

BEYOND NEO-CLASSICISM AND PRIMITIVISM

MARIO PERNIOLA

NEO-CLASSICISM AND PRIMITIVISM

In the course of the Eighties a series of cultural events and tendencies in figurative art brought the attention of artistic circles, back to neo-classicism and to nineteenth century Academicism. These were: the opening of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, the reevaluation of *art pompier*, a vast itinerant art exhibition, dedicated to William Bouguereau, the anachronistic movement, and that of the French neo-classicists... All these cultural events showed that a century of experiment and avant-garde was not enough to erase from modern taste an interest for the classical. However, the neo-classic sensibility, even if scorned and derided, remained alive in the course of the Twentieth century, in some type of Realism and especially in the *Kitsch*, which constituted an important phenomenon from the sociological and anthropological point of view.

At the same time, however, a series of cultural events and pictorial tendencies occurred on an opposite side, oriented towards a reconsideration of Primitivism, that could be seen as the most specific and distinguishing characteristic of avant-garde painting in the twentieth century. These cultural events were: a vast art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, in 1984, the enormous book produced by William Rubin, the reprinting of the fundamental study by Robert Goldwater *Primitivism in Modern Art* (first published in 1938), the flourishing of *neofauve* tendencies like "the new wild Germans" ... All these cultural events evidenced that the search for an originary essence, simple and primary, constitutes an aspect of great importance in the art of our times.

Neo-classicism and Primitivism have, historically, been two opposite trends. The first was inspired by an ideal of solemn

beauty and was based on the imitation of canons, endowed with metaphysical validity. The second instead, was inspired by the need of forms expressing vital, elementary energies, simple and profound forces, that would be common to all men. Both trends have nurtured a metaphysical pretense and have imposed themselves through a cultural strategy, which is harsh and tyrannical, and so cancelling each other out. That which differentiates neo-classicism from renaissance Classicism is exactly this aggressiveness and intolerance. Neo-classicism, in fact does not limit itself in affirming the super historical, idea of beauty, a value to always strive for. Similarly that which differentiates the artistic primitivism from the positive study of primitive art is the pretense to impose the reproduction of their forms as the only artistic activity essentially linked with the most profound experience of life. In fact the artistic Primitivism of the nineteenth Century has been accompanied by a very superficial knowledge of the production of primary cultures and there is reason to believe that it has been more of an obstacle to the development of such knowledge than an aid.

Consequently, the first task facing of us presents a double aspect. On one hand one must show the relative character of Classicism and so to say "anthropologise" the Greek and Latin world. On the other hand, it is necessary to show the ethnocentric and imperialistic character of artistic Primitivism, which imitated with the maximum of arrogance, the artistic patrimony of the entire world, presenting it as European art. In other words, with Neo-classicism we disguised ourselves as Greeks and Romans, ignoring the fact that the ancient world is other than just noble simplicity, quiet grandiosity and harmonic symmetry. With Primitivism, we disguised ourselves as



ESTHER MAHLANGU: *Untitled*. 1991.
Industrial paint on canvas. 127×151.
CAAC. Africa Hoy. CAAM.



EFIIMBELO. *Aloalo. Fiarakodia (Taxi Jungle)*. 1989/90.
Wood painted. 200×12×29 cm.
CAAC. Africa Today. CAAM.

primitives, ignoring the fact that primary cultures are not at all characterised by simplicity, inwardness or by emotional hyper-excitement. Neo-classicism and Primitivism are artificial and deceiving constructions. They are obstacles not only to the positive study of the classical world and of primary cultures, but especially to the understanding of that which ties us to the classical world and of that which separates us from it, of what ties us to primary cultures and separates us from them.

THE NEO-ANTIQUE

The coming back of neo-classicism and of Primitivism hides a more important and essential fact; this is the birth of a new sensibility for the ancient world and Extra-European cultures, which we may baptise as Neo-antique sensibility. This new sensibility, does not regard only threats, but relates to culture in its more comprehensive meaning; it values the Ancients and the Extra-European populations for reasons, which are profoundly different from those that were the base of Neo-classicism and Primitivism. In fact, this new sensibility searches in the Ancients not the basic essential principles of the modern world and of Western civilisation (order and measurement), but the different and the unknown. Inversely, it searches in Extra-European cultures, not the originary and primitive vitality, but the *esprit de finesse* and ritual repetition. This sensibility arose from a series of researches and studies.

The anthropological consideration of the ancient world, that digs its roots in the story of religions of the past century and which has had in the course of the last decades a vigorous development, introduces us to ways of thought and to conceptual horizons completely different from those handed down by Classicism, metaphysics and logic of identity. Under many aspects the Ancients are found to be much stranger than the image that the anthropologists have given of the primitive world. This strangeness is much more disturbing because it emerges from environments that are familiar to us. Regarding Extra-European culture, ethnophilosophy, or better "ethnologic", that is to say the attempt to integrate into philosophical thought conceptual structures of Extra-European peoples, evidenced on one hand, the intellectual finesse of behavior, of languages and of ways of life, and on the other hand, the order and regularity of very complex and articulated rituals. Consequently there is at work a paradoxical inversion. In the Ancients we find that difference that Primitivism searched for in non-Western cultures, and vice versa, outside Europe we find those norms, rules and models that Neo-classicism searched for in the Ancients.

Regarding specifically the arts, the school of Vienna, that at the beginning of this century marked the theoretic elimination of Neo-classicism, greatly contributed to the birth of a new sensibility in regard to antiquity. In more recent times, the work in conceptualization of artistic african behavior, by scholars of various extractions and nationalities has brought a fundamental contribution to the birth of a new sensibility in regards to Extra-European cultures.

NEO-ANTIQUÉ AND THE SCHOOL OF VIENNA

In the School of Vienna in whom Alois Riegl, is the author what we find the basis of a new approach to the art of the ancient world. What strikes us the most in his research is the fact that he minimizes the significance and importance of Classical Greek-Roman art. He does so in favor of, came first, Egyptian art and Archaic Greek art and on the other hand, late Roman art. The first, Egyptian art, would constitute the most radical manifestation of a tactile artistic will, that ignores depth, that is without shadow and that strongly surrounds figures. In this type of representation importance lies in the surface area in its most material dimension. Art is thought of as an addition and a complement of nature: its task is the production of objects that have the same ontological constitution as that of things. In this artistic experience the connection of forms in two-dimensional space plays an important role. This would be specifically the primary function of touch, whose primacy over the other senses, leads to a material and objective conception of reality. The second one, that of late Roman, is instead, according to Riegl, characterized by a visual artistic will. This generates a new type of beauty without vivacity playing with the busy exchange of light and dark, on the alternating of light and shadow, and on the exaltation of spatial and three-dimensional features. Even if this artistic will leads towards the visual isolation of the figure, also within it acts the preoccupation to link these figures. This function is carried out by rhythm, that reestablishes the connection and safeguards the experience of a full world, where nothing is missing.

Classic Greek-Roman art is then, compressed between the Egyptian tactile world and the rhythmical world of late *Romanitas*. It ends up deprived of its autonomous artistic will and it is considered by Riegl, as a compromise, a moment of passage between two experiences otherwise strong and determinant.

From the theory of Alois Riegl spring two important consequences. The first consists of the fact that in the study of antiquity attention was turned from classics to periods which had been undervalued by Neo-classicism and considered to be archaic or barbaric, therefore closer and akin to the so called primitive, or at least to what was supposed to be so. Thus falls the evolutionary conception of history, that is the base not only of Neo-classicism, but also at the base of Primitivism. The second important consequence consists of the high evaluation of ornamental art done by Riegl in 1893 in *Stilfragen*. Now the idea of ornament is the link between European aesthetics and Extra-european cultures. In fact it creates a problem of order that has nothing to do with the classic, nor with the naturalistic; it allows us to reevaluate the minor European art (from metal work to jewelry), where the socio-cultural status of art is similar to that of Extra-european productions. Finally it resolutely breaks with those poetics and aesthetics that are subjective, pretending to extend to all the world an idea of art, that is typically ethnocentric.

NEO-ANTIQUÉ AND ETHNOPHILOSOPHY

Passing from the problems of European art to those of Extra-european art, one cannot avoid expressing a fundamental methodological reserve on the anthropological approach, that claims to consider in an inclusive and unitary manner all the manifestations of the art of Africa, America and Oceania.

If one wishes to really pass over Primitivism and its evolutionist presuppositions, one needs, at least, to consider these three enormous cultural areas in separate ways (working out from within all those distinctions and underdistinctions which seem necessary). With the present state of research it seems to me that from African culture springs the largest number of stimuli and incentives for the elaboration of an aesthetic thought, which emancipates itself from Primitivism and meets the European consideration of Antiquity. The ethnophilosophical studies of Tempels, Griaule, Dieterlen, Maya Deren, Roger Bastide, Alexis Kagame, Marc Augé and many others, give us a picture of African thought which is unique and involves a conception of artistic activity that has nothing to do with subjective Primitivism.

According to Janheinz Jahn, author of an excellent work on modern African civilisation, *Muntu Umriss der neoafrikanischen Kultur*, who is particularly attentive to the relationship between ways of thought and artistic manifestations, African aesthetics can be defined in one concept, that of *kuntu*.

There are two fundamental aspects of *kuntu*, the relative formal arbitrariness of the work, and the rhythm. Regarding the first, in classical Western art there an inseparable connection between the content and the form, Hegel defines classic art as an immediate unity of ideality and materiality, as a harmonic meeting between the spiritual and the natural. On the contrary, in African art this connection is not determined in an unambiguous and definitive way. The same image can have completely different meanings or might not even have any meaning at all. In order to have a meaning it is necessary to give it a name and to have an artistic form, that conforms to it. This process becomes clear immediately, if one keeps in mind what is the cultural model par excellence, of the African experience of the sacred: the *trance*. In a trance a god appears: he possesses the follower who gives hospitality to him in his body, therefore furnishing him with a vessel in flesh and blood. The divinity acquires those somatic characteristics of the single individual for the entire duration of the trance. No essential connection exists between the divinity and the physical aspect of the possessed: nevertheless the fact that it is exactly this god and not another which possesses this individual, is not casual. It is based on a deep affinity between the two. The cultural model of "possession" is valid also for sculpture. The single statue gains significance and value only on condition that is determined by *nommo*, that is to say by the magical power of the word, that links it with this or that divinity of the back pantheon. At the same time, however, the activity of the sculptor reduces the area of indeterminateness sensitizing the name of the statue, and materializing it into an object. As in a trance, also in *kuntu*, the materialization of the divine has a limited duration, beyond which, bodies and statues fall back into a profane condition. The consequence of this experience is a strong accentuation of the tactile aspect over the visual aspect. What counts is not the figure of the body, but its being "cloth", "dress", "skin".

The second aspect of *kuntu* is rhythm. It is an essential part of any type of African art and it is not by chance one of the fundamental conditions in rituals where trance is basic. The model which inspires all the forms of African art is, according to Jahn, the rhythm of percussion instruments. The language of the drum is language in its proper sense. It is the *nommo*, the word of the forefathers. The various parts of an African work of art, says Jahn, are always articulated rhythmically and related one to another. Rhythm springs forth from repetition that has the ultimate function to prove and to gua-

rantee the articulated unity of the cosmos. This unity is not something immobile and static. According to Placido Tempels, the african world is an interaction of powers influencing each other. In Africa beauty without efficacy and power does not exist. That doesn't mean however that african aesthetics is reducible to a conception functionalistic, or worse merely utilitarian. Many objects function only to make the beholder happy. At the origin of this happiness is, however, the feeling of the dynamic connection among the things of the world.

TACTILITY AND RHYTHM

Now we find ourselves with an experience from antiquity that has nothing of the classic, and with an experience from african culture that has nothing of primitive. The most surprising thing is that these two experiences are extraordinarily similar and are based on the same ideas: tactility and rhythm. They are constitutive of a unique sensibility which has been defined as neo-antique. However the affinity between ancient culture and african culture is a well known theme to those who study antiquity as to those who study Africa: from *Dyonisos* by Henry Jeanmarie to *Black Athena* by Martin Bernal, many scholars have emphasized the points of contact of the greek world with the african world. Vice versa, many african culture scholars, starting with Leo Frobenius have made evident the similarities and connections of african culture with the classical world.

The various manifestations of the trance (greek, african, arabic) all lead back to a geographical area, whose epicenter in the Mediterranean, that expanded to countries facing Gulf of Guinea and from there to Brazil and to the west Indies.

From a theoretical point of view, the principal questions regard exactly the ideas of tactility and rhythm. Contrary to Neo-classicism and Primitivism, which emphasized the other senses, in Neo-antique sensibility, touch is the sense that acquires a primary role. The essential is not to isolate an image or a statue from all the rest, dedicating it to aesthetic contemplation or else to vital empathy, but to understand the connections, the ties, the ways how, that it connects to the environment, to the context. At base of the Neo-antique sensibility is the idea that things of the world are in touch with each other and between them emptiness does not exist. Tactility does not exclude the porosity the penetrability of the body. The full, as in the physics of the ancient Stoics, penetrates through the full. What is important in this conception of the world is on one hand the monistic idea of reality, thought of as thought unique, compact and continuous way, and on the other hand the fact that this idea does not exclude welcoming, reception, the mixture of bodies. In fact this monism is not immobile, but is moved by a continuous movement, without cracks or fissures. Rhythm is, as observed by Emile Benveniste, this particular way to flow, a fluid form, a passage through or across, a transit without ups and down, similar to a piece of clothing that one can arrange as one likes.

POST-MODERN, NEO-ETHNIC, NEO-ANTIQUÉ

The Neo-antique sensibility, born from the meeting between the anthropological approach to antiquity and the philosophical consideration of african thought, today has two enemies, more dreadful than Neo-classicism and primitivism. Neo-classicism and Primitivism notwithstanding their revival in the course of the last ten years, are movements which belong to

the past. Different is the case of the Post-modern movement and of the neoethnica movement. Postmodernism under certain aspects (mainly from the architectural point of view) has included Neo-classicism and Neo-ethnic, under certain aspects, has included Primitivism.

Post-modern and Neo-ethnic are opposites.

The first dissolves all identities and promotes the free exercise of their meanings. Neo-ethnic on the contrary, recuperates the cultural identity of the single community and reaffirms it in a much more exclusive and strict way. Nevertheless, paradoxically, they produce the same effect: the levelling of all cultural manifestations. Postmodernism provokes this effect directly, because it considers cultures as interchangeable styles, the choice between them being only a question of practical convenience and of actual success. The Neo-ethnica provokes the same effect, indirectly because by letting prevail as the only cultural criteria, the physical, biological and racial it abolishes completely the possibility of a critical thought. In fact, for him who does not recognize himself in any ethnic identity, all cultures become equal and interchangeable between themselves, but also he who recognises himself as a member of a particular ethnic identity cannot exercise his own critical spirit: he is enjoined to identify himself *tout court* with a factitious identity, leaving completely out of consideration the complexity of his own tradition. There is not just one way to be Hebrew, Palestinian, Kurd, Croation or Serbian, but inside all these cultures there is a fight between an identity and a difference, between one way to be rigid, immobile sclerotic, and another way to be plastic, progressive and sensitive. Post-modernism and neo-ethhnic proceed in opposite ways to a simplification and banalisation of private and communal life. Together they aim to consolidate the climate of spectacular Neo-obscurantism in which we are immersed.

In what way is Neo-antique sensibility an alternative in respect to Postmodernism and to Neo-ethnic? First it does not search for a cultural identity where to hide itself. Inside Western tradition it shows a difference that was present and operating since remote antiquity. It is not true that everything is interchangeable with another; it's not true that "everything goes well", as Postmodernism affirms. Western tradition was the theatre where two opposing conceptual structures faced each other, two completely different ways of life, and two completely different conception of art. The first, of metaphysical character, is founded on the profound divorce between thought and feeling. The second, of historical character, considered thought and feeling in their inseparable connection and manifested itself artistically in the importance assigned to tactility and to rhythm. In addition Neo-antique sensibility does not consider these orientations as exclusive rights of the Western world, but is looking for the positive relationships and verifications in other cultures and civilizations. However differently to what happens in esoterism, one always deals with analogies, that must be empirically proved and which do not justify the existence of universally valid archetypes. For instance, the cultural model of the trance has a very ample geographical expansion, but it is something essentially different from shamanism and cannot be included in the generic category of ecstatic experience.

That which qualifies Neo-antique sensibility is on one hand the capacity of wonder in regard to oneself and to what is close to us, on the other hand the capacity of recognition in regard to the extraneous and the far. The first attitude is opposite to the impression of *déjà vu*, of "I've heard this before", to *blasé* cynicism and disenchantment that accompanies Postmodernism. Recently Julia Kristeva in *Etrangers*

à soi même (Paris 1988) and Paul Ricoeur in *Soi même comme un autre* (Paris 1990) evidenced exactly the alien figure that we have in ourselves and in our traditions. The second attitude, that is the capacity of recognizing in Extra-european cultures elements of our feelings, is opposite not only to the closure that characterizes Neo-ethnic, but also to the apologetic uncritical acceptance of other cultures that often constitutes its other face. For example the fanatic exaltation of the Oriental religions or of Pre-colombian culture, or of Hebraism... on behalf the of who is not oriental, nor indian, nor hebrew... rises from that lack of critical mind which is at the base of someone Neo-ethnic attitude. In these cases the total misconception and preconceived hostility in regard to one's own traditions and ones own knowledge often hides an inability of experiencing and an emotional lack not different to that wich is at the base of Postmodernism.

"GIOCOFORZA", POSSESSION, HOSPITALITY

A theoretical probing of the three tendencies (Post-modern, Neo-ethnic, and Neo-antique) implicates an examination of three fundamental words to which these could be reconducted. In my opinion, these words are respectively "giocoforza", appropriation and hospitality. The italian word "giocoforza", wich does not seem to exist in other languages (to the best of my knowledge), characterizes very well the way to be Post-modern, because it unites the game (*gioco*) and the constraint (*forza*); more than that, it implies an external violence which imposes itself as the only condition of effectuality. When I say that it is "Giocoforza" to behave in a certain way, to make a certain decision, to complete a certain thing, I do not mean that is absolutely necessary to do so, nor that I am not free to do otherwise.

I intend to say that if I wish to remain in the game, I do not have a choice, but I can at any moment leave the game, and become an outsider. Now in the Post-modern point of

view, to be an outsider is the worst situation of all; in this sense one can consider Post-modern as the extension of politics of all aspects of life.

Different is the case of Neo-ethnic. Here the key word is that of possession. Law, the *nómos* of the earth, is the appropriation of territory. The German philosopher Carl Schmitt underlines the union between the greek *nómos* (law), the greek *némein* (which means I distribute, but also I possess) and the german *nehmen* (to take). Now the logic that inspires Neo-ethnic is just exactly that of possession, not only of what is of others, but moreover of what is one's own.

In this sense that it does not respect the extraneous, the difference implicit in one's own traditions, but imposes a factitious identity. The image it promotes has a caricatured rigidity that does not correspond at all, to historical reality. The Neo-ethnic denies the germinating complexity of birth and of *ghénos* and superimposes a grotesque mask that sells itself for the original. It intimidates and threatens one's own countrymen, forcing them to identify with this image.

The idea that links itself with Neo-antique is instead that of hospitality. It is something complex: it is at the same time a giving and a taking. In ancient times next to the words (as in Greek *lambáno*, Latin *praehendo*), where to take means take away and snatch away, leading to an attitude of greed and of avidity, there are others (like the Greek *dékomai* and the Latin *capio*) where to take means to receive, welcome, accept, understand and listen. In these meanings hospitality is not charity, it is not desinterested help and pure compassion. On the contrary it establishes a relation where the guest has obligations and duties no less than the host. The giving of hospitality reveals itself as a giving more than a taking. At the base of such relation is the trust that eventual tensions and disagreements will be overcome to the benefit of both partners. It implies at last that hospitality does not refer to blood, nor to earth, but to culture and to knowledge. As Edmond Jabbe's says: "Incommensurable est l'hospitalité du livre".