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MORPHOLOGY AND DIACHRONY IN CULTURAL CRITICISM

Introduction

The historiography, modelled after the philosophical study of history in the tradition of Herder, Hegel and Marx, understands the relationship between facts in terms of genesis and evolution. In his *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba* (*Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath*, 2004), published in 1989, Carlo Ginzburg identified a possible alternative to this epistemic model of dealing with historical transformations in Wittgenstein's remarks on Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough.* Wittgenstein writes that "historical explanation, explanation seen as a linear hypothesis, is just one way of gathering data – their synopsis. One can equally well consider data in their reciprocal relation and summarize them in a general image regardless of the form of a chronological development". Ginzburg notes that the epistemic solution is not the substitution of diachrony with morphology, but rather an integration of the first to the second. In other words, we can only fully understand the meaning of changes through time if we identify constants and understand the way they interact with change. It was Goethe, the father of a prominent branch of modern morphology, who already remarked that forms, organic forms in particular, have nothing static about them, they are not *Gestalt* but *Bildung* (formation, development).

The relationship between morphology and history shares multiple points of contact with art theory. We could ask ourselves, for example, whether literature and the arts are to be seen as symbolical conveyers of a particular historical time, or as the product of a pattern of connections – *Zusammenhänge* in Friedrich Schlegel's language – which, though anchored to a given spatial and temporal dimension, bring nonetheless together motives, topoi, and themes stemming from cultures and times far-apart.

During the 20th century, a new idea of moving beyond the traditional historiographical approach emerges in the writings, for example, of Walter Benjamin. Similarly, Ernst Bloch's idea of contemporaneous non-contemporaneity prefigures an interpretation of time that is closer to geological stratification than to a straight line directed toward an ending goal.

It is against this theoretical background of approaches to the study of forms – in which also Georg Simmel and André Jolles figure prominently – that the essays in this volume (originated in the International Conference *Forms, History, Narrations, Big Data: Morphology and Historical Sequence* held in Turin in November 20-21, 2019) investigate questions of transformation, structure and interpretation in a wide range of artistic disciplines. While dealing with the history of literature, cinema, fashion, art and architecture, this collection of writings paints a picture of the multiple facets associated with the concept of morphology. Key concepts recurring in several texts are those of *Bildung* (in its dual connotation of something that is 'formed' and something that is in the process of being 'formed'), *Gestalt* (understood as the consolidated image), connection, structure, and hermeneutics – that is the mode of knowledge production in which intuition and empathy are substitutes for the scientific method. Headlining this volume is a versatile essay by Carlo Ginzburg, followed by a *Focus* section that suggests reflections on the topic presented by the organizers and keynote speakers of the Turin conference. The third block, named *Percorsi*, features contributions by many of the speakers at the Turin conference, covering multiple disciplines and points of view: *History and Fiction*, *Myths and Diachrony*, *Big Data and the Digital Sphere*, *Visual and Material Studies*. Concluding this volume are a contribution by Renato Rizzoli (*Letture*) on a cinematographic rendering of Hamlet and its connection to gender identity during the Weimar republic, and a review by Matteo Sesana, covering the publication of a collective volume on the influential 13th century Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi.

The opening essay by Carlo Ginzburg investigates the relationship between morphology and history in Darwin's evolutionary theory following his first major work, *The Origins of the Species* (1859). Among the roots of Darwin's work Ginzburg pays a special attention to Jean-Baptiste Robinet's essay *De la nature*, published first anonymously in 1761 in Amsterdam. Robinet reversed the Aristotelian motto "art imitates nature" arguing that Nature behaves like an artist. His comparison of Nature and Art was deeply inspired by Winckelmann's idea that "the slow, gradual progress of Art is an imperfect image of the progress of Nature". The paper explores the intersections between morphology and history, tracing the distant roots of Darwin's reflections on rudimentary characters. In fact, Darwin's debate with his scientific interlocutors – for example Jean-Baptiste Lamarck – led him to explain rudimentary characters on the basis of a linguistic model, which turned morphology into history.

My contribution, is intended as a broad overview of the aforementioned terminology pertaining to morphology: diachrony vs. synchrony, *Bildung*,

comparison, correspondence, nature, topos and anachronism. Morphology is a matter of perspective, i.e. a particular point of view from which one can observe known cultural phenomena and their place in history: it is actually a double, simultaneous point of view, since nature could be viewed from the observatory of culture, and culture from the observatory of nature. Morphology contains two features which philosophical thought has tried to explain since its remote pre-Socratic origins: the stasis of the form and the mobility of the living. If we now observe literary works in the light of these features, we see how the invariant elements can be traced back to the critical environment inspiring the works of Herder, Jakob Grimm, Goethe, and later Warburg and Jolles, and lastly the scholars of biopoetics.

Federico Vercellone traces the philosophical trajectory of morphological studies, from Goethe's crucial contribution to the conceptualization of metamorphosis, through *Frühromantik* thinkers and Haeckel's aesthetization of knowledge, down to Aby Warburg's new foundation of the morphological tradition into the study of visual arts. Vercellone's essay closes with the most crucial art historical theoretical contributions of the last few decades, from Belting's idea of "the end of art history" to Bredekamp's *Theorie des Bildakts*. These new approaches took the study of images out of its traditional purview in order to better analyze the overflow of images, from their art historical boundaries to every aspect of contemporary life. To conclude, Vercellone asks himself if what we are witnessing is a 'return to ekphrasis', understood as a return to an explicit contact between the written word and images, following the traumatic self-determination of images.

A morphological approach, or an approach that explicitly interrogates questions of form, is not only a methodology applied to the study of literary phenomena but, as admirably illustrated by Mazzoni in his essay, it can also help answer the question of "what is (the common element of) literature". Starting with a pointed critique of *Die Logik der Dichtung* (1957, 1977) by Käte Hamburger and *Fiction et Diction* (1991) by Gérard Genette, Mazzoni traces the history of the modern idea of literature, starting from its ancient Greek precursors (Plato and Aristotle, in particular). According to Mazzoni, "literature deals with particulars", or rather it tells us about the traces that particulars leave behind in the world. It shows how the 'particulars' can be 'universals' or can glimpse at 'universals' without going through concepts, but simply by thoughtless recognition.

"It is a unique potential of narrative that allows for the smooth intermingling" of the diachronic and the synchronic, according to Brockmeier. The dynamic relationship between synchronicity and

diachronicity can find a new cinematic dimension in autobiographical works such as *Running in the Family* (1982) by Michael Ondaatje. Brockmeier navigates in great detail the complex web of memories mixing with dreams that plays out in the opening paragraph of Ondaatje's memoir, a narrative construction characterized by temporal multilayeredness and an interplay of fantasy and awareness. The result is, in the author's words, a "code of simultaneity to be deciphered in the middle of ordinary life, a work of art to be understood, little by little".

A crucial knot in the morphological debate is the relationship between morphology and history, between the exemplar character of forms and structures unchanged through the centuries and their belonging to a specific historical time. According to Zinato, the interpretative analysis of Francesco Orlando offers a poignant way to investigate literature as a field inhabited by forces in mutual conflict. Zinato shows how a critical relationship with literary texts always implies a profound relationship with history (not only external, but internal history too, taking into account the crucial Freudian notion of 'the return of the repressed'), and how historiography and literary criticism can inherit, from Orlando's work, a new way to put forth the problem of the history of forms.

The intermingling of diachrony with morphology takes on many shapes and informs the manifold relationship between narration and history. The second section of essays is dedicated to exploring the boundaries between history and fiction. By tracing the proliferation of stories with a 'rube' type protagonist in times of cultural and technical change, Peter Schwartz attempts to navigate the resurgence of this type of stories in a global perspective and brilliantly connects them with the identification of what he calls 'paradigmatic crimes', crimes whose cultural resonance in a given time exemplifies societal anxieties about historical changes. After all, the relationship of society with historical phenomena is embedded within multiple paradigms of interpretation, that can at times create their own mythology. Gianluca Cinelli insightful analysis of multiple reactions to and narration of the German defeat in the battle of Stalingrad, clearly paints a picture of how historical events and their progression can be interpreted (and manipulated) into a system of mythic archetypes. Luigi Marfè follows the aftermaths of the collective trauma of 9/11 in both images and writings, and reflects on the artistic representability of historical violence or "the ethical commitment of an art based on the pain of others", as Susan Sonntag put it. Focusing on Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), Marfè investigates the dialectics of traumatic memory, the suspensive act between the exhibition of horror and the relentless return to the memory of the event "to keep it alive

and continue to question its meaning, regardless of whether these efforts are in vain".

The key word 'myth' often appears often in morphological discourse and the third section of this volume is dedicated to it. Here the notion of diachrony (already present in the reflections of Brockmeier) and the relationship between time and myth is best exemplified in the essay by Salvatore Renna. Discussing the 'open' character of myth, which "owns its almost uninterrupted vitality to a radical liberty" (Bettini), and arguing that it is necessary to consider myth as part of a polysystem, Renna directs us to the so-called "Polysystem Theory" – as developed by Itamar Even-Zohar. This theory enables us to understand the dynamic relationship between ancient myths and the innovative, anti-hierarchical re-reading of antiquity in postcolonial contests, as exemplified in Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides*. Chiara Lombardi reads Herodotus' tale of Gyges and Candaule as a fundamental archetype of human behavior, set at the origins of History. This intuition is exemplified by two rewritings of the tale: Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Moravia's novel *La donna leopardo.* Irena Kristeva takes us into the complex intermingling of myth, legend, tales and anecdotes used by the French author Pascal Quignard. Quignard believes that the coexistence of past and present in a sort of *entremonde* is what makes myth a receptacle of ancient memories, or memories of the origin: that is why myth is present and constantly recreated in every literary form. To conclude the discussion about literary criticism and morphology, Cinerari's essay explores the work of Paul Valéry and his project of a 'morphologie généralisée': an attempt to categorize the infinite forms of Nature ("c'est-à-dire la *Produisante* ou la *Productrice*") and shed some light on the relationship between natural and artistic 'morphogenesis'. According to Valéry, if art is the meeting point of necessity and chance, then its value resides in its anachronistic refusal to submit and conform to its own epoch.

A further section of this volume tackles the complexity of the contemporary digital age and its relationship to underlying questions of form and content. Bridging the gap of literature and the digital sphere, the interesting contribution by Anastasia Drozdova and Vladimir Petrov takes us into the fascinating world of contemporary fanfiction production. Now widely popular online among the young generations writing about video games, TV shows, YA book series and blockbuster movies, fanfiction is actually not a recent phenomenon and can take on even giants of Literature such as Pushkin. A certain degree of intertextuality is present between the source material and the fan fic, but bringing Pushkin to the digital sphere can underline the immanent features of the original text while also stressing culturally-based differences in the re-writes. Comparing English-speaking

and Russian-speaking fanfiction Drozdova and Petrov investigate how mass-culture and traditional folklore inform changes to the story: in the transcultural sphere "fic-writers actively implicate their readers' identity and literature preferences in the texts based on *Eugene Onegin*". After finding out how the digital sphere can create a fertile and prolific environment for the re-writing and after-life of classic literature, we are now warned about the ways in which digital tools can help or hinder literary studies and archival efforts. In every attempt to quantitatively investigate the humanities we need to build models and set rules or categories, but a degree of approximation invariably accompanies every operationalized concept. Guido Bonino and Paolo Tripodi problematize this discrepancy: the problem in the humanities – they argue – is that, in the search for verifiability, falsifiability, comparability in quantitative studies, we often forget that words and perceptions are rarely or never characterized by complete explicitness. Nonetheless, quantitative research can help ask and answer new questions, that can't be investigated by the means of traditional methods. Bonino and Tripodi conclude: to navigate these difficult waters, a good rule of thumb is to be prudent, look for the middle ground, go only as far as it makes sense. But what does approximation mean if we think about organizational and archival systems? Maria Giovanna Mancini asks this question by looking at how CIDOC CRM works: CIDOC CRM, created by the International Council of Museums, is defined by its creators as "a theoretical and practical tool for information integration in the field of cultural heritage". Using a technical term from computer and information science, CIDOC is an ontology: a representation and definition of a concept, its properties and categories. It thus suffers from the same problem of approximation problematized by Bonino and Tripodi. Every model for the systemic/archival organization of heterogeneous data is inevitably flawed and ambiguous, but – Mancini argues – now more than ever it is necessary to pose some serious questions about the quality of the information we collect, the modalities of collection and organization and about the "unconscious messages and meanings" embedded in every ontology.

A final section of this volume is dedicated to heterogeneous studies in the visual and/or material arts that try to problematize/apply the concept of morphology in the disciplines of art history, fashion studies and semiotic. Alessandra Mascia's analysis of a potent, recurrent, archetypal form – that of the Hand of God – takes the morphological discourse firmly into the art historical realm, following in the footsteps of a famous predecessor, Aby Warburg. The mystical image of the writing hand, from the biblical episode of Baldassar, is superimposed onto the (artistic) reflections surrounding the creating hand of the artist. From Michelangelo, to Parmigianino to Carracci, artists 'speak with their hands'; the divinization of the artist's hand –

creative agent, relic, anatomical model – culminates in the work of contemporary artist Katharina Hinsberg, in which the line – the artistic trace – is but an extension of the hand itself. Alessandro Rossi reflects on the question of anachronism in Renaissance art, especially in response to Alexander Nagel's and Christoph Wood's influential studies. Rossi's point of contention is not per se about the idea of an anachronic Renaissance, but rather about the methodology implemented by the two American scholars. Starting with a close comparison between Carpaccio's *Vision of Saint Augustine* and the sculpture of the *Risen Christ* in the Poldo Pezzoli Museum, Rossi convincingly shows how delicate the relationship between "historical method" and "hermeneutic creativity" truly is. In a remarkable study on the performativity, versatility and the reception of transformable clothes, Alessandra Vaccari tackles one of the biggest trends in contemporary fashion (that of a sustainable, hence transformable, fashion) and takes it back to its historical roots. If fashion is an agent of change and clothes are a natural conduit to express one's identity – identity as a compelling illusion created through a theatrical performance, following Judith Butler – then transformable garments conjugate the performative aspects of the clothes with those of the wearer. Moreover, transformable clothes embody the potential for transformation inherent in fashion itself; in the words of Viktor Horsting e Rolf Snoeren: "We are fascinated by transformations. The promise of transformation – that is something magical". The last essay of this section forces us to reflect on the visual dimension of the written word and of poetry in particular. The desire or the need to elaborate poetry in graphic or iconic form has manifested itself in various cultures in different parts of the world and in different periods of history – from the Alexandrian *technopaegnion* and the medieval pattern poem, to calligrams and 20th century concrete poetry. If, as Arnheim and Gombrich have noted, the awareness of organized configuration is the guiding principle of artistic images, a morphological approach is fundamental in order to identify their 'elective affinities' and formulate hypotheses about the reasons for their recurrence. W.J.T. Mitchell considers writing a point of connection between the verbal and the visual and Pasquale Fameli seeks to demonstrate how, despite the discontinuous and irregular nature of their appearance, logo-iconic instances are not "attempts to force poetry, but rather they are attempts to reveal the deepest nature of written poetry itself".