

# ART AND BODY

## A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

*Elio Franzini*

ABSTRACT. – This work moves from the theme of judgment, according to the Aristotelian model of the relationship between senses and intellect. In this relationship, art has a symbolic function and makes visible what is hidden in nature. This idea is mainly stated through the theories of three different authors: Herder, who examines the relationship between sight and touch; Merleau-Ponty, who considers the corporal integral experience and the unity of senses; Deleuze, who defines painting not as ‘visual data’ but as an operational diagram. The art-work requires so the operation of the senses to manifest the opacity of the real and renders her symbolic product a reality thanks to the movement of apprehension.

Aesthetics is, from the point of view of its etymological meaning, the ‘theory of sensitivity’. Historically it turned towards the study of the *sensibilia* and of the acts of perception, of imagination, of memory. Among the ‘sensible things’ that offer themselves to be apprehended by subjects and cultural communities, some objects with a specific symbolic value have taken on a special role: artworks.

On the topic of art it is not possible to build a unified canon that is universally accepted and valid. For example, writing can be considered as an image that, through signs, presents some representational content, while in contrast the reproduction of visible things offers immediately the reality of what is represented through a direct image. Nonetheless, there is a basic difference that marks the relationship between the different areas of knowledge: things that are sensible – that one can see, touch, and hear, with their specific qualities that elicit emotions, passions,

pleasure, and sorrow – have a different relationship with the image represented than things that are just thought (be these mental images or the laws that determine their functioning). It is evident that knowledge is the link between these two processes and that philosophy is essentially the history of the attempts to find connections of knowledge between thinking and sensing; but it is just as clear that the functions and ways of these processes are differentiated and are situated at the origins of aesthetics and logic.

Obviously logic and aesthetics cannot be entirely separated, since the epistemological problem always assumes their connection, even if in different ways. But if we consider aesthetics, which is the study of the different aspects of sensing (feelings, sensations, etc.), not as merely preliminary to the science of thinking, but as an autonomous territory, which inaugurates a specific forefront of knowledge, then their relationship can be reconsidered in search for a, perhaps paradoxical, aesthetic world *logos*.

From this point of view, the acts connected to ‘representing’ have different meanings and they relate differently to the epistemological dimensions of ‘judgement’. Judging is not only an epistemological act of thinking but also an aesthetic and sensitive rapport between the subject and the world. If, as Aristotle teaches, there cannot be a science of particulars but only of universals, then the aesthetic judgement, which refers to single things falling under our senses in a contingent way, will not be able to offer absolute knowledge: its images will have to be mediated through a categorical synthesis, that is to say to insert that single object into a system of objects. Imagination, or representation, involves two moments: the passive ‘given’ image and its active conceptual processing. The first operation pertains to the world of sensation (aesthetics), the second to the world of thought (logic): thus representation, even if it has to encompass sensation, *aisthesis*, finds its truth and its universality only in the *logos*, in its translation into categorical and conceptual terms.

There is no doubt that the Aristotelian model, summarized for centuries in the expression (from the *De anima*) «nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses», has been influential on subsequent thought. The double status of the image gives the priority of immediacy to aesthetics and to its sensory rapport with the particulars of the world,

but it gives to logic the possibility to reach knowledge with certainty. It is not our intention here to discuss Aristotle's view, but only to presume that the Aristotelian distinction between *aistheta* and *noeta*, between sensory things and intellectual things, between sensory images and logical figures (from which we started), may leave space for a series of questions from which aesthetics has developed in the multiplicity of its views.

For example, in Leonardo's thoughts one finds two different directions that appear to continue, on several levels and in a more pragmatic way, the debate on the nature of the image and of the representation which started in classic Greek philosophy. Besides the common idea (in sixteenth-century treatises) that painting is a 'high' *mimesis* of the real (thanks to Platonic paradigms) that is geared towards an ideal dimension, there is also an insistence that this 'noble' imitation continues the metaphorical tradition started by Gregory the Great and by the Carolingian books. In fact, Leon Battista Alberti writes that the first task of a painter is to represent a 'history' but to give to it an 'ideal' meaning. Leonardo adds one element to these theories: painting is superior over all the other arts (even poetry) since the sense of sight is superior to all other senses. Leonardo, overcoming the monotonous unanimity of the critics regarding the harmonious sisterhood of poetry and painting, manifests the vivifying belief that, rather than twins, these arts are totally different in many respects<sup>1</sup>. This debate that, as we have seen, is not at all new, will have wide consequences, of which we will analyse here some historical and theoretical aspects.

The superiority of the sense of sight is here affirmed not for physiological, mystical, or theological reasons, but thanks to its characteristic of being a 'mental eye' having the ability to summarize and formulate aesthetic judgements. It is obvious that the first goal of Leonardo is to locate painting among the liberal arts, but there is also the aim to underline the intrinsic judgemental potential of the 'visual virtue', beyond the humanistic 'classicism'. Pictorial representations are truly judgements because, differently from poetry, they pose an immediate relationship with the pictured objects. Painting is superior to poetry for its larger 'communi-

---

<sup>1</sup> See R.W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: the Humanistic Theory of Painting*, New York, Norton, 1967.

cability'. Moreover, painting owes such a superiority to the fact that it manages to be a life-like interpretation of nature through 'figures', which are visible data of immediate visual apperception. This is how Leonardo unhinges the 'classicist' paradigm: it is not true that poetry and painting are sister arts, and that their rules are equally effective in reaching a perfect formal measure. Painting is superior because it goes to the qualitative root of things themselves. It is the presence of a technical capability to construct that makes painting superior to poetry: unlike the latter, painting does not register just the 'names' of things, but also the universality itself of their shapes – a form which is visible, as sight is indeed the organ that 'gives shape'. This 'interpretative' reading of Leonardo, in its anti-classicist strength, will be resumed in the battle against classicism that some eighteenth-century authors will lead in favour of a formative autonomy of art: formative, in the first place, of judgemental and cognitive dynamics. It is not wrong to assert that some echoes of pictorial art as an expressive and aesthetic-imaginative interpretation of nature are found in Bacon, Vico, or Diderot. This is how one may think that a formative ability to make *poiesis* may inaugurate a kind of knowledge, of knowing, that does not give priority to the instruments of *logos*: art interprets nature, it shows its organic forms, its intrinsic dynamism. In summary, art makes visible what would otherwise remain hidden without this *poiesis*-making activity, without a technical capacity to dig in the folds of meaning that nature itself offers. A unitary *fil rouge* that may constitute a formative paradigm based on the expressive and communicative possibilities of arts is, obviously, an *a posteriori* construction – but a construction in which it is evident that the cognitive paradigms referring to the world of art are constantly evolving: word, symbol, icon, panel, painted image are not eternal and immutable realities. Likewise, the functions of the senses are not outside the flow of history either. Art itself modifies and amplifies these functions.

The classicist tradition holds, as mentioned, that painting and poetry are 'sister arts'. Nonetheless, according to classicism, painting finds its completion in the word: as the Carolingian held, it is the word that can best come close to the purity and immediacy of truth. Painting is, by nature, something material; as we have seen, it is given a 'mediumness' from which it cannot be freed. In the post-Renaissance art systems,

painting does not always manage to maintain its equivalence with poetry. In other words, the symbolic layer is increasingly occupied by the word, leaving analogy and metaphor – considered rhetorical forms of inferior epistemological value – to the image. The symbol's power of allusion, made manifest in poetry, establishes its superiority over the metaphorical mediumness of painting, unless the latter can subjugate itself to a 'manner' – to the rules of perfection, of iconicity, and immutability that characterize poetry.

Even if these are the dominant views, they are not the only ones and, as demonstrated by Leonardo, they will not rule the century uncontested. Beyond its historical limits, classicism is simply that view that tends, in a Platonic way, to bring the image back to the *logos*, and the seeing to the *eidōs*, temporarily blocking the aesthetic and materic layer. The image is thus limited to perform only a 'minor' task, which tends to limit it to narration, denying the possibility of switching from the metaphor to the symbol, which is so characteristic of the iconic painting. In order to make painting, or a figural form of knowledge, take on in modern times that role of symbolic mediation – as a symbol of thought itself – that the Nicaean had attributed to it, it is necessary to exit from classicist paradigms in order to recover the formative sense of the image, as a certain thought that goes through the body, through its sensitivity, that holds the power to render the sensory world semantic, through a gesture of *poiesis*.

To this purpose, we shall now trace the main stages of the debate regarding the nature of visibility that, upon first impression, may seem to pertain only to figurative arts, but that instead provide the occasion to show in an emblematic way how knowledge is not limited to a logic-discursive, abstract and formal, representation. What emerges in this debate is how sensory and visible reality, that is translated into images and figures, always alludes to an originary invisibility, embedded in the nature of things, that cannot be reduced to the word and can be shown only through the images themselves.

The 'knowledge' in images is graspable only by breaking free from a classicist paradigm controlled by rules and by reinstating a symbolic idea of form. This symbolic idea of form has the visible and the invisible always simultaneously present (and mediated): not more than the word,

but in a different way. The artistic 'form' is not a mimetic image, but is the symbolic and expressive sense of aesthetics: it is, as Kant will say, an aesthetic idea not reducible to the word. It is the mark of an exhibition of thought that, because of its being symbolic, no concept and no representation can express. To see and to touch (as Herder will maintain)<sup>2</sup> what is beyond the sensory world allows us to place art in a symbolic rapport with the aesthetic dimension of space and of time: art is not a *mimesis* led by rules, but rather an expressive and communicative exhibition of meanings of knowledge of the intuitive forms of aesthetics.

It has already been noticed that there is no single concept of 'art' or 'theory of art'. It is likewise known that the ties between the field of *aisthesis* (and of *aestheta*) and of artistic objects are only occasionally referred to: Diderot talks about them, even if it is only in the wake of the Leibniz-Wolff school of thought that this discourse can find some systematic premises. It was Lessing, who knew the writings of Winckelmann and Baumgarten, who explicitly theorized them, since he differentiated among figurative and poetic arts through the aesthetic-intuitive dimensions of space and time. In this context, the specificity of figurative art, which is deployed in space and escapes the temporal dimension of action, is given to the body that is exhibited in it. The way of exhibiting bodies is, in aesthetic terms, visibility. According to Lessing, it is visibility that dictates the rules of painting.

Despite these premises, it would be inappropriate, and not justifiable by Lessing's *Laocoon*, to hold that the founding role of visibility implies the rejection of the sense of touch. Highlighting the visible value of aesthetics in figurative arts has another goal, i.e. denying (or, even better, giving new meaning to) the link between painting and the invisible. Beauty, traditionally linked with seeing, has become a way to address form that only an artform meant for bodies can satisfy, meanwhile rejecting the complexity of ugliness. In order to be accepted, this complexity needs a further aesthetic dimension, and that is the temporal dimension that is characteristic of poetic art. From this one can deduce that, for Lessing, modernity and all its layers of representational rapports can find in poetry

---

<sup>2</sup> See J.G. Herder, *Plastik. Einiger Wahrnehmungen über Form und Gestalt aus Pigmaliions bildendem Träume*, Riga, J.F. Hartknoch, 1778.

a more adequate and complete expressive form. This also entails, as the following generations will confirm, that a form of aesthetics having its main reference point in the empathic connection between visibility and beauty is destined to decay. Even an 'aesthetics' that does not address the spatial visibility of form is 'artistic'. The 'arbitrary' signs of poetics, and not just the natural ones used by painting, can originate an artistic value or effect, which from art reaches the aesthetic receptors in the spectator that may be, by now, dissatisfied by an exclusively formal beauty.

Obviously it is not just Lessing, in the second half of the eighteenth century, who let go of the corporeal visibility of beauty. It is a phenomenon that happens wherever one questions the tradition of a rhetorical Classicism, born in France in the wake of Boileau, which garnered so much success in different parts of Europe due to all its academic inheritances. Therefore, even the specific attention that Lessing devotes to 'visibility' need not to be interpreted as a refusal of other aesthetic dimensions in order to grasp the beauty of bodies, but only as an adoption of the models of visibility that, since the Renaissance, associated the corporeal and natural qualities of beautiful forms to the act of seeing.

We need to consider as similar to Lessing those authors who explicitly address 'tactility', which is an aesthetic element that is always the sign of a critical attitude towards the 'closed' and 'regulated' concepts of artistic beauty, unable to grasp its sensory meaning, its aesthetic origin. On the contrary, touch emphasizes this origin, even without opposing visibility, but rather supplying further possibilities to perceive beauty. Generally speaking (in philosophical terms), this is testified by the role that Condillac outlines for touch in his *Treatise of Sensations*. He associates touch with sight as a sensation fundamental for knowledge, and defining it as a 'philosophical and profound' organ. This idea is, at a different level, confirmed by Berkeley and, more generally, in the English eighteenth-century culture, within which Burke's *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (the 'manifesto' of artistic anti-classicism in this period) plays a fundamental role. In the context of a sensory vision of the aesthetic categories (both 'beautiful' and 'sublime'), it gives to tactility a special attention, explicitly paired up with sight in its ability to relate itself to form and to the formless.

There is a passage in which Burke specifies that the description of

beauty starting from sight could also be illustrated through touch, which produces a «similar effect»<sup>3</sup>: it provokes «the same species of pleasure» and demonstrates how there «is a chain in all of our sensations», that «are all but different sorts of feelings» provoked by different kinds of objects, but all in «the same manner»<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, not only does Burke go so far as to present the famous paradox through which he formulates the hypothesis of an enjoyment of colours through touch but also, and more importantly, he designs his entire aesthetic theory of beauty around sensory qualities that are mainly tactile. In fact the variability of bodies (which is a crucial element for a non-classicist and non-model-ruled concept of beauty) can be best ‘grasped’ through touch. His definition of beauty, notoriously sensual and feminine, is totally tactile since pleasure – the same phenomenon that, when brought into the sensory world, grants the continuation of species – is not linked to geometric objects but rather to «soft, smooth, variegated, unangular bodies», to «beautiful» bodies, evidently associated with femininity. In sum, touch is the true sense of beauty, the one that defines its kind of pleasure and also, through sex, its social usefulness, since «touch takes in the pleasure of softness, which is not primarily an object of sight»<sup>5</sup>. Where there is ‘form’ (more in the beautiful than in the sublime), touch is absolutely necessary because it allows an empathic rapport with the object, thus causing a ‘relaxation’ of bodies. Still, even the opacity of the sublime and the formlessness that comes with it can get excited by the tactile powers, where rough and sharp bodies cause an impression of pain, which consists of a violent tension or a contraction of the muscle fibres. In conclusion, touch has a precise aesthetic role in the beautiful and in the sublime and, particularly for the beautiful, it is the primary cause of that pleasure that defines its form and function. It reveals itself as an ‘aesthetic’ organ because it does not grasp the unity of bodies but rather, against every form of classicism, the variety, which is necessary to beauty.

When Herder, in his essay on sculpture *Plastic art* (1778), seems to attribute a special role to tactility, he is simply continuing the eighteenth-

---

<sup>3</sup> E. Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Basil, Tourneisen, 1792, p. 195.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 197.

century tradition. This is confirmed, in the first place, by his cultural references who, other than the members of Wolff's school, are Condillac, Diderot, Burke (and with him all of English empiricism), Winckelmann, and Lessing. Herder's underlining of the 'antique' and 'past' aspects of figurative art, and of sculpture in particular, was already present in Lessing and, perhaps, could be deduced from Winckelmann. The true novelty of the Herderian discourse is elsewhere, in the explicit link between 'touch' and 'sculpture' – even if this is not completely new, if one considers the treatises or iconography of the Renaissance – almost as if this art may come to represent the axiological reference of the aesthetic-corporeal sense, and redefine the debate between the visible and the invisible that, until that moment, had involved only painting and poetry, image and *logos*.

The alternating fortune of tactility within the sixteenth-century debate on the *Paragone* between the arts had been surpassed in the eighteenth century or, at least, brought within the context of knowledge. But never before Herder had anyone theorized the link with sculpture in a context meant to specify an organic system of the arts (in the wake of Lessing and on aesthetic-intuitive bases, and not on rhetorical bases). In fact Herder, in an advance that is full of consequences, thinks that tactility confronts us with the third dimension, with that spatial characteristic that identifies the aesthetics of sculpture: the haptic moment, as Riegl will call it. Even if this moment was forgotten by his contemporaries and by the next generation, it is the starting point of a path that, through Lipps or Fiedler, leads to multiple theorizations on the relationship between touch and sculpture, which has been characteristic of the critical reflection of the twentieth century.

Herder is at the origin of a problem that, even if present and made possible in the aesthetic-philosophical thought of the eighteenth century, leads far from its premises: the aesthetic-artistic collaboration between visual and tactile that the eighteenth century theorized is here cast in doubt, with a resulting backlash against the general definition of the idea of artistic form. Herder maintains, at the beginning of *Plastic Art*, that «sight shows only figures, while touch only bodies: everything that is shape can be recognized only through the sense of touch, while through sight only surface, and not even of bodies, but only the surface exposed

to light»<sup>6</sup>. One needs to doubt not only that (as Lessing said) all figurative arts may be arts pertaining to the body but also that ‘form’ may be apprehended through sight. The ‘body’ (i.e. the object that is present in space through its three dimensions) can be represented only by sculpture, while painting will have to do with the figure. But the ‘body’ of sculpture is such because it is in tactile contact with our body, that is to say with a body that can really make one ‘feel’ the form, its impenetrability, hardness, softness, smoothness, form, figure, roundness – and here one can see the general epistemological concept that underlies the Herderian discourse. One need not to compare and contrast touch and vision, but rather comprehend that only when taken together they can lead to judgement. As a consequence, those artforms where touch guides sight, i.e. sculpture, will have such an epistemological centrality as to be able to give, alone, the ‘form’ of things. In Herder, therefore, the canonical eighteenth-century reasons for the epistemological association between the two senses are utilized both to distinguish between the respective arts, breaking off abstract sisterhoods, and to differentiate their epistemological roles.

In addition to having an intrinsic phenomenological validity (in the proper sense of the word, since he explicitly alludes to Lambert<sup>7</sup>), the Herderian distinction also explains the double level on which the topic of touch needs to be understood. On the one hand, by continuing the anti-classicist traditions of the eighteenth century and the debate on *Paragone* between the arts and their interpretative potential, Herder argues against the epistemological centrality of sight by adding to it the necessary and complementary role of touch. On the other hand, though, he highlights the rapport between sight and touch to further a philosophical discourse on the arts which implicitly challenges the eighteenth-century ‘systems of the arts’. According to Herder, these systems are built only on hearing and sight: to these senses one now needs to add touch, since it does not limit itself to perceiving what is ‘outside’ of it (sight), and does not only put one object ‘next’ to the other, but can perceive them ‘one in the other’, thus offering not only surfaces or sounds but also forms.

---

<sup>6</sup> J.G. Herder, *Plastik* cit., p. 11 (trans. by the author, here and *infra*).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.

If, implicitly referring to Alberti, painting is *tabula* and proceeds with a clear reference to rhetoric (in fact, Herder maintains that it always has to come back to invention and disposition, that is to say to the two fundamental parts of the construction of the discourse), sculpture is a spatiotemporal form (he writes «it is here and it lasts»), it is the existence of the corporeal presence of life itself, that aspires to aesthetically present «the soul of the body»<sup>8</sup>.

What we have is not a dichotomy between ‘sight’ and ‘touch’ but rather, to better understand the superior formal completeness of the latter corporeal sense, a partition between the respective artistic correlates, i.e. between painting and sculpture. The first is ‘dream’ and ‘enchantment’, while the second, by contrast, is truth and presentation (*Darstellung*); the first is rhetorical or ‘novel’, the second a living presence. Sight, by itself, is only «the hand’s reason», while «only the hand gives forms, concepts of what the forms mean, of what lives in them»<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, following Burke, if the hand prefers a rounded and sensual form, sculpture does not limit itself to it, to the beauty, but rather it tends toward the sublime which demands reverence. This is the paradox of a sublime form that ‘creates its light’ and ‘creates its own space’: exhibition of infinity that demonstrates the infinite nature of artistic form, its ability to build a space that, in order to be complete, needs the other intuitive form, i.e. time. This time is not linear and narrative but is that of a hand that actively moves across the surface of the matter through touch, going beyond the limits of visibility and pronounceability. One can thus grasp the epistemological possibilities of art starting from an originary aesthetic act that pursues the pre-categorical through a spatiotemporal present form.

In fact, Herder writes, even bypassing the issue of sculpture, what the hands touches «seems bigger than what the eye sees in a flash as fast as lightning», and is thus appropriate for the sublime<sup>10</sup>. Touch indicates the aesthetic tension that is in the form, in the sublime aim of art, in the form’s endeavour to be not only a representation, but also a figure: «the

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 120.

hand never touches completely, it cannot grasp any shape in one go, aside from the sphere, which is the shape of quiet and of perfection resolved in itself»<sup>11</sup>. Touch is, in art, a sensory way to feel infinity, the sublime, without totally constraining it in the illusory finitude of the visible representation. Sculpture is, for touch, at the same time unitary and indefinite, present and overcoming its finitude: «the sculptor stands in the darkness of the night and goes searching for gods' figures»<sup>12</sup>. It is form, but not reducible to allegory or to abstraction, because it is never entirely given to one single form, keeping its opacity as an invitation to deepen time and again the formal temporality of space.

Herder's conclusions on tactility and sculpture find their first justification, as already mentioned, in eighteenth-century culture. Nonetheless, on the bases of these 'contextual' premises, they raise a more general problem. In fact, starting from this point, one can question why touch should embody the sublime opacity of art, the ability to grasp infinity in a form, the same ability that allows us to overcome a conception of art as a mimetic and repetitive illusion (connecting back to the *fil rouge* of the interpretative theories of art which started in the Italian Renaissance). The consequences of these issues have been numerous, particularly in art criticism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some led towards the determination of a specific 'value' connected to tactility, be it touching with the eyes (Hildebrand), the gothic-barbaric haptic of Riegl and Woringer or the 'tactile values' of Berenson. Others have affirmed that these art theories are not sufficient to solve the 'aesthetic problems' (epistemological and philosophical) that Herder brings in<sup>13</sup>. The problem, in fact, is why it should be touch that indicates the limits of representation. Historically speaking, one can maintain that this happens because Herder is within a discourse where the link between tactility and sculpture aims to show that sublimity of art which is unknown to the classicism of the 'sister arts'.

The Herderian position can be described as an attempt to raise to the sublime, *via* touch, the Lessingian system of art. Instead, one can

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> See M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, trans. by C. Dallery in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. by J. Edie, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 159-190.

hypothesize that through Herder one can approach other questions which bring back the classical debates in aesthetics between visible and invisible, to which art always newly testifies. On the one hand, touch is the sense which escapes isolation and opens to the totality of the aesthetic experience. It is an embodied perception, which goes beyond the clarity of 'visibility' to include also the hidden power behind the apparent transparency of the representation. On the other hand, touch is the sense which makes explicit – through sculpture as an ideal model – the knowledge of how reflecting on sensation/sensitivity (whether Lockian or Baumgartenian) brings one to an intuition of the artistic form that, through space and time, grasps the specificity which cannot be reduced to a mimetic or formalistic representation. Touch also indicates the possibility of reaping the hidden aspects of form, the invisible, the 'unfinished' that, since the time of Leonardo, has been the best response to the exclusively narrative, metaphorical or rhetorical view of art. In this way, one can affirm that touch is an ulterior method of opening the symbolic dimension of art, which is precluded – as Diderot taught – by its reduction to language or to only one of the senses. Touch is, instead, bound to the ambiguity of a bodily gesture: for Herder, touch was irreconcilable with any form of allegory or rhetoric.

Herder's two arguments or, perhaps more generally, the entire eighteenth century in its anti-classicist mode, find their theoretical reference outside art criticism (which was perhaps not their intended destination) and therefore outside any particular axiology of the various arts or any scientific, physiological claim about the capacity of the different senses. It is, in fact, in contemporary thought regarding aesthetics and art that one finds links to the questions raised by Herder. The first and most evident path leads to Merleau-Ponty, for whom painting has the task of offering a visible existence to what the profane vision believes to be invisible, in such a way that the muscular sense is not needed to perceive the voluminous nature of the world. Doubtlessly, for Merleau-Ponty the eye and visibility were of supreme value, in that painting even when destined for other purposes always celebrates the enigma of visibility. However, visibility, the eye itself, is occupied with more than mere visual data: it is the intention, truly platonic, to seek the Being, its traces, that transforms vision into a mirror or concentration of the universe, a meta-

morphosis of Being in the vision of the painter<sup>14</sup>. The centrality of the gaze, therefore, is not to the detriment of touch but rather focuses our attention on the non-physiological, but rather ontological, nature of perception of the work, which opens up the invisibility of Being: returning to the theme imposed by Herder. Thus, when Merleau-Ponty writes about the eye and visibility, he shows how painting is an ‘interrogation’ of the invisible through the visible: but this interrogation always begins with a unitary body, with the delirious and secret genesis of the aspects of our body. Vision and the eye, privileged because paintings refer to the act of seeing, are metaphors for a corporeal access to the hidden truth of Being. Additional evidence for this idea comes from Merleau-Ponty’s suspicion of the optical-physical systems of vision, in particular perspective theories of vision.

Metaphors transport us beyond the ‘illusionism’ of vision, back to the ‘metaphysical’ significance of painting: to an invisible Being made of contingencies, reversibility, of living and lived bodies. Consequentially painting is not complete either in the visual or in touch’s unveiling: it is not adding a dimension to the two dimensions of the canvas but, instead, echoing Nicea, it supersedes entirely the consideration of painting as a pure and simple representation. As Herder had argued for sculpture, the work is more than an object in space but rather an object that constructs its own space. According to Merleau-Ponty, in this space it is the painter that is born in these things, in a sort of concentration and returning to self of the visible<sup>15</sup>.

To argue that in painting vision is the encounter of all the aspects of Being like at a crossroads<sup>16</sup>, gives rise to a body that is not just the eye but a combination of tactile and visual, a protagonist in an «integral experience in which it is impossible to measure the contribution of each sense»<sup>17</sup>. The centrality of this ‘embodied synthesis’ is undeniable in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and is not contradicted by the privileging of the act of ‘seeing’, from the moment that tactile data, even if often left

---

<sup>14</sup> See *ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> See *ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> See *ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Id., *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by C. Smith, New York, Humanities Press, 1962, p. 137.

out of 'scientific' consideration of perception, are integrated into a total experience in which the separation is not ultimately discernible.

The search for this 'total experience' that transports Merleau-Ponty to ontology and the ontological sense of painting, is distant from an analysis of the objective specificity of the work, of the 'canvas' as a perceived object. But this total reality remains embodied and the specificity of the sense or senses involved in the act of perception is always within a communicative context in which «synaesthetic perception is the rule». If this rule is not consciously explicit it is due to the 'cultural' intervention which Husserl called modern objectivism and which he traced back to Galileo and Descartes. Scientific knowledge, according to Merleau-Ponty, has removed the experience of sensing: «we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned to see, hear and generally speaking feel in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the physicist conceives it, what we are able to see, hear and feel». It is, instead, the communication between the senses that opens up the «structure of things», in the conviction that «the form of objects is not in their geometric shape: it stands in a certain relation to their specific nature and appeals to all our other senses as well as sight»<sup>18</sup>.

We can then conclude that the 'form' of objects is inseparable from the 'total experience' of our embodied senses: our perception is the capacity to unite all of our sensory experiences into a 'single world'. This world differs from the one described by science. Instead, it is nearer to the way in which our binocular vision perceives a single object, where it is not the 'epistemological subject' that synthesizes but «the body, which when it escapes from dispersion, pulls itself together and tends by all means in its power toward one single goal».

These citations from Merleau-Ponty could continue, bringing us to the 'pre-categorical' sense that he attributes to our body schema that has been ignored by the intellectualism against which he has always battled; but all of these citations would bring us back to the central point: the unity of the senses, that *fil rouge* which, as in the anti-classicist views of the eighteenth century (from Burke to Herder) is defined as an opposi-

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 267.

tion to a purely 'intellectual' form (and formation). Like Herder, Merleau-Ponty wants to go beyond a purely 'scientific' conception of the body and form. He describes a dynamic 'common sense' in which the senses «translate among themselves without needing an interpreter» without passing «through the idea». These observations, writes Merleau-Ponty, permit us to give full sense to the expression of Herder: «Man is a perpetual common sense, which now is touched from one part and then touched by another». This citation from Herder shows that, beyond the differences in historical contexts, the road is the same: *via* touch one reaches the totality of embodied experience to establish (with the aid of a phenomenological stance) that with the notion of the body schema «it is not only the unity of the body described in a new way, but also, through this, the unity of the senses and of the object»<sup>19</sup>. In this, the unity and identity of the tactile phenomenon do not come about through any synthesis of recognition in the concept, they are founded upon the unity and identity of the body as a synergic totality. Thus, tactile experience is always a meeting between the organic totality and the embodied experience.

One might then ask, at this point, what is the relationship between 'common sense' and the aesthetic 'objectness' that defines the artwork. If, for Merleau-Ponty, in painting it is Being which manifests its significance, it is perhaps necessary to ask what special experience might be reserved for the experience of the artistic object as a spatiotemporal aesthetic reality, with its capacity to bring specific thoughts. This is one of the central themes of contemporary aesthetic thought, which begins again from the relationship between symbol and metaphor, between visible image and invisible meaning (signified), that would seem to be a fundamental axis of the entire history of aesthetics. For Merleau-Ponty, painting is the figural expression of an ontological form that has its primary reference (genetic and interpretive) in the organic totality of the body and its gestures. In contrast, Gilles Deleuze, despite being included in the tradition which is outlined and rooted in a 'tactile vision' of art, challenges any interpretation which ignores the 'cognitive' sense of art. In his book *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation* there are evident in-

---

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 273.

fluences deriving from the phenomenological tradition, particularly Merleau-Ponty: the originality of the corporeal sensation, the centrality of the Figure, the need to supersede the false dilemma between figurative and non-figurative, the 'hermeneutic' role of Cézanne, and the suspicion towards an illustrative or narrative conception of the pictorial are some signs of this legacy. But here one also finds the consideration of the relationship between Sensation and Figure, placed in an unintentional context, in which «The Figure is the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh». The reference to the flesh and to sensation is explicitly connected to a phenomenological (Heideggerian) Being-in-the-World, in virtue of which «I become in the sensation and something happens through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other»<sup>20</sup>. But this encounter brings neither an intentional and descriptive stance nor an ontology. In fact, for Deleuze, the Figure – the form attributed to the sensation – «is the opposite of the form related to an object». This challenges the singular, global unity of Merleau-Ponty (the 'body synthesis') and instead brings us to fragmentation: to a sensation made up of multiple instincts, levels, and intensities that lacks a defined centre.

For Deleuze, painting (in particular the painting of Cézanne) excludes the idea, often found in the preceding pages, of an ontological base, of a unity based on a lived body, which is «still a paltry thing in comparison with a more profound and almost unlivable Power [Puisance]» in which the unity of the bodily rhythm can be found only where «the rhythm itself plunges into chaos, into the night, at the point where the differences of level are perpetually and violently mixed»<sup>21</sup>. The lived body is compared to the 'body without organs' referred to by Artaud, which has only 'zones and levels' where sensation is the amplitude of waves: a 'hysterical' body which is beneath and beyond the representation.

In fact, this dark body, hysteric and cruel, has eyes everywhere and refuses to develop the temporal (and formal) moment of the organic

---

<sup>20</sup> G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation*, ed. by D.W. Smith, Minneapolis, MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. 85.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 103.

encounter with Being. The invisible forces which, according to a phrase by Klee also used by Merleau-Ponty, the art of painting 'grasps', are not comprised within a formative dynamics; they are not 'branches' of the genesis of the Being; they are not even icons of transcendence, but rather of an intense and pulsive obscurity. They are a scream that, unlike that of Laocoon, should not to be confused with the visible spectacle that makes you scream: they are forces of isolation, deformation and dissipation instead. In sum, these corporeal obscure forces, even if not directly referring to sculpture, are primarily manual gestures (as Herder first noticed): «these manual signs, almost blind, mean to testify the intrusion of a different world into the visual world of figuration»<sup>22</sup>.

The optical organization, destabilized by Merleau-Ponty through his criticism of linear perspective, but then restored on the basis of the organic unity of the living and sensing body, is now definitely surpassed by defining painting not as 'visual data' but as an operational diagram. In contemporary art, this diagram has taken different routes: towards abstraction, when shapes «belonged to a new, purely optic, space, which does not have to subordinate to itself any manual or tactile elements»; towards abstract expressionism (or formless art) where 'optical geometry falls apart to leave room for an exclusively manual line»; and to move on to the pure tactile Action Painting, in which the hand subjugates the eye. Most importantly, there is also another way, Bacon's, «which is neither optic as abstract painting, nor manual as Action Painting»<sup>23</sup>.

This is the 'Egyptian' way, which means, according to a definition by Riegl, a haptic way where painting becomes strictly associated with sculpture. The western tradition in painting, often ignoring this plastic aspect of figurative art, has substituted a tactile-haptic space for this primitive haptic vision and its spatiality. This new space can be defined as 'intentional', since «it is no longer the essence, but rather the connection to express itself, that is to say the human organic activity». When the eye takes on only the optical function, leaving behind the haptic, as one can see in Merleau-Ponty, it ends up subordinating the tactile to itself,

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 168.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 170-171.

considering it a «second power»<sup>24</sup>: this originates either a pure optical space (described by Wolff, which leads to abstraction) or, as a reaction, ‘a violent manual space’ which takes place in what Worringer calls ‘barbaric art’, or gothic, as opposed to Byzantine art, and which today leads to formless art. Perhaps it was this alternative, presenting on one side the iconic-optic Byzantine, and on the other the Western-tactile (which leads to the praise of the hand, of the making of things, of the bodily *poiesis*) – these two having the common merit of challenging the rhetorical-narrative aspect of painting or, as Deleuze writes, «of disintegrating the optical-tactile space of the so-called classic representation»<sup>25</sup> – it was this alternative, which fascinated but did not convince Herder, inducing him to search for those «combinations and new and complex correlations» of which Deleuze speaks and which have constituted the authentic history of painting and of Western art itself. This ‘third way’, which Herder identifies with sculpture and Deleuze with colour, is what sets in motion the haptic function of sight.

But such an ‘Egyptian’ function, embodied in Bacon’s work and brought by Bacon himself towards catastrophe, cannot be traced back to an organic rapport between the eye and the hand: Herder’s *sensorium commune* need not be interpreted along the same lines as the eulogy of the hand by Focillon or Merleau-Ponty, since «it is subject to dynamic tensions, logical upheavals, exchanges and organic substitutions»<sup>26</sup>. The values of the hand are not ‘organic’: the digital, the tactile, the manual and the haptic have a complex relationship with the eye and among themselves. Taken all together they constitute the «painterly fact», in which different shapes, all accidental, are comprised within one Figure that does not tell any story (not finite nor infinite, not metaphorical nor symbolic) and «does not represent anything other than its own movement, making apparently arbitrary elements get together in a single continuous output»<sup>27</sup>.

We are faced with an Icon which is not a symbol but pure sensation, a presence which is not history nor representation, that unfolds under an

---

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 193.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 197.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 227.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 232.

eye that is part of the uncoordinated sensorial system and is not a symbol of the organic unity of the body: Lessing's denial that figurative arts may be linkable to action and narration and thus to the space of the body is reaffirmed, on the condition that the organicity of the body be shattered in the multiple tactilisms of the Figure, in which «the hand, the touch, the grasp evoke this direct manual activity that traces the possibility of the fact»<sup>28</sup>.

Painting itself embodies the difference that is the fact itself, the paradoxical foundation of a third eye that, as Herder maintained, no allegory can express and no ontology can embody: one haptic eye, which leads to a 'new clarity' – evidently neither Cartesian nor phenomenological – in which every dualism between tactile and optic is surpassed, as is every form of their ambiguous fusion, to inaugurate a 'logic of sensation'. In this logic there is no room for 'representing', and the figurative semantics of feeling is articulated in such a way that the centrifugal and centripetal rhythms of the body have dispersed the harmonic organicity of the form.

Deleuze not only redefines Herder's *sensorium commune*, but he also continues to advance towards illustrating the opacity of the presence, of the Figure, that is to say of elements that a living body will never be able to reconcile in an organic vision (constituent or ontological), and which therefore have to be accounted for by a 'cruel body'. However, at the opposite end of the scale from Herder, and closer to the problems that today's art world presents, the haptics of the body refuse a symbolic consideration of the tactile form. This presents itself, in its substantial sensory presence, as indefinable, similarly to how it was described in Merleau-Ponty's ontology: the 'different' clarity pursued by Deleuze does not investigate the symbolic opacity of the work as form, as an aesthetic reality whose condition of being a representation and an image holds an element of secret 'workings'. Although this does not reduce it to the bare aesthetics of the form, nonetheless it cannot do without such aesthetics and without its 'frame'.

Deleuze, in his complex diagrams that deconstruct the optic and the tactile, understands that in painting there is an event of such strength

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem.*

that it cannot be explained by simply linking it back to the Being (and perhaps this is the most violent break from the tradition which started with Neoplatonism): this event is made up of entities lacking a harmonic rapport with the body, so that the exchanges and reversible interactions that perception deploys are not immediately true options or tensions but rather primarily ‘facts’, where what is at stake is the body, with all its tactile physicality. Even if he does understand clearly the ‘difference’ of painting (or even the thickness of this difference that characterizes painting) – its constantly escaping allegorical or metaphorical substrates<sup>29</sup>, as in Herder – nonetheless he links the ‘sublime’ opacity of the symbol to the ambivalences (sociological in the first place) of the simulacrum, in which painting is only a multiplicity formed by differential elements, as expressed in *Difference and Repetition*.

Starting from this eulogy of roughness, of savagery, of formlessness, or of cruelty, one can arrive at a conclusion, to which one is forced by the history of the aesthetic relationship between the visible and the invisible: there is no such thing as a system in the ‘philosophy of art’, and maybe in general it does not make much sense to talk about ‘philosophy of Art’ (or of the single arts). Painting and sculpture simply place us in front of ‘entities’. These have the common characteristics of making us think, according to the Kantian definition of symbol, starting from their own aesthetics, from the layers of qualities that are articulated within them. A philosophical approach to arts does not consider them as a regional ontology to be resolved by description, and not even as an opening towards the Being or as a tool of deconstruction crowbar. Its ‘objects’ manifest images, representations, and forms which are able to show the symbolic multiplicity of aesthetics, that is to say that it is not reducible, in its logic, into constituent operations. Painting presents ‘things’: one interrogates the general sense of this ‘thingness’, not the relationship with the being but the emerging of an intuitive sense through those things.

Some possible horizons for a philosophical investigation are: an investigation on the spatial sense of the artwork, on the surplus of its spatiality, on the aesthetic origin of the symbolic, on its perceptual coordina-

---

<sup>29</sup> See P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. by R. Czerny with K. McLaughlin and J. Costello, London, Routledge, 2003.

tion with the kinesthetic system of the body, on the opacity that operates within these processes of being intentional, and on the spiritual, historical, and motivational meanings that upon these bases can build a particular non-causal and non-necessary (to the formal reality of the work) statute. These investigations need not become a system, a definition, a 'philosophy'. When we are confronted with an 'icon' (or with a *tabula* or a 'body') we just ponder on its sentient nature, on the specificity of its form, of its relationship with other modes of knowledge, from language to voice. One can then revert to form, to the aesthetic and spatiotemporal meaning it has for our senses. This may be the only possible answer to the issues that have been raised since the eighteenth century: understanding that the tactile and spatial sense of the artwork leads to a question regarding time. It is within time that the whole meaning of the form, its sublime exposure as a reality that questions the 'limits' of the body, of its senses and of the senses relationships when confronted to their immanent symbolic meaning that becomes explicit and tangible in the artwork.

In conclusion, painting and sculpture confront us with symbolic forms, with visible figures that allude to the far possibility of grasping that remains opaque, to a world of possibilities that is encompassed by the shape and its processes of construction, but it does not exhaust itself in its regulated and categorized vision. The iconophiles of Byzantium seemed to forget the existence of a type of painting that just wanted to be visible, without alluding to the invisible, offering itself to the pleasure of the gaze – that is that painting which iconoclasts accepted, and thus doing they allowed the symbol to reside in the unchangeability of alluding signs. But they forgot that one cannot define the painting's meaning and, as Merleau-Ponty did, believe that this may always be a process of ontological transubstantiation or, as Deleuze, believe that this always manifests the deforming cruelty of the 'cruel' body. Whether it is an ontological symbol or a simulacrum, painting requires the senses to manifest an opacity that does not lead to an absolute horizon but to those processes that render its symbolic product a reality that originates from movements of apprehension, from actions that present their constituent meaning even without exhausting it.

We started from the icon, from a mystical eulogy of a medium

which, being visible colour, is capable of linking with the secret truth of the invisible. The era of the image has produced also illusory ‘enlargements’ – just think about the movie about the image, *Blow-up*, by Michelangelo Antonioni – which offer only the surface of things, in which the invisible blends into the illusion that destroys feeling and the sense of truth. Recently Baudrillard observed that in art things fall into nothing, and iconoclasts seem to posthumously win, not by burning the images, but rather by multiplying them infinitely without worrying of their aesthetic reality and of their spiritual meaning.

ELIO FRANZINI

Università degli Studi di Milano  
elio.franzini@unimi.it