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dissociating functions of the sign: what to do with description in art criticism

● Every description of a work of art, every good ekphrasis, tries to fill the mysterious gap between words and images. The most important part of our work as critics is the belief that a transmission or transposition from one sign system to the other is possible. Language tries to approximate the "condition" of the picture in many ticklish ways. And yet we remain in a prison house of language: when we verbally describe a picture, language always pictures itself. According to Donald Kuspit concepts of art criticism are "transmuted passions". Pictures are mute and our task is to transmute them into verbal passions. When we describe a work of art, an object, we have to trust in our capacity to create such metaphors which have a potential into two directions: first they have to show the way out of language and second, they have to embrace some way a semantics of the picture.

Every description illustrates its own mode of being in language. That is why Boris Bernstein has said: "descriptions of works of art create their own subject matter". By this he probably means that as a medium language is not a transparent illustrator. Therefore the subject matter created by the description of a work always says something else than what the subject matter of the work of art does. The same goes for description of forms. Every act of criticism exercises its narrative according to sets and limits of its own genre. Thus there is a possibility that we describe totally different pictures almost in a same way. Dominant patterns of descriptive language take the lead, and the chosen jargon depicts itself.

Every critical act tries to get along with a semantic heterotopy of the visual image by translating it into a verbal interpretation. Therefore when we speak about forms of a picture we have to rely on the theory of the forms - of any kind. It comes only after that we can write about it.

The best way out of the vicious circle of the rhetoric of style and language is the use of conventional concepts which seem to have a capacity to refer outside of the critic's style of describing. The best criticism can illustrate is its own language and the history of the conception of art.

The task of art criticism seems to be the mediation of pictorial conceptions to the public. What really happens is that we mediate some conceptions which have

already been born in language. This means that language mediates these conceptions through us. But it is characteristic of any verbal commentary that it has to find the way out to the other sign systems.

What art criticism cannot but articulate - and also communicate - is different conceptions of art, of any kind. Let's say that these conceptions do not live in the work of art itself but only in our minds and in theory books. And surely we can be certain that in one work of art only some of these conceptions we have internalized can become actual. There is no work of art in which all our conceptions we have learnt to know can be co-present at the same time - in one picture plane. But what does this "at the same time" actually mean? It means that usually a work of art is a plane or object for our cultivated projections of meaning. In that sense it is not surprising what Oscar Wilde has said about art criticism: "...criticism demands infinitely more cultivation than creation does."

Especially the dispute about postmodernism has left for critics an urge to throw all new concepts of the so called critical studies against the work of art. There is a wide range of different kinds of conceptual tools: some of them function only as a machine to affirm the work of art and classify it promotionally, some have capacity to make implications which satisfies our desire of argumentation on the level of Weltanschauung.

When describing a work of art the most interesting part of the process is always fictional - and it happens by means of those metaphors which have an urge to find a way to larger contexts. Many of general conceptions of art are so universal that they cannot help depicting a particular work of art. On the contrary, a work of art turns out to be a valuable symptom for some widely used concepts or conceptions. Such as "master narratives", "discursive practices", "multiculturality", "post-colonial art", "a pictorial turn" or "art after the end of art".

What we need is a balance between the conceptual tools and the syntactic system of the work of art. Galvano della Volpe has drawn attention to the idea of "semantic organicity" or organic "semantic modules" in verbal expressions. It means that a text has to take into account the translatability some metaphoric utterances as forms in different sign systems. This leads to mea-

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sure “the semantic criterion of organic contextuality”. More specifically this means that description has to be semantically organic in respect to the work which could be “illustrated” by concepts. So it has to shape the equivalency at least in metaphorical level. The problem is the relationship between the density of the visual signs of the work of art and the shortness of the description.

It is true that Modernism bracketed the referent of the work of art. But in fact so did post structuralism during the high moments of postmodernism. While postmodern art criticism wanted to uncover some of the main mystifications of modernism (e. g. the autonomy of the sign), French Post structuralism tried to insert the discourse of modernism into the critical discussion of the postmodern culture and society. This has created a clear discrepancy: there where two currents crossing each other at the same time - in different places. This confusion or let's say fusion, has had some implications: Poststructuralist cultural criticism wanted to oppose totalizing structures and centrism - and ended with totalizing its own talk about “the infinite play of signification”.

In fact the philosophical Postmodernism didn't entail any increase of critical terms, quite the contrary: it created the oligarchy of certain dominant critical terms of some central thinkers (Lacan, Heidegger et. al.).

First, misreading of art became possible or even desirable. In the second phase misreading became almost a rule and meant only certain routes of reading a picture. And finally it meant that everything was to be seen according to certain ideas of Heidegger or Lacan (as in the previous book of Kaja Silverman called *World spectator*).

My point is that it has been a great misfortune for postmodern thinking that critical language has “developed” only there where certain established ready made approaches have taken a command. What we have now in hand is only well tuned and widely accepted radical ways to talk. What has been left outside of the intellectual fabrication is the employment of the means of description of the work of art: how to change, dear I say develop, the doxa of description (or ekhprasis) of our ever changing target: art.

The main problem lies here: when describing the work of art we need an open

area of concepts. This requires, of course, an inter-disciplinary attitude (we cannot help referring to everyday situations on the level of tropes): we need all the plenitude of concepts, especially those which are not reducible to one of those widely accepted theories. This is the only way to do justice to the ideal heterotopy of the work of art. The approach we need then is better to be eclectic: the best way making criticism is evidently conceptual and metaphorical heterotopy. The great chain of being demands the great chain of concepts.

And every overinterpretation is only a humble proposal according to wishes of a critic's overestimated cultural ego. Sometimes one doesn't have to wonder why Oscar Wilde considered criticism the only worthy form of autobiography.

Indeed some tropes (as metaphors and metonymes) have a power to make bridges between sign systems. In that sense also some critical terms or concepts have a metaphorical potential. All resemblances between descriptive words and visual images meet in our Symbolic screen. We can speak about the symbolic reduplication - as Slavoj Žižek does: It means “The minimal gap between a “real” feature and its symbolic counterpart.

In practice a description is about choosing the right, the most fitting words. We have a sense that we need different things in different situations. The best thing a de-automatization of the object depicted. We have to estrange the visual information of the picture when describing the art work at least for the reason that we have to use different sign system - any way. In this sense every description of a work of art always contains a potential for double coding - and if we are aware of these prospects and if we use it consciously as a strategy for estrangement, we can offer a parallel aesthetic contribution the relationship between critical text and a work of art.

Every decade has its own chliesses. The first thing is to exclude some redundant expressions. For example I have never used following words in my critics: “majestic”, “monumental gravity and grandeur”, “personality”, “culturally constructed”, “The closeness of nature in Finnish Art”, “cartesian cogito”, master narratives“. I have also wanted to avoid words which we can find in Gustave Flaubert's naughty little book *The Dictionary of Accepted Ideas (Le Dictionnaire des idées reçues)*. Instead of

fixed slogans we have to demand for ourselves severe multiplicity in art-descriptions.

If we think that in the artistic communication the plural aspect prevails, we have to describe these aspects in plural. This means that we have to give room for eclectic concepts with which to approach the work just to make proposals. We have to make these proposals parallel to the work described. As Oscar Wilde has stated: criticism is “a creation within a creation.” (*Critic as artist.*)

What we really need is certain kind of overinterpretation, the excess of interpretation that could grasp the particularity of the art work we are trying to interpret. This can be hysteric or paranoid but not reductive. We need sensitivity in describing the work, not the rude and uninterdependent attitude towards largely accepted, trendy and in this sense a bit non-communicative concepts.

Jonathan Culler has reminded us that overinterpretation might be like overeating: “they go on eating or interpreting in excess, with bad results.” Probably this leads, not to understanding but - as Culler says - “overstanding” of the work. But we need extreme interpretation and extreme descriptive tools for the art which tries not to communicate or which tries to make the reading and articulation of the work of art difficult. This is where criticism has only to follow the path of abnormal communication.

This doesn't imply that we have to find out the original intentions of the artists and in this sense to take into account the maxim ironically pronounced by Denis Donoghue: “they keep going till they reach the artist”. Rather we really have to win the art work on your side by describing it in a way its context wants to imply. This doesn't have to mean a peaceful co-existence between descriptive words and images. We have to admit the basic discrepancy between the two sign systems. Rather it means the urge to find impure and hybrid or compound genres of writing. The only thing we can really trust is the instability of language, the continuous feeling of uncertainty. This kind of feeling might give us the strength to use this instability in the service of description in art criticism. ●