

AESTHETICS AND RHETORIC (ITALIAN DEBATE)

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It. Estetica e retorica (dibattito italiano); Fr. Esthétique et rhétorique (débat italien); Ger. Ästhetik und Rhetorik (Italienische Debatte); Esp. Estética y retórica (debate italiano). Rhetoric has received various definitions throughout its history, from Greek and Roman Antiquity (principally thanks to Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian) to contemporary times, through different contexts in the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Modern Age. Here we can define rhetoric in general as that art or science of speech which implies certain strategies to gain consent from, persuade or move one's audience. Since its revival in the second half of the 20th century, chiefly due to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958), which conceived of rhetoric as a theory of argumentation in opposition both to irrationalism and violence and to demonstrative and dogmatic reason, rhetoric has played an interesting role in aesthetics studies. In Italy, in particular, the aesthetic relevance of rhetoric is due not only to the international debate on this discipline, but also to the significant impulse which the latter received from the Italian phenomenological school inspired by Antonio Banfi. It is useful to recall the distinction drawn by Emilio Mattioli between two fields of aesthetic studies that draw upon rhetoric: hermeneutic ontology (Gadamer, Ricoeur, Ernesto Grassi) and the critical phenomenology of Jaus, Anceschi, Barilli, Curi, and Bagni, originally springing from the Milan school (Banfi, Morpurgo-Tagliabue and Formaggio; see Mattioli 1986, Bollino 2012). Here we can underline two domains, which are sometimes interconnected: on the one hand, the theoretical implications of the rhetorical origins of certain aesthetic concepts; on the other, aesthetic reflection on forms of critical reason encompassing experience, circumstances and feelings.

FROM RHETORIC TO AESTHETIC CONCEPTS

Studies on the rhetorical origins of aesthetic concepts are significant both for the definition of aesthetics as a discipline in the 18th century and for the theoretical relevance of rhetoric in the contemporary debate on specific aesthetic notions. Concepts such as those of poetics, mimesis, invention, and beauty have

received specific attention, often thanks to international studies (see for example Michel 1982, Fumaroli 2001). The most representative examples of this historical and theoretical interest are provided by the concepts of sublime and metaphor.

1. From the perspective of Antonio Banfi's Italian phenomenological school, the development of the debate on the sublime chiefly revolves around the questions: is the sublime only a style, or does it have a philosophical dimension? Is it an aesthetic category? In opposition to subjectivist aesthetics, which considers rhetoric only an intellectualist tendency towards classification, Antonio Banfi (1949) underlines the importance of ancient rhetoric and its development for contemporary aesthetics scholars, envisaging it as a field of study for a "phenomenology of art". The rules of rhetoric, and particularly those concerning the sublime, first of all point to artistic reality as something distinct from existential reality; secondly, they signify the control of the imaginative and emotional dimension of art. Within the five moments of Longinus' essence of the sublime, the moment of pathos as rational enthusiasm acquires a central aesthetic role.

During the second half of the 20th century, Emilio Mattioli, partly inspired by Luciano Anceschi's critical phenomenology, developed some of Banfi's insights. In Mattioli's reflection on the sublime, the focus is not only on the Italian debate, but also on the international one, as shown by his interest in Baldine Saint Girons' works and by his criticism of the American approach (Harald Bloom) and of Cvetan Todorov. In opposition to the latter's idea that rhetoric disappears when aesthetics arises because, unlike aesthetics, rhetoric is a heteronomous art (Todorov 1977), Mattioli argues that rhetoric presents certain autonomous aspects. Therefore, the sublime acquires particular significance, principally owing to the central role of pathos (Mattioli 1983). Starting from these phenomenological assumptions, several studies have explored the history of the sublime in an effort to define its philosophical and aesthetic significance (see, for instance, Lombardo 1988, Carchia 1990, Russo 2004, Franzini 2015 and Feloj 2012).

2. In addition to the stylistic aspects of rhetoric, the aesthetic debate has focused on a figure of speech of great philosophical and aesthetic relevance: the metaphor. The main questions can be summarised as follows: is the metaphor merely an embellishment? Or, on the contrary, does it have some heuristic and creative significance? By setting out from both the phenomenological and the hermeneutic tradition, Ernesto Grassi (1990) goes beyond the question of the heuristic and creative significance of metaphors: in his view, metaphorical language not only serves more than a merely literary or ornamental function, but can even reveal the original sense of being, the "inexpressible" that rational language cannot express. In contrast to rational language, whose aim is to demonstrate necessary conclusions on the basis of evident premises, rhetorical and metaphorical language can turn towards the true sense of things on which not only demonstrative premises but all human creations are based.

Although there is an evident historical link between metaphors and rhetoric, since the 1950s the debate has moved significantly away from the rhetorical features of metaphors, conveying a somewhat stereotypical view of rhetoric. According to the leading figures in this debate, metaphors have a cognitive and heuristic value (see the debate between Black, Ricœur, Lakoff and Johnson). Against the backdrop of this international debate, in Italy the metaphor has also been made an object of aesthetic research.

Indeed, although in the English-speaking world the debate has increasingly shifted towards the cognitive sciences since the 1990s, the contribution of aesthetics seems significant today, especially insofar as it highlights the heuristic and innovative function of metaphors (see Contini 2017 and 2021).

Italian aesthetic reflection on metaphors has led to a revival of both past and contemporary philosophical traditions. On the one hand, ancient and modern philosophical thought, as exemplified by Aristotle and Giambattista Vico, enables one to correctly define the main issues in this debate. On the other hand, the contemporary tradition, as represented by phenomenology and hermeneutics, fosters a reflection on the innovative and heuristic function of the metaphor. Firstly, the metaphor is linked with other concepts, such as those of imagination and symbol explored by Merleau-Ponty, Ricœur and Dufrenne, as well as with Valéry's conception of dance (see Franzini 2007 and Messori 2001). Secondly, the thought of philosophers such as Ricœur and Mitchel plays an essential role in the relationship between metaphors and images, insofar as it develops an aesthetics centred on the political use of metaphors (Martinengo 2016).

RHETORIC AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF REASON

In addition to the line of research concerning the transition from rhetoric to aesthetic concepts, there is another one which pertains to the critique of reason, chiefly from a phenomenological perspective. Some insights in this respect emerge from Ernesto Grassi's work. One of the main outcomes of his thought is the rehabilitation of rhetoric, as a relationship of both coincidence and co-implication is seen to exist between this art and philosophy. Grassi also provides a positive reappraisal of the humanistic tradition based on the study of early-modern interest in rhetoric, as exemplified by Giambattista Vico (Grassi 1980). The critique of reason in the contemporary aesthetic debate also implies an attempt to define a specific kind of aesthetic reason that is not rationalistic and Cartesian, but which phenomenologically sets out from the field of experience and sensibility.

As Renato Barilli (1969) observed, the distinction between the two cultures of rhetoric and logic, rhetoric and dialectics, emerges with a particular intensity in some 16th-century theories and in the 17th-century debate between Ancients and Moderns. Starting from a phenomenological critique of culture and a critical reinterpretation of Perelman's views, Giulio Preti (1968) reflects on the dichotomy between two forms of culture: rhetoric and science. The former offers an axiological discourse that aims to persuade on the basis of values and concerns the field of historicity, contingency and passions; the latter develops a theoretical discourse that aims to demonstrate specific claims within the universal abstract field of reason in order to attain the truth.

Aesthetic aspects emerge in Preti's reconstruction of the anti-humanistic debate that led to the querelle between Ancients and Moderns: from the scientific view of Bacon, Galilei, Pascal and Descartes, Fontenelle represents a sort of culmination of the anti-humanist perspective. The scientific view, according to Preti, is the hallmark of modernity: it appeals to the intellect and the infinite progressiveness of knowledge, against tradition, the will and the principle of authority; it is not exclusive to scientists, but also characterises all men of letters and artists aware of their own modernity. Given the common origin of

the two cultures in the experiential sphere, Preti interprets the logical perspective phenomenologically, through an intersubjective notion of truth. Scientific culture has the function of renewing the vitality of the humanistic one when it becomes self-referential.

From another phenomenological perspective, Renato Barilli (1969) hopes to overcome the “dissociation” between the two cultures, by recovering a pre-Cartesian idea of reason and logic, while maintaining a contemporary perspective inspired by phenomenology (Husserl and Merleau-Ponty) and structuralism (Saussure). Rhetoric is an essential tool in order to provide the humanities with a scientific foundation. Barilli follows in Perelman’s footsteps through the study of ancient, Renaissance and modern rhetorical thought (for example, Cicero, Francesco Patrizi, Vico and Eliot), in order to outline an alternative reason to the Cartesian one and thus overcome the dissociation in question by reuniting the two dimensions of dialectics and rhetoric. Therefore, rhetoric played an important role in the aesthetic debate of the second half of the 20th century, by leading contemporary thinkers to critically engage with the modern legacy of Cartesian reason. In this engagement scholars in each case tend to emphasise one of the two cultures or the other, sometimes looking for a way to reconcile them and hence trying to renew the model of reason by drawing upon elements often derived from phenomenology.

Once again, from a phenomenological perspective, in recent years the issue of rhetoric has inspired various efforts to outline a model of aesthetic reason capable of overcoming the dichotomy in question. This means promoting a kind of thought that is directed towards the search for a foundation, albeit not an absolute one – a kind of thought capable of mediating between the fields of historical experience and synchronic reason. Reason is conceived of as a “stimulus for and function of research”, and not as something fossilised. Driving aesthetic thoughts are consequently found in Leonardo da Vinci’s treatment of qualitative aspects of nature such as light and colours, in Kant’s critique of reason, and in Goethe’s metamorphic dynamism, as well as in Husserl’s and Valéry’s phenomenological and constructive perspectives on the crisis, while also drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s insights (Franzini 2007).

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