DIALOGICAL INTERACTION IN THE ARTS: IS SOCIAL CHANGE POSSIBLE THROUGH LITERATURE?

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Abstract: The paper proposes to consider literary writers as a potentially powerful driver of social change. It investigates how the implicit response of the readers is made apparent by a personal habit change. The viewpoint offered emerges from an analysis of poems and narratives by contemporary German and Italian writers. The analysis used to enhance student learning caused a positive personal change within them and developed into a new way of facing further challenging interpersonal circumstances.

Keywords: Habit Change; Social Change; Implicit Dialogical Interaction; Medieval and Renaissance Art; Werner Lutz; Ada Negri; Franz Kafka.

1. Introduction

Social change tends to be related to political, economic, and cultural shifts and studied by specific disciplines. This paper proposes a consideration of expressions of art, such as paintings and literary works, as a potentially powerful factor of social change. People are implicitly invited to reply to an artist’s creation by identifying themselves with its content. In this form of understanding, an implicit dialogical interaction between artists and their public may be recognized, which may determine a change in one’s life. The aim of this work is therefore to explore this form of understanding, in order to investigate how the implicit response of the public is first made apparent by a personal habit change.

The originality of the proposed viewpoint emerges from the didactic experience which is achieved as a result of the analysis and the process of translation conducted on short poems of contemporary German-Swiss poet Werner Lutz (1930). The use of his poems to enhance student learning caused a positive personal change in them and this individual-level change then developed into a wider social change, that is to say, in the new way the students faced further challenging interpersonal circumstances.

The analysis is grounded in the theory of contemporary linguists and literary scholars, such as M.M. Bakhtin (1981), C.S. Peirce (1931-1958; 1976), O. Ducrot.

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2 An example of a brilliant social thinker is Zygmund Bauman. His latest works are about social changes in the so called “liquid modern world”, which reflects an age of uncertainty; cf. Bauman, *Liquid Life*, 2005; *Liquid Times*, 2007. In the German field Niklas Luhmann’s study of the social system in modern society (“systems theory”) is also being applied by sociologists all over the world; cf. Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* 1997.
(1991) and J.R. Searle (1979; 1995), and it begins with the teachings of the Ancients, especially Cicero and Aristotle.

It is common knowledge that Cicero showed in his work *De oratore* the three functions of speech: *docēre, delectare, movēre.* The focus of the analysis is on this third aspect (*movēre*), which in addition meant to involve and to ‘move’ the hearers, in order to make them ‘adhere’ to the proposed thesis. Before Cicero, Aristotle had identified this aspect with a purification phenomenon (*katharsis*), which was the real aim and the desirable effect that tragic poetic art had to have on the spectator. His starting point was the profound link he recognized between two spheres of human activity: poetic art and ethics. Poetic art aimed at the ethical education of the spectators, as passions were for them an essential element in their ethical behavior and in knowledge as a whole.

The considerable importance of the arts has been acknowledged throughout the centuries. Human beings have always been in search of meaning in their lives and, in each generation, they have looked to works of art to shed light on their destiny. The arts strive to reach, and to make people reach, the true nature of man by depicting his anguish and his delight, his needs and his strengths, thus trying to ‘elevate’ human life. In this way, works of art ensure the growth of the individual and consequently the development of the community by means of a “supreme art form” called “the art of education”.

1.1. ‘Social Change’ Through the Arts: a Didactic Experience

This “art of education” can be found in almost all types of art. In the didactic experience, students can learn to look at a painting as an example of a particular typology of text, which is a communicative event between artists and their public. Italian students often have a preference for Medieval or Renaissance frescos because of the realistic way they depict people and reality, which enables the students to easily identify themselves with the figures.

Medieval and Renaissance art is the first example of educational form that, according to the Ancients, includes entertainment. At the end of the thirteenth century, for example, with Giotto di Bondone and Duccio di Buoninsegna, the flat world of the preceding painting style was transformed into an analogue for the real world. Before the variety of colors and the realistic human behavioral poses of the figures (cf. the *Scrovegni Chapel* in Padova, the Upper Basilica in Assisi and the Cathedral of Siena), the viewers saw their emotions reflected in the new pictorial space. Something similar happened in the mid-fifteenth century with the frescos painted by Masaccio in the *Brancacci Chapel* in Florence. As art was linked to instructional and educational purposes, the illiterate public could gain insight into biblical content and truths in a fascinating and intriguing manner, being thus...

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motivated to imitate the resolute approach of the figures towards their lives and fellow creatures.

A fruitful didactic experience can also be offered by the dramatic beauty of Michelangelo’s painting The Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, which has the rare power to silence entire groups of students. The imposing portrayal placed before their eyes stimulates at once a reflective experience by making contact with something outside themselves. The fresco actually conveys a compelling significance that is usually neglected in everyday life: “the risk of man’s definitive fall”, which is the dramatic destiny of damned souls, who in Doomsday are far removed from salvation. Yet, at the same time, the colors and forms of the fresco become “a proclamation of hope, an invitation to raise our gaze to the ultimate horizon”, by reminding viewers that human history is “a continuing tension towards fullness”.6


Similar didactic experiences are also possible by reading and analyzing literary works. Approaching a poem is like moving closer to an unknown person, whose glance reflects a particular outlook on life. Thus, whenever a literary text is approached, it initiates an endless labor of interpretation. This process ends up with the fascinating experience of identifying oneself with that specific outlook on life.7 However, this requires time and the willingness to be not only emotionally, but also profoundly, changed.8 Moreover, after reading a poem, the readers’ eyes are enriched by the poet’s worldview, and this provokes a change within them. This enriching experience consists of a modification of their hábitus, that is, of their behavioral patterns regarding situations and the people around them. It is thus a psychic feature, which complements the social aspect of communication.

In linguistics, speaking of a habit change and of an undertaken commitment as a consequence of a dialogue, implies that a meaningful communicative event has successfully occurred between the interlocutors. As stated by Peirce, the communication is fulfilled when it does not leave everything invariable, but produces a meaning which involves a person as a whole. Reality actually sets men in motion by stimulating their response, which will be vigorous if they are disposed to activate a change in their habits, that is, in the laws they usually follow.9

In line with such acknowledgments, the action of learning should imply considerable effort, because for Peirce to learn means “to acquire a habit”, the habit

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6 Benedict XVI. Meeting with Artists. 2009.
8 Many are the ways in which communication occurs and simultaneously changes people. They can be summarized according to three main levels. The informative and the emotional involve superficial or transitory changes, while the third level regards a long-lasting change in the behavioral patterns (hábitus) in everyday life; cf. Peirce, Collected Papers. 1931, 221-226.
9 For Peirce, a habit is an “acquired law”, equivalent to a “disposition”, which is similar to “some general principle working in a man’s nature to determine how he will act”; Ivi, 1932, 100.
“of tossing aside old ideas and forming new ones”.\textsuperscript{10} As observed in the encounter of the students with Michelangelo’s fresco, such a conversion is “always consequent upon impressive experiences”, which bring human habits into “an active condition” by creating “a habit of changing habits”.\textsuperscript{11} Moreover, this \textit{habit change} makes students “learn how to learn”, and this can “sustain a lifelong desire for learning”, both in the individual and in the social sphere.\textsuperscript{12}

The analysis of didactic experiences that, as a first step, involve a change in the individual was inspired by some direct questions used in the poems by Werner Lutz. A poem such as the following:

\begin{verbatim}
Jemand fragt
bist du auch Taucher
tauucht du auch in dir
nach dir\textsuperscript{13}
\end{verbatim}

can easily be felt by the reader as an impulse to provide an answer. In addition, as the narrating voice is addressing a general \textit{you}, all the readers can identify themselves with this \textit{you}, by feeling themselves invited to answer personally through their own introspection. The dialogical interaction therefore takes place only if the poem’s questions become the readers’ questions and this activates a personal modification in their life.

A link between the theoretical, linguistic aspects used in this work and the dialogical interaction in the arts is offered by the theory on dialogue by the Russian literary scholar and linguist, Bakhtin. He considers ‘dialogue’ as the primary means through which people communicate meaningfully with each other. In his work \textit{The Dialogic Imagination} (1981) he affirms that in any living conversation “every word is directed towards an \textit{answer}”, to which “primacy belongs”, as it is “the activating principle” in which “understanding comes to fruition”.\textsuperscript{14} At the same time, Bakhtin highlights the implicit dialogical form and function of the novel, although such a form of art is not, strictly speaking, dialogical. His starting point is the enormous power of the ‘internal dialogism’ of a word, which can never be considered as an isolated and independent act, not even in a monologic utterance because, when language conveys a meaning, it means something for someone. In this way, “the arena for the encounter” is the subjective belief system of the recipients (the readers). Their understanding and response can be “deep and productive”, whenever their encounter with the author creates a sort of “fertile soil”, on which they build “a further creative development”.\textsuperscript{15} This development is possible because, as soon as an author’s word penetrates into the readers’ interior,

\textsuperscript{10} Peirce, \textit{The New Elements of Mathematics}. 1976, 142.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibidem.
\textsuperscript{12} Kankkunen, \textit{How to Acquire ‘The Habit of Changing Habits’}. 2004, 383.
\textsuperscript{13} Lutz, \textit{Bleistiftgespinste}. 2006, 87 (‘Someone asks/are you a diver too/do you also plunge into yourself/towards yourself’).
\textsuperscript{14} Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}. 1981, 282; italics in the original.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibidem; cf. Ivi, 293, 347.
they question it and enrich it with their personal experiences, carrying into it their own accents and expressions, thus creating a “dialogizing background”.16

Similarly, Ducrot emphasizes the inevitability of an answer before l’acte d’interroger. In the quoted poem by Lutz, for example, the dialogical interaction between author and reader should take place as soon as the addressee feels somehow ‘obliged’ to answer that specific question. However, this invitation to answer can emerge in different ways. An example is highlighted by Searle when he draws attention to social facts that do not require language. The successful interaction between human infants and adults takes place in praesentia without the use of words and thanks to the reinforcement of the connection between connoted and referential elements.17 In contrast, the encounter with works of art is an example of allusive, connotative meaning expressed in absentia, because what is conveyed is usually suggested alongside the works, and their recipients must infer the meaning without the help of the author. Ducrot expresses this dynamic by speaking of a signification implicite combined with a signification littérale. As speakers or writers often have a mysterious besoin d’implicite, they cover specific contents (events, personal experiences, and even feelings and thoughts) with a sort of loi de silence, through which they convey something without saying it.18 It is the recipient’s responsibility to infer and interpret the implicit meaning.

This paper will subsequently give further examples which have also been taken from literature regarding the ability of the readers to activate, also in absentia, a type of implicit dialogical interaction with the author of a literary work. This becomes evident in the didactic experience with younger generations. Through the analysis of poems, learners are introduced to the universal values communicated across ages and cultures, and this reinforces the link between tradition and modernity.

Poems can be a stimulus for students, especially when they encounter difficulties in writing their graduation theses, which is a first step into wider society. An example is offered by the change experienced by a student who was given the following words written by Werner Lutz:

Untertauchen und wieder auftauchen
erst viel später
vor einer unbekannten Küste.19

After reading them, the student made up his mind regarding the effort he had to make and the time he had to spend (viel später, ‘much later’) to be able to see the results of his effort. Because of this poem, he further understood that his work was a challenge and his attempt was not in vain. It only had to be considered within

16 Ivi, 358.
19 Lutz, *Bleistiftgespinste...*, 44 (‘To dive and come up again/much later/in front of an unknown shore’).
a wider context, the one regarding his future work. The poem actually conveyed to him the moral principle that people can reach their goal only if they are ready to struggle and to spend the required time on it. Moreover, as graduation theses are an important step in the social life of students, this young man produced a virtuous model for his future way of working with people inside society.

The analysis was then extended to poems and narratives of other contemporary (German and Italian) writers in which life is explored in its main features through intense and personal expressions of living and experiencing life.

Strictly connected to the previous extract by Lutz is a poem by contemporary Italian poet Ada Negri (1870-1945), whose content is a plain invitation to love one’s own work, *Ama l’opera tua* (‘Love your work’). The stimulus to reflect on the personal attitude towards one’s own labor emerges from a series of imperative verbs, all in the second person singular. These verbs address the reader, who is directly involved in the conveyed content. Imperative forms like ‘love your work’, ‘suffer for it your most beautiful and secret pain’, ‘give to it the sun of your days, the shadow of your nights’ are all an incitement to become aware of the importance that every moment dedicated to one’s own work can have for the life of the individual, as well as for the society in which the individual lives.

Moreover, as Ada Negri’s later poems turn to inner reflection and spirituality, they can become an occasion for ‘social’ change, if readers are willing to identify themselves with the content of the dramatic situations described in them. By going deep inside herself, into the wounds of her sorrowful life, she actually depicts all she had learned from her experiences. She thus involves readers in her inner changes before life’s challenges, by rousing their souls through recurring questions and intense phrases.

Her poem *Il dono* (‘The gift’) is another example. In the first part, she expresses profound sorrow for a gift she has been waiting for all her life but never received. The second part is, however, the description of a rare moment of abandon and inner happiness during which she becomes aware of what is truly the real gift she has been longing for: the flood of her vermilion blood she has always been receiving from life. It is a secret flowing in her veins, a beating in her wrists, and a sparkling light in her eyes, which she starts to love, simply because it is (her) life.

However, her poetry never expresses just sorrowful mourning. It always communicates a final ardent hope, forever awaiting a great love even if it never materializes, because she never surrenders.

1.2.2. ‘Social Change’ Through Prose: Franz Kafka

Because of the didactic experience with the poems by Werner Lutz and the profound effect that Ada Negri’s innate passion for human life has on readers, a


21 “Scorre intanto il fiume/del mio sangue vermiglio alla sua foce:/e forse il dono che puoi darmi, il solo/che valga, o vita, è questo sangue: questo/fluire segreto nelle vene, e/battere/dei polsi, e luce aver dagli occhi; e amarti/unicamente perché sei la vita.” Ivi, 769.
similar challenge was offered to an entire group of students on a Master’s degree course. In addition, as the course was on expressive techniques of German as a foreign language, the short text *Gemeinschaft* (‘Fellowship’) by Franz Kafka was proposed.22

The one-paragraph story is about five friends who leave a house and position themselves in a row, one after the other. Since that moment they have been living together. They are together and want to remain together, living a peaceful life, until an interfering factor emerges. Another person would like to be part of their group by joining them as a sixth member but, although there is no specific reason, they refuse to admit him. Thus, as many sentences and verbs demonstrate, they remain impervious to change. Nevertheless, the story concludes with a remarkable statement:

> no matter how he pouts his lips we push him away with our elbows, but however much we push him away, back he comes.23

These words testify that the person’s desire to be part of the group is real, tenacious, and persistent. The theme of the story is, therefore, twofold. On the one hand, there is a closed-minded party which forces the exclusion of a new person. On the other, there is an unknown person, who dares to desire (and makes every effort to do so) to be part of the ‘circle’ of friends. At the end of the story this profound and continuous desire overturns the point of view and this raises questions in the reader regarding the different attitude of the characters.24

Kafka’s literary story is actually *fictional* and, as such, it conveys a particular connection between the literal meaning of the sentence and the meaning of the writer’s utterance. Furthermore, in line with Searle’s words concerning works of fiction, even Kafka’s story “conveys a ‘message’ or ‘messages’ which are conveyed by the text but are not in the text”.25 The writer means what he writes, but he also means something more, which the reader must infer. This ability is based on the awareness that the story would be “obviously defective if taken literally”, so that the reader “is compelled to reinterpret it in such a way as to render it appropriate”.26 According to the didactic project, the students had to infer what the author wanted to share with them and they had to judge a similar personal experience in light of it.

In order to do this, they were asked to answer some questions, by stating if they agreed with the rejection by the five friends. They had to write if they had

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24 The inestimable power of man’s desire was expressed by the American writer Don DeLillo in the opening of his novel *Underworld*. “Longing on a large scale is what makes history”, and it was somehow explained with following words: “The game doesn’t change the way you sleep or wash your face or chew your food. It changes nothing but your life”. Cf. DeLillo, *Underworld*. 1999, 11, 32.
26 Ivi, 112sq.
experienced a similar situation in their lives and how they had reacted, if they had perceived that their closed circle was suffocating, and if they consequently had desired to expand it. As they felt involved in the content of the story, they reacted by answering openly. All of them had lived through a similar situation, but they admitted that their encounter with Kafka’s words had enabled them to better judge the past event. As they became aware that the rejection emerges from a negative attitude (hábitus) toward people and life in general, and destroys any possibility of experiencing new worlds.

As Albert Camus wrote, the destiny and possibly the grandeur of Kafka’s work consist in offering all possible solutions without indicating any one in particular. Consequently, the metaphorical utterance of his work stimulates readers (and students) to read his words more than once to grasp what the author’s utterance might have meant (“speaker’s utterance meaning”) among the expressions he uses (“word, or sentence, meaning”). But to catch the “semantic content other than its own meaning” the students required an ‘extra element’ which is the ability of their inference to understand what is (or should be) actually meant.

The didactic experience with Kafka’s story therefore clarifies that communicative events (and therefore also works of art) are successful when they result in the interlocutor’s response (and related responsibility) to the content received through them, even when this content remains somehow implicit.

1.3. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, it is worth quoting the following words from the Letter to Artists written by Pope John Paul II:

[Works of art] not only enrich the cultural heritage of each nation and of all humanity, but they also render an exceptional social service in favour of the common good.31

What does this “exceptional social service” consist of?

The didactic experiences with Lutz, Negri and Kafka have shown that the beauty and the content conveyed by works of art have the special power to involve the viewer in a personal experience, which can be identified with “the care of the

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27 As underlined by Benedict XVI, the experience of beauty “leads to a direct encounter with the daily reality of our lives, [...] transfiguring it, making it radiant and beautiful”; Benedict XVI, Meeting with Artists. 2009. Not surprisingly, the ‘world of the books’ has been seen as the sole key to comprehend ‘the book of the world’; cf. Serrano, El mundo de los libros ilumina el libro del mundo. 2009.
29 Searle, Expression and Meaning..., 77.
30 Ivi, 90.
31 John Paul II. Letter to Artists....
soul” and “the unity of the self”. Indeed, the exposure to beauty predisposes the viewer to the good and the true, and this is profoundly edifying because it enables people to recognize the difference between beauty and ugliness and, consequently, between good and evil, “making the soul graceful”. This pedagogical recognition consists of the change that the individual experiences in life and which actually starts in the soul.

According to Solzhenitsyn, since beauty is a privileged route to both the true and the good, art is important in helping the modern world because it has a profound impact on a person’s moral character. This is the original contribution which artists offer to the history of culture. Not surprisingly, in The Idiot by Dostoevskij, one of his characters asserts that the world will be saved by beauty.

Moreover, works of art and the beauty they convey, understood in the light of the Ancients, enable the viewer to experience ‘the joy of knowing’, which is intellectual enjoyment. This joy allows people to come into contact with their true selves, with their longing to be united “with the True, the Good, and the Beautiful”, and this desire causes a sort of “remaking of the self”, a redirecting of one’s own life “to the true good and the ultimate telos”.

This ‘remaking’ and ‘redirecting’ of man’s life has been here considered as the effect of a dialogical interaction between artists and their public. This interaction should comprise the first concrete step of a personal habit change towards a consequential, wider social change. Further studies may explore – from a didactic point of view – other forms of this kind of dialogical interaction across different European languages and expressions of art.

WORKS CITED


33 Ivi, 92.
36 Ramos, Art, Truth..., 106.


