



ORIGINS OF ART: MEANING AND MESSAGE IN VERBAL AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT - The article argues against the proposition that the origin of art is to be seen in the intentional communication of already verbalized messages. Instead, it is argued that feeling and non-verbalized emotions lie at the foundation of art, and that imitation and a mimetic being in the world plays a role in art. This means that interpretation of prehistoric art should take place on another level than the semantic one. The hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur provides a theoretical foundation for such an interpretation.

RIASSUNTO - L'articolo confuta la proposizione che l'origine dell'arte sia da ricercare nella comunicazione intenzionale di messaggi già verbalizzati. L'autrice sostiene come il sentimento e le emozioni non verbalizzate siano alla base dell'arte. Questo significa che l'interpretazione dell'arte preistorica dovrebbe avvenire su un livello diverso rispetto a quello semantico. L'ermeneutica di Paul Ricoeur fornisce una base teorica per questa interpretazione.

I would like to take my departure in Emmanuel Anati's definition of art as it was presented in his opening speech for the symposium two years ago (Anati 2011). Here it is suggested that all art involves communication, memory and externalization. This is a good starting point. The question would be: communication, memory and externalization of what? To my mind, the philosopher Susanne Langer has a good offer when she says "I think ... that every artist has only one artistic aim ... to present his idea of some mode of *feeling* ..." (Langer 1970 : 124; my emphasis).

Much research in rock art is concerned with a possible semantic of art - it is often argued that rock art is a kind of language: that what has been put down on the rocks was originally a verbal meaning, then transformed into images. In this perspective, the task of the scholar is then to transform the images back into a verblity.

From an art historical point of view, art was allegorical from the beginning of the Christian era and until Romanticism. Allegorical art in a Christian tradition means for example that a lamb is a symbol of Christ, a dove a sign for the Holy Ghost, and a triangle with an eye means the Trinity God. Painting in western culture until the late 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century was a translation of verbal meaning into images. The question is at what time this began and whether prehistoric art was made according to the same device or a different one. In the same way as Michael Ventris succeeded in deciphering the hieroglyphs by means of the Rosetta Stone, Oscar Almgren (1927) hoped to be able to break the code of the petroglyphs. Many have followed in his footsteps, but the question is whether "writing" is the right metaphor for understanding rock art.

Our culture is a verbal culture. This has been so for the past hundreds or thousands of years. Academics are particularly verbal (Warburton & Bredholt Christensen, forthcoming). Yet, even in our verbalized society there are other ways of communicating than the discursive. Dance, sculpting, and music most often do not have verbal origin and cannot be directly transcribed into verblity, as also the Romantic artists pointed out. Instead, the Romantic artists saw art as an effort seeking to express the inexpressible via symbols.¹

In Ancient Greece, art was seen as *mimesis*, an imitation of nature. With the Romantic artists came the idea of the artist as a genius and real art as singular, original and unique. Thus, to speak roughly, there are two ways of viewing art: one is as a verbal form (the allegorical) and the other is as non-verbal (claiming originality). In what follows I will present a third perspective.

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1 A symbol may be defined as a sign with a surplus of meaning (Ricoeur 1976: 55).



Two keywords in narrative theory are telling and showing. Telling is to narrate whereas showing is to represent scenically. Whereas one perspective on prehistoric art is seeing it as a Telling - referring to an Order or System (of myths, of conceptions) already there, another approach would be to look at the art as Showing - as acting and as an open, bodily and performative process (cf. also Conkey 2009), referring to other acts, rather than to an Order; perhaps creating a system during the act, perhaps not even that.

The dancer Anna Halprin (2002) has developed a dance form with the point of departure that “everybody is a dancer”. Her method is to establish a contact with ground and body, that of one self and those of others, in the dance. Supplementing the dance is painting, drawing and writing. Sessions often contain first dancing, then a continuation of the dance into painting; the picture is then showed to another person - who will then dance the picture. There is no “message” here, but an exchange of impressions and feelings, a wordless dialogue - with the floor, with oneself, with dreams, with the person in front of one.²

Singleton (2011 : 414) mentions what was earlier called animism - speaking with trees - falsely assumed by Europeans to be the thought that there are spirits sitting inside the tree, whereas really it just has to do with treating trees as living beings. The example illustrates how projections have been and are being made onto foreign peoples. Yet, whereas I agree that it was for a long time excluded from official Western cultural norms to speak to trees, the decline of authoritarian institutions and official religion and the rise of ecological movements, experimental theatre and dance, new age and a quest for another kind of spirituality has seen a change, and people are again talking to trees and perceiving their life (as Anna Halprin in the film *Breath made visible*; cf. also Bredholt Christensen 2007). This makes a link between us and the Wa Kongongo from Tanzania with whom Singleton lived, and perhaps also prehistoric peoples. This link was suppressed in our culture for a long time and was therefore invisible until few decades ago.

An important aspect of traditional art is that it implies imitation, replication and copying rather than, or as much as, invention, change and creativity (Coe 2003). Palaeolithic cave art shows continuity rather than change in the course of the 20.000 years between the first paintings and the last ones. In fact, originality as a virtue is a fairly recent and western phenomenon, dating back only to the Renaissance. Thus, there may be no reason to think that there was any particular quest for originality, or any drive for making something absolutely innovative, in the Palaeolithic.

This recalls the ethologist Richard Dawkins' concept of memes. Apart from genes that are biological replicators, Dawkins introduced in *The Selfish Gene* (1976) the concept of memes that are cultural replicators: “Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches” (Dawkins 1976: 192). Memes are replicated via natural selection just as genes. This means that some memes are more successful than others. Criteria for success are: longevity, fecundity and copying fidelity. Some things, such as a certain length of dress or popular songs have a high success rate and spread rapidly but are shortlived. Other things, such as the idea of god, celibacy and religious laws also have high success rates and are additionally long lived.

The concept of memes points to the fact that art is not only about inventing but also about copying and imitating - doing what the others are doing. This is not meant depreciative but as a matter of fact and characterizing us also today. The creativity of “man” is often being emphasized. Yet, we are also imitating each other, in learning and in reproducing and transmitting.

The art historian Gombrich (1950) suggested that the origin of Palaeolithic art was that the animal so to say came out of the rock, appeared by itself, in a curve on the wall that suggests the curve of the deer's back, or in a stalagmite suggesting the leg; the role of the artist was then just to complete what was in fact already there.

This idea, although of course not verifiable, is useful in introducing the idea of a matrix and linking to the idea of memes. To the person/artist coming after the first, the first horse or deer was already there, and it was easier to make the next. There was already a model that it was possible to imitate. It was not anymore necessary to invent things from scratch. Yet, the idea is that not even the first person invented from scratch - the ingenuousness of “the first person” was to see what was already there in the wall itself.

Another example of a strong meme is that of the woman. The matrix of the so-called “Venus figurines” from the European Ice age seems to go back at least to the figure of Berekhat Ram (230.000 BP) whereas their descendants can be identified in representations of the female figure all the way from the Neolithic and till today.

We can call it a play with form, or “intermateriality” - new material forms “quoting” earlier forms. In this perspective, the meaning of the new image or new figure is not a semantic or a symbolic meaning, but a performative one: the “sense” of the act comes from and in the act itself; the act itself changes its performer (and possibly the world around). As such, one artist and one group binds him-/her-/itself to the other in a marking.

2 See also the website of Tamalpa Institute, in the USA: <http://tamalpa.org/> and in Germany: <http://www.tamalpa-germany.de>

A form of identity is formed. More than the artist mastering the medium and using it as her/his tool, the artist can be seen as the tool of the material or of nature.

Torun Zachrisson who works with cultic places in Sweden says it is the place in the first place - a special beauty or dominant feature, or a special historical event - that attracts people to lay down offerings or paint specifically here. But "landscapes do not live just via their visual appearance, but also through the contents we assign to it" (Zachrisson 2004: 30; my translation). To illustrate this with an example from Valcamonica, the continued accumulation of rock images in Luine and around Capo di Ponte have kept drawing attention to the beauty and strategicness of exactly these places (so, the images makes us note the place - the cultural makes us note the natural). The first rocks were incised in the Epi-palaeolithic - this was the decisive new. From then on there was something imitative or repetitive in all further images, despite the fact that other inventions were made, such as new motives (for example humans or labyrinths) and categorizations of the kind seen in the division of rocks into themes (e.g., maps, weapons, *rosa camuna*, huts. Cf. e.g., Anati 1982; Sansoni 1987: 99ff). It is my claim that the reason we constantly note the impressive and characteristic tops of Concarena and Pizzo Badile is not least because of the rock art (and its followers: the medieval churches of San Siro and San Salvatore, and from modern times the CCSP).

Yet another example I will take from Nigel Barley's study of African pots where markings or signs do not necessarily mean in any semantic or symbolic sense. Barley (1994: 120f) says that there is a similarity in the patterning of pots and bodies among the Dowayo, and that this similarity signalizes bonding and belonging to the same category, but that the signs themselves do not represent or signify anything ("sun" or "road") and do not have a name. The marking itself is enough to establish a link between, for example, body and pot. The signs make links and connections but do not refer to any specific symbol.

On Mesolithic finds from Denmark, the patterning on tools and amber is mainly graphic and seems to mark similarity and establish connections as the African pots do. So for example the stick from the Åmose: in a pictorial way it draws a link between man and deer. At the same time, the two are not equal - the patterning runs in different directions on the two creatures.

In much research concerning prehistoric art, it is assumed that there was a meaning, in the sense of an intended message, behind the production of art. This is for example the idea expressed by Paul Bahn: "... the original meanings of prehistoric rock art are lost forever in the absence of the artists" (Bahn 2001: 78) who is furthermore sceptic as to the possibility of ever being able to approach this meaning: "Until a time machine is invented ... we are unlikely to get any closer to the true meaning of prehistoric rock art" (Bahn 2001:84). Although these quotes are not recent, their content is still current.

What Bahn assumes was there but is now lost is the meaning understood as the intention of the artist. This leaves archaeology on the outset in a position of deficit in comparison to the ethnographer who has access to informants and therefore to "the real meaning".

Yet, Bahn's point of view can be challenged. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur worked mainly with text analysis but has argued that also social action can be seen as text (Ricoeur 1973). Following this, it can be justified to look also at material culture and archaeological material from his hermeneutical point of view. Whereas understanding in a verbal communication has to do with understanding the intention of the speaker, this is different when "the said" has been written down - or acted out, or sculpted or painted.

Ricoeur argues that when a piece of work - literary or non-literary - is finished, it is no longer the property of the author or the artist but is given over to the world. This means also that the depth-semantics of a text is not what the author intended to say, but what the text is about or the world it points to: "Instead of being addressed just to you, the second person, what is written is addressed to the audience that it itself creates. ... *The vis-a-vis of the written is just whoever knows how to read. The copresence of subjects in a dialogue ceases to be the model for every understanding*" (Ricoeur 1973: 97).

There is thus no need for Bahn's scepticism. Intention / the point of view of the artist is only one way of understanding a work but not the one and only one. In fact one could say that the ideal of an interpretation is to "understand an author better than he could understand himself" (Ricoeur 1973: 114).

Summing up my points in this article I have argued that:

Feeling and non-verbalized emotions lie at the foundation of art

Art is not always produced with the purpose of communicating a semantic message

Intention is not the (only) clue to an interpretation of a material

Imitation plays a role in the production of art



I have tried to show cases in which there is not necessarily a "message" that can be translated "back" into verblability, because the art was possibly never grounded in a verblability at all, but in feelings, emotions, explorations, investigations, on individual, collective or cosmic levels. Yet, even if the material may not be based on a "form" referring to a "content", this does not exclude an interpretation and does not prevent us from having access to get an understanding of the material and the "World" it points towards.

As an example of an approach in line with what has been sketched out here I would like to point to the studies of Iegor Reznikoff. Reznikoff is singer and has investigated the painted caves of de Portel and Niaux from a musical standpoint and with regard to the resonance of the cave. His point of departure is that the level of sound is more primitive in our consciousness than the level of speech, but also that music and sound work deep in us on an emotional level that is difficult to express in words. Sound is a feeling, physically in the body. By singing in Portel he realized that both body and cave vibrated and that "the density of pictures in a location of a cave is proportional to the quality of the resonance of this location; the pictures are found mostly in resonant areas" (Reznikoff 2005: 2.1). Thus he speaks of an earth or mineral meaning of sound and also an animal meaning of sound, because of the relations with the pictures of animals. None of these meanings are semantic.

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