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***Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of the Arts.
From the Singularity of the Work of Art to the Singularity of
Human Existence.***

Abstract: Starting from Rembrandt and the Ricoeurian interpretation of the famous painting *Aristotle touches the bust of Homer*, this essay focuses on the text/interview with Paul Ricoeur *Arts, Languages and Hermeneutic Aesthetics*. Trying to indicate the innovative themes of the interview, Caputo identifies (as a link-category between the philosophy of art and philosophy of life) the question of singularity, and the possibility/impossibility of communicating the naked experience that characterizes it.

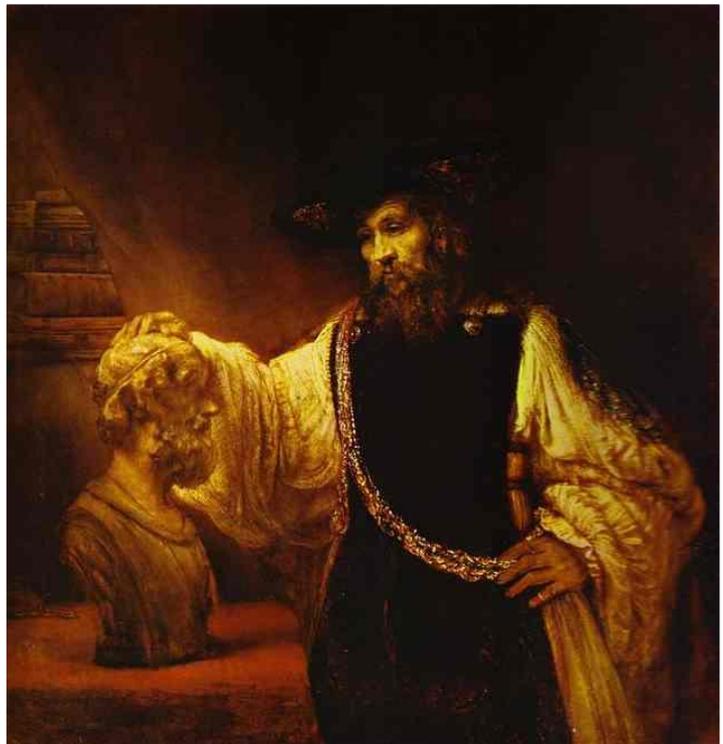
Keywords: *Hermeneutics, Arts, Singularity, Rembrandt, Communicability*

1) Aristotle ‘touches’ the bust of Homer: philosophy in dialogue with the ‘other’

«This painting by Rembrandt entitled Aristotle with a Bust of Homer, is the symbol of the philosophic endeavor, as I perceive it»¹. On the one hand, ‘the philosopher’ par excellence, Aristotle. On the other, ‘the poet’ par excellence, Homer. Philosophy, says Ricoeur, «does not begin from nothing; it begins from the Poetry»². It begins, we could say, widening the spectrum³, from the pre-philosophical, from the a-philosophical, from what is ‘other’ from itself. Aristotle does not limit himself to looking and admiring, but ‘touches’ the bust of Homer. He touches life. He wants to experience it.

*Oneself as Another*⁴ is the title of the most famous book by Ricoeur. But it is also, perhaps, the key to his hermeneutical philosophy, the root and the meaning of his interpretative and dialogic approach. It is no coincidence that many interpreters have called him «the philosopher of all dialogues»⁵. His philosophy as a matter of principle is dialogue: with the history of philosophy, of course, but also with psychoanalysis, with the sciences (the humanities and the natural sciences), with linguistics, structuralism, etc.

All of this is possible (and necessary) in Ricoeur’s view, because – we could say – philosophy is oneself as another. It is a dialogue with



¹ P. Ricoeur, *L'Unique et le Singulier*, Stanké/Alice éditions, Montréal/Bruxelles, 1999, p. 53.

² Ibid.

³ See, for example, P. Ricoeur, *Lectures 2. La contrée des philosophes*, Seuil, Paris, 1992.

⁴ Id., *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, Paris, 1990.

⁵ I take the liberty of referring to my [Introduction \(“Logoi”, 2015, I, 1\)](#).

otherness, with what is different from you.

Just as each of us would not be himself without the internal dialogue with the otherness that inhabits us (and that we ourselves are... as another), just as each of us would not be himself without the dialogue (conscious or unconscious, verbal or non-verbal) that we have always *been*, from the moment we are born until the last moment of our life (a dialogue with those around us, with the 'you', with 'everyone', with friends and with enemies, with the books we read and with the symbols of the stories: the story that we live⁶), so it also is for philosophy, which would not be itself, if it were not in internal dialogue with its own history, but also in dialogue with all that philosophy is not.

The Rembrandt painting, in Ricoeur's interpretation, reminds us of this. «Philosophy is always a second degree labor, (...) a second level of discourse»⁷. It is never 'first philosophy', but always 'second philosophy'. The work of interpretation (of *logos*, so to speak) always arises from



something that precedes it: i.e., «ordinary language, that of the sciences, psychoanalysis, poetic discourse». And that is what Ricoeur did throughout his whole life, multiplying the *others*, multiplying the discourses, languages, disciplines with which he chose to enter into dialogue. To enrich – in this mediation – philosophy itself, ... and to generate it.

Now, this is where our reflection begins: from that which actually seems to be a paradox within the Ricoeurian path. Because, if what we have said is true, if this framework is, for Ricoeur, the symbol of philosophy itself, then Ricoeurian philosophy should have poetic language, or at least the language of art in general, as its privileged partner. In fact, says Ricoeur *L'Unique et le Singulier*, when we use the term 'poetic' we understand it in a broader sense, as a language that «creates meaning», as a «creative, primitive, original and originating energy»⁸. Heidegger would say *poiesis*, creation in the broadest sense.

However, Ricoeur is not Heidegger and, to keep the dialogic spectrum of his philosophy vast, he does not limit it to a dialogue with the human sciences, or with poetry or literature or art. Indeed, one might say, he almost hides this original and intimate dialogue. He does not explicate it, advertise it, nor externalize it. So much so, that Ricoeur never dedicated a Monograph to poetry, let alone art.

Herein lies the paradox. Ricoeur does not speak in a systematic and clear way of his relationship with the poetic and the artistic. To understand it, to understand what is, *de facto*, in any case, a key to decisive self-interpretation (precisely as the choice of this painting by Rembrandt shows) we have to dig into the folds of the unspoken Ricoeur. In short, we have to look for the theme of the relationship between philosophy and art in scattered quotations and various interviews.

This is also the reason why, still today, there is no systematic reflection on Ricoeur and the hermeneutics of art (this issue of "Logoi" will attempt to begin to fill this gap). This is strange if it is true that, as we are trying to say, art and poetics in general are and remain fundamental keys (hidden, concealed, yet decisive) in Ricoeurian thought.

There are many issues at play.

⁶ I am referring to the 'threefold structure' of the 'person' in Ricoeur: *Self/Others/Institutions*. See my book *Io e tu. Una dialettica fragile e spezzata. Percorsi con Paul Ricoeur*, Stilo, Bari, 2009, pp. 114 sgg.

⁷ P. Ricoeur, *L'Unique et le Singulier*, cit., p. 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Personally, rather than Ricoeur's relationship with this or that artist or musician or filmmaker or poet, and more than strictly aesthetic issues, I am interested in the theoretical issues at play.

2) Theoretical issues at play

To understand Ricoeur's position on the theme of art (of the arts), there are (in addition to the text already mentioned, *L'Unique et le Singulier*) a couple of interviews in particular to which we must turn: *Critique and Conviction*⁹ and *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics*¹⁰ (we present the [Italian translations of this Interview in "Logoi", 2015, I, 2](#)).

They are interesting Interview (despite the fact that they are fragmentary and episodic; or perhaps because of it). They are interesting because, reading these pages, we can understand what questions Ricoeur started from when addressing the issue of artwork; and we can also understand the thinkers from whom Ricoeur takes these questions (or, in any case, with whom he enters into a dialogue). We will limit ourselves to indicating these issues in a schematic way (because we will then address only one aspect of these issues).

- First, the relationship between universal and singular in artwork (with reference to Kant and to *Critique of Judgment*); and, from Kant, as a sub-question:
- the possibility to define beauty and ugliness.
- Then, the question of the communicability of a work and its reception, which relates to...
- the issue of the temporality of an artwork (and here the references are obviously Heidegger and Gadamer), but also Hegel, in a different and complementary way.
- The relationship between copy and *mimesis* in artwork (and here again Gadamer, but even earlier, Plato and Aristotle);
- artwork as language and, therefore, as refiguration of a world (a central theme in Ricoeur, in particular in relation to literature).
- Closely related to this theme is that of the metaphorical function of art (Nietzsche, but not only; consider the long-distance dialogue with Derrida on the theme of the metaphor);
- the truth of artwork, and then art as a clear place, obviously to dispute the idea of truth as adaptation (here the references are again Heidegger and Gadamer).
- The relationship between representation and expression in an artwork;
- the change in the representative meaning of the arts in the 20th century;
- the relationship between works of art and emotions;
- the relationship of unity and difference between the different art forms.
- The need to interpret the arts 'together' to understand their common roots and their differences;
- the relationship of the arts with silence and the ineffable, and the limit-case of music (here the dialogue with Jankélévitch);
- the reciprocal gift of languages (i. e., that which the arts give to philosophy and philosophy to the arts);
- the relationship between aesthetics, ethics and religion.

Even from this (banal) list, we can see not only how many issues are involved, but how we are faced with questions that are theoretical-hermeneutical more than strictly aesthetic. On the rare occasions in which Ricoeur uses the term *aesthetics*, he does so using it as an adjective rather than a noun. His philosophy is hermeneutic. From a dialogue with other languages, knowledge, and experiences, philosophy emerges enriched the specific nuances of these *other* languages. The aesthetic nuance is one such possibility. But not the root of the question. In short, we want to say it even more strongly. *Ricoeur does not make*

⁹ P. Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction. Conversations with Francois Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, translated by K. Blamey, New York, 1998 (*Aesthetic Experience*, cap. 8), pp. 171-186.

¹⁰ *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics. Interview with Paul Ricoeur. Conducted by Jean-Marie Brohm and Magali Uhl* (September 20, 1996 in Paris), tr. engl. by R.D. Sweeney and J. Carroll: <http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/ricoeur-e6.php> ([Italian translation: P. Ricoeur, *Le arti, il linguaggio e l'estetica-ermeneutica. Intervista a cura di J.-M. Brohm e M. Uhl* \(Parigi, 20 settembre 1996\), tr. it. di A. Caputo, in "Logoi", 2015, I, 2](#)).

philosophy of art. And he is not interested in doing so. He is ‘also’ interested in art (as in other languages) because in artistic experience and in its otherness, as compared to philosophy (radical otherness), he finds some questions, questions that only the artistic experience know; questions that psychoanalysis, or science, or the history of philosophy do not ask in the same way. Ricoeur is interested in the questions that come ‘from’ the artwork (from the artworks). So, if we want to use the expression *hermeneutics of the arts*, it must be done by putting the emphasis on the first word: it is not the case of interpreting the works of art, but of understanding what the arts can give and say to hermeneutics, to the question of interpretation and, more generally, to the question about existence and its meaning.

Having established these necessary prerequisites/framework, we can now move on to the heart of our discussion.

It is clear that to give a complete idea of the hermeneutics of the arts in Ricoeur we must address all these points. Which would be impossible in this context. We will choose, then, just one subject/key, a word/key to work on; and we will leave all the other issues in the background.

We choose to present the issue, the question, about *singularity* in relation to the work of art. In fact, it seems the raw nerve (from which you can glimpse almost all the other issues mentioned above); but, most of all, it seems to me to be the *newest* issue, question, the one most particularly ‘Ricoeurian’, in comparison with all the others.

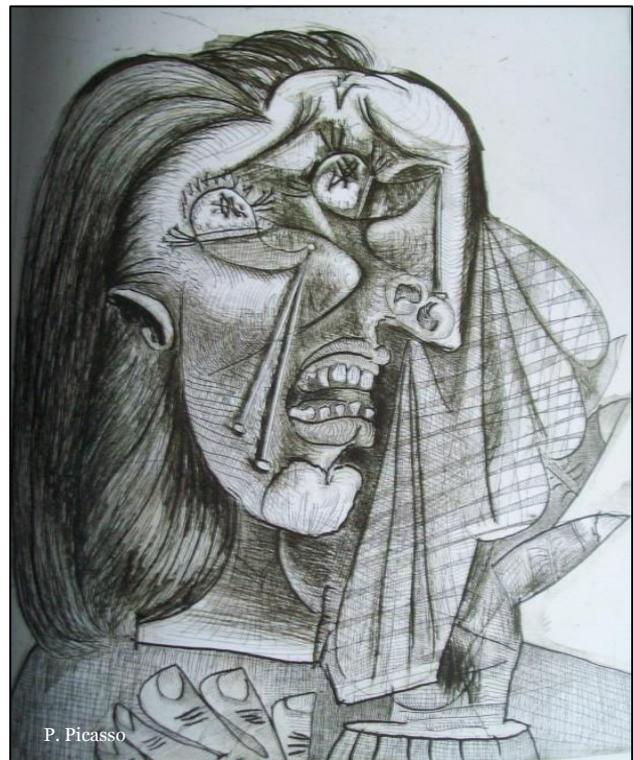
3) The universality of the communicability of artwork

We have already mentioned that the original reference here is to Kant and to the *Critique of Judgment*. Ricoeur often called himself *a post-Hegelian Kantian*: not because he was interested in the answers of Kant, but because he found the universalizing tension of the thinker (his attempt to hold the universal to the singular) to be interesting. This is the hermeneutic heritage of Kant, according to Ricoeur. This is the recovery that hermeneutics makes of Kantian tension, after Hegel, after historicism, after the risks of historical relativism. Ricoeur calls it: « the post-Kantian benefit of a return to the Kantian aesthetic»: «the reconquest of the transhistorical over the historical constitutes»¹¹.

We could also call it the recapturing of a universal/universalizing moment in the singular/individualizing moment.

Of course, today we can no longer do this in Kantian terms, we can no longer think that there is a universal *beautiful*. Today less than ever. Who could say that ‘Munch’ or ‘Picasso’ are universally beautiful?

On the other hand, today we no longer have any illusions that classical art was universally beautiful.



¹¹ *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics. Interview with Paul Ricoeur:*
<http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/ricoeur-e.php>.

Just think of Aphrodite of Knidos (Praxiteles), which was rejected by its buyers, because it did not meet the criteria for beauty of its era. Classical beauty does not exist. It is a myth.

So, Ricoeur reminds us (learning from the authors mentioned before: Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Gadamer) that a work of art has its own trans-historicity. It exceeds its period, despite being created in its period («the work of art escapes the history of its constitution»). «The result here is in excess of its»¹². Therefore, it can speak to every era, beyond its era. This is its first form of universality, universalizability.

A work of art is universal (or at least can be universal) because it speaks. Because it communicates, says Ricoeur. It is communicable¹³.

So, then Ricoeur shifts the problem of the universality of the artwork to the aspect that interests him most. We have someone/something that speaks (the artist, the artwork) and someone who sees, listens, reads, interprets, uses, receives. Just as a book is potentially addressed to «a temporally open and indefinite public»¹⁴, so is every work of art. But what makes it possible for a work to be communicable? Ricoeur responds with a term we could call typical of a certain French philosophy: monstration. « the fact that a work of art aims, beyond the intentionality of its author, and insofar as it is a work of art, to be shared, therefore first of all to be shown»¹⁵.

A work made to show itself, that is, to communicate, that is, to create sharing «between the creator and his»¹⁶.

This is evident in what Ricoeur (with Gouhier) calls the arts «of two times»: «those where the existence of the work requires a second time, which is that of its recreation: theatrical representation, musical execution, choreographic realization beginning with the writing of a libretto, of a score, of a script»¹⁷.

It is clear that a work is made to be shown. There is no theater if not in front of a viewer. There is no concert if not in front of a listener. But, according to Ricoeur (and here Gadamer docet), this also applies to those that Gouhier calls the «arts of one time», («those where the existence of the work coincides with its creation: painting and sculpture, for example»¹⁸), because, even in this case, what makes an artwork an artwork (and lets it continue to communicate beyond the limits of time) is its ability to re-create itself in those who come into contact with it.

Indeed, «it is perhaps here, in this indefinite capacity to be reincarnated, and in a way each time historically different, but substantially and essentially founding, that the profound signified»¹⁹ of a work of art emerges.



¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.: «One could say that the work of art escapes the history of its constitution, and it is this temporality of a second degree which constitutes the temporality of communicability. This transhistorical communicability is the rational equivalent of objectivity, as much in the beautiful as in the sublime».

¹⁴ Ivi, <http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/ricoeur-e2.php>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. [see H. Gouhier, *Le théâtre et les arts à deux temps*, Flammarion, Paris, 1989].

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

It is in ‘monstration’ (i. e.: showing itself in one time, but being potentially open to infinite reception in all times) that lays the foundation for the possibility of a work to communicate. And communication is nothing more than recreation, reincarnation, «‘monstration’ renewed endlessly»²⁰: interpretation. This is clear, immediate, in the case of reading a book.

Ricoeur says: «each plot is singular and has exactly the status of the work of art according to Kant: the singularity capable of being shared»²¹.

Each book, we might say, is *one and one hundred thousand*. Indeed, it is the whole of all interpretations (the ‘history of effects’) that have been given to that book. And every time it is my book, because the story speaks to me and it tells me things it does not tell others. This is the core of Ricoeurian hermeneutics: the aim of the interpretation is not so much, or only, to understand the work of art (try to understand what the author meant, his language, his historical or psychological context), but to understand oneself in front of the work of art, understand one’s self.

Here Ricoeur recaptures a metaphor of Proust. Novels are like magnifying glasses that authors give to readers, so that they can look inside themselves and try to discover parts of themselves that, before reading that novel, were completely unknown²².

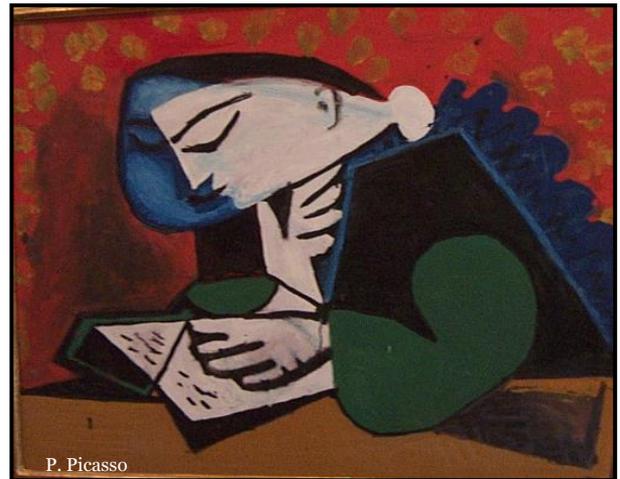
However, this applies to every work of art, if we really encounter it, if the encounter really happens. In the same way that, if I let myself be met by a person (if I let the person in front of me question who I am), after having met him/her, I am no longer the same (I may come

out of it enriched, or wounded, but, in any case, he/she will have left a mark on me, I will be changed), in the same way, if the work of art speaks to me and if I let it talk, this encounter will change me.

It is the process of reconfiguration; or, we can say, the self/other dialectics, which we spoke of at the beginning.

Ricoeur says: «as reader, I find myself only by losing myself»²³. It is the first moment: the distance from self, from the world; it is losing oneself in reading, losing oneself in the work of art, losing oneself in the other: because I want to listen, I want to try to understand what it has to tell me, I want to be enriched by its otherness.

Then there is the return to self, the reconfiguration. I close the book; the concert ends; I leave the museum; the dialogue with that person ends. What did he/she/it tell me, in this meeting? How have I been changed? How has my identity changed, thanks to that otherness?



²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ivi: <http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/ricoeur-e3.php>

²² In *A la recherche du temps perdu* (in a passage loved and quoted by Ricoeur), Marcel Proust writes: «I thought more modestly of my book and it would be inaccurate even to say that I thought of those who would read it as ‘my’ readers. For, it seemed to me that they would not be ‘my’ readers but the readers of their own selves, my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers- it would be my book but with its help I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside themselves».

²³ P. Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and Human Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 144

It is what Ricoeur calls ‘mimetic reconfiguration’. In the case of the work of art, «the creativity of the art consists, penetrating the word of everyday experience in order to rework it from inside»²⁴.

However, this is clear, and, in any case, in our opinion the originality of Ricoeur’s discourse lies not so much, or only, in this. Gadamer spoke of this perhaps in a clearer and more original way. Let us return to the problem of singularity, because it is here, as we said, that Ricoeur’s argument plays on a particular and paradoxical level: perhaps questionable; but that, for this very reason, makes us think. In fact, at this point Ricoeur turns to Kant, and tries to recover another of his questions. We could say: the one about genius. Why is every doodle not a work of art? What is the secret of an artwork? Why does one work of art speak to me, communicate to me, tell me something, and another does not?

4) Why does ‘one’ work of art speak to ‘me’?

Of course, we could move the conversation to the historical level again (Ricoeur also does so and remembers: only looking to the past can we say with certainty that a work was a work of art; if it has exceeded its historical significance and continued to speak in later times). However, this is a question of art history, or of the history of art criticism. It is not a hermeneutic-existential question. The hermeneutic-existential question is instead: why does this work speak to me? And the question is not trivial.

It is not only a challenge to the aesthetic-relativistic theory of taste. It is obvious and much too easy (more now than at the time of Kant) to say that there is not an objective beauty or pleasure, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so what I like speaks to me. So, I like Magritte and Magritte speaks to me. Another person likes Bach and Bach speaks to him. A third party likes Godard and Godard speaks to its. Sure. Obviously. But the question is: what makes a work (in its singularity, in its difference from all the other works) speak to me, in my singularity, in my difference from all the others: a difference that is not only of taste, but also of history, culture, world, origin. And the question is decisive, in our opinion, because it touches (perhaps beyond what Ricoeur himself realized) the heart of the hermeneutics theory.

Indeed, it is the same question that I ask myself when I am with someone else. And I choose him: to have a dialogue, to interweave our stories, of friendship, of love, of sharing, of work, or even just to walk a stretch of road together: why does his/her singularity meet my singularity? Is an ‘us’ truly possible?

Where does this sharing (communication, communion) begin and where does it lead?

Even here, in our view, the work of art can become a hermeneutical model. So, we return to our question, which is only seemingly trivial.

Why does this work speak to me? A question that clearly supposes at least two others: why and how does a work of art speak? And: why and how do I listen to it, can I listen to it?



²⁴ Id., *Critique and Conviction*, cit., p. 173.

We have to start from the discussion about the communication/communicability of the artwork. What is it? Ricoeur links the term ‘communicability’ with the term ‘contagiousness’. «Communicability is the modality of the universal without concepts; it is a matter of a powder train, of contagion (*de traînée de poudre, de contagion*) from one case to another»²⁵.

It is a communicability, universality, linguisticity (so to speak) that is universal without being conceptual. We could say (following the suggestive metaphor of fire and contagion) that it moves on an emotional level.

However, of course, Ricoeur does not believe in the ‘hysteria of the masses’ and the contagion he speaks of is not unbridled pathos.

Let us stop this, though, for the moment: it is a communicability in which what is at play is not so much, and not only, the level of verbal communication, but the imaginative-affective level. It is a communicability in which what is at stake is not so much the conceptual level, as the iconic-emotional level. Embracing and reintroducing an insight of Heidegger’s, Ricoeur points out that our existence is affective (first of all, and more than reflexive) and the infinity of our emotions is varied with nuances often unknown to us, not yet explored. Our soul is like a musical instrument (see *Music as Limit-Case*²⁶). We are like a ‘musical instrument’, that vibrates differently, depending on how it is *touched* and depending on the keys (or strings) which are lightly touched. It can be the melody of the world, of a particular event (happy or sad) that *plays* it. It can be the symphony of love or the screech of rage, of a struggle, of despair that makes it vibrate. But even reading a book, listening to a poem, looking at a picture, or listening to a song can modulate the strings of our soul. «Although, at the limit, could not one say that to each piece of art there corresponds a *mood*? The work of art in effect is referred to an emotion which has disappeared as emotion, but which has been preserved as a work»²⁷.



5) The singular grasp of the artist and of the receiver

This is the key of the discussion. The essence of a work of art consists in this: it preserves, concentrates an emotion in a work of art. It ‘iconifies’ it. As a symbol concentrates in itself several possible meanings, in the same way, a work of art concentrates in itself a possible universe of emotions.

Of course, this applies to every word, to every experience, but, in the case of art – exactly because there are fewer words, there is less concept (there is more silence, less conceptual representation, more space for the *mood*) – there is a greater concentration of imaginative-emotional meaning.

So, we are ready to respond to our question: why does a work of art speak, how does it communicate? «The work expresses the word by iconizing the singular emotional relation of the artist to the word, which I have called the ‘*mood*’ »²⁸.

²⁵ *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics. Interview with Paul Ricoeur:*
<http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/ricoeur-e.php>.

²⁶ See A. Caputo, *Paul Ricoeur e la musica come caso-limite nella sinfonia delle arti.*, “Logoi”, 2015, I, 2.

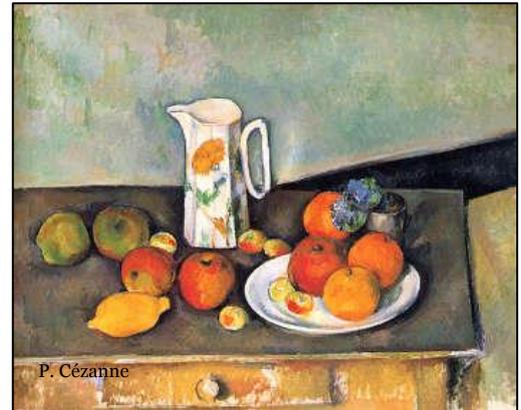
²⁷ *Arts, Language and Hermeneutic Aesthetics. Interview with Paul Ricoeur:*
<http://www.philagora.net/philo-fac/ricoeur-e4.php>

²⁸ Id., *Critique and Conviction*, cit., p. 181.

There is, at the beginning, the artist's singular emotional relationship, with regard to the world. There is, says Ricoeur, a 'singular grasp' of reality. Which is not related to whether a work of art is more or less similar to reality.



«If [a work] deserves to figure today in our imaginary museum, it is because (...) its genuine object was not the fruit bowl or the face of the young girl in the turban but the singular grasp by Cézanne or Vermeer of the singular question posed to them»²⁹.

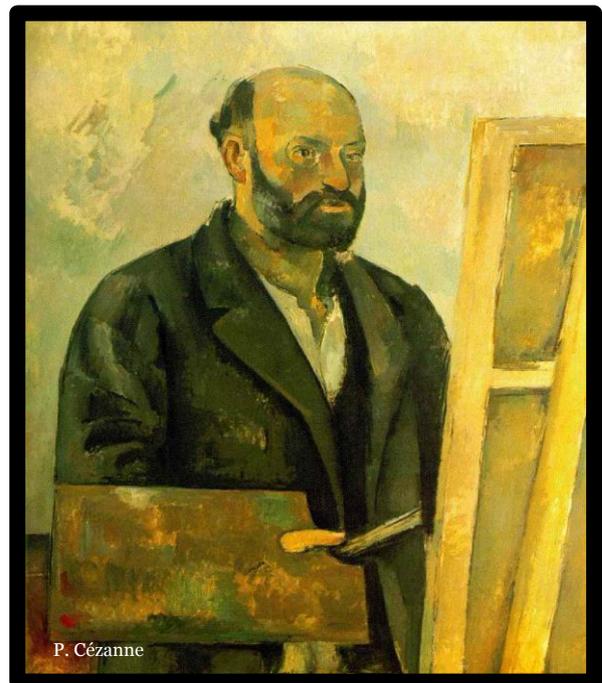


A work of art is a singular grasp (a singular emotional relationship) by the artist, a grasp of the singular question that is put to the artist in the expression of the world. What does this mean? An obvious example is Monet, with his water lilies, to which, not coincidentally, we have dedicated the cover and Editorial. Another example is Cézanne. Why did Cézanne feel the need to make more than fifty copies of *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*? Is it not always the same mountain? No. It's never the same.

It is as if it were necessary for Cézanne to do justice to something that was not the idea of the mountain – not the terms we use in general discourse – but that represented the singularity of *this* mountain, here and now, (...) what insists on receiving the iconic augmentation the painter alone can confer upon it³⁰.

The mountain does not exist as an idea, as a universal. There is only 'this' mountain 'here and now', calling me, asking to be painted, asking to receive that emotional concentration (iconic increase) that only the painter can give it. There is no universal question, but a singular question that requires a singular response: from the singularity of the artist, in the singularity of this particular situation of time, space, atmosphere, and feeling.

The artist is the person who perceives (Ricoeur says) this question, this appeal, this «urgency of an unpaid debt with respect to something singular that had to be said in a singular manner»³¹. And the artist 'says' it. And the surprising thing is that this singular communicates something universal.



²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 178.

³¹ Ivi, p. 179.

[The] naked experience as such was incommunicable; but, as soon as it can be problematized in the form of a singular question which is adequately answered in the form of a response that is singular as well, then it acquires communicability, it becomes universalizable³².



This is the wonderful strangeness, the amazing possibility of art. Experience (of the artist, but of every man, every one of us) is always naked experience. Incommunicable. Like each unique experience (mine only), like each individual emotion (mine only). How can I express it, how can I communicate it? The other will perceive it starting from himself, as his. And not as I live it, as mine. But in every naked experience there is a question, there is an appeal, an urgency, a need: to be said, communicated; which

is not only mine, which can be shared, shareable.

How is this possible? The mystery of art shows us a way. The painter (musician, filmmaker, poet, writer), with colors, lines, fullness and emptiness, silences and notes, moving images, metaphors and narratives, tries to concentrate his singular experience in a particular moment of his life and his story. He iconifies his emotional relationship with the world: here and now. He renders the different aspects of this 'here and now' «ever denser» and he «intensifies them in condensing them»: in the same way that a symbol, or a metaphor does. He gathers a «polysemy»³³, which is the infinite polysemy of experience, of life. «The work of art can have an effect comparable to that of metaphor: integrating levels of sense that are overlaid, preserved and contained together»³⁴.

Ordinary language, in his practice, in the wear and tear of use, in becoming a mere instrument of communication, often fails in communication. It fails precisely where what it would like to communicate is deeper and more intense. Indeed, it does not reach those depths. It remains in the superficiality of general communication; it remains in the general, in the generic.



³² Ivi, p. 179.

³³ Ivi, p. 172.

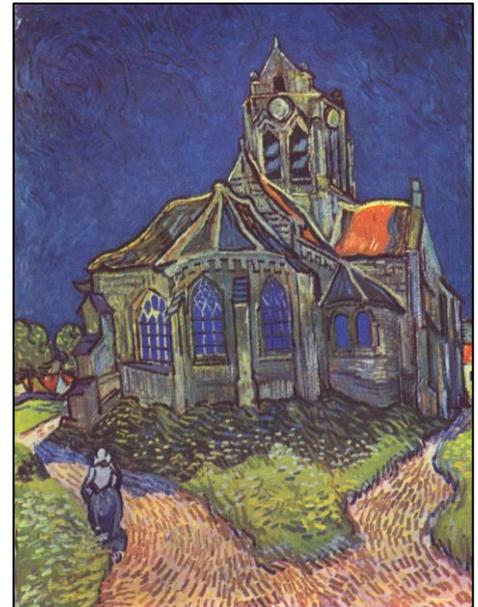
³⁴ Ibid.



This generality (the ordinary conceptuality of language, in which each word corresponds to one thing), fails in expression, because it is not able to say, in the way art does, *this is a pipe*; this is love; this is pain. It is not the same with the universality of art, which, instead, knows that experience is singular. And is only concerned with communicating its own singularity.

No one can die for me. No one can live for me. No one can see this cathedral for me and paint it for me. I already know that my response to the appeal of this cathedral is singular, as my experience before it is sacred.

«Van Gogh's *Church at Auvers-sur-Oise* (...) does not represent the village church (...), but materializes in a visible work what remains invisible, namely the unique and probably crazed experience that van Gogh had of it when he painted it»³⁵. Therefore, it can speak, can communicate in depth: because it is not communicating an abstract and general concept (as ordinary, common language risks doing). It speaks one to one, as Kierkegaard would say. It «involves each time a spectator, a listener, a reader who is also in a relation of singularity with the singularity of the work»³⁶.



Every work of art is the experience of a singularity, who speaks to a singularity. And, because of this, it says different things to each of us. But, exactly for this reason, because it speaks to the individual in his singularity, it can, in principle, speak to all individuals; «it is the first act of a communication of the work to others and, virtually, to all»³⁷.

Then, you can apply the words of Zarathustra to each work of art: a work for everyone and for no one. Not for anyone who is unwilling to be reached, in his singularity, by the singularity of that work of art; but for all those who want to be touched and transformed by its otherness. «The work is like a trail of fire issuing from itself, reaching me and reaching beyond me to the universality of humanity»³⁸. It is the *powder train/contagion* of the communicability of the work mentioned earlier.

Here then is what the work of art does. «To follow the requirements of singularity to the end is to give the best chance of the greatest universality: such is the paradox that must probably be maintained»³⁹.

Therefore, the more the artist will be 'that singularity', the more the artist will not be affected by profit, by trade, by what is fashionable, the more the artist will perhaps be outdated, counter-current, but 'singular', ready to tell (as only he knows how, and only he can) the urgency of what inside him asks to be told ... the more his work will speak, will communicate its singularity; and the more it will communicate to the individual (to us in our singularity) universally. Indeed, experience, emotion, and life are singular; and even art. The opposite is not art, but a repetition of what has already been said, thought, communicated.

So, on this we will trail off, leaving this train of thought unsettled on two questions. They deserve another space and another time.

³⁵ Ivi, pp. 179-180.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 180.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

6) Concluding: what about life? And philosophy?

First of all: and life? Is not the process that we have described in art perhaps the fundamental process of all forms of communication? Is it not true that when we want to communicate ourselves to others – when I want to communicate my singular life, to another individual – I can only do it by fully expressing my singularity? Is it not true that the more we are ourselves, in our truth (even contradictory and torn, not masked by what is generally said and thought of us), the more we strip off our masks



and we show in our fragility (the fragility of our naked existence, poor in words, poor in certainties, poor in generalities), the more we are not influenced by profit, by trade, by what is fashionable, the more we are perhaps outdated, counter-current, but singular (ready to tell, as only we can tell, the urgency of what inside us, inside me, here and now, in my singular history of life, asks to be told) ... the more I really talk, I really communicate, because then it is 'my' life that speaks: before and more than my words?

...

And philosophy? Let me conclude on this issue. Scorching. But I think it is the challenge that thinkers like Ricoeur (as well as many other French, Derrida, Deleuze, Nancy; and, allow me say, thinkers such as Heidegger and Nietzsche, singular thinkers, thinkers on singularity) delivered to us, with their deconstruction of metaphysical-conceptual, abstractive philosophy: the 'universal' philosophy in the general and generic sense of the term 'universal'.

And philosophy? If philosophy is the work of the concept and only the work of the concept, can it ever be singular? Can it ever communicate anything? What is the relationship between singularity and philosophy, between emotion and concept? Can philosophy be communication between one individual and another? And, if so, how?

Or perhaps it always has been so, despite 'philosophy' itself (if since the time of Plato, «as light that is kindled by a leaping spark», only «as a result of communion», of a life lived together, through dialogue together, conceived together⁴⁰).

Perhaps it still is so, in spite of us, professors of philosophy, and writers of the concept. Perhaps philosophy still continues to speak today – within and beyond the *logos* – from the singularity of those who thought (the great philosophers of the past) and of those who still try to think in the present (we little philosophy professors) to the singularity of those who read (a book of philosophy), or listen (to a lesson in philosophy).

Can philosophy still communicate something today? And how, if in the lives of those who philosophize, teach philosophy, study philosophy, write about philosophy, life does

⁴⁰ Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 341 c-d.

not first speak? Is it not true, even in philosophy, as shown by the more radical philosophers, in their radical tragedy, that you cannot communicate but in the singular?

Perhaps, even when a philosophy ‘speaks’, it is because it is life that speaks in that philosophy (the urgency of life, the radical questions of life, the wounds and the depths of life ... speak in that philosophy): before and more than the words that that philosophy has been able to say or will ever say.

