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Attraverso l'arte

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INDICE

Introduzione	VII
--------------	-----

PARTE PRIMA

FRANCESCA BONICALZI Conoscere e/è immaginare	3
---	---

RICHARD M. LIDDY Art Education: Perspectives from Lonergan, Langer and Maslow	13
--	----

LUCIA GASPARINI Di fronte all'arte, forma significativa. Lettura degli scritti di S.K. Langer alla luce di un interesse educativo	23
---	----

CECILIA DE CARLI La <i>vis</i> educativa di Hilla Rebay alle origini del Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum di New York	39
---	----

SARA MEDA Irena Wojnar: l'arte nella formazione della persona	57
--	----

PARTE SECONDA

ERICA FRASCHINI Adulti e patrimonio artistico: osservazioni metodologiche intorno a un'esperienza	75
---	----

GRAZIA MASSONE Imparare dall'arte: è possibile un incontro tra i bambini e gli artisti?	91
---	----

Gli Autori	105
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RICHARD M. LIDDY

Art Education: Perspectives from Lonergan, Langer and Maslow

Educare attraverso l'arte: il pensiero di Lonergan, Langer e Maslow. Bernard Lonergan (1904-1984), il filosofo-teologo canadese, spesso faceva riferimento alle opere di Susanne K. Langer (1895-1985) nei suoi scritti sulla coscienza artistica e simbolica. Le analisi sull'arte di Langer, in particolare il suo lavoro del 1953, *Sentimento e forma*, considerava l'arte come l'oggettivazione di modelli puramente esperienziali che ci permettono di prestare attenzione e di «vedere» ciò che altrimenti potremmo ignorare. L'arte educa l'attenzione in modo che vediamo – o sentiamo o percepiamo – le più profonde dimensioni dell'esperienza. Congruenti con queste idee di Lonergan e Langer sono quelle di Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) sull'importanza della «formazione esperienziale» secondo cui le persone vengono educate a identificare in se stesse «esperienze di apice» su cui altrimenti potrebbero facilmente passare oltre. Questa tecnica di auto-appropriazione, comune sia a Lonergan che a Maslow, sembrerebbe avere importanti implicazioni per l'educazione artistica. Inoltre, imparare a identificare le dimensioni chiave nella nostra esperienza potrebbe anche aprirci al «sacro». Nelle parole del teologo Karl Rahner (1904-1984), l'arte concentra e allena la nostra attenzione verso «l'eterno mistero che è dietro la realtà esprimibile».

1. *Bernard Lonergan*

My interest in this topic comes from the time of my doctoral dissertation on an American woman philosopher of art, Susanne K. Langer. I became familiar with Langer's work through my own teacher, Bernard Lonergan, a Canadian Jesuit, who taught at the Gregorian University in Rome from 1953 to 1965. I will say something about Lonergan before speaking about Langer, art and education.

Lonergan was born in Canada in 1904 and died there in 1984. As a young man he entered the Jesuits who sent him to study philosophy in England in the late 1920s. He did not especially like the scholastic philosophy he was taught there and instead dedicated himself to understanding the processes of human understanding: scientific, philosophical, artistic, economic, etc. In that quest he was helped by the introspective philosophy of John Henry Newman and also by the philosophical

works of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, but his aim always was to understand how we understand today, in a highly scientific environment: what goes on in us as we have an insight, an «aha!» experience, a moment of enlightenment.

In 1957 Lonergan published his seminal work, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, in which he used the examples of mathematicians and scientists to highlight the human spirit's drive to understand, to discover the cause, to find the reason why – and the outline of the world revealed by understanding such understanding. In the introduction to *Insight* he summed up the point of his book in this way:

Thoroughly understand what it is to understand, and not only will you understand the broad lines of all there is to be understood but also you will possess a fixed base, an invariant pattern, opening upon all further developments of understanding.

Lonergan also says in the introduction to his book that someone who comes to an understanding of what his book is all about will have an experience of «startling strangeness». The world will no longer look the same to you. You will never again be able to be a philosophical naturalist, considering nature to be some *blob* 'out there', nor yourself to be such a *blob*, nor God. Even though you might now and then act in a hedonistic or materialistic way, you will never again be able to reasonably be a materialist. You will know in your heart of hearts, in your deepest mind that the world is more than that – fundamentally because you are deeper than that.

Nor, in the realm of art will you be able to be just an aesthete, seeking experience just for the sake of experience; art will be connected to the rest of your life – your search for meaning, your search for love; even your search for God. Art will itself not be a *blob* without an inner and conscious relation to the rest of being.

2. *Transformation*

Now in Lonergan's writings 'transformation' was an important term. In fact, he would say that in a real sense transformation is the name of the game. It is what human life is all about. Such transformation can take place on various levels. There is obviously the moral level in which one moves from living on the basis of merely desires and fears, pleasures and pains, to living on the basis of values: what is the genuinely good thing to do: the genuinely reasonable thing, the authentically loving thing.

Then there is religious transformation, more commonly called ‘conversion’, a transformation that is at the core of the religions of the world. Lonergan calls such transformation a ‘falling in love’ and a ‘being in love’ in a fundamental way: a way that opens up new horizons for a person.

And then, finally, there is intellectual transformation or conversion: the attainment of clarity about our minds and about the world. It is this that is at the core of Lonergan’s analysis of human consciousness and of the philosophy.

Now, as I mentioned, as a young student I was sent to Rome and there encountered Lonergan as my theology teacher. At the time he was ‘over my head’ and I did not understand what he was talking about; but with the encouragement of some other students I dedicated myself to trying to understand what he was saying – and I spent a good part of a year, day in and day out studying his seven-hundred page work – filled with scientific examples – *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*.

That effort culminated one particular day when, all of a sudden, all the pieces fell into place and I began to understand what he meant. Words which previously had lain inert on the pages of the book began to jump off the page. Sections in the beginning of the book began to connect with sections at the end of the book and, most of all, I began to identify in myself, the act of understanding and other conscious acts that he talks about in the book. He called that process the process of self-appropriation.

3. *Susanne Langer and Art*

At the same time as I was coming to understand Lonergan’s work, I had to chose a doctoral dissertation and, after some thought and searching, I decided to do one on art, specifically the philosophy of art of an American woman philosopher by the name of *Susanne K. Langer*. Langer taught at a number of universities in the United States and her works on symbolism, art and mind are still in print.

Lonergan very much appreciated Langer’s work, specifically her book *Feeling and Form*, and for various reasons I felt that by exploring her work on art and comparing it with Lonergan’s, I could learn a great deal. After all, I was living at the time in the midst of the great city of Rome, a living museum of world art. Also, the Second Vatican Council was going on within the Catholic Church with great discussions on the liturgy and especially on the role of symbols in the liturgy. I thought my work on Lonergan and Langer would help me understand what was go-

ing on within the church also. (Perhaps I had also fallen in love with the letter 'L': Lonergan, Langer, Liddy, liturgy – Chi sa?).

For Langer, the creation of art is not emotional release; it is not symptomatic. It involves insight, the focal point of Lonergan's work. For the artist grasps forms in images – forms and patterns that are purely experiential – such as the patterns in a design or the melody in sounds or the feeling expressed in a figure of speech – and the artist grasps those patterns *as significant*, as particularly pleasing, as a significant juxtaposition or combination and instead of expressing his or her understanding in words or theories, turns and creates an object of art. Both Langer and Lonergan define art as the objectification of purely experiential patterns. Art is a way of capturing the elemental meanings found in subjective experiences. The artist objectifies those experiences in works of art in order to come to know those experiences better himself or herself and to allow others to participate in those significant experiences.

Such purely experiential patterns, which the artist grasps in artistic insight, are not subordinated to any other purpose than the joy of experiencing. In our practical living our vision and hearing and listening – our experiencing in general – is subordinated to the practical tasks of getting by in a ready-made world. But aesthetic experience frees us from such practical and intellectual concerns in order that we may enjoy the experience itself: the forms of design, of colors, of sound, of movement in dance, of being in a place in architecture, of what life feels like in literature. Moralistic or propagandistic motives can destroy aesthetic and artistic experience. So also can a self-centered, utilitarian or 'what's in it for me' attitude.

Langer adds something else to her analysis; and that is that these purely experiential patterns that the artist seeks to express are filled with feeling. There is a rhythm to the music, a certain something in the design, a reflection in art of organic depths. Such depths reflect feelings of awe, fascination, the uncanny: an openness to the world, to adventure, to greatness, to goodness, to majesty.

While Langer emphasized the fact that art reflected such depths, Lonergan would see in such organic depths a striving, a longing, a yearning for a fuller completion; an orientation that finds partial fulfillment in the artist's desire to know the patterns of human experience and to create reflections of such patterns. It is in the artist herself that the organic depths attain consciousness, 'become luminous', and become tinged with the infinite horizon of being and beauty.

Some people will say that art is an illusion, others that art reveals a fuller profounder reality. But the artistic experience itself does not involve a discussion of the issue. What we can say is that it is opening a new horizon, it is presenting

something that is other, different, novel, strange, new, remote, intimate – all the adjectives that are employed when one attempts to communicate the artistic experience¹.

In emphasizing the «organic» character of aesthetic form, Langer notes, for example, the rhythmic character of works of art: the consummation of one event is simultaneously the preparation for another, creating the setting up of new tensions by the resolution of former ones. Thus,

Decoration may be highly diversified or it may be very simple; but it always has what geometric form, for instance, a specimen illustration in Euclid, does not have – motion and rest, rhythmic unity, wholeness. Instead of mathematical form, the design has – or rather, *it is* – «living» form, though it need not represent anything living, not even vines...².

The effect of this «life» within each work of art is to make the perceptible forms *more perceptible*.

The immediate effect of good decoration is to make the surface, somehow, *more visible*; a beautiful border on textile not only emphasizes the edge but enhances the plain folds, and a regular all-over pattern, if it is good, unifies rather than diversifies the surface. In any case, even the most elementary design serves to concentrate and hold one's vision to the expanse it adorns³.

Different materials are said to have different feelings⁴.

A competent painter, accepting a commission for a portrait, a mural, or any other 'kind' of work, simply trusts that, contemplating the powers of the medium, he will have a sudden insight into the feeling it can express; and working with it, he will pursue and learn and present that feeling. What he is likely to say, however, is that if he thinks about the commissioned subject long enough, he will know 'what to do with it'⁵.

For Lonergan organic depths find understanding in the human act of understanding that presages the future: the plus, the more that can be found in human experience. It is that more, that plus that a purely naturalist view of the world cannot explain.

¹ *Topics in Education*, p. 216.

² *Ibi*, p. 63.

³ *Ibi*, pp. 88-89.

⁴ *Ibi*, p. 85.

⁵ *Ibi*, pp. 389-390.

4. *Art as Schooling Attention*

Recently, I was reading about the whole move to interiority in modern philosophy. From Descartes whose struggle culminated in his «Cogito ergo sum», to Kant who consolidated this emphasis on the thinking subject, to Hegel who saw individual consciousness as participating in the grand narrative of Spirit with a capital «S», to Kierkegaard who emphasized individual decision making, to Schopenhauer to emphasized the world itself as will and artistic creation. At the end of this list Lonergan's point was that human consciousness itself is a revolving structure moving from experiencing to understanding to judging to deciding as we influence and are influenced by the worlds we build. But all of this happens consciously, in the interiority of the human person.

The sculptor contemplating a block of marble is struck by an insight of what might, through his skilful work, emerge from the block. Or a poem might begin, as one poet put it, as a «lump in the throat». Just as the scientist Poincare had his insight into the equivalence of mathematical formulae as he was stepping onto a streetcar in Vienna while conversing with a friend, so insights happen where and when they happen; what is important is that we notice them and the conditions that might facilitate their more frequent happening in the future.

Recently I had the experience of teaching a course on Catholicism and Art in which I lectured a great deal about the meaning of Catholicism and the meaning of art; but it was not until the students themselves got up to present their research on art, art that reflected the spirituality of concrete people, that I realized «This is the missing piece: this is what I've been looking for in this course: the students' own experiences as they experienced and came to understand – to some degree – the experiences and creations of others. We can go on and on with words, but for the words to be alive, they have to be rooted in experience and expressive of experience.

So it is with art. From Lonergan's perspective, from the viewpoint of an adequate theory of interiority, art education would consist largely in helping people to see, to hear, to feel; but not just to see, to hear and to feel – but also to be able to have the leisure to link the experiences with each other and with the rest of life. Wordsworth called poetry «emotion recollected in tranquility». It is not just emotion but emotion questioned and understood and expressed.

The key thing is that whereas philosophy and science are abstractions that give you a universal slice of reality, art gives you the concrete experience of life with all of its attendant feelings, tensions and resolutions. While science asks what *de facto* is happening in this or

that dimension of the world, and philosophy tries to ask the questions, What is human life? or What is the world? art helps you to attend to the actual experience of life. Some philosophers, such as Lonergan and Langer, can give you a vocabulary for talking about art – and it would seem that that is very important for art educators – art takes you away from ordinary living so that you can return there in a fuller way.

It is withdrawal from practical living to explore possibilities of fuller living in a richer world. Just as the mathematician explores the possibilities of what physics can be, so the artist explores possibilities of what life, ordinary living can be. There is an artistic element in all consciousness, in all living. Our settled modes have become humdrum, and we may think of all our life simply in terms of utilitarian categories. But in fact the life we are living is a product of artistic creation. We ourselves are products of artistic creation in our concrete living, and art is an exploration of potentiality⁶.

For art helps you to see more deeply and clearly and in new ways. And music helps you to hear in new ways – it helps you to attend to your experience of hearing.

And literature helps you through the very words the writer uses to «feel» what concrete life is like.

5. *Attention*

So «attention» is so important in art. And in fact, art helps you to develop your ability to pay attention – not to be distracted, not to be so caught up in the world of practicality that you miss what is going on right in front of you.

Bernard Lonergan speaks about the «transcendental precepts», that is, the exigencies that are built into our very being. They not only drive our conscious being but they pick out what is worth seeking. Such precepts are: be attentive; be intelligent; be reasonable; be responsible – and from a humanistic and religious point of view: be loving. Such precepts drive the whole self-correcting wheel of our consciousness: from experience to understanding to judging to deciding. But the whole begins with paying attention.

In a wonderful article, «Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies With a View to the Love of God», the French writer, Simone Weil,

⁶ *Ibi*, p. 217.

wrote about the importance of attention in intellectual development⁷. Twenty minutes of genuine attention, Weil contended, is worth more than hours of muscle-tightening and stressed efforts at trying to control the material. And the development of such attention, Weil also contended, is not unconnected to our ability to truly attend to each other in interpersonal relationships and even to our ability to pray.

So attention is so important in art as it helps us attend to colors and shapes and feelings and patterns that we experience – it helps us to so attend to these patterns of experience that they are «truer» or «more true» than ordinary experience.

6. *Abraham Maslow and Art Education*

Let me add to this something about education. And for this I refer to the work of the American psychologist, *Abraham Maslow*, who spoke of ‘self-actualizing’ people as those who were able to take advantage of ‘peak experiences’. Everyone, Maslow said, has peak experiences: that is, experiences of beauty, of goodness, of insight, of love. But not everyone, he said, is fully aware of such experiences going on within them; nor do they know how to pay attention to such experiences, to take advantage of them and to create the conditions for multiplying them and thus undergoing a transformation in one’s own life. To do that, he said – to have a world of self-actualizing people whose lives are filled with peak experiences – requires a new kind of education; that is, an education in which people are shown how to pay attention to their own conscious experiences, and to allow those experiences to bear their full fruit.

Maslow’s analysis has implications for education. For the education that is needed, Maslow asserted, is an education in which people are encouraged to become aware of their own capacities for self-actualization. For the education that really means something is the one that involves people personally. Education at its best does not just point to *other people’s* experience and understanding; primarily it points to *one’s own*. As Maslow put it:

All this implies another kind of education, that is, an experiential education... [I]t also implies another kind of communication... What we are implying is that in the kind of experiential teaching which is being discussed here, what is necessary to do first is to change the person and to change his awareness of himself. That is, we must make him aware of the fact that peak-experiences go on inside

⁷ S. WEIL, *Waiting On God*, London 1950, pp. 66-75, French edition, *Attente de Dieu*, 1950.

himself. Until he has become aware of such experience and has this experience as the basis for a comparison, he is a non-peaker; and it is useless to try to communicate to him the feel and the nature of peak-experience. But if we can change him, in the sense of making him aware of what is going on inside himself, then he becomes a different kind of communicatee. He now knows what you are talking about when you speak of peak-experiences; and it is possible to teach him by reference to his own weak peak-experiences how to improve them, how to enrich them, how to enlarge them, and also how to draw the proper conclusions from them...

...In all of these we may use the paradigm that the process of education (and of therapy) is helping the person to become aware of internal, subjective, sub-verbal experiences so that these experiences can be brought into the world of abstraction, of conversation, of communication, of naming, etc., with the consequence that it immediately becomes possible for a certain amount of control to be exerted over these hitherto unconscious and uncontrollable processes⁸.

It takes one to know one, therefore. One needs to focus on one's own aesthetic experiences in order to communicate about aesthetic experience to others. And others have to be encouraged to get in touch with their own experiences in order to know what you are talking about. And, as Lonergan would emphasize, if you know what you are talking about then you can communicate with others. As the Latin saying goes, «*Rem tene, verba sequuntur*». Know what you are talking about – and the words will come.

7. Art and Holiness

Finally, since this is a religiously founded university, let me add a few words on the relationship of art and art education to goodness and holiness. At first blush it would seem that there is no such relationship. For we all know good and perhaps holy people who have no aesthetic sense; and on the other hand, we know of great artists who obviously were not holy.

On the other hand, a modern Catholic theologian by the name of Karl Rahner wrote several essays on the relationship of art to goodness and holiness⁹. For Rahner our experience of God is contextual: we are in this world; we are, as the title of his book put it, «spirit-in-the-world»

⁸ A. MASLOW, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*, Viking Press, New York 1970, pp. 89f.

⁹ I am indebted for the references in this section of the paper to the work of my colleague at Seton Hall, K.C. Choi.

and that contextuality reflects the importance of human experience in the reception of divine grace. Theology itself can often consist in long reasonings without reference to such experience and the artistic-poetic touch can often be lacking. On the other hand, for Rahner art is intrinsically religious. It can in principle open the person up to religious experience. Poetry, for example, can be a presupposition for truly hearing the Word of God. Were not the psalms themselves poetic reflections of life and longing?

The English novelist and philosopher, Iris Murdoch, made the suggestion that art can be a school for goodness. «The good artist», she said, «is not necessarily wise at home, though I would feel that the artist had at least a ‘starting point’». Elsewhere she wrote:

Art is not a diversion or a side issue; it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*».

While art may not make one holy, its significance lies in its capacity to focus our attention/perception/vision or our senses. To quote Rahner again, it focuses and trains our attention to «the eternal mystery which is behind expressible reality». Or Murdoch:

Art shows us the world, our world and not another one, with a clarity which startles and delights us simply because we are not used to looking at the real world at all.