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Fritz Jahr's bioethical concept and its influence in Latin America: an approach from aesthetics¹

ABSTRACT

Fritz Jahr, creator of the concept of bioethics, would have been happy to go to the cinema to see the film *Avatar*. He would have enthusiastically donned the darkened 3D glasses and enjoyed this movie that he had, in a way, already had a glimpse of over seventy years ago. Because when in 1927 he published his article "Bio-Ethik: Eine Umschau über die ethischen Beziehungen des Menschen zu Tier und Pflanze" ("Bioethics: A Review of the Ethical relationships of Humans to Animals and Plants") he was ahead of his time and he bequeathed us with what is rightly called *a vision*. This article is written as an acknowledgement of his work and dedicated to his memory.

The influence of the European philosophical and aesthetic thinking has been very important on Latin America and especially on our River Plate basin. The European approach, more than any, could be deeply verified in the fields of psychology, psychiatry and related medical humanities. In particular, French and German authors such as Wilhelm Wundt, Theodor Fechner, Rudolf Eisler, Friedrich Ernst, Daniel Schleiermacher, Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner among others, have had strong influence on Jahr's work.

The discovery of Jahr's work by Hans Martin Sass and its initial Spanish disclosure by Fernando Lolas Stepke has become a truly epistemological event. Fritz Jahr's

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Zeitgeist, which contains the philosophical and theological background, and also the esthetic and scientific spirit of his time, has become crucial to the bioethical concept it coins. Looking back, this idea is, nowadays a *supplement* to the medical and biological context which saw the rebirth of Bioethics in the 70s, by Helleger and Potter.

The discovery of the Fritz Jahr's text and its very detailed analysis by Sass, is essential to our perspective in that it establishes a connection between the concept of bioethics and traditional European philosophy which dominated in the period between the two world wars. Three interesting points which were raised in Jahr's text are: (1) The precursory analysis of ethical premises for experimentation with animals. (2) Raising the issues of an ecological agenda in the field of bioethics— issues which also integrate contemporary priorities, (3) the birth of bioethics linked to the great transformations of the first quarter of the 20th century.

With regards to the latter, certain events contemporary to the publication in 1927 of Fritz Jahr's pioneer article should be pointed out. Some of them include the advance made in science and technology: the enunciation of the principle of uncertainty and the birth of quantum physics - Bohr, Heisemberg, 1927-; the first long distance television transmission (1925) and the premiere of the first sound movie (1927). Furthermore, the European political context, with the consolidation of fascism, was an important influence of this life and work (Sass, 2011). Finally, the contemporaneity of Jahr's article and two crucial texts written by Sigmund Freud: "Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety" (1925) and most especially "The Future of Illusion" (1927) that became an important reference for concerns regarding ethics in relation to scientific-technological development.

***Pathos* and bioethics: the *Parsifal*, by Richard Wagner and beyond**

It's interesting that both references to Wagner in Jahr's work come from the opera *Parsifal*. Its first act represents the touching scene of a white swan being killed by a boy who would then become Parsifal to redeem man from its original sin.

Let us remember the scene: Gurnemanz is saying his prayers and suddenly something terrible happens. Someone has killed a beautiful white swan. It was killed by an arrow in full flight. They bring the culprit who was barely a boy and they asked him why he had done that. He simply said that he shot his bow and arrow at anything that flew... Gurnemanz speaks in defense of the swan and begs the boy "Do you see the look!"

*An unheard-of act!
Could you murder, here, in the holy forest,
Whose quiet peace embraced you?
Did not the beasts of the thicket approach you tamely?
With greetings both friendly and true?
What sang the birds from the branches to you?
How did the good swan harm you?
Seeking his mate, he flew aloft,
To circle with her above the lake,
Which thus he made a consecrated bath.
Did you not wonder at it?
Were you tempted only to a wild and childish shot?
It was our friend: what is it to you?
Come! Look! Here you struck it,
The blood still thickens,
Dully hang its wings,
Its snowy plumage darkly stained,
Dimmed its eye - do you see the look?*

Parsifal has listened to Gurnemanz with growing emotion: now he snaps his bow and hurls the arrow from him.

*Are you conscious of your sinful deed?
Speak, boy! Do you realize your great guilt?
How could you do it?*

This particular passage and the opera's denouement have surely had a strong influence in Jahr when he had to draw up his recommendations about the treatment that animals should receive, especially when they are objects of scientific investigations. (Lolas Stepke, 2008). The swan's lifeless look questions not only the terms of our relationship with animals, but also what we can perceive of our human condition through them.

This is the issue: If we have a compassionate heart towards animals, then we will not withhold our compassion and help towards suffering humans. If someone's love is great enough to go beyond the borders of human-only and sees the sanctity even in the most miserable creature, he or she will find this sanctity as well in the most poor and lowest fellow human, will hold it high and will not reduce it to class of society, interest group, one party or what else may be considered. On the other

hand, senseless cruelty towards animals is an indication of an unrefined character becoming dangerous towards the human environment as well.

Fritz Jahr, *Tierschutz und Ethik in ihren Beziehungen zueinander. Ethik. Sexual- und Gesellschaftsethik. Organ des ‚Ethikbundes‘* 1928, 4(6/7): 100-102 (translated by Sass, 2010)

We could hold that esthetic inspiration -such as the argument of an opera- promoted in Jahr the opportunity to think through the relationship between humans and the rest of the species which inhabited the earth. This example is just useful to show the cultural sources heritage in the foundation of bioethics concept. At the same time, it shows Jahr as pioneer in the use of audiovisual resources in the art of teaching bioethics, which is nowadays a well-known tendency.²

Logos, ethos, pathos

Music, paintings, literature and cinema offer an extraordinary scenario for bioethical exercises in thought (Cattorini, 2006; Muzur & Rincic, 2010). The articulation of language with ideas and passions had already been studied in classical Greece (Lain Entralgo, 1958).

For Plato, and especially for Aristotle, the strategy of transmitting knowledge originated from the power of rhetoric. Rhetoric, in this case, should not be confused with mere oratory, and it has three dimensions:

- Ethos: This concept refers to the establishment of trust between teacher and audience. (According to Aristotle, ethos does not belong to the speaker, but to the audience).
- Pathos: This concept refers to the use of emotional appeals to alter the audience's judgment. This can be done through metaphor, amplification, storytelling, or presenting the topic in a way that evokes strong emotions in the audience.
- Logos: The use of reasoning, either inductive or deductive, to construct an argument.

Through cinematic resources, the idea and its argumentative development (logos) is strengthened by evoking passions and sentiments (pathos) using music, images,

² For a more detailed analysis of this articulation between Puccini's *Turandot* and Amenabar's film, see Michel Fariña, J. "La opera y el final de la vida a través del cine: una perspectiva ética" [Opera and End of Life through Movies: an Ethical approach], CeFI CD ROM, Defensoría del Pueblo de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 2008. See also the analysis of the film "The life of David Gale" by Michel Fariña, J. & Lima, N. (2009) *Entre zoe y bios: El derecho a desear la propia muerte* [unpublished manuscript].

movement, and poetry through the framework of a process of genuine transmission from teacher to audience (ethos).

The power of images and the existential experience of the spectator have, therefore, a strength that goes beyond the verbal experience. This is especially made clear when ethical issues in health practices are linked with violent and controversial situations in the area of bioethics and Human Rights (Solbakk, 2006).

European and Latin American contributions to the articulation of (bio)ethics and movies

Since its origins, the world of cinema has promoted awareness of ethical problems. Hence all the great thinkers of the 20th century like Jorge Luis Borges, Alain Badiou, Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, Alejandro Ariel, Giorgio Agamben, Italo Calvino, Ignacio Lewkowicz, Slavoj Zizek, among others, have been concerned with its power of thought.

With the expansion of the film industry, ethical issues have reached wider audiences, promoting interesting discussions inside and outside the academic world. Furthermore, with the creation of digital technology, many people are participating in a renewed wave of cinematographic passion. The ability to film and project in high quality at low cost, along with the ability to access wide size screens and sophisticated audio systems are all factors that have extended the cinematic experience far beyond the constraints of commercial theatres. The excellence and affordability of technology allows access to different kinds of sources, thus expanding creativity and including a wider audience.

Meanwhile, studies on explicit ethical subjects related to Science and Technology have increased, as has attention to Bioethics and Human Rights problems. Finally, the ethical issues raised in films have exceeded the merely academic realm and has become an important tool for social change.

Ethical problems appear in cinema productions in at least two ways. On the one hand, films explicitly present contemporary ethical dilemmas. On the other hand, audiences and critics often find in film the opportunity to discuss moral or ethical issues that the director did not intend to present, often surprising the director himself. In both cases, the result is an extraordinary experience of thought and real or potential action.

Alain Badiou, the most important living French philosopher, gave a series of conferences on "Thinking the cinema" (Bbadiou, 2004), in which he develops an interest-

ing hypothesis: cinema differs from the rest of the arts in that, unlike painting or sculpture, it is not contemplative; within the experience of viewing a film, the spectator participates in the act of creation itself. Cinema is not, therefore, a mere "illustration" of ethical subjects, but a matrix in which the actual ethical/aesthetical action takes place.

In the same line of thought, Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian academic, has dedicated a great part of his vast work to articulating films with the theoretical categories extracted from psychoanalysis, ideology and politics. In his most recent works – "The Ticklish Subject" (2004), "The Political Suspension of the Ethical" (2005) and "How to read Lacan" (2007) – this tendency to explore these subjects is sustained, accompanied by a more sophisticated methodology, all in all presenting an original model for the study of complex ethical cases.

This line of academic work is not only characteristic of the Northern Hemisphere, however. The well known Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges wrote a whole series of articles based on the study of films, some of which, like "Dr. Jeckyl and Mr. Hyde, transformed" have become canonical texts for those seeking to approach ethical problems through artistic production.

The stimulus of European philosophical and psychoanalytical thought has led many Latin American authors to once again take up these lines of thought, thus generating a permanent production of reading material on ethical matters as presented through cinema.

A bioethical thesis on *Avatar*

Let us introduce a short example, taken from the well known film *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009). How to read this movie under a bioethical view? We are going to propose a short thesis that surprises the spectators, especially those who went to the cinema to see a film about marines and interplanetary battles. We shall not reveal the turn of events but shall suggest some of its coordinates.

It has to do with complexity and about what is still *unthinkable*. Grace, the scientist played by Sigourney Weaver, openly recognizes her ignorance on the Pandora's world: *Alright, look...I don't have answers yet, I'm just now starting to even frame the questions.* Why does nature defend itself? *What we think we know is that there's some kind of electrochemical communication between the roots of the trees. Like the synapses between neurons. Each tree has ten to the fourth connections to the trees around it, and there are ten to the twelfth trees on Pandora. That's more connections than the human brain...*

New meaning is then given to Neytiri's soft, caring manner with which she teaches Jack Sully how to take care of plants and animals, even on how to kill them when this becomes an inevitable necessity. Let us remember again Fritz Jahr's words: *If our heart is sensitive towards animals and plants, we will not deny compassion and care to human beings who suffer*. He glimpsed at ethics that knotted our acts to the cosmic destiny of mankind. He wanted to give a non-metaphysical character to his intuition and leaned on the science of the time, which was still insufficient to render an explanation for such complexity. A century later and we are still in diapers, although we have profited from this ignorance. We know that we do not know, and this new narcissistic wound transforms itself, we hope, into an engine of thought. At least this seems to be happening if we see the more serious ecological initiatives and the surprising work being done with animals –zootherapy for example- or the more recent findings on the complexity of dolphin brains.

On the other side of sensitivity, Selfridge, the politician who is in charge of the interplanetary mission of *Avatar*, pragmatically says "*they are only trees*". In this manner devastation is justified, reminding us of Adorno's words, when he suggested that Auschwitz started when somebody, standing in front of a slaughter house, says "they are only animals".

Euthanasia, assisted suicide and film

In the classical definitions for euthanasia, either by commission or omission, euthanasia means the medical decision to cause the death of a person with the aim of putting an end to suffering. Active euthanasia is when death is caused by means of an act such as the administration of a lethal injection; passive euthanasia on the other hand, is when death occurs by the non-administration of the essential care such as food, water, etc. These methods must be differentiated from palliative/terminal sedation which consists of providing sedatives to make terminal patients in agony fall into a deep sleep while they await death. Until here, the definition works.

But what happens when the person undergoes unbearable pain, one which is not truly life threatening? In this case medical intervention is not authorized and the decision lies solely in hands of the patient. But once again, what happens when, due to their illness, the person is not in condition to take the initiative to put an end to their suffering?

A last example is the film *Mar Adentro* (*The Sea Inside*, Alejandro Amenábar, 2008), which seems to be predictable in that it explicitly opens the debate on euthanasia. Based on the true story of Ramón Sampedro, a quadriplegic who asks that his long

suffering be put to an end, spectators are put in the position of having to take sides either *for* or *against* the patient's right to "die with dignity". However, when the ethical-sanitary debate seems to be exhausted, Amenabar introduces a scene that will change the normal run of events.² The character is lying in bed and "Nessun Dorma", an aria from the final act of Puccini's opera *Turandot* is heard, the beauty and pathos transports Ramón Sanpedro away from his irreparable disability. And although the story continues along the path of morality over life and death, from that moment onwards nothing will ever be the same for Ramon. And it is this new perspective we wish to point out. During his flight through *Nessun Dorma* (*None shall sleep*), for an instant, the subject escapes from his disability and he accesses a new knowledge, a new understanding, about himself.

Discussion

Two important conclusions could be deduced from Jahr's references (1927 and 1928) of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*. The first one is that philosophy, mythology and art have been key issues in the birth of bioethics concept, working us a *supplement* of the medical and biological reappearance of the concept in 70s. Second, that ethical deliberation could find in esthetic - especially in films as massive art by excellence - a *via reggia* to accede to the complexity of our actual bioethics dilemmas.

The use of cinema and other audiovisual resources is of great important because it puts into play the Greek notion of *pathos*, that is, the category that Aristotle considered, along with *reason* (*logos*) and *ethos*, to be essential for the development of a genuine connection in communication. The fragments used to teach Bioethics and Human Rights are paradigmatic of this process, because they put into practice the tragic dimension of each ethical decision. Frequently doctors and psychologist, especially when they work in situations of extreme violence and social bereavement, are confronted with conflictive situations in which there are often no "good" choices. The dramatization of such situations – similar to a Modern Greek play – confronts them with the anguish facing a vital experience which promotes a cathartic process and generates new understanding in the educator.

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