



# Beauty and Life

Exploring  
the anthropology  
behind the fine arts

edited by  
Rafael Jiménez Cataño

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# The Disruption of Science and the Triumph of Wonder. The “Freudiana” Case<sup>1</sup>

GIUSEPPE MADONNA & MICHELA CORTINI

## I. INTRODUCTION

This essay questions art as a supreme form of encounter with the meaning of things, with the sense of feeling and perceiving, with the meaning of life; a concept proposed by the philosopher, scientist and theologian Pavel Florenskij on several occasions, with a not too veiled opposition to the scientific method.

If we start from the interesting metaphor of the map and the territory, of gnoseological and epistemological derivation, we can wonder about science and art as maps that allow us to cross an impervious and hypercomplex territory which reality represents. Our essay, more closely, wants to raise a question about which map is more appropriate when it comes to describe the territory of the human soul: art or science?

Art and science, therefore, as two possible, and in part opposing, maps of a single territory; two maps with many differences, both aimed at grasping the motivations and the deepest reasons for human action and feeling.

In order to demonstrate how and how much art can become a very challenging competitor to the scientific method, we will use the case of *Freudiana*, an opera and a musical album by The Alan Parsons Project that aims to offer a window on the origins and the scientific assumptions of the

<sup>1</sup> A first version of this essay, in Italian, is currently under review as a paper for an Italian humanities journal.

clinical method proposed by Freud. In detail, we will analyse *Freudiana* by resorting to Florenskij's concrete metaphysics, and to his gnoseological outlook, with the intent to demonstrate how and how much the artist's astonishment is able to grasp reality in a surprisingly competitive way compared to the theoretical conceptualizations proposed by science.

## 2. THE DISRUPTION OF SCIENCE: AT THE ORIGIN OF THE METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL OF PAVEL FLORENSKIJ

There are many writings in which Pavel Florenskij questions about art and science, making his own philosophical proposal revolve around a main pillar: wonder. Astonishment, wonder, intended as a deeply philosophical method, is opposed to the scientific method, preferring to anchor itself to the common thought, as Florenskij poetically demonstrates in *Dialektika*.<sup>2</sup> It is in this writing that, starting from an apology of the common sense, Florenskij unhinges the bases of the scientific knowledge, arriving to sustain that “*actually* Science does not exist, while the different sciences exist and by the mere fact of coexisting they deny each other.”<sup>3</sup> Each science is intolerant of the point of view and object of the other sciences, having been born with the precise purpose of proposing an explanation limited to the boundaries of its own sphere. The fields of the sciences remain separated from one another, decreeing an impossible unity of knowledge, a unity towards which the philosopher tends with nostalgia.

It is interesting to take a closer look at the relationship that philosophy weaves with both common sense and the sciences. Recalling what Goethe sustained, Goethe to whom in his *Memoirs*<sup>4</sup> he declares a very important intellectual debt,

<sup>2</sup> Pavel Aleksandrovič Florenskij, *Stupore e dialettica* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Florenskij, *Ai miei figli. Memorie di giorni passati* (Milano: Mondadori, 2011).

defining him as his “mental nourishment,” Florenskij seems to echo the famous motto “grey is the theory, green is the tree of life,” which is due precisely to Goethe. Life is represented as disordered and chaotic, but also alive and in clear contrast with death. And, therefore, “Philosophy can meekly endure the mere *absence* of method in common opinions, but it is merciless towards the *misrepresentation* of life in the method of Science. To the former, Philosophy stretches out its hand, while it can only reproach Science for its truncated pretensions.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Dialektika* Florenskij recognizes as the main method of philosophy the dialectic understood as a living relationship with reality and as an “uninterrupted experiment on reality in order to reach the depths of its deepest states.”<sup>6</sup> The word “experiment” is very interesting, because of the scientific value it implies; even in the common sense, experiments, in fact, are *scientific*. Florenskij opens this word, *experiment*, and “unwraps” it from the scientific envelope in which it is deliberately caged in the first decades of the 1900s: he “frees” it from the scientific grip to give it back to life. Therefore, the experiment becomes uninterrupted because philosophy, life, cannot be satisfied with *one* and only one experiment. “Science is satisfied with a single experiment and, having constructed a scheme and wrapped it in it, works on the scheme that it wraps; philosophy seeks a never-ending experiment, with thought that shuttles from itself to life and from life back to itself. Such a spool is the dialectic, the method proper to philosophy.”<sup>7</sup> The textile metaphor of the spool allows us to visualize a warp and weft able to build, to weave, to develop infinitely in time and space. In this sense, no answer, as well as no pattern, can be definitive; it calls into question new questions, raises to

<sup>5</sup> Florenskij, *Stupore e dialettica*, 46.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

life that is elusive or, to quote Florenskij's own words, "life drags by the reins a recalcitrant science."<sup>8</sup> And it is life that imposes wonder as a method, undermining schematism and theorizations.

### 3. FROM PHILOSOPHY TO ART: THE TRIUMPH OF WONDER

In other words, in clear contrast with contemporary scientism, Florenskij accuses modernity of being the harbinger of a mechanistic vision of knowledge that analytically breaks down and separates. The gnoseological and epistemological proposal he becomes spokesman of, vice versa, is magical-religious, in the etymologic sense of the term *relegere*, embodying a cognitive impetus that does not want to disjoin but rather to unite, unify, *bind* in a vision that makes of the contact between elements, but also of the contact between men, of the collective and the interpersonal, a supporting dimension. In this sense, art becomes one of the most mature forms of philosophical knowledge, becoming a self-representation of life and not an aesthetic representation of it.

It is in a particular way in "The Reverse Perspective"<sup>9</sup> that Florenskij thematizes the aforementioned difference, comparing modern perspective with the pictorial representations of Russian icons. The latter are presented as "defective," even if beautiful, just because they are based on a perspective that Florenskij calls *reverse*, which openly conflicts with the perspective canon, typical of some artistic representations, which are correct but inert. A unity that condenses different points of view appears in Russian icons, even capable of showing and revealing back and frontal planes at the same time, a whole that rebels against the idea of folding, cutting off one or more dimensions. The icons,

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>9</sup> Florenskij, *La Prospettiva Rovesciata e altri scritti* (Roma: Gangemi, 2003).

created on two-dimensional planes, have the incredible claim of revealing not only three-dimensionality, but all the dimensions on which life feeds, unifying space and time.

Pure art, which the icons represent, is what allows us to access the truth of being, without structures that act as an intermediary and that would inevitably be violent, like Procrustean beds ready to vivisect, “forcing” life into predetermined patterns. It seems, in fact, that what bothers Florenskij is the predetermination that would sanction the primacy of the observer over the observed, of the scientist’s intellect over reality. Florenskij’s proposal overturns this primacy and sanctions a natural order of knowing, dictated by the opening of the eyes and the stretching of the ears; in other words, we are talking about the *wonder*, able to know, more vivid in a child than in a scientist. It is not by chance that art as a door opened wide on reality is, for Florenskij, a “childish,” primitive art, an art not yet “touched” by layers of theories and rules, an art able to listen to reality, no matter if this is a sunset or the emotional response to a sunset. Art as a form of knowledge asks only for closeness, the breaking down of distance, distance understood as profoundly diabolical in spite of its presumed objectivity (not by chance, the etymology of this adjective, *diabolical*, derives from *diaballo*: to divide); a closeness that is not like that of the reflection in a mirror, but rather rich in the possibility of entering the mirror, of crossing it exactly like Alice, becoming a *royal door*, not to look at oneself, but to discover and discover oneself through art. Such a vision of art sensibly distances us from the metaphor of the map and the territory from which we started and that deserves, at this point, an important clarification. For Florenskij, in fact, art cannot be a representative map; it is rather and always a territory to be crossed, a door that opens or, to use his own words, a window that is always made of light, because, trivially, imagined on a closed wall it would not be a window, it would be

something else; in other words, the window partly coincides with the air and the light that it allows to cross.

It is clear that such a conception of art questions the social mandate attributed to the artist, as well as the self-awareness that every artist should be able to develop with respect to the motivations of his art. In this regard, the words of a contemporary artist, Bruce Nauman, who summarizes in the neon sign “The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths” what he feels is the mandate assigned to him, are definitely interesting. It is particularly the word “revealing” that seems to echo Florenskij’s proposal; art reveals, not represents. And it is interesting that the horizon Nauman yearns for is the world, not the restricted circle of technicians or the community of scientists, but the entire world. And it is as if Florenskij, even though he had not seen Nauman’s famous neon light, anticipates it, proposing art as a *royal door* that opens up the entire world, everyone, to the essence of things: the technician, the scientist, the housewife...

Florenskij’s evaluation of the works of art in “The Reverse Perspective”<sup>10</sup> is enlightening, where he explicitly emphasizes not so much the artist’s ability to reproduce reality according to the canonical perspective, but rather the ability to transfer a whole, including the soul; thus, paradoxically, the perfect icon becomes a dead photocopy, incapable of vibrating with life, while the icon of the reverse perspective, whose artistic canons are revealed, is capable of life and impact.

Before going into the analysis of the proposed case, it is opportune to remember that *Freudiana* is certainly not the first, and probably not even the last, work of art dedicated to the theoretical proposal developed by Freud and/or to therapeutic techniques somehow derived from it. Without going too far, in terms of space and time, it will be enough here to recall the work of the Italian poet Vivian Lamarque

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

who dedicates three collections of poems to the relationship with her Jungian analyst and who succeeds in concentrating in a few verses the whole universe that *happens* between a patient and her/his therapist.

#### 4. THE CASE METHOD

Having chosen a case study as the methodological pillar and form of the paper, in this paragraph we will present the reasons that inspired us, clarifying how such a choice is the natural precipitate of the research object that interest us. At a closer look, actually, we could see in our paper several interrelated objects of study. First of all, we could undoubtedly say that we are interested in dialoguing with Florenskij in order to guess which is the elective cognitive and informative method for psychological sciences, “using” *Freudiana* to demonstrate what the Russian theologian claimed about art as a supreme form of knowledge compared to the scientific method (in fact, this is what we claimed throughout the paper).

We could, however, with the same dynamic, say that we are interested, at a more specific level, in reflecting on psychoanalysis and returning an effective summary of it, “using” the *Freudiana* case for this purpose.

What does case analysis consist of? And why is it a methodological choice consistent with our objects of inquiry? To answer this question, it may be useful to refer to the querelle between quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis that has marked the recent history of scientific psychology. These two opposing research paradigms have, in fact, both shown limits in gnoseological terms that we have presented elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> calling for the development of a triangular research system, capable, in other words, of enhancing the strengths in each of these approaches.

<sup>11</sup> Michela Cortini, “Mix-method research in applied psychology,” *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* 5-23 (2014).

The quantitative method has had the undoubted value of allowing us to overcome the introspective method, marking the birth of so-called scientific psychology. On the other hand, however, this approach has undergone a “computational drift,” anchored to the development of statistics, which has transformed observation and analysis into the ability to apply very complex statistical tests. Moreover, “usually the quantitative methods of analysis are based on data collection techniques where it is the researcher herself/himself who imposes the range of answers among which the subjects under investigation will make their choice (think of the survey method), with consequences in terms of risk of manipulation of the setting. The greatest risk is that one of validating excellent theories with sophisticated statistical techniques; theories that are obviously vivid in the researcher’s mind, but that often do not have a true correspondence in reality in terms of the constructs under investigation... The qualitative paradigm has recently experienced, in our opinion, a paradoxically symmetrical drift in comparison to that one suffered by quantitative methods. We are referring to the postmodern turn in the social sciences, which took place at the end of the 1980s and which, in our opinion, represents an involution and not, as many have argued, an evolution,<sup>12</sup> reversing the power play between reality and interpretation. In other words, postmodern philosophy, which was born from the ashes of the quantitative drift, has ended up favouring an approach that undermines the very ontology of the phenomena and subjects under investigation in favour of the interpreter, in favour, once again, of the subjective. Reality in its ontological objectivity does not seem to be of interest or even exist as long as it does not encounter a user of some kind capable of restoring mean-

<sup>12</sup> Karl E. Weick, *Sensemaking in organizations*. Vol. 3. London: Sage, 1995.



ing to it. What frightens us is the relativism and weakness of a scientific position that naively (?) affirms that the only force capable of giving life and subsistence to things and phenomena is the point of view of a subject, her/his ability to give meaning. Giving meaning, should, instead, strictly speaking, follow the datum of existence.”<sup>13</sup>

The case method seems to respond to both these drifts, preferring on the one hand an intensive, vertical type of data collection, in clear opposition to the quantitative system that focuses on a few aspects, the presumed “universals” of which it goes to ascertain the presence on large numbers of subjects; on the other hand, rejecting the drift of qualitative methods, intended as focused on the interpreter, wanting rather to return a map that paradoxically coincides with the territory, in line with Florenskij’s metaphor of the window-light, totally focused on the data in itself.

In the key in which we intend to “use” the method of cases, we move along this approach, to such an extent that the case is offered not to the eye of the super-specialist capable of reading it with scientific categories by force of adeptness, but rather to the common eye.

*Freudiana*, therefore, is the case that offers itself to the eye and the ear of common sense with the double pretension of testing Florenskij’s gnoseological system and of projecting it “crashingly” into the psychoanalytic universe, through a channel as direct as the sense of hearing is.

In more technical terms, “Case study research involves intensive analysis of an individual unit—e.g. a person, a community or an organisation. As such, case studies provide an opportunity for the researcher to gain a deep holistic view of the research problem, and may facilitate describing, understanding and explaining a research problem

<sup>13</sup> Cortini, “Mix-method research in applied psychology,” 904.

or situation.”<sup>14</sup> The case aspires to express a heuristic power for the scientist and an equal popular-conciliatory power for common sense.

##### 5. *FREUDIANA* BY THE ALAN PARSONS PROJECT:

###### BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTES AND GENERAL FRAMEWORK OF THE WORK

Sigmund Freud dedicated much of his life to studying the human soul and was attracted to many forms of art, aesthetic expressions of the inner self. Strangely enough, the father of psychoanalysis, a lover of painting, sculpture and literature, was never interested in music, despite the fact that the Vienna of his years was the cradle of many famous composers. Yet music is a language that allows the artist to represent the inexpressible and the listener to cross the boundaries of that eloquence that Freud himself considered deceptive and not very exhaustive.

Listening to Ludwig van Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, it is not difficult to understand that there are states of mind that can be expressed and understood exclusively through the language of music, given that, sometimes, words and figurative arts have to deal with a limit of approximation that represents an insurmountable barrier to externalization.

But while Freud never showed interest in music, music has often dealt with him and countless artists have cited him in their lyrics, dedicated songs to him or written entire albums about his precious work, as Eric Woolfson did in 1990 with *Freudiana*.

Together with Alan Parsons, Woolfson gave life to the historic group *The Alan Parsons Project*, which produced works that became milestones of progressive rock. *Freudiana* represents the moment of the formal separation of the mythical duo. For fans of the group it was a rather ambig-

<sup>14</sup> Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Vol. 5 (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 109.

uous phase, since their artistic collaboration was not completely interrupted and the same album *Freudiana* was marketed both with only the name of Eric Woolfson on the cover and with the words *The Alan Parsons Project*.

It seems that one of the main causes of the separation were the conflicting ideas of the two partners about the destination of the work, as Alan Parsons wanted *Freudiana* to be their eleventh album, while Woolfson was thinking of making a musical.

For this reason, in addition to the commercial white-cover album, a black-cover album was recorded, known as “Black Freudiana,” sung in German and structurally revised for stage acting. The album was available only in the theatres that hosted the musical and, predictably, the debut was at the Theatre an der Wien.

*Freudiana* is a concept album, like all the works of the Project, and has 18 tracks. Also tested is the alternation of instrumental pieces and sung with connotation typically progressive rock, masterfully combined with hints of more styles that enhance the originality and elegance of the work.

For obvious reasons of space, we will limit ourselves to presenting those pieces that we believe are most capable of representing how art can serve science, becoming an incredibly clear and universal instrument with which to reach a decidedly vast and non-technical public, made up not of experts but rather of ordinary people. In other words, we want to show how *Freudiana* is able, in the time and space contained in an album, to enclose and divulge the main cornerstones of the psychoanalytic proposal.

To this end, we will propose the analysis of the different pieces, enclosing them in different categories; first, we will retrace the process that leads to the decision to go into analysis, with the different procedural aspects that distinguish this special kind of therapy. Secondly, we will analyse two pillars of Freudian thought and psychoanalytic practice:

the Oedipus complex<sup>15</sup> and the interpretation of dreams,<sup>16</sup> referring to several clinical cases that are hidden behind *Freudiana* passages and that follow what can be found in the reports written by Freud himself. Finally, we will analyse the historical-critical parabola that led from the birth of psychoanalysis to its revisitation by post-Freudian critics.

## 6. ANALYSIS UNDERTAKING

When we think of psychoanalysis it is easy to frame it, exclusively, as a *therapeutic* method. We would like to underline, here, how psychoanalysis is placed *in primis* as a therapy, and in this case as a word-therapy to solve problems and discomforts of psychological nature, but also, in parallel, as an instrument of self-knowledge. In other words, it is not so rare arriving at a psychoanalytic pathway only for the desire of self-knowledge, without this implying, necessarily, a discomfort or a previous disorder on which to intervene.

In any case, the psycho-analytic pathway is made of different steps, which can be synthesized in the passages that we will analyse in the following paragraph, in which, referring to the single pieces, we trace, together with the Project, the parabola that leads from the cognitive need and/or therapeutic urgency to the decision of analysis, to the entrance in therapy and to its development.

### 6.1. *The Nirvana Principle*

A prolonged baritone note precedes the metaphorical opening of the curtain and the solemn melody that emerges heralds the leitmotif of the whole work. This instrumental

<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Fliess, and Michael Schröter. *Briefe an Wilhelm Fliess: 1887-1904*. (Frankfurt am Main Fischer, 1986); S. Freud, *The dynamics of transference, The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII*, 1911-1913.

<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Freud, *L'interpretazione dei sogni, Opere*, vol. III, Torino, Boringhieri, 1980 (or. ed. 1899).

piece has a marked suggestive function that prepares the listener for a musical journey into the universe of the unconscious.

It is probably not a coincidence that this track in the beginning is instrumental. The lack of a voice makes the instruments themselves spokesmen and well represents that movement of reflection and silence of those who are about to enter therapy. It is a vocal silence only, made dense by the timbres and rhythms that trace an introspection, special instrument for those who intend to look inside themselves.

This piece is characterized by accelerations, driven by the wind instrument, to generate a climax that seems to quiet down only on the edge of a sudden and sacred silence, propped up in the very last notes by a background that seems stolen from the sound of nature. The hyper-technological accelerations of the whole piece, markedly progressive, seem to represent insuppressible cries, which almost violently and monologically impose themselves for the whole piece, appeased only by nature, in the explicit bars. It is an I, bent, looking for a light and an inner peace in a dark magma of emotions that can do nothing but gush, until the longed-for return to Nirvana.

## 6.2. *Freudiana*

A typically exotic background is the prelude to a rhythmic piece that marks the real beginning of the narration or, out of metaphor, of the analysis.

The stasis dictated by sadness and loneliness is interrupted by the rediscovery of a dusty old book about a man with a ring on his finger. That man is Sigmund Freud and the ring (which returns in several pieces and to which an entire song is dedicated, *The Ring*) is the symbol of the bond that is established between him and his patients, a metaphorical circle that encloses the shared values and mutual trust.

Many of Freud's patients appear in the text: the Wolf Man, Little Hans, the Mouse Man, clinical cases that allowed him to lay the foundations from which modern psychoanalysis developed. Lost and hopeless souls that a foreign and benevolent hand helps not to fall into the abyss.

In the song is also mentioned Anna O., the woman suffering from hysteria that Dr. Joseph Breuer cured with the cathartic methods suggested by the young Freud when he was just a student. "Freudiana, do you want to change the world?" is a question that underlines the epochal innovation brought by psychoanalysis in the study of the human mind and of the related pathologies that have their roots in the unconscious, therefore not necessarily due to organic lesions or overt traumas. A beautiful solo by the guitarist of the Project, Ian Bairnson, concludes this musical introduction to the enigmatic world of Sigmund Freud.

### 6.3. *Sects Therapy*

The track *Sects Therapy* is undoubtedly one of the most fascinating, both for the textual aspect and the melodic-musical one, although it remains one of the most "difficult" to enjoy in terms of aesthetic experience. In an ironic way, all the doubts of those who are about to undergo a psychoanalytic process are presented. The patient is faced with a path that is undoubtedly expensive (compared to which it is often challenging to "be able to afford" therapy) and in some ways eccentric or at least peculiar, from the couch to pan-sexualist interpretations, recalled in the text by the approach to the nudist colony whose attendance could perhaps be more effective than the long and laborious psychoanalytic path. The sound recalls classic musicals, with rich pressing orchestrations and the ironic and biting voice of Frankie Howerd, often halfway between singing and speaking. Closing your eyes, you can almost imagine to be in a circus with the opening of the scene left to acro-

bats and orchestral clowns. And it is perhaps precisely this that the song wants to raise: an irreverent juxtaposition of psychoanalysis to the action of other groups labelled by the title as *sects*, ranging from Hare Krishna to nudists, with an explicit recognition of the elements of the ultra-sensitive and hypersensitive, asceticism and liberalization of corporeality and sense of modesty.

#### 6.4. *I Am a Mirror*

In the sciences that study the human mind the word mirror is recurrent. That defence mechanism of the unconscious that makes us project onto others the unresolved world we carry inside ourselves is known as psychic projection, but there is also Lacan's theory of the mirror according to which, between 6 and 18 months of life, children come to identify themselves through their own reflected image. Quite recent is the Italian discovery of mirror neurons that are activated when we observe an individual perform an action and make it possible for us to understand it since the same neurons operate when we perform the same action.

In this song with a rock connotation, the mirror is associated both to the specific function of the therapist during the analysis and to the image of the other who, as if it were a duplicate of us, reflects the reality that concerns us more faithfully than the one we ourselves consider absolute. Some passages sung by Leo Sayer are unequivocal: "I am a mirror...Looking at me you see yourself," as well as "And it's all a crazy game you don't want to play, tell me what can you say...", a clear invitation in the first person of the analyst who, through the vision of the patient, tries to reveal the unconscious.

The instrumental part breaks out vigorously and persuasively with the strings of the orchestra conducted by Andrew Powell, the talented British composer who has

contributed to making the stylistic imprint of the Project exclusive and unmistakable.

The function of the mirror is masterfully simply, rendered by the refrain that drums throughout the song: “I am a mirror” is mirrored and reflected, duplicated, repeated a myriad of times; the function of the mirror is precisely this: to return to the eye of the subject its own figure. The shift from the spoken-dialogue, which is done in psychoanalysis, not by chance also defined as word therapy, to the seen, capable of grasping the figure in its entirety, is interesting and recalls the refrain of that *Penny Lane* of the Beatles to which, as we will see, tribute is paid: “... is in my ears and in my eyes.” The echo continues, “I am a mirror,” a visual metaphor repeated acoustically, generating an ultra-powerful possibility of mirroring oneself. Speaking according to Florenskij’s gnoseology, the piece “I am a mirror” conveys the possibility of finding an accomplished self-image, playing on acoustic-visual repetition. In a few minutes, common people have the possibility to grasp one of the elective instruments used by the psychoanalyst, his becoming an echo and therefore a mirror of the patient’s image.

#### 6.5. *You’re on Your Own*

Following the parable traced by *I am a Mirror*, *You’re on your own* reiterates, with some force, that the therapeutic path is a path whose pivot is the patient, who, literally, must be left free by the therapist (the narrator of the piece) and made autonomous and able to face the world.

The markedly rock structure of the piece has nothing to symbolize a sort of abandonment by the therapist towards the patient, but rather the attempt to energize and make the self aware of the tools with which alone she/he can face everything. The piece reminds us of the end of every psychoanalytic path, which should be so capable



of empowerment as to make the patient aware of her/his own history and past and autonomous with respect to the future challenges of life.

## 7. THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

Undoubtedly one of the most famous discoveries attributable to Freud is the Oedipus complex, significantly called at times by Freud himself “nuclear complex,” to signify not only its alleged universality, but also its ability to predict much of the development of the self and personal well-being.<sup>17</sup> It remains nowadays one of the key themes of contemporary psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic practice (think of the figure of Recalcati), so as to be considered by some as the bread and butter of therapy.<sup>18</sup>

The Oedipus complex recounts, according to Recalcati,<sup>19</sup> the human condition par excellence, that is, being a child, or the “coming after,” being born within a *given* context, at a *given* time, from *given* parents and the challenge of life is to recover a healthy relationship with one’s roots, to make them one’s own and/or to sever them in order to find oneself finally.

The desire for incest of Freudian memory, therefore, exceeds in contemporary psychoanalysis, particularly in that of Lacanian imprint, the anchorage to strictly sexual references, to embrace not only the theme of knowledge (“how did I come into the world?”), but rather that of identity (“whose am I, to whom do I belong?” And, therefore, “who am I?”), clearly palpable in the two passages of which a critical reading will follow in the next paragraphs.

<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The dynamics of transference*, *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XII, 1911-1913.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Britton, “The Oedipus situation and the depressive position,” in *Clinical lectures on Klein and Bion* (London and New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992), 34-45.

<sup>19</sup> Massimo Recalcati, *Il Segreto del Figlio* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2017).

### 7.1. *Little Hans*

As already mentioned, music was never a passion for Sigmund Freud, even though the socio-cultural context was favourable to him. Among his students, for example, was Max Graf, a music critic who turned to his teacher and friend to cure his son Herbert (known as Little Hans) of a disabling phobia he had developed after a traumatic event.

Little Hans' turmoil is told by Woolfson and Parsons through a combination of sounds and rhythms that evoke the style of the Beatles and express the brio and naïve directness of a child. For this reason it is the most catchy song of the album, although the carefree melody conceals the inner pain of the little Hans that only "Professor man" (Freud) will be able to heal.

What made the clinical case particular was the therapeutic modality, since Freud did not deal directly with the 5 years old child, but rather used the intermediation of his father with whom he exchanged many letters. This peculiarity does not match with the song in which a polite and affectionate Freud asks questions directly to the young patient in order to delve into his unconscious.

This deviation from what Freud reported directly in the report on the case of little Hans<sup>20</sup> opens, in our opinion, an interesting perspective on the entire *Freudiana* work, which, evidently, does not want to be a sterile musical synthesis of the Freudian proposal, but rather a sort of parallel in a critical key, capable of anticipating the very limits that the critical literature of the end of the 20th century highlighted with respect to the methodological proposal of the Viennese psychoanalyst. Contemporary criticism, in fact, has repeatedly emphasized as the shift to

<sup>20</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Analysis of a phobia in a five year old boy* (Standard Edition, Vol. 10, 1909) 3-147.

the role of analyst of Max, father of little Hans, represented an obvious limit to the analytical intervention.<sup>21</sup>

In any case, the Oedipus complex and, more generally, the relationship with the figure of the father remain the core of the entire song, and at different levels. We cannot, in fact, as already underlined, not catch the relationship with previous musical styles, the previous generation, symbolized by *the Beatles*, whose sonorities echo explicitly in the song, tracing *Penny Lane*. Moreover, the case of *Little Hans* recalls the relationship between children and parents (not only the father but also the mother, mentioned several times in Freud's report), including extra-familial parental figures; think, for example, of the relationship that Max, little Hans' father, had with Freud himself, experienced as a vicarious father. At the end of the passage, it is interesting to note the explicit reference to the dream, the interpretation of which is an instrument of choice for the psychoanalytic system. It is singular that the dream referred to is exactly the one Freud referred to in the original report dedicated to little Hans, with the appearance of two giraffes.

### 7.2. *No One Can Love You Better than Me*

It is in particular the low voice thundering "I am the universal father... I am the lord" that makes of this track a real icon of the Oedipus complex and to transfer the idea of a heavy boulder able to crush the self, to "blackmail" it in a wall of silence. In the evolution of the piece, where different rhythms and different family figures alternate, the metaphorisation of the battle against a "lord and master" is striking, a battle that seems to make the self succumb,

<sup>21</sup> See, just to give an example, the following works: Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, Vol. 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Judith Fertig Chused, "Little Hans 'analyzed' in the twenty-first century." *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 55.3, 2007: 767-778.

decreed by the refrain repeated in explicit and by the closing with the sound of percussions. It is precisely the final percussion that recalls a heartbeat that is about to die out, underlining the dynamics of Oedipus, where, inevitably, there is a battle for life or death.

## 8. THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS

Undoubtedly, the technique of psychoanalytic intervention for which Freud is universally recognized is the interpretation of dreams,<sup>22</sup> often dismissed as a gateway to the patient's past. In fact, for Freud the dream, as Musella and Trapanese remind us,<sup>23</sup> has a transformative and not representational power, being able to rework on the phantasmatic plane a traumatic experience in which desire is inscribed in a perturbing way. Moreover, it is the category of the disturbing to suggest to Cantelli that comparison between Freud and Florenskij from which we moved as a starting point for this paper; "Florenskij's icon, in other words, presents itself as a real return of the repressed that, in the case of the uncanny or Unheimliche, is characterized as an undue survival of the animistic aspects that have characterized the collective childhood of the human species and that characterize the childhood of each individual"<sup>24</sup> such that it is possible to recover the magical thought and common sense of which art exudes as a key, as a door, to access the meaning of things, overcoming the ambitions that scientific thought, or perhaps it would be better to say *scientist*, claim to possess.

<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud, *L'interpretazione dei sogni*, *Opere*, vol. III, Torino, Boringhieri, 1980 (or. ed. 1899)

<sup>23</sup> Roberto Musella and Gemma Trapanese (eds.), *L'interpretazione dei sogni: Dialoghi sulla tecnica psicoanalitica* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Chiara Cantelli, *L'Icona Come Metafisica Concreta* (Palermo: International Center for the Study of Aesthetics, 2011), 56.

8.1. *Funny You Should Say that*

The song *Funny You Should Say That*, decidedly ironic, is dominated by the alternating voices of the cappella group *The Flying Pickets*, able to magnificently render the dream world, with all its spatiotemporal contradictions.

There are explicit references to the famous cases of the mouse man and the wolf man, present in Freud's reports, as well as recourse to key words of the psychoanalytic system such as removal or frustration.

The recourse to falsetto and to the serious falsification of the male voice in some parts of the piece renders, in an almost mocking tone, or rather fairy-tale-like, the contents conveyed. Just as fairy-tale is the framing of the symbology of the wolves, described exactly as it happens in *Little Red Riding Hood*, with big eyes to see better, big ears to hear better, sharp teeth to eat better...

In a Florenskian key, the piece is able to underline the patient's childhood, that world made of fairy tales to which the tone of the song and the dreams recall, rendered by the staging of the playful and differently modified voices, the patient's childhood to which one is invited to return as a graft of the psychoanalytic therapy anchored to the repressed.

9. *FREUDIANA: FROM CHARCOT TO POST-FREUDIAN CRITICISM*

The album is incredibly capable of reconstructing the whole parabola of the Freudian proposal, from its beginnings to its decline, or rather to the reinterpretations that posterity has made of it. We have already had the opportunity, as far as this last aspect is concerned, commenting on *Little Hans*, to underline how the dialogic structure of the piece, staging a therapeutic encounter between Freud and little Hans, has already received a critical note with respect to the therapeutic role let act to Hans' father in the reality of the facts; almost the piece has the audacity to correct Freud

himself who, precisely, in this case guides a father-therapist, a figure absolutely not contemplable today, not only in any kind of psychoanalytic system, but in any kind of psychotherapeutic system, where the setting respects, with rigid observance, any previous interactional roles.

As for the recovery of the beginnings of the Freudian method and criticism, we cannot leave out *Let Yourself Go*, dedicated to Charcot, *Dora* and *Far Away From Home*.

### 9.1. *Let Yourself Go*

This track describes the principle of hypnosis used by one of Freud's earliest teachers: Charcot, explicitly and repeatedly mentioned in the song.

Hypnosis is musically rendered with the almost melodious repetition of the refrain "Let Yourself Go" and the scanning of the metronome typical of some hypnotic practices.

In a Florenskian key, the piece is such an icon of the hypnotic process that, listening to it, one risks being hypnotized by the sweetness of the melody and falling into a dreamlike state by virtue of the repetition and the invitation to let go.

Today we know that Freudian psychoanalytic practice has progressively substituted dreams for hypnosis; the dream as the abode of repressed desires allows the subject to return to an elsewhere, far away in time and space, clearly expressed in the text when it says "And before long you won't know where you are...", which allows the patient a therapeutic translation such that all pain will be eliminated. The piece invites to a hypnosis-sleep, which becomes almost a lullaby at the end, with the narrator's voice that turns into a whisper, with the promise and the hope that it may favour a dream able to relieve all pain.

### 9.2. *Dora*

In *Dora*, dedicated to one of the most famous cases in the history of psychoanalysis, the lack of certain undoubt-

edly expected aspects is more striking than the presence of other ones that project the user towards psychoanalysis and, even more closely, post-Freudian psychotherapy. What is undoubtedly missing is some metaphorical reference to the drives and libido, framed by Freud as a primary phenomenon in a framework of neurosis.

The text, but above all the melodic-acoustic structure of the piece, decidedly of romantic imprint, refers rather to an overcoming of the pan-sexualism of Freud and returns a very light note, anything but instinctual, to relationships, present, for example, in the theoretical development that Erich Fromm made of psychoanalysis.

The clinical case of Dora is one of the best known and most discussed in the history of psychoanalysis.

In reality the young woman's name was Ida Bauer, she was the daughter of a former patient of Freud's and did not want to accept the diagnosis of hysteria. In fact, Dora abandoned the sessions prematurely and it was only by analysing the causes of the failure that Freud understood the importance of the patient's projections onto the analyst and devised the theory of *transfert* (called, originally, *transference*<sup>25</sup>). This confirms that science often makes great strides when it questions itself and recognizes its own errors. Thanks to that resounding failure Freud was able to complete an unfinished therapy.

At that time the patriarchy and the prevarication towards women were very widespread and even today, although more than a century has passed, there are those who accuse the Viennese psychoanalyst of machismo and argue that the coldness and lack of empathy towards Dora have prevented him from understanding and interpreting the inner discomfort of the young woman.

<sup>25</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Dora: An analysis of a case of hysteria* (Wien: Simon and Schuster, 1997; or. ed. 1901); Freud, *The dynamics of transference, The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Volume XII, 1911-1913).

None of this transpires in the ballad in major Sol with its romantic imprint, the text of which presents a benevolent and paternal Freud who grasps the fragility of his patient and hopes to see her again to continue the interrupted therapy. He delicately digs into the unconscious to free a wounded soul from that tangle of forbidden relationships, harassment and social conventions overloaded with preconceptions. The change of tone towards the conclusion opens the doors to hope and another element, in addition to the lyrics, characterizes the benevolent Freud of the song: the beautiful voice of Eric Woolfson, a soft and light feather that hovers over the sweet melodies of a real musical dream.

A musical dream that suggests, at least to the expert ear, a reference to the theories on transfert and counter-transfert and to the parabola that these two leading elements in psychoanalytic action have undergone, passing from being an obstacle to be avoided, the first representing the patient's resistance and the second that of the analyst, to becoming rather powerful weapons to be read in a relational key as the song *Dora* implicitly invites to do. It is possible to find, in this translation, what the post-Freudian criticism, especially that of Argentinian and Mediterranean matrix has carried out,<sup>26</sup> assigning to the overturning of values towards transfert and counter-transfert, and therefore to projective identification, a more and more relational role.

### 9.3. *Far Away from Home*

In *Far Away From Home* we are struck by the powerful anchorage to the ultra-sensible, to the spiritual dimension that a part of contemporary psychotherapy has recovered (think, just to give an example, of Viktor Frankl's work). The lyrics recall natural elements that are typically symbols of the spiritual dimension, such as the good star that guides

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Paula Heimann, "On counter-transference," *International journal of psycho-analysis* 31 (1950): 81-84.



us (as it happens also in *Don't Let the Moment Pass*) or the sun able to illuminate the darkness and, in the final stanzas, there is an explicit reference to the possibility of finding one's own Jerusalem. The title, *Far Away From Home*, seems to suggest, in a paradoxical way, the main way to find oneself: distancing oneself from home, where, obviously, we find again, in a key of development, the metaphorical overcoming of the Oedipus complex, in which the spiritual element, not at all contemplated by the original Freudian system, finds a leading space.

The piece is performed by the a cappella group *The Flying Pickets* and recalls the sacred context not only for the vocal execution, but also for the incipit sounds. In a Florenskian key, the sonorities that explicitly refer to a sacred choir and the explicit reference to words such as "hope" and "consolation" condense in a few minutes what post-Freudian criticism, firstly of Frommian derivation and then of Franklian one, has tried to say with pages and pages of theoretical density, unapproachable by common people.

*Far Away From Home* demonstrates, once again, how much this album seems to have been able not only to represent Freud's thought, but to make it alive again, therefore plastic and in a certain sense changeable, able to move and to go beyond, proposing a dimension, the spiritual one, to which not only Freud never made explicit reference, but that he has in a certain sense strongly denied.

#### 9.4. *There but for the Grace of God*

The final piece of the work is "There but for the grace of God," which on the cover is defined as a hymn to the human condition.

In the delicate piano introduction minor and major chords follow one another. From a perceptual point of view this alternation conveys both melancholy and hope and this clearly reflects Eric Woolfson's sweet and melancholic style.

The melody perfectly matches the fine vocal intonation of John Miles, an old acquaintance of Alan Parsons, having already sung on various successful albums by the Project (*Tales of Mystery and Imagination, Pyramid, Gaudi*). The marvellous female voice that takes over is that of English actress Matti Webb, already heard in solo performances on the tracks *Don't Let the Moment Pass* and *No One Can Love You Better Than Me*.

The text, but also the title itself, recalls the element that is not only at the basis of human relationships, but that for Freud, in particular, represented the crossroads that connects that methodical psychoanalytical approach, scientific, therefore “male” to the typically female emotional involvement that pity and love nourish.

“No one is an island, No one born alone” sings Webb, to emphasize that no one is saved alone and love cannot exist if there is no other. From own birth until own last breath, one relates to her/his neighbour and only through her/ his neighbour it is possible to discover oneself.

Every man alone is inevitably doomed.

“Say there but for the grace of God, go I...go I.”

#### 10. CONCLUSIONS: THE REASONS FOR A TITLE OF A WORK THAT STANDS AS AN ICON OF THE FREUDIAN PROPOSAL

We have proposed the *Freudiana* case as an emblem of the method suggested by Florenskij, according to whom art, capable of arousing wonder, can, and in a certain sense must, anticipate science in developing, but also in showing and communicating knowledge.

In this sense it seems interesting to reflect on the title of the work, *Freudiana*. They could have chosen *Unconscious* or *Psychology of the Deep*; and instead, no, *Freudiana*. This is an interesting game of mirrors; it offers to the common sense a way as explicit and immediate as music can represent to get to touch and show not the psychology of the deep, but the

Freudian proposal that aims at it. It's a game of cross-references; Freud's work reflects on the unconscious and on the psychology of the deep.

The album proceeds, not by chance, letting infer a deep direct knowledge of Freud's works and, more in detail, of the main axes of Freud's proposal, from the Oedipus complex, to the therapeutic relationship, to the transfert, up to the relationships that Freud has woven with his own masters. But *Freudiana* doesn't stop here and, just in a Florenskian key, expresses the audacity of wanting to go beyond what it shows. The pieces are composed not to express Freud's thought but, following the model of Florenskij's inverted perspective, to reveal it in the fullest sense of the term, exactly as it happens with the relationship between window and light, a relationship we have already commented on.<sup>27</sup>

*Freudiana* therefore becomes an icon of Freud's thought and not a summary of it. This is perhaps the key to grasping the special artistic gift that allows a work not to limit itself to represent, but to become an icon; an icon that, as in Florenskij's system, expresses an energy and becomes a privileged place for the encounter with the meaning of things.

The Alan Parsons Project group offers an icon of Freud's thought, demonstrating how art is capable of capturing and transmitting in a way that is absolutely parallel, and indeed competitive, with what science and its theoretical frameworks do. Talking about icon means talking about the "best way to keep alive the legacy left by Freud ... to transmit all its dynamism by establishing a dialogue with him through what he entrusted to us;"<sup>28</sup> in this sense, the icon is grasped as concrete metaphysics,<sup>29</sup> echoing those words of Goethe already quoted according to which grey is the theory, green is the tree of life.

<sup>27</sup> Cantelli, *L'Icona Come Metafisica Concreta*.

<sup>28</sup> Jean-Michel Quinodoz, *Reading Freud. A Chronological Exploration of Freud's Writings*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 2005), 112.

<sup>29</sup> Cantelli, *L'Icona Come Metafisica Concreta*.

Remaining within the theme of the icon, it seems right to mention the cover of the album, with the representation of Freud made through an explicit recourse to the representation of glasses for the upper part of the face and through stains on the model of the Rorschach test for the lower part of the face. As is well known, the Rorschach test is a projective test, probably the best known of this category of tests, where an ambiguous stimulus is deliberately used on which the patient can project part of her/his own experiences and personality. Interesting is the active involvement required, in perceptive terms, to the user, who has to attribute to those spots, even if sufficiently explicit and in reality not very ambiguous, the contours of Freud's face. This operation, which prefers to the perfection of a photo, emblem of the *represented*, the imperfection of a sketch intended as a matter so alive to require the active participation of our gaze, cannot but recall Florenskij's inverted perspective and the imperfect icons, but able to contain three-dimensionality. In the case of the cover of *Freudiana*, the choice of relying on a projective mechanism of the viewer's gaze restores to the resulting icon the ability, in the imperfection of the data and even before listening to the pieces, to grasp even the psychological dimension.

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# Museum Cultural Mediation as an Anthropological Approach to Art History. Visitors' Experiences at Museo di Roma<sup>1</sup>

FULVIA STRANO

*People need dialogue and cultural mediation, even while standing in front of a raw stone in a museum. They need an exchange to 'dress up the bareness' of that stone with the fullness of their imagination, springing from their experiences and memories. People are the actual, real heritage, with their ability to imagine, remember, and share.<sup>2</sup>*

## I. THE ROOK MOVES (ON THE IVORY TOWER)

Art History is an ideal field for anthropological research. Looking at a painting means, first, paying attention to signs, shapes and stories created by human beings and handed down to other human beings. Undoubtedly, without the human gaze, any artwork would cease to 'narrate its own story' because it would be devoid of a *spectator* who actualizes the very essence and reason for the piece of art to live: "That is indeed the paradox: a gaze is necessary, at least one, for ruins and cultural heritage to remain alive."<sup>3</sup>

Today we can perceive through intuition the implication of Marc Augé's statement, but it is important to underline that what Augé asserted represents the culmination of a strenuous and calamitous path which has, for centuries, characterized the approach to art and the definition of cultural heritage itself. A path, we must admit, which has

<sup>1</sup> Translated by Barbara Antonucci.

<sup>2</sup> Luca Dal Pozzolo, *Il patrimonio culturale tra memoria, lockdown e futuro* (Milano: Editrice Bibliografica, 2021), 94.

<sup>3</sup> Marc Augé, *L'antropologo e il mondo globale* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2014), 101.

not been completed yet and which still displays unresolved knots, as the recent *querelle* over the *divisive* content of some monuments—which were to be demolished by virtue of the fact that they stand as an expression of what is nowadays no longer lauded and is against our modern values—shows. Maybe Augé is right when he talks about “an ideology of the present and of the evidence” which—as happens in the spells in fairytales—inhibits the effort to think about today within a historical dimension and thus, fatally, condemn us to a privation of the future.

Such a drift, moreover, leads to a further gathering of historical and documentary knowledge in the hands of a happy few, a more and more selective *élite* of experts, a reservoir of secluded and unshared truths, destined to oblivion if not preserved by this ‘cast of experts’ schooled in the same language, preserving the artworks inherited from the past from the devastating fury of ignorance.

The risk really exists, and it is more alive today since we live in enlarged societies inhabited by tensions about identity, contrasting visions and conflicting rights, and all of us are caught together in a ‘global net’ for the first time in human history. We are currently living in an unprecedented dimension which has no formal geographical and cultural distances but compresses “the profundity of time and history”<sup>4</sup> necessary to understand the past (in a sense, *appropriating the past*). Our dimension prompts us to look at the conflict and at the diversity which characterize the past rather than looking at analogies with *our* present.

Making “stones speak”—allowing the cultural heritage to transfer knowledge and convey information which are useful to the present and are capable of orienting the future for generations to come—does not mean instilling artworks with the powers of an oracle or any mysterious knowledge, as if a painting or a statue were depositories of a hidden and

<sup>4</sup> See Pozzolo, *Il patrimonio culturale tra memoria, lockdown e futuro*, 45-50.



immanent truth, not subject to the evolution of society and to the continuous change of sensibility of the involved subjects. This attribution of ‘sacredness’ to the piece of art—and thus its intangibility—stand as a legacy of a 19<sup>th</sup> century mentality that still influences both the strategic planning of museum officers and of cultural mediators and the methodological approach of most academic education in Italy.

To ‘make stones speak’ we need to reverse our gaze, turn the telescope round if you will, and look at the people, not at the objects, shedding light and bestowing a prominent role on the relationships that are generated from sharing and dialogue, favoring education and knowledge, encouraging the development of critical thinking.

To reach this aim, a change in perspective is needed, an act of humility from the scholars and a pinch of courage for those in charge of education.

In a sense, what we need is a “rook move;”<sup>5</sup> a lateral move on that *turris eburnea* (*ivory tower*) that for centuries has protected—and isolated—the ‘experts’ and the *connoisseurs* from the public and from the *uninitiated* visitors. For it is the public (today more than ever) who represent the largest number of museum visitors (and tourists in cities of art) and who embody the ideal audience for assessing the real ‘actuality’ of the past, its validity in terms of answers to our expectations as human beings.

## 2. REVERSE THE TELESCOPE. LISTEN TO THE OTHER, LISTEN TO OURSELVES

The first necessary step, although alone it cannot be sufficient, is listening to the public. Clearly, it is not simply

<sup>5</sup> The “horse” in chess moves designing an “L,” thus undertaking other pieces with one move. That is why it represents an important piece in the game strategy. In this perspective we can read the use of this definition in Andrea Camilleri’s novel (*La mossa del cavallo*. Sellerio, 1999) and in a recent political essay by Matteo Renzi (*La mossa del cavallo*. Marsilio, 2020).

a matter of answering the public's questions at the end of a guided tour, a lecture, or a conference. Explaining and short dialectic exchanges of this sort are already quite common.

Listening to the public requires first and foremost the ability to remain silent, to leave visitors a space to talk and express their ideas and insight on the artwork they are looking at.

It is crucial to place ahead of any description, information, or explanation (by the cultural mediator) the visitors' experience. This is a very difficult thing to do for an art historian, a curator, or a tour guide, prepared and trained to convey detailed and correct information, content acquired through years of studying and research. Keeping still before the public may also represent for many experts a void which is un-fillable, a knowledge deficit, a lack of wisdom and expertise.

All of which stands as a legacy of an 'atavistic' inferiority complex which has always stigmatized the work of educators (in museums but not only there) and relegated them to a "peripheral, volunteer, or entry-level activity,"<sup>6</sup> compared to other curatorial functions.<sup>7</sup> It is this mistake in perspective which has led to this reasoning. If the task of the medi-

<sup>6</sup> "But in the museum of the future, educators move from the periphery to the center. [...] They lead the department, define its philosophy and mission, and overturn the historical definition of teaching as a peripheral, volunteer, or entry-level activity," in Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the Art Museum. Interpretation as Experience* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2011), 152.

<sup>7</sup> It is not a mere coincidence that from the 70s museums in the USA tried to answer the increasing demand of the public by adopting an enrollment policy of educators as volunteers, as if the activity of communication of the cultural heritage and mediation were an 'external' activity, outside the museum governance and mission. It is therefore easy to understand how in Italy, from the Eighties, educational programs were 'externalized' in museums and sites of culture, being considered 'additional services'—like guarding, bookshop, and cloakroom—within the Legge 4/1993 also known as "Ronchey Law."

ator is that of bringing large audiences closer to knowledge and to a comprehension of the art on display, her/his function is to facilitate this process by making the observer feel comfortable—whatever his/her knowledge is—and allow everybody to find an ‘access route’ towards the art.

If it is true that art is always contemporary, thus always capable of increasing stimuli and provocations which are actual, it is the role of the mediator to connect cultural heritage to the audience. To do so, s/he has to detect in today’s imaginary landscape the visual elements and the suggestions that were actual in the art pieces’ past, although expressed with a different language and for this reason difficult and alien to the present. Cultural mediators facilitate comprehension, leaving the language of art to speak: a universal language which uses color and light as phonemes, solids and voids as syntax. Starting from the audience’s clues, the cultural mediators let impressions circulate and be shared among the guests and leave questions open, never directing answers, favoring the dialogue within the group.

It may be hard for an expert to be confronted with this methodology. Accepting the ‘observation’ that s/he considers ‘wrong’—considering her/his knowledge, the research carried out and the documents—without correcting the observer, represents the most difficult task facing mediators. But maybe an even more treacherous (because subtle and unconscious) task is to be ready to question what the expert eye has seen, advancing questions that nobody has ever asked before, and whose answers have never been given. To do it, you need humility.

We need to start from the assumption—as remote as it may seem—that a real possibility exists that the expert eye has not *seen* the object s/he has in front of her/his eyes but only the mental image (date, author, critical reviews, temporary expositions, catalogs info, etc.) of that specific piece of art, almost detached from its real existence.

This is a continuing paradox, which reinforces the divide between experts and museum visitors. Too often, the ‘insiders’ seem to have lost their grip on the universal value of art, the capability art possesses to convey to all of us something which belongs to us, because it has always been within us.

And if we believe that the only valid interpretation is the one learned at university or studied in books, we are not contemplating the possibility of finding other keys and words to describe a piece of art, other channels to transfer knowledge. For example, start from the impressions that the art piece evokes in the public, and then work from there intuitively to share more knowledge.

It is certainly easier to indulge in the pleasure of a notion to explain to the audience than to be open to a dialectic confrontation; especially if one does not recognize the interlocutor’s ‘authorship’ and does not consider it sufficient for a dialectic exchange. Nevertheless, it is not *pouring* the notion *ex cathedra* that comprehension of art is stimulated. Art requires a process of inner assimilation, an appropriation which takes place as a response to an intimate necessity, a personal need, an emotional space of one’s own existence.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Educators/mediators, teachers, and museum curators have long understood the value of active participation within didactic projects. There is a wide-ranging literature on the development of methodology to transfer knowledge, especially within school programs, which sees the passage from *frontal instruction* to *alternative instruction*.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, students represent a specific target, same age, and similar

<sup>8</sup> Within the vast literature on the topic, we suggest Anna Salerni’s latest work, “Modelli e strategie didattiche,” in P. Lucisano, A. Salerni and P. Sposetti (ed.), *Didattica e conoscenza. Riflessioni e proposte sull’apprendere e l’insegnare* (Roma: Carocci, 2019) 157-199 (and general bibliography).

expectations in terms of educational aims/needs. Primary school children are different from high school kids, but the two groups outline an identifiable cluster, within a long path of ‘formal’ learning (school).

If we consider a more generic audience, like the one in a museum, learning takes place in a more “open, flexible, and informal” way and “approaches are differentiated and depend mostly on the single visitor’s intention.”<sup>9</sup>

Some museums had to take on this challenge before others as they needed to translate their heritage in a more accessible language. Natural science museums or demo-anthropological and ethnographic museums had to adapt and design new museum spaces—a process begun at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century—transforming the activity of mere preservation of finds belonging to ancient peoples into an activity which highlighted and emphasized the value of the civilizations which produced them.<sup>10</sup> Yet for art museums there is no common practice in Italy. We lack a shared methodology of cultural mediation adopted on a large scale, embracing the needs of different audience typologies in terms of age, origins, social environments, and culture.<sup>11</sup>

In the United States and in Anglo-Saxon countries, cultural mediation models have developed earlier both for historical and environmental reasons and because of the nature itself of museums and their mission.

<sup>9</sup> Martina De Luca, “Un esempio di trasposizione didattica: la didattica museale,” in *Didattica e conoscenza*, Carocci, 235.

<sup>10</sup> See also Vito Lattanzi, *Musei e antropologia. Storia, esperienze, prospettive* (Roma: Carocci Editore, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> There are many examples and enlightening practices, especially in Contemporary Art Museums, i.e., Rovereto’s Mart, Bergamo’s GAMeC, and Rome’s National Gallery. What is still missing is an overview of the single experiences, in order to provide useful and shared tools for the sedimentation of a methodology applicable to all museums and places of art, for each category of public and suitable for any kind of art, not only contemporary.

## 4. DIALOGICAL TEACHING

Rika Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee<sup>12</sup> have devoted much energy to the description of a dialogical method in terms of an evolution of the public's participation in art museums.<sup>13</sup> In relation to the *Conversation* and the *Discussion* which gather around a well-defined objective from the beginning (comprehension of a piece of art) the *Dialogue* is open and not predictable as to its final outcome, because it is a participatory process which evolves in a subjective way, according to the person's sensibility and personal experience.<sup>14</sup> The mediator acts primarily as a dialogue *Mover*, although it may happen that it is the visitor herself/himself who starts the exchange, pushed by an uncontrollable emotion that s/he could not resist while looking at a piece of art.<sup>15</sup> The role of curator/mediator is thus to 'facilitate' and let the visitors' impressions and perceptions flow; s/he acts as a catalyst of an experience, according to John Dewey's

<sup>12</sup> Respectively in charge of educational programs at Frick Collection in New York and expert of museal education at J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles.

<sup>13</sup> R. Burnham and E. Kai-Kee, *Teaching in the Art Museum*, 79-111. In mid-eighties Burnham studied at the Educator Program Department of Metropolitan Museum of New York, at the time directed by Philippe Yenawine, creator, and co-founder with Abigail Housen (passed away in August 2020) of the educational methodology *Visual Thinking Strategies*.

<sup>14</sup> Graphically, the 3 methods are portrayed in the shape of a circle, a triangle, and a rhombus. The last, referred to the *dialogical teaching*, is explained by the authors as a *four-sided model* whose vertices are ideally occupied by the subjects who are active in the dialogue: the *mover*, the *follower*, the *bystander (detached observer)*, the *opposer*. The four sides are in a reciprocal relation and often interchangeable during the dialogue, which is carried without a predefined scheme and can turn towards unexpected and unpredictable perspectives for the curator herself/himself.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, questioning on what may be happening within the pictorial representation; or underlining the beauty of a specific colour, the softness of a fabric or the transparency of a painted glass.

ideas.<sup>16</sup> In order to accomplish this task, the mediator must be ready to be caught off-guard by a question, a doubt, an unfamiliar point of view; s/he must be ready for the unexpected, a question s/he may not know how to answer. And her/his task is exactly to let herself/himself be overwhelmed by astonishment in order to share it with the public, make it circulate, reflecting together and extracting/recovering useful insights in order to understand the artwork, in a perspective of actual transformative experience.

##### 5. DIALOGICAL TEACHING EXPERIENCE AT MUSEO DI ROMA

As a curator in charge of the Education Programs at Museo di Roma, in 2015 I began to use the dialogical methodology within the Museo di Roma, working with adult visitors and high-school students (within the so called *alternanza scuola lavoro* [ex Legge 107/2015] today dubbed PCTO. *Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e per l'Orientamento*).

Besides my personal belief in the methodology, studied first in literature and then put into practice as a museum visitor on several occasions at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, I decided to adopt the methodology as it responds to an ethical principle which I consider essential for any curator appointed to a public museum: create opportunities of encounter and exchange among a diverse audience, aimed at reciprocal—and not merely cultural—enrichment. I firmly believe that conveying notions is not sufficient to justify my certified role as a museum officer. Creating opportunities for encounter within the museum halls (and on digital platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic) means bringing together diverse groups of people that probably would never meet anywhere else. A public museum represents a social space where visitors can experience personal growth as individuals and as part of a

<sup>16</sup> John Dewey, *Art as experience* (New York: 2005 [1934]).

community. It is something which goes beyond approaching cultural heritage, which is something we all possess, and from which we can all benefit.

The introduction of the dialogical methodology allowed me to ‘ferry’ the audience from the traditional ‘guided tour’ towards a ‘transformative experience’ which is astonishingly enriching. In fact, over the last five years it has produced a consistent growth in visitor numbers.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, at the beginning, the introduction of this methodology created some perplexities among people, far too accustomed to *frontal instruction* or to visit exhibitions focused on the curator’s explanation, with a few final questions from the audience. I had expected a certain kind of inhibition from the visitors, as people do not always want to expose themselves, fearing to be pointed out as ‘ignorant’ in front of a painting. What I feared most was complete silence, the *void* generated by the lack of information provided on the author, the title, and the date of the art piece.<sup>18</sup>

Despite my initial fears, reticence and mistrust have been very sparsely represented, while the emulative effect triggered by the first speakers produced—during encounter after encounter—a deep transformation in the visitors who repeated the experience, sometimes returning more than once, often arranging a date with other visitors in order to meet again, confident in the belief that their experience at the museum would be full and of benefit to their psycho-physical wellness, as well as allowing them to nourish their relationships with other human beings, and in essence, soften the pain of their existence.

Sharing impressions and listening to the questions raised through a prolonged observation of the painting lead

<sup>17</sup> Encounters take place with a maximum of 15 people and progressively—with increasing demand—we adjusted to 3 runs on the same topic.

<sup>18</sup> Caption was covered.



to increased knowledge about the piece of art, through the mediator's work of 'melding' the different voices, putting together information gathered by the exchange, showing the congruity between what was perceived and what we know about the painting's subject, the reasons it was produced and the stylistic choices of the author. Within the dialogical teaching experience, notion is thus not neglected but *postponed*; it comes after the audience have offered their visual impressions which in themselves come after prolonged observation. Maybe the most significant thing we found was how the curators discovered new points of view, sometimes giving way to novel research areas which had previously been neglected by scholars. The inexperienced eye may grasp elements that the specialist eyes classify as not interesting or alien to her/his scientific research. And through this perspective the application of the methodology opens new pathways for scholars and primarily for the institutions which are dedicated to education and training.<sup>19</sup>

The exchange below is extracted from a report on an experience of *dialogical teaching* focused on the painting *Autoritratto con la famiglia* di Giuseppe Bartolomeo Chiari<sup>20</sup>:

*Curator:* Hi guys, now, look for a short moment at this group of people. What information do you gather from it?

*A:* They seem to be a family, certainly wealthy, maybe from the aristocracy.

*B:* The clothes are quite elegant, also the children look smart. And the jewel on her corset is very important, prominent, sophisticated.

<sup>19</sup> Hopefully, Italian academies and universities will welcome my invitation and widen their education programs.

<sup>20</sup> To see the painting: <http://www.museodiroma.it/it/opera/autoritratto-con-la-famiglia-0?tema=1->

- C:* It seems like a family jewel, maybe it's a noble family, high aristocracy, because it is an inherited jewel.
- Curator:* Indeed, overall, there is a lot of elegance, even if the clothes are not those of an official ceremony: they are clothes worn at home, even if elegant and sophisticated. They display social status, definitely.
- D:* The woman is a central figure, and she is staring at us, while the two men next to her are both looking at her, but their eyes never meet. This conveys a bit of tension to me; maybe their relationship is not so smooth.
- B:* It's as if everything turns around her, in a good and also a bad sense. She seems burdened by life: three children are a lot. But she is also glad of her wealth, and she shows off: pearls, earrings, the big jewel, and the brooch on her bosom.
- A:* The little child, dressed in red, has an apple in his hand. It could mean something, symbolically speaking.
- E:* The apple stands for the original sin, and it also appears in representations of the Holy Mary with Jesus.
- A:* The whole composition seems to recall a *holy conversation* with Holy Mary at the center, maybe with the child and maybe also ... Saint John in the left figure who lifts his forefinger? It reminds me of Leonardo's images.
- Curator:* Well, we can indeed read this pictorial expedient as a literary reference; the painting has a visual connection to 'high-level' iconography which makes the whole even more valuable. It was quite a common strategy between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, an instrument of visual communication through an iconographic connection to the viewer.
- B:* Yet the woman seems in pain. Looking at her eyes closely, they seem wet and sad, full of held-in tears.
- C:* And looking at it deeply, her left hand seems swollen and aching. She seems not to be able to rest it naturally. And on her little finger there is a pale band as if a ring

has been removed; maybe she couldn't wear it because of the swollen hand.

*D:* That's true! She cannot be an aristocrat. She has hands that work, hands with a slight arthritis, like the hands of people who work at home, maybe spending long hours with their hands in cold waters.

*A:* So the jewel doesn't belong to the family?

*E:* What I can tell you as a jewel expert, it is that it isn't an Italian manufacture. It could be French, British ...but I wouldn't say Italian.

Through this dialogue clues about the painting are gradually detected by the participants. According to their sensibilities and prior knowledge the painting is slowly unveiled to the visitors' and enters their comprehension, without any preliminary information about the author, the period, and the subject. Through the visitors' gaze, the artist Chiari and his family begin to tell their own story, about their inner relationships and the silent pain, like the fact that of the eight children of the couple only three survived.

The jewel and the swollen hand have made the audience discharge the initial hypothesis of a noble family. The jewel was probably bought by Chiari from one of his many foreign buyers, being one of the most successful painters in Rome at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly appreciated by the cosmopolitan aristocracy of travelers and diplomats in the city.

That hand, so dissimilar from the painting, in pain and swollen (as doctors visiting the museum confirmed) led me to deepen my research at *Archivio Storico Diocesano* in Rome on the origins of Lucrezia Damiani, wife of Giuseppe Bartolomeo Chiari in 1691, and I discovered she was the daughter of a greengrocer from Città di Castello who moved to Rome with his large family near Parrocchia di Santa Susanna (where the couple met).

Despite providing the curator with useful clues for further research on the painting history,<sup>21</sup> the encounter—repeated with other groups of people—activated in the participants the capacity to enter into a relation with the painting which goes far beyond the ‘taught’ notions about a piece of art. The shared observation of details, often contrasting or difficult to interpret, activated in the visitors a reciprocal dynamic of listening capable of flattening any possible hierarchy among the speakers (related to cultural level, social status, and dialectic skills). The emotional approach to the art piece made the human encounter possible, starting from personal situations, sometimes painful and always honest, which showed—one more time—that painting is a universal language, capable of telling everyone its own story, even without prior knowledge.

Through dialogue, people become willing to listen and not only to others but also to their inner universe.

During a dialogical encounter with a small group of psychiatric patients visiting the museum<sup>22</sup> a young woman suddenly started to speak, quite astonishingly since she had remained quiet for a long period, an elective mute. Her therapist was positively impressed and very pleased about what happened (he told me on the phone afterwards). From that day, the patient had begun to talk to him and to other people living in the group home, relying on her therapist, and creating a solid therapeutic relationship with him. I have selected a passage from the psychotherapist’s email

<sup>21</sup> The research in the Archivio and in the Archivio Storico Capitolino and the Archivio di Stato di Roma were carried out also by trainee students (not only for this painting but also for others). The methodology, then, went beyond the museum walls, continuing in the places dedicated to Art History research.

<sup>22</sup> Based on an agreement between the Sovrintendenza Capitolina and ASL RM1. The group was made up of 12 people, with personality disorders, accompanied by the therapist in charge of the project.

which shows the anthropological meaning and the potential embedded in the mediation experience from art:

*Dear Mrs. Strano,*  
*I thank you for your hospitality and for the interesting experience of looking at a painting while building a dialogue with the participants. The guests of the two communities of which I am in charge were very happy about the experience and we believe we should make it not an occasional opportunity but an experimental project. The empathetic relationship the art creates allows the viewer to bring their own inner world into the art piece. In this experience it was important the way you led the group, knowingly managing the critical moments, and I really appreciated the way you did it. [...].*  
*I have worked in mental health for many years, and I have been doing it with the same enthusiasm since the beginning of my career, because I consider it a job that always offers new possibilities of growth; relationships are characterized by a profound humanity which emerges by sharing small daily deeds. Art in its many and diverse forms of expression [...] translates life's ambiguities and ambivalences replicating it and freeing it from the anxieties and conflicts present in the reality lived by people in distress and thus making it usable. In this perspective, it really is a therapeutic act, thus "transformative." Thank you again, see you soon.*

The painting examined on that occasion was *Ritratto di Girolama Santacroce come Vanitas* by Pompeo Batoni,<sup>23</sup> a painting particularly interesting to share with an audience. The woman who took part in the encounter and broke her silence said that the posture of the painting's protagonist evoked in her mind the presence of a lute in the room and according to her the imperceptible gesture of her right hand (which unbuttons her *negligee*) hinted at the plucking of the strings of the lute, making the air resonate with a constant and prolonged vibe. Her ingenious intuition, never before recorded in literature and almost shocking in its immediacy and lucidity of transmission, burst from the psychological distress of the woman's life, marked by sexual and identity

<sup>23</sup> To see the painting: <http://www.museodiroma.it/it/opera/girolama-santacroce-come-vanitas?tema=1>

problems. But the topic of the musical instrument as a key to entering the painting via a subtly provocative and sensual perspective is confirmed in the wide artistic literature<sup>24</sup> available about this painting and opens up new possible scenarios for the interpretation of the painting.<sup>25</sup>

The painting *Ritratto di Girolama Santacroce Conti* was the object of many dialogical encounters at the museum (and on the virtual platform throughout the pandemic) producing significant information and data on the advantages of the methodology applied to different typologies of visitors.

During an encounter with high school students, after a deep observation of the paintings, the participants (age 16-18) expressed their personal interpretations.

*VALENTINA:* We can say the young woman has a seductive attitude as she seems to want to unbutton her gown. She expresses both innocence and sensuality ... colours are very 'warm' and her skin very fair.

*LAVINIA:* I think the woman is untying the knot of her gown as if she were ready to give up her innocence.

*ELEONORA:* Yes, it seems she abandons purity and chastity (represented by the casket on the left) to enter adulthood. It seems she is about to have intercourse with her beloved ...

<sup>24</sup> See, among others, Philippe Vendrix, "Il liuto e la vita pubblica nell'età moderna" (translated into Italian by Maria Semi), in Guido Mambella (ed.), *A cavallo di un monocordo. Lo strumento musicale come accordatura di saperi* (Pàtron editore, 2013); <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01237121>.

<sup>25</sup> Although widely known, the painting has never been under deep scrutiny of critics and research is limited to a superficial reading of the portrait of Girolama Santacroce Conti. I tried to overcome these limits and discuss the painting in Fulvia Strano, "Non solo 'Vanitas.' Il ritratto di Girolama Santacroce Conti come allegoria dell'Amore Virtuoso," *Bollettino dei Musei Comunali di Roma*, XXIX, 2015: 17-22.

*GINEVRA*: Maybe the part of the mirror (on the right) shows a side of the noblewoman, the side she shows everybody. While the other part shows her real essence.

*ELEONORA*: it seems to me the work of a painter that portrays his beloved in her negligee, and she stands in front of him. It reminds me of the scene in *Titanic* in which Jack makes a portrait of Rose, even if it may sound silly ...

My first observation is related to the truthfulness of what the students grasped. The *Ritratto* hides many clues which are useful to unpick a sort of riddle, that Batoni presents to the audience, almost engaging his viewers in a subtle game of sensory hints and logical puzzles.<sup>26</sup> Beyond a manifest immobility and a much-flaunted tranquility, *Girolama* displays a subtle restlessness, an inner curiosity which is unveiled through subtle visual deceptions that only a prolonged observation can disclose. The exchange within the visitors' group, once they overcame their fear of expressing thoughts that might lead to teasing, led to a deep and full comprehension of the painting which is, in fact, a psychological portrait of the protagonist.

Another observation, of no less importance, concerns the identification of the meaning of a piece of art painted in 1759 with the contemporary film transposition *Titanic*, by James Cameron (1997). Just like Rose (Kate Winslet) with Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio), the portrait of the woman is the plastic representation of a complicity, of an intimate union of souls, that certainly existed between the duchess Girolama and the painter Batoni, even though it did not reach passionate heights of the two *Titanic* passengers.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Fulvia Strano, "Non solo 'Vanitas'," 20.

<sup>27</sup> Liliana Barroero, "Non solo 'Milordi.' La società romana nei ritratti di Batoni," in *Pompeo Batoni 1708-1787. L'Europa delle Corti e il Grand*

Within this interpretative dynamic, generated by a dialogical encounter in front of a painting, the actual and most authentic nature of the museum is revealed: not anymore “art-centric but anthropocentric [...] committed not to the necessity of conveying knowledge related to art, science or nature but to the creation of an attitude of listening, of seeing, of long pauses, in order to mend the gap between art and life, between universal and individual, between ephemeral, generic fruition and long-lasting appropriation, capable of favoring a return to the museum, to visit the same museum halls, to look at other works, look better, question and understand more.”<sup>28</sup>

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the museums were closed to prevent the spread of the virus. The prolonged closure of museums forced cultural mediators to make enormous efforts in terms of creativity and courage. And as often happens during calamities, several problems emerged, like the absence of a museum education system adapted to the actual needs of the public. Digital technologies represented the main resource available by which to communicate with the public during lockdowns, but many museums did not use adequate *language* and suitable methods to e-interact with the audience, and often relied on the consolidated formula of frontal instruction and passive learning with the additional disadvantage of being distant and separated from the visitors by a screen. But dialogical teaching was a success also when used on e-platforms, thanks to the significantly interactive nature of the methodology and to the possibility of expressing ideas in real time both in written and spoken forms. Moreover, the possibility of writing comments in

*Tour*, exhibition catalog by Liliana Barroero and Fernando Mazzocca (Lucca: 2009) 90 and footnotes.

<sup>28</sup> Giovanna Brambilla, “Nessun quadro allo spettatore. La narrazione come decentramento dello sguardo,” in S. Bodo, S. Mascheroni, and M.G. Panigada (eds.), *Un patrimonio di storie. La narrazione nei musei, una risorsa per la cittadinanza culturale* (Milano: 2016), 77-78.



the chat box allowed everyone to share their thoughts, even those that were scared to talk in front of other people and discouraged by other visitors' promptness.

Dialogical teaching on the platform has also given the audience the opportunity to express their distress due to the lockdown, to reveal hidden feelings of distress which we tended to hide (to ourselves as well) or deny in fear of falling victim to loneliness and depression.

An example of the efficacy of the methodology and of its relatedness to the anthropological dimension of the artistic experience is represented by the encounter on *San Camillo de Lellis salva gli ammalati dell'Ospedale di Santo Spirito durante l'inondazione del Tevere del 1598*, canvas painted in 1746 by the Frenchman Pierre Subleyras and kept at the Museo di Roma.<sup>29</sup>

The first frame (in very high definition) shared during an encounter with the museum *e-guests* showed the image of 'still life' which occupies the center of the painting: a man gradually loads a basket full of daily items (dishes, a lemon, pottery bowls and some fabrics) and lifts it from the water of the river which is flooding into the hospital ward. His arms are stretched, his muscles contracted, his face, turned, is hidden to the audience. It is an homage to 17<sup>th</sup> century synesthesia, to Caravaggio 'filtered' through Chardin—the painter of the silence, as he is described, that Subleyras finely interpreted.

Invited by the curator to express their feelings, participants used words like *fatigue*, *heaviness*, *cold*, *anxiety*; but also, *haste* to save things from the flood, to tidy things up. The visitors imagined the clatter of the pots, the noise of water which broke in with rage. And then, enlarging the scene, the feeling of confusion and chaos slowly found a

<sup>29</sup> To see the painting: <http://www.museodiroma.it/it/opera/san-camillo-de-lellis-mette-salvo-gli-ammalati-dell%E2%80%99ospedale-santo-spirito-durante-l>.

rhythm, a reason to exist, in the wisdom of calm movements demonstrated by Saint Camillo and his brothers, as they acted wisely and with experience. Passing from one detail to another, the shared feeling became fear; for the flood and for the disease contaminating the people in the hospital:

*A.:* I don't think it is a contagious disease; they would have their mouths covered (this is a clear connection to the days of the pandemic).

*B.:* There are too many sick people in a single place; it must be wartime or a pandemic.

*C.:* True! It makes me think of Manzoni's plague. In fact, it could be the time of *Promessi Sposi*.

*D.:* The character at the center (Camillo de' Lellis, the painting's protagonist) does not look worried; rather he looks very determined.

*A.:* He does not feel the weight of what he carries, as if he were used to it, trained to accomplish that task.

*B.:* He feels the responsibility of what he is doing but he can manage the situation very well. He is not panicking; he is not afraid of dying.

*A.:* He must save the others and himself. It is his *mission*.

*C.:* The people in black are very generous (Saint Camillo and his brothers). They show that even in despair there are people that take care of others.

The connection to the situations we were all living through was inevitable. Hospitals full of people, wards full of suffering patients, doctors and nurses tired out both physically and psychologically, but still, working hard and even smiling in pictures for the press; with their faces covered by the marks of the prolonged use of face coverings and their hands held together to shape a heart. Thus, the

audience grasped more than ever the holiness of Saint Camillo de' Lellis, to whose canonization Subleyras's painting pays homage: a holiness made up of simple and loving gestures (and here the reference to Caravaggio's 'still life' at the center of the painting) towards all people in need, with no distinction of status, age or origins. A holiness away from the spotlights, a life dedicated to helping others.

I was particularly impressed by two statements from the participants, for their ability to synthesize the experience and for their deep comprehension of the painting:

A.: It is in me the idea that, after all, we need to trust each other.

B.: This painting gives you the idea of real love for others.

And then, as if to suggest a new title for Subleyras's canvas, adapting it to the days of COVID-19, full of initiatives, like singing from the balcony, to overcome the fear of dying, a woman texted "Andrà sempre bene."

The experience of sharing personal feelings related to the distress of long days being isolated had an encouraging effect on the participants, overcoming the distrust and fear that accompanied us during lockdowns (and still accompanies us). The dialogue around the painting represented a transformative experience, allowing visitors to enter into the painting narrative using their senses and through reciprocal exchange.

But it is the message of Subleyras's painting which is so alive and close to us. The message of mercy and dedication which connotes Camillo de' Lellis's sanctity that was immediately understood by the participants, an instinctive and smoothing empathy, a profound sense of admiration and gratitude for the protagonist's values and way of life. And this is the primary aim of a 'canonization painting'.

## 6. TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ART HISTORY: A MINDSET CHANGE IS NECESSARY

Cultural mediation represents a valid instrument for an anthropological approach to Art History, as we can see from the cases outlined above. Yet we need to highlight an objective problem, a sort of obstacle, which is represented by the typology of academic teaching.

Art History in Italian universities and academies is certainly of high quality, also thanks to a tradition of excellence recognized worldwide. The problem begins when one thinks about transferring the knowledge acquired in a professional and productive domain, with an economic value, in order to become an active subject in the development and in the promotion of market strategies connected to culture and heritage management. It is useless denying that to date most of the academic world still believe that ‘with culture you cannot eat.’<sup>30</sup> This is one of the reasons why in Italy we still think about employment for young graduates in Art History almost exclusively in terms of research, oriented towards academic writing, conferences etc. thus directing their perspective towards academic careers, with a PhD or a Post-graduate specialization course. With regards to Art and Communication the field further narrows to some post-graduate courses, within which it is still difficult to find curricula on didactic methodology;<sup>31</sup> while the demand

<sup>30</sup> In 2010 Giulio Tremonti, at the time Economy Minister in the Berlusconi Government, in answer to complaints by his colleague Sandro Bondi, Minister for Culture and Cultural Heritage, who was being faced with another cut in funding, uttered the sentence “*Non è che la gente la cultura se la mangia / people do not eat culture,*” a very unfortunate sentence which became in the collective imagination “with culture you do not eat / *con la cultura non si mangia.*”

<sup>31</sup> To mention but a few very active departments, Dipartimenti di Scienze dell’Educazione at Bologna University and at Roma Tre University, even if more focused on pedagogical contexts rather than artistic.

for courses in Museum Marketing and Museum Management is growing, but mostly within the realm of academic courses with economic foundations.

This dichotomy has favored the processes of externalization of Education Programs and services within museums, basically handing over to third parties the management of what I daresay is the museum's *core business*, that is to say, the task of communicating its cultural heritage through mediation with the visitors.

Today's challenge is to imagine an academic system open to change, ready for a confrontation with other realities, bearers of needs to which today's students will have to answer once they become the museum experts of tomorrow.

In this perspective an anthropological approach to the study of Art History is inescapable and mandatory, capable of giving a central role to people rather than to the artwork, replacing monologue with dialogue, encouraging shared glances and reciprocal listening.

And to achieve this goal we need a change in mindset because

[...] to give a central role to visitors, we need to create the conditions to 'make stones and heritage talk' and also sing in a comprehensible language. A robust investment from our institutions is necessary, an inversion of positions and of the telescope's gaze: from an introverted standpoint—focused on the organization of its own procedures [...]—to an extrovert one, capable of involving all the visitors in shared paths, possible only through a deep knowledge of visitors' typologies and conscious of their diversity.<sup>32</sup>

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