

EMPATHY AS AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The relation between the spectator and the work of art is arguably the most basic notion of an aesthetic experience. It is in this relation that the eternal questions about the work of art's meaningful communication to the spectator are found. One of the most significant aspects of an aesthetic experience which is needed to be investigated in order to seek to answer this question is the possibility of empathy understood as the intuitive and emotional coincidence between the two sides of the relation, namely the spectator and the work of art. What does empathy imply? What do we mean that the spectator entered an empathic relation with the work of art? In other words, if empathy as defined above is to be possible between a person and a work of art, then what are the conditions for this possibility? Empathy between a person and an object seems hard to be conceived if we do not postulate the presence of a third element in the aesthetic experience, namely another person. In fact, empathy would seem to be possible only between two persons where the second person is the artist and where the work functions as a medium. If this is the case, then further questions arise. For example, one of these questions is that, if empathy is constituted between the spectator and the work of art and if empathy is possible only between two persons, then firstly, how is the meaning that the artist gives to the work retained by the latter and secondly, how is it then disclosed to the spectator?

One simple answer to the above question is that the artist gives meaning to the work of art by giving matter form. Clearly such an answer is unsatisfactory because what is crucial for grasping the transfer of meaning from artist to spectator via the work of art is the immaterial transferral which is what defines empathy in the first place. It is this precise characteristic of the aesthetic experience which needs to be investigated. More specifically, it is the moment when the spectator truly feels the meaning through an intuitive act which is defined not by rationality and conceptualisation but by an irrational and emotional feeling that encapsulates the ideal aesthetic experience that is in need of investigation.

Of course a work of art can be understood and appreciated without the need of the empathic moment, for example through a more deductive approach as in adding up information to get the picture e.g. the context, the biography of artist, the historical moment, the logic behind the work. But it is through the intuitive act of empathy that the individuality of the spectator and of the artist meet at the same point, becoming a unity, losing their roles and their dialectical opposition. It is an event that occurs suddenly and lasts briefly, a sort of illumination which gives us insight into the work without explanation, where we lose our role of spectator by living inside the work, reaching a sort of wholeness between us, the work of art and the artist. It is that feeling of fullness that follows the empathic event in the aesthetic experience which accompanies us when returning into the daily life, that woollen feeling which gives us the confirmation of the intensity just lived that is central to the aesthetic experience.

We then see that a basic and general question such as the relation between the spectator and the work of art immerses us in the more specific and metaphysical question of how is it possible to transfer meaning from the artist to the work of art, retain this meaning and consequently disclose it to the spectator, a relation which is ideally characterised by empathy as defined above. Furthermore, an investigation of these questions can then be taken outside the strict field of aesthetics and applied to the everyday relation between the individual and any object of experience. Clearly then, the attempt to answer the question of empathy becomes the prerequisite for the success of any work of art which aims at truly imparting a message to the spectator.

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