

## V - Divination, Ecstasy and Neo-Chivarily

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Another sector directly involved in the discourse we are making is that which modern culture has assigned – probably as an escape valve – to what is improperly styled the “irrational”, better identified by experts as the “ambiguous”: we are speaking of aesthetics.

Artistic intuition too today has been, in some ways, hypostasized, and the Homeric prototype of the blind seer, of the poet who needs no physical eyes because he has inner sight, still prevails, but but along the canons of an aesthetics run wild, detached that is from any metaphysical paradigm, which in the best of cases moves along the indeterminate, and in their turn neo-mythical, paths of psychologism.

In ages and cultures different – previous or peripheral – to ours, *aesthetics* (in the wider sense, the science of the sensible, visible and manifest) is considered to be intimately related, “like a shell to the pit”<sup>1</sup>, to a centre which is intellectual in Aristotle’s sense of the word, invisible, remote and in a way strictly metaphysical; from this

legitimately mythical point of view, every human action is *exterior*, and every deed *aesthetic*, in the sense that the former descends from that transcendental pit, and the second is a trace, a testimony, it reveals it<sup>2</sup>.

Now, contemporary socio-culture refers to a *Weltanschauung* which has deliberately cut off any theory of the invisible<sup>3</sup>, and which has equally, as we have seen, reformed the idea of materialism; and from this point of view, what is exterior, visible and – by extension – imaginable takes on the primary importance of the sole field of investigation, thus justifying a self-referential aesthetics, exactly as is usually said to be the case for every mythology. We thus find ourselves dealing with an idea of creativeness, of divergent intelligence, which, while on the one hand it propitiates blind faith in an intellectualism, that of “art operators”, which we can call, to say the least, vague, on the other hand it serves an alienating aestheticism which is often functional to the persuasive work of mass media. Sacred art having died, craftsmanship having disappeared (and with it the ancient idea that art is “doing well what must be done”) and little being left of the social use of art theorized in a more recent past, what is left is little more than another form of «totemism»<sup>4</sup>, of transposed divination which sees in the artist its bard and in the art critic its *auctoritas*.

Let us explain better how we see the matter. In archaic civilizations, aesthetic work starts as a “natural event”, as an objective unfolding of supernatural truths, shared among different subjects; this is why, in the mythical social structure, art is in a way independent from the artist, who in fact is not individually involved in its operation: rather than a “creation”, this is a “translation”, or rather a *tradition*. The subjectivity of the artist as such is extraneous, as can be seen from the anonymity of the work.

With the advent of so-called “modern sensitivity”, which we can date back to the Western renaissance, we can find a general subjectification of artistic productions, which goes together with the replacement of theocentric organicism by humanist individualism; this led to the formation, together with the very idea of “art” (as a significant body taken out of context from its function), of the idea of «artist», as an *individual* who, set by “talent” in the mysterious place of convergence of the social and existential trends of a given historic period, as an upside-down “chromatic prism”, reflects back a synthetic ray: the *work of art*. This not only expresses the *essence* of that period through “style” and its *substance* through “technique”, but also anticipates its global intuitions, aesthetically converted, which only history can afterwards scientifically operate<sup>5</sup>.

One can say even more, going back to the reflections shown in the

previous chapter. After what we have just described, which we can call a historical parenthesis, in the light of post modern so-called “weak culture”, it no longer seems likely – in view of the objective impossibility of seeing a convergence and sublimation in a single *athanor* of the fragmentary coefficients of the contemporary world – to hypothesize an art which totally represents its epoch; this is why there is currently a “mosaic” theory of aesthetic divinations. But it is here, we believe, that the super-individual entity corresponding to the metaphysical *noûs*, of which the man of archaic civilization was nothing more than a more or less enlightened craftsman, far from disappearing, is replaced, in our contemporary world, by an equally invisible, but collective and infra-individual entity: *Advertising*. Its composite vocabulary is the only artistic language which effectively corresponds with the features of shrewd fragmentation and clever stylistic inconsistency needed to “universalize” and synthesize today’s cosmopolitan and analytical existential consciousness.

To conclude, we uphold the idea that the corresponding element of traditional *sacred art* (we are not of course speaking of modern so-called “religious art”) in the post-modern world is the universalistic counterfeit of advertising. This through a process of involution where we identify three stages: the ancient world which produced anonymous works, the modern world which founded art and produced “artists”, and finally the contemporary world; the latter is forced by circumstances to give up the romantic “genius”, and returns secretly, neo-mythically, to the anonymity of specialized *craftsmen* who bring together, in the apparent super-individuality of advertising, all the needs, the professional skills and styles which inform the times<sup>6</sup>.

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The new generations are, as always, the litmus test for engagement or lack of engagement (and often of gross blunders) in the pedagogy of a society; here we can see how all the post-modern youth culture (well represented by the behaviour which gravitates around that other neo-parabolic form of artistic narrative which is *video-music*), when its provincial outliers are not forced to live the sad condition of survivors, takes on darkly “chivalrous” features, in an activity where the myth of the computer is associated with a neo-spiritualism which has as its «*mantra*»<sup>7</sup> music which is, not coincidentally, derived from African tribal music, sacred and ecstatic, with as its imperative a feverish quest for an undefined *Grail*, hedonistically aesthetic and mythologically scientific. In this context, it is not too bold to guess that the so-called disco-music, once the sentimental character typical of previous dance music genres has been abandoned or reformed, may represent the tool of a modern sort of *technique of ecstasy*<sup>8</sup>; consumed in those «temples» of libidinal impulse which are today’s dance halls, this ecstasy has no precise aim other than the

affirmation of the collective hedonistic narcissistic described above<sup>9</sup>.

In this context, we may mention the insidious neo-parable which is the video-narrative for the masses, a technique of expression which, as is well known, can be used for the most diverse artistic and propaganda purposes, and which is clearly closely related to the type of the advertisement spot.

The peculiar character of this product is the carefully balanced match between *images*, drawn from the cinetheques of collective imagination, and *music*, in an exasperatedly alluring montage developed along a deliberately ambiguous and fragmentary discourse, suspended between psychologistic aspirations and commonplaces, either desecrated or confirmed; all of this is packaged according to highly refined and syncretistic post-modern aesthetic canons. The end product, thanks to its ambiguous forms and contents, is a very efficacious *vehicle* of messages (piled up in a more or less conscious manner by their authors) otherwise difficult to express, at least in such a synthetic and direct manner; it therefore allows a practically unlimited range of significations and projective possibilities by the user. This way, the new “dogmas” of the contemporary world are confirmed. Being expressed by *wordless ideas*, they are the basis for the iconography of the post-modern “mystery of faith”<sup>10</sup>. The same recourse to *nonsense*, now completely taken on by contemporary narrative, brings back to mind the Buddhist koans, thus only confirming what we said<sup>11</sup>.

We may also add this: since the ordinary life of today’s masses runs along the double track of *represented* time and space, since they are often mediated, this life in some way universally existentiates, making it itself its own, the typically diachronic and spatially heterogeneous character on which fruition of the cinema is based, the latter – also because inseparable from narration in general – being co-substantial with the myth<sup>12</sup>.

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We take the liberty of presenting a series of reflections, perhaps a little off-centre in relation to our thesis, but which will help to understand what we mean when we speak of pseudo-chivalrous attitudes to be found in the existential behaviour of our contemporaries, especially the youngest ones: we wish to call attention to certain aspects of sports. It is certainly taken for granted that, generally speaking, in ancient times or in any case in civilizations with mythic social structure, gymnastic activities (*gymnasia, ludi, agônes*) were, so to speak, a phenomenon with spiritual associations, in a context where the purpose, to overcome oneself or a certain idea of *victoria* suggested, at least ideally the

achievement of an exquisitely interior goal; and this often in the light of a metaphysically based theory of self-realization. Nor is it necessary to pause to consider the fact that today certain forms of sport fanaticism echo other enthusiasms of a very different spiritual elevation, like those (but this is no place to handle the delicate ethical issues associated with exterior forms) of the ancient *holy wars*, currently parodied in the football stadiums.

Rather, we would like to pause a moment to consider a sport which has recently met with enormous success – first across the Atlantic, then in Europe – probably also because of the hedonistic concessions it offers: we refer to body building. The spread of this discipline among the masses has almost brought about the disappearance of the typically European pot bellies which once used to afflict those not involved in physical activity, creating a youth which would have been the envy of eugenicists of the past; but it is not so much this new myth of the race which interests us, as certain practical aspects of this neo-Spartan sporting shape.

Ever since the days when the weight-lifter used to be seen as a kind of “odd character”, this sport was attended by a sort of pseudo-heroic ethic which ranged from altruism to a sense of honour and sacrifice, but never in the past did it have, as now, a profile which we might call pseudo-religious. Today’s gym is the counterfeit of certain Oriental places of training for martial arts: where however the traditional terms of *spirit building* are replaced by the post-modern and hedonistic ones of *body building*. In a kind of devotion which is at once Spartan and coquettish, and in the “Olympic” gazes of the “priors” of these “cloisters” – the coaches – there is a real mystic of *trans-figuration*, of “rebirth to a new life” in a “glorious body”. Here we might still be speaking of features to be found in every kind of sport; however, it is rather in the profile of training, which the skinny “novice” has to go through, that we find a curious neo-mythical character. As is well known, this discipline is based on physical effort and on an indefinite *escalation* towards pure force and muscle volume. To this end, the exercises, are structured in so-called “series” repeated to exasperation, and set out in rhythms which are strictly ordered in movements which may call “perpetual”. We are left with the impression that the person falls into a kind of *pax* or, vice versa, of *furor*, stemming from this mechanical sort of “adaptation to universal rhythms”, in a way similar to what should happen if we conform to the outward form and behaviour of religious practice, for example in the case of ritual Islamic prayer; in the latter case, the fixed and immutably repetitive nature of certain gestures should – among other things – lead to the reintegration of the “exiled” individual into the cosmic movement and its cycles. As Islamic prayer is repeated in certain hours of the day and night, so the body-builder trains himself according to very strict schedules; as the ritual prayer is split up into

*rak'a*(constituent parts), so the exercises of the body-builder are split up into similar sets. Again, as in the language of weight-lifters we can be told to do "100 plus a 100 repetitions" of flexing this or that muscle, in the language of Islam, we can be told to make "100 plus a 100 repetitions» of the pronunciation of one *divine name* or another (the Sufi practice of *dhikr*), not to mention the strict nutritional and sexual prohibitions common to both disciplines.

The difference seems to lie only in what one intends to *build*, in the two opposite types of *universal man* (in Arabic, *al-insân al-kâmil*) which one is seeking.

One must also take into account the fact that the *effort* – as we said – so fundamental in this sport, is equally basic, under the name of *jihâd*, in the practice of Islam; muscular tension thus takes the place, on the one hand, of the spiritual tension of the Muslim (*muslim*, literally «one who submits»), and on the other hand may also remind us of what certain Japanese seasonal rituals hinted at, where the extreme physical fatigue which the young men who had to carry an extremely heavy tabernacle was held to enhance a spiritual opening. In fact, there is no doubt that body-builders are deeply convinced of the "cathartic" aspect of their discipline.

Thus, after spending two hours at the gym working on aesthetic body construction, our "weight believer" (who may equally be a man or woman) may "chivalrously" venture out on the streets of his or her town, with the almost explicit intention of personally living out a "heroic" *video-clip*, a sort of composite post-modern saga. This of course holds true for a small number of cases, the best. The others are best dealt with, not by any human science, but by a strictly natural science: ethology.

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In this context, it may be of help to draw up a short note about the curious phenomenon of these most recent times, which goes under the name of *survivalism*; this is clearly associated with the new myths of the body and physical efficiency, and blends them – on the level of aesthetic and behavioural fashion – to a vague and clearly neo-mythical apocalyptic idea, sometimes imaginatively post-nuclear. This *vague* involves projecting oneself outside of today's technological environment and, whether or not in the context of an ecological disaster, learning to survive, counting only on oneself and on a few, essential and primitive tools. To do so, one must first build up an efficient body, and if possible attend a "survival course", by now widespread even in Italy, where one learns how to become a perfect «Rambo-scout» for emergencies. Thus this vogue, like many others of the bored post-modern society, as it is watered down, becomes –



whether or not those involved are aware – a full part of the existential mosaic of neo-chivalry which we have already talked about. In fact, it is in this framework that we must place such evidential phenomena as mass attendance of *body-building* gyms, the fact that shops which specialize in clothing for young people sell wrist or neck compasses as clothing accessories, or the very widespread habit of buying the kind of car – certainly useful in the African bush but a waste, to say the least, in our urban landscapes – called «*four wheels driving*», or simply “all-terrain vehicle”.

All these fragments, together with the habits bred by attendance of cinemas where the kind of films we shall later be discussing are shown, help to compose the complex and evasive personality of the young post-modern “knight” which in Italy goes under the very general and imprecise name of “paninaro”. We shall leave any reflection on the evident “apocalypticism” of these phenomena to the reader, who may enjoy figuring out the network of citations from traditional mythology which can be found in games such as “simulated survival”<sup>13</sup>.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup>. This traditional expression belongs to Sufism, Islamic esotericism; it generally indicates the relationship between *esotericism*, that is the initiatic field, and *exotericism*, the religious field, areas simultaneously present in the Muhammadian tradition.

<sup>2</sup>. The very term “religion”, in its etymology (Latin *religo*, «connect», «joint») shows how it refers existentially to something which transcends the experimentable, not because of lack of tools, but because of a radical difference in nature, and which one can therefore know only by means of a *revelation*.

<sup>3</sup>. Except, ironically, those which, on the one hand refer to germs and bacteria, new hordes of Gog and Magog which insidiously and invisibly surround us; and on the other, psychic disorders which afflict, among others, those who investigate such hordes from microscopes; such disorders have their “seers” in psychoanalysts.

<sup>4</sup>. In so-called primitive cultures, the term *totem* designates a being or an idea which encloses the transcendent meaning of the emblem of a certain clan, as mythical ancestor and guardian spirit.

<sup>5</sup>. Italy recently hosted a show of contemporary art, curated and attended by the most qualified critics, under the significant title «Arte santa» (“Holy Art”), a show which focused on the state of the art of the *avant-garde*. The basic idea of the show was the following: contemporary art can be assigned a certain character of “holiness” in

the sense that, according to these critics, it moves around in psycho-existential contexts once pertinent to sacred art. Art, today “freed from its ancillary condition to the religious sphere”, wants, in other words, to manage metaphysics by itself, and not just aesthetics.

[6.](#) It is worth mentioning that nothing like advertising was known to the non-modern world; for example, Christian eschatological traditions rejected the times when “none may buy or sell anything without the mark” (*Revelations*, XIII/17) a symptom of extreme spiritual degeneration.

[7.](#) The Hindu tradition calls *mantra* a special sacred verbal formula, analogous to the Sufi *dhikr*, based on a supposed analogical correspondence between sounds and principle realities, which, if suitably recited and repeated in a ritual manner, should help one’s consciousness to achieve certain degrees of spiritual realization.

[8.](#) Technique of ecstasy is used to mean, in general, the complex of magic-religious ritual, especially belonging to shamanic cultures, which provoke a state where a contact with the celestial or infernal world is established.

[9.](#) Here are a few significant names of Italian discotheques: *Starlight*, *Extasy*, *Ritual*, *Pleasure*.

[10.](#) It is interesting to note that the latest generation of TV films are directed according to the canons of video-narrative, and therefore probably represent the prototype of the coming cinematography.

[11.](#) A *koan*, in Zen Buddhism, is a very short tale, apparently without a completed meaning, where ambiguity and absurdity afford the teller or the listener the opportunity to effect a “break of levels” between the rational made and the so-called transcendent intellect, thus enabling him to grasp metaphysical evidence which cannot be expressed through discursive language.

[12.](#) In this light, also, that unreal and fantastic, and in certain ways childish, character which rationalist critique often attributes to traditional civilizations seems, indeed, to belong properly and only to the modern decomposition of ancient mythics. This originally did not of course prevent the space and time dimension from being lived in and measured, *enacted*, in a word, as a connecting element of the social dimension: its metaphysics resounded, so to speak, from the *inside*, from that very existential zone which, today deserted, corresponds, in our opinion, to what certain contemporary intellectuals call the place of “silence”.

[13.](#) A short aside on aesthetics. There is perhaps a connection



between aesthetics and ostentation, since the idea of luxury is clearly and directly associated with an idea of exteriority, of *sui generis* aesthetics. In an essay written in 1913 under the title *Luxus und Kapitalismus* (published in Italian by All'insegna del Veltro, Parma 1982) the German sociologist W. Sombart associated the birth of capitalism with luxury, calling it the "legitimate child of an illegitimate love"; this after the slow "institutionalization" of the demand for private ostentation by women under the *ancien régime*, a process which he calls the "secularization of love". It would be interesting, from this point of view, to see how the various traditions define the mutual relations between aesthetics and femininity, and how the function of the feminine principle can be interpreted as the means for a legitimate flow, or on the contrary, as an obstacle enhancing a sort of existential closure or exile.