

Petru BEJAN*

A Hermeneutics of the Image

Abstract: The particular hermeneutics or branches of hermeneutics will introduce variations to the general canons of interpretation. Is interpretation an essentially subjective bet, relying on the flair and competencies of the interpreter? Or would it be desirable for the exegetic travail to strive, as much as possible, towards a maximum of objectivity? Broadly speaking, the positions are centered either on the “letter” of the text (i.e. on the prime, unequivocal meaning), or on its “spirit” (targeting a second, derived meaning). Not infrequently, the literal reading was suspected of reductionism and sterility, while the other – of infidelity and extravagance. Under-interpretation and over-interpretation seem to be the extremes to be avoided; one is submissive, suffocated by the authorities (the text and the author – taken as absolute references), the other one is prone to “fly”, to exegetical detachment, inadherent to the scruples of a rigorous hermeneutics.

Keywords: hermeneutics, interpretation, image, iconography, iconology, endogenous hermeneutics

While the reflection on the beautiful had anticipated the configuration of a discipline of aesthetics, the interpretative practices preceded the establishment of *hermeneutics* as rigorous study. After whole centuries of exploration of the hidden meanings through “working” with the text (be it religious, legal, literary, philosophical...), it wasn’t until the German Protestant theological environment, through Schleiermacher, that the first methodological enterprise, assuming a systematic and general character, was delivered. In this optic, hermeneutics should be seen as “an art of understanding”. Convincingly strung, interpretation – either grammatical or psychological – would help us understand a text as well as the author himself, and maybe even more. The task of interpretation is infinite, therefore you can rarely hope to faithfully restore *everything*. Applied prudently and knowledgeably, certain rules and principles could bring us closer to the authorial intentions, so that they can prove to be credible, veridical or plausible. In the absence of data with the advantage of certainty, we can only afford to speculate or “guess” the original meaning, the one envisioned by the author only and deliberately disguised at the surface of his work.

For a long time, the *text* has been the privileged hermeneutic reference. The proliferation of artistic practices will divert the attention of researchers

* “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, Iasi, Romania; email: pbejan@uaic.ro

towards an insufficiently explored area – the one of the *image*. In the exegetical siege of visuality, the first to mobilize have been aesthetics (determining the generic speculative frameworks), the theory and history of art, art criticism. *Iconography* and *iconology* have separated as distinct applications within art history. According to Panofsky, “iconography (...) concerns itself with the subject matter or meanings of works of art, as opposed to the form” (Panofsky 1980, 57sq.). Its function is rather “statistical”; it identifies, describes and classifies motifs found in images, stories, allegories. Iconology, instead, is a method of interpretation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of symbolic values, grasping the “life” of the image from the perspective of the meanings inherent to works. The statistical cumulation of information may be necessary, but insufficient as a whole. Its refinement in an interpretative direction would provide greater satisfaction. Iconology significantly compensates, therefore, the deficit of speculation. Going along the lines of Aby Warburg and Ernst Cassirer, Panofsky lays the foundations for a real “science of seeing”, applicable even today to the image, in a double hypostasis: static (painting, sculpture, photography, installation) and dynamic (video, film and so on).

Not few are the writings of conceptual elucidation that circumscribe the same motif. Authors such as Ernst Gombrich, Hans Belting, Régis Debray, Jean-Jacques Wunenburger, Jacques Morizot describe the mechanisms of signifying through image, the projections in the imaginary and the “philosophy” of such signifying. In a philosophical order (phenomenological, hermeneutic and structuralist), important names such as Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Michel Foucault, Jean-Luc Marion propose ingenious applications to the understanding of images – secular or religious. In the iconological direction, the writings of George-Didi Huberman, Daniel Arasse, Victor-Ieronim Stoichiță have come into prominence, preoccupied with the analysis of the vaguely perceptible clues in paintings, the significant details that escape the hurried eye or “what isn’t seen” clearly.

But there are also positions that contest the relevance of the hermeneutic project. Susan Sontag, for instance, argues “against” the interpretation of the work of art, denouncing its “arrogance”, the systematic aggression operated by critics and philosophers, for the purpose of exposing its alleged “content”. Interpretation is “the revenge of the intellect upon art. (...) To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world, in order to set up a shadow world of *meanings*” (Sontag 2000, 18 *sq.*). Investigated with the “scalpel” of reason, subjected to the “surgery” of thought, the work diminishes its stake. Instead of a distant, excessively rationalized perception, Sontag proposes a sensual, “erotic” reading, proclaiming the principle of the pleasure to “taste”, to enjoy the work of art directly, and not to reduce it to a sum of meanings. “What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable today?”, Sontag wonders. “The best criticism is of this sort that dissolves

considerations of content into those of form... Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more...”

*

The mistrust regarding the manner in which art criticism is managed today also motivates the hermeneutic project proposed by Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun (Crăciun 2016). The author experiences a legitimate dissatisfaction towards the precariousness of catalog texts and chronicles in the Romanian press, in which he reads the signs of a real “crisis”, but one that should be surmounted. The *Endogenous Hermeneutics*, the hermeneutics drafted by the Bucharest researcher, could be a pendant of superficiality or “lăutărisim” (a term by which Noica designated improvisation, working “by ear”) – found more and more often in the discourse on art.

To a “hermeneutics of the subject” of Foucauldian inspiration, Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun counterposes one of the *object* or the *image*, conceived in culturological and anthropological patterns. The author denounces, among others, the insufficiency of the morphological study, the excessive comparativism, the unsystematic character of the analyses, the overbidding of biographic evocations, the unjustified speculation. Oriented in an anthropological direction, art criticism and art history would calibrate their discourse on “being” not at the *aesthetic* level, as they did until now, but in an *ethical* sense.

The method of “endogenous hermeneutics” has been elaborated in the “atelier” of Brâncuși’ sculpture. “Look at my works until you see them”, the artist demanded. Joining the most important interpreters of the sculptor from Hobița (Carola Giedion-Welcker, Ionel Jianu, Sidney Geist, Petru Comarnescu, Barbu Brezianu, Dan Grigorescu, Doina Lemny), Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun articulates a methodology folded on the exigency of knowing the work *from the inside*. Anthropological hermeneutics studies the work of art as a self-centered whole. It aims at “the reconstruction of the message subjacent to creation through morphological, syntactic and symbolic research of the work studied”. The method is “inductive, it proceeds from the individual to the general, the analytic approach starts from minimum units and assembles them on levels of increasing complexity, up to the register of maximum generality assumed by the philosophy of culture”. The endogenous approach is “polarly opposed to comparative, psychological, sociological, semiotic, Marxist, feminist approaches, and it should precede them”.

Matei Stîrcea Crăciun articulates a project as bold as possible. The center of gravity is represented not by iconology, as would have been somewhat predictable, nor by traditional hermeneutics, nor by the one fortified by recent philosophical studies. His exegesis is one of a philologist; he is

concerned with plastic “grammar”, the morphology and syntax of artistic languages, reference points largely familiar to semiotic methodology as well, which is in search of clues, items, significant references.

The author bravely creates concepts (endogenous hermeneutics, hylesic symbolism), formulates principles, establishes rules, analytical tools, goals and finalities, searches everywhere for arguments that sustain and confirm his hypotheses. The advantages of the method? It identifies the sources of inspiration, determines the symbolic significances of every motif, “measures” the intake of novelty in relation to the sources, establishes convergences with similar creations, determines the weight of the various themes, provides culturological circumscribing and positioning.

Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun’s project gives the impression of a will to cover the work of art in a “totalitarian” manner, but also of objective circumscribing. Nothing seems to have escaped his hermeneutical “vigilance”. Is it *stricto sensu* applicable to the discourse of intimate elucidation of art products? The answer is affirmative, as already confirmed by the author himself in the previous grand exegetic endeavours regarding the sculpture of Brâncuși (*Limbajele materiei*) and Paul Neagu (*Nouă stațiuni catalitice*), both precious and useful to the monographic studies in the field.

The method of exogenous hermeneutics incites to discussions and problematizations, matching the assumed ambitions. Will it also provide to art criticism the anticipated analytical tools? In what manner? Does the identification of hermeneutic indices, in the manner of accounting, always provide satisfaction? Will the art critic accept to temper his interpretative enthusiasm, his evaluative dispositions, his “spirit of finesse”, in order to mechanically apply a pre-established scheme, in which speculation is both suspected and repressed *ab initio*? Does the “endogenous” bet not limit the field of action of hermeneutics itself, obstructing it in possibilities? Repressing external references (comparativism, biographism, free associations), won’t it risk unilateralism or partiality, almost inevitable? How do we quantify in the economy of creation the accident, the unpredictable, the spontaneity, the intuition, the genius – all refractory to any methodological obedience?

Endogenous hermeneutics, of the object or of the image, is of a delightful coherence. The author “geometrizes” interpretation, “disciplines” it and codifies it in detail. The invitation to plunge into the “inner horizon” of the work of art is, in fact, the invitation to visit the “laboratory” of creation, to pursue the latent energies, the heuristic potential of the works, the force of symbolic expression and contamination. The “moral” of the endeavour just mentioned? In order to avoid the derisory, art criticism must abandon improvisation and superficiality in favour of in-depth research. As illustrated by Matei Stîrcea-Crăciun’s texts, a sagacious and erudite hermeneutist of image.

References

- Belting, Hans. 2004. *Pour une anthropologie des images*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Debray, Régis. 1992. *Vie et mort de l'image. Une histoire de regard en Occident*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Gombrich, Ernst et Eribon, Didier. 2009. *Ce que l'image nous dit*. Paris: Arléa, Éditions Cartouche.
- Morizot, Jacques. 2005. *Qu'est-ce qu'est une image*. Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin.
- Panofsky, Erwin. 1980. *Artă și semnificație*. București: Editura Meridiane.
- Sontag, Susan. 2000. *Împotriva interpretării*. București: Editura Univers.
- Sîrcea-Crăciun, Matei. 2016. *Tratat de hermeneutică a sculpturii abstracte. Perspectiva endogenă*. București: Editura Institutului Cultural Român, Editura Brâncuși.
- Sîrcea-Crăciun, Matei. 2010. *Brâncuși, Limbajele materiei*, București: Editura Anima.
- Sîrcea-Crăciun, Matei. 2013. *Paul Neagu. Nouă stațiuni catalitice. Studiu de hermeneutică a sculpturii abstracte*. București: Editura Triade / Brumar.
- Wunenburger, Jean-Jacques. 2004. *Filosofia imaginii*. Iași: Editura Polirom.