

THE ROLE OF IMAGINARY IN THE TRANSITION FROM MODERNISM TO POSTMODERNISM

ROLUL IMAGINARULUI ÎN TRANZIȚIA DE LA MODERNISM LA POSTMODERNISM

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Abstract. *The transition from modernism to postmodernism represents a long and complex process that characterizes contemporary western culture, especially art and aesthetics. With in such a complex process that involved important changes in attitudes towards multiculturalism and questioning of some basic concepts like “reality” and “identity”, imagination plays an important part. The present paper intends to emphasize the way in which artistic imaginary is involved in the transition from modern to postmodern paradigm in art and aesthetics.*

Key words: aesthetics, artistic imaginary, knowledge society, postmodernism.

Rezumat. *Tranziția de la modernism la postmodernism reprezintă un lung și complex proces ce caracterizează cultura occidentală, în special arta și estetica. În cadrul unui asemenea proces ce a presupus importante schimbări de atitudine față de multiculturalism, antrenând totodată punerea în discuție au nor concepte fundamentale, cum ar fi cel de „realitate” sau cel de „identitate”, imaginația joacă un rol important. Lucrarea de față își propune să evidențieze modul în care imaginarul artistic este implicat în tranziția de la paradigma modernă la cea postmodernă.*

Cuvinte cheie: estetică, imaginar artistic, societatea cunoașterii, postmodernism.

INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims to emphasize the role of imaginary in the transition from modernism to postmodernism. In order to do that, we are going to use the concept of descriptive imaginary. Initially, we introduced this concept in association with philosophy of science problems. In that context, the concept of descriptive imaginary referred to the use of imaginative faculty within the limits of rationality in scientific discourse. This way, the concept could be used for investigating the dynamics of scientific representations responsible for the major changing moments in the history of natural sciences. However, giving the fact that the applicability area of descriptive imaginary is much wider, this time we are going to develop its links to aesthetics.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

First of all, we have to justify the necessity of using this concept which relates human imagination to rationality. Traditionally, the two areas have been opposed for a long time, at least in Western culture (Védrine Hélène, 1990). Starting from Plato,

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imagination was regarded as having a difficult relation with scientific knowledge. Such reluctances prolonged through whole Ancient and Medieval history of Western culture (Bodinier J.L., Breteau J., 2000). In times of Reform also, any imaginative excess has been regarded as dangerous for any religious or scientific attempt of establishing a knowledge base about the world (Culianu I.P., 1994). However, the birth of modern natural sciences could not have been possible without an imaginative effort of describing the laws on nature in a rational manner, which implied also the effort of conceptualizing natural phenomena. Hence, the use of imaginative faculty takes place within the limits of rationality, in the descriptive effort of depicting the structure of natural causes that determine natural phenomena. Moreover, as part of the effort of establishing the ontology about the "real" world, human imagination plays an important role in the endeavor of producing the "image of the real world" that we use to call "reality". But imagination also plays an important part in art. Of course, artistic imagination has a weaker relation with human rationality than scientific imagination (Barbour Ian G., 1990). Still, that relation exists and we believe one can trace a connection line between the two. That is why we consider descriptive imaginary could be used as a tool concept for investigating the relation of artistic imagination with rationality throughout the recent history of art, namely modern and postmodern times.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To better understand the specificity of using the artistic imagination in modern art, one has to uncover the philosophical roots of modernity. In this respect, Friedrich Nietzsche was maybe the first one to observe the profound changes that took place in Western culture at the end of Enlightenment period. The most visible one regards the attitude towards religion. At the basis of such an attitude lay the positive attitude towards human reason and its capacity of providing a trustful basis for developing science. In fact, the late Renaissance witnessed a reorientation of Western culture from theological problems, dominant in the Middle Age, to more pragmatic problems that favored the maturation of different scientific disciplines, including the humanistic ones.

Human Being became an obsessive investigation subject for Renaissance writers, scientists and artists, while human reason became the distinctive attribute of mankind (Russ Jacqueline, 2002). We could say that in Renaissance took place a veritable „Socratic Turn” in cultural areas, similar to the much later „Linguistic Turn” in analytical philosophy or „Social Turn” in philosophy of science. Such a phenomenon has been accompanied by important scientific discoveries and artistic innovations which contributed significantly to the rise of artistic realism. Among them, we could mention the three dimensional perspective in painting, introduced by Brunelleschi, the *sfumatto* technique introduced by Da Vinci or the careful treatment of anatomical details in painting and sculpture mastered by Michelangelo.

Moreover, human body started to be used in an allegorical manner for representing the Universal Creation. Gradually, the old image about Nature has been replaced by a completely different one. Altogether with the rise of the Enlightenment ideas about a more democratic society (Macfarlane A., 2002), the enthusiasm regarding the possibility of reflecting not only about the appearances of natural phenomena, but merely about the hidden causal chain that determined the manifestation of phenomena in the surrounding world was the main aspect that gave humans a special status in comparison with Nature. Thus, Human Being became privileged in comparison with

any other part of nature because human rationality gave it descriptive powers. Basically, knowledge was seen as being certain, objective and good (Grenz S., 1996). People like Galileo, Newton and many others demonstrated the power of human descriptive faculties by developing natural sciences, while Comte and his followers developed social sciences starting from the same conviction. Gradually, for modern scientists rationalism and empiricism became the basic ingredients of modern science and starting from here the modern paradigm was conceived as a unitary one.

This character of the modern paradigm remained fundamental as regards the artistic component of modernism. Therefore, in modernity the artistic descriptive imaginary has a strong relation with rationality. It helps choosing the forms, volumes, lines and colors suitable to individualize a specific artistic expression compatible with modern artistic values. Modern artistic paradigm is a unitary one, being usually perceived as a rationalistic project that gave birth to a special type of cultural anthropology. This anthropology was a Eurocentric one, initializing a hierarchy of cultures, imposing the western analytical manner of understanding reality to other cultures (Grenz S., 1996). There are no alternative or multiple modernistic realities. There is only *one* modern reality for any artist that intends to express himself within that paradigm. Modernism was characterized by a commonly shared enthusiasm regarding the possibilities of science to solve the most important problems of Humanity.

All this enthusiasm started to vanish at the end of the Second World War, as a consequence of the atomic bomb and of the huge casualties determined by modern warfare. Knowledge by itself proved not to be good in all the ways. It became obvious that science and technology alone are not capable of solving the most stringent problems of Humanity. Even worse, science and technology alone can be used to increase dramatically the negative consequences of military conflicts, namely to increase dramatically the number of casualties and to widely spread terror and suffering. Philosophers, artists and specialists in humanistic sciences began to understand that moral neutrality is a dangerous characteristic of science and technology. Science alone cannot solve social problems having cultural causes. Therefore, cultural diversity cannot be ignored any more, especially if one takes into account that technological “superiority” of western culture didn’t generate the long expected social harmony. As a consequence, cultural diversity could not be ignored any more, reality itself becoming plural and diverse in postmodern era. The new anthropology gave up the superiority complex of western culture in favor of a more objective attitude towards other cultures. Their identity became an interesting alternative to the western way of building and understanding reality, no matter what technological level characterizes those cultures.

As a consequence, postmodern paradigm is a decentralized one, cultural diversity being assumed as a form of richness. There is no unique postmodern reality. There are multiple postmodern realities, culturally embedded. Even the concept of “objective real” is questioned in postmodern philosophy and postmodern Art. Correspondently, postmodern Art favors the pluralism of expression, artistic descriptive imaginary playing a much more important role here, because each cultural space, with its own identity, is characterized by its own artistic imaginary that determines the general axiological matrix used in generating a specific reality, or a

specific way of interpreting reality. Connoting the objective reality is the rule of game that makes possible the intercultural postmodern dialog in Art.

In the same time, there are enough features of postmodern paradigm that are inherited from modernism: for example, the use of reason in configuring artistic discourse and the problematic of ideology. But the ideological use of reasoning is carefully analyzed in deconstructivism. On one hand, ideology is rejected and considered dangerous. On the other hand, ideology is unavoidable in the process of culturally structuring the postmodern reality. Social ideologies are important, but in the same time, the deconstructivist vocation of some postmodern philosophers favors the continuous critical use of human reasoning for unveiling the hidden axiological assumptions embedded in any work of art. New forms of aesthetics, like the relational aesthetics, emphasize the fact that artistic imagination is used in a specific way in postmodern paradigm, enhancing new forms of artistic communication (Bourriaud N., 2002). In fact, postmodernism cannot be separated by networking communication that gave birth to information society: the very basis for what is called today knowledge society (Himanen P., 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

1. The role of artistic descriptive imagination is more complex in postmodern paradigm, in comparison with modern paradigm, implying a more refined attitude towards rationality.

2. Postmodern cultural identity is built and could be understood starting from its imaginative component that generates in the same time the ontological framework for the postmodern concept of reality.

3. Artistic descriptive imaginary is intensely used today for connoting postmodern works of art, for making them to catalyze reflection regarding the possibility of creating alternative realities as expressions of postmodern identity.

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