

CAPRICCIO

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(First published May 31, 2019)

It. *Capriccio*, generally untranslated, even though Eng. also Whim, Fancy, Caprice; Fr. *Caprice*; Germ. *Laune*; Span. *Capricho*. An authentic neologism of the Middle Age language, documented as from the latest 13th century, "Capriccio" is one of the most polysemic word in the Italian lexicon, and a significant term of the Art Criticism vocabulary mostly between 16th and 18th century. Among its synonyms are, for instance, "Sudden desire", "Inconstant behavior", "(Free) Fantasy", "Inspiration" and even – in the form of "raccapriccio" – "Revulsion", "Horror" (Battaglia 1962: 727-729; Cortellazzo, Zolli 1985: 1064). It is interesting to note that this richness embraces very different (and even opposite) meanings, that probably come from a complex etymological history. At first it was most likely two words, then merged into a single name: "Capo-riccio" (Hair curl) and precisely "Capriccio", a word this last that – in its form – recalls the goat (It. "capra"), and so an Idea of irrationality and madness (Pianigiani 1988: 1135). During the 17th and 18th century, Capriccio also became an artistic and musical genre characterized by fantasy, expressive freedom, mix of heterogeneous elements, improvising and speed in performing.

THE BIRTH OF THE IDEA

Even though the birth of Capriccio – as a special term to describe a particular poet's and artist's attitude to be free from the coercion of moral and aesthetic rules – dates back to the first half of Cinquecento, studies on its conceptual nature start only in the 20th century. For a long time indeed, especially within the classicist currents, Capriccio has been marked by a negative connotation as license, disorderliness, tendency to ugly and disharmony. From the beginnings, scholars focused their attention on the relationship between the origin of this word and its use in the meaning of derogation of conventions (Crispoliti 1958; Ossola 1971). It is possible to find this kind of significance in Pietro Aretino's *Dialogues* (1534-36), which have the revealing subtitle of *Capricciosi e piacevoli ragionamenti*. Protagonists of these talks are some whores, nuns and married women conversing in a randy and lecherous speech about the art

of harlotry. According to his typical literary style, in this work Aretino makes use of the exact opposite of the elegant and fine language, and also of the "high" theme, for example, of Pietro Bembo's *Asolani* (1505, 1530), a group of three dialogues on the nature of Platonic love, representing the official standard of the Italian prose at that time. In another contemporary author, the poet Francesco Berni, Capriccio takes on an even more radical meaning. In his *Capitolo in laude d'Aristotele* (1532: vv. 104-105), the word Capriccio means something like "deviant inspiration": it is, better yet, a genuine "automatic writing" that works against the author's will. Addressed to his interlocutor, the cook Pierre Buffet, Berni writes in fact: "These (verses) are whims ('capricci') that want to come to spite me, as you like to make chestnut pies ('pasticci')". In Berni's poetry, moreover, the word Capriccio is intimately linked to 'maninconia', a word that in the Florentine form of the 16th century mixed melancholy and madness (Campione 2011: 28). It is in Anton Francesco Doni's works that Capriccio reaches its full significance: in his *Mondi* (1552-53) and *Marmi* (1553), two collections of several dialogues that he imagines between bizarre and paradoxical characters, Capriccio embodies one of the forms of the inspiration, the first and the most impetuous one, that turns the creative operation in an automatic, instinctive and even unintentional action. So the result of the capricious making is an unfinished and magmatic object, in which one still sees the signs of the artist's hand (Campione 2011: 82). For Doni, the Capriccio is in short a power that drives – with speed ('prestezza') and (seemingly) indifference to style – the sculptor and the writer to free the work from the excess of matter. Like a statue is inside the marble before the artist sculpts it, a literary text is imprisoned in a mountain of books ("una soma di libri") already written by others, and the writer's task is to bring it to light.

THE ART THEORY

It is due to Giorgio Vasari the use of Capriccio in the widest range of meanings, as one of the principle interpretative instruments of artists' style and work. Although – in its 'technical' nature – it is a word of the Cinquecento Art Theory, Vasari in his *Vite* (1550-1568) uses "Capriccio" referring also to artists of the past, like Cimabue, Giotto, Nicola Pisano, Simone Martini. About Leon Battista Alberti's Tribune of SS. Annunziata Church in Florence, Vasari writes for example: "it is gorgeous, whimsical and difficult". Speaking of Andrea Mantegna's *scorci* he uses almost identical words: "whimsical and difficult invention". So, in Vasari's *Vite*, the Capriccio covers all the spectrum of the artistic creativity: it is (just like for Anton Francesco Doni) the first and sudden inspiration; it is the "Concetto" (concept) in the use made by Benedetto Varchi in his exegesis (1547) of Michelangelo's *Sonetto 151*, *Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto*; it is the artist's ability to cross the difficulty of the art and the matter; it is an ornament that hides defects in art and nature; it is an impetuous artistic will; it is above all an intelligence combined with greatness of soul, in a singular contiguity with the ancient Idea of Sublime. According to Alice Rathé, the Capriccio for Vasari "not only fertilizes the artist's spirit on which it acts, but also it inspires the posterity" (Rathé 1980: 242).

From Vasari on, now in the midst of the Counter Reformation, more and more the Capriccio will have to deal with the climate of moral orthodoxy. On the one hand, some treatisers ('Trattatisti') like Lodovico

Dolce (*L'Aretino*, 1557), Giovanni Andrea Gilio (*Dialogo nel quale si ragiona degli errori e degli abusi de' pittori circa l'istorie*, 1564), Gabriele Paleotti (*Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre et profane*, 1582) refuse the Capriccio in the artistic representation, mainly in religious one, as a deviation from the faith truth. Michelangelo himself becomes the target of a raging debate because of his nudes in the *Last Judgement*, and his dangerous freedom in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Painting as a work of art, which has to be clear and comprehensible by everyone, driven by the Capriccio becomes obscure and inscrutable: «Michelangelo – writes Dolce – doesn't want his inventions understood, except by a few and educated» (Dolce 1960: 191). For Gilio the Capriccio (in the positive form of 'bel capriccio') can be an unrepeatable inspiration, a fleeting Idea, but it is flawed and needs a long work by the artist not to appear a shapeless object, or worse morally dangerous (Campione 2011: 221). Paleotti lastly, for his part, thinks that it is fair to painters to introduce new inventions, "but not to swings and whims, without order and law" (Paleotti 1961: 401). On the other hand, some 16th century scholars try to bring back the Capriccio to a Platonic substratum, recalling the classic distinction between a figurative and a fantastic imitation. Raffaello Borghini (*Il Riposo, in cui della pittura e della scultura si favella*, 1584) identifies two types of artistic invention: one coming from others (in which you can find religious, historical and mythological subjects), and one coming from the artist himself, that largely corresponds to the idea of Capriccio. A similar belief expresses Gregorio Comanini (*Il Figino*, 1591) about the genres of the pictorial mimesis: it exists one (the 'imitazione icastica'), that produces only images of things made by nature; and another (the 'imitazione fantastica') which Comanini defines "cosa di capriccio e d'invenzion [dell'artista]" ("a thing of whim and artist's invention"; Comanini 1962: 256). Among this kind of representations, Comanini indicates the bizarre anthropomorphic Giuseppe Arcimboldo's still lifes, perhaps the most emblematic example of the artistic extravagance in the late Mannerism. The difficult compatibility between the Capriccio's expressive freedom and the moral scruples of the Counter Reformation finds an interesting meeting point in the attempt of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593; first published in Rome with many woodcut illustrations, 1603) to give a personification to the concept of Capriccio. Ripa imagines the allegory of Capriccio (represented in the illustration) as a young man dressed by a multicolour costume, with in hand a bellows and a spur. In Ripa's description, the two iconographic attributes embody a moralistic attitude, as instruments to flatter the virtue (the bellows) and sting the vice (the spur). It is very likely, however, that Ripa's operation consisted in a real masking of the truth. Notoriously, indeed, bellows and spur are symbols of the madness and inspiration (Campione 2011: 158). According to Roland Kanz, Ripa's *Capriccio* interprets the conceptual background of this idea in the sense of the virtues and the morality (Kanz 2002: 163). Hiding the real meaning of these objects, Ripa therefore wanted to "save" the Capriccio from the censorship, and preserve the last yarning of expressive freedom that still remained to the artist.

Now at the beginning of 17th century, the Capriccio ceases to be an exception in art, and even becomes a rule: it is significant, from this point of view, the notion of 'Capriccio regolato' ('regulated whim') devised by Federico Zuccari (*L'Idea de' Pittori, Scultori et Architetti*, 1607). Distinguishing an internal drawing from an external one ('disegno interno' vs 'disegno esterno'), and in this last a natural one from an artificial drawing, Zuccari identifies in the third type of this (the 'disegno fantastico': 'fantastic drawing') the

objectification of the Capriccio. It must be subject to “a certain rule, and a middle ground” (“una certa regola, et una via di mezzo”) so that the artistic invention can live together with the beauty.

ART AND CAPRICCIO

Regardless of the Grotesques, a kind of decoration that – in the mix of bizarre, strange and monstrous elements – during the Cinquecento exactly embodied the idea of Capriccio, starting from the early 17th century it becomes a particular artistic genre, in which you can find the taste to the paradoxical, the misshapen, the witty and the fantastic. At first mostly in the graphic arts, the Capriccio had seen in some engravers the most brilliant interpreters of this artistic genre. In 1617 the French painter Jacques Callot published the *Capricci di varie figure*, a suite of several etchings representing characters of *Commedia dell'Arte*, dwarfs, humpbacks, musicians (Kanz 2002: 248-257), drawn and engraved with a free and nimble line. Even more visionary are Giovan Battista Bracelli's *Bizzarrie di varie figure*, published in Livorno, 1624: in many ways, Bracelli's engravings anticipate some aspects of Surrealism, with the juxtaposition of strange and senseless elements (scissors, rackets, shovels and pickaxes, geometrical volumes, flames and smoke) that form vaguely human figures. It is to be noted that, in the same time, the Capriccio was theorized also by the musical point of view. After the first examples of *Capricci* composed by the Flemish musician Jacquet de Berchem (*Tre libri di Capricci*, 1561), a musical translation of several *Stanzas* of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, in 1619 the German theorist Michael Praetorius in his *Syntagma Musicum* gives, for the first time, a clear definition of the musical *Capriccio*: “the *Capriccio*, i.e. the improvised fantasy, takes place when a composer for his own amusement undertakes a fugue according to his own whim, but he doesn't linger long. Rather, he passes soon to another fugue, in any way it comes him to mind” (Praetorius 1619: 21).

In visual arts, during the 18th century, the word “Capriccio” began to designate a typical genre of pictorial landscape characterized by architectonical elements, often really existing but mixed to others in a far-fetched way: for example, the Giovanni Paolo Pannini's *Capricci* (first half of 18th century) often gather in a single framework buildings of the Ancient Rome actually very far from each other. In Pannini's *Capriccio romano* (1735. Indianapolis, Museum of Art) you can find indeed, as if they were in a single square, the *Pantheon*, the *Temple of Vesta*, the *Theatre of Marcello*, the *Obelisco Lateranense*, the equestrian statue of *Marco Aurelio*. In Giovan Battista Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione* (1745-61), among the best known 18th century engravings, the *Capriccio* joins with the poetry of the Sublime bringing into being the most suggestive example of the pre-romantic artistic fantasy. Francisco Goya's *Caprichos*, the suite of eighty etchings and aquatints published in 1799, ideally close the 18th century with the most disconcerting indictment against vices, superstitions, moral degradation of Spanish society at his time. *El sueño de la razón produce monstrous*, the most famous engraving in the collection, represents the painter himself oppressed by bats, owls, cats: the darkness of madness that takes shape, but that the artist tries to drive away with the power of the truth.

Exhausted its subversive power, during the Romanticism the Capriccio became the core itself of the artistic expression, and disappeared from the Realism as unessential and misleading. Perhaps, it is within

Dada and *Surrealism* experimentations, and in many phenomena of the contemporary art, that the idea has continued to live as a total reconfiguration of the concept of art.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

The disappearance of the Capriccio from the horizon of art has involved, as from the early 20th century, its reconversion in an expressive mode based on the total rethinking of the creativeness. Although it no longer exists as an artistic genre, its legacy still continues in other forms that characterize many aspects of current art. If we move our standpoint to the context of the modern and contemporary, we find that the essence of the Capriccio is a tendency to the taunt in the double way of a ludic attitude of the artist and a shock on the viewer (Danto 1981; Hughes 1982; Danto 1997; Julius 2003). It is a movement that already starts with the Impressionism, but arrives to its full ripe within avant-garde currents. After *Album primo-avrilesque* by Alphonse Allais, a suite of visual humoristic experiments (among them: *Communion of Anaemic Young Girls in the Snow*, 1883; *Apoplectic Cardinals Harvesting Tomatoes on the Shore of the Red Sea*, 1884; *Negroes Fighting in a Tunnel by Night*, 1884), in which the descriptive and elaborated titles respectively correspond to a fully white, red and black sheet, it is most likely that the first Capriccio in modern art is Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), perhaps his most famous *readymade*. Simply by signing an urinal as an authentic art work, with the apocryphal name of "R. Mutt", the French artist rewrites the rules of artistic production. Duchamp doesn't make a creative object, he chooses a trivial thing and puts it on a pedestal: from then on, it changes forever the way to think about that item (Duchamp 1917: 5; Dickie 1969: 255; Subrizi 2008: 75-76). We can say something similar about *L.O.O.Q.* (1919), the famous mustached *Mona Lisa*, in which the nonsense acronym breaks down an idol of the universal art. On the other hand, in the late Twenties the "paranoiac-critical method" theorized within the Surrealism by Salvador Dalí has a lot to do with the ancient concept of Capriccio: the artistic creation is born from delirium and from the exploration in the regions of the unconscious (Dalí 1974: 49). Little over twenty years later, Piero Manzoni's *Artist's shit* (Celant 1975: 52-55; Grazioli 2007: 122-128; Gualdoni 2014) brings to the ultimate consequences the desecrating action of the creativeness, in an authentic rebirth of the Capriccio: everything is granted to the artist, even to sell his own poop, as long as there's a public interested to buy it for gold. No less radical is Andy Warhol's operation to submit the "hyper realistic" painted and silk screened reproduction of a daily life banal object, a soap pad box, as a sculpture (Danto 1998). The two objects (Warhol's *Brillo Box*, 1964, and its cardboard supermarket counterpart) are virtually indistinguishable: what is that causes that the first is an art work, and the other one not? According to Arthur Danto (1986) it isn't a perceptual feature, but a "soul" that is all one with the representational statute of the art object.

Sometimes in contemporary art the "capricious" becomes "horrorful", like in Joel Peter Witkin's disorienting b/w photos, in which corpses or dismembered parts of bodies (but also dwarfs, amputees and freaks) are protagonists of chilling still-lives, or are posing as in real *tableaux vivants* (Campione 2013: 43). Or even in many Damien Hirst's installations (see, for example his glass cases containing rotting parts of animals, infested with thousands of flies), that decline a persistent idea of illness and death. If the Capriccio, in contemporary art, corresponds to taking to the extreme limits the irreverence and the

emotional trauma, it is likely that in Gunther von Hagen's exhibitions (Campione 2012) it finds the final and perfect embodiment: real cadavers transformed in bewildering plastic puppets, often posed like in famous Baroque paintings (though completely flayed...), are probably the ultimate and no return finish line where today's art arrived, and with it the last breaths of the Capriccio.

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

F. P. Campione, *Capriccio*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2019 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2019/spring/Capriccio.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630050.

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F. P. Campione, *Capriccio*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Vol. 2, Milano, Mimesis, 2019.