

Do the arts dream of society? The secret war of languages

Descrizione

Whenever I think, speak or write about the arts the crucial knot of my analysis is knowledge. Of course emotion is important, as well as some intellectual pride, but knowledge gives the flavour to the whole system. It is well rooted in the dramatic urgency that leads single creative artists to craft their works: if they were able to display their sentiments and views in an ordinary way – through plain spoken language, for example – they would not need any kind of expressive substitution, and their discourse should not need to rely upon powerful semantic channels able to convey it to its potential (even not desired) recipients.

Knowledge is also important in the growth of creative tendencies, artistic and cultural groups, and all the social clusters advocating the rise and the consolidation of views, styles, techniques and all the methodological tools that can define creative waves. This normally occurs as a response to an insufficient conventional knowledge, in any case to push the threshold of language ahead. Whether it is only innovation (along the path) or revolution (against the path itself) its language wants to show, not without some surprise or even some repugnance, that the world needs new words, new concepts, possibly new truths.

Certainly knowledge is fundamental in the audience's appraisal of the arts and culture. Some are reluctant to the art experience since they believe that their previous knowledge is insufficient; many want to acknowledge and to socially assess their conventional knowledge many others actually explore the arts and culture because they firmly want to increase and to deepen their present knowledge: they will be enthusiastic about what they do not know yet, they will like surprises and unexpected languages, being driven by a non-prejudicial view of their happiness. In any case, language matters.

In such a value chain, from individual creative artist through cultural clusters to individuals and groups forming the society a ring is clearly missing. Art works can be made real and available to cultural experience through what we may define the arts system, a sort of infrastructural and institutional grid where organisations, traders, critics, experts, consultants, advisors and mainly professionals (the art technicians) are active and actually establish the conventional value hierarchy, draw the maps, build the paths. The mainstream art and culture horizon strongly depends upon the cultural milieu.

Paradoxically, it is there that knowledge proves weak and contradictory. Generated by a magmatic urgency, coagulated among common views of the possible, pursued for the sake of improving one's welfare, knowledge can be perceived as dangerous by those who use the arts and culture to freeze the world, to mummify its features, to strengthen their role of gatekeepers in charge of neatly separating wheat from rye, pretending to act as our final judges. Until the arts and culture are believed to hold an ethical power they will be given forced objectivity and inalterability. It would be our task to understand its mysteries. Books badly read can lead to the disaster.

Now, unexpected things are occurring. Apparently extraordinary events such as the occupation of public spaces can be considered either bizarre, proving unconventional for the sake of it, or eloquent such as symptoms of an irreversible passage between two cultural, social and economic paradigms. This complex, and often complicated, flow of action covers a wide range of options in response to the evident insufficiency of the conventional language. It may be chaotic but it reflects new urgencies on the part of individuals and social groups; moreover, it involuntarily manages to aggregate individuals who share an orientation in groups whose critical mass opens new tracks in a landscape where abused certainties are draining the residual energies.

Such a response can appear too much unconventional, and sometimes illegal. Its strength and weakness lies in the non-institutional nature of its action, often antagonist and lacking a real strategy. Nevertheless its noise has driven the attention and the worries of many mainstream organisations, whose managers sometimes try to react to signals of discontent. Once the arts and culture system could rely upon its

self-assessed aristocracy considering its founding values and its material features unchangeable: it was an *aere perennius monumentum*, or so its professionals liked to believe. In the recent years the emerging society appears quite enigmatic, since the comfortable binary divide between cultivated mates and ignorant thugs is no more credible. Despite the commonplace view of digital society as a horde of barbarians, that some conservative analyst describe as too inconstant in attention and too stable in hedonism, our society is the most sophisticated and hyper textual of history. The arts and culture could not find a more fertile cradle to grow and expand.

The acknowledgement of a new paradigm calls for new responsibilities, that is where cultural managers become reluctant. The challenge is faced trying to build an acceptable compromise: things remain exactly as they have been (“our fathers did like this, there is no reason to change it” is the prevailing refrain), and some indulgence is granted to what seem to be superficial inclinations of contemporary audience. Touch screens in museums, along with ashtrays, ties, scarves and gadgets occupy the horizon although visitors are happy to buy sources of knowledge such as catalogues, audio guides, dvd and the like; special effects such as on-stage google glasses, or incentives to play such as tweet-seats in opera houses are introduced in order for young spectators to be captured although opera can be powerful for its semantic strength. Still knowledge.

Can we write a love letter without ever reading it (or simply sending it) to our beloved person? Do we expect her to learn our language, or we better try and express our feelings adopting her views and expressions? Culture finds itself in a similar dilemma. Its system, made by professionals, choices, styles and beliefs, considers its own language sculpted on bronze, and therefore unavailable for doubt and discussion. The only margin left by such a solid view is some side – and accessory – flow of information where knowledge is ambiguously hybridised (and often spoiled) by entertainment. Among the many examples the improper use of social networks, obscure object of fear on the part of many cultural professionals who simply open an account using it as a digital reproduction of what they were used to do in the analogic dimension (press releases posted on facebook, information about timetables posted on tweeter).

The situation is quite controversial. It needs a clear perception, and possibly evaluation of the costs and benefits likely generated by a substantial change in the relationship occurring between culture and society, in practical words between cultural organisations and their audience. What cultural professionals are afraid of is the possible loss of identity and consistency which could be generated by a change in the organisation of cultural supply and in the protocols for exchange. Such a fear is justified with the strong belief that the semantic features of the arts and culture must not be altered. True, but they are dialogic products and activities by their nature, just like the love letter: they have a lot to say, indefinitely; but they need a recipient who understands their language, interprets their multiple meaning, connects it with her/his may experiences, filters them through her/his desires, accumulates their value (and possibly improves her/his own happiness).

The good news is that we do not need to alter language, simply to speak with contemporary society. Art and culture can only convey their unique and infungible endowment of knowledge through shared channels of expression, not expecting members of the audience to transform themselves into humans of the past. Time travelling, although fascinating, only exists in novels and movies. In the meantime it can be sensible to understand that contemporary audience normally surfs a world where light, sound, speed, sentiments and relationships are totally new. And, frankly, the past was not necessarily a better world, we have wide and deep evidence that probably we do live in a much safer and stimulating reality. In any case, in 1947 the pitch of musical notes was adapted by an international convention to a post-war world in which the ordinary soundtrack was already composed by urban traffic. Why are we so reluctant to adopt the same approach for the wider and growing art system?

The arts and culture could finally become adult (until they pretend to be innocent and eternal they are still adolescent). This would finally connect with the world and with society, as it used to be before the industrial revolution. It could cost some effort to understand the rich complexity of contemporary society, comfortable labels defining everything like in a military map should be abandoned, some responsibility should be accepted. But the opportunities would multiply rapidly, reshaping the cultural system as something accessible that society could finally appraise and appreciate, fulfilling the basic urgency of self-representation. And, surprise, pursuing a sold sustainability,

since an effective dialogue would lead to the acknowledgement of value and to a range of favourable reacts on the part of the audience: we come back, we bring other people, we spread a positive word-of-mouth, we buy tickets, objects and services able to widen our critical scope, we donate, possibly we engage in action and co-operation.

In this issue of Tafter Journal the essays compose a powerful mosaic aimed at exploring the features of the dialogue between culture and society. The secret war of languages can be smoothly extinguished by new approaches and new views: we can abandon our mainstream certainties, interpreting culture as a stimulating archipelagus where languages are able to hybridise each other, as Ludovica Michelin highlights; we find it more valuable to abandon the rigid grids of conventional labels to focus upon language rather than frames, as Agostina Di Martino suggests; we can get indefinite benefits widening the scope of our dialogue, integrating the digital and the analogic dimensions in order to seriously play the game of sharing identities and horizons, as Francesca De Gottardo and Valeria Gasparotti focus upon, also showing the slow tuning typical of the Italian cultural system; we can adopt an effective strategy in drawing a price map in response to a multidimensional and dynamic willingness-to-pay of the emerging society, as Valeria Morea strongly recommends.

Synergic languages will raise society's happiness, and attain a growing degree of sustainability in our complex and fertile world. That's culture, honey.

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