

## PolArtity

The author of this short essay do not mean to follow too far the steps of one of the “social species” narrated by Honoré de Balzac in his ambitious depiction of the social human of 19th century France, namely the Polish character he portrayed in *La Cousine Bette*, Wenceslas Steinbock, who abandons his artistic genius becoming a mere art critic, ceasing his art operandi to seat in cafés and just talk about art. Somewhere in his stories, Hermann Hesse also identifies first music and then over-philosophication as a symptom of decadence. Aware of this, we may proceed...

This attitude may as well be that of Michelangelo Buonarroti, who, in his very sober life did not at once cease his art operandi, a very demanding one which often saw him confronted with sculptures and frescoes, yet preferably sculptures. Buonarroti was, however, also a poet and did in fact go down to a certain critic mostly concerning the art of paintings. Several scholars like Svetlana Alpers, quotes his reactionary critic against paintings as being basically not an art for real men to be made and consumed, but rather for domestic housewives. These scholars, might make use of such quotation to create a certain indignation and move on with a comparison of Southern versus Northern art as it is the case of the above mentioned American historian (ironically also a claimed artist as much as an art critic). This without acknowledging a key factor, namely that the art of oil painting was just coming “to the picture” as a Northern invention, an invention that allowed less of a vigorous impetuous from the side of the artist, if we compare it for instance with the vigour required for the quickly drying colors of a fresco such as that of the Sistine Chapel. In this respect, Buonarroti’s critic can be seen as a legitimate reaction as much as that of an artist seeing the threat of the advent of a new artistic medium, banalizing, to a certain respect, the impetuosity of his work.

In several of his scattered notes compiled in his *Zibaldone di Pensieri*, the Italian Romantic poet, Giacomo Leopardi makes a critical distinction between the Southern character being most apt to fight in time of war and to relax in time of peace even abusing it, and the Northern character as one who has to constantly come up with events in order to fill a lack of inner life. The same goes a century later for D. H. Lawrence when, considering Verga’s Realist novels, he writes in his *Handbook* that in the sun (in this case of Sicily) man are objective and in the snow subjective. This later statement seems rather misleading when we are to consider Alpers’ distinction between Italian art being narrative and requiring reading and interpretation, and Dutch art being descriptive and requiring only seeing. Where is then this Northern objectivity and

realism to come from? Possibly from the new light provided in Northern households with the introduction of glass windows characteristic of the 17th century. This is quite emblematically shown in one of the most representative Dutch paintings, that of Johannes Vermeer depicting a maid pouring milk in front of a window or that of a pianist or an astrologer also standing in front of this new source of light. The introduction of this artificial light then becomes the equivalent of a camera flash, lighting an instant as characterized more by Caravaggio's paintings.

Here, we shall take a small detour in mentioning another component that art historians seem to take in little consideration, namely the fact that within the polarities they create, there are other strong polarities. The Southern art was in fact also characterized by a South and a North, the former focusing more on drawing and the later focusing more on color. Michelangelo again here was quite amazed by the work of the Venetian school yet of such work he criticized the lack of drawing (e.g. Tiziano Vecelli) which later was proclaimed by the French Academy in Rome to be superior to painting because more conceptual and less emotional. Now, despite the fact that Caravaggio operated in his troublesome life in Rome, he was nonetheless born in the Celtic Bergamo, far below the Alps, a flat and in this respect dutch-like place characterized by long periods of fogs and to some extent gloominess.

We could here base more observations in the objectivity that the exposure to light brings to the art work by also moving further with examples such as that of another Southern/Northern ambiguous figure like that of Albrecht Dürer. In one of his most renown watercolours for instance, the Southern German artist depicts a young hare. What is most peculiar in this realist, thus descriptive sketch is the fact that the hare is depicted out of context, as on the sterile white table of a laboratory where the artist, like a scientist examines him and observes him. Again a still life which could be also explained by mentioning the new possibility offered by new artistic media (oil paintings) and the new environment (a studio with windows) as it is the case of the many still lifes of dead birds and animals following a century later in Holland. A more striking example of which is the work promoted by Constantijn Huygens in the New World, still life sketches revealing the unseeable, what the microscope brings to the picture.

From this extreme hand in which the paint becomes a quasi-scientific depiction of what the new light conditions can allow to see and what the new techniques allows to represent (one should not forget to mention the use of the camera obscura which favoured these descriptive conditions), we can now draw a comparison back with the Italian art of the 15th century. As Alpers describes in her book "The Art of Describing",

there is here certainly not an image of reality. The American historian defines it as a narrative mode but we may as well define it as an image of a vision, a vision that only a Southern light can provide as the Umbrian light and sweet atmosphere which comes to our eyes and direct itself into our minds when viewing Fra' Angelico fresco of "Gesú Bendato", a fresco painted in a small chamber of a monastery, an artificially imposed gloominess, re-enlighted by such a painting. The consumer in this respect is a different one from the bourgeois like consumer of Dutch art from two centuries later. It is likely to be a monk who can use such a fresco as a mechanism to heighten his spirit.

In this respect Michael Baxandall's book on Fifteenth Century Italian painters can be seen as revealing a rather blasphemous aspect of such a spiritually driven art production. It seems to turn the argument in proclaiming that these Italian painters were in fact painting for money, justifying changes in the making of these paintings as economical ones where the client from the beginning looks at the quality of the material and later will look more into the skill and personality of the artist. In the introduction of his book he also brings forward the case of Fra' Angelico, demystifying such a soul for the amount of gold he was earning. It would be interesting here to then see the motif behind every artistic intention. Was Fra' Angelico painting for money as Baxandall seem to imply? Standing in front of one of the angelic priest's paintings, seeing all his dedication, this is barely hard to believe. Has historian like Baxandall have stood contemplating any of Fra' Angelico works for real? Or has he mostly consumed the art he speculates about through documents and representations of representations? The gold background of Fra' Angelico paintings is in fact not only a guarantee for quality but also a guarantee for skill which the historian postpones to a latter development. By looking attentively at the golden layers in one of Fra' Angelico's paintings we will be able to observe highly detailed etching which might as well surpasses the work and skill of an artist painting a landscape as a background.

Without then drawing from the biography of the artist alone (it was not for nothing that Fra' Angelico was called "The Angelic"), without speculation we may, in this respect, let the work of art talk by itself accompanied exclusively by the voice of whom can get inspired by it, rather than the voice of whom can turn it into an analytical and speculative object of interest. It is a known fact that the Venetian artist Jacopo Tintoretto painted the entire Scuola di San Marco (fortunately spared by Napoleon's troops who just forgot to plunder it) asking for no fees. The driven factor was certainly not money, as a rather iconoclastic and populist protestant attitude might suggest. The moralizing Catholic attitude might, on the other hand, elevate him by claiming that he painted all the Scuola because his family had been spared by the black plague.

Can't we just admit the fact that he painted because he wanted to paint, because his strong nature pushed him to do so given also the fact that he was always the first to, at an opening for a commission, present not the drawing but already a piece of the final work already in place? It is certainly a fact though that the economical wellness of the Venetian Republic (at that time actually decreasing with the opening of trades across the Atlantic) was certainly one of the necessary factors which allowed artists to proliferate (in the case of Rome however these artists were mostly never locals as it is the case of New York today but not of Stockholm).

Generally, such a demystification of the South seems to be a common trend in the historicization of the North. Another Venetian, Antonio Vivaldi, also another devoted priest, but in this case a composer, was also rather accused of his softness for money, this based on his correspondence. Vivaldi was latter to die in Wien, rather unknown and poor with his native Venice Republic now ultimately coming to an end. In this sense a stable economy, seems a precondition particularly for such a musician working with expensive arrangements (although his solo and less known pieces are majestic). In the restricted view of the author, history and particularly that of art and culture is a far more complex realm and a more systematic coverage of it would have to be applied when making spatial as well as temporal comparisons. One thing is clear however, and that is that the introduction of a new medium bares implicitly the potential in which it can be naturally applied. We can then see dutch painting as the natural outcome of oil painting with its implicit characteristic (long to dry and mixable), applicable to a light canvas, in a studio with a certain artificial light caused by for instance the use of a newly introduced type of lamp and the introduction of a certain new type of window.

The latter is obviously only one factor in determining the kind of art characteristic of an age. We can then move forward making assumption such as the inner characteristic of a group of artist belonging to a certain climate and yet even here it is hard to make distinction. Nikolai Gogol himself, in his story "The Portrait", makes again such a distinction of this poor Northern artist comparing him to a plant which, once brought to the daylight of the South (in his story referring to Russian artists going to Rome) blossoms. But yet again, what about the mannerist painter Jacopo Pontormo? Although a rather pale blond and thus Nordic looking character (possibly of Longobard descendance), this Florence based painter was most subjective and introvert. Aside from living in an attic where the accessing stair was retreatable and where he could completely be left in a rather emancipated isolation, Pontormo also kept a diary where he accounted on his gloomy everyday life, listing what he ate and how bad he felt in certain occasions. How miserable and yet this misery was latter accounted to be just

another theory circulating at that time, stating that the cultivation of melancholy in an artist's soul was beneficial to his art (are we to believe this?).

Here again Alpers, as well as other historians hastening for a quick comparison, fails to account to the fact that art in the 16th century came to some sort of introspective stand, where art, like a Narcissus, could watch itself on a mirror, the same mirror we can detect in Pontormo's faces, a clear portrait of his melancholic being. It is through mannerism in fact that a phase of art could be described more as a passage rather than a drastic distinction and turning point. Under an evolutionary perspective which Alpers seems to avoid, the art of Renaissance painting can be seen as starting from the spiritual and narrative vignettes as that of Giotto to then move in more identifiable visions, into the painter himself slowly getting aware of his surrounding. It is a process of awakening from a dream like state to a state of full awareness this despite the ambiguous polarities needed for the argumentation of an art theory. Narcissus reflecting himself on a turbid pond is first absorbed in a contemplation beyond himself, then slowly becomes aware of himself and later recognize the environment around him by shifting his sight from his reflected persona to the background, which he learns to put to sharp focus (is this looping? there is a strange resemblance between the beginning and the end).

This is yet another possible interpretation of a more or less universal art movement. One of many however and in this respect, the format of an essay with a particular format can be rather limiting, although it well brings to light a certain aspect of a phenomenon. The premises however can be always criticized but this is probably what the interpretation of history is about, a pool where no fixed views can be superimposed, only reflections. An historian may as well bring this or that proof revealing an aspect of a phenomenon, such as Baxandall's explanation of 15th century Italian painting as strongly affected and determined by the actual mecenati and in which the artist did not have the freedom as for instance the romantic painter. Even here however, the historian seems to bring only to a worst light the paintings of the time, not specifying for instance the actual impact of such constraints. The classic artist is in fact dependent on constraints. As Raymond Queneau wrote a century ago, the classic artist is far freer than the post romantic artist who has no such constraints. The classic poet as well as the artist, like the Italian painters of the 15th century, was to for instance force to draw within a set of rather rigid geometric structure, using only a set of figures. It is in this limitness, made even tougher with the economical limitness, that the genius is revealed. In this sense, a Dutch art could be interpreted as an art made in a freer setting which, through protestantism, even freed itself of the religious tradition. The Dutch artist of the 17th century could be seen as an artist looking himself around for something to paint

now that that "Southern" tradition had been abolished. He looks around and sees an empty or crowded landscape, some dead birds... probably being a bit bored or probably recuperating from reality itself the bases for a new tradition. This attitude can be noticed also in Venice, a city rather rebellious of any church authority, where, similarly, artists like Canaletto, freed themselves of the less oppressive tradition, depicted their open views of the city.

Classic art is also a complete form of art providing from the beginning not an art commodity to be placed in whatever household of whatever bourgeoisie. Classic art comes with an architecture, it compensates it and extends it. It is an organism or better a mechanism to set us mentally and thus spiritually in motion while mere descriptive art is only a glossy surface of a nature the bourgeoisie has been distanced from in the even more gloomy existence of his much more artificialized city dwelling. It is thus a substitute to a natural lack while Italian and religious art is a supplement to a divine nature, particularly in the solar context of a church or whatever temple, already beautifully located in a landscape that is already idyllic and do not necessitate a beautiful representation of another idyllic landscape. The comparison of this Anglo-American researcher trying to build a poetic of their "visual culture" against such a "spiritual tradition" cannot stand. As they now control the stage and establish their canons, outsiders might as well break off from their media based hegemony in view of what they actually seem to lack, the conditions for a spiritual drive.

What we shall contrast is the contemporary attempt of identifying as "art commodity" also spiritual undertakings as historian like Baxandall's attempts, by, for instance, not mentioning that all the gilded expenses of a painting was for the interior of a church which was very humble from the outside. This setting at large was a metaphor of the Christian soul in the early stage, humble and poor yet overlooking the splendid solar landscape outside, and very bright in the darkness within, as the reflection of love coming from the heart and to be processed through the brain, something that the Northern Puritan cannot seem to accept. As the Church transformed into an institution, the later decoration of such interior took this humbleness away (still well perceivable in Franciscan convents like Assisi), just like institutional seems the product of these new monks, scholars of the convent of academia. In this respect the new polarities can be rather based on art commodity versus spiritual enterprise, particularly in the view of institutional work versus work conceived in more humble and precarious conditions.

In this sense, the lack of "descriptiveness" of the more spiritually driven type of art which is labelled as "narrative", is misleading. As Tarkovski has shown as with the

picture of Andrei Rublov, the Russian equivalent of Fra' Angelico, this descriptiveness is implicit. By looking at an icon by Rublov, Tarkovski was able to recreate the whole context, a master work of historical realism surpassing any explicit description of that time. In this respect the so called "narrative" art is as well "descriptive" but implicitly, giving the viewer a more active role in imagining, while a complete "description" can leave little ground for such kind of active imagination from the part of the viewer, as it is often the case in contemporary fiction.

But here also we cannot discuss the 17th century without really naming and knowing all that has revolutionized that age such as the discoveries and inventions and their impact. We have mentioned the use of the camera obscura as mean to make art more descriptive, working as a modern camera in fact, but the historian could also mention the Northern diffusion of the press which in a way removed the necessity for pictorial art to be narrative. How are we then to approach such a constellation interlacing with other historical constellation as some sort of always changing and rotating mechanism? Are we to follow a particular trajectory as suggested us by the academic upbringing or are we to keep wondering without ever coming to a definite conclusion, as guides pointing occasionally at this or that star as much as the artificial lights lighten in the horizon below?

The imposition of a system seems here a rather straightforward answer to it. One could think of a Raymond Lull like combinatorial wheel system where several such historical comparisons could be created. There we might also be able to find how these polarities not only have ambiguous inner polarities contradicting themselves, as shown partly by this essay, but that such polarities even swap over time and what was true of one pole is now true of the other as, for instance, the use of film in post-war Italy as being rather objective and realistic than becoming quite imaginative while up North, with for instance the Dogma movement, realism was resurrected and later brought back to bla bla. and the movie Gomorrah resurrecting Italian neo-realism bla bla. Academics and historians could in fact play such game in recovering and resignifying history (as well as the present and the future) or just let themselves be stimulated by the accidentality of time and see what that, quite randomly brings them... too nice of a game, the current constraints of the academic patrons however wants a certain evidence and in a certain format... a good limitation?