

Culture as a cognitive approach

Descrizione

Evolutionary subjectivity

When two individuals are exposed to the same artistic product (a painting, a movie, a poem) they can have quite different reactions to it. Such reactions tend to be of two separate kinds: on one hand, there is the simply hedonistic impact of artistic consumption (“I like it” or “I do not like it”), which implies the revelation of an immediate and emotional process; on the other hand, there is the evaluation about whether such product can be included in the cultural realm.

“Cultural” characteristics are subjective: although many monuments, buildings and theatrical works are more or less unanimously accepted as belonging to the cultural set, we must acknowledge that such inclusion is the outcome of a subjective and potentially controversial process. The cultural realm is increasing in quantity and in variety through the decades. While during the Nineteenth Century the cultural set certainly (and prevalingly) included European mimetic art, only after the turn of the century abstract paintings started to knock at the door of culture, and they were not unanimously accepted: still now there are many people doubting about the definition of abstract art (and many other forms of expression) as “culture”.

Of course, we can easily give some expert the power to decide on our behalf. But this could not change the terms of the issue, since the individual acceptance of some product as cultural implies a specific process of appreciation and enjoyment which is quite different from that generated by other products. Our aim is not that of establishing which product is culture and which is not, but – on the contrary – to suggest that subjective evaluations in such a respect are unavoidable, legitimate, controversial but yet sound. We will just try to describe the cognitive process through which each individual stores his/her exposure to any creative product in the cultural file or out of it.

Such an analysis will provide us with a view of the likely reaction of consumers to cultural exposure, and will lead us to carry on our analysis in order to suggest cultural decision-makers (either public or private, global or local) effective managerial tools aimed at eliciting consumer appreciation. Although the argument seems to take a

binary path (is this culture, or not?), it will show the importance of using the economic characteristics of cultural products as the tools used by consumers to extract the maximum possible value from cultural supply: the degree in which such characteristics are made explicit is then crucial. Finally, our argument raises the issue of cultural freedom on the part of individuals: not only their evaluations must be considered equal in weight, but also the opportunity to select their own cultural choices within the widest possible set of alternatives are positive values in a democratic setting.

a) identity

The first aspect is related to the concept of identity. This implies that the content of any cultural product conveys to consumers information about specific characteristics of a nation, a period, a group of people, even an intentional or imaginary mix of these, in a symbolic but quite direct and explicit way. Very often individuals refuse to accept some product as cultural because they are not able to recognise its identity (i.e. its identification with some reference in the real world), or they consider it insufficiently expressed: the example of abstract art can help us in such a respect, since those who do not consider it culture simply state that it does not describe reality. Of course, we do not intend to start any discussion about the foundations of any subjective view; we simply acknowledge that exclusion from the cultural realm is normally explained in terms of limited or confused identity.

The concept of identity is quite central, for example, in the discussion about the need to exhibit art in its proper context, or in the arguments about the Elgin Marbles or the Axum Obelisque . Cultural value is likely to decrease when the identity of artistic products is not respected. Of course, we could question about the subjectivity of such a concept. The idea of identity is not uncontroversial. This just confirms the strong difficulties faced in a definition of culture on one hand, and on the other it highlights the operational problems related to the effectiveness of the transmission chain between supply and demand.

b) taste formation

The second aspect is related to the taste formation process. The word culture clearly indicates a process of cultivation, i.e. of accumulation of resources and generation of something different and greater than the mere arithmetic sum of such resources. The (subjective and somehow cloudy) difference between culture and entertainment is played upon the presence or absence of such a process. It should be clear that the accumulation of knowledge, and the eventual generation of a progressively deeper

ability to elaborate critical judgments, is not necessarily started in a uniform way and intensiveness for each consumer.

The idiosyncrasy of such a process implies that the personal experience of cultural consumption leads each individual to form his/her own stock of knowledge, pursuing – with various degrees of awareness – a sort of “specialisation”, and therefore addressing his/her own future consumption towards the units which he/she believes most effectively able to increase the value of his/her stock. This is reflected in a progressively higher willingness to pay for cultural consumption (for those units that appear to be consistent with one’s own stock), and in a demand for higher quality of supply: given the nature of this taste formation process, quality must be considered the sum of heterogeneous characteristics that allow each individual consumer to derive high informational value from cultural consumption. In such a respect, the conventionally assessed value of an art object can be important, but other aspects are equally relevant, such as the material organisation of supply, the amount of information made available, the variety and appropriateness of informational by-products (guides, catalogues, reproductions, and the like).

c) informational transmission

The third aspect is quite obvious, nevertheless we will see how its presence is not at all granted in the consumers’ perspective: culture requires the operation and effectiveness of an informational process of transmission from supply to demand: being a symbolic product, at least one of the five senses must be involved. Although obvious, this aspect has quite strong implications: there are artistic products whose cultural nature is (temporarily or permanently) denied when they are subtracted from such a transmission process. Art objects which are not exhibited in a museum, as well as performances that are no more staged, but left in a deposit are cases of products whose artistic value can be out of question, but whose cultural role is at least temporarily denied or delayed. They do not generate any cultivation process, since nobody can be sensorially exposed to them.

Managerial implications

The perceived presence of the above mentioned characteristics induces each individual to consider a product as belonging to the cultural set or not. In the individual perspective this can provide him/her with a criterion for selecting different and heterogeneous experiences. Such a process of individual investigation about the funding aspects of culture does not overcome controversies; moreover, we must

acknowledge that some products, which are traditionally not treated as cultural, seem to hold the characteristics we are attributing to culture: identity, taste formation, information. In such a respect, there is a growing number of public administrators, journalists, experts and scholars attributing the label of “cultural” to food and wine, tourist resorts, fashion and industrial design, and so on.

Questioning such expansions of the concept is not among the goals of this essay. Nevertheless we can just point at the need to match what we defined objective with the above discussed subjective aspects of cultural products. Let us take wine as an example. It is quite often related with a clear and strong identity; it can generate and implement a process of taste formation; it is transferred to consumer through an informational chain involving at least four out of five senses. And, as far as its objective aspects are concerned, we can certainly observe that wine is the outcome of a creative process, and that it is original and not fungible. The only, but fundamental, problem is that wine is not “useless”, i.e. its prevailing function is still to provide consumers with a physical effect. On the contrary, although a monument can be used as a territorial mark, or as a meeting point, or as a traffic sign, its prevailing function is the sensorial and cognitive exposure. We can try to describe such an argument in a table.

| | No Subjective Aspects | Subjective Aspects |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Prevailing Function | Manufacturing Goods Non-Cultural Tourism | Wine and Food Design and Fashion Environment |
| Prevailing Decoration | Entertainment Not Exhibited Art Serial Decoration | Cultural Products Cultural Tourism |

The inclusion of a product in any box is not necessarily static: changes may occur if some of the funding aspects appear (or disappear). If an object created by a designer is no more used in normal life and it is exhibited in a museum (or even left at home among the family memories) then it can acquire cultural nature in the individual perception; on the contrary, if a historical building is used as home or office, then the perception of its cultural elements may decrease.

This brings us to the last issue dealt with by this paper: the characteristics that allow each individual to elaborate his/her own cultural set are not binary, as we observed above. They may be possessed in various degrees by each different product, and such

a “cultural density” may change through time. This strongly depends upon the strategies and decisions adopted by cultural managers. If identity, taste formation and information are activated and implemented in a high degree, then the level of appreciation, and consequently both frequency of consumption and willingness to pay will rise, strengthening the degree of sustainability of cultural products.

We can simply make a paradoxical example. The Coliseum in Rome is conventionally and unquestionably considered “culture”. Nevertheless the opportunities to provide its consumers with a clear description of its identity, with the possibility to derive from it a notable contribution to taste formation, and with an extensive endowment of information appear to be quite limited: in its proximities no signal, reproduction, text, illustration or animation lets its visitors understand what it was and how it was used. While nobody would exclude the Coliseum from the cultural set, not many can really enjoy its cultural characteristics due to a lazy and chauvinistic cultural policy on the part of its public managers.

This could be a fertile starting point, and a real possibility for cultural economics to suggest an effective strategy for organising cultural supply in order to meet the expectation of cultural demand as expressed by contemporary individuals; in such a way the various immaterial and financial opportunities of the cultural market can be exploited along a path of cultural and economic sustainability.

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