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De-lirious Marks

On the Rationality of Marking and Irrationality of the Arts

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I would like to dedicate my brief talk to a reflection that should be – I think – at the heart of what we do. What I would like to discuss, in a nutshell, is the paradoxical relationship between marking, as a rational, quantifiable process, and the performing arts as a practice that delivers unquantifiable, indefinable, irrational representations.

I ought to clarify this paradox, but before doing so, as the topic may seem a bit abstract, I will begin from a concrete experience. I have a sense an uneasiness to decide marks when it comes to practical performances; assigning a mark often tends to leave me puzzled. One would imagine that my uneasiness resides in the marking criteria, which might not be clear or defined enough. Though, again, paradoxically, the more specific the criteria are, the more problematic it is to mark, for the simple reason that criteria never manage to encompass the complexity of assessing, judging and discussing an artistic performance – and I am here referring to the artistic-element of the performance. But I do not want to sound like someone that is incapable of marking, and I hope, on the contrary, that you will take this little experience as a starting point for my reasoning.

Well, in order to get to my point, I have to go through a sort of Pindaric flight and touch upon some topics that may seem at a first glance unrelated to the

matter of marking, but I guarantee they will lead us back to our general theme of assessment.

I would like to start from a consideration of art – understood holistically, as the performing arts, visual arts, written arts, and so on: art as that thing that is vague, imprecise. An artistic object – that be a theatrical performance, a script, a composition, a novel, a painting – never really tells us reality, but instead presents some form of representation. And what is interesting is that, in order to be enjoyed, a piece of art has to contain some sort of void, there needs to be something that is non-said; because it is exactly in the non-said, in that void, that the piece of art leaves the realm of reality and opens to the imagination: the imagination of the spectator, of the reader, of the listener. Umberto Eco writes that an artistic text – a novel or a poem – is nothing else than a text ‘woven of white spaces, of interstices to be filled, and the person who created it predicted that they were going to be filled and left them blank’¹. The artistic text, on its own, does not say everything, and such a void – such white interstices – are precisely what the reader has to fill with their own imagination. Without this process of imagination we are not before an artistic object, but an encyclopedic or empirical definition. The encyclopedic definition, in fact, is the opposite of an artistic, poetic text. The encyclopedic definition defines with exactness the concept it describes, there must be no void there, otherwise it would not be a definition; the artistic text, on the contrary, must be incomplete, imprecise, vague, open to interpretation and imagination. In this sense, an artistic object *is* an artistic object only if it is imprecise, vague, open; otherwise it would be an empirical description. Umberto Eco’s concept of *opera aperta* (open work) clarifies this rather well. His concept, in a nutshell, maintains that any ‘work of art is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its

¹ Umberto Eco, *Lector in Fabula: La Cooperazione Interpretativa nei Testi Narrativi*, 11th ed. trans. Simone Spagnolo, Bompiani (Milano, 2010), 52.

unadulterable specificity'².

The French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé expressed the same idea in a different way. He says that 'to name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which comes from the happiness of sensing bit by bit: to suggest ... this is the dream'³. For Mallarmé, the pleasure of art does not reside within the act of naming – of defining – but in the act of suggesting. Words, and poetry, for Mallarmé, have to incarnate symbols and metaphors: figures of speech, representations. We are looking at the artistic object, again, as that thing that has to be imprecise: just a touch of vagueness so we enjoy it by 'sensing bit by bit'.

A few decades before Mallarmé, the Italian poet and philosopher Giacomo Leopardi, who is perhaps one of the most inspiring and provocative thinkers of the 19th century, actually wrote a praise to the vagueness. In his book titled *Zibaldone*, he says that 'the words *faraway*, *ancient* and similar words are highly poetic and pleasurable, because they evoke vast, indefinite ideas'⁴. Similarly, 'the words *night*, *nocturnal*, etc., descriptions of the night are highly poetic because, as night makes objects blurred, the mind receives only a vague, indistinct, incomplete image, both of night itself and of what it contains'⁵. Unavoidably Leopardi, in his praise to vagueness, reaches further implications for his aesthetic vision. In fact, later on in his book, he writes that: 'highly pleasing also, for the above-mentioned reasons, is the sight of an innumerable multitude, as of stars, people, etc., a multiple motion, uncertain, confused,

² Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*. trans. Anna Cancogni. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4.

³ M. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire: conversations avec mm. Renan, de Goncourt, Emile Zola...* ed. Jules Huret, digitised reprint by University of Michigan (2007) (Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1891), 60. The translation hereby reported is by the author. The original French quote is: 'Nommer un objet c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème qui est faite du bonheur de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer ... voilà le rêve.'

⁴ Op. cit. in: Calvino, I., 1988. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, p.58

⁵ Ibid. p.58

irregular, disordered, a vague rising and falling, etc. which the mind cannot conceive definitely or distinctly, etc. like that of a crowd, or a swarm of ants, or a rough sea'⁶. Vagueness is crucial for Leopardi to define poetry, but it is perhaps even more crucial as the tool that allows artistic pleasure. It is interesting to mention, also, that Italo Calvino, who differently from Mallarmé and Leopardi is a contemporary writer, dedicated an essay to the theme of exactitude. (I am mentioning Calvino as he should be familiar to some of us here, as we are working on some performances based on his novel *Invisible Cities*.) In his essay, he proposes a sort of praise to the exactitude. This would seem to contradict the wish for vagueness I was referring to. However, spoiling the conclusion of Calvino's writing, in case you would like to read it, I have to reveal that Calvino's ultimate point is that we, as writers and artists, should be exactly vague; or better, that the vagueness embedded in our artistic works has to be presented with exactitude. I will quickly cite a passage in which he expresses this point: 'the poet of vagueness can only be the poet of exactitude, who is able to grasp the subtlest sensations with eyes and ears and quick, unerring hands. [...] The search for the indefinite becomes the observation of all that is multiple, teeming, composed of countless particles'⁷.

It is evident, I believe, that such a praise to vagueness does not have to be intended only for poetry or literary works, but for art in general. The examples we could look at are many, of course, but I will only mention a few, proceeding in big steps.

Let us think of Brecht's use of music and his criticism of opera. Brecht used to maintain that opera is an absurd form, in that it tends to use rational elements in the plot, and wishes to display a realistic representation, but such a rationality and realism is annulled by the presence of the music and singing. He provides a very clear example: 'A man that is about to die is real. If in that moment he

⁶ Ibid. p.62-63

⁷ Calvino, I., 1988. *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, p.60

sings, there we are in the sphere of the absurd'⁸. And it is exactly in this absurdity – in this imprecision of reality, in this vagueness of the real moment in which a man sings while dying – that Brecht identifies the artistic pleasure. He writes, with great clarity, that 'the more the music makes reality imprecise, unreal, the more the overall performance is dense of pleasure: the intensity of pleasure directly depends from the degree of unreality'⁹. The use of music – but also the use of the *Verfremdungseffekt* and other Brechtian tools – is precisely aimed at amplifying the inexactness of reality within the representation. Songs, in Brecht's works, have the explicit function of highlighting the imprecision of the representation; which is imprecise because it dilates reality. One of the most well know examples takes place at the end of *The Threepenny Opera*, when Captain Macheath, ready to be hanged, starts singing a three-to-four-minutes-long song: absurd.

But if we forget about Brecht for a moment, and only concentrate on music as an artistic form – and I mean music, not songs – then I guess we can project ourselves in the kingdom of vagueness. Music on its own does not say anything specific; it cannot say anything specific: it is a vague language. It is intangible, invisible, and – most importantly – untranslatable. As Claude Levi-Strauss says, in reference to music: 'This kind of language cannot be translated into anything else, except itself. You can translate music into music. [...] But you cannot translate music into speech'¹⁰. And therefore, I should add, this non-translatability makes music, so to say, the queen of vagueness. But I am not alone in saying this. There are a few important people that had similar thoughts:

⁸ Brecht, B. *Writings on Theatre*

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Op. cit. from: Michael Chanan, 'Preface' in *Music, Text and Translation*. Ed. Helen Julia Minors. (Bloomsbury Academic, London and New York, 2013) p.xii

Arnold Schönberg: ‘Music speaks in its own language about merely musical matters’.

Edgard Varèse: ‘I believe my music cannot express anything but itself’.

Igor Stravinsky: ‘I consider music, in its essence, powerless to express anything: a feeling, an attitude, a psychological status, a phenomenon of nature, etc. Expression has never been the immanent property of music’.

Anton Webern: ‘Through this language [musical language] mankind wants to express ideas; but not ideas that can be translated into concepts, instead musical ideas’.

Pierre Boulez: ‘Music is a non-meaning art’.¹¹

But let us forget about music for a moment. Let us look at the bigger picture. Let us consider not the individual art forms, but wider creative, artistic trends. Let us think for instance of the style that is the perhaps the closest to our time: postmodernism. Is not postmodernism a celebration of the imprecise? Let us think of its main features: non-linearity, multinarrative, metanarrative, fragmentation and collage, impersonality, plurality, openness to interpretation, incompleteness, infinity, and so on. But we can go even earlier, and consider modernism, and its many stylistic categories: symbolism, surrealism, cubism, futurism, impressionism, expressionism, dadaism, and so on. Aren’t these styles a carnival of the vague, or – to recall Leopardi – of the ‘multiple motion, uncertain, confused, irregular, disordered’? But also – to recall Calvino – aren’t these styles nothing else than examples of how the vague is displayed with exactitude?

But let us forget about modernism and postmodernism. Let us consider an even bigger picture: a psychological, perhaps philosophical one. What I am here calling vagueness, in Freudian terms, goes under the name of madness. As Freud – as well as other psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan – say, the man

¹¹ Op. cit in: Jean-Jaques Nattiez, *Musica e significato* in *Enciclopedia della musica Vol IX*. tr. Simone Spagnolo (Giulio Einaudi Editore, Milano, 2002)

is constantly lived by both rationality and madness, and there are three way in which our madness is expresses: through the dream, through love, and through art. I do not have the time talk about dreams and love now, though these two themes are strongly and unavoidably related to our subject matter. I will only continue with the matter of art: art as an expression of madness. By madness – to be clear – I do not mean craziness, or mental instability; which are the consequences that Freud eventually elaborated in pathologies. I mean madness as irrationality: as that sphere of the human mind that does not deal with coherence, rational purposes, realistic objectives. Artistic products, in fact, do not really have purposes or objectives. They do not function as mathematical calculations that move towards a solution; again, they do not operate as dictionaries that provide a definition. On the contrary, they act irrationally, madly, like the dreams and love. Let us consider an example, still from the Leopardi's repertoire. In one of his Nocturnal Poems – one of his most famous openings – the poet asks to the moon: 'What do you do there, moon, in the sky? Tell me what you do, silent moon.'¹² Why would you ask to the moon what it does? What can it do? It's there, in the cosmos, rotating around the earth, with not purpose, really. Why would the poet even ask anything to the moon in the first place? There is nothing rational in this question. It is pure madness asking a question to the moon: you won't get an answer, as we know. The matter is that the artist asks a question to the moon because in it he does not see only the moon, but also something else. The moon, in this sense, is not just what it is, empirically, rationally; but also and most importantly something else. Through the artist – and for the artists – the moon acquires a different signification: it can become for Leopardi an interlocutor he can talk to, an entity that can tell him about his life on earth. What matters here is that there are several significations for the moon, and when meanings oscillate the artist moves between rationality and irrationality, between reality and representation, between normality and madness.

¹² Leopardi, G. *Canto Nottirno di un Pastore Errante* (1829-30)

Therefore, the artistic process – and consequently the artistic work – really, demands that the artist oscillates between the rational and irrational, looking for other significations beyond the empirical reality. There is motion, here, that I would like to highlight: a movement between the reality we know and the irrationality of the mind; between the actual meanings of the things and the artistic representation; between the accuracy of the real world and the vagueness of the imagination. This is a crucial, vital movement that every artist has to accomplish. Every artist has to *trans*-gress to and from his own madness, his own irrational place. And this transgression has to be ‘delirious’. I am intentionally using the word delirious, here, because it has an etymology of great interest to us. De-lirious – from the Latin *de-lirare* – means ‘to-go-outside-of-the-walls’, ‘of-the-furrow’. The *lira* were the walls surrounding the ancient Roman cities, and the act of *de-lirare*, is nothing else than going-outside-of-the-city, outside of the known. In this sense every artist has to ‘*de-lirate*’; he has to go-outside-of-the-rational-into-the-irrational: he has to be delirious. As philosopher Massimo Cacciari says (in a lecture that you can find on YouTube) ‘every painting has to *de-lirate* its frame; every novel has to *de-lirate* its book; every performance has to *de-lirate* its stage’. The verb *de-lirate* does not exist in English, I know, and I had to invent it, irrationally. But it is probably a good idea to exploit this Anglicisation of the Latin term, because it is only on the other side of the *lira*, that art can begin. There is a beautiful quote that comes to my mind, again by Calvino, from one of his theatrical texts. Make of it what you like. It says: ‘[it] is after the end of each story that a story begins’¹³.

From this ‘delirious’ perspective, learning the arts, or learning to make art, is fundamentally a process of de-lirium; a process of transgression of the limits between reality and representation, exactness and madness, known and unknown, inside and outside. I invited some students, recently, to be delirious,

¹³ From the libretto of Berio’s *Allez-hop*

and to transgress, in the terms I am talking about; but I don't think they took it particularly well. Nevertheless, I wish to re-propose the same invitation in this context, to us teachers: I invite you to teach students to be vague, to be mad, to be delirious – again, in the terms, and only in the terms I have been talking about.

Now, linking all this to our theme of assessment, and moving towards a conclusion, I believe the question is limpid and unavoidable: how can we give marks to artistic performances? Or better, how can we assign a number – a quantifiable, exact number, a rational figure – to something that, in its deepest essence, is a non-quantifiable, inexact, irrational practice? How can an artistic performance be represented by an empirical quantity? If we were to deal with a mathematical exercise, or with a scientific formula, or chemical relation, or simply a yes-or-no test, then a quantification is possible and necessary, unavoidable. An algebraic exam can only be quantified with a rational number: if the result of a calculation is correct, then the student gets a high mark: easy, straightforward. But if the assessment involves a transgression from the rational to the mad, then giving it a grade is problematic indeed. Of course, we could imagine a way of grading the amount of delirium, but that suggests to me even more problems.

I am not fully sure what a possible solution is, but my first thought, unavoidably, is to get rid of the marks.

Though let me clarify: I am here referring to the marks that intend to assess an artistic product – a performance, a script, a composition, a staging, a design: an artistic idea. I am definitely and categorically not referring to academic objects, which, on the contrary, and very differently from artistic creations, are based on empirical criteria. An academic essay has to follow the principles of objectivity, accuracy, facts, evidences, syntax, etc.: elements that belong to the sphere of rationality, exactness, reality. Academic work demands to be assessed through marks, as it is only through grades that we can define a

work's objectivity, like an encyclopedia, or edited book. But the artistic work neglects these parameters, and if there is something that it demands, that thing is not a concrete number, not a solid mark. After all, I do not think that student, in turn, can fully interpret the meaning of a number in relation to their creative performance. Even worse they seem to understand their artistic work only according to rational perspectives: according to criteria, expectations, credits, qualifications, purpose, future gains, career, perhaps even capitalist profits and monetization; which are aspects that have little or nothing to do with an artistic process, and solely provide – I think – a disillusioned connection between reality and art.

Thus, how could we get rid of the marks? Perhaps – but this is only a suggestion, a possibility, and I am not even sure it is the right one – they could be replaced by a system that facilitates the journey between the exact and the vague, a method that accompanies the transgression between the rational and the irrational, a series of criticisms that allow the movement between reality and the madness of the dream.

We can call this method feedback, formative feedback, continuous assessment, one-to-one review, criticism, dialogue, chatting over a drink; it doesn't matter. What I wanted to share, here – and I am concluding – is not a solution, but a problem: the problem that marks are not de-lirious enough to educate to, and assess the arts.

Thank you.

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