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AESTHETICS AND RHETORIC (INTERNATIONAL DEBATE)

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It. *Estetica e retorica (dibattito internazionale)*; Fr. *Esthétique et rhétorique (débat international)*; Ger. *Ästhetik und Rhetorik (Internationale Debatte)*; Esp. *Estética y retórica (debate internacional)*.

Rhetoric has received various definitions throughout its history. While some definitions frame it as the art of good speech or the art of persuasion, we might propose a broader notion, one that extends beyond the linguistic domain and introduces a rhetorical space of aesthetics: rhetoric as the *art of bringing the possible meaning of things to expression*.

Depending on the epoch and the various interpretations, especially after the emergence of aesthetics as an autonomous discipline, aesthetics has more or less explicitly drawn from rhetoric concepts and words that shape its theoretical problems, lexicon, and conceptual framework (Saint-Girons 2000, Franzini 2015). Rhetorical concepts have historically and theoretically structured ways of understanding *poiesis*, fruition, and other dimensions of aesthetic objects or acts. After an overview of the broader philosophical framework surrounding the aesthetics and rhetoric debate, we will explore some possible objects and practices associated with a rhetorically understood aesthetic experience.

PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORKS

Following the 'renaissance' of rhetoric in the 20th century (Perelman 1971), rhetoric has gained renewed attention in the field of aesthetics (Raimondi 2002, Barilli 2011). In the philosophical literature, we can distinguish three fundamental lines of debate on aesthetics and rhetoric in the 20th century.

1. *Hermeneutics*. Building on Nietzsche's and Heidegger's (2009) lectures on rhetoric, authors such as Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Grassi have underlined the close interconnection between hermeneutics, understanding, and rhetoric. Rhetoric must understand the interlocutor, and hermeneutics needs the dialogical principle of rhetoric, a connection that is reinforced in cultures that are essentially based on writing (Gadamer 1997).
2. *Phenomenology*. Some authors, such as Geiger and Ingarden, have linked rhetoric to aesthetic fruition, particularly to the formal value (*eurythmy*) that characterises profound aesthetic fruition (Geiger 1928),

and to the ontology of the literary work (Ingarden 1960). A particular strand of phenomenological studies in Italy, mainly derived in various ways from Antonio Banfi's legacy (Formaggio, Preti, Franzini, Anceschi, Mattioli, Bagni), emphasizes the openness to the field of sensibility, the possible, and the experiential flow inherent in the intersection of aesthetics and rhetoric, particularly in relation to the arts.

3. *Postmodernism*. Some thinkers (Baudrillard, Deleuze, McLuhan, Barthes, Genette) critically examine the relationship between appearance, or images, and reality in the 'society of the spectacle'. Through the interconnection of hermeneutics and semiotics, they also explore the fragmentation of language and the infinite regress of meaning, which implies an open-ended idea of artworks.

The interconnection between aesthetics and rhetoric thus outlines a non-dogmatic and 'minor' form of reason, which relates to the lifeworld, sensibility, and the *kairos* (Perelman 1971, Franzini 2007, Barilli 2011).

IMAGES

An important strand of research in 20th-century art theory and history has examined the connections between aesthetics and rhetoric focusing on the role of memory, spectator's response, and ornament. The research carried out by Warburg and scholars associated with the Warburg Institute marks a crucial point in this respect.

Warburg's legacy. Just as memory in classical rhetoric functions as an immense repository of images and argumentative schemes, so too in art history the collective memory of the Western imagination, rooted in Antiquity and its mythology, emerges (Warburg 2020; see also Raimondi 2002). With notions such as *Pathosformel* and *ornament*, Warburg interprets rhetorical concepts and highlights in images traces of the dynamic movement of the relationship between life and forms. The investigation of ornament in Ernst H. Gombrich (1979), and of the power of images in terms of *topoi*, *metaphors*, or recurring *similarities* in spectators' responses in David Freedberg (1991), reveals the enduring significance of rhetorical thinking in image theories up to the present day, including those theories developed in dialogue with contemporary cognitive science (Freedberg-Gallese 2007).

New Media. Drawing on its earlier work on the arts of the *trivium*, including rhetoric, McLuhan pointed out that the invention of the printing press marked the transition from an oral culture based on hearing, which aimed at an affective involvement of the listener, to a written culture based on seeing, which created a greater distance with the viewer. McLuhan attributes the gradual crisis of rhetoric in the modern age to this shift. By contrast, today's new media are the protagonists of an integral communication that marks the rebirth of rhetoric in all its dimensions (McLuhan 1962, Barilli 2011). The manipulative and distorting sides of rhetoric are addressed by authors who explore communicative systems in capitalist society. Barthes (1964) adopts a semiotic approach to study the persuasive function of the text-image relationship in *new media* as a vehicle for ideologies. Baudrillard theorises the substitution of reality by simulacra in image-saturated societies (Baudrillard 1981). Nevertheless, rhetoric survives in its *heuristic* function, with the redefinition of rhetorical concepts even in 'postmodern' authors such as Deleuze (1988).

SOUNDS AND RHYTHMS

The intersection between rhetoric and music lies in a sort of historical isomorphism between these two arts: both rely on the arrangement of parts in a whole, rhythmic flow, and psychological effects. This isomorphism has led to a broad and varied discussion of the relationship between music and rhetoric from Antiquity to the modern age. However, in the 20th century, with the problematisation of tonality as a natural musical system, the intersection between music and rhetoric became part of a broader discussion on the analogies between music and language and music's modes of signification (Fubini 1973). Within this discussion, formalists such as Hanslick, Schoenberg, and Kivy argued that music has meaning in its form, while contentists such as Cooke (1959) and Chailley (1963) argued that music can also have extramusical content, such as representational content, the expression of the composer's emotional world, and the effects of certain musical *topoi* on emotions, even in the case of past composers, such as J.S. Bach. A particular point of view in this debate was offered by Giovanni Piana (1991), who showed the problematic nature of naturalistic or rationalistic dogmatic positions, as well as of relativistic-cultural ones, and emphasised how meaning emerges in the encounter between the "power of habit", as a historical-temporal dimension of experience, and the "power of the structure" of the sound material, which outlines the conditions and directions of possible meanings. Such an idea opens up an important direction for future research: rhetoric could retain its *heuristic* function not in the classification of the *topoi*-emotions correspondence, nor the definition of text-music relationships, but in rethinking the phenomenon of rhythm and sound through rhetorical concepts. This approach would trace the path of possible meanings that arise from the interaction between both the subjective and objective correlates.

LANGUAGE

A lively debate has emerged about aesthetics and rhetoric in relation to the domain of language, literature, and historical theory.

Literature. Starting from an objectivist interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology, Ingarden (1960) pointed out that the literary work is an intentional object composed of several layers that form a polyphony of meanings. On the sonic-linguistic level, Ingarden used some poetic, rhetorical and musical concepts (such as rhythm, sound, polyphony, and declamation) as metaphors, extending these rhetorical-musical notions into other areas of artistic expression. Within the framework of Russian formalism, on the other hand, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) emphasised the dialogical nature of language, framing literary works as polyphonic constructions composed of multiple interacting voices.

Formalism and structuralism later informed the French *Nouvelle Critique*, which focused primarily on the rhetorical aspect of *elocutio*, related to the use of figures of speech, as seen in the works of Claude Bremond, Groupe µ, and Gérard Genette. According to Roland Barthes (1964), rhetoric makes it possible to deal with the confused, the informal, the ideological, and the non-thematic sphere.

Outside France, the debate between aesthetics and rhetoric has also gained new prominence in the literary field. Focusing on authors such as Eliot and Pound, "New Critics" such as Tate, Brooks, Empson,

and Richards reanimated the classical debate on plain versus ornate style, exploring the tension between intellect and the senses (see Barilli 2011).

History. In post-modern historical theory, the *heuristic* function of rhetoric is emphasised by Hayden White (1973), who pointed out that histories can be conceived as rhetorical discourses. and analysed the works of some historians and philosophers, identifying rhetorical strategies based on tropes. The renewed theoretical and aesthetic interest in rhetoric has also led some thinkers to retrace its history, as in the works of French (Fumaroli, Michel, Meyer) and Italian (Mattioli, Bagni, Bollino) scholars.

Rhetorical concepts. The current debate on aesthetics and rhetoric also concerns specific rhetorical aspects (often examined in relation to their possible cognitive functions), such as metaphor (Ricoeur, Blumenberg, Lakoff and Johnson, see the ILAe entry "Metaphor"), analogy (Valéry, Hoffstadter), and memory (Proust, Valéry, see Salvestrini and Mariani-Zini 2024).

Given the fragmentation of rhetoric, when its singular aspects are isolated and the cognitive power of rhetoric as a whole is attenuated (e.g. Groupe μ and Ricoeur), or the ongoing naturalisation and biologisation of its concepts (e.g. Freedberg, Lakoff and Johnson, Hoffstadter), it is worth emphasising, in conclusion, how current research can engage with a *critical* idea of rhetoric. According to what has been variously outlined by several scholars (e.g. Perelman 1958, Raimondi 2002, Franzini 2007, Barilli 2011), a critical rhetoric thus emerges when all its parts contribute to expressing a possible and open meaning of things. It is a rhetoric that eschews dogmatism and circumscribes a dialogical sphere of reason, attentive to the sensible and to circumstances, without renouncing a possible intersubjective foundation. This critical rhetoric encompasses historical research across all epochs, as well as theoretical enquiries into the most varied domains – not only language, but also images, sounds, and rhythms.

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