

GIORGIO VERZOTTI
EACH AND ALL OF US

"I have always tried to present arguments for my moods; but not to justify them and even less so to fill the scene of the text with my own personality; but, on the contrary, in order to offer and present my individuality for a science of the subject, whose name is of little importance to me provided it achieves (which is by no means certain) a generality which neither constrains me nor cancels me out."

This is what Roland Barthes wrote at the beginning of his strange and successful book on photography. Strange because it does not set down a theory based on the expressive potential of this particular instrument, about which he actually knows quite little, but rather tries to construct a theory of himself as an observer, so to speak. The above quotation could not be more explicit and clear.

The author's own biography is strange: the book on photography, quoted by leading scholars of visual communication, was written on an impulse, as if due to some inner need (as he said himself) after his mother died, and soon after its publication Barthes himself was killed in a car crash in Paris: he was disfigured by the accident and his body was only recognised in hospital a few days later. So the book was written shrouded in death and that is inevitably how we read it: death which appears to us in filigree like a subtext, while we read a text attempting to construct a science of the subject, redefining a generality based on an irreducible life experience.

Let's take a careful look at the various passages in the above quotation: it starts with moods, as is clearly stated, not from the inside, from emotions and feelings and even less so from mental life; dark moody vitality forms the basis of this construction, which, however, in order to establish something general, inevitably has to be clear, crystalline and "enlightened".

Moreover, it does not attempt to justify these moods and even to place the author's own individuality at the focus of the textual "stage". It is not some representation of the Ego that is being attempted, nor the placing of this Ego to the fore, but rather the acknowledgement of it being the object under analysis, even if it is just an empirical study for the moment, the kind referred to by Goethe and then taken up, not surprisingly, by Benjamin in another piece of writing on photography which has also now attained canonical status: "There is a kind of delicate empirics, which intimately identifies with the object and hence becomes an authentic theory".

Authentic: but be careful, the emerging "text" will still be deeply affected by moods, otherwise the science being grounded will never be a science of the singular or unique. So not a proper theory but a special theory taking into account two contrasting necessities, that of the irreducible singularity of any generalisation and, of course, that of generality itself. (Do you remember what they used to say back in the days of feminism and gay liberation movements?)

Mario Mieli came up with a sublime impromptu statement at a public debate: I am the only **theory** of my ass hole).

This Ego is not an abstraction however (it would be like saying Man instead of Men), neither is it anything more central, indeed it is largely composed of the relations with some Other, not to mention with subconscious formations, so it becomes an Ego more willing to take a back seat (I would not say "weak", but almost so) and assume the possibility of this theory. Of course we need to see if it works: this really is "performative" knowledge and it could not be otherwise.

In fact there is just one question to be asked: does it work? Can a science be developed which is based on an supposition constructed around a contradiction, which, presumably, progresses in terms of paradoxical assumptions? Can we really expect this science, if it were indeed grounded, not to be inevitably relative to the subject to which it is so closely tied, to the extent that we can say that it projects this science beyond itself?

Barthes, for example, has done this, he has constricted a theory of photography which only applies to himself, which does not pretend to apply to others or be "objectively" aimed at providing a better understanding or use of this technical means and its imaginary world.

And yet, it works... The aforementioned book has become a bible for anybody interested in photography from a non-technical and non-specialist viewpoint, let's say from an aesthetic viewpoint.

The science we are talking about has, shall we say, the distinctive traits of a utopia, which is actually realised. Philosophers have indeed looked at it and its possible realisation, particularly over recent times, but art has always taken it on board.

And indeed here we are talking about an artist or rather something particular about her. Maria Morganti is tackling the issue of a diary taken as the interweaving of a life story, and the life story is the grounding moment of that kind of generality we are talking about. The life in question is her father's and the trace from which it can be reconstructed is the diary he kept for much of his life, right through to his death. I do not know how Morganti plans to elaborate her thoughts on her father's diary, whether with the tools of painting or in some other way. But I know that this new undertaking is another step forward in her career, perfectly in line with the corpus of works she has so far created. Morganti has always worked on the meaning of existential time by means of painting, with space and its phenomenology constructing the seamless variation on a theme.

In relation to this latest step forward, I am interested in the idea of an artist working on her father's life story, composing that external view which, according to Adriana Cavarero, can only take on meaning within that tangle we call life: meaning, I would add, which redeems this life story, transcending the contradictions with which it is inevitably interwoven (or is that an excessively Hegelian thought?). The reason I believe this utopia can be

created is because it makes narration serve a very similar purpose to that of a theory when the said theory is empirical or even turns it into a paralogy. A paralogy is a paradox elaborated into a system which is always consistent with its own constituent laws. In this respect it is very similar to narration and its structure, and I believe we ought to have plenty of confidence in the saving grace of narration. Narration, and life stories in particular, linked as it is to historical reality forces us to create a logical thread between events, filling in any voids where possible or, if necessary, replacing them with some totally invented parts provided they are realistic and, most significantly, logically enchainned.

Logic creates reality effects which are useful for rediscovering the unitary nature of what would otherwise be an entangled thread linking together and justifying a life: Christa Wolf has stated this very clearly by writing a simple description of a certain day in her life, always the same day, the 27th September, every year from 1960-200. It is incredible how many things we forget, even those most closely related to us, so the German writer tells us we must "always take notes". Every meticulously noted 27th September allows the writer and we the readers to find some justification for the sequence of events and hence progress from anecdote to history: a finished story which is simultaneously individual and collective. You do not need to be a politically engaged writer, who lived in Germany first when it was Communist and then reunited, to achieve these results in terms of self-awareness: constantly take notes and work on these notes, moving beyond our excessive proximity to events, which we cannot totally understand, in order to finally really grasp them once they have been told in their entirety.

But that is not all: narrative structures crop up in the works of contemporary artists, who express themselves through painting, video clips, photography and objects. These structures, sometimes put forward in an embryonic state as cues or trials, provide anchor points in the vast sea of media simulations in which we are submerged, in the progressive process of de-realisation we are witnessing. There is something absurd out there to fight against: for the German writer it was Communist dictatorship, for us the pervasive spectacularisation of reality; in both cases and with their due differences, absurdity strikes most directly into the heart of everyday life.

So it is no coincidence that the artistry I am talking about (and I include Maria Morganti's work in this artistry) starts from everyday life and, often, from the way it is recorded in a diary to form a front of resistance: not in order to disclose something "real" hidden away somewhere, but to truthfully realise some "meaning", which works for each one of us and all of us.

Giorgio Verzotti

(Translation by Martyn John Anderson)