

BOOK REVIEW

GIOVANNI MATTEUCCI, *IL SENSIBILE RIMOSSO. ITINERARI DI ESTETICA
SULLA SCENA AMERICANA*

Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2015.

Samuele Sartori

University of Milano

samuele.sartori@studenti.unimi.it

Il sensibile rimosso (translatable as *The Repressed Perceptible*) published by Mimesis Edizioni in 2015, is a recent book written by Giovanni Matteucci, full professor of aesthetics at the University of Bologna. The book's purpose is to provide the reader with a critical and at the same time historical overview of the problems concerning the complex relationship between sensibility and aesthetics. The book basically focuses on how some important American philosophers have developed these problems from the beginning to the end of the 20th century. Matteucci drives us across heterogeneous languages and theories of different thinkers, many of whom have remained almost unknown to the European audience for many years (especially in Italy, where a critical analysis of these texts was still missing until recent times).

Il sensibile rimosso is divided in two parts. The first part, entitled *Profili*, aims to analyze some 20th-century American authors, such as Santayana, Dewey and Langer, whose aesthetic theories did not always receive an adequate academic attention due to their distance from analytic philosophy. In Matteucci's view, these authors of the first half of the 20th century share the same fundamental focus in their researches, which are all aimed at understanding the epistemological and phenomenological relationship between aesthetics and sensibility, often enriched with anthropological arguments. The main theme of the philosophies of these authors is the potential content of the perceptible, which, in Santayana, takes the form of a search for the sense of beauty, conceived as an intrinsic, positive and objectified value, immanently springing from the tension between the perceivable reality and the ideal dimension.

Beauty is therefore the main aesthetic manifestation in which we apperceive the *synolon* of experience and value; the latter cannot be separated by means of intellectual fantasies, but must be always presented in a relational and – at the same time – immanent way. Hence, for Santayana, there are two consequences: first, something like an emotional perceptive consciousness becomes an essential feature of the human being *qua* being; secondly, the overthrow of Kantian epistemology which states the primacy of transcendental categories over perception. Matteucci, in his analysis of Santayana's book *The Sense of Beauty*, states that Santayana's search is aimed at the clarification of the relationship between the material empirical element and the value.

In Dewey's work, this issue is developed through a study of the qualitative structures of experience, and also enriched by anthropological nuances. To do this, Dewey raises strong objections to any dualism that contrasts facts and values on a practical level, matter and form on an aesthetic level, and what is mental and what is corporeal on a metaphysical and epistemological level. In order to succeed in his criticism Dewey uses a pragmatic notion of the real, which collects in itself both poles of the respective dyads. As Matteucci points out, Dewey's naturalistic pragmatism pays attention to both everyday experience and the artworld. Everyday experiences are understood not as intra-psychic facts, but rather as the result of dynamic functional interactions where a plastic subjectivity is able, through an active perception, to let emerge the real already loaded with meanings. Meanings, in turn, are understood as the result of a semantic relationship between the organism and the environment. Principally, art is for Dewey a powerful experience (or, as he famously says, "*an* experience") for two reasons: first, the experience of art improves the active and performative character of perception. This affects the power of signification of the object, and consequently the extension of the polysemous character of meanings. Secondly, art is conceived as human *poiesis* which turns what is not perceivable into the perceivable. Due to the presence of a new artistic medium, it is possible to have

a new experience with its peculiar strengths, qualities and meanings. According to Matteucci, Dewey is the philosopher who has expanded the concept of experience without opposing it to imagination, and by doing so he also conceived of perception and art as connected to each other on the basis of a philosophical-anthropological conception. Therefore, he represents one of the philosophers most dissociated from metaphysical concepts, as well as from analytical or hypostatized definitions.

Matteucci focuses then on Susanne Langer and, in particular on her argumentations in support of a logic of feeling that takes place in the symbolic form of the artwork. In the book *Philosophy in a New Key* Langer's theory of symbolization is already set out. Two types of non-exclusive symbolisms are proposed here: in the representational logic signs are univocally related to the significance, while in the presentational logic symbols immanently contain a plurality of meanings. Thus symbolization is linked to human sensibility and has a functional-evolutionary role that allows us to plunge semantically, before than ontologically, in our world environment. This theory requires that the contents of perception are already symbolized by our senses which have specific categories of understanding. Therefore, the human mind is primarily a stream of symbols, which is pre-rationative but not pre-rational, and only later a stream of consciousness. A fundamental consequence of Langer's logic is the following: the reception of appearance, no longer labelled as merely fictitious, but already loaded of meanings due its immanent logic in the iconic-representational sensibility.

The last author treated in Matteucci's *Profili* is Richard Wollheim, an atypical analytic philosopher both for his phenomenological references (mainly Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne) and for his interpretations of Wittgenstein which leads him to confute the extensional theory of art and also the intensional one. In *Art and its Objects*, a new reading of Wittgenstein's linguistic theory is given. Particularly, the notion of form of life is

interpreted as the hybridization of naturalness and historicity. Art in its material component is, for Wollheim, a language with its practical and anti-elementarist grammar which has the peculiarity of mixing sign and referent. To understand this, it is important to go back to the relationship between perception and understanding. Wollheim understands our sight as something grammatically and phenomenologically structured; therefore humans have a representational view which enables them to *seeing-in* perception, understood as the immanent interconnection between perceptible content, expression and emotions.

The second part of the book is entitled *Problemi e prospettive*, and its purpose is to analyze some among the most important themes of contemporary analytic aesthetics. The first theme on which Matteucci focuses is the complex relation between sensibility and judgment in contemporary debates on aesthetic properties. Matteucci analyzes the contributions of a large group of authors on this argument, such as Sibley, Beardsley, Kivy, Walton, Scruton, Petit, Lennon, Azton, Bender, Zangwill, and Zemach. They are divided in two streams which are still in conflict: the former thinks that it is possible to outline an intersubjective logic of aesthetic judgments; the latter considers it as impossible to identify this logic, and leaves to the individual and her personal judgment the ability to identify and formulate aesthetic properties. Still on the relationship between sensibility and faculty of judgment, Matteucci individuates another classic problem of philosophical aesthetics – namely the connections between appearance and judgment.

By eschewing reductive prospective such as classical empiricism and absolute idealism, analytic philosophy seems to return to Kantian apriorism, on the one hand, and to a phenomenological matrix, on the other. While Kantian apriorism holds that the principles that structure our judgements are prior to our experience, phenomenology moves in the opposite direction by stating the dependence of judgement from perception.

As a contemporary supporter of the first perspective Matteucci enquires McDowell, according to whom it is possible to theorize an immanent structuring of perceptions immediately conceptualised, in a perfect congruence between sensibility and intellect and without space for appearances. Instead, Crane's philosophy risks to propose a simplification of the phenomenological notion of intentionality that leads him to a more empirical path than the Husserlian one. Matteucci concludes the chapter by reminding us that the relation between appearance and judgment is also a main focus of Dewey's and Wollheim's philosophies, the only two philosophers who provided an original interpretation without trying to reduce the sense to a presumed origin from which all experience should result.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, the analysis of the problem of artistic creativity starts with Elster's philosophy. In his opinion, creativity does not concern the authenticity or originality of the artwork but must necessarily be subjected to constraints, exactly as his theory of pre-commitment demonstrates: only within these constraints it is possible to maximize the aesthetic and creative value of the work, whereas without them the human being would be unable to make projects and create anything. However, this theory is not fully satisfying because it formalizes creativity up to the point of paralyzing it in a sort of causal determinism where expressive freedom has no resonance. So, in order to escape the fallacies of Elster's theories, Matteucci also makes use of some conceptual tools provided by Bourdieu and Ryle.

The last chapter of the book is entirely dedicated to Shusterman's philosophical and anthropological concept of the aesthetic field, starting from the overcoming of the dichotomy between a natural and a historical aesthetics. Shusterman proposes the idea of a historicized naturalness that can also be linked to Bourdieu's concept of historical transcendence and Gehlen's idea of artificial nature. The aesthetic field is read by Matteucci as the first acknowledgment of pragmatic aesthetics in our contemporaneity, inasmuch as this concept represents an attempt to interpret the dynamic interrelationship between history and nature. On this basis, we can conclude that the aim of the book is a sort of rehabilitation of these pragmatic and anthropological issues in aesthetics within both the Italian and the international philosophical context. The leftover, for future philosophers, consists in some significant conceptual tools through which engage in new researches.