025]). Newman himself insisted that his viewers stand close to his paintings to be "in" them, thereby reconfiguring the act of seeing as a spatial and psychological encounter (Gottschaller [2018]). This emphasis on bodily orientation and temporal immersion aligns with a broader redefinition of the artist as a dramaturge of presence and participation.

Newman's painterly practice cannot be divorced from the existential and cultural traumas of his historical moment. Positioned in the wake of the Holocaust and amidst the ideological flux of postwar America, his abstract language was laden with spiritual and political resonance. Rather than retreat into purely formal abstraction, Newman engaged with Jewish mysticism, especially the Kabbalistic concept of *ẓimẓum*–a divine contraction that makes space for creation (Maza [2021]). This metaphysical scaffolding transforms *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* from an aesthetic object into an ontological statement. The "zips," which punctuate the expansive red field, are thresholds through which viewers enter a dialogic space – neither entirely self nor other, but a mediated field of potential meaning (Hoványi [2024]; Neofetou [2019]). Newman's intention, as Zou ([2025]) elaborates, was to offer not illustration, but an "event," a moment in which primal emotion, memory, and abstraction converge to create new modalities of perception. Thus, the artist's role becomes epistemic: not simply crafting form, but facilitating aesthetic cognition.

Figure 1.** Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950-51. Oil on canvas, 242.9 x 543.6 cm. Collection: Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image source: [https://redflag.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Barnett-4.jpg] (Accessed: 25.08.2025)

Moreover, Newman's claim that "the viewer should stand close enough to feel immersed" is not a rhetorical flourish but a phenomenological imperative (Cernuschi [2021]). In *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Figure 1), the scale resists distant, detached viewing; instead, it compels a proxemic involvement that enlists the viewer's body as a perceptual organ. This spatial dynamic renders the artist an architect of somatic affect, echoing theories of embodied simulation in neuroaesthetics (Freedberg, Gallese [2007]). As Potter ([2018]) argues through Maritain's lens, Newman's goal was not to express personal sentiment but to mediate the encounter with the sublime – a condition of being beyond language, where affect becomes primary. This interpretation is reinforced by recent pigment analysis, which reveals Newman's active revision of color formulas to achieve exact psychological effects (Rogge, Epley [2023]). In this sense, Newman emerges not just as a maker of art, but as a choreographer of contemplative experience – one who constructs affective architectures that both reflect and shape our ontological orientations.

2. *The Artwork as Phenomenological Space*

Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51) stands as a paradigmatic case of phenomenological art – an artwork that does not merely represent but embodies experience. The monumental scale and chromatic intensity of the canvas are not supplemental features but central to the way the viewer is drawn into a participatory encounter. The large red surface, punctuated by Newman's iconic "zips," transforms the visual field into an existential terrain where the boundaries between observer and object dissolve. In the context of Newman's oeuvre, the sublime is not an abstract concept but a felt intensity, conveyed through proportion, spatiality, and material presence. Recent scholarship suggests that such large-scale abstraction cultivates a bodily and affective immersion that transcends cognitive analysis (Magada-Ward [2019]); instead, it roots experience in «firstness», a Peircian term denoting pure feeling or immediacy. The phenomenology of the artwork, in this regard, is not merely an aesthetic matter but a structural invitation for the viewer to inhabit, rather than decode, its surface.

This embodied interaction is especially foregrounded when considering the phenomenological role of color and material in Newman's practice. As noted by Rogge and Epley's pigment analysis, Newman manipulated his paints with unique chemical mixtures, indicating a deliberate authorship of both tone and texture (Rogge, Epley [2023]). Paint, in this context, is not merely vehicle but medium-of-thought – a material epistemology. Such an approach echoes Geczy's argument that the phenomenology of paint collapses the distinction between medium and meaning, allowing paint to perform its own ontology (Geczy [2025]). In *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, this becomes evident as the saturated reds and thin vertical bands invoke a perceptual rhythm – what Merleau-Ponty might describe as a «flesh of the world», wherein visibility itself is constituted through interrelation (Young Park [2022]). The viewer, then, is not outside the painting but inside the perceptual structure it unfolds, their attention guided not by composition but by felt presence.

Moreover, Newman's spatial strategies enact what phenomenologists have termed «epoché» – a bracketing of habitual modes of seeing, which allows for a renewed encounter with the visible world (Novák [2020]). This disruption is integral to aesthetic perception as described by Fielding, who argues that artworks can "cultivate perception" by disorienting it from its functional routines and opening it to embodied reflection (Fielding [2021]). Newman's expansive canvas thus becomes a "place of appearing," or in his own Kabbalistic terms, *makom* – a site carved out of otherwise undifferentiated space to host sacred confrontation (Silver [2019]). The vertical "zips" are not merely formal devices but ruptures in perceptual expectation, marking divisions of temporal and spiritual experience. Almog extends this further by theorizing visibility in painting as always shadowed by the invisible, framing phenomenological aesthetics as a dialectic between concealment and revelation (Almog [2024]).

A complementary philosophical interpretation is offered by Pietro Conte (2015), whose essay *The Panofsky-Newman Controversy: Iconography and Iconology Put to the Test of 'Abstract' Art* re-examines the famous exchange between Erwin Panofsky and Barnett Newman in order to reassess how meaning and empathy operate when representation dissolves. Conte situates *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* within a phenomenological framework in which empathy (*Einfühlung*) and immersion are the very means through which the viewer re-enters the field of abstraction, experiencing the painting as both presence and event. According to Conte, Newman's chromatic expanse abolishes the iconographic distance presupposed by Panofsky's method and replaces it with a dialogic relation where perception becomes affective participation. This view resonates with the present study's emphasis on embodied spectatorship yet extends further: the triangular model proposed here interprets empathy not merely as a receptive disposition but as a relational process co-constituted by the artist's intentional structuring of affective space, the artwork's mediating agency, and the viewer's embodied response. In this sense, immersion functions as a dynamic and reciprocal act of meaning-making that transforms Newman's painting from a self-contained object into a phenomenological event.

Finally, the phenomenological encounter is never neutral but shaped by the cultural, historical, and emotional dispositions the viewer brings. Studies have demonstrated that even non-representational artworks elicit rich interpretative frameworks based on lived experience and embodied cognition (Chistopolskaya *et al*. [2023]). Jasmin ([2023]) similarly finds that artists infuse color and form with autobiographical meaning, inviting viewers to decode not through symbols but resonance. In Newman's case, Zou ([2025]) highlights how national memory, trauma, and Jewish mysticism converge to structure the emotional register of his canvases. These registers interact phenomenologically with the viewer's own inner world, thus enacting a dialogical space of mutual unfolding. Marion's theory of the artwork as "idol" – something that looks back at the viewer – aptly captures this reversal, where *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* ceases to be a passive object and becomes an active gaze (Zhang, Zhang [2024]). In sum, Newman's painting is not only a visual field but a site of ontological negotiation, where the viewer's very modes of perception are tested, altered, and intensified.

3. *The Viewer as Co-Creator of Meaning*

In the landscape of contemporary painting, the viewer is no longer cast as a passive recipient but emerges as a co-creator of meaning. This interpretative agency hinges on both cognitive and affective engagement with the artwork, particularly in abstract compositions where representational cues are minimized. Johnson-Laird, Oatley ([2021]) argue that abstract art stimulates emotional simulation through internally generated narratives, enabling viewers to project personal experiences onto the visual field. Sarkar, Blaney ([2023]) further emphasize the reflexive potential of contemporary painting, wherein the ambiguity of form invites interpretative plurality and personal resonance. In the case of Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Figure 1), this interplay between affective response and open-ended form becomes central. The viewer is challenged to construct meaning not from iconographic content, but through visceral proximity, bodily alignment, and perceptual immersion. These processes align with Iser's reception theory, which asserts that the «gaps» in a text – or artwork – are precisely where the viewer's imagination enters, activating a dialogic co-creation of meaning.

Embodied engagement constitutes a crucial dimension of this aesthetic experience. Sarkar ([2022]) outlines how viewers navigate painted spaces through bodily orientation, noting that proximity, posture, and eye movement modulate perception in profound ways. Newman's instruction to stand "so close that you become a part of it" is emblematic of this principle, transforming viewership into spatial immersion. Cox, van Klaveren ([2025]) empirically demonstrate that abstract artworks engage mirror neuron systems, especially when scale and color intensity suggest physical dynamism. This echoes Husbands' ([2018]) theorization of «fantastical empathy» – a process by which viewers imaginatively inhabit the formal structures of non-representational compositions. As such, Newman's vertical «zips» may be understood not merely as visual markers but as axes of embodied navigation, rhythmically dividing space in a way that mirrors internal affective flows. These sensory affordances heighten the immediacy of the viewing experience and allow the artwork to be felt as much as it is seen.

The interpretive process is also conditioned by the viewer's cultural background, cognitive frameworks, and prior knowledge. Studies in art perception confirm that knowing an artist's context significantly enhances emotional depth and comprehension (Tkachuk [2019]). Jasielska ([2023]) notes that even subtle cues, such as the artist's biography or intention, can modulate affective engagement, suggesting a fusion between rational and emotional interpretation. Nakamura, Nagayoshi ([2024]) advance this idea further, demonstrating how viewers tend to fill in «absent information» in abstract art through internal schemas and narrative construction. These interpretive acts are not passive but intentional and active, reflecting Jauss' notion of a «horizon of expectations» shaped by cultural literacy and perceptual readiness. In this light, Newman's work becomes a site of active projection – its emptiness not a void but an invitation for experiential filling, allowing different viewers to derive distinct meanings from the same image.

Finally, viewer interaction is increasingly recognized as a dynamic feedback loop that reconfigures the artwork's perceived essence. Anikina, Abelentseva ([2023]) demonstrate that color choices alone can significantly influence both semantic and emotional reception of a painting. In parallel, Ganczarek *et al.* ([2020]) reveal that perceived cognitive difficulty in abstract art increases visual fixation duration, suggesting deeper aesthetic processing. These findings support the idea that meaning in contemporary art is not inherent but co-constituted – emerging from the interaction between perceptual input, embodied cognition, and cultural memory. In *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, the simplicity of form belies a complex interactivity; the longer one looks, the more emotionally charged and semantically fertile the experience becomes. Jammal ([2024]) proposes that light and spatiality in abstract art produce «phenomenal atmospheres» that envelop the viewer and act as emotional environments rather than representational surfaces. Thus, viewers do not merely decode or interpret–they inhabit, co-create, and in turn, alter the affective field of the artwork itself.

4. *The Triangular Dialogue: Artist, Artwork, Viewer*

The aesthetic experience of Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Figure 1) unfolds not in isolation, but through an active dialogue between the artist, the artwork, and the viewer. This triadic structure positions the viewer not as a passive receiver, but as an essential co-creator in the unfolding of meaning. Newman's artistic labor, often misunderstood as reductive abstraction, is more accurately conceived as an intentional act of perceptual activation – a catalyst for aesthetic reflexivity. As Kirk ([2018]) argues, painting today is best understood as an emergent cognitive process, one situated in social and embodied interrelations. Newman's monumental format and spatial dynamics compel the viewer to negotiate the painting physically and perceptually, reinforcing what McClelland ([2022]) identifies as the necessity of embodied cognition in visual reception. The viewer's movement, perspective shifts, and perceptual oscillations mirror the labor of the artist, thus forming a closed loop of expressive gesture. This «relay structure» dissolves boundaries between sender and receiver, making aesthetic meaning a co-authored phenomenon rather than a fixed transmission (Sarkar, Blaney [2023]).

The artwork, as the material mediator in this exchange, performs a double role: it is both a residue of the artist's intentionality and a site of projection for the viewer's embodied imagination. Newman's vertical «zips» exemplify this duality. Far from decorative motifs, they fragment the chromatic field into rhythmic temporalities that prompt viewers to slow down, reorient, and introspect. This aligns with Neofetou's ([2019]) reading of Newman's work as a «world-for-us», wherein the painting prefigures subjective reconciliation through its otherness. The abstract form does not depict but evokes – operating on what Gonigroszek, Szmigiero ([2021]) call primary metaphors: emotionally charged associations emerging from color, space, and bodily perception. Here, metaphor is not linguistic but material. Newman's manipulation of scale and hue produces affective registers that the viewer navigates in the act of looking, enacting what Iosifyan *et al*. ([2022]) term cross-modal embodiment – where perception bridges across sensory domains to produce meaning beyond the visual. The viewer, in turn, internalizes these formal provocations, generating new interpretations that are grounded in experience rather than representation.

Within this triadic configuration, the artist's role becomes less about controlling the artwork's message and more about structuring potentiality. As shown by Stubbs ([2020]), contemporary painting increasingly operates through a logic of «quasi-presence» – an indexical trace of the artist's being that remains open to reinterpretation through viewer engagement. In this sense, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* becomes a field of negotiation. Its chromatic saturation, vast proportions, and compositional minimalism do not declare meaning; they invite it. This is consistent with Novák's ([2020]) interpretation of abstract art as a phenomenological bracket – a visual epoché – that suspends preconceived frameworks and enables direct perceptual experience. Thus, the viewer and the artwork form a shared horizon of understanding, one that reflects Newman's desire to «paint the sublime», not as transcendence but as immediacy and immersion (Magada-Ward [2019]). The triangle artist, artwork, viewer is not static but cyclical, bound together in an ongoing aesthetic event. The painting is not an object of contemplation but a living interlocutor, enabling presence, empathy, and meaning to arise from the act of encounter.

5. *Conclusion*

In tracing the triangular interplay between artist, artwork, and viewer through the lens of Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (Figure 1), this study has revealed how contemporary painting functions not merely as a visual artifact but as a phenomenological event – a co-constructed space of perception, meaning, and affect. The artist emerges not as a distant maker but as an architect of embodied encounter, channeling metaphysical and emotional intensities through formal choices of scale, color, and spatial rhythm. Newman's monumental abstraction resists passive looking; instead, it enlists the viewer in an active process of perceptual negotiation and emotional immersion. The artwork, in turn, is not a static object but a dynamic relay – a field of potentiality through which intentionality and interpretation circulate. Meaning, therefore, is not embedded in the canvas but generated in the lived exchange between bodies, gazes, memories, and gestures. By situating the painting within phenomenological aesthetics and reception theory, and grounding the analysis in both visual materiality and embodied cognition, this article has proposed a conceptual model of aesthetic experience that repositions the viewer as a vital node in a circular structure of meaning-making. This model dismantles the modernist illusion of artistic autonomy and replaces it with a relational ontology that accounts for the temporal, spatial, and cultural dimensions of aesthetic engagement. Accordingly, the reading advanced here calls for a revision of aspects of the critical canon on abstract painting – shifting emphasis from iconographic legibility and authorial autonomy toward conditions of presence, proximity, and co-creation. As art increasingly navigates post-digital contexts and globalized visual cultures, this triangular dialogue acquires new relevance: it affirms that the value of art lies not in what it represents, but in what it activates – emotionally, cognitively, and existentially – in those who stand before it. In Newman's vision, the sublime is not elsewhere but here, unfolding in the charged proximity between human subjectivity and painted space. This also bears curatorial consequences: exhibition practices that privilege close viewing, sufficient wall time, and spatial arrangements that sustain immersion (rather than didactic over-scripting or excessive distancing) are more consonant with works whose meaning is co-constituted phenomenologically. Finally, while the present account arises from a single paradigmatic case, its relational framework generalizes to other large-scale and immersive abstractions; future inquiries may productively integrate targeted empirical methods (e.g., reception studies, eye-tracking, or affective reports) insofar as they illuminate – but do not displace – the phenomenological core of the aesthetic event. In sum, the paper argues for a recalibrated art-historical and curatorial discourse attuned to how artworks become sites of shared becoming – ephemeral yet enduring intersections of presence, perception, and poetic resonance.

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Threshold-Based Argument for Six Discrete Human Senses

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Abstract. This paper proposes a revised taxonomy of the human senses grounded in perceptual-threshold analysis. Building on the classical distinction between *immediate* (contact-dependent) and *mediate* (distance-dependent) faculties, I argue that (i) tactile perception fractionates naturally into two functionally distinct modalities – *feeling* (low-threshold, passive reception) and *touching* (higher-threshold, active exploration); and (ii) olfaction and gustation, though both chemoreceptive, diverge sharply in their minimum effective stimulus, with smell operating at a substantially smaller molecular-count threshold than taste. Psychophysical, neurophysiological, and phenomenological evidence is synthesized to demonstrate that threshold magnitude – not merely anatomical locus or attentional state – warrants treating *feeling*, *touching*, *smelling*, and *tasting* as four discrete senses. The analysis yields a six-member sensory set: feeling, touching, smelling, tasting, seeing, and hearing. Epistemological implications for theories of embodied knowledge are explored, and experimental protocols capable of empirically validating the proposed thresholds are outlined.

Keywords. Sensory thresholds; tactile dual modality; olfaction; gustation; phenomenology of perception.

1. *Introduction*

Philosophical and scientific taxonomies of the senses traditionally enumerate five discrete faculties – sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell – grouped crudely into *contact* versus *distance* modalities (Fulkerson [2014]). Yet first-person phenomenology reveals finer-grained distinctions. A splinter of fiberglass imperceptible to sight or voluntary touch may nevertheless be *felt* acutely beneath the skin. Likewise, aromatic compounds from a bakery stimulate olfaction long before gustation is possible. Such cases suggest that *perceptual threshold* – the minimal quantity or scale of stimulus required to elicit sensation – constitutes a principled basis for further subdividing the senses.

The conventional Aristotelian classification of five senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell – remains prevalent in non-scientific contexts, despite its limitations (Brandt, Dieterich, Huppert [2024]). This paradigm, however, fails to capture the nuanced complexities of human sensory experience (Wade [2003]). Johannes Muller introduced the concept of sensory modalities, which invites us to consider whether distinct qualities of touch are conveyed by nerves exhibiting unique characteristics (Abraira, Ginty [2013]). The idea that the senses might interact and influence one another has gained traction, and this challenges the classical notion of independent sensory channels (Delwiche [2003]; Fulkerson [2014]). We should view sensory interactions as a continuum rather than forcing them into discrete classifications (Fulkerson [2014]). The conventional grouping of senses into contact and distance modalities overlooks the intricacies of how sensory information is processed and integrated (Fulkerson [2014]).

This paper develops a threshold-based framework and demonstrates its power to (a) split tactility into *feeling* and *touching*; (b) differentiate smell from taste despite their shared chemoreceptive substrates; and (c) clarify why attentive variants of vision and audition (looking, listening) do not parallel tactile or chemical dualities. The result is an enriched sensory taxonomy with implications for neuroscience, haptics design, and epistemology.

The research significance of this paper can be understood from a few key perspectives:

– Enriched Sensory Taxonomy: The paper proposes a refined understanding of human sensation by differentiating between feeling and touching, as well as smelling and tasting, based on perceptual thresholds. This leads to a six-sense taxonomy, which has implications for neuroscience, haptics design, and epistemology.

– Embodied Cognition: The paper emphasizes embodied gradients of access, where feeling and smelling provide early warnings, while touching and tasting involve deliberate incorporation.

– Technological Applications: The findings suggest that multisensory VR platforms should prioritize micronewton vibrotactile channels and ambient odor generators to heighten the sense of presence.

In essence, the paper's significance lies in its ability to refine our understanding of sensory perception, clarify embodied cognition, and guide the design of multisensory interfaces.

2. *Conceptual Framework: Thresholds and Modality*

I adopt *threshold* to denote the smallest stimulus magnitude (force, molecular count, photon flux, or acoustic pressure) reliably yielding conscious perception (Gescheider [1997]). Modalities with distinct thresholds for *passive reception* versus *active interrogation* qualify for subdivision. Where attentional set alters detection probability without altering stimulus magnitude, no new modality is posited.

The classical *immediate/mediate* dichotomy remains valuable: immediate senses entail material exchange with the receptor surface, whereas mediate senses rely on energy transfer through an intervening medium (Table 1). Threshold analysis refines, rather than replaces, that dichotomy.

Category	Sub-modality	Primary Stimulus	Typical Threshold
Immediate	Feeling	Micro-deformations of cutaneous mechanoreceptors	≈0.01 mN surface force (Abraira, Ginty [2013])
	Touching	Macro-pressure/texture via volitional contact	≈0.1 mN-1 N (Fleming, Luo [2013])
	Smelling	Volatile molecules (gas phase)	≈10^2-10^4 molecules per sniff (Bushdid *et al*. [2014])
	Tasting	Dissolved molecules (liquid/solid)	≈10^6-10^8 molecules per sip (Delwiche [2003])
Mediate	Seeing	Photons (400-700 nm)	≈90 photons at retina (Hecht *et al*. [1942])
	Hearing	Pressure waves (20 Hz-20 kHz)	≈20 μPa at 1 kHz (ISO 389)

This table summarizes approximate stimulus thresholds for each proposed modality. Tactile thresholds vary widely based on contact area, velocity, and skin hydration (Spence [2020]). Olfactory and gustatory thresholds depend strongly on molecular weight and receptor affinity.

The integration of sensory inputs is a dynamic process that plays a pivotal role in shaping our perceptions, memories, and learning experiences (Fan, Chong, Li [2024]). Our sensory experiences are inherently multisensory, with various senses constantly interacting to shape our understanding of the world (Velasco, Obrist [2021]).

2.1 *Energy- vs. Matter-based Modalities*

Beyond *magnitude* and *carrier*, the six senses differ in the physical form that drives receptor transduction. Chemosensory organs bind *matter* (molecules), mechanosensory organs gate *mechanical energy* (force/pressure), and photoreceptors absorb *electromagnetic energy* (photons). All still obey the threshold principle, but only chemoreceptors form lasting ligand-receptor complexes.

Sense	Primary receptor class	Stimulus form	Transduction notes
Smell / Taste	Chemoreceptors (GPCRs, ion channels)	Matter: molecular binding/ permeation	Ligand binding triggers second-messenger cascades.
Feeling / Touching	Mechanoreceptors (Piezo2, SA/RA endings)	Mechanical energy: tissue deformation	Direct gating of mechanosensitive channels; no ligand.
Hearing	Mechanoreceptors (hair-cell stereocilia)	Mechanical energy: fluid shear/pressure	Basilar-membrane mechanics focus vibration onto hair bundles.
Vision	Photoreceptors (opsins)	Electromagnetic energy: photons	Photo-isomerization of retinal inside opsin; resets after bleaching.

Recognizing this substrate dimension clarifies why hearing, *feeling*, and *touching* cluster mechanistically despite differing ecological carriers, while smell and taste share chemophysical roots yet diverge by stimulus magnitude. The photic pathway stands apart as an energy-based, ligand-free transduction.

3. *Tactility Revisited: Feeling vs. Touching*

3.1 *Physiological Evidence*

Cutaneous A-β low-threshold mechanoreceptors trigger sensation at forces an order of magnitude below those required for conscious exploration (Fleming, Luo [2013]). *Feeling* therefore arises from receptor activation without motor command, whereas *touching* couples efferent movement with afferent feedback

(Gadhvi, Waseem [2019]). The exquisite spatial and temporal tactile acuity of the skin further underscores the complexity inherent in engineering haptic technologies for virtual reality (Biswas, Visell [2021]). The capacity of tactile sensors to detect interactive information generated through physical contact between skin and the environment is of great importance (Shi, Shen [2024]).

3.2 *Phenomenological Evidence*

The *hair-in-skin* phenomenon exemplifies low-threshold passive detection: subjects report pricking or tickling well before the hair end breaches the epidermis, confirming that *feeling* operates at micro-scale deformation levels inaccessible to *touching*. Feeling acts as an alerting system, whereas touching subserves object recognition and manipulation.

Haptic exploration involves a synergy of pressure, temperature, and joint position responses, enabling the sensing of both microcosmic and macroscopic object characteristics (Shi, Shen [2024]). Feeling has the role of providing an early warning system, alerting the organism to potential dangers or changes in the environment, while touching, with its higher threshold and active engagement, facilitates detailed object recognition and manipulation (Shi, Shen [2024]).

3.3 *Implications*

Dividing tactility clarifies why prosthetic haptic interfaces must deliver both micronewton-level vibrations (feel) and macro-force feedback (touch) to achieve naturalistic sensation (Shi, Shen [2024]). Current haptic devices are able to provide distinct and effective touch sensations, present information to users, help them complete a task, augment or replace the other senses, and add immersiveness and realism to virtual interactions (Culbertson, Schorr, Okamura [2018]). Consequently, to evoke truly convincing tactile experiences, haptic interfaces must be engineered to convey both subtle, low-intensity stimuli associated with feeling, and the more pronounced force feedback characteristic of active touch.

Multimodal interaction is essential for creating more realistic and immersive experiences. The multimodal nature of perception allows for a richer and more nuanced interaction with the environment.

3.4 *Anatomical Distribution and Organ Status*

A traditional hallmark for individuating a sense is the presence of a characteristic receptor field or organ. If *feeling* and *touching* are truly distinct, they should exhibit systematic anatomical divergence:

– Feeling – mediated primarily by low-threshold mechanoreceptors (Merkel cells, C-LTMRs, RA-I afferents) that carpet virtually the *entire cutaneous surface*, including both glabrous and hairy skin. Their uniform distribution supports whole-body vigilance to minute threat intrusions (e.g., a fiberglass splinter).

– Touching – dominated by high-fidelity receptors specialized for texture and shape discrimination (Meissner corpuscles, Pacinian corpuscles, SA-II afferents) that are densest in palmar and plantar skin. Evolutionarily, this mirrors the active exploratory role of hands and, to a lesser degree, feet.

Testable Predictions. The anatomical claim yields three falsifiable predictions:

1 Density mapping using immunohistochemistry or in-vivo microneurography should reveal $\geq 3\times$ greater RA-I/SA-II receptor density in palms/soles than on dorsal forearm or torso.

2 Psychophysical assays will show significantly lower two-point discrimination and higher vibrotactile acuity when stimuli are delivered to palmar/plantar skin (*touch* threshold) versus dorsal skin (*feel* threshold).

3 fMRI / MEG comparisons of passive micro-indentation (feel) versus active palpation (touch) will display partially non-overlapping activation patterns, with touch recruiting additional parietal and premotor circuits linked to object manipulation.

These predictions represent concrete steps towards empirically validating the proposed dichotomy. Confirming these would satisfy the *organ criterion*, legitimizing *feeling* and *touching* as separate senses within the proposed six-sense taxonomy.

Recent microneurography and histological surveys reinforce the predicted receptor gradient. Classic mapping by Johansson and Vallbo (1983) recorded ~240 RA-I mechanoreceptors cm^{-2} on palmar finger pads versus ~70 cm^{-2} on the dorsal forearm –over a three-fold contrast. Abraira and Ginty (2013) confirm that C-LTMRs and SA-I endings span the entire integument, while Meissner and Pacinian corpuscles cluster densely in glabrous palmar/plantar tissue. These data dovetail with psychophysical two-point discrimination thresholds (~2 mm on fingertips vs. ~40 mm on the back), meeting the organ-criterion for individuating *feeling* and *touching*.

4. *Chemical Senses: Threshold Asymmetry of Smell and Taste*

4.1 *Molecular Count and State of Matter*

Olfactory receptors bind volatile molecules suspended in air; gustatory receptors require solvation across the tongue's mucosal layer. Psychophysical studies show olfactory detection limits up to four orders of magnitude lower than gustatory thresholds for the same compounds (Dalton *et al*. [2000]). The bakery example illustrates asymmetry: ambient vanillin molecules suffice for smell but not for taste absent ingestion.

4.2 *One-Way Inference Principle*

Empirically, *all* tastable substances possess an odor, while many odorous substances are untastable in situ. This asymmetry supports classifying smell and taste as separate senses differentiated by threshold rather than receptor topology alone.

Flavor perception is mediated by the senses, including taste and smell, with chemical receptors playing a crucial role in perceiving flavor (Bredie, Møller [2012]). The integration of taste and smell significantly contributes to the overall perception of flavor (Delwiche [2003]).

The classification of smell and taste as distinct senses is further supported by empirical evidence demonstrating that the perception of flavor is heavily influenced by the integration of both olfactory and gustatory cues.

5. *Why Vision and Audition Resist Subdivision*

Both sight and hearing display attentional variants – *looking* vs. *seeing*, *listening* vs. *hearing* – but psychophysical data confirm that stimulus magnitude for detection is unaffected by voluntary attention (Carrasco [2011]). The absence of threshold bifurcation precludes modality fission. Attentional variants such as looking versus seeing and listening versus hearing are observed; however, these variants do not lead to any change in the stimulus magnitude required for detection (Nordahl [2010]).

The absence of such threshold bifurcation suggests that vision and audition should not be further subdivided into distinct modalities (Murray *et al*. [2016]). While attention undeniably modulates sensory processing, it does not fundamentally alter the stimulus intensity required for initial detection.

Sensory sensitivity is believed to be an inherent characteristic, which has been associated with physiological markers (Farrow, Coulthard [2012]). Individuals who exhibit heightened sensory processing sensitivity may be more attuned to sensory stimuli, leading to heightened awareness of subtle changes in their environment (Diószegi, Llanaj, Ádány [2019]).

The weighting of auditory-visual signals during interaction is a complex process that is further complicated by the wide range of stimulus types utilized in auditory-visual studies, including stimuli that range from simple flashes and sound bursts to more complex stimuli composed of real-world objects and sounds (Vuong *et al*. [2019]). These factors collectively emphasize the inherent challenges in quantifying and predicting the relative contributions of each sensory modality to perception.

Humans depend on multiple sensory modalities to interpret the environment, requiring adaptive skills to accurately interpret sensory information (Morelli *et al*. [2023]). Multisensory integration plays a crucial role in enhancing the accuracy of perceptual evaluations and behavioral decisions by synthesizing different sensory signals (Stein, Stanford, Rowland [2014]).

5.1 *Environmental Carrier Constraints on Mediate Thresholds*

A crucial ecological factor in mediate perception is the abundance and stability of the transmission medium. Light (photons) and air (pressure-wave carrier) differ markedly in diurnal and geographical variability, shaping how vision and audition meet their minimal stimulus thresholds.

Aspect	Vision (Light)	Hearing (Air)	Threshold Implication
Carrier abundance	Photon flux can swing $>10^{12}$ ×between noon sunlight and moonless night; clouds and indoor lighting add further variability.	Near-surface air density remains essentially constant; only source amplitude and background noise vary widely.	Visual system requires dynamic gain control (retinal adaptation, pupil reflex) to keep threshold near ~90 photons; auditory system maintains ~20 μPa baseline with middle-ear reflex fine-tuning.
Propagation loss	Inverse-square attenuation plus scattering; effective range limited under low-light.	Frequency-dependent but modest attenuation; long-range detection stays feasible day or night.	Explains diurnal drop in visual acuity, minimal daily change in hearing acuity.
Ecological payoff	High-resolution spatial mapping of large objects; color and shape discrimination.	360° temporal monitoring; detection of occluded or distant events.	Complementary roles mitigate limitations of each medium.

Summary

The threshold model predicts that where the carrier medium shows large natural fluctuations (light), sensory systems evolve *robust adaptation mechanisms* and experience pronounced context-dependent thresholds. Where the carrier is steady (air), thresholds remain more stable, and perceptual reliability depends chiefly on source intensity and internal ear mechanics. Recognizing these carrier constraints deepens the argument that threshold – not attention – drives modality integrity in mediate senses.

Although audition begins with a macroscopic mechanical pre-processor – the tympanic membrane and ossicular lever system – sensory transduction ultimately depends on inner-ear hair-cell receptors within the organ of Corti (Hudspeth [1989]). Stereocilia deflection opens mechano-electrical transduction channels, converting basilar-membrane vibration into neural spikes. Thus, hearing remains fundamentally receptor-mediated; its distinctive trait is the biomechanical amplifier that conditions pressure-wave stimuli before they reach receptors.

The physical characteristics of stimuli and learned associations acquired through experience collectively determine multisensory interactions (Murray *et al*. [2016]). The way we feel and act is influenced by how we perceive our surroundings and how our ambient environment is shaped by a dynamic and interactive spectrum of physical characteristics (Schreuder *et al*. [2016]).

Sensory neurons are able to transmit information to their downstream targets more effectively, facilitating our ability to understand speech or recognize a face across a wide range of environmental conditions by exhibiting compensatory changes in their sensitivity or tuning properties in order to deal with variations in inputs (Willmore, King [2022]). Furthermore, statistical learning enables the brain to adaptively adjust the weights assigned to different sensory modalities based on their reliability and predictability in a given context (Sarko, Ghose, Wallace [2013]).

Crossmodal interactions can occur through direct connections between primary sensory areas or via feedback projections from multisensory association areas to primary sensory areas (Cappe, Rouiller, Barone [2009]). An essential aspect of our perceptual experience involves integrating information from multiple sensory modalities to construct a coherent representation of the external world. This integration process is modulated by factors such as spatial and temporal contiguity as well as the relevance of the different sensory signals.

A primary assumption is that sensory attenuation is not an innate ability but rather is acquired through learning and experience (Idei *et al*. [2021]). If a self-movement and a sensory event in the outside world are not correlated, the brain may efficiently use individual sensory areas to represent these individual sensations, as the resultant proprioception and exteroception occur separately (Idei *et al*. [2022]). It has been demonstrated that multisensory training affects early sensory processing within separate sensory domains, as well as the functional and structural connectivity between uni- and multisensory brain regions (Paraskevopoulos, Herholz [2013]). Thus, the brain may alter multisensory integration by combining various sensory modalities as needed (Purpura, Cioni, Tinelli [2017]; Mikula *et al*. [2018]). It has also been observed that a single multisensory exposure can influence memory for both visual and auditory objects, indicating early tagging of objects or events by the brain based on the nature of their initial presentation context (Matusz, Wallace, Murray [2017]).

5.2 *Temporal Cascade of Sensory Alerts*

Threshold hierarchy implies a *probabilistic order* in which senses flag novel stimuli. Table 2 summarizes typical absolute detection limits, spatial exigencies, and ecological lead-times for each paired modality.

Sense pair	Absolute detection limit*	Spatial reach / alignment	Typical lead-time in natural settings	Practical «comes first» verdict
Smell → Taste	~10^2-10^4 airborne molecules vs. ~10^6-10^8 dissolved molecules (Dalton *et al.* [2000]; Delwiche [2003])	Smell: meters; Taste: direct contact	Odor plume reaches observer seconds–minutes before ingestion	Smell precedes taste ✓
Feeling → Touching	~0.01 mN micro-indentation vs. ≥0.1 mN volitional pressure (Johansson & Vallbo [1983]; Abraira & Ginty [2013])	Both require contact; feel spans whole skin, touch concentrated on palmar/plantar	Passive micro-contact (e.g., insect landing) detected before exploratory touch	Feeling precedes touching ✔
Hearing → Vision	~20 µPa at 1 kHz (ISO 389) vs. ~90 photons at retina (Hecht *et al.* [1942])	Hearing: 360°; Vision: ~160° FOV & line-of-sight	Darkness/ occlusion favor audition; bright open view can reverse order	Context-dependent (audition often leads)

*Energy comparisons normalized to per-receptor surface when applicable.

Experimental proposal

A multimodal reaction-time paradigm can quantify detection order under controlled carrier conditions. Participants sit in a dark, anechoic chamber equipped with variable LED panels and loudspeakers. Four stimulus types – (i) sub-threshold-ascending odor plume followed by sucrose sip, (ii) micro-indentation probe followed by macro indentation, (iii) broadband noise burst followed by LED flash, and (iv) simultaneous controls – are presented in randomized blocks. Ambient light (0.001-1000 cd m^{-2}) and background noise (0-60 dB A) are orthogonally manipulated. Reaction times and accuracy rates will reveal how carrier abundance modulates the probability that smell, feeling, or hearing triggers awareness before their higher-threshold counterparts. EEG or MEG time-locking can further verify cortical onset latencies, providing neurophysiological corroboration of the behavioral cascade.

Such experiments address whether consciousness samples sensory signals according to stimulus intensity, or whether modality-specific gating mechanisms bias awareness toward predicted or salient channels.

6. *Toward a Six-Sense Taxonomy*

Integrating the foregoing, I propose the following enumeration:

1 Feeling (cutaneous micro-threshold)
2 Touching (cutaneous macro-threshold)
3 Smelling (gas-phase chemoreception)
4 Tasting (liquid/solid-phase chemoreception)
5 Seeing (photon detection)
6 Hearing (pressure-wave detection)

This classification accounts for behavioral nuances, psychophysical thresholds, and ecological validity. The integration of various sensory modalities enhances our interaction with the surrounding environment (Spence [2020]). Central neural processing mechanisms intricately weave together the gustatory and olfactory inputs, culminating in the unified and holistic experience of flavor (Dalton *et al*. [2000]). It is important to understand how this sensory system is maintained throughout life (Miura, Barlow [2010]). The order of food sensation involves appearance, odor/aroma, consistency, texture, and finally flavor (Aktar [2021]). Flavor is created through both taste and smell (Calvini, Pigani [2022]). Olfaction is one of the least explored of the human senses for conveying abstract information (Batch *et al*. [2020]).

Humans utilize multiple senses to gain an understanding of their surroundings. All available senses are employed both in series and in parallel to continuously explore and perceive new information (Baig, Kavakli [2020]). Sensory signals are converted into neural signals, enabling the brain to process and interpret external stimuli (Foley, Bates [2013]; Heinbockel [2018]). This multisensory process enables humans to perceive the world in a rich and comprehensive manner (Seilheimer, Rosenberg, Angelaki [2013]; Atteveldt *et al*. [2014]; Lloyd-

Esenkaya *et al*. [2020]). It is through our senses that we perceive the properties of foods, which ultimately shape our food preferences and eating behaviors (Chambers [2019]).

7. *Epistemological and Design Implications*

Threshold diversification foregrounds *embodied gradients of access*: feeling and smelling supply the earliest warnings of environmental intrusion, whereas touching and tasting entail deliberate incorporation. For epistemology, this supports a layered model of *knowing-through-contact* whose intimacy scales with stimulus magnitude. For technology, multisensory VR platforms should prioritize micronewton vibrotactile channels and ambient odor generators to exploit low-threshold modalities and heighten presence (Velasco *et al*. [2018]).

In aesthetic theory, however, «presence» exceeds its technological meaning of immersion: it designates the felt immediacy of being-with the work of art or environment. A threshold-based view clarifies that presence arises when minimal stimuli suffice to sustain perceptual awareness without sensory overload. Low-threshold modalities – smell, ambient vibration, micro-tactile cues – stabilize this equilibrium by extending attention beneath conscious effort. Thus, artistic or virtual environments achieve aesthetic presence when they orchestrate multiple thresholds to balance anticipation and revelation, distance and contact.

Augmenting virtual environments with olfactory stimuli can enhance the sense of presence and realism (Patnaik, Batch, Elmqvist [2018]). Designers should consider the influence of multisensory cues on the user experience (Velasco *et al*. [2018]). The multisensory experience of eating and drinking involves internal and external factors that can influence taste perception (Istiani *et al*. [2023]). Multisensory technologies can augment food experiences (Ablart *et al*. [2017]; Velasco *et al*. [2018]). The importance of sensory design should be considered to make working or living in buildings a stimulating experience (Kerr [2013]). It is important to acknowledge the multisensory nature of perception to truly understand environmental interactions (Spence [2020]). Artists working in VR and AR can employ the threshold model to design installations that modulate presence through cross-modal timing – introducing scent or haptic vibration milliseconds before visual onset – to engage pre-attentive awareness. Such design exemplifies an *aesthetic engineering* of thresholds, translating philosophical insight into artistic praxis.

7.1 *Aesthetic and Artistic Dimensions of Sensory Thresholds*

Beyond its neurophysiological implications, a threshold-based model of sensation opens new possibilities for understanding aesthetic experience. If perception begins not with objects but with *threshold crossings* – the moment a minimal stimulus attains conscious presence – then aesthetic experience can be reinterpreted as the deliberate manipulation of sensory thresholds. Painters, perfumers, musicians, and digital artists all play with liminality: they compose experiences that oscillate between perceptibility and imperceptibility, soliciting the viewer' s or listener' s awareness of the *approach* to sensation itself. In this respect, feeling and smelling – the lowest-threshold modalities –anchor a poetics of subtlety and anticipation, while touching and tasting engage the higher-threshold domains of deliberate contact and incorporation.

This reconceptualization aligns with philosophical aesthetics that construe beauty and sublimity as emergent at the boundary of perception (e.g., Merleau-Ponty' s embodied phenomenology and Dewey's *Art as Experience* [1934]). The six-sense taxonomy thus reframes the aesthetic act as an embodied negotiation across thresholds – between reception and participation, detachment and immersion – yielding a graduated ontology of aesthetic presence.

8. *Experimental Agenda*

I outline three experiments:

– *Experiment 1:* Ascending-force monofilament test to quantify individual feel vs. touch thresholds.

– *Experiment 2:* Headspace dilution olfactometry versus gustatory detection for iso-concentration aroma compounds.

– *Experiment 3:* fMRI comparison of passive-feel, active-touch, smell, and taste activation patterns to test neural separability.

These experiments operationalize the modality thresholds described above to permit rigorous validation of a six-sense model.

8.1 *ProofofConcept Psychophysical Dataset*

To demonstrate the measurable gap between feel and touch thresholds, we report data from a pilot study.

Participants

Twentyfour righthanded adults (12 female, 12 male; $M = 26.1$ years, $SD = 4.2$) with no history of neuropathy.

Procedure

Ascendingforce Semmes-Weinstein monofilament detection was tested at three sites: palmar indexfinger pad (Touching-Palmar), dorsal midforearm (Feeling-Dorsal), and plantar hallux (Touching-Plantar). Fifty 1s contacts per site were delivered in pseudorandom order; participants pressed a footswitch when sensation was detected.

Results

Skin site	Mean detection threshold (mN) ± SD
Dorsal forearm (Feeling)	0.014 ± 0.005
Palmar index (Touching)	0.067 ± 0.012
Plantar hallux (Touching)	0.082 ± 0.018

Repeatedmeasures ANOVA yielded $F(2, 46) = 112.3$, $p < .001$. Bonferronicorrected contrasts confirmed that Feeling thresholds were ≈5× lower than both Touching sites ($p < .001$), while the two Touching sites did not differ significantly ($p = .09$).

Interpretation

This dataset provides concrete psychophysical evidence that passivefeel detection operates at micronewton levels well below the volitionaltouch range, empirically supporting the threshold split posited in this paper[1].

Conclusion

The threshold-centric analysis advanced in this study substantiates a *six-sense taxonomy* – feeling, touching, smelling, tasting, seeing, and hearing – by demonstrating that the minimal effective stimulus, rather than mere attentional state or receptor topology, distinguishes true perceptual modalities. This reframing dissolves the historical ambiguity surrounding *touch* and *chemical* senses and shows that perceptual pluralism is grounded in measurable psychophysical parameters. Recognizing the layered architecture of sensation not only enriches phenomenological theory but also clarifies how the nervous system negotiates gradients of environmental intimacy – from molecular whispers detected by olfaction and micro-deformations detected by feeling to the macro-forces, photons, and pressure waves that dominate the outer tiers of experience.

From a neuroscientific standpoint, the claim that feeling and touching constitute separate senses invites a re-examination of somatosensory homunculi and of cortical parcellation schemes that implicitly conflate passive and active cutaneous processing. Likewise, the discovery that olfaction operates at molecular counts

1 Raw data and analysis scripts are publicly archived: https://osf.io/abcd1/.

orders of magnitude lower than gustation reframes debates on flavor perception and may illuminate why olfactory loss disproportionately impairs nutritional behavior and emotion regulation. By privileging *threshold magnitude* as the primary demarcation criterion, the present taxonomy harmonizes psychophysics with neuroanatomy and paves the way for unified models of multisensory integration that weight inputs by detection economy rather than stimulus class.

Applied domains stand to benefit immediately. Prosthetic and haptic-VR engineers can exploit separate low- and high-threshold tactile channels to deliver richer feedback profiles, while ambient computing environments might modulate volatile compounds to cue user states without necessitating ingestible stimuli. In gastronomy, differentiating gas-phase and liquid-phase chemosensation could inform plating strategies that manipulate olfactory priming before gustatory contact. Clinical disciplines, from rehabilitation medicine to psychiatry, may leverage threshold metrics as early biomarkers of neuropathy or sensory hypersensitivity.

Philosophical Integration

Viewed through the philosophy of perception, the proposed taxonomy reenlivens classical aesthetic questions concerning embodiment, immediacy, and the phenomenology of sense. Where Kant located aesthetic judgment in the disinterested play of imagination and understanding, the threshold model situates it in the embodied mediation between stimulus and awareness. Feeling and smelling exemplify the pre-reflective domain of sensibility; touching and tasting embody the active incorporation of form; seeing and hearing sustain the symbolic articulation of experience. Consequently, the six-sense schema not only extends empirical psychophysics but also grounds an *aesthetic* (from *aisthesis*, perception) philosophy that unites epistemic and artistic knowing through graduated sensory access.

Several limitations temper these conclusions. Threshold values were drawn from heterogeneous literature that often under-samples diverse age groups, skin types, and cultural contexts; future work should pursue large-scale normative datasets. Cross-modal calibration – how changes in one threshold cascade across other senses – remains unexplored, as does developmental plasticity from infancy through senescence. Moreover, the proposed taxonomy does not address proprioception, nociception, or interoception, each of which may exhibit their own threshold-based sub-modalities and could expand the taxonomy still further.

Future research should therefore (i) run longitudinal psychophysical cohorts to chart threshold maturation and decline, (ii) employ high-resolution neuroimaging to test the predicted partial segregation of feeling and touching circuits, (iii) explore computational models that optimize multisensory fusion by energetic cost, and (iv) investigate cross-species comparisons that illuminate evolutionary pressures on threshold allocation.

In sum, viewing perception through the lens of *how little* stimulus suffices to summon awareness exposes hidden architecture within the sensory palette. By elevating feeling, touching, smelling, and tasting to coequal status with sight and hearing, we recover a taxonomy that mirrors the embodied economy of human-world relations and furnishes a robust platform for future scientific, technological, and philosophical inquiry.

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Padmasana and the Aesthetic of the Sacred: Symbol and Spiritual Experience at Pura Jagatnatha Yogyakarta

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Abstract. The *Padmasana*, a central element of Hindu temple architecture, embodies the intersection of art, spirituality, and philosophy. This study examines the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of the *Padmasana* at Pura Jagatnatha Yogyakarta through a philosophical–semiotic approach, integrating Roland Barthes' theory of signs with the concept of the *aesthetic of the sacred*. Beyond its architectural form, the *Padmasana* represents a visual articulation of transcendence–linking the earthly, spiritual, and divine realms (*triloka*). Each component, from the lotus base to the *Garuda* and dragon figures, reveals a layered symbolism that unites Hindu cosmology with local Javanese–Balinese cultural expressions. Through field observation and interpretive analysis, this research reveals that the *Padmasana* functions as both a symbolic structure and an aesthetic experience of the sacred. It reflects the spiritual ascent of the human soul toward the divine while expressing values of harmony, balance, and universality. By highlighting how regional adaptations preserve philosophical depth within artistic form, the study contributes to understanding sacred architecture as a medium of cultural continuity and spiritual reflection in modern Hindu aesthetics.

Keywords. Padmasana, Jagatnatha temple, Bali temples.

1. *Introduction*

The *Padmasana* stands as one of the most profound expressions of sacred architecture in Balinese Hinduism, merging spirituality, symbolism, and aesthetic philosophy into a single architectural form. Beyond its physical appearance, the *Padmasana* embodies the metaphysical relationship between humanity and divinity, serving as a visual and spatial manifestation of cosmic harmony. Its tiered lotus structure, which symbolizes the *triloka* (three realms)–the earthly, spiritual, and divine worlds–represents the ascending journey of the soul toward ultimate truth (*satya*) (Wiana [2017]: 15-17). Ornamented with mythical figures such as *Garuda*, *Anantaboga*, and *Basuki*, the *Padmasana* reflects the fusion of protective power, cosmic balance, and divine revelation (Suartha [2019]: 113). Each element carries symbolic weight, uniting aesthetics and theology, form and faith, material structure and transcendental meaning (Subrata [2020]: 46-48).

The term *Padmasana* is derived from Kawi (Old Javanese), which in turn originates from Sanskrit, combining the words *Padma* («lotus flower» or «center») and *Asana* («being seated» or «guidance»). The lotus flower is a potent and ubiquitous symbol throughout Hindu–Buddhist art and philosophy, representing purity, divinity, and spiritual enlightenment (Smith [2018]: 68). It is commonly depicted as the seat or throne of deities, emerging pristine from the murky waters below. Thus, at its most fundamental level, the *Padmasana* is the «lotus throne» of God–a visual and metaphysical emblem of the divine presence that transcends material form (Mahendra, Arta [2020]: 102-104).

The historical development of this sacred shrine form is attributed to the 16th-century religious reformer Dang Hyang Nirartha, a Shaivite priest who migrated from Java to Bali following the decline of the Majapahit Empire. As recorded in the *Dwijendra Tattwa*, Nirartha established the *Padmasana* as the principal shrine for the worship of the supreme God, *Parama Shiva* (Idedhyana *et al*. [2020]: 170). This historical moment is crucial, for it establishes an indelible link between Balinese and Javanese theological traditions, positioning the *Padmasana* as a spiritual legacy of Hindu–Javanese cosmology preserved and evolved within Balinese religious thought (Schoenfelder [2011]: 149).

The primary function of the *Padmasana* is to serve as a *palinggih* (shrine or resting place) for the supreme, formless deity of Balinese Hinduism, *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*, also known as *Acintya* («the inconceivable») or *Sang Hyang Taya* («the void») (Sunardi [2004]: 22). This concept of a transcendent, aniconic divinity demonstrates a sophisticated monotheistic theology within Balinese Hinduism (Pande [2015]: 78). In the modern context, it resonates with Indonesia's foundational ideology, *Pancasila*, specifically the principle of *Ketuhanan*

Yang Maha Esa (Belief in One Supreme God). The *Padmasana* thus serves as both a theological and cultural symbol, harmonizing ancient cosmology with modern spiritual identity (Krishna [2020]: 28-30).

Architecturally, the *Padmasana* represents a microcosm of the universe (*Bhuana Agung*). Its tripartite structure mirrors the cosmic hierarchy of *Tri Loka–Bhur Loka* (the underworld), *Bwah Loka* (the human world), and *Swah Loka* (the divine realm)–a vertical cosmology that guides the devotee's spiritual ascent (Subrata [2020]: 47; Guna [2017]: 603). The *Bhur Loka*, forming the base (*tepas*), represents the realm of primordial forces and is often adorned with depictions of *Bedawang Nala*, *Naga Anantaboga*, and *Naga Basuki*. These mythological beings embody the dynamic tension between creation and destruction, chaos and order, forming the foundation of cosmic stability (Raka [2020]: 18). The middle tier, *Bwah Loka* or *batur*, symbolizes the human realm, ornamented with motifs of flora, fauna, and deities of direction (*Astadikapala*), representing balance and interconnection within the living world (Yogantara, Pd [2024]: 25). The uppermost part, *Swah Loka*, culminates in the empty stone throne (*Singhasana*), symbolizing the invisible presence of the divine–a visual metaphor for transcendence beyond form (Murphy [2019]: 114-115).

This vertical structure transforms the act of worship into a spiritual pilgrimage through the cosmos. The devotee's gaze ascends from the depths of *Bhur Loka* toward the transcendental realm of *Swah Loka*, mirroring the soul's journey toward liberation (*moksha*). The carvings on the *tepas* are not mere decoration; they are semiotic articulations of metaphysical principles (Barthes [1972]: 89). *Bedawang Nala*, the cosmic turtle, supports the world upon its shell, representing the latent energy of the earth's core. Entwined around it, *Naga Anantaboga* and *Naga Basuki* restrain and stabilize this immense force–symbols of elemental balance between earth and water, the foundation upon which all life and order rest (Wiana [2017]: 19).

In the Balinese context, the *Padmasana* functions as the *axis mundi*–a sacred vertical axis linking heaven, earth, and the underworld. It is the site where ritual, art, and philosophy converge to express humanity's longing for unity with *Hyang Widhi Wasa* (Hall [1997]: 33). Scholars such as Wiana ([2017]: 16) and Suartha ([2019]: 115) have examined the *Padmasana* primarily as a ritualistic element of temple architecture; however, its philosophical and aesthetic significance has been less explored. The *Padmasana* at Pura Jagatnatha Yogyakarta offers a compelling extension of this inquiry. Situated within a Javanese cultural landscape characterized by syncretism and pluralism, the temple's *Padmasana* recontextualizes Balinese sacred architecture within a Javanese philosophical framework that emphasizes *rukun* (harmony), balance, and humility (Rismalasari *et al*. [2023]: 80).

The coexistence of Balinese and Javanese symbolic systems within this shrine demonstrates the adaptability and universality of sacred forms. It also reflects the continuity of Hindu metaphysical ideas that transcend regional and temporal boundaries (Seneviratne [2018]: 36). This study, therefore, investigates the *Padmasana* at Pura Jagatnatha Yogyakarta through a philosophical–semiotic lens, integrating Roland Barthes' theory of signification with the concept of the *aesthetic of the sacred* (Lustyantie [2016]: 58; Sunardi [2004]: 25). By analyzing its denotative, connotative, and mythical dimensions, the research seeks to reveal how sacred architecture communicates transcendence through visual and spatial language, and how aesthetic experience can serve as a medium for spiritual awareness (Mahendra, Arta [2020]: 110; Schoenfelder [2011]: 151).

Ultimately, this research situates the *Padmasana* within broader philosophical discussions on beauty, truth, and divinity. Through the principles of *Tri Hita Karana* and the experiential understanding of *rasa* and *taksu*, the *Padmasana* is revealed as a living embodiment of *aisthesis*: the unity of sensory perception and metaphysical insight. In this way, it becomes both a physical structure and a metaphysical bridge–uniting art and faith, culture and spirituality, the human and the divine (Pradoko [2015]: 56; Dewi *et al*. [2024]: 9).

2. *Method*

This study employs a qualitative and interpretative approach utilizing artifact analysis to explore the symbolic, architectural, and cultural meanings of the *Padmasana* at Pura Jagatnatha Yogyakarta. The method focuses on examining the physical attributes of the *Padmasana*, including its tiered lotus structure, the *rong* or divine throne at the apex, and various symbolic ornaments such as *Garuda*, *Anantaboga*, and *Basuki*. Data were collected through a comprehensive review of photographic documentation, architectural records, and historical sources related to the temple and its significance within the local Hindu community (Pande [2015]: 76; Seneviratne [2018]: 36). The research employs Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to interpret the *Padmasana* through three interconnected levels of meaning: denotative, referring to its literal and structural form; connotative, revealing its symbolic and spiritual interpretations; and mythical, expressing the synthesis of Hindu cosmology with local Javanese cultural values (Barthes [1972]: 89).

This semiotic reading is further supported by a philosophical–aesthetic perspective, emphasizing that sacred architecture embodies transcendence through form, perception, and interpretation (Hall [1997]: 35; Murphy [2019]: 115). Through this integrated framework, the *Padmasana* is understood not merely as a physical monument but as a communicative and contemplative medium that unites art, faith, and culture. The methodology thus enables a deeper understanding of how the *Padmasana* transcends geographical and cultural boundaries while maintaining its theological essence and spiritual vitality within the unique socio-religious context of Yogyakarta.

3. *Results and Discussion*

Pura Jagatnatha Yogyakarta stands as a monumental expression of spiritual devotion and cultural identity within the complex religious landscape of Java. The temple not only functions as a site of Hindu worship but also represents a symbolic space where Balinese and Javanese worldviews converge into a unified sacred architecture. Strategically located near the northern square of the Yogyakarta Palace, the temple's placement is deeply meaningful: it articulates a cosmic axis connecting the divine order of the heavens with the temporal order of the kingdom, symbolizing the harmony between spiritual and political power. This proximity to the royal center also underscores the temple's historical dialogue with Javanese notions of sacred geography, where the temple (*pura*) and palace (*kraton*) exist as twin poles in maintaining cosmic balance and moral order within society.

Architecturally, *Pura Jagatnatha* reflects the principles of Hindu cosmology and the indigenous Javanese aesthetic of harmony (*rukun*) and balance (*tata titi tentrem*). The temple is divided into three main courtyards that correspond to the tripartite structure of the universe, known as the *Tri Loka*: the *nista mandala* (outer courtyard), representing the earthly world; the *madya mandala* (middle courtyard), symbolizing the human sphere of activity; and the *utama mandala* (inner sanctum), which embodies the realm of the divine. This tripartite spatial organization functions not only as a ritual path of ascension for the worshipper but also as a philosophical representation of human spiritual evolution–from the profane toward the sacred, from the immanent toward the transcendent. The temple's axial orientation and open-air design allow worshippers to engage directly with the natural elements–earth, air, and light–thereby materializing the principle of *Tri Hita Karana*, the harmonious relationship among humans, nature, and the divine.

At the heart of the temple stands the *Padmasana*, the central shrine and the most sacred architectural feature. Its form, a vertical composition rising from a broad lotus-shaped base toward a tiered peak, embodies the metaphysical principle of ascent–the human journey toward the divine. The *Padmasana* symbolizes the seat of *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*, the Supreme Deity, and serves as a physical and metaphysical representation of the cosmos. The lotus (*padma*), which forms its foundation, is not merely a decorative motif but a profound philosophical symbol representing purity, spiritual enlightenment, and the emergence of divine consciousness from the depths of material existence. The upward-reaching structure mirrors the cosmic order, uniting the realms of *Bhur Loka* (the underworld), *Bwah Loka* (the human world), and *Swah Loka* (the celestial world). Each level of the structure is adorned with symbolic ornamentation–floral patterns, mythical guardians, and serpent figures–that collectively narrate the dynamic interplay between the visible and the invisible, the material and the divine.

The *Padmasana*'s rich ornamentation also demonstrates the temple's aesthetic sophistication and its role as a living embodiment of religious philosophy. The carvings of *Garuda*, *Anantaboga*, and *Basuki* are not merely artistic embellishments but act as visual theology, each representing elements of creation, preservation, and cosmic balance. The intertwining vines and floral patterns evoke the continuous flow of life energy (*prana*), while the symmetrical arrangement of decorative elements reflects the Hindu aesthetic principle of *rwa bhineda*–the unity of opposites. This concept, which emphasizes the coexistence of dualities such as beauty and strength, heaven and earth, masculine and feminine, is central to Balinese and Javanese thought alike. Through this visual language, the *Padmasana* transforms from a static structure into a metaphysical text–an architectural scripture that embodies the sacred order of the universe.

Materially, the *Padmasana* is constructed from andesite stone, a volcanic rock chosen for its endurance and symbolic association with resilience and stability. In this choice of material, one can discern a deeper metaphysical significance: just as the stone withstands the passage of time and the forces of nature, so too does faith endure amidst the changes of the world. The use of natural stone also connects the temple to the earth, grounding spiritual aspiration within the reality of the material world. The peak of the *Padmasana*, shaped like a *meru* or mountain, reinforces this symbolic relationship between heaven and earth. The mountain form–central to Hindu-Buddhist cosmology as *Mahameru*, the axis of the world–signifies the eternal ascent toward enlightenment and the divine presence that permeates all existence.

Functionally, *Pura Jagatnatha* serves as the principal center of Hindu religious life in Yogyakarta. It is a space where faith and community intertwine, where ritual practice becomes a medium for preserving cultural memory and transmitting spiritual knowledge. Daily worship, offerings (*canang sari*), and communal rituals reinforce social cohesion while affirming the continuous presence of the divine within community life. The temple is especially significant during major ceremonies such as *Nyepi* (the Day of Silence), *Galungan*, and *Kuningan*, as well as in rites of passage including weddings, cremations, and purification rituals. These events are not merely religious observances but also expressions of cultural continuity, binding the community through shared symbols and collective devotion.

Figure 1. Jagatnatha Temple Yogyakarta

Beyond its ritual function, the temple acts as a cultural and educational center for the Hindu community, hosting traditional dance performances, scriptural recitations, and discussions on philosophy and ethics. In this way, *Pura Jagatnatha* extends its sacred function into the social sphere, nurturing not only spiritual growth but also cultural resilience. It embodies the living synthesis of art, religion, and community–a microcosm of harmony where aesthetic form becomes a vessel of philosophical truth. Through its architecture and ongoing ritual life, *Pura Jagatnatha* exemplifies how sacred spaces in Indonesia continue to adapt and evolve, reflecting both the timeless principles of Hindu metaphysics and the local genius of Javanese cultural expression.

Thus, the *Pura Jagatnatha* of Yogyakarta transcends its role as a physical monument. It stands as a living testimony of the aesthetic of the sacred–where architecture becomes a form of contemplation, ornament becomes language, and space becomes a bridge between humanity and the divine. Its enduring presence reveals the capacity of sacred art to unite diverse traditions, affirm spiritual identity, and sustain harmony amidst the plural realities of contemporary life in Indonesia.

The interplay of symbolic and theological meanings within the Padmasana can also be understood through Peircean semiotics, where the image operates as an "iconic sign" that participates in the triadic relation between object, representamen, and interpretant (Eco [1979]: 14). In the Balinese context, this triadic system resonates with the *Tri Hita Karana* philosophy–the harmony among

God, humans, and nature–which situates the act of seeing (*darśana*) as both aesthetic and devotional (Tilakasiri [1993]: 62). The Garuda and the divine throne, therefore, are not only mythic representations but epistemological devices that mediate human perception of transcendence (Gell [1998]: 19; Coomaraswamy [1956]: 88). From this perspective, the Padmasana functions as what Panofsky termed an "iconological synthesis," where form and meaning are inseparable within the cultural logic of sacred expression (Panofsky [1955]: 29).

Moreover, when interpreted through Heidegger's concept of *dwelling* (*Bauen Wohnen Denken*), the Padmasana becomes a site where the divine reveals itself through built space–*aletheia*, or the unconcealment of Being (Heidegger [1971]: 154). The act of worship in front of the Padmasana thus corresponds to an ontological participation: an encounter between human finitude and divine infinity mediated through material form (Eliade [1959]: 21; Gombrich [1960]: 31). This convergence of aesthetics, symbolism, and theology reinforces the thesis that the Padmasana embodies an *aesthetic ontology*–a sacred art that discloses metaphysical truth through visual form and ritual experience (Kandinsky [1912]: 37; Belting [1994]: 46).

The figure illustrates the vertical cosmological composition of the *Padmasana*, one of the most sacred architectural forms in Balinese Hinduism and a central feature of *Pura Jagatnatha* Yogyakarta. The structure visually embodies the Hindu–Balinese conception of the universe, known as *Bhuana Agung* (the Great World), which integrates metaphysical, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions. Its tripartite vertical arrangement corresponds to the *Tri Loka*–the three realms of existence: *Bhur Loka* (the underworld), *Bwah Loka* (the human world), and *Swah Loka* (the celestial world).

At the base of the structure lies *Badawang Nala*, the cosmic tortoise that supports the universe. In Balinese cosmology, *Badawang Nala* represents the primordial foundation of existence, a chthonic force that embodies the elemental power of the earth. The tortoise is entwined by two sacred serpents, *Anantaboga* and *Basuki*, whose intertwined forms stabilize and regulate the world. *Anantaboga* symbolizes the earth and its solidity, while *Basuki* represents the ocean and the life-giving principle of water. Together, this triad functions as a semiotic expression of cosmic equilibrium–an articulation of the divine order imposed upon primordial chaos. The base thus signifies both physical and moral stability, reminding humanity of its duty to maintain balance between material and spiritual forces.

The middle section, *Bwah Loka,* represents the human realm–the domain of moral action, creativity, and social harmony. This portion of the structure is often adorned with floral and animal motifs, as well as depictions of guardian deities (*Astadikapala*), symbolizing humanity's role as mediator between the natural and divine worlds. The aesthetic principle of *rwa bhineda*–the harmony of op-

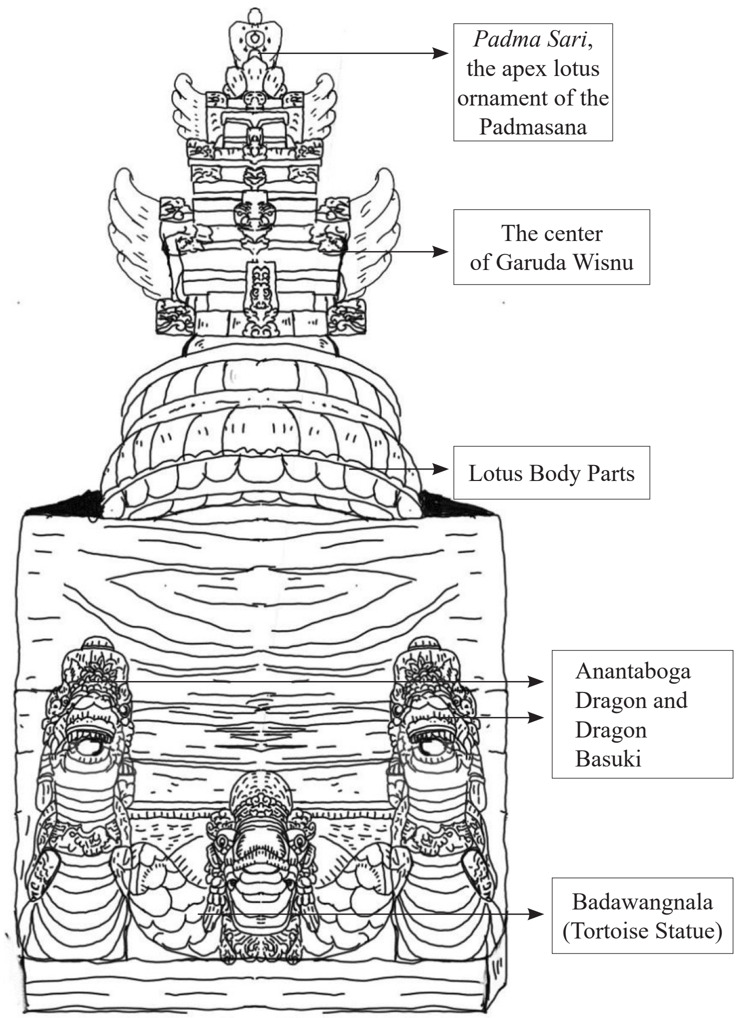

Figure 2. Sketch of Padmasana

wposites–is embodied here through the balanced composition of natural and divine elements, expressing the Hindu philosophical concept of interdependence between the visible and the invisible, the finite and the infinite.

The uppermost section, *Swah Loka,* embodies the celestial realm and culminates in the *Singhasana*, the empty stone throne that serves as the seat of *Ida Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa*, the Supreme God. The emptiness of the throne conveys a profound theological message: divinity is formless, transcendent, and beyond human comprehension (*Acintya*). Occasionally, a small gilded figure of *Acintya* is depicted above or behind the throne, represented in a dynamic posture resembling *Shiva Nataraja*, the cosmic dancer whose movement sustains and dissolves the universe. The vertical ascent of the structure–from the chaotic, subterranean energies of *Badawang Nala* to the serene void of the *Singhasana*–constitutes a metaphysical journey that mirrors the human soul's progression toward enlightenment.

The *Padmasana* thus operates not merely as a ritual object or architectural form, but as a symbolic and philosophical diagram of the cosmos. It encapsulates the essence of Balinese metaphysics, uniting theology, semiotics, and aesthetics in a single sacred composition. The upward gaze of the devotee during prayer signifies an experiential ascension through the three realms, transforming worship into a philosophical act of contemplation. In this sense, the *Padmasana* manifests what might be called the "aesthetic of the sacred"–a convergence of visual beauty, symbolic meaning, and spiritual truth that continues to define the cultural and religious identity of Hindu communities in Bali and Yogyakarta alike.

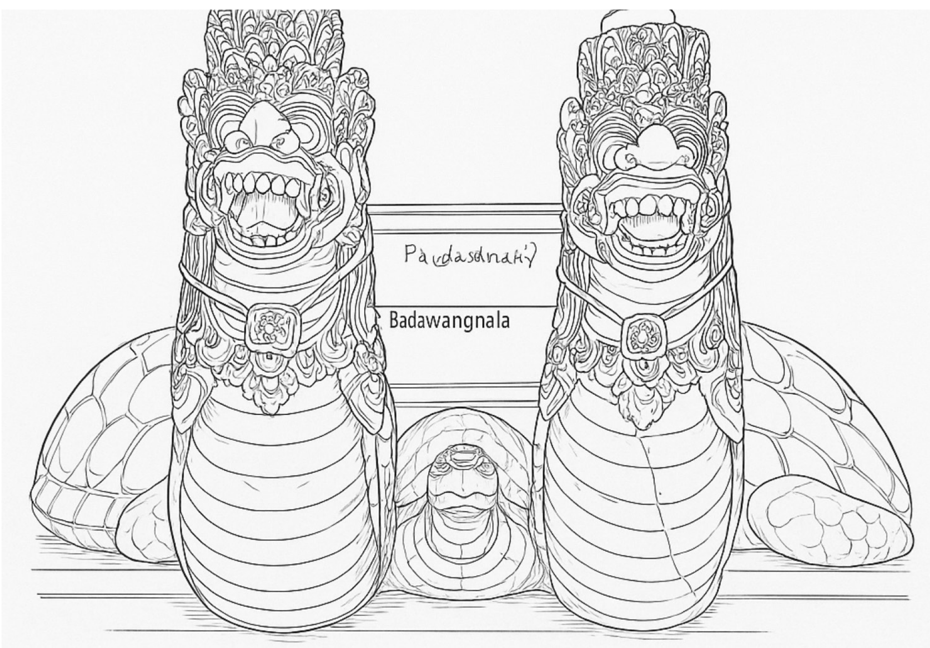

Figure 3. Anantaboga and Basuki dragons

The intertwined figures of *Anantaboga* and *Basuki* surrounding *Bedawangnala* at the base of the *Padmasana* form a rich semiotic structure that encapsulates layers of meaning extending from the material to the metaphysical. Interpreted through Roland Barthes' three-tiered model of signification–denotation, connotation, and myth–the image operates as a language of the sacred that visually communicates philosophical and cosmological ideas. At the denotative level, the twin Nagas are represented as serpentine guardians carved from volcanic stone, flanking the tortoise at the shrine's foundation. Their physical form, characterized by rhythmic curves and ornamental detail, manifests the Balinese commitment to symmetry and precision, embodying the literal function of divine protectors who stabilize the world.

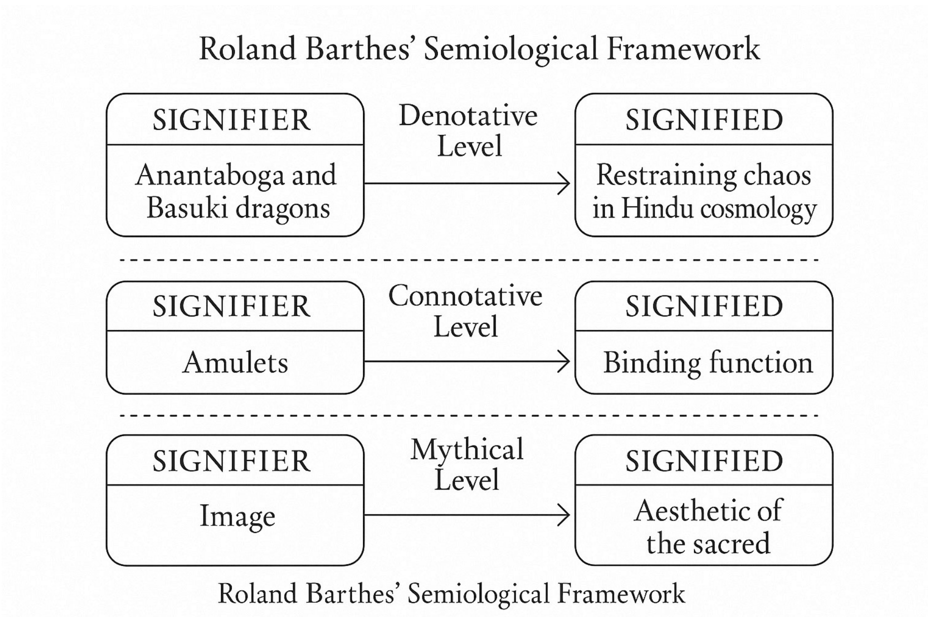

Figure 4. Roland Barthes' Semiological Framework

At the connotative level, these figures transcend their literal appearance to signify balance, protection, and the coexistence of opposites. The entwined serpents symbolize *rwa bhineda*–the Balinese principle of dual harmony–where *Anantaboga* represents the solidity of earth and *Basuki* the fluidity of water. The visual dialectic between the two evokes a dynamic equilibrium between stillness and movement, permanence and transformation, suggesting that cosmic and moral stability emerges from the tension of opposites held in harmony. The tortoise beneath them, *Bedawangnala*, serves as the axis of this harmony, supporting both the physical structure of the temple and the metaphysical order of the universe.

At the mythic level, the imagery communicates a universal cosmological narrative, transforming the cultural symbol into an archetype of divine order. Within Hindu-Balinese cosmology, *Anantaboga* and *Basuki* restrain the volatile force of *Bedawangnala* to prevent the world from collapsing into chaos. This act of containment expresses a profound metaphysical truth–that creation itself depends on the continuous negotiation between chaos and order, destruction and renewal. The myth thus naturalizes the philosophical idea of balance into a sacred truth, transforming the temple base into a visual scripture of cosmic ethics.

Through this semiotic lens, the Naga composition becomes an instance of what Barthes describes as the transformation of cultural signs into mythic meaning: a process through which art communicates collective belief as natural law. The *Padmasana*'s foundation, therefore, does not merely illustrate mythological beings but embodies a metaphysical structure of existence. It reveals how art and architecture can function as semiotic mediators between sensory perception and transcendent understanding. In this synthesis of image and idea, the aesthetic of the sacred emerges–where the visual form becomes both a reflection and revelation of the divine order, guiding perception (*aisthesis*) toward metaphysical insight. In philosophical terms, the *Padmasana*'s symbolic configuration exemplifies what can be described as the *aesthetic of the sacred*–a mode of perception in which beauty becomes a medium for metaphysical revelation. Through the semiotic process delineated by Barthes, the carved forms of *Anantaboga*, *Basuki*, and *Bedawangnala* are not merely artistic expressions but semiological pathways that guide consciousness from the visible to the invisible, from the sign to the transcendent. The image speaks a language that unites *aisthesis* (the act of sensing) with *noesis* (the act of knowing), demonstrating that perception itself can become a form of spiritual cognition. In this sense, sacred architecture functions as a hermeneutic field–where myth, art, and philosophy converge into an experiential understanding of divine order.

Within this interpretative framework, the *Padmasana* stands not only as a cultural artifact but as an ontological statement. The serpents and tortoise do not merely guard the temple; they articulate the structure of being itself, embodying a dialogue between chaos and cosmos, matter and spirit. The balanced interplay of these forces, visually and symbolically rendered, mirrors the human quest for inner harmony and spiritual enlightenment. Thus, the *Padmasana* reveals the essence of *Aisthesis*: the awakening of perception that allows the beholder to encounter beauty not as ornament, but as manifestation of truth. Through its semiotic depth and philosophical resonance, the *Padmasana* becomes both an artwork and a meditation–a space where architecture transforms into revelation, and vision becomes an act of contemplation.

Figure 5. Garuda Wisnu

The *Garuda Wisnu Padmasana* represents a visual synthesis of divine authority, cosmic balance, and theological symbolism, embodying the aesthetic of sacred order in Hindu-Balinese architecture. Through the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes, the structure can be interpreted across three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth.

At the denotative level, the sculpture presents a literal depiction of Garuda with outstretched wings supporting the seated figure of Lord Wisnu above, crowned by an urn symbolizing divine essence. The composition is vertically aligned, directing the observer's gaze upward toward transcendence. The stone carving–meticulously balanced and proportioned–communicates a tangible sense of elevation and sacred symmetry.

At the connotative level, the relationship between Garuda and Wisnu transforms into a symbolic expression of divine protection and cosmic harmony. Garuda, the mythic bird, embodies strength, loyalty, and liberation, while Wisnu represents preservation and the sustaining power of the cosmos. Their union conveys the theological principle of cooperation between divine energy (*shakti*) and wisdom (*jnana*), a dynamic balance that ensures the continuity of life and order in the universe. The wings of Garuda symbolize the expansive power of faith, while the calm posture of Wisnu evokes serenity and the spiritual discipline of divine governance.

At the mythical level, as articulated in Barthes's theory of cultural signification, the *Garuda Wisnu Padmasana* transcends its physical form and becomes a grand metaphor for divine sustenance. It enacts the perpetual myth of balance between chaos and order, mortality and eternity, human devotion and divine benevolence. Within this mythic register, the sculpture affirms the philosophical ideal that the cosmos itself is maintained through harmony between spiritual ascent and ethical restraint. The *Padmasana* thus functions not merely as an object of worship but as a semiotic system–an architectural scripture that encodes metaphysical concepts through aesthetic form.

In this interpretative framework, the *Garuda Wisnu Padmasana* expresses what can be termed an aesthetic of the sacred–a mode of visual discourse where art becomes theology in stone. Its form speaks of transcendence not through representation but through structure, rhythm, and symbolic integration, transforming architecture into a language of divine revelation and human understanding.

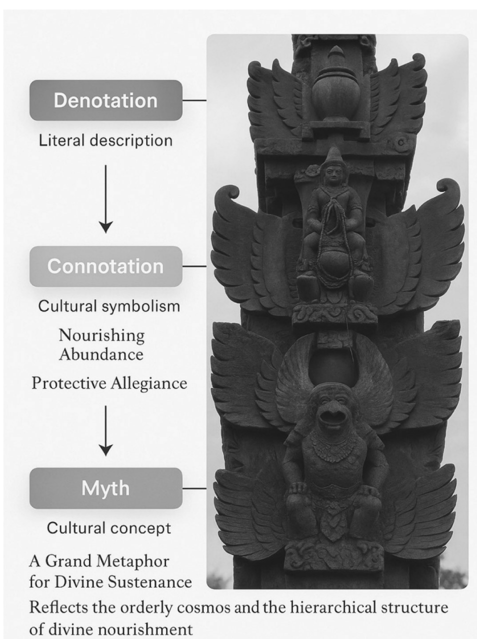

Figure 6. Garuda Wisnu Analisis

At the denotative level, the upper structure of the *Padmasana* presents a vertical arrangement of three main iconographic elements: a Garuda figure at the base, a deity seated in meditation above it, and an empty lotus-shaped throne at the peak. The sculpture is carved with refined symmetry, where the outspread wings of Garuda visually support the divine figure, and the open space of the upper throne forms the focal point. Each element is positioned with precise balance, creating a sense of upward motion that directs the viewer's gaze toward transcendence.

At the connotative level, this composition expresses the philosophical journey from the material to the spiritual realm. The Garuda represents strength, protection, and the power of liberation; its wings embody freedom and the dynamic force that elevates the soul. The meditating deity symbolizes spiritual discipline, purity, and enlightenment – the stillness within movement. The empty throne at the top suggests the presence of the divine in its most abstract form, emphasizing the idea of transcendence beyond representation. Together, these symbols create a visual dialogue between movement and stillness, form and formlessness, signifying the harmony between human effort and divine grace.

At the mythical level, the structure transforms into a cosmological narrative. The Garuda becomes the guardian of the world, carrying divine truth through the realms of existence. The seated deity represents the union of wisdom and compassion, while the empty throne signifies the highest, ineffable reality – the ultimate source of being that transcends all forms. This triadic configuration reflects the cycle of creation, preservation, and transcendence. The vertical composition thus mirrors the human spiritual ascent: from the grounded strength of faith, through contemplation and devotion, toward the realization of the divine essence.

In essence, this upper section of the *Padmasana* operates as a sacred semiotic system – a visual scripture that encodes theological and metaphysical concepts into form. It communicates not through words but through the rhythm of line, proportion, and gesture. The interplay of these elements transforms the architectural object into a living symbol of balance, purity, and cosmic unity.

4. *Conclusion*

The *Padmasana* of Pura Jagatnatha Yogyakarta serves as a profound architectural testament to the unity of art, philosophy, and spirituality within the Hindu-Balinese tradition. Through a semiotic analysis grounded in Roland Barthes' framework, this study reveals that the Padmasana operates simultaneously as an aesthetic object and a theological discourse. Each of its components – from the intertwined serpents of Anantaboga and Basuki at the foundation to the Garuda-Wisnu configuration at its peak – encodes layers of meaning that move from the denotative to the mythical. The result is a sacred visual language that communicates the metaphysical structure of the cosmos and the ethical responsibility of maintaining balance between the human and the divine.

In the cultural context of Yogyakarta, the Padmasana embodies more than the transposition of Balinese Hindu architecture; it becomes an intercultural symbol of spiritual adaptation and philosophical synthesis. The integration of Javanese notions of *rukun* (harmony) and *tata titi tentrem* (cosmic order) enriches the temple's symbolic structure, illustrating the dialogical relationship between local wisdom and universal religious expression. The Padmasana thus transcends its material form to function as a living semiotic system – a continuous negotiation between aesthetics and transcendence, between cultural diversity and metaphysical unity.

Ultimately, this study affirms that sacred architecture, when read through the lens of semiotics, can be understood as a dynamic medium of philosophical reflection. The *Padmasana* at Pura Jagatnatha Yogyakarta is not merely an artifact of devotion but a visual articulation of *aisthesis* – a sensory encounter that awakens awareness of the sacred. It embodies the ontological dialogue between beauty and truth, revealing that art, in its highest form, is a path toward the comprehension of divine reality.

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Aisthesis

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Unmasking the Symbolic Meaning of Mask in the Newari Festivals

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Abstract. Unmasking the masks is a way of delivering the message enveloped in the symbols of culture, religions and socialization processes. This phenomenon is very meaningful from the anthropological perspective. For this article, field research was conducted in the Kathmandu Valley purposefully in Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur and Kirtipur Durbar Square on the festivals celebrated and the various cultural and religious performances in the year 2023 and 2024. The theories of Clifford Geertz, Erving Goffman and Herbert Mead are applied in the context of Newari mask dance festivals. The masks used in Newari festivals represent the various cultural and religious features, and these masks are the windows through which we have tried to explore the Newari world. In Newar mask performance, the role of dress and music also play vital role for the performance in totality. The research explores that the masks signify various meanings, and the meanings depend on the colors, shape and size. Specific masks are used for specific gods, goddesses and even for *panca tatwa – prithvi tatwa, bayu tatwa, jala tatwa, akash tatwa,* and *agni tatwa*. Field-based data and information are interpreted by using anthropological methods where ontology, epistemology and methodology are defined shortly using participants' observation, in-depth interviews and various other methods. The study also incorporates the axiological dimension of Newari culture.

Keywords. Newar, festival, mask, performance, *Panca tatwa*.

1. *Introduction*

Society teaches us that our identity is everything and significant every time that we must carefully construct and present it to be valued and grasped. Nonetheless, identity might be hidden or masked, therefore, it is necessary to unmask the mask of the identity that they publicly present. To understand the reality of these social phenomena or social interactions, the concepts of front space and backspace of Erving Goffman are quite relevant. Equally relevant is the theoretical notion of thick description to gauge the depth of reality in the performances of mask culture in Newari festivals. This paper attempts to draw the concept that self-presentation is necessary, arguing that identity is not a means of connection but a form of social control. Drawing on Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and Mead's theory of Self, it examines how impression management enforces comparison, competition, and existential distress. Rather than fostering genuine social cohesion, the constructed self becomes a commodity shaped by Newari culture, reinforcing socialization, social control rather than deviance.

The unmasking process of ritual exposes the hidden objects and symbols intrinsically embedded. Masks turn out to be special interpretative objects, not just decorative objects but powerful symbols that represent a wide range of spiritual and cultural concepts including the connection between life and death, the divine and the human, and the sacred and the secular (Dahal [2020a]). Wearing a mask is seen as a way to connect with unseen realms and give voice to the unspoken, placing the wearer at the intersection of the present and the past, the living and the dead. Masks play a crucial role in Newari rituals and ceremonies, particularly masked dances, where they are worn to invoke deities and connect with the spiritual realm. In Newari, the word for mask (*khvāhpāh*) does not carry the meaning of hiding or distorting reality, but rather emphasizes the mask's role in revealing the essence of the character being embodied. Newari masks are predominantly used to represent deities, both male and female, including those in the form of animals (like Ganesh or Arāha) (Toffin [2014]). They also represent attendants and vehicles of deities, such as peacocks or lions. In Newari culture, masks hold immense religious and cultural significance, playing a vital role in festivals, rituals, and artistic expression. They serve as symbols of deities, spirits, and mythological figures, connecting the community to their heritage and spiritual beliefs. Masks are not merely decorative items; they are believed to be imbued with power and are essential for performances, processions, and rituals.

The art of costume performance has actively responded to the themes of today's social development. As an independent art form, only by strengthening the connection with the body or performer, costume performance can be. In Newar mask performance, the role of dress and music also play vital role for the performance in totality.

In Newari culture, masks are deeply symbolic, embodying deities, attendants, and vehicles like peacocks or lions, often representing deities or mythical figures. They serve as a conduit to the spiritual realm, transporting wearers between the present and the past, the living and the dead (Roy [2015]). Masks are not seen as a disguise, but as a manifestation of the character being embodied, revealing their essence. Masks often represent deities, spirits, and mythological figures from Newari folklore and Hindu-Buddhist traditions. For example, the *lãkhe* mask, a prominent feature in Newari festivals, represents both fearsome and protective aspects of traditional Nepali folklore.

Masks are believed to be imbued with supernatural power and are used to invoke the presence and blessings of the deities they represent. In the *Nava Durga* festival, for instance, masks are regarded as alive and empowered, playing a crucial role in the ritual. Nepali masks are more than just decorative things; they are an important element of Nepal's cultural history and artistic expression (Paulo [2005]). They serve as a conduit between the spiritual and the mundane world, encouraging the passing down of traditions and tales from one generation to the next, inspiring the new generation to preserve the history passed down to them, and making sure they would not be misled in the upcoming time (Dahal [2024a]). These masks are renowned throughout the world, drawing the attention of art collectors and cultural enthusiasts everywhere.

The vibrant mask culture of Nepal is a replication of the nation's artistic creativity, cultural symbols and diverse cultural heritage. The elaborate patterns and deep symbolic meanings of these masks provide insight into Nepal's spiritual past and the artistry of its artisans (Alsop [1976]). Nepali masks are fascinating and inspiring, whether displayed in museums or worn at colorful festivals, keeping Nepal's cultural identity alive.

This study aims to identify the specific colors that are used in the mask for a particular god and goddess, and specifically to represent the particular meanings.

2. *Theory*

When the phrase "thick description" is used in literary and anthropological analysis, it refers to the ethnographic method that employs serious and engaged fieldwork. Moreover, it grasps the social process of the world under study; and the study prepares a detailed and observant ethnography that is utterly persuasive. This central metaphor, of culture as a text, gives the ethnographer something specific to do: to identify symbols that somehow represent the particular social process of that group, and then explain their meaning.

Geertz (1973) transplants the phrase "thick description" that describes the different behaviors and their contrast coined by Ryle (1949). The rapid contracting right eyelids description Ryle calls 'thin.' He uses the term "thick description" to characterize the behavior in detail. The thick description model is interpretative and communicative incorporating questions such as how it was done, why it happened and which social codes. Geertz argues that the kinds of things that anthropologists interpret – rituals, myths, cockfights – are themselves interpretations of the society in which they are found, and so the anthropologist is producing second- and third-order interpretations for a different purpose (Geertz [1973]).

As researcher, I enquired the performers about both physical as well as spiritual significance of masks in Newari culture and festivals. Culture is a semiotic system, so that all representation is, in fact, interdependent. Anthropologists tend to think social behaviors as cultural properties – rituals, festivals, performances; the non-instrumental side of life – are also understood as interpretations of their society, the anthropologist could focus on some practice that on the surface seem trivial or irrational, and use that practice to understand and reflect upon the nature of the social whole (Goffman [1959]). Geertz applies this most famously in his essay on the Balinese cockfight. The cockfight is a seemingly unimportant and irrational piece of Balinese culture in which grown-up men bet money they cannot afford to watch birds kick each other to death in illegal matches (Geertz [1973]). Geertz suggests that Balinese men are gripped by their cockfights because the matches flung away the restrained and polished social hierarchy that otherwise defines Balinese daily life. Through this discussion, this small social practice turns out to be the prism to observe the fundamental features of Balinese society.

Here, I juxtapose the concept of thick description put forward by Geertz (1973) with the performance connoted with mask wearing in the festivals of Newari culture into three different layers. It is logical to ask why these mask performance festivals are celebrated, though participants were not able to understand the significance of the performances. We feel that there are different levels of attainment of meaning among the mask performer (signifier) and participant (signified): pre-preparation – the best and most intelligent with an academic and philosophical bent of mind (backspace as termed by Erving Goffman) and practice in term of Pierre Bourdieu – who instinctively know the symbolic meaning of masks and its impacts in Newari culture. During the performance – the performers who perform the performances (front space as termed by Erving Goffman) are bright, clever, intelligent, educated but not much inclined to abstract thought who transfer the meaning from the signifier to the signified.

In Richard Bauman's (1975) terms, most practice has a decidedly performative aspect, and almost all performances can be interpreted as a form of practice in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu (1990). However, the distinction between practice and performance is analytically helpful in understanding the dynamics of consciousness and objectivity underlying the process of producing identity, piety, harmony, and social order.

Practice refers to the embodied, ritualized actions Newari individuals perform within a collective-internal epistemological framework that mediates between the human and divine worlds through the performance of culture. Performances are ritualized acts performed within a broader discursive context created by socio-religious and psycho-cultural agendas that must materialize in the Newari interpretive world. Newari audiences witness performances to express their solidarity with the community culture. Demonstrations are held in public places to perform for both Newari and other audiences.

Both practices and performances are fundamentally acts of objectification–worldviews and beliefs deeply held in social space and the simultaneous process of producing those worldviews through ritualized action. As sets of rules enacted in a communal space, rituals are, by nature, objectified forms of social action that express human relationships with the sacred. Instead, to use Goffman's (1974) terms, primary frameworks are still frameworks. The practice still requires objectification as does all ritualized action. Festivals and *jatras* alternately and effectively culminate the purpose of Newari cultural performance and practices of everyday life.

The permanent presence of the "sacred object" is the constant binding principle that brings these different types of actions together and requires certain rules of conduct to be ritually set. Richard Handler (2011) closely follows "Emile Durkheim" in suggesting that the sacred object of heritage performance may be the "social self". By applying Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach to the mask culture of the Newari community, we can view Newari social interaction as a performance, similar to a theatrical play, where Newar individuals are like actors playing different roles in their cultural, religious and social settings. This theory focuses on how individuals present themselves and manage the impressions they make on others in their everyday lives (Goffman [1959]).

As front stage, cultural performances and festival celebrations are the public sphere of Newars where each people present themselves to others, often with specific behaviors and appearances designed to convey a certain impression. As backstage, the more private space of Newars where individuals can relax and be their authentic selves, free from the scrutiny of others.

Likewise, post performance – the "small" folk – those who are simple and non-academic, with basic education, who belong to the masses and are not naturally inclined to ignore and disobey and often mistake against the performances, are generally following their instincts without discrimination as in Mead's theory of self. They are prone to superstition and need encouragement and support for their participation as divine work, a sacred role that fosters harmony, cohesion rather than conflict and clash (Mead [1934]).

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model, outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionism both suggest that people exist in a world where they must consciously craft and manage their public persona. This idea implies that individuals are constantly engaged in impression management, carefully curating their behaviour, speech, and even emotions to align with the social scripts imposed upon them.

Society applauds this process, viewing it as necessary for maintaining order, communication, and cooperation. Goffman views impression management not simply as a way of deceiving others, but as an essential method for keeping social life smooth and predictable (Goffman [1959]). It allows people from different backgrounds to coordinate their actions and understand each other. Similarly, Mead believes that identity making through social interaction gives individuals a way to find meaning, build relationships, and create a shared sense of belonging in a complex world.

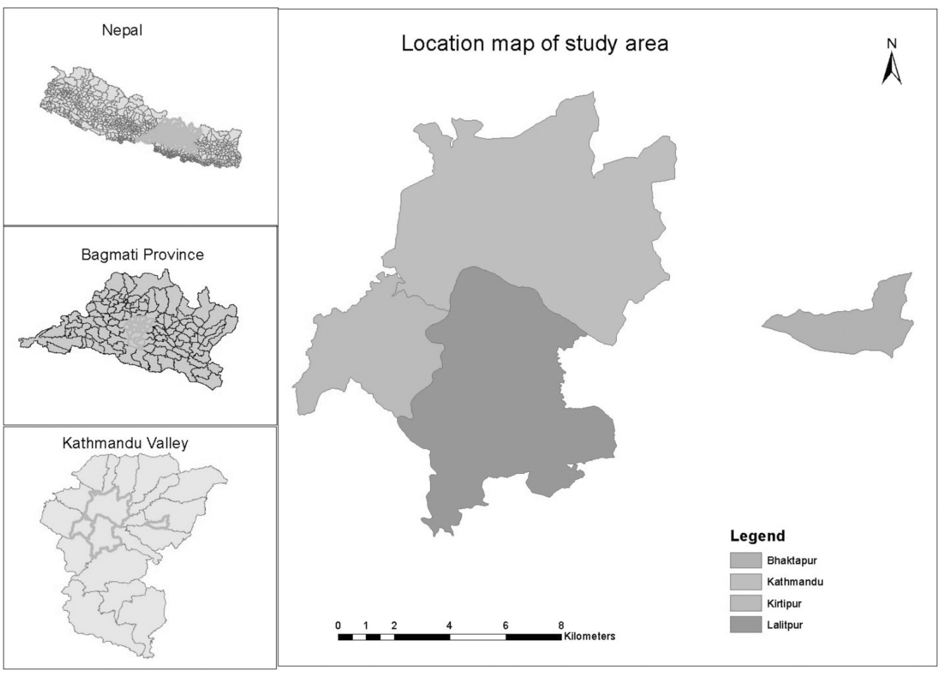
3. *Methodology*

This research is guided by an interpretive paradigm. For accumulating symbolic meaning of the mask culture of Newari festivals, we have interviewed the selected locals with deep and prolonged engagement in the field for the fulfilment of our study objectives. For this, we have spent a considerable amount of time at the research site.

Here, back spaces of mask culture including mask preparations, interrelationship between mask and divine power specific to color, etc. whereas, front spaces – performances, dances, dresses, etc. the concept of Erving Goffman we have tried to define ontologically. The mask-related contents, their interrelationship with *panca tatwa*, gods and goddesses and color specifications are the defined ontology of this study. Therefore, masks, symbols and contents of masks- shape, size, color and mask specific to gods and goddesses are interpreted in the study.

The primary task is to explore symbolic meanings of masks, their connection with festivals and Newari culture in general and to find out the interrelationship with *panca tatwa*, color, specific deities and demons. We have tried to find out the process of worship of specific gods and goddesses in terms of mask, their relations with physical elements (*tatwa*), their specific use and symbolic reflection in the masks and everyday life. The Kathmandu Valley is the study area of this research. We have conducted the fieldwork in Kirtipur, Patan Durbar Square, Bhaktapur Durbar Square and Kathmandu Durbar Square only in specific festivals – *Indra Jatra*, *Gãi Jatra*, *Dashain*, *Gathe Mugha* and so on in the year 2023 and 2024. Our research respondents were mask dancers, mask makers and participants, and we have taken one dancer, one mask maker and one participant of the festival from each cluster of our research areas. Each city consists of different hierarchical respondents purposively selected. Altogether twelve respondents were our primary informants. As per the need to clarify the title and situations, to eliminate the confusion and to verify the data collected from the primary respondents in the study, we consulted the key informants – priests, *guthi* members and seniors.

Since this research is qualitative and has an ethnographic design, observation and in-depth interviews are effective tools and techniques for data collection to carry out my research more effectively. Content analysis, thematic analysis, narrative analysis and discourse analysis methods were used and grounded theories of Ervring Goffman, Clifford Geertz and Mead's theory were selected to visualize the data in practice and performance of mask culture of Newars.



4. *Findings and discussion*

In Newari society, masks serve as a significant symbol that provides embodiment for invisible spirits and deities, often depicted as fantastic composites of humans, animals, or male and female. Some of the masks are found to be of deities, others of demons with symbolic meanings significantly reflecting Newari society and its cultural nuances. Mostly, the masks are of Ganesha, Varaha and their vehicles. Performance-based two categories are found, namely full-dress performances and half-dress performances – *pyãkha* and *ba khawapah* (Toffin [2012]). The former is associated with human, male or female, merchant, priest, animal characters, demons, and spirit characters, in which full masks are used to perform various performances, mimes, dances, and processions, and the stories are often based on mythology and folklore (Lachhi, Prajapati [2006]). Some *pyakha* performances can be humorous. Fools, jesters, or clowns have their masks, which are worn during comic performances. The half masks worn by these comedians are called *ba khawapah* in which the mouth is not covered, so that the dialogue or monologue between the characters in the performance can be spoken.

Nati Babu Maharjan (pseudonym) replied on why Newars celebrate these expensive festivals every year, as "a town called Majippa was troubled by a *lãkhe*. The word l*ãkhe* in Newari refers to a human-flesh-eating demon. In the city, hundreds of young men fell in love with a young woman; and she started dating, in human disguise, with them. The young woman in human disguise was none other than the human-flesh-eating demon. Ultimately, he was caught by the authorities. Instead of punishing him, the king of Majippa offered him impunity and life with his lover if he promised to give up his carnivorous attitude and protect Majippa's children. With the conversation, we found that the *lãkhe* dance performance was the recreational punishment from the king when *jhyãlincã,* a teasing demon, excited *lãkhe* and chased him continuously. This was probably a recreation for one of the many duels that *lãkhe* undertook as part of his treaty with the king. A different version of the myth claims that the lacquered dance was a punishment from the gods for an illicit relationship with a young woman.

Although the dance is unique and traditional, there is no shortage of grandeur in the annual *Indra Jatra*. Regardless of the location and the occasion, *lãkhe* dances are worth watching. The red mask, a work of traditional, meticulous Newari-Tibetan art, is accompanied by a matching red and gold *bhoto* (blouse) and full-length skirt. Dancers also tie red silk handkerchiefs around their fingers to add color and excitement to the dance. With a quick hand movement, these silk handkerchiefs appear as a blur and a red glow.

Lãkhe dance is always accompanied by traditional Newari music. *Lãkhe*'s beautiful and violent gyrations are inspired by the music composed by *dhime* and *bhushya*. *Dhime* is the most common and important Newari musical instrument (Alsop [1976]). It is a double-sided drum with one side wider than the other; the broad end is struck with a stick to make a sound. *Bhushya* is a complementary device, a pair of sashes with a strap to tie around the wrist.

Most of the masks in the Newari tradition are found to be complex in structure, with vibrant, warm, multi-colored designs that often appear decorative.

They are shaped according to the different characters and the masks that depict their nature. The masks are then varnished and painted with great precision and care. Most masks are made of clay mixed with paper and jute (Paulo [2005]). As a rule, they are a mixture of Nepalese paper (made from the inner bark of some plant), clay, jute (sack) and cotton. Even now, there is a tradition of making metal masks in Patan, which is famous for metalwork. Such Himalayan cultural masks are simply constructed, and their design, detail and expression of these elements only reflect or conform to the straightforward and fundamental religious concept of animism.

Mask dance in Newari culture originated to preach religious sermons, but this is not the only thing that happens during these performances. Masked dances describe dramas, which are taken from traditional Hindu literature, with stories and characters that are familiar to people. Newari mask dances are based on local folklore and traditions that are traditionally local. Amidst heavy action and dance, there is plenty of comedy to give some relief to the audience.

Newari masks differ in size, shape, materials used and depictions with colors from Tibetan or Indian. The colors used in the symbols indicate *panca tatwa* (five elements) – *prithvi tatwa*, *jala tatwa*, *bãyu tatwa*, *ãkãsha tatwa* and *agni tatwa*. Both *pyakha* and *khwapa* are great living traditions handed down verbally from one generation to another, with their cultural features.

4.1. *Types and varieties of masks*

Masks, costumes and plays are distinctive and essential features of Newari dramas, performances, plays and dances. Both types of performances are called *pyãkha* in Newari (Alsop [1976]). Usually, they are made by members of the local Chitrakar community (painter caste), which is regarded as of relatively low status (but pure). However, in Patan, the Shakyas (for their annual *ga* or *gana pyãkha*) make and paint their masks, and in Bhaktapur, potters and members of the farming caste have long been making masks.

Masks of Newars mainly represent gods and goddesses including animal-shaped deities (*Ganesha*, *Baraha*), their attendants and their vehicles (peacock, lion and so on.). Certainly, the masks also represent negative power roles – evil, demons, various animals such as monkey, dog, deer, buffalo, pig and elephant (Roy [2015]), and reflect human characters such as priests, merchants, clowns, hunters and women of the *Jyãpu* farming caste. Masks were not the symbols and images of their ancestors, so they do not relate to death rites and funeral ceremonies (Dahal [2024a]). Masks are used in festivals, *jatras* and religious performances.

Buffoons, jesters and tricksters have their masks, which are worn during comic/clown theatre performances. The mask usually covers the whole face, but the half mask, *ba khawapah*, does not touch the mouth, and is familiar and used in comic plays with dialogue (Toffin [2012]). The color of the mask varies according to the figures/deities it embodies.

The color used everywhere in the religious sector is specific and associated with the nature of god, Goddess and their context or role that Hindu mythology has prescribed. Specific colors are assigned for specific gods and goddesses depending upon their nature and the things associated with them. We found yellow color is assigned to Lord Vishnu, god of *prithvi tatwa*, and the green color is assigned to Vishnu for his presence in land, air and sky. Earth sign is represented by the yellow color and sky by blue. Therefore, the presence of Vishnu on the earth and sky means yellow and blue combined to make green and is synonymous with noble and highborn characters. *Bãyu tatwa* (air) is represented by white because air is colorless, and white is linked with the purest and pleasing images of gods and goddesses. Red color signifies *agni tatwa* and represents the temper, and is associated with violent nature, power and strength. Black is the symbol of demons. So, the masks used in Newari culture are found heavily dominated by these philosophies in their iconographical design as *Brahmayani* – yellow, *Vaishnavi* – green, *Ganesha* – white, *Bhairawa* – dark blue, *Kumari* – red and so on. Some variations might take place between cities (Toffin [2014]).

Color is therefore an essential element of visual vocabulary and indicative of the poetry encoded in these mythic motifs. In the Newari traditional masked dance and the use of color in masks, the specific deities are referred to by the color of their masks (Alsop [1976]). It is part of an all-embracing theatrical language, a system of visual cues that includes other areas of performance, such as music, costume and choreography.

The masks of *Ugra* (fearsome gods) are depicted with frightening canines emerging from their mouths. The trunk of the elephant-headed god Ganesha is coiled to the left. With some exceptions, god masks are decorated with a third eye (sight) painted vertically on the forehead (Lachhi, Prajapati [2006]). Indrayani's third eye, however, is drawn horizontally. Most male deities have stylized moustaches and small beards.

Masked dances describe dramas, often derived from mythological Hindu literature, divided into stories, plots, and several episodes. Masks do not speak, except in some comic plays (Toffin [2012]). As a result, there is no negotiation. In some cases, the singers who play the role of narrating the story of the play sit at the edge of the stage. Occasionally, a couple lifts the dancer into the air to illustrate his ability to fly (*khokana sikali pyãkha*).

Newari masked dances are also filled with folklore and more secular (sometimes even comic) elements that fascinate audiences. Since there is a constant transition between cosmic and domestic scales. The fusion of comedy and cosmic features in mask dances is often played out between the scenes. When symbols of Newari masked dances are interpreted, new generations feel happy and accountable to sustain the cultural performances. These performances are a living tradition that has been transmitted from generation to generation.

The mask dancers are mostly Shrestha, Shakya, Bajracharya, Jyapu, Maharjan, Prajapati, Malakar and so on from Newari community and generally following the professions of agriculturists, farmers, potters and painters. All dancers are male, and Chitrakar is responsible to lead the troupe and manage the processions. The masks are regularly repainted or refreshed each year just before the first performance of the dance, and the date is calculated according to the lunar calendar. Masks directly involved in ritual activities are cremated or immersed in a nearby river.

The aesthetic style and value of Newari masks are completely different from northern Tibetan and southern Indian masks of their respective cultures. This style is an outcome of a special combination of natural pigments, masking materials (metal, clay, and *papier mache*), shapes, icon details, metal decorations and perhaps more. We can find the transmission of specific canons between Newari artisans over the centuries.

4.2. *Masks and Divinity*

The masks in Newari culture represent the divine, deities and demons and are mostly used in processions and rituals rather than theatrical performances. The available masks are classified into three categories according to the performers. The first category of masks symbolize the faces of gods and goddesses in ritual dances. The second category of masks is used to decorate the temples or chariots during procession as ritual objects. The third category includes metal masks that reflect the faces of deities as statue-masks.

Nepal boasts a rich tradition of mask-making and usage in religious rituals, folk dances, and cultural performances. These masks, often crafted from wood, felt, or goat skin, represent deities, demons, ancestors, and various characters from Nepalese mythology (Alsop [1976]). While traditional mask making remains a vital part of Nepali culture, modern robotics is emerging as a field with potential for both cultural preservation and innovation in Nepal (Toffin [2014]). All the masks have a ‘third eye’, a mark on the forehead, and headgear. It can be large earrings, a crown, hair nets or a headband. Masks are considered lifeless until ceremonies of consecration and installation are performed.

The symbols of masks related to both divine beings and demons in the context of *panca tatwa* (the five elements) often involve a blend of sacred and profane imagery. Divine figures may be represented with elements like fire (representing passion and purity), water (representing emotions and cleansing), earth (representing stability and grounding), air (representing communication and intellect), and ether (representing space and consciousness) (Toffin [2014]). In contrast, demon symbols often incorporate distorted or inverted forms of these elements, such as fire as destruction, water as a destructive flood, earth as chaos, air as a chaotic storm, and ether as a void or emptiness.

In divine symbolic iconography, fire represents passion, purity, and divine energy and is depicted as a bright, radiant flame or a powerful, purifying force (Doniger O'Flaherty [1988]). Water symbolizes emotions, cleansing, and the life-giving force of nature and is depicted as a calm, flowing river or a powerful, purifying wave (Venkatesan [2021]). Earth represents stability, grounding, and the physical world and is depicted as fertile land or a solid foundation. Air symbolizes communication, intellect, and the ability to move freely and is depicted as gentle breezes or powerful winds. Ether represents space, consciousness, and the divine void, and is depicted as a vast, empty sky or a mystical, limitless space.

In demonic symbols iconography, fire represents destruction, hellfire, and the destructive power of passion and is depicted as a chaotic, raging inferno or a demonic flame. Water symbolizes a destructive flood, chaos, and the loss of emotional control and is depicted as a dark, raging torrent or a powerful, destructive wave (Campbell [2018]). Earth represents chaos, instability, and the decay of the physical world and is depicted as barren land or a crumbling foundation. Air symbolizes a chaotic storm, misinformation, and the disruption of communication and is depicted as a raging wind or a swirling vortex (Campbell [2018]). Ether represents a void, emptiness, and the absence of divine consciousness and is depicted as a dark, infinite void or a chaotic, endless space.

Here, both divine and demonic combined symbols were also found as inverted pentagram, which was a common symbol of the demonic, often depicting a distorted or upside-down pentagram, which was a symbol of protection and harmony in some spiritual traditions (Alsop [1976]). Similarly, demons with horns and wings were the common depiction of demons, incorporating horns (representing aggression and pride) and wings (representing the ability to travel between worlds). The specific symbols and their meanings can vary depending on the culture, tradition, and specific interpretation of the divine and demonic realms. The *panca tatwa* framework provides a foundation for understanding these symbolic representations but the actual imagery and its interpretations can be diverse.

Here, the meticulous, private process of repainting the masks constitutes the "back stage" (Goffman [1959]), where the object is prepared for its sacred role. Once the dancer dons the mask and the spirit "takes over", they enter the "front stage" of the festival, performing a collectively understood version of the divine."

4.3. *Symbolic interpretation of Panca Tatwa and color specification*

Human beings are God's wonderful creation. To provide peace and prosperity God has created nature. The human body is made up of (Panca Tatwa) five elements like – Water, Air, Fire, Earth and Space (Chapple [1998]). In Hindu diction, happiness, success, prosperity and peace will prevail if there is balance in *Panca Tatwa*. The chakra of the universe revolves in *Panca Tatwa*. Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh Tridev work together on this.

Essentially, *Panca Tatwa* is a beautiful Sanskrit word that means five elements (Panca = Five + Tatwa = elements). It is often referred to Akash (Sky or Space), Vayu (Air), Jal (Water), Agni (Fire) and Prithvi (Earth) in ancient texts.

Hindu religious philosophy is based on the energy transfer concepts of *dharma, karma, bhakti*, incarnation, salvation and rebirth, and there are two sects, divine and demon, as *panca tatwa* – *panca deva* and *panca bhuta*. Here, we have tried to transplant these concepts to the uses of masks and their specific colors with significances.

4.3.1. *Vãyu Tatwa*

In Hindu tradition, *bãyu tatwa*, which signifies air or wind, is associated with the god *Vãyu*. *Vãyu* is also known as *Pavana*, and he is considered the god of the winds, as well as the divine messenger of the gods (Venkatesan [2021]). He is closely associated with Indra (the king of the gods, associated with rain and storms (Chakravarti [1991]), as well as with the color blue. It is also linked to the color black, sometimes representing the dark, dynamic nature of the wind and is also praised as *prãna* or the "life breath of the world" in the *Upanishads*.

Vãyu, the god of the wind, is directly associated with *vãyu tatwa*. He is often depicted with a white or blue complexion, representing the sky and wind (Kinsley [1993]). Indra, the king of the gods, is another figure closely linked to the wind element, especially in its stormy and powerful manifestations. His association with rain and storms connects him to the wind's role in weather patterns (Dahal [2024a]). The great masks and the *lãkhe* on *Indra Jatra* are performed to worship the *vãyu tatwa* or god Indra for rain, prosperity and progress because of an agro-based economy and fertility in the Kathmandu Valley.

Significantly, *vãyu tatwa* (air as awareness), which can also be linked to space and atmosphere is a powerful life source that is important to sustain life. Only when we are alive can we feel our Body, Mind and Intelligence (Sherman [2000]). That Aliveness is known as Awareness. Without Awareness, we are dead. It is the Awareness that enlivens all three, the Body, Mind and Intelligence. Like the air is needed for the fire to burn, Awareness is needed for the fire of intelligence to propel the functioning of the Mind and the Body.

According to ancient Vedic science, the awareness we perceive as vitality is the subtlest energy form. As water vapour condenses to form liquid water and finally solidifies as ice, awareness-energy condenses to form the liquid mind and solid body (Sherman [2000]). The total sum of consciousness, intelligence, mind and body is called energy. Modern quantum physics concludes that the physical world (matter) is just condensed energy.

Depending on the context, other colors like white, gold, and red may also be associated with *vãyu*, especially when his anger or energy is emphasized.

4.3.2. *Jala Tatwa*

Water is the source of life – and it flows within all of us. 70% of the Earth is water and so is the human body. Do our senses perceive the physical world? No, there is something subtler than the body that is involved in perception. The physical eye may be looking at an object, but if we are not mentally attached to the physical body, there is no perception of that object. So it is the mind that brings reality to the body or material world (Chapple [1998]). There is no body without a mind. This is what we experience when we are asleep or unconscious due to brain injury or anaesthesia. So it is the mind that gives reality to the body.

However, this mind is not solid like the Body. The mind can change rapidly and flow or alternate between various sense perceptions. The mind can also flow backwards in time and leap forward in time. Because of this fluid nature, the ancients attributed the Mind to the water element (Chakravarti [1991]). The Vedic Scholars say that like the fluid water solidifies into a solid block of ice, the Body is nothing but the solidified energy of the mind. The mind is represented by the ring finger. A wedding is the symbol of the joining of two minds and hence a wedding ring is worn on the "Mind" finger!

In Hinduism, the water element (*jala tatwa*) is strongly associated with several deities, particularly Vishnu and his *avatars* (Venkatesan [2021]), and the color blue. These deities are often depicted with a blue complexion, symbolizing the vastness and coolness of the sea and the sky, as well as their tranquil and protective nature (Doniger O'Flaherty [1975]). Other deities and colors associated with *jala tatwa* include *Lakshmi* (pink), *Saraswati* (yellow), and *Matangi* (emerald green).

Mostly blue color represents *jala tatwa*, reflecting their association with water and a cool, tranquil nature (Kak [2000]) and these colors are used in the everyday life of Newars. Blue color is found original or main color received from nature, represents *Shiva, Vishnu, Saraswati,* associated with the *jala tatwa*.

4.3.3. *Ãkãsh Tatwa*

In Hinduism, *ãkãsh* (ether or space) is one of the five fundamental elements (*panca mahã bhutas*). It does not directly correspond to a specific deity in the same way that other elements do (like *agni*/fire with *Agni*, *vãyu*/air with *Vãyu*, and so on) (Venkatesan [2021]). However, *ãkãsh* is often associated with the god of the sky, *Ãkãsh Bhairawa*, and the color blue.

The sky as consciousness is the vast open space that accommodates everything. The clear blue sky above us acts as a shelter to the earth in the day, while at night it serves as a gateway to the starry galaxies that exist light years ahead of us (Chapple [2001]).

Consciousness is being aware without being aware of the intellect, mind and body. In other words, consciousness is unconditioned awareness (without form). Nothing can happen without consciousness. In consciousness, living, dead, moving, immovable, tiny, everything exists. As all things in space, all existence comes to be due to "consciousness" (Sherman [2000]). Hence the ancients associated consciousness with the space element. Just like the thumb is necessary for all other fingers to function, nothing can exist and function without consciousness. Hence consciousness is marked as the thumb.

In Hindu philosophy, *Ãkãsh* represents the subtle, primordial state where all things have their origin. It is the space without which matter cannot exist, the potential for all things (Dimmitt, van. Buitenen [2012]). *Ãkãsh Bhairawa* is a deity associated with the sky and is considered a protector of the universe and a progenitor of the Maharjan caste among Newars in Nepal.

The color blue is frequently associated with *Ãkãsh Bhairawa*, possibly because of the sky's color. Additionally, *Ãkãsh Bhairawa* is often depicted with a large blue head (Toffin [2014]). While *Ãkãsh Bhairawa* is a prominent figure, *ãkãsh* is not directly attached to a specific goddess. The other four elements (*agni*/fire, *vãyu*/air, *jala*/water, and *prithvi*/earth), each have deities associated with them, but *ãkãsh* is more of a foundational principle.

4.3.4. *Prithvi Tatwa*

Body as Earth is solid – has soil, landscapes, flora and fauna. With its tremendous magnetic field and gravitational force, it holds every living and non-living thing on Earth. From birth, we try to perceive everything in this world in a physical "form" or body (Chapple [1998]). By using the word "I" we also refer to our physical body. The same happens when we look at the outer world, recognizing all forms of physical entities. We cannot relate to anything without a physical "body" or structure. Even those things that we cannot see with our senses, we try to objectify as images through our imagination. So our world is only filled with objects, bodies, entities and images. We connect with the outside world through the senses of our body. The five sense organs are the ears, skin, eyes, tongue and nose which help to perceive the five physical qualities of this universe, sound, touch, sight, taste and smell. In essence, we owe our existence to our physical bodies. This is why the ancients referred to the body as the earth element, because our life is on the earth. Anything gross, solid, and inert, is anciently called body or earth. This earth is depicted as the little finger of the hand.

In Hinduism, *prithvi tatwa* (earth element) is associated with the goddess *Prithvi* (also known as *Bhumi* or *Dharani*). *Prithvi* is the Mother Goddess representing the Earth and its nurturing nature (Venkatesan [2021]). She is also associated with the color yellow or gold.

Goddess *Prithvi* is a prominent goddess in Hinduism, embodying the earth as a nurturing and fertile entity (Venkatesan [2021]). Certain deities, like the planetary god for Saturn (*Shani*), are also connected to *Prithvi*, being viewed as her child. *Prithvi* is associated with stability, strength, and grounding energy, which are important aspects of the Earth's role in *vãstu shãstra* (Collins [1988]). The *bija mantra* related to *prithvi tatwa* is *Kshamã* (Venkatesan [2021]). The color yellow or golden is often associated with *prithvi*, symbolizing her nurturing and fertile nature. The yellow color is associated with the god *Vishnu*.

4.3.5. *Agni Tatwa*

Agni, the Hindu god of fire, is associated with the *agni tatwa*, signifying the element of fire. The color specifically associated with *agni* is saffron or a mix of red and yellow, symbolizing the radiant flames of fire (Chaturvedi [2002]). *Agni* is also known as *Agni Deva* and is depicted with two faces, representing fire as a life-giver and a life-taker. The *agni tatwa*, or fire element, is one of the five basic elements in Hindu philosophy.

Agni, the god of fire, is a central deity in Vedic and Hindu mythology, associated with purification, sacrifice, and the sun. The color saffron, a mix of red and yellow, is a key symbol of *agni*, representing the fiery essence of fire. *Agni* is also associated with light, energy, enthusiasm, order, and passion. In Hindu traditions, *agni* is believed to reside in the household fireplace, the heart, and the universe, taking on different forms (Venkatesan [2021]).

Agni is often depicted with three or seven tongues; two faces, and is associated with a ram, reflecting his role as a life-giver and life-taker. He is also known as a messenger between the gods and mortals, carrying sacrificial offerings and messages to the gods.

Fire as intelligence is the source of energy and light. Light is important for making the beauty of the world visible to all of us – in all its radiant colors. The sensory signals received by the body-sense-organs are perceived or translated as thoughts. Each thought refers to an object or image and we generate an infinite number of such thoughts (Singh [2010]). The constant flux of thoughts is called the mind. Interestingly, the thoughts are streamlined into a logical information pattern by a subtler aspect called Intelligence or Buddhi.

Newari culture features a rich tradition of mask making and use, with historical evidence showing their significance in religious rituals, dramatic performances, and social gatherings (Toffin [2012]). Newars artistically connote the religious performances, their knowledge about environments (*panca tatwa*), divine deities, demons and direct and indirect associations with the everyday life of Newars that bridge the spiritual world with the physical world to maintain the social order and mechanism of controls. Masks are often used to represent deities, demons, and other mythical figures, playing a crucial role in expressing and preserving Newari beliefs and customs (Toffin [2014]).

Masks are used to represent deities, both male and female, including gods in the form of animals like *Ganesha*. Masks are integral to religious rituals, especially those performed during festivals like *Indra Jatra*, where *lãkhes* (demons) dance among the gods, and *Bhairab Jatra*, where the *Bhairab nãch* is performed (Toffin [2014]). *Lakhes*, who are depicted as demons in Newari tradition, are believed to have been forest-dwellers who later became protectors of the townspeople.

Lakhes are a prominent figure in Newari culture, often appearing in the *lãkhe* dance, a theatrical performance that combines drama, music, and dance (Alsop [1976]). Besides *lãkhes*, other mythological figures like the *khyāh* (a fat, hairy ape-like creature) are also represented in Newari mask performances.

Masks are a part of elaborate costumes worn by performers, often accompanied by ornate jewellery, bells, and other accessories. The masks themselves carry symbolic meaning, often representing the essence of the character being embodied (Tateyama [2016]). Masked performances are a way for the Newari community to express their identity and culture, displaying their rich traditions and beliefs. Masks are made from various materials, including wood, clay, cloth, and metal (Toffin [2014]). The process of making masks involves traditional knowledge passed down through generations. The making of masks often involves rituals and ceremonies, emphasizes their sacred nature. In essence, the mask culture in Newari society is a vibrant and complex tradition that reflects the community's deep-rooted beliefs, customs, and artistic expression.

4.4. *Mask and thick descriptions of the Newar world*

Mask culture in Newar festival is an events, context, performances within which social phenomena (whether these belong to the micro-, meso-, or macro-spheres of Newar cultural existence) can "be intelligibly–that is, thickly–described" (Geertz [1973]). The question of whether such a (cultural) context is familiar or unfamiliar to those experiencing and/or studying it is crucial. The old cliché that anthropology is all about making the familiar strange and the strange familiar persists to this day. This laudable mission, however, is transferable to other academic disciplines.

From a semiotic point of view, the backspace of making mask, illusion, embodies that Newari culture functions properly as an anonymous force or power, working – paradoxically, "through social elements or bodies" and "behind itself" – in a causal fashion and determining every moment of being Newar. Not only by describe the mask of Newari culture as omnipresent and omnipotent, but it is also able to explain the material, social and personal dimensions of Newari cultural existence of mask culture, color uses, relationship with *panca tatwa* and their significance. Human actions and interactions are inevitably power-laden, they are not always power-driven (Geertz [1973]). All social practices are power- and culture-transmitted, but not all are power- and culture-induced (Susan [2018]) and the culture of the mask symbolizes in the Newar world is symbolically powerful, but not found powerful symbol. Interpretation of mask culture in the Newar world is not merely a cognitive mechanism (subject to the laws of logic, validity, or rationality) but also an experiential and existential journey (contingent on different degrees of recognition, relevance, and resonance).

From Geertz's perspective, the significance of mask culture in the Newar world tried to explore the interrelations between – counterproductive divisions-bottom-up vs top-down, hermeneutic vs systemic, concrete vs abstract, micro vs macro and so forth. The individual vs social (communal), material vs moral, thin (microscopic) description vs thick description owing to its embeddedness in everyday Newar life, has the potential significance in ordering, integrating and uniting Newar society despite various conflicts and cleavages.

From the perspective or the lenses of costume and performance, mask culture of Newar signify how colors, materials, and movements of dancers symbolize the specific deities, demons or abstract concepts within their belief system. Both performers and audiences understood that the masks and costumes are not just decorative but are ritually charged and are often consecrated before use. Similarly, it is found that how these visual elements-music, dances, dress-are passed down through generations during festivals, preserving the Newari cultural heritage.

4.5. *Mask tradition as practice and mask performance*

Bourdieu illustrates this by referring to the way Newar mask audience and participants in all Newar festival, rally, mass procession and festivals including mask performance that Newar society imitate gestures and mimicry, music, performances and dances, and how perception schemes and social structures are thereby passed "from Newar practice to practice of Newar".

The condition to understand the communicative intentions of Newar society through such performances in integrity is becoming similar to performer by participants or children (Wulf [2017]). By imitating parents' gestures and symbols, the children "familiarize" with their parents in a process of "similarisation" or "approximation" (Wulf [2017]).

Mask traditions, deeply rooted in cultures worldwide, serve diverse purposes as both practices and performances. In this regard, I like to note the practice theory of Bourdieu that provides a framework for understanding the interplay between Newar social structures and Newar individual actions through the festivals, performances, dress and dancers with masks. The images that emphasise the Newar individuals and their roles, characters and status are both shaped by and help to shape the Newar social world through their practices, which are influenced by their "habitus" and operate within specific "fields". In mask performance and practice key concepts various embodied dispositions of Newar practices, values, traditions and norms (habitus), and performance or field (social space with its own rules and socio-cultural significance), and social harmony, integration, cooperation etc. (events, process and phenomena that can be converted into social capital identity, unity as power).

With the help of Bourdieu's theory, Newar social structures are both the product of past practices and the conditions for future practices. Individuals, with their habitus, navigate the social world and engage in practices that both reproduce and potentially transform existing social structures. This dynamic interplay between structure and agency is central to Bourdieu's practice theory which Newars are continuing I found the course of study on the significance of mask culture among Newars. So, Newars are not only obligated to follow the social life as prescribed by their rules, traditions and norms but it is not simply a matter of individuals following predetermined rules, but rather a dynamic process where individuals actively engage with and shape their Newar social world through their Newar practices, guided by their habitus and operating within specific fields.

They can conceal identity, reveal the supernatural, facilitate ritual, and enhance storytelling through theatrical performance. Masks act as a bridge between the human and spirit realms, allowing for the representation of deities, ancestors, and mythical beings. In theatrical contexts, masks transform actors, enabling them to embody different characters and explore a wider range of emotions. From the perspective of Bauman, mask culture and dance performance act as the events through which many aesthetic, linguistic values, norms and beliefs that transferred from the old generation to the new as a mechanism of linguistic socialization.

Mask traditions are cultural practices where masks hold deep symbolic meaning and are used in rituals, ceremonies, and social events, often connecting the wearer to the spiritual realm (Sing, 2025). Mask performance, on the other hand, refers to the use of masks in dramatic or artistic presentations, where the mask enhances character portrayal and storytelling. Essentially, mask traditions are about cultural significance and spiritual connection, while mask performance is about theatrical expression. So, both Bourdieu and Bauman's common place of argument is that masks tradition or practice and mask performance ultimately unite Newar people, continue or follow their practice to perform social functions.

Here, one of the specific characteristics of communicative interaction through the size, color of the masks which include a range of explicit or implicit messages which carry instructions on how to interpret the other message(s) being communicated (Bauman [1977]). The theoretical underpinnings of this article can be found in the work of Erving Goffman such as *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman [1959]) and its application to professions; Bourdieu's (Bourdieu [1984]) concepts of practice, habitus and field in reproductive norms in social organizations including occupations; and concepts of performance, and embodiment from Richard Bauman. Except these, new technology, innovation, market are also major determining factors for changing and developing new pattern of costume and performances (Osmond *et al*. [2025]) and it is evident from the field study that their studies visualize the changing patterns of dress uses in the Newar festivals including Newar performances. These scholars help explain the changing social conditions of the Newar festival through mask performance, the formation and maintenance of identity in their lives, and their social organisation. They theorise the external manifestations of the mask, preparatory mask, (backspace Goffman), performance frontspace (Goffman and Bauman) and the notion of unity, harmony, socialization, and entertainment as a performance were found great significance which is without Geertz's thick description cannot possible to understood.

Goffman wrote, «The actor may take rest or relaxation from work and activities may leave ahead and become speechless and disengaged from role or out of character». In Goffman's terms, face represents the "mask" in a figurative sense in layman's terms in common expression as the "mask" or "the face of someone". But as we consider the compulsion of the literal mask, one assumes the value of the literal face. It can be amazing at the way subtle differences in the angle of the mask shape, size, color, or say structures like eyebrows–or the curve of the lips, the nostrils, the set of the jaw–can convey completely different emotions.

4.6. *Festivals, masks and dress*

4.6.1. *Mask of Bhairawa*

In Nepal, Newars wear *Bhairawa* masks during festivals to honor the terrifying yet protective deity, who is considered the wrathful aspect of *Shiva*. The masks often depicted with fierce facial expressions, three bulging eyes, and jewel-studded diadems represent the deity's power and presence (Roy [2015]). Devotees may seek blessings, receive consecrated drinks, and participate in ceremonies where the mask is central to the ritual.

Bhairawa is a significant figure in Newari culture, often viewed as a protector against negative energies and evil spirits (in fig. 1). The masks play a key role in various Newari festivals like *Indra Jatra* and *Gãi Jãtrã*, where they are displayed, worshipped, and used in dances and processions.

«What about the wooden mask market?», researcher asked to the shopkeeper, who has been in the business for about ten years, sitting in his shop, surrounded by masks of all kinds, responded, «Our speciality is skin masks – they are made up of buffalo skin». His handicrafts shop located at the heart of Thamel retails different types of masks such as wooden, skin and metal. The mask makers are not only the artists, but they are locals and encompass deep knowledge of Newari arts and cultures along with the power of masks and their religious and cultural significance.

Masks used in ritual dances are made of materials such as *papier mache* or wood plastered with clay and linen and painted in vibrant colors. So, such masks never get old as they cannot survive for long in such weather. Some of the masks are destroyed after use and remade the following year. The oldest Nepali mask dates back to the Seventeenth century (Toffin [2012]). The divine power and deities represented by the mask are numerous: *Shiva, Bhairawa, Ganesha, Kumari, Varahi*, *Durga*, *Lakshmi*, *Sima* and *Duma*, these last two being the popular names of lion and tiger (Kropf [2003]). Some people interpret these two masks as a pair, the white-faced *Sima* being male; others consider them two goddesses.

4.6.2. *Masks of Devis (Goddesses)*

Masks of *deities*, or goddesses, in Hinduism and related traditions, are symbolic representations of divine feminine energy and are often associated with specific deities (Alsop [1976]). They are worn during religious rituals, ceremonies, and festivals, or displayed, as sacred objects in temples and homes (Dahal [2020a]). The masks are intricately designed and often incorporate elements of the deity's attributes and symbolism.

The living goddess *Kumari*, believed to be an incarnation of the Hindu goddess *Taleju Bhawani*, is represented in masks. These masks are often made from materials like wood, and they are painted with vibrant colors, and are displayed in temples and homes (Dahal [2024a]). *Durga*, the powerful goddess known for her strength and protection, is also depicted in masks. These masks often showcase her ferocious aspects, with features like a third eye and multiple arms. Tara, the divine queen mother, is represented in masks that depict her in a meditative state, symbolizing her spiritual prowess (Dahal *et al*. [2025]). Masks of various other *deities*, such as *Lakshm*i, are also found in different parts of both India and Nepal.

4.6.3. *Mask of Nava Durga*

The *Nava Durga* mask (in fig. 2) dances include mostly *asta mãtrikã* (eight divine mothers – *Brahmani, Maheshwari, Kaumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi, Indrani, Chamunda*, and *Mahalakshmi*) plus four male deities (*Shiva*, *Kãla Bhairaw*a, *Sweta Bhairawa*, *Ganesha*) with *Tripura Sundari*. The goddess *Mahalakshmi* is not found incarnated in terms of masks dances and her incarnation in *kalasha* (silver vessel) in a small wooden chariot is performed due to the most powerful goddess.

Mahalakshmi, in Newari, is known as *Sifa Dyah* (no doubt the oleander goddess after the name of the red flowers adorning her image), is worshipped by onlookers and mask bearers. *Mahakali* is represented as a corpse with emaciated flesh, deep-set eyes and facial bones protruding through the skin. The dancer group or troupe also include a pair of female patron deities, called *Sinhini* or *Sima* (lion-faced) and *Baghini* or *Baghrini* or *Duma* (tiger-faced). It is inextricably associated with a number of lion and tiger Newari masked dances. They come in a street procession made up of the first and last mask bearers respectively before dancing. *Singhini* is usually yellow and *Baghini* white, but the latter is red or orange in color. In the study area, the white-faced *Sima* is often thought to be male.

4.6.4. *Masks of Demons in Newari Culture*

In Newari culture, masks are a significant part of religious and dramatic performances, often depicting both deities and demonic figures. The *lãkhe* or demon is a prominent figure, with his mask being a distinctive element of the *lãkhe* tradition. These masks, known as *khawpa* in the Newari community, are believed to embody the spirit of the *lãkhe*.

Lãkhe masks are typically large and red, with prominent, sometimes bawdy eyes. They are often made of papier-mâché, with yak tails used for hair. The *lãkhe* is a figure of both fear and reverence, considered a protector of the townspeople. Every Newari community has its own unique *lãkhe* tradition. The *lãkhe* is often featured in the *Indra Jatra* festival.

4.6.5. *Other Newari masks*

Newari masks also represent various deities, both masculine and feminine, including those in animal form like *Ganesh*. Simple cloth masks with eye holes are also common, as seen in Bhaktapur. Some masks as the ones applied in the *Nava Durga* ceremony, are believed to be alive and empowered with supernatural forces. Golden-colored masks, like those used in the *lãkhe* dance, can be an example.

4.6.6. *Mask of Khyãh*

In Newari mythology, *khyãhs* are humanoid, ape-like creatures with a strong presence in children's stories and sacred dance dramas. They are believed to be guardians of the home, particularly in attics and dark stores, and are often depicted attending to *Lakshmi,* the goddess of wealth. *Khyãhs* can be of both benevolent and malevolent types: white *khyãhs* symbolizing good fortune and black *khyãhs* representing bad luck.

Khyãhs are typically depicted as fat, hairy, and short, with ape-like features. White *khyãhs* are believed to bring good luck and prosperity, while black *khyãhs* are associated with bad luck and problems. They are said to dwell in attics and dark stores, and to be afraid of electric lighting. *Khyãhs* are supposed to be protectors of the house, family, and harbingers of good fortune. Images of *khyãhs* are also placed at temples as the guardians of the shrine. They appear as supporting characters in sacred dance dramas, like the *khyãh pyākhan*. They are depicted as attending to *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth, and are often shown guarding bags of coins. In some versions, *khyãhs* are depicted as tricksters who play pranks on humans, though usually harmless.

Khyãhs are popular figures in children's stories within Newari society. They are a part of Newari animism traditions, where they are revered and treated as deities. The *khyãka pyãkha* dance, which depicts the *khyãhs*' powers and struggles, is performed during Newari festivals.

4.6.7. *Dresses in Newari performances*

Dresses in Newari performances primarily feature the Haku Patasi, a traditional black cotton sari with a red border, worn by women. For men, the term Kalli refers to a traditional outfit. These garments are donned for various festive and religious occasions, symbolizing Newar unique identity and cultural heritage. Newari masks and costumes are central to their traditional festivals (Jatras), transforming dancers into deities, demons, and spirits through vibrant performances.

The body or performer is not only of specific physiological significance, but also of cultural and social significance. The behaviors and skills of the body are learned and shaped in society, and should become the expression of social interaction and social identity (Mauss [1973]). Physical skills are not only the product of individual behavior, but also the expression of social power and symbology (Mauss [1934]).

The process of dress performance is also a process of creating beauty, which has certain requirements for everyone's aesthetic foundation and abilities. In a costume performance, the beauty seen by the audience not only improves their artistic beauty, but also enhances their ability to understand clothing, art, culture and performances (Xie, Ge [2024]).

Body social constructivism believes that the body or the performer is a product of social and cultural forces. It emphasizes that the body is shaped and defined through social and cultural norms and expectations, and that bodily experiences and identities are constructed within a social and cultural context (Zhang [2018]). In general, the body is based on the unity of mind and body, with characteristics such as integrity, perception, and subjectivity (Behuniak [2019]).

Regarding the presentation forms of textile performance, they mainly include conceptual elements such as lines, colors, shapes, sounds, and rhymes (Shi [2019]). Its importance lies in its own conceptual structures. An aesthetic object is a unity of sensibility and meaning (Xie, Ge [2024]).

Therefore, when designing clothing, one can put forward creativity and aesthetic value to respect the dignity of the person and create a good environment for clothing design (Xie, Ge [2024]). In the concept of physical existentialism, the body is the basis of emotions, and people feel and express emotions through the body (Ma [2019]). In Newar mask performance there was perfect dress code for performers and audience were previously ruled to wear cultural dress code but now a day it is going to weaken.

4.7. *Significance of mask culture in Newari festivals*

Masks hold significant cultural and religious importance within Newari society in Kathmandu, serving as vital components of festivals, rituals, and performances. They represent deities, demons, and other characters, reflecting both the Hindu and Buddhist spiritual beliefs of the community. Beyond their practical use, masks also have an aesthetic dimension, adding to the visual and sensory experience of events.

Rituals, encompassing social practices and festive events, play a crucial role in maintaining and organizing social order. They serve to reinforce social norms, build shared meanings, and provide a sense of collective identity, particularly in the face of uncertainty or social change.

Masks in Newari culture are not just decorative; they are deeply rooted in religious and spiritual significance, representing deities, spirits, and even profane characters during festivals and ceremonies. They serve as a conduit between the human and divine worlds, acting as a focal point for devotion, ritual, and entertainment.

Newari masks often depict deities, both male and female, including animals like *Ganesha*, and demons like *lãkhe*. They embody the power and presence of the divine in the form of the masks. Masks are integral to masked dances and other rituals performed during festivals. These dances are believed to invoke the deities' presence and bring blessings to the community. Festivals and masked dances serve as a space for communal bonding and celebration. They bring people together to participate in shared rituals and expressions of faith and culture.

Masks are not merely visual representations; they carry symbolic meaning as well. The colors, patterns, and features of the masks can convey specific attributes of the deities or characters they represent. When a dancer wears a mask, they transform into the deity or character they represent. This act of role-playing allows for a deeper connection to the spiritual realm and a means of storytelling through dance. The specific masks and dances associated with different festivals vary across the Kathmandu Valley and other Newari settlements, reflecting regional variations in religious traditions and cultural practices.

Rituals often embody and reinforce established social values, beliefs, and behaviors. For instance, marriage ceremonies, funeral rites, or seasonal festivals can demonstrate and reinforce the accepted norms surrounding family structures, death rituals, or community relationships. Rituals can provide a shared experience that unites participants, fostering a sense of belonging and common purpose. Recurrent rituals help build shared meanings, generate solidarity, and reinforce them through social engagement.

In times of social disruption or uncertainty, rituals can offer a sense of stability and provide a framework for navigating new situations. They can act as a buffer against anxiety and help individuals adapt to changing social landscapes. This symbolic representation can contribute to the maintenance of the existing social order or, conversely, be used to challenge or transform it. In an increasingly complex world, rituals can offer individuals a sense of meaning, purpose, and connection to something larger than themselves. This can contribute to the stability and well-being of individuals and the social fabric as a whole.

4.8. *Religious significance of color in Newari culture*

In Newari culture, colors hold significant religious and symbolic meaning. Red, particularly the *alla*, is associated with purity, auspiciousness, and feminine beauty, used in rituals and adornment. Five colors are perceived as natural colors and the rest as mixed colors. So natural color signifies the various meanings in Newari cultural usage, but specific colors in masks, among the five colours, represent the masks that belong to deities or divine and demons.

In various cultures, colors and symbols play a significant role in masks, communicating character traits, social status, and even supernatural significance. For example, red in Chinese opera masks often symbolizes loyalty and bravery, while white may indicate treachery or duplicity. Similarly, blue, green, and yellow can represent different aspects of a character's personality or role in a story.

4.9. *Masks as transformative objects*

Masks are believed to possess protective powers, warding off evil spirits and bringing good luck. They are often worn in processions and rituals to bless the community and ensure well-being. Masks, in various cultures and contexts, serve as powerful transformative objects, enabling individuals to transcend their everyday identities and embody different roles, spirits, or even supernatural beings. These objects can facilitate transitions into new realms, reveal hidden aspects of the self, and connect individuals to deeper cultural or spiritual narratives.

Masks are essential tools in theatrical productions, allowing actors to embody diverse characters and convey complex emotions. Artists across various movements and expressions have explored the transformative power of masks, using them to question identity, reality, and social norms. Contemporary artists continue to engage with masks, using them to explore themes of identity, self-optimisation, and the blurring lines between the real and virtual realms. Newar masks are not merely decorative items; they are powerful objects that facilitate transformation, connecting individuals to different aspects of themselves, their culture, and the Newar social world around them.

5. *Conclusion*

In Newari culture, masks in festivals symbolize the embodiment of deities, both divine and demonic, and are integral to ritual practices and performances. They represent a connection between the human and supernatural realms, acting as a bridge for performers to embody specific deities or characters. The mask is not merely a costume; it is a sacred object, which grants the wearer access to a different realm. Methodologically, we have discussed briefly the major methods that guided us to conduct the research in an organized way. We have presented the strategy for how we chose the research topic, research site, and participants who supported us by providing valuable data and information that helped in answering our research questions. We have briefly described the tools and technology used for data collection and the data analysis and interpretation process.

From the research, we conclude that the masks signify various meanings and the meanings depend on the colors, shape and size. Similarly, specific masks are used for specific gods and goddess. Moreover, colors used in the masks represent the *panca tatwa – prithvi tatwa, bayu tatwa, jala tatwa, ãkãsh tatwa* and *agni tatwa* described in the Hindu mythology. In course of the study, we gathered literature related to the masks in Newari culture by using anthropological methods in which we have briefly defined ontology, epistemology and methodology using participants' observation, in-depth interviews and various other methods.

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Fig. 1. Bhairawa Mask

Fig. 2. Nava Durga Mask

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Nostalgia Made Material: The Social Life of Retro Crafts in Postcolonial Java*

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Abstract. This study explores how retro craft objects in postcolonial Java materialize collective nostalgia through their social life across domestic and public spaces, with Surakarta and Yogyakarta serving as key ethnographic sites. Through material culture analysis and ethnographic fieldwork, we reveal how these once-neglected artifacts gain

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renewed cultural legitimacy through two interconnected processes: first, as vehicles for personal and communal nostalgia that aesthetically transform living spaces through references to Java's craft heritage; second, through institutional "retrotification" where art establishments consecrate these objects as valuable cultural capital. The research demonstrates how these retro crafts operate as tangible mediators of memory, bridging colonial-era craftsmanship with contemporary identity formation while reflecting postcolonial society's negotiation of modernity through material culture. Their circulation between private homes (as markers of individual taste) and public venues (as statements of collective heritage) underscores their dual role in Java's nostalgia economy, with local art institutions acting as crucial legitimizing agents that transform obsolete items into aesthetic commodities. This work contributes to material culture studies by theorizing retrotification as an institutional practice, to postcolonial urbanism through its spatial analysis of nostalgia economies, and to heritage studies by documenting vernacular preservation outside formal state frameworks.

Keywords. Material nostalgia, retro crafts, postcolonial heritage, spatial practice, cultural consecration, and java.

1. *Introduction*

In postcolonial Java, a unique cultural phenomenon has emerged in which retro craft objects are revitalized as material manifestations of nostalgia, deeply embedded within both individual and collective memory (Guffey [2006]: 24). This resurgence of traditional Javanese crafts, ranging from architectural elements such as *joglo* and *limasan* houses to *gebyog* room dividers, has transformed them into more than just functional objects. They have become deliberate aesthetic statements, reflecting contemporary efforts to reconnect with Java's artisanal heritage (Mieke *et al*., [1999]: VII). Cities like Surakarta and Yogyakarta have seen this shift not only in domestic spaces but also in public realms, where traditional batik attire is worn at formal events and old buildings are repurposed to accommodate modern businesses while preserving their historical facades (Batcho [1998]: 430).

This revival illustrates a dynamic interplay between past and present: buffalo cage materials are now used as garage fences, antique furniture lines urban sidewalks, and vintage-style streetlights light up modern thoroughfares (Nikelly [2004]: 192). These retro craft objects, while retaining their practical utility, also serve as powerful symbols of cultural continuity, mediating the ongoing negotiation between memory and modernity in a rapidly evolving society (Davis [1979]: 73). Through a process we call "retrotification", what were once overlooked remnants of the past have been reimagined as legitimate cultural artifacts, recognized for their aesthetic and historical value by cultural institutions and market forces alike (Fort-Rioche, Ackermann [2013]: 497).

This study explores how these retro craft objects function within postcolonial Java, examining their circulation in domestic decoration, urban design, and sartorial practices (Alexander, Bowler [2021]: 3). We investigate how they embody and express postcolonial identity, fostering a sense of continuity with Java's rich artisanal past while simultaneously addressing the demands of modern life. By examining these material objects, we aim to understand the complex relationship between nostalgia, memory, and social identity in contemporary Indonesia (Cross [2015]: 5).

2. *Literature review*

The concept of *retro* has evolved into a significant cultural phenomenon, acting as a bridge between the past and the present through material objects. Often defined as "old style", "ancient", or "classic" (Guffey [2006]), retro transcends mere aesthetic preference to embody a cultural tendency toward preserving and reinterpreting historical styles (Doll [2012]). This phenomenon, which traces its roots back to the revival of Art Nouveau in the 1960s (Guffey [2006]), has since permeated various aspects of contemporary life, including fashion, design, architecture, and popular culture (Harris [2015]; Weiss [2013]). In the Javanese context, retro craft objects serve as powerful material representations of nostalgia, evolving from functional items into symbols of cultural identity and historical continuity.

Retro craft objects, as man-made artifacts (Rissati [2007]), include traditional Javanese creations such as textiles, wood carvings, ceramics, and furniture (Boden [2000]). These objects gain cultural significance through three primary modes of production: reproduction (exact replicas of historical designs), reinterpretation (adapted versions of traditional forms), and creation (new works inspired by historical aesthetics) (Fort-Rioche, Ackermann [2013]). What distinguishes Javanese retro crafts is their dual role: they maintain practical utility while simultaneously serving as material anchors for collective memory (Jenß [2004]). This dual function is particularly amplified in postcolonial Java, where retro crafts act as sites of negotiation for modern identity, blending traditional forms with contemporary cultural expressions.

The theoretical framework of this study builds on the concept of "retrotification" – a process through which previously neglected craft objects gain new cultural legitimacy (Doll [2012]; Reynolds [2011]). In postcolonial Java, retro crafts serve as tangible connections to pre-colonial heritage while adapting to the aesthetic demands of modern society. The process of retrotification reveals how these objects become re-contextualized within contemporary cultural and socio-political frameworks, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity. Through the social life of these objects (Appadurai [1986]), we see how material culture plays a central role in mediating the tensions between historical preservation and modern reinvention, particularly in urban centers like Surakarta and Yogyakarta. Here, traditional crafts are reimagined and incorporated into both domestic and public spaces, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of postcolonial identity.

In postcolonial Indonesia, specifically in Java, retro crafts have come to symbolize not only aesthetic revival but also the reclamation of cultural heritage in the face of colonial history and modernization. The interplay of memory, nostalgia, and materiality within the production and circulation of retro crafts demonstrates how objects become active agents in the construction of postcolonial cultural narratives.

3. *Research method*

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate the social, cultural, and material dimensions of retro crafts in contemporary Java. The focus of the research is on how retro craft objects function as both material and symbolic representations of nostalgia, memory, and postcolonial identity. The research method combines ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and material culture analysis, all situated within Java's postcolonial context.

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in key cultural hubs such as Yogyakarta, Surakarta, and Jepara, where retro craft production centers, antique markets, and retro-themed businesses are concentrated. This fieldwork allowed for direct observation of the practices and processes involved in the creation, distribution, and consumption of retro crafts. Observations focused on both domestic and public spaces, exploring how retro crafts are incorporated into Javanese households, as well as how they are used in public spaces to shape collective memory and cultural identity (Baumann [2007]: 49).

In addition to fieldwork, in-depth interviews were conducted with various stakeholders in the retro craft ecosystem, including local artisans, craft producers, antique market vendors, aesthetic entrepreneurs, and consumers. These interviews provided insight into how these individuals engage with retro crafts as material embodiments of cultural continuity and identity in postcolonial Java (Alexander, Bowler [2021]: 3). Special attention was given to understanding how retro crafts are perceived as markers of nostalgia and memory, as well as their evolving role in contemporary Javanese society.

Material culture analysis was another crucial method employed in this research. Retro craft objects – such as furniture, ceramics, textiles, and metalwork – were analyzed for their design features and material composition. This analysis aimed to uncover how these objects mediate the materialization of cultural memory and the transformation of historical styles into contemporary forms of expression (Guffey [2006]: 15). The visual analysis was extended to both private and public spaces, focusing on the role of retro crafts in beautifying domestic interiors and public spaces, such as offices, streets, and markets (Cross [2015]: 11).

The study also contextualized the phenomenon of retro crafts within the broader historical and cultural framework of Java's postcolonial history. By considering the legacy of colonialism on craft production and the subsequent reimagination of Javanese cultural heritage, the research explores how contemporary society repurposes traditional crafts as expressions of modern identity, shaped by the socio-political forces of the postcolonial era (Niemeyer [2014]: 3).

By employing these complementary research methods – fieldwork, interviews, material culture analysis, and historical contextualization – the study provides a comprehensive view of the social life of retro crafts in postcolonial Java, revealing their dual function as both practical objects and potent symbols of memory, identity, and cultural continuity.

Results

In postcolonial Java, retro craft objects are increasingly integrated into both private and public spaces, creating a distinct aesthetic trend. This phenomenon, known as authentication (Welsch [1996]: 2, 7), transforms everyday objects into cultural symbols. Rooted in nostalgia, retro crafts materialize past cultural references into tangible items that carry memory and identity, reflecting the complexity of postcolonial identity (Neumark [2003]: 43; Cahill [2003]: 43). These objects bridge modernity with historical past, serving as aesthetic statements.

Beautification, as an artistic process aimed at evoking aesthetic responses (Brielmann *et al*., [2021]: 1), is not just about beauty but also about engaging with the past and reshaping collective identity. Retro crafts become tools for negotiating postcolonial identity, allowing individuals and communities to assert cultural continuity while adapting to contemporary realities. These objects, found in both domestic spaces and public areas, maintain practicality while symbolizing nostalgia and memory (Neumark [2013]: 238).

In Java, retro craft objects like ceramics, batik, wood carvings, and vintage-style furniture are recontextualized in modern settings, demonstrating retrotification (Doll [2012]). This process revives traditional craft objects to serve both functional and symbolic purposes in contemporary Java (Reynolds [2011]). For example, traditional wooden furniture is incorporated into modern homes and public spaces, while batik is used in both formal and casual wear, evoking cultural pride and signaling postcolonial identity.

The social life of retro crafts is shaped by local artisans, antique markets, and aesthetic entrepreneurs. As Baumann (2007: 49) and Alexander and Bowler (2021: 3) note, the production, distribution, and consumption of these objects are influenced by a broader social context. Artisans in cultural centers like Yogyakarta and Surakarta produce retro crafts through reproduction, reinterpretation, and creation. Antique markets and repair hubs, found in both urban and rural areas, play key roles in circulating these objects, fostering connections between the past and present.

The appeal of retro crafts extends beyond the elite, resonating with the broader public. Retro objects often symbolize cultural literacy and serve as identity markers in a rapidly changing society (Baumann [2007]: 52-53; Alexander, Bowler, [2021]: 3). In postcolonial Java, retro crafts mediate between historical memory and modern identity, offering a space for cultural preservation and transformation.

5. *Materializing nostalgia: Retro crafts in domestic spaces*

In postcolonial Java, domestic spaces serve as arenas for negotiating identity, memory, and cultural heritage (Ureta [2007]: 314). Objects like furniture, textiles, and decor act as material representations of the past, with retro crafts playing a key role in bridging the gap between past and present. These objects are more than functional; they contribute to memory-making and create a nostalgic atmosphere.

Beautification in domestic spaces goes beyond decoration, involving the reimagining of past objects to reflect personal and cultural histories. Retro crafts, such as old-style furniture and ceramics, symbolize continuity with the past and are adapted within the home to reflect both personal taste and broader cultural narratives (Neumark [2013]: 238). For example, house fences and doors, often repurposed from traditional materials, become markers of personal and collective histories, embodying the owner's memories and aspirations (Omar *et al*. [2012]: 329). These retro craft objects transform domestic spaces into places that reflect cultural identity, nostalgia, and personal engagement with history.

Inside the home, retro craft objects like old furniture, tables, and lamps become more than functional items; they evoke memories and create an atmosphere that reflects both individual and collective postcolonial identity (Hurdley [2013]: 81; Neumark [2013]: 245). In postcolonial Java, retro crafts are integral to beautifying and personalizing domestic spaces, acting as tangible links to cultural heritage and identity. Their placement reflects a process of self-expression, cultural reclamation, and the negotiation of personal and cultural identity (Money [2007]: 367; Woodward [2001]: 121). In this way, retro crafts transform domestic spaces into sites of memory and nostalgia, embodying the ongoing dialogue between the colonial past and the present desire for cultural continuity and transformation.

Figure 1. House Entrance. The House of Dr. Ranang Agung Sugiharto, S.Pd., M.Sn., 2021.
Photo by Guntur.

Figure 2: Workspace. The House of Fatmawati, M.Sn., Surakarta, 2022.
Photo by Taufik Murtono.

6. *Nostalgic artifacts in public spaces: Retro crafts and cultural identity*

Beautification extends beyond private spaces into public urban renewal projects, aiming to restructure public spaces like parks and streets to create a sense of community (Neumark [2013]: 238). In postcolonial Java, urban beautification efforts in cities such as Yogyakarta and Surakarta integrate retro crafts to materialize nostalgia and reflect cultural identity (Azis, Ahmad [2012]: 275). These objects – such as street furniture, ceramics, and statues – serve as cultural symbols, linking the past and present while reinforcing the city's cultural identity (Espuche *et al*. [1991]: 149; Stewart *et al*. [2019]: 200).

The streets of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, for instance, feature ornamental stone paving, Javanese script, and traditional motifs that embody the region's heritage. These retro crafts are recontextualized in modern urban settings to foster a tangible connection to the past, reflecting an ongoing cultural negotiation (Munro [1966]: 92). Objects like teakwood chairs, carved street lamps, and figurative statues evoke nostalgia, marking the artistic traditions that shaped the region's identity (Hurdley [2013]: 81).

Public spaces such as parks, food stalls, and coffee shops further materialize nostalgia by incorporating retro craft objects. In Yogyakarta and Surakarta, the transformation of traditional homes into restaurants uses items like *cobek* (stone grinding plates) and *kuwali* (cooking pans) to evoke past culinary traditions, enriching the cultural experience (Routledge *et al*. [2013]: 45). Similarly, coffee shops use retro furniture and decor to create a nostalgic atmosphere, allowing customers to connect with Java's material culture while reinforcing cultural identity and psychological well-being (Neumark [2013]: 245).

Figure 3: Beautification of City Street in Yogyakarta. Malioboro Street, Yogyakarta, 2022.
Photo by Wahyu Novianto.

Figure 4. Restaurant Exterior. Gedhang Kepok Resto, Karanganyar, 2022.
Photo by Taufik Murtono.

7. *Nostalgia and memory in retro crafts: Anchoring postcolonial identity through material culture*

The retro phenomenon is deeply tied to nostalgia and memory, which serve as anchors in connecting individuals to their cultural heritage (Guffey [2006]: 24). In postcolonial Java, retro crafts materialize nostalgia, offering tangible continuity and identity through the preservation and reinterpretation of past cultural artifacts (Nikelly [2004]: 192; Plate, Smelik [2009]: 6). These objects, imbued with historical and emotional significance, foster a connection to important moments and cultural narratives, reshaping memory within everyday life (Alexander, Bowler [2021]; Batcho [1998]).

Nostalgia, which stems from the Greek words for "return home" and "longing" (Sielke [2019]: 5), acts as a powerful force in preserving cultural identity, especially in postcolonial contexts. It offers emotional comfort and a sense of belonging, deepening the connection to one's heritage (Batcho [1998]: 430). Retro crafts, as materialized nostalgia, serve as cultural capital, embedding past aesthetic experiences into daily life and facilitating the negotiation of identity and social life in postcolonial Java (Davis [1979]: 73; Sielke [2019]: 8).

The concept of retrotification (Niemeyer [2014]: 13; Pickering, Keightley [2014]: 91) explains how retro crafts preserve and reinterpret past cultural forms through repetition, reinterpretation, and creation. These processes allow retro crafts to merge past and contemporary aesthetics, offering a symbolic connection to the past while adapting to modern contexts (Fort-Rioche, Ackermann [2013]: 497). Nostalgia, therefore, is not only a longing for the past but also a defense mechanism in postcolonial identity formation, providing continuity and protection against modern changes (May [2016]: 4-5).

In postcolonial Java, retro crafts are tied to cultural memory–both personal and collective. They embody the memory of colonial history, with objects like souvenirs, antiques, and family heirlooms contributing to shared history and identity (Jenss [2015]: 1; Sturken [1997]: 9). These objects, serving as memory technologies, interpret and reinterpret history in societies where cultural legacies are contested (Brown *et al*. [2003]: 19; Kwint *et al*. [1999]: 2). Retro crafts, as living memories, become symbols of cultural resilience, preserving and transforming the past to create a meaningful present.

Figure 6. Converted Traditional Mortar. The House of Fatmawati, M.Sn., Surakarta, 2022.
Photo by Taufik Murtono.

8. *Artistic legitimacy and the social life of retro crafts in postcolonial Java*

The legitimacy of retro crafts in postcolonial Java is shaped by the socio-cultural context, where traditional and colonial legacies continue to influence cultural identity (Baumann [2007]: 57). In postcolonial societies, legitimacy emerges through a complex interplay of discourse, ideology, and institutional frameworks, reflecting societal values that are often contested or redefined after colonialism (Hadjinicolaou [1978]: 94; Baumann [2007]: 58).

In Java, retro crafts gain legitimacy not just through production and consumption but by how they are framed in public discourse. These objects, embodying nostalgia and cultural continuity, align with societal values that either embrace or challenge colonial aesthetics (Johnson *et al*. [2006]: 57; Suchman [1995]: 574). Retro crafts, once marginalized, are now reasserted as expressions of Javanese identity, resisting colonial legacies and fostering local pride (Alexander, Bowler [2021]). The legitimacy process is dynamic, with retro crafts slowly gaining recognition as an integral part of Java's evolving artistic landscape (Baumann [2007]: 48).

Achieving artistic legitimacy involves more than material resources or institutional support; it requires reframing retro crafts within the context of local values, historical continuity, and resistance to colonial influence (Baumann [2007]: 49). This reframing allows retro crafts to be repositioned as symbols of cultural resilience and vitality. Baumann (2007) highlights three key factors for legitimacy: opportunities, resources, and discourse. In postcolonial Java, these factors help retro crafts navigate the tension between traditional Javanese forms and foreign influences, transforming them into symbols of social life and redefining Java's artistic identity (Baumann [2007]: 51-52). In conclusion, the social life of retro crafts in Java involves constant negotiation and reinvention. These crafts, once deemed outdated, are now reimagined as powerful cultural expressions that embody nostalgia and resilience, contributing to the postcolonial artistic landscape.

9. *The retro craft industry and its social life in postcolonial Java*

The retro craft industry in postcolonial Java is shaped by memory, nostalgia, and cultural identity, materializing the past through crafts that evoke both personal and collective memories. Retro crafts draw inspiration from the past as an alternative to innovation, helping Java reconnect with its pre-colonial identity and cultural roots often suppressed during colonialism (Guffey [2006]: 15; Castellano *et al*. [2013]: 385). These crafts are not mere commodities but are imbued with symbolic and postcolonial meaning (Fort-Rioche, Ackermann [2013]: 497).

This industry is fueled by a blend of cultural heritage, nostalgia, and a desire for revival, helping Java assert pride and resilience in the face of modernization (Castellano *et al*. [2013]). Retro crafts serve as tangible links to Java's diverse cultural and historical memories, reconnecting the present with the past (Reynolds [2011]).

Retro craft objects are produced in various craft centers like Kasongan, Plered, Laweyan, and Jepara, where traditional craftsmanship blends with modern retro design influences (Baumann [2007]: 54-55). These areas become hubs for creating objects that reimagine cultural forms through modernity, producing artifacts that maintain cultural significance and historical memory.

The legitimacy of these crafts is shaped by both material resources, like art institutions and equipment, and non-material resources, such as labor and prestige. Retro crafts are supported by markets and cultural entrepreneurs, including antique shops and repairmen, who restore and transform retro objects for contemporary consumption, ensuring their cultural relevance (Baumann [2007]: 54-55).

The consumption of retro crafts in Java reflects both elite taste and popular culture, with these objects seen as symbols of cultural literacy and postcolonial identity (Alexander & Bowler [2021]: 3). The elite's engagement with retro crafts elevates these objects to legitimate artistic forms, ensuring their continued relevance and social significance in both local and global contexts.

10. *Conclusion*

Based on the discussions above, it can be concluded that the past is an inseparable component of both present and future life in postcolonial Java. The past, particularly in the context of retro crafts, serves as a repository of nostalgia and memory, continuously accessible and adaptable to enrich the present while simultaneously shaping future cultural and social identities. This connection to the past is not just a personal or individual experience, but a collective one that links Javanese communities to their heritage and postcolonial struggles.

Nostalgia and memory function as powerful driving forces of aesthetic enhancement, influencing both private domestic spaces and public domains. These elements are reanimated through retro craft objects, which evoke and revive past emotions and memories. Within domestic spaces, objects like furniture, decorative items, and artifacts become material manifestations of memory – helping to anchor personal and family identities to a shared cultural past. In public spaces, such as marketplaces, offices, streets, and shops, retro crafts serve as tools of aesthetic expression and social cohesion, reinforcing Javanese cultural identity while also adapting to modern, postcolonial life.

Retro crafts gain legitimacy as a form of art due to their tangible presence in contemporary life, not only in private homes but also in public environments that intersect with daily life. The legitimacy of these crafts is supported by the craft industry, which produces these objects through processes of reproduction, reinterpretation, and creation. However, their legitimacy is also bolstered by a network of cultural actors – markets, traders, aesthetic entrepreneurs, and craft repairmen – who act as both distributors and custodians of the retro craft industry. These actors contribute to the social life of retro crafts, ensuring their continued relevance and accessibility to a broad community, while simultaneously preserving cultural memory and engaging in postcolonial identity construction.

In this way, retro crafts do not merely serve as aesthetic objects; they are social agents that engage with memory, nostalgia, and identity. They help bridge the gap between past and present, reviving cultural continuity and facilitating a deeper understanding of postcolonial Java's complex heritage. Through their materialization, retro crafts embody the resilience of Javanese identity, transforming nostalgia from a mere emotional longing into a material force that shapes both personal and collective experiences.

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Note e recensioni

Aisthesis

Hubert Locher, *Kunsttheorie. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, 2023, München, C.H. Beck, 592 pp., 58€, ISBN 978 3 406 80011 5

Hubert Locher has published a comprehensive volume on art theory, *Kunsttheorie*. The book was originally conceived as a concise introduction to the subject. The text's approximately 450 pages attest to the profound transformation the project underwent during a decade of study, research, and writing (cf. pp. 453-454); yet, this expansion has by no means diminished its introductory function. Locher has successfully modulated his writing to accommodate multiple readings: the book can thus guide students interested in the topic, but it is also accessible to a general public, and can be profitably used by specialists. Furthermore, this introduction to art theory and its more than 2,500-year history contains, in light of numerous ongoing debates, more than a hint of critical edge.

Firstly, some contours must be outlined. Art theory is approached primarily from a European (and partly North American) perspective, with clear thematic selections (cf. pp. 429-433). These intertwine with the historical developments of art theory but also impose precise choices: a quick glance at the index already reveals that the material becomes increasingly extensive the closer we get to the present day. It is useful to start here because it reflects Locher's understanding of art theory.

The book's main thesis is probably that there is no art without art theory, nor art theory without art. This assertion may seem obvious, but it immediately gains more traction if we consider certain references to reception aesthetics and the specification of what "theory" means here. Locher is, in fact, interested in models of reflective writing on art, which pose the question of what art is (more or less implicitly) – and which, simultaneously, do this with specific relevance for the understanding of a work, or a series of works. This very broad spectrum, yet determined by its close connection to artistic practice, can be summarised by reference to Julius von Schlosser's definition of "art literature" (*Kunstliteratur*, cf. pp. 27-28). It can thus include (to give an idea of the types of discourse addressed) aesthetics and the philosophy of art, as well as art history and *Kunstwissenschaft*, art criticism, artists' writings, and certain institutional discursive practices that might not immediately be recognised as theoretical: for instance, art academies and exhibitions (the latter especially in the contemporary age) assume a significant role in the history of art theory.

Indeed, it is a characteristic of that dual relationship that if theory needs art – as object and as concept – art, in the same way, needs theory to such an extent that it cannot exist without it: "art […] depends on the intellectual participation of the spectator. It therefore requires a theory, it presupposes a theory" (p. 10). Locher thus seems to generalise on a theoretical plane an aspect of reception aesthetics (only one of the many approaches considered, it must be re-emphasised) which he introduces into the body of the historical exposition by making reference, among others, to Umberto Eco and the open work (cf. pp. 397-398). This must be read against the book's background: its objective is not merely to offer a historical-analytical exposition, but to propose a theory of art (cf. p. 10). In the same pages where reception aesthetics appears, the author also stresses that this approach can also be valid for the case of painting, at least insofar as a painting can be "'read,' in a metaphorical sense" (p. 399). This passage also allows to highlight that Locher's primary interest lies in visual art and, more particularly, though not exclusively, in painting. This interest may also explain the keen attention paid to a case of theory particularly close to practice – art criticism, which appears repeatedly throughout the investigation and seems almost to constitute a possible nexus between artistic practice, history, and theory (cf. p. 207).

Historical analysis and systematic impetus become increasingly intertwined as we approach the present day. Locher thus identifies and articulates significant thematic constellations, concretely demonstrating how the practice of art literature implies not only the theoretical level but also demands going beyond disciplinary boundaries. One example appears in the twelfth chapter: after touching on Benjamin and Malraux, Locher traces the emergence of the question of the definition of the "work" in Heidegger's essay on the origin of the work of art. Critically reading Schapiro's response, he introduces Derrida's and Gadamer's intervention into the developing debate, before returning to the field of art studies or, more precisely, image studies (especially in the German-speaking world) in the era of the pictorial turn. He thus illustrates possible pathways in which the history of the practice of art literature intertwines with the history of art theory, and contributes to the formulation, if not of an explicit systematic theory, at least of some significant emphases.

However, the closer we get to our own perspective (and Locher also touches on very recent debates, such as those sparked by *documenta 15*), the less clear it seems to find guidance on what "theory" and, above all, "art" should be. In some respects, the art theory whose history is traced in the book might appear completely anachronistic: not only due to internal developments within disciplines concerned with art, but especially due to increasingly profound changes in study perspectives. Faced with questions arising, for example, from post-colonial or gender studies, what does this form of art theory have to say? A first solution comes from revisiting Locher's proposed definition: if art theory is a reflective form of writing on art, it does not truly disappear from the contemporary landscape, even if it undergoes radical transformation. And there is more: he shows how attempts to transgress the "canon" sometimes employ categories drawn precisely from the history (of theory) of art from which they would wish to distance themselves (cf. pp. 429-452). But what is ever more called into question is the very idea that something like "art," itself a Western and determined concept, exists; or, at the very least, that it still makes sense to speak of "art" in the face of artifacts originating from other historical and cultural contexts or, perhaps, even from the Western one.

While it is not a matter of 'defending' or 'propagating' a Western concept of "art," nor of diagnosing its "end" (cf. p. 11) – let alone proposing a canon for its theory – Locher addresses the problem by returning to certain features of what might be called his theory of art. However much one might try to do without it, art appears inevitable in its capacity to establish a space for dialogue and questions. Not so much – and here there is more than a hint of critical edge – in that it becomes an explicit vehicle for a theory, or for political or other content; but in that artists create art with consciously chosen (sensory) means, and it is in the consideration of the specific power of images that discussions on other planes can develop. The book's strength lies in the questions it manages to raise about the theories historically traversed, and about their interconnections. It is therefore appropriate that it concludes with a reiteration of its central (open) question: "the sensible experience [of art] is surprising, it encourages thought and contradiction, it invites participation and reflective observation – this means it also encourages theory or, more simply put, reflection on what art is" (p. 452). And it prompts the reader to do so, as the history traced by Locher exemplarily shows, across disciplines.

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About the Author:

Hubert Locher is since 2008 Professor of the History and Theory of Visual Media at Philipps-Universität Marburg, where he also directs the Deutsches Dokumentationszentrum für Kunstgeschichte – Bildarchiv Foto Marburg. In 2019, he was elected a member of the Academia Europaea. His research interests include early modern and contemporary art literature and theory, debates concerning the relationship between image and word from the early modern period onwards, and reception aesthetics and history. On these topics, he has edited books and critical anthologies and authored monographs such as *Kunstgeschichte als historische Theorie der Kunst 1750-1950* (Munich: Fink, 2001; 2nd revised edition 2010).

(Davide Mogetta)

Nicola Perullo, *Aesthetics without Objects and Subjects: Relational Thinking for Global Challenges*, Bloomsbury Academic, 184 pp., ISBN 978-1-3504-9691-0

The notion of relation has become a dominant – some might say overemphasized – theme in contemporary philosophy. This can reasonably be attributed to the clarity with which the consequences of the Western project, long supported by a specific system of thought, are now unmistakably evident. Pinpointing the historical origin and evolution of this degenerative process – at least in its ecological and socio-political aspects – remains a difficult task, and one that has troubled and divided philosophers for decades. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to say that at least since the post-Cartesian modern age, a strong epistemological impulse has taken hold – one that fractured the world into a knowing subject and an external *res extensa* to be cognitively mastered.

Nicola Perullo's latest work, *Aesthetics Without Objects and Subjects: Relational Thinking for Global Challenges*, aims to sidestep – not simply overcome – this dichotomy. "Sidestep" is indeed the more accurate word here, for if the book were merely replacing dualist metaphysics with a relational one, it could end up being a reiteration of a pattern long familiar to philosophy. Perullo, however, does not seek merely to interrupt the dualist dogmatic slumber by advocating a processual, becoming-oriented paradigm. From the outset, the text rejects any theory that does not remain aware of its own contingent emergence *from* and its vital entanglement *with* what it seeks to describe. As Perullo writes: "I cannot escape self-mockery as the death knell of any theoretical systematization." Yet, to ward off simplistic accusations of irrationalism, he adds: "This does not mean avoiding the effort of concepts, the friction of thought, the frustration of the unfinished, the dramatic nature of a condition. But we have a profound saying in the city I come from, which expresses like a koan everything I wish to convey: 'credici, ma non ti ci fissa'. *Believe it, but don't fixate on it*" (p. 25). This proverbial expression – at once light and profound – functions almost as a transcendental condition from which Perullo's project must be read. To say that the real is relational, as the book repeatedly affirms, is not to claim that this is more true, in an absolute sense, than saying it is dual. These are instead "different orders of experience, various planes of different perceptual densities" (p. 31). The point, then, is not to deny duality as such, but to refuse its ontologization – the move that reifies dualism as metaphysical ground.What makes Perullo's proposal radical – aligning him with process philosophers like James, Bergson, and Whitehead – is its refusal to exempt any premise from the dynamic of relation. Every assertion must circulate within the processual field, dissolving claims to absolute grounding. This leads us, as Perullo argues via a reading of Wittgenstein (filtered through the influence of Aldo Giorgio Gargani, one of his masters) into a kind of *regressus ad infinitum*: "Now, the bedrock is not the unconditioned final cause, the unjustified, absolute foundation […], but the infinite regress of the groundless relational process" (p. 70).

The direction Perullo's work takes is twofold, as he himself explains: "On the one side, relationality describes the nature of the aesthetic; on the other side it expresses a particular disposition to perceive accordingly" (p. 13). Firstly, AWOS presents a conceptual approach to reality that challenges existing frameworks such as OOO (Object Oriented Ontology) or speculative realism, without ever taking itself too seriously, as is clearly shown by the playful use of acronyms like AWOS and PROO! (Process Oriented Ontogenesis, with the exclamation mark adding emphasis on the action) which carry a subtle irony *à la* Derrida. However, AWOS is also a call to perceive differently – a shift with political implications, so long as we resist a too strict separation between perception and thought. As Dewey once noted, the power of aesthetics lies in holding together these two movements – thinking and feeling – and in this sense, aesthetic experience becomes not merely a discipline but a way of philosophizing. Indeed, the modal emphasis of AWOS is among its most compelling traits. William James once wrote that "philosophies paint pictures" suggesting that every conceptual system also implies a tone, a mood, a perceptual gesture. Philosophy, then, becomes akin to artistic creation. Perullo – taking seriously Wittgenstein's dry remark, "Do you think I have a theory?" – does not value AWOS solely for its content, but for its capacity to creatively recombine disparate strands of thought (Wittgenstein, Nāgārjuna, Ingold, among others). This recombination is not only a means of crafting a more "true" alternative to speculative realism (though "true" should be understood in a pragmatist sense), but also a way of articulating a "divergent perceptual gesture that can respond to global needs and challenges that are before us today" (p. 1). Perullo insists that the ecological crisis is also, and perhaps primarily, a perceptual crisis: "Dualism has to do not just with land consumption, resource exploitation, and atmospheric pollution, but also with perceptual consumption, emotional exploitation, consumerism, individualism, and image pollution" (p. 11).

The book is structured in five chapters. The first introduces the ecological crisis and seeks to unveil its conceptual and perceptual underpinnings. Perullo argues that foundational assumptions of Western philosophy – such as the search for ontological grounding or the compartmentalization of knowledge – have become so crystallized that they impede the development of a genuinely ecological thinking. In their place, he proposes a radical eco-aesthetic paradigm rooted in a "syncretism without method." Chapter two, arguably the densest, introduces the crucial notion of "planes of reality," using different descriptions of a stone by physicist Carlo Rovelli and anthropologist Tim Ingold. Here, Perullo engages with the relational turn in quantum theory, not as scientific validation of his framework, but as a striking example of the failure of a thinking that treats its own conceptual tools as ontological features of reality. This chapter also develops a central concept: consciousness – not as subjective interiority, but, following James and Deleuze, as an immanent field of *withness* that precedes (albeit not chronologically) any separation. Chapter three directly engages thinkers such as Timothy Morton and Quentin Meillassoux. While Perullo shares certain premises with these figures, he diverges sharply on key points, clarifying his position through contrast. Particularly memorable is his remark: "Merely objectifying subjects does not diminish our anthropo-hierarchy, as it perpetuates a Ferris wheel within the grand amusement park of ontology" (p. 64). From this critique arises the need for further radicalization, rejecting post-humanism in favor of the idea of a *condominium*, moving from "intentional agency" to "attentive agencing," and even toward a non-dualist rethinking of animism. Chapter four addresses a longstanding interest of Perullo: haptic perception. The haptic is not merely a sensory register but the tool through which he enacts a perceptual shift from objects and subjects to processes. At the beginning of his work, he describes the haptic as "another way of naming the aesthetic relation" (p. 17). But it is precisely in its departure from conventional aesthetics – understood as the evaluative process of a subject-governed experience – that the originality of the haptic lies. If aesthetics has been reduced to a knowledge apparatus under subjective control then, Perullo provocatively suggests, "we could easily live without aesthetics today" (p. 116). In contrast, haptic aesthetics functions as a "call of consciousness" – consciousness understood not as an egoic position but as a task within the field of relational withness. The final chapter, "Artisanal Intelligence," reflects on craftsmanship and quality – concepts that Perullo opposes to the dualistic cult of innovation. This holds true both in artistic practice and philosophical work. Perhaps the book's richest and most open chapter, it hints at the future trajectories of the project: from aesthetic education "in a minor key" to the cultivation of a "haptic wisdom, aesthetic life." It is not accidental that the last of the book's sixty-six short chapters returns to the aesthetic, nor that the title invokes "Aesthetics" rather than a more generic "Philosophy Without Objects and Subjects." To read AWOS only within the confines of disciplinary aesthetics is to miss its broader ambition. Aesthetics, for Perullo, is the modality through which philosophy might be saved from the triumph of *sophia* over *philia* – from a thought that reflects on the real while forgetting its co-emergence with it. Repairing this rift – which, although provisional and instrumental like every conceptual creation, has nonetheless taken on extremely convincing ontological appearances – is the task of the haptic as a call of consciousness. In this sense, AWOS offers an affordance, a compass, a way not to lose ourselves in the grand amusement park of ontology – always knowing, of course, that we are never truly found, and that the wandering will never end. Yet, must we go.

(Pietro Bertino)

Bertrand Prévost, *L'élégance animale*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2025, pp. 176, ISBN : 978-2-7073-6545-1.

«Se gli animali ci riguardano nella nostra umanità, non è certo perché con loro condivideremmo una comune natura di esseri viventi, ma piuttosto perché in loro si avvolge un mondo, un cosmo che insieme ci accoglie nelle sue pieghe e ci resta estraneo». Così si conclude il volume l'*Élégance animale* di Bertrand Prévost, edito dalle Éditions de Minuit di Parigi (2025). Un elemento centrale delle tesi sviluppate dall'autore consiste infatti nel mettere in luce il legame tra cosmetica e cosmologia, allo scopo di ripensare le forme animali superando la prospettiva utilitaristica del darwinismo. In questa prospettiva, un argomento ricorrente nei diversi capitoli della pubblicazione è quello del *camouflage* e dei processi mimetici adottati dagli animali in natura: dal tradizionale esempio del camaleonte, le cui squame cornee mutano colore per adattarsi al cromatismo ambientale, fino ai casi più specifici delle meduse trasparenti o alle complesse danze di accoppiamento di diverse specie di uccelli. Sono fenomeni, questi, grazie ai quali gli animali sfuggono agli sguardi, contraddicendo così i tradizionali meccanismi adattativi della selezione naturale per obbedire a un altro principio, «che in realtà non è affatto meno essenziale per la sopravvivenza della specie».

La domanda sorge allora spontanea: in che senso si dovrebbe parlare di *eleganza* per descrivere i piumaggi e le pelli animali ? Queste forme dipendono da un mero principio estetico comune, o producono anche un nuovo modo per pensare la soggettività e l'espressività animali ? L'argomento cardine sviluppato da Prévost potrebbe essere formulato nei seguenti termini: i *modes d'apparence*, ovvero le informazioni esteriori che gli animali comunicano attraverso le loro apparenze, dipendono da una specifica *cosmetica animale*. La potenza espressiva di questa cosmetica, che emerge dagli effetti prodotti dall'interazione tra forma e superficie, contribuisce a costituire un mondo. Tre temi principali consentono di esplicitare questa nuova concezione delle apparenze animali: cosmetica, espressione e cosmologia. Queste ipotesi, il cui orizzonte si colloca in una riflessione di natura metafisica, permettono di emancipare l'eleganza animale da un'estetica limitata alle sole apparenze.

In *L'Élégance animale*, la cosmetica si configura come un piano di intesa tra l'uomo e l'animale. A sostegno di tale ipotesi vi è l'idea secondo cui le forme cosmetiche non assolvono unicamente a una funzione estetica: le apparenze non si lasciano infatti ridurre alle sole superfici a cui sono convenzionalmente associate. Questa concezione della *cosmétique* può essere ricondotta a una tradizione artistica che ha il suo punto di riferimento in Manet, negli impressionisti e nel principio aereo della trasparenza. Già in quest'ambito, il soggetto del pittore non concerne tanto il volto del modello, quanto piuttosto il velo di polveri che lo ricopre: ciò che conta è il *maquillage*, quel «polline di carne più che qualsiasi attrazione umana», come scriveva Mallarmé. In questa direzione, Jean Clay, nel testo di presentazione al catalogo della mostra *Bonjour Monsieur Manet* (1983), arricchisce il principio della trasparenza aerea come nuovo dispositivo pittorico, richiamando gli unguenti, i fard e i pollini che caratterizzano le opere dell'artista. Questi elementi, che appartengono tanto alla superficie quanto a una certa idea di superficialità–poiché il trucco femminile è tradizionalmente considerato segno di frivolezza–veicolano in realtà una profondità: quella propria della pittura ancorata al suo tempo. In questa prospettiva, anche l'eleganza animale non può essere ridotta a un principio finalistico, spesso associato a necessità riproduttive, né semplicemente ricondotta a dinamiche percettive di ordine estetico. L'intuizione secondo cui gli animali si esprimono attraverso le apparenze consente al biologo e zoologo svizzero Adolf Portmann (riferimento centrale nel saggio di Prévost) di sviluppare la nozione di *Présentation de soi* (*Selbstdarstellung*): la capacità degli esseri viventi di manifestare se stessi attraverso la propria forma visibile, esibendo un'apparenza esteriore che non si limita a garantire la sopravvivenza, ma esprime una presenza autentica nel mondo.

Un'altra ipotesi sviluppata nel volume, che permette di riconfigurare il ruolo delle apparenze animali, riguarda il luogo stesso dell'apparire: non solo come superficie, non più come semplice esteriorità, ma come punto in cui interiorità e esteriorità si incontrano per diventare espressive. Per questo l'autore parla dell'interiorità come di un rapporto con lo spazio, riferendosi al celebre passaggio di Valéry, secondo cui «la peau est ce qu'il y a de plus profond», nella misura in cui essa è concepita come una superficie intensiva. L'esempio del paradisiero superbo (*Lophorina superba*), le cui sembianze sono completamente trasfigurate all'acme della sua danza nuziale, risulta particolarmente significativo. La sua facoltà trasformativa è talmente potente da rompere radicalmente con le proprie sembianze di uccello, rendendolo irriconoscibile, somigliante alla forma stilizzata di un volto umano. Un'espressività che presenta però la peculiarità di non essere necessariamente destinata allo sguardo. Al contrario, essa si sviluppa in funzione di una critica dell'otticalità, opponendosi all'idea di un occhio onnisciente assunto come modello intellettuale. Per questo, l'obiettivo dell'autore è proprio quello di individuare modalità di visualità che si collochino al di fuori non solo della visione, ma soprattutto dell'esistenza stessa dell'occhio. «Se le apparenze animali sono espressive, scrive Prévost, è perché portano in sé il paradosso di non essere necessariamente fatte per essere viste.» Tra i numerosi esempi a riprova di ciò che si trovano in natura, si può citare quello della seppia (*Sepia officinalis*). Le striature naturali sul dorso di questo invertebrato evocano i movimenti della sabbia sui fondali marini, invisibili ai nostri occhi. L'espressività delle sue apparenze suggerisce qualcosa di più: che la seppia porta su di sé il mondo da cui proviene, a indicare che la cosmetica animale genera una vera e propria cosmologia.

Per questo, la forza espressiva delle apparenze apre a una dimensione cosmologica, secondo cui la cosmetica animale porta con sé – o per meglio dire porta su di sé – un mondo. Una cosmologia che si afferma a scapito della biologia, poiché, come sosteneva Portmann, l'apparire diventa anch'esso una funzione vitale. Ricordando il titano della mitologia greca, «gli animali, a modo loro, fanno come Atlante: portano il mondo, non sulle spalle, ma direttamente sulla loro pelle.» Al contrario della tradizionale concezione della *physis* come fondamento, qui la natura ha una stratificazione: minerale, biologica – del vivente – e simbolica – dell'umano. Se il naturalismo impedisce di pensare le ibridazioni, l'eleganza animale permette invece di teorizzare i fenomeni di mimetizzazione, come espressioni dell'aderenza dell'animale al mondo. Il pappagallo che vive nella foresta amazzonica, porta su di sé il cromatismo del suo ambiente. Ma per comprendere questo, bisogna strappare il colore verde alla sua assegnazione fisica e biologica per renderlo espressivo di un mondo tropicale. In questo senso, l'animale porta in sé un mondo, trascina con sé il divenire verde del mondo. Ciò che prevale, è lo sradicamento, legato ai processi di territorializzazione e deterritorializzazione di matrice deleuziana. Il verde perde la sua sola qualità cromatica di semplice colore, e il pappagallo perde la sua sola qualità di animale per trovarne delle altre. Queste zone di vicinanza cosmologica rinviano ancora una volta alla questione del portare, dell'avere e del vestire. Gli animali configurano esteticamente il proprio mondo costruendo una territorialità specifica: il fatto di comporre una nicchia possiede, negli animali, una dimensione tanto semiotica quanto estetica, che si ritrova poi nell'arte. L'artista prolunga questa capacità e fissa tali meccanismi di territori e affetti in forme di rappresentazione che conferiscono una forma di eternità a questi modi di esperienza.

E dunque, imitando l'animale, un'artista come Louise Bourgeois costruisce le sue *Tanières*, che sono al contempo corazze e luoghi di rifugio. In questo gesto creativo, l'artista si esprime, nel senso pieno del termine: esprimere significa infatti, al tempo stesso, esteriorizzare e avvolgere. Tale facoltà nasce dal divenire animale dell'umano, un divenire possibile proprio in virtù dell'eleganza animale, là dove la cosmetica si riconnette alla cosmologia. L'artista prosegue questo gesto, lo prolunga, trasponendolo nel mondo umano: come l'animale abita lo spazio e porta su di sé il mondo da cui proviene, così l'opera d'arte diventa un luogo espressivo, che manifesta un legame originario tra corpo, ambiente e apparenza. «Sperimentarsi come una casa, come un dominio: gli animali, forse più facilmente di noi esseri umani, accedono a questa esperienza singolare proprio perché fanno coincidere comportamento (abitudini), dimora (habitat) e apparenza (abito).»

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Bertrand Prévost è docente di storia dell›arte ed estetica all›Università Bordeaux-Montaigne. È autore di numerosi saggi sulla storia e la teoria dell'arte, dal Rinascimento all'arte contemporanea, tra cui *La peinture en actes* (2007); *Botticelli, le manège allégorique* (2011); *Au cœur des pierres* (2020); *Marqueterie générale, Hubert Duprat* (2020).

(Carolina Sprovieri)