

## A Poetics of Contemporary Art to Understand the Meaning of Our Age\*

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### Abstract

The aim of this essay is to analyse Stefan Sorgner's book *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* in the light of the differentiation between science and ideology and the related differentiation between aesthetics and poetics. The starting point of the analysis lies on the very foundations of posthumanist thought, the roots of which are believed to be in Italian Humanism itself, of which Pico della Mirandola's reflection was examined.

*Keywords:* aesthetics, poetics, science, ideology, Humanism

### 1. Introduction

Stefan Sorgner's book on posthuman aesthetics (Sorgner, 2022), which we will discuss in this article, is very useful for understanding some of the essential dynamics of our age. I believe it is no coincidence that it is precisely a book on aesthetics that has this characteristic. In contemporary times, the aesthetic paradigm is considered central, and Sorgner is well aware of this, also considering his formation. Indeed, he has been a pupil of Wolfgang Iser and Gianni Vattimo, two thinkers who appropriately founded their "systems of thought" on the study of the aesthetic condition. And as we shall see later in these as in other contemporary thinkers (I am thinking of Derrida, for example), the aesthetic condition assumes a decisive importance, to the point of becoming a sort of

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\* To Marco Cavallo, in the name of a "posthuman" friendship.

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preferred parameter for understanding reality. It could be said that in many respects this is the case. Considering the aesthetic as everything that concerns the sphere of sensibility, it is evident that it underlies the possibility of the determination of a vision of things as meaning that each person gives to reality. As Hegel clarified, the aesthetic constitutes the condition of possibility for the foundation of something like a worldview, a *Weltanschauung*. It manifests itself whenever something other than a description of states of affairs is produced—what in the context of a theory of praxis is recognised as knowledge of a knowledge i.e. a knowledge of an ideology. As we shall see eventually, the concept of ideology is central to our reflection. Here we will use it from the theoretical work carried out by Marxism, in particular by thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser, but also from a reflection that was founded on that basis: the semiological reflection of Luis Jorge Prieto. The other attempt we will try to make is to anchor Sorgner's reflection in the history of Western metaphysics. The assumption from which we start considers the limits of the totality of Western theoretical production as identifiable from constants. We will therefore attempt to identify some of these constants present within Sorgner's reflection (as well as within the philosophical mainstream to which it refers), from those that we will be able to see. Finally, we will analyse some of the discourse propositions in Sorgner's book with the method of commentary, as was customary from the Middle Ages onwards with texts considered canonical through the use of annotations (glosses).

## 2. An Origin of Discourse

Remaining within the margins of modernity, we can locate one of the roots (one of the presuppositions) of Sorgner's discourse as well as of the posthumanist discourse in general at the reflection of Humanism. I am thinking in particular of an Italian thinker and a specific work of his, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1948). Basically, the twofold idea (which can then be reduced to one) on which the post-humanist philosophical discourse is founded concerns the incompleteness of the human project and the protean nature of the human essence itself. One of the fundamental theses of Pico della Mirandola's aforementioned work is that human being is the only one among God's creatures that does not have a definite and stable essence. The essence of human being consists in not having an essence. The nature of human being is not to have a nature.

Statuit tandem optimus opifex, ut cui dare nihil proprium poterat commune esset quicquid privatum singulis fuerat. Igitur hominem accepit indiscretæ opus imaginis atque in mundi positum meditullio sic est alloquutus: «Nec certam sedem, nec propriam faciem, nec munus ullum peculiare tibi dedimus, o Adam, ut quam sedem, quam faciem, quæ munera tute optaveris, ea, pro voto, pro tua sententia, habeas et

possideas. Definita ceteris natura intra praescriptas a nobis leges coercetur. Tu, nullis angustiis coercitus, pro tuo arbitrio, in cuius manu te posui, tibi illam prefinies. Medium te mundi posui, ut circumspiceres inde commodius quicquid est in mundo. Nec te caelestem neque terrenum, neque mortalem neque immortalem fecimus, ut tui ipsius quasi arbitrarius honorariusque plastes et fictor, in quam malueris tute formam effingas. Poteris in inferiora quae bruti degenerare; poteris in superiora quae sunt divina ex tui animi sententia regenerari. (Pico della Mirandola, 1942, pp. 104-106)

God is described as creator (the English translation of the text of the *Oratio* for example uses the term “Craftsman” or artisan, “the best of artisans”; see Pico della Mirandola, 1948, p. 224), with a whole series of terms that refer to the same conceptual galaxy. The same creative action, which seems to have as its ultimate purpose the creation of the human being, is justified on the basis of the evocation of an aesthetic horizon. “Opere consummato, desiderabat artifex esse aliquem qui tanti operis rationem perpenderet, pulchritudinem amaret, magnitudinem admiraretur” (Pico della Mirandola, 1942, p. 104). Actually, the *opus consummatum* can not be considered complete yet. Its finality requires a further step. Like every artefact, it exists only in relation to another, in relation to the other. And this relationship is articulated in the two moments of understanding (rational action), and of aesthetic enjoyment, which in turn is divided into love for beauty and admiration for the immensity of the work. But if we ponder carefully, as described by Pico della Mirandola, the whole nature of this articulation takes on an evidently aesthetic connotation. Sublime admiration, love for beauty and rational understanding can only ever exist on the basis of a logic of contemplation that justifies its exercise. The human being is the other, the spectator of creation: *universi contemplator* (Pico della Mirandola, 1942, p. 104). Now, given that contemplation is the condition of original innocence, as simultaneous union of powerlessness and absolute possibility, we can better understand the meaning of this particular humanist nihilism. The human foundation has “nothing proper” (Pico della Mirandola, 1948, p. 224)—*nihil proprium* (Pico della Mirandola, 1942, p. 104). Thus the essence of the human being is founded on nothingness. A lack of archetypes, an absence of qualities, and a lack of specific places (of habitats) characterise this *novus filius*, which means that in addition to lacking an essence and a natural purpose, as we read specifically in the passage above, the human being obviously lacks a defined origin. We could argue that the meaning of the ‘aleatory materialism’ (Althusser, 1997) of radical humanism is all here. We can recall this by rereading that excerpt from Althusser’s text in which the metaphor of the train traveller is used:

... an idealist philosopher is like a man who knows in advance *both* where the train he is climbing onto is coming from *and* where it is going: what is its station of departure and its station of destination ... . The materialist, on the contrary, is a man who takes

the train *in motion* (the course of the world, the course of history, the course of life) but without knowing where the train is coming from or where it is going. (Althusser, 1997, p. 13)

This attempt to formulate a materialism, which seeks to distance itself from any form of idealism, a materialism to which Althusser allows us to direct our attention has precisely a counterpart in Italian humanist thought (bear in mind that one of the fundamental thinkers of Althusser's maturity not by chance, is Machiavelli) as a privileged moment of anti-foundationalist reflection within Modernity. Incidentally, we cannot but ask the question whether a human being like Althusser's materialist traveller can ever exist. It paradoxically seems more like an ideal projection rather than a description of a state of affairs. It brings to mind the formulations of the artistic avant-gardes and their socio-political utopias. Let us think here of the human being described by the situationist Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio in his *Manifesto of Industrial Painting*: "Men without memories will be created; men in a continual violent ecstasy, forever starting at ground zero" (Gallizio, 1959). Equally incidentally, we should question the possibility of a realisation of this utopia and consider whether the anthropocene human being is not attempting to embody this avant-garde model. Moreover, the motif of the voyage into the unknown (see Ulysses in Dante's *Inferno*) not only represents a commonplace of Western thought, but also offers a particular metaphor for the contemporary epistemological attitude, which has in anarchic epistemologies one of the privileged moments with which even within philosophy the libertarian credo of our age is manifested. Or perhaps should we consider all this as a specific moment of the manifestation of an ideology? A simple surface analysis of the course of Western thought might also remind us of that fundamental principle according to which we should think that every supposed step forward, even before constituting a possibility of emancipation from the past, is always also simultaneously a confirmation of it. And is it not the linearism presupposed in this analysis as well as in the object analysed still constitutively part of Western ideology (to the extent that it represents an essential foundation of it) as a great attempt to represent the totality (as a *mise-en-scène*) of the world? After a direct comparison with some of the theses in Stefan Sorgner's book, hopefully the meaning of these questions will become clearer in the following pages.

### 3. Glosses

"You cannot experience one artwork twice as you cannot step into the same river twice" (Sorgner, 2022, pp. 11, 12, 132).

As we have just indicated, this sentence recurs several times in Sorgner's book. To us, it seems almost like a keystone of the text: a kind of formula getting in it

and understanding its reasons more deeply. Apparently, it is not a complex sentence at all. It is not possible to have an experience of a work of art that repeats itself. The Heraclitism that becomes explicit in the second part of the formula, in addition to declaring a camp alignment (belonging to a school and the manifestation of a faith: that in becoming) draws a parallel between artistic experience and experience in general. According to Sorgner (and not only to him) what everyone experiences in relation to a work of art he also experiences in relation to every being he can experience in the world. But before continuing, I think an aside is in order, which will make our interpretation more problematic. Besides what can be a fairly easy sociological criticism, a criticism that is usually extended to the internal phenomenon of post-humanist theory and that is to be historically linked and therefore dependent on the logics of late liberal capitalism, what we would like to note here instead, is of a different nature. Sorgner's aspiration from the very title of his book is to found a post-human philosophy of art. What does this mean? What I have just stated presupposes, at the very least, that we understand each other on certain basic issues and thus taking for granted certain elements so that what is said to be a philosophical approach (whatever that means) can make sense. There are at least three absolutely necessary assumptions. The first, of course, it exists a philosophy as a unanimously acknowledged shared theoretical practice with an almost unambiguous approach to the reality it intends to carve out as its own object of enquiry (which it obviously does not). Again, it is necessary that this theoretical approach has a universal character (otherwise it is hard to see what sense it can ever have if it would be confused with any subjective—and for this very reason debatable—view of things in the world). Third, that there is a universally shared concept of art, which there is not. Sorgner, however, does not want to dwell on all art but only on posthuman art. And here other problems arise. Is it possible for an aesthetic that wants to be a philosophy (in the sense made explicit earlier) of art to focus solely on a specific genre?

Let us leave these questions in abeyance for the moment, to which we will be able to give answers later, as our reflection unfolds, and return to where we were before, noting a detail that is still related to one of Stefan Sorgner's two masters. Wolfgang Iser is one of the major contemporary thinkers who have focused on the aesthetic problem. He is among those who believe that one of the great mistakes of aesthetic theorising until the second half of the past century, when postmodern theory (I prefer to say ideology) took hold, was to always start from the universal to arrive at the particular. For this reason, the individual work of art ended up being unimportant or even irrelevant in the thought process. For this reason, many aesthetic scholars began to deal with individual works of art with an approach that was apparently different from that of art criticism.

Now, apart from the fact that we should always bear in mind the difficulties that a hermeneutic circularity such as this poses (how do we recognise that we are

in the presence of a work of art, when we experience it, if not from a general concept of art that is evidently shared on a community level?), the main question we need to ask ourselves is whether, in the end, Sorgner's rather than an aesthetics (a philosophy of art) is not also an art criticism.

#### 4. Interlude

This last question invokes another: what is an aesthetics, in the sense of the discourse I am trying to make here? That is to say: what is an aesthetics and in what does it differ from an art criticism? Anyone can see that this is a question that clearly invokes abysmally complex epistemological issues, which I will not even touch upon here, but nevertheless, I will attempt to answer to it by hinting at these same issues. To answer the question I posed earlier correctly, it is necessary to ask about the object of investigation of both, aesthetics and art criticism. At first glance, it would appear that the object of both is the same: works of art. And both, in the end, would seem to have the same purpose: to determine the essence of contemporary art (through, precisely, the study and analysis of works of art). In reality, if we look closer, we might see that while art criticism actually focuses (or believes it focuses) on the study of works, aesthetics, as a preliminary science or pre-science (also in the Heideggerian sense of *Vorwissenschaft*) has another object: the way in which works of art are known. In order to understand this differentiation, a deviation from our main discourse will be necessary. In order to make this diversion, I will refer in particular to the reflections of a linguist, Luis J. Prieto and, in particular, to one of his books, *Pertinence et pratique* (1975). And we will see that it is precisely the concept of relevance (which had already been investigated by other scholars, such as Karl Bühler or André Martinet—the latter was a teacher of Prieto—and had also been a central notion in the Prague School of Linguistics and, in particular, in the linguistic theory of Nikolai Sergeevič Trubeckoj) that will be central to our reflection.

There are at least three aspects that characterise a reflection of a scientific kind, in the sense of a reflection that, as we said before, is intended to be universal and not to be confused with mere opinion. The first of these concerns the fact of recognising the historicity (and therefore the relativity) of one's point of view. The second concerns the fact of recognising one's purpose in the method of investigation and not in the results of the investigation itself. The third concerns the fact, connected to the first, of recognising one's own objective sphere as non-natural.

The first and third of these aspects in particular have the consequence of allowing one to differentiate a scientific theory from an ideological one. The latter holds that knowledge of the reality to which it refers is a necessary consequence of

it. In general we can therefore define as ideological those discourses that refer to a knowledge of material reality that aims to naturalise itself, denying its historicity—see Prieto, particularly *L'idéologie* (1975, pp. 143-176). On a particular level, however, there is an inevitability of the ideological manifestation of certain disciplinary discourses. This inevitability is connected more specifically with the first two aspects, and the case of art criticism mentioned earlier is proof of this. In fact, like any discourse that wants to have credibility, it presents itself as certain, objective, basing this objectivity on a misunderstanding: it tends to confuse identity and difference. This means that it confuses objects with the knowledge of these same objects. In fact, the identities through which objects are known (e.g. works of art) are an effect (a modality) of the knowledge of these same objects. It is the difference that is instead situated at the level of the objects. But this does not necessarily have to be recognised. Its recognition is precisely an effect of relevance. And it is by virtue of the latter that the character of knowledge manifests itself in its absolutely relative mode (unlike scientific knowledge, for which the most appropriate adjective is not relative but relational: the form of knowledge we are proposing cannot be defined as relativism—a typical product of sceptical ideologies, which always need to conceal their substantial contradiction—but as relevantial relationalism).

## 5. More glosses

The question of the relationship is central to Sorgner's text. In all the various declinations of the term (relational, relationality, relationalism...) it recurs in the book dozens of times. Moreover, it is central to describing the conceptual core of metahumanism, the last frontier of post-metaphysical and anti-foundationalist postmodern thought. "Metahumanistic nodal points are plurality, perspectivism, relationality and a non-dualistic ontology of permanent becoming in all respects" (Sorgner 2022, p. 22).

From this concise and very effective description of the meta-humanist programme, one can derive the fundamental elements of those epistemologies that triumphed in the second half of the past century, elements that are concentrated in a synergetic manner. The aim is to bring out the complexity of the reality in which we are immersed. The work of art ends up being a kind of mirror of this reality. The work of art in its very essence embodies from this point of view a form of radical mimesis of reality. The evolutionary ideology that marks this discourse often risks failing to bring out the historical fact that this particular condition of metamorphic complexity is coessential to the very advent of modernity—a phenomenon that established itself in the Renaissance period and then exploded with the Baroque era.

Yet, I insist on recognising in this book by Sorgner the relevance of allowing some of the fundamental aspects of this advanced modernity of ours to emerge, with the undoubted merit of doing this in an always clear and limpid writing. It is a linear way of manifesting the non-linearity of the reality one wishes to describe, the reality of this age of ours, the essence of which is considered to be absolutely fluid and indeterminate. In order to think about this essential indeterminacy, Sorgner feels it is necessary to have recourse to weak, non-binary epistemologies (Sorgner, 2022, pp. 119-120). Like any philosophical discourse, the latter tends to mask its ideological provenance, ending up trapped within its own limits, and the limits of Sorgner's philosophical discourse on art are the same limits within which postmodern ideology develops and acts. As regards to the concept of ideology, we can refer to what has been said earlier, with one addition (which also has the character of a synthesis of the discourse made earlier): an ideology is always fundamentally an absolutization or a universalisation of a particular datum. If it is the disguise of history that one wants to propose as nature, it is always so as an absolutization of a particular point of view.

Now, in the specific case of philosophical reflection on art, and in the even more specific case of Sorgner's philosophical reflection on art, the objective, as we said before, should be that of determining the essence of contemporary art (in the sense of being able to determine the essence of everything that is considered as art in our era). Sorgner in his book also analyses the work of several artists as an exemplification of what in the light of the discourse we made earlier we could define as post-humanist poetics. It would therefore not be an aesthetic, but a poetics. By this last term we mean a specific vision of art, linked to certain practices and styles, which, even if it presents itself as absolute (even if it therefore prescind from the relational bonds that bind it to all the other systems within the artistic universe), concealing its determined historicity, can only ever be relative (to a specific historical moment, for example, or to a specific cultural space).

Here, then, is clarified the aspect of great interest to which I have repeatedly referred earlier, an aspect that this book by Sorgner undoubtedly possesses. It concerns the description of a specific spatio-temporal segment relating to art and which goes under the label of posthuman. And this posthuman art is certainly in tune with that part of society that most considers itself equal to the task of embodying the destiny of an era. This art therefore manifests the style that a dominant narrative believes should be that of our age, but which is in fact well evidenced by the very heterogeneity of the indefinite forms of sensitive manifestation, including the artistic forms themselves. In fact, ours is an era that more than any other perhaps justifies the coexistence of very different and even conflicting styles. In the arts, for example, the figurative style coexists with the abstract, realism with surrealism, canonical forms of representation with the



offshoots of the avant-garde with their inheritance of gestures, performativity, etc., and all of this is also sometimes intertwined with the canonical forms of art. And all this is also sometimes intertwined and hybridised, to the point that one could say, as the Italian poet Edoardo Sanguineti said in one of his poems, in *Postkarten (62)* (Sanguineti, 2004), that today's style (of every artist—Sanguineti said this of himself) consists in not having a style. Today we can register a co-presence of forms that present themselves as incompatible (as is specific to every poetic) with one another, all justified by hermeneutic 'commerce', the guarantor of a general interpretative market economy.

To what extent all this can be traced back to the timbre of the voice of the West, which for more than a century now has also been clearly audible from the East, is another matter, which we will try to explore in more detail on a future occasion.

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