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Sex, Art, and Semiosis. A brief note

Abstract:

All signs are grounded in cognitive double perception: a framed and incomplete perception of forms, and an unframed and completed conceptual perception of things. The relation of forms to things is, in a sense, metonymical, since the forms are forms *of things* but can be aesthetically present to us *as such*, as signifiers. Erotic perception is therefore aesthetic and, for the same reason, semiotic.

Perception is completion. We assemble what we perceive, and build space-time scenarios out of fragmentary information, which we integrate; how this works is a huge question that gives rise to a lot of neuro-cognitive research. *Sensory* perception is not *conceptual* perception (apperception), since there is this complex process of completion by projection and integration to go through, before we really ‘experience’ what we see, hear, touch, etc. We share this condition with all conscious animals. But human consciousness has an extra capacity for monitoring and controlling parts of the process; if we stand by the window in the top floor of a high building, then instead of nervously wondering about how to escape in case of fire, we can just slow down the emotional flow driving this completion and admire the scenery. We now frame the view and attend to it as if it were a picture – maybe we will in fact take a photo from there. Likewise, instead of interpreting a sudden sound as an alarm signal, we can frame it, mentally repeat it, maybe whistle it or directly play it on some instrument, and share and enjoy it as a ‘piece’ of music. Even in interaction with others, we can ‘cut out’ a sequence, repeat it mentally, then tell it or perform it as a ‘piece’ of theater. What this demonstrates, is our capacity for delaying the normal, fully integrative (ap)perception and framing the low-level percepts into discrete units, which we can memorize, reproduce, and communicate. It is noticeable that most simple examples of this special operation, which we can term a phenomenological delay function, or in-completion, are *esthetic*.¹

How did this incompletion function originate, and *why* does it exist? These are two very different problems that are both worth elaborating. The origin of perceptual

¹ When infants acquire language, they equally pick up fragments, play with them as isolated sound cascades, then repeat and reproduce them, then rearrange them – in a sort of primordial poetry.

delay may be identified in some preexisting functions that could have been strengthened, expanded, and generalized, thereby 'spilling over' and determining other, closely related functions. Human sexuality is a good candidate for such a function; it developed features such as an extended and ritualized foreplay, social sharing of settings, and an inherent tendency to frame the scenario, the involved bodies, and even body parts. The framed content is experienced as 'beautiful', radiant, charged with high emotional intensity, shifting unstably between joy and panic, and conducive to ecstatic moods, physical arousal, and *uniqueness*. The 'significant other' is sexually *unique*, and the event scenario itself is *unique*, even if it is regularly repeated. Our mind freezes the experienced feelings and perceptions into an intimate treasure, an *agalma*, as Lacan said, a sacred image, kept close to the heart of our subjectivity.

The particular state of mind pertaining to the sexual domain of social life, often involving intoxication of the subject and sacralization of the object, becomes a domain of activities related to celebration, ceremony, manifestations of authority of all kinds, and is eventually sedimented as a competence that certain 'gifted' individuals assume as a call and a profession: the 'artists'. Speaking in tongues, painting 'in tongues', inventing and playing 'pieces' of music, dance, theater – ceremoniously framed and perceived as they are performed: as *unique* experiences of something 'beautiful', much like sex. If we are into it, we 'love' art. The verb 'love' travels from eroticism to art.

Art has to be communicated. Communication and intersubjectivity are in its essence, and for the following reason. It is an inherent property of intentionally framed, discrete, unique contents that they be shared; the very act of framing is an act of communicating, at least potentially. We cannot experience a work of art as a work of art without wanting to share and potentially show it to others, indefinitely many others – mankind, if it were possible.²

The first step was sex, and the second, art. The third step is semiosis. We *superimpose* a framed, in-completed content over an open, completed version of the same content. The first item is now a signifier, and the second item a signified, linked by the mental feat of double perception, by which a thing is mentalized or represented twice – as a framed-and-shared entity and as an unframed percept, whether present or

² Would this characterize sexual acts? Not immediately, if we consider modern habits. But the estheticized versions rendered by so-called *erotic art* – literary, pictorial, sculptural, choreographic, cinematographic, pornographic, etc. – testify to the mediated persistence of the basic phenomenon: framing = sharing.

memorized, that is, as a signified concept.³ Signs of all types rely on this basic superposition, and all are experienced as esthetic phenomena, even if the content is utterly pragmatic, historically integrated with the circumstantial, complex, conflictual and often rather ugly (un-beautiful) life of the community. *Rhetoric* takes care of the esthetic aspects of pragmatics in general. Maybe the forerunners of the superposition are the pictorial chronicle, the mythological narrative, the oral legends, and then the sacred theater, worldwide.

If semiosis (as basic pictorial metonymy) precedes *language*, which is likely to be the case, then glossolalic singing should appear as a primary form of 'speech'. Using our vocal chords for *calling* on each other with short jingle-like songs on a person's name is still a common habit. The proper names we now integrate in grammatical language are evidently related to the uniqueness phenomenon of our sexual imaginary: the *singular* other has a *proper* name, which has a *proper* prosody, a melodic shape. Furthermore, calling is inviting for a session of content sharing of some kind. So, calling is followed by showing – this is the *deictic* function of semiosis. The syntactic function emerges when the singer-speaker breaks up an already framed and frozen scenario into sub-frames, framed parts (this is called parsing), namely the grammatical parts of the sentence. Grammar is a sort of scenarial theater, organizing scenes and sub-scenes into units that can combine (and recombine) into larger plays, so-called discourse. Discourse is again based on dialogue, because speakers need to go on and off stage rhythmically and take turns. This (overt or covert) dialogical exchange articulates utterances and allows extended narration, description, and argumentation to unfold. Speaking (whether by singing, chanting or using the modern style called prose) is dramatizing; enunciation is always an act of theatricality, as can be observed in co-speech gestures. It is no wonder that many subjects feel that speaking, especially in front of larger audiences, is embarrassing, intimidating: it is, if I am right, a form of bodily exposure derived from early-cultural, ritual sexual display – and directly liking to do it is almost a form of exhibitionism. In some religious orders, speaking is considered sinful; it is intuitively felt to be problematic. So, generally, is art, in modern civilization. Human beings seem to

³ *Metonymy* is a primary example of this superposition: "The White House declares...". A frozen, framed aspect is used as a signifier for the unfrozen, unframed version of the scenario referred to – so, in the metonymic expression, a house apparently can speak. This is the way we typically remember things; metonymy is mentally natural to us. It pertains to our mental architecture.

dislike or be uncomfortable with their own semiotic origin, or rather to feel ambivalent about it. They do feel uncomfortable about the study of it, *semiotics*, the framing of the framing; because framing, incompleteness, is still somewhat sacred, 'agalmic', thus transgressive, ecstatic, problematic. This is the attitude we tend to adopt toward that which made us human in the first place. We feel deeply ambivalent about ourselves. We are embarrassed and uncomfortable being *us*... (unless we never think about it).