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THROUGH THE SIGHT OF SYMBOLIC ART: THE IMAGINAL RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

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Abstract

Most diffused research attitudes in the field of education are marked by approaches, ideas, representations, that “scientific disciplines” use to analyse main themes and problems of Pedagogy. This certainly contributes to grant Pedagogy a scientific status and provides researchers and educators with clear interpretation patterns and useful educational tools, but often it limits their sensibility, forcing them to assume a rationalistic, reductive and judging attitude towards the complex educative phenomena they face. To compensate for this fashion this paper propose an “imaginal research” that is an artistic and poetical approach aiming to recognise and include imagination among comprehension procedures of Educational Sciences. Following several thinkers who promoted the revival of imaginative thought and called for “poetic reason” the imaginal approach seeks to extend its knowledge basis in a similar way to the imaginative and artistic disciplines. It is a highly reflective perspective which explores educational culture and its theoretical constructs, problems, objects and practices through the medium of collections of artistic images; Specifically, we look to the world of art to identify works with a particularly rich symbolic content; then, following a conservative respectful and nomadic hermeneutic approach in line with the procedures of symbolic-imaginary enquiry, the symbolic works of art are encountered, not so much to “illuminate” them but to understand them and to participate in the symbolic mythical tissue of them. Contemplation of these images, which are particularly rich in meaning, also promotes deeper knowledge of the phenomena under study, it reveals the various sedimentations of sense underlying them and ultimately facilitates a deeper, more detailed and shared understanding of them. This approach does not claim to uncover a single definitive meaning in experience and will not have a rapacious and greedy grip on the world but, on the contrary, turns to it, in a bewildered position, in a continuous research always open to possible interpretations and meanings. In this sense imaginal research approach has also a deep pedagogical aim that is to promote a more sensitive attitude towards symbolic dimension of the world and to enhance participants’ sense of belonging to an “animated” reality which they may consequently approach with renewed “fondness” and sense of responsibility.

Keywords: research; imagination, art

THE IMAGINAL RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES

The most diffused research attitudes in the field of education are nowadays marked by approaches, ideas, representations and interpretations that “scientific disciplines” (especially Psychology, Sociology and Neurosciences) use to analyse main themes, aspects and problems of Pedagogy. This certainly contributes to grant Pedagogy a scientific status and provides researchers, teachers and educators with clear interpretation patterns and useful educational tools, but often it limits their sensibility, forcing them to assume a rationalistic, conceptual, reductive and judging attitude towards the complex educative phenomena they have to understand and to face every day.

To compensate for this fashion this paper propose an “imaginal research” (Mottana 2002; 2004; 2010, Barioglio 2010; 2014) that is an artistic and poetical approach aiming to recognise and include imagination among knowing and comprehension procedures of Educational Sciences. Following several thinkers (such as Gilbert Durand, Carl Jung, James Hillman, Henry Corbin, Gaston Bachelard, Jean Jacques Wunenburger, Maria Zambrano) who, in the course of the last century promoted the revival of imaginative thought and called for “poetic reason” and “contradictory rationality”, the imaginal approach seeks to extend its knowledge basis in a similar way to the imaginative and artistic disciplines. Indeed, starting with the ancient tradition of symbolic imagination of the hermetic philosophy, the studies of these authors restored and supported the power of “creative”, “active” or “archetypal” imagination as a more affective and participative way of building knowledge and they often underlined that it is still alive in arts. Starting with this idea, imaginal research aims to learn from arts. It is a highly reflective perspective which explores educational culture and its theoretical constructs, problems, objects and practices, not in terms of theories and disciplinary categories (be they critical, social, historical or psychological) or the genealogy of how they have been determined and interpreted over time, but through the medium of collections of artistic images. Specifically, we look to the world of arts (cinema, poetry, literature, music, dance, picture and plastic arts) to identify works with a particularly rich symbolic content. Obviously, in the complex scenario of our so called “civilization of images” the notion of “symbolic content” (or coming from the “imaginal world”) is very important and it lead us to distinguish images really able to generate knowledge from something else. As Wunenburger underlines, the “imaginal” is an important region of what we usually call “imaginary”. A particular zone in the great field of all imaginative forms made of visions, dreams, mental and artistic images whose main character is given by its specific collocation between rational intellect and sensible perception. It is an intermediate world in which we meet imaginative forms coming from the passive cognition of a subject who does not create them but “finds” and fixes them without recognising completely their origin and destination. That is, in other words, what we can call a “vision”, or a visionary apparition, a vision of objects, figures, landscapes endowed with a mythical and symbolic echo. Images in which we can see and perceive a sensible content of the common experience but charged by a symbolic “aura”. In other words those “objects” release a constellation of analogical correspondences that appears as a deeper rooting. They are shapes and figures standing on the edge, on the border or better at the threshold, situated between visibility and invisibility, between a given phenomenal appearance that, for the particular way of their apparition (i.e a mountain in which we can observe, and perceive, the dissolution and the fluctuation of its matter such as in Cezanne’s *Saint Victoire*) seem to lay in an order of reality different from the usual one. As a matter of facts it refers to a series of different meanings belonging to the relative invariant repertoire of the collective imagination (myths, archetypes, symbols and so on). When artistic works preserve, in their presentation, such an openness on the symbolic order they are certainly forms of imaginal world. Be it in a poem, in a picture, in a music or in a movie the imaginal images is enigmatic and powerful. Its deep roots, its theme coming from somewhere else, coming from the past, from the myth realm, represents through the forms of the present, manifests itself in an unexpected and surprising intertwining that introduces us to the deep meaning of experience. In it each visible trace situates on an invisible background that offers itself in an allusive, slanting and enigmatic way. From this point of view the imaginal is not static, is not aesthetic, is not imprisoned in an ideal concept of beauty and forms as some critics assert. The imaginal is dynamic, its visionary receptiveness is open on all the artistic scenario, without any prejudice, but only according to an orientation. It asks the art works the ability to symbolise, to resonate a network of correspondence, it stimulates in artistic creation a moving and preferably trasgressive energy to produce images that can be vehicles of revelation, of knowledge and gratitude of the inwardness of the world. That *Weltinnerraum* that Rainer Maria Rilke invited us to safeguard and that, in some way, also did Marcel Proust, Martin Heidegger and Carl Gustav Jung. And at this point of our discourse, the term “sym-bolising”, a beloved word by Henry Corbin, indicates that the task of an imaginal art, as well as the imaginal operativity of who wants to enjoy it in a transformative (ad educative) way, is to retune our deaf and rootless sensibility to the sym-bolising activity of the whole world. Because in the hermetic vision, which the imaginal refers to,

everything symbolises with everything else even if not necessarily drained or pacified, rather very often shattered, wounded and discordant, but anyway in an living and interconnected organism. The imaginal work allows each particular thing of the world to be acknowledged in its symbolising *virtus*, by others, thus permitting us to interiorise our symbolic living in the world. Through the “vision” offered by the imaginal art our dwelling the world can re-discover itself as participative and inextricably connected with any other, even infinitesimal, element of a universe that, from the very origin, share the same fate. And it is just against this universal symbolisation that the separating and dominant rationality of Western culture fights and has been fighting for the last centuries, preventing us from perceiving the deep resonance interconnecting all the elements and our specific role of receivers and transmitters of such an intimate psycho-material irreducible sympathy. As an expression of a symbolic knowledge (and research attitude) not involved in Western rationality, the imaginal remind us, and at the same time prescribes, the way of our dwelling, our role of participants with some privileges (and some responsibilities) of the integrity of a huge living organism. To cultivate the imaginal sensibility researching and finding imaginal art works, through the exercise of a contemplative attitude towards them, through an attitude able to remind us our place in life and world, appears a pressing and unavoidable educative task. In a certain way what is imaginal is always “outdated?” in the sense of Friederich Nietzsche’s assertion, but always topic, always current in our time just because of its paradoxical extraneousness. It is a spring that emerges from many sinking points, it is the synthesis of silent underground torments, it is the confluence of floats and undertows. Otherwise how could we define, from a similar point of view, Joseph Beuys’, Anselm Kiefer’s, Hermann Nitsch’s art works, without a reference frame that witnesses the persistence of such a transformative, effective “outdatedness”? To say nothing of music, drama, dance in which entire geological ages of creation seem sometimes to gather in unpredictable and glowing works like Arthur Schnittke, Meredith Monk, Pina Bausch or Giacinto Scelsi ones. A research attitude matched to lend hear and attend the imaginal, is an office to the world, is a way to repay the world with the feminine, cyclic, obscure, ambiguous living forms that the calculating rationality has repudiated (Durand, 1993). Elements of a rejected imaginary but fertile, fruitful and indispensable for the comprehension of vulnerability and inextricability of a miraculously united living body. From this point of view educate to an imaginal means most of all to create occasions to explore symbolic works in which the very voice of the works can be heard, in which the works can speak, in their own language and according to their particular attitude, without any prejudice, any classification, any subjective and anthropocentric projection. It means to stop, to stay in the vision and in the interpretation of the symbolic recalls that their outlines radiate. The interpretation of such images is very difficult, nomadic and thorny. As it lays before any categorisation the image is a troublesome subject to any effort of conceptual grasp, and even to any hermeneutic attempt engaged in testing the genealogy of the sign or of the symbol. But, to tell the truth, since when the image has become an “aesthetic object”, as Hegel told us in a definite way in his *Estetica*, since when it has lost its integrity of vital experience, since when it has become the object of a separate discipline, the image seems to have been buried under a charming, but also oppressing, flood of words. The imaginal research approach, proposes to come close to the art work, at least at the beginning, without any screen, filter or particular aesthetic category in order to allow the observer (or the listener) to explore the texture of the image the most directly as possible, in its radical nakedness. The naked image, the image as much as possible cleaned out by the deposit of supposing expert knowledge is what we, first of all, need to experience. In these conditions the imaginal world manifests as a living one. A world provided by an inner animation of its own, a face, a feature able to invest the observer of all its material meanings. When we approach the work imprisoning immediately it in a cage made of biographical, formal, contextual, critical information we have to know that what we are going to see will inevitably be compromised, muffled, reduced, shaped into the coordinates of a modest preliminary process. To restore the meaning power of image means, first of all, that the experience of the image is at the beginning without any presence of a specific knowledge. It has to be a silent and total experience. Something like a real contemplation. At the same time it is better to reset the contribute of the specific artistic knowledge too. Just to make an example, to know technique and technology of cinema or the language of a music score in the imaginal experience surely leads to

a lignification of the access into the visual or sounding matter. Of course it is possible that a certain musical shape has had, during a certain period, a particular meaning (“madness” or particular “ilts”), but for the imaginal exploration of the sounding universe of a composition, are we so sure we need to recognise this form or shape? At least at the beginning we can consider that it is unnecessary or even harmful and damaging because it prevents us from a direct and intense vision. What we are trying to say is that we need to dwell, to live and experience directly the image, to recognise it as it offers in its material aspects perceivable by our senses and then to describe it in a plain or even metaphoric language. Renouncing any pre-constituted formula, the description is obliged to find exacter, more adequate words, words phonologically more stickier to its matter, instead of taking refuge in quotations. In this sense, imaginal hermeneutics invites us to restore a primigenial relationship with the art work, a contact before any introduction and any specific cultural technical projection. Then we need to stay, we need to have a long and “extroverted” dwelling into the work in order to perceive and reflect, receive its feature its geography and its specific geology. To dwell the work listening and listening to its voice, looking and looking at it in order to allow it to show itself. We need to walk in it with the interest and passion we could have for an unknown, mysterious and charming place, looking for what is less visible, for what is fleeting, for the connections of its parts, for the details, for shapes and figures. This is the imaginal hermeneutic experience at its first step. But it is the most important one: we have to allow the image to communicate directly without any obstacle its figurative and sensitive richness. We need to “return to images?”, just to resound the slogan of Phenomenology, we need to learn to see again using a patient and persistent sight as much as possible similar to the contemplative sight of the artist who made the work restoring the surprising symbolic texture of all the objects he devoted to. Nevertheless the imaginal interpretation is not only an appreciation and description activity or a participation to a particular world. We have to pick and comprehend the symbolic and analogical allusions that a particular matter expresses. Not to come to a definitive explanation but just to try to identify some possible meanings, to name those resonances, the reticular correspondences between the explored matter and the world of shapes, symbols, archetypes the work refers to. When the work is really symbolic this job inevitably leads to feel the constitutive ambivalence and contradiction of meanings, the multiplication and dissemination of any meaning “trace”. Such a loss in the work, that slowly will lead to a certain number of possible way of interpretation, will produce an inevitably moving, plural, ambiguous knowledge. Each element in the image will certainly reconnected with all the others but according to iridescent perspectives always unsettled in a definitive way. So this research route allows us to draw an open knowledge, matched to the multiplicity and the ambiguity, that contradictory, amphibole, analogical knowledge about which, symptomatically with one voice, some inspirers of imaginal thought talk about: from Gilbert Durand (1993) to James Hillman (1998), to Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (2002). A kind of *acknowledge* that, we think, can be a good medicine against the raging of a calculating and objectifying rationality so widespread, and with so dramatic effects, in our contemporary civilisation. From this point we can start to promote an education through images, an education to acknowledge the world as a united organism, animated and provided of its own, undeniable, subjectivity. In this sense imaginal research approach has also a deep pedagogical aim that is to promote a more sensitive attitude towards symbolic dimension of the world and to enhance participants’ sense of belonging to an “animated” reality which they may consequently approach with renewed “fondness” and sense of responsibility.

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