

ART HISTORY BETWEEN THE HEDGEHOG AND THE FOX. MUTATIONS OF A DISCIPLINE FOR THE TIMES TO COME

by Michele Dantini

Who deals with art history in Italy is struck by the separation of antiquarian studies. At least according to many scholars, the latter don't seem to have specific historical implications or civil responsibilities. It is thought that teaching and preserving cultural heritage complete the entire scope of activities. But that's how art history stops being a humanistic discipline concerning the reconstruction of historical events and the transmission of critical thinking, so to become a sort of apprenticeship: a technical training for the few.

I would like to focus on the issue of the relationships between research and cultural journalism, considering it from the perspective of a particular field of study, mine. Who is the recipient of art history? How to approach an audience wider than the narrow circle of specialists, collectors and devotees? Or to emancipate the study of the past from the lamentations of nostalgia? Here are some possible questions²³. We often distinguish the two activities - "research" and "cultural journalism" - in a hasty way, disregarding ambiguities or undertones. We mention the type of publication that includes this or that contribution and we are very zealous in distinguishing among scientific journals, popular magazines, newspapers, blogs, etc. All this seems painfully extrinsic. Do such distinctions have really to do with the intimate necessity and consistency of a path of innovative research that tries to find and nurture its audience in a varied way and at different levels?

Humanities have important responsibilities. The funding cuts in public education, common to Western countries, but more severe in Italy, reduce the opportunities for training and for skilled labor. Can we really stay neutral? We must ensure not only the preservation of cultural heritage,

23 Hans Belting, *The end of the History of Art?*, University of Chicago Press, 1987. In conceiving educational and political-cultural proposals, we should not forget, as art historians, the fictional, pedagogical character of Great Narratives, including the history of art in its classical-idealistic, linear and evolutionary paradigm. Let's consider the Italian case. Led back to unity and rearranged under the legal-administrative terms of "heritage", art history, like literary history, represents a stimulus for pre-unification patriots and a retrospective myth for Italians in the decades after unification. Knowing the "fathers", Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, becomes "a ritual of recognition, and, at the same time, of rejection" for the national leadership (cf. Homi Bhabha, edited by, introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London 1990, p.5).

but also of interpretive skills in general, of writing and reasoning²⁴. The traditional academic distinction among the different "missions" of research, which distinguishes between "science" and "dissemination" in a rigidly hierarchical way, seems misleading.

The educational effectiveness of a qualified blog cannot be underestimated (and should not, not even by "examiners"!). Day by day, its administrators address thousands of non-specialists, whose knowledge of art history they improve. The maintenance of a curious and informed audience will however benefit the research. Even the activity of a good social media editor, provided he is independent, has a utility that is not only public, but also scientific. This is how younger generations learn art history: they create *online* educational agencies and, day by day, erode the pompous opposition between "university" and "the world out there".

"Academics have got many instruments to communicate with the general public", Nicholas Christof writes in The New York Times. "There are online courses, blogs and social media. However, they seem reluctant to lavish the pearls of their science via Facebook and Twitter. But I say: Professors, do not lock yourself in cloisters like medieval monks. We need you!"

A deeper friendship between philology and (counter) information opens up opportunities that the humanities should hasten to seize. A specialist research confined to a distant past can be combined with an essay-survey on current topics, still devoid of bibliography, or with the invention of new disciplinary "objects" involving different fields of research. When meant as a conversation in public, art history has no need to seek shelter exclusively in the printed pages of journals. On the contrary, it dialogues with social criticism and with cultural anthropology in terms of "participating observation".

In discussing *Not For Profit* by Martha Nussbaum²⁵, a book about the defense of the civil role of the Humanities, the English philosopher John Armstrong recently invited scholars to "preserve everything that has a high intrinsic

24 For an in-depth notion of "cultural heritage", cf. Marilena Vecco, *A definition of "cultural heritage": from the tangible to the intangible*, in: *Journal of Cultural Heritage*, xi, 3, July|September 2010, pp. 321-324.

25 Martha Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, Princeton University Press, 2010

value and [to] publicly promote the total adhesion to that value”²⁶. I do not know well what Armstrong’s “intrinsic value” refers to. However, it is clear that the ability to explain (and explain yourself) in an effective way becomes urgent in a moment of great difficulty for the Humanities.

“Digital media,” noted Jürgen Habermas, “are the third major innovation since the invention of writing and printing. But they alone do not create progress. During the nineteenth century, books and newspapers in general circulation have fostered the birth of national public spheres. Within them, the attention of a large number of people could simultaneously focus on the same problems. This is what the web cannot produce: it distracts and disperses. Online communities lack an inclusive glue, the strength of a public sphere capable of showing what things are important and what are not. The skills of good old journalism should not be lost: they are indispensable today no less than yesterday”²⁷.

If it is true that Italian journalism mostly addresses politicians with stinging criticism or with suggestions so haughty as unheeded, we should instead learn to reach out to an audience that first asks to be informed²⁸. I’m thinking of university researchers, who might learn the techniques of investigative journalism or of reportage - a survey “on the field”, the acquisition of first hand news, the consolidation of a network of informers - and make an extensive use of them. However, such researchers would benefit of an autonomy broader than that granted to professional reporters and would not be forced to hastily chase overt traces.

We are not ready to evaluate the interest that some sovereign funds show in the Italian cultural “heritage” or to predict the consequences that this will have on environmental protection and tourism policies. Similarly, we lack effective representations of contemporary patronage, of the relations between cultural policies and marketing, or of the social use of “creativity”: representations that may be able to place the disciplinary “object” at the

26 John Armstrong, *Lost Art of Speaking to a Mass Audience*, in: *The Australian*, 11 June 2011 @ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/lost-art-of-speaking-to-a-mass-audience/story-e6frgcjx-1226073245960>

27 Jürgen Habermas, *What the Web can't do*, an interview by Markus Schwering, in *Reset*, 24 July 2014

28 cf. Alfonso Berardinelli, “*La Repubblica*”: *un club esclusivo, ma di massa*, in: *Diario*, i, 2 December 1985, p. 9, now in: *Diario 1985-1993* (with Piergiorgio Bellocchio), Quodlibet, Macerata 2010, p. 103 et seq.

intersection between art history and social sciences. If we will be able to produce them, we will experience a strong expansion of disciplinary boundaries and will forge new instruments. The public benefit of specific researches carried out on issues of general interest is unquestionable, and the comparison with real life urges researchers to undergo a constant process of self-training.

In reconstructing Warburg’s intellectual biography, in a volume at times woefully intricate, Ernst Gombrich suggests, on several occasions, that the adoption of a historical-stylistic point of view (instead of an “iconologic” one) would have spared the author of *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity* unsolvable historical and theoretical dilemmas²⁹. The statement surprises for that certain air of suspicion or condescension with which the Viennese art historian considers his predecessor. However, it leads to acknowledge the originality of Warburg and of his main polemical target: the aestheticizing history of art, which causes the distress that afflicts mere specialists. “[Warburg] never regarded academic goals as detached from life”, Gombrich says. “Each of his essays contained an implicit message, addressed to his age and resulting from a deep personal involvement”. According to the founder of the Institute that still bears his name, the historical-critical investigation on the “taste” of an era is not separate from a broader moral reflection or from a pressing curiosity about the origins of the creative process, derived from the contact with art and contemporary societies.

The proposal to link art history to cultural anthropology, made by authoritative interpreters of Warburg’s legacy, such as Baxandall, Haskell, Settis or Ginzburg, responds to the different conditions of the modern world³⁰.

A second “mutation” is however necessary to give the discipline a utility that is not just residual. This means that we need to reject the “devaluation of our time”, historically connected to the antiquarian tradition, and to practice philology within current cultural, economic and social processes.

29 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg. An intellectual biography*, The Warburg Institute, 1970.

30 Carlo Ginzburg, *Da Warburg a Gombrich* (1966), op. cit., in part. pp. 75-79; Salvatore Settis, *Futuro del “classico”*, Einaudi, Torino 2005, p. 93 et seq.; about the topic, cf. also Federico Zeri, preface to Sally Price, *I primitivi traditi*, op. cit., pp. ix-xii. At first ignored, Zeri’s text has been later analyzed by the Italian historical-artistic community, ritually devoted to the exercise of attribution (cf. also, on the topic, Francis Haskell *Art and the Language of Politics*, *Journal of European Studies* September 1974). About anthropology as “cultural critique”, cf. George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago|London 1999 (1986).

It comes to this, as far as possible: to complement (substitute) corporate media in the production of qualified and independent information. For reasons of costs and economic and financial partnership, the global network is rejecting the costly practices of surveys on the field. Why not include the broad-range investigation or the brilliant commentary among a researcher's institutional tasks?; or why hesitate to take part in the negotiations on breaking news and schedules? This is our task: to catch the initial appearance of great future processes in the present moment: they will affect education, memory, public sphere, environment and knowledge³¹.

What will we consider as “current affairs”, and why? To whom will the “immaterial” belong in our next future, to great oligopolies or to communities of citizens? “Cultural anthropologists”, Clifford Geertz writes in *Life Among the Anthros and Other Essays*, “are today working in a disordered, shapeless and unpredictable world situation, ... [ir]reducible to any ideological and moral categorization and to hasty political judgments. A true fox: this, I think, their natural habit should be. To be it, they need genius, restlessness, elusiveness and a passionate dislike for hedgehogs. Interesting times, a changing profession: I envy those who will inherit all this”³².

Geertz's reflection is acceptable even for different disciplines. There are significant evolutionary convergences between art history and interpretative anthropology.

If the political and technical-economic power chooses to represent itself in terms of “creativity”, the latter now becomes the typical “figure” of ideology. The reference to “creativity” shapes the entire historical and social horizon of expectations and distracts from considering social relationships in terms

31 cf. Umberto Eco, *C'è un'informazione oggettiva?* (1978), now in *Sette anni di desiderio*, Bompiani 1983, p. 142: “to talk about the reformulation of the ideology of news means to talk about a new journalism, especially for the press, which has to become more and more a historiography of the moment”. After more than three decades from Eco's statement, it is difficult to think that the “reformulation of the ideology of news” may come from the very heart of professional information. If it is true, then, that “very few like the author of *The name of the Rose* have been able to keep alive a learned habit, dating back to the dawn of historical humanism, in the transition between the Seventies and the Eighties”, it is also true that the relationship between “persuasive word” and “action”, mentioned before, is denied, in late Eco, by the showing off of a stunning erudition.

32 Cf. Clifford Geertz, *An Inconstant Profession*, in: *Life Among the Anthros and Other Essays*, Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 211. For the metaphors of the hedgehog and the fox, cf. Isaiah Berlin, *The hedgehog and the fox*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1953.

(say) of equity or domain. It is not clear how new areas of public discussion and control may be generated or consolidated. Institutional research can however redistribute opportunities of choice and education. And, in my opinion, it must do it.