

# ***Metaphor and Canon in Paul Ricoeur: From an Aesthetic Point of View***

Alberto Martinengo\*

*University of Torino*

ABSTRACT. Ricoeur's theory of metaphor can be easily reduced to one thesis: metaphorical language originates from the introduction of rule-governed violations inside a given code. These violations do not contradict the capacity, on the part of language, to produce a reference to the world, but rather feed and renew it.

The aim of this essay is to emphasize the aesthetic implications of this thesis. In fact, the model of the rule-governed violations can be applied to the phenomenon of artistic revolutions, to highlight the precise rules of violation through which the twisting of a given aesthetic canon happens. The essay is dedicated to a specific case study: the artistic revolution of the avant-garde, in the early twentieth century. Here, the model of rule-governed violations helps clarify the way in which the overthrowing of the Western naturalistic canon occurs in some specific movements of the avant-garde.

Metaphor is one of the fundamental devices through which a determinate linguistic code renews and develops itself. *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur's text which is most easily ascribable to an "aesthetic" sensitivity, starts from this simple — and perhaps banal — thesis. It is a thesis which, on the one hand, highlights an evident continuity with Ricoeur's reflections on the symbol; but which, on the other hand, points out a series of new problems, many of which — and it is precisely the case for the aesthetic implications — remain for all intents and purposes an *unicum* in Ricoeur's work.

This sensibility to the aesthetic problem has at its core the theoretical nucleus of *The Rule of Metaphor* itself — that is the referential strength of

---

\* Email: a.martinengo@gmail.com

metaphorical language, its intrinsic normativity, which allows metaphor to say something about the world. As it has been noted, Ricoeur's theoretical model shows relevant implications from a philosophical point of view, and sets a very "theory of metaphorical reference" which is of great interest (Ricoeur 1986, pp. 216-256). But the fact remains that its consequences are more general, and involve many other domains, first of which is precisely that of aesthetics. From this point of view, beyond the explicit intentions of Ricoeur, but in a sense which owes entirely to *The Rule of Metaphor*, the discourse on the metaphorical reference seems to pave the way to a more general reflection on art, and in particular on that which we could define as the *structure of artistic revolutions*<sup>1</sup>. A generalization that — in the version that will be given here — has among its most significant case studies the complex phenomenon of the avant-garde, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

### ***I. Metaphor and World: the "Ontological Vehemence"***

Ricoeur's interest in the problem of metaphor arrives from afar and is placed precisely in his analyses of the symbol as a universe of language which says something about the world, out of the context of pure description<sup>2</sup>. The unsolved problem in those reflections — and the starting point of *The Rule of Metaphor* — is that of constructing a theoretical model which can justify the referential pretense of non-descriptive languages and the innovation that such languages produce. It is the idea that Ricoeur summarizes in the notion of "ontological vehemence", that is, the hypothesis that apparently autoreferential languages, such as the symbolical and the metaphorical, manifest yet an impassable ontological value.

To say it concisely: in what measure — asks Ricoeur — does the symbolical universe maintain reference to the world? And, secondly, is such a universe concluded in itself, or does it possess devices that guarantee its evolution and vitality? The response that *The Rule of Metaphor* gives consists, precisely, in a development of the referential function of language,

<sup>1</sup> The expression is used for example by Vattimo 1988, pp. 90-112. Vattimo uses it, however, in a different context and in a more delimited sense than ours.

<sup>2</sup> The reference is obviously to the essays published in Ricoeur 1967.

beyond its purely descriptive dimension. Or, to be more explicit, in the direction of a *split-up* between reference and description: a rehabilitation of the non-descriptive languages in their capacity to intentionalize the world. Which can appear to be in turn paradoxical. But Ricoeur's strong argument is exactly in the second thesis, according to which this reference to the world does not occur *against* the devices that make language evolve in an anti-descriptivist mode: it does not come about by circumscribing the possibilities of development of language, but rather *through* them. In other words, the vitality of language (do not forget the original title of the volume is *La métaphore vive*) is in all respects one of the instruments through which language itself guarantees a reference to the world.

This presupposition, in its complexity and in its apparent ambiguity, is the real core of Ricoeur's discourse. And it is a hypothesis which Ricoeur arrives at, applying to metaphor the notions of *category mistake* and *sort-crossing*, which *The Rule of Metaphor* draws above all from Colin Murray Turbayne and Gilbert Ryle (Ricoeur 1986, pp. 229-239 and pp. 247-256). In Ricoeur's reading, the *category mistake* is a linguistic device that moves from the initial signification of a word and reflects it on different possible levels: a determinate predicate, afferent to specific semantic domains, undergoes a sliding that opens the possibility of synthesis with subjects unrelated to it. This is a crucial point in Ricoeur's theory of metaphor: the metaphor is in fact characterized by an adaptative capacity that is *halfway* between the positive function of polysemy and pure and simple equivocalness. In this way, metaphor becomes for all intents and purposes the space of a linguistic transformation which, on the one hand, abandons the context in which the subject-predicate combination is unique and given once and for all; but which, on the other hand, is kept far from the equivocation, in which the predicate would become completely incomprehensible. In other words: in a "good" metaphor what is at issue is the "calculated advancement" toward a threshold of keeping the subject-predicate combination at a limit-point, beyond which the twisting would only bring the loss of signification.

Along this path, Ricoeur comes to a fundamental problem. As *category mistake*, the metaphor in fact poses a problem of validity of the process: it demands an evaluation criterion, which allows us to distinguish the metaphors among the most general collection of improper predicates.

What is revealed is thus the demand to identify a *canon*, which consents to measure the departure of the metaphor from the “literal” significance of a word while, at the same time, estimating the calculated approach to the threshold of which I have spoken: something that consents to define with precision the context of the living metaphor, to trace its boundaries with respect to other performances of language.

Ricoeur’s analysis proceeds gradually. But the point of departure is obviously the impossibility of activating a principle external to the *metapherein*, in order to declare its validity. From this point of view, the course of *The Rule of Metaphor* is — on the contrary — totally oriented to the identification of the conditions for a criterion internal to the metaphor, with all of the overdetermination implied. The solution to which Ricoeur arrives is mostly known, but it is worth recalling it briefly. If the problem is that of tracing with precision the perimeter of metaphorical language, in *The Rule of Metaphor* the only way out is by overturning the manner in which we are used to considering the effects of the linguistic process of metaphorizing. In other words, the solution is that of overturning the way we habitually think about metaphor, shifting the “burden of proof” from the level of the *articulation* of the sentence, to that of its *comprehension*.

The strategy consists therefore in defining with precision the device that is at the base of metaphorical language. And just starting off along this course it is possible to come to the limits beyond which the metaphorization cannot go. In this sense, *The Rule of Metaphor* explains that the twisting of the ordinary subject-predicate combination is not at all the origin of the process of metaphorizing, but it is (if anything) the result. In other words, we are not speaking of a metaphor when we rewrite the subject-predicate combination: on the contrary, we are forced to rewrite *ex post* such a combination, after having recognized it as a metaphor. The question may appear subtle, but in fact it is crucial. The *metapherein* is built from the “significant response” produced in the face of an otherwise incomprehensible incongruence, by means of the effect that — on the comprehension level — drives a determined lexical tension toward its resolution. If this does not at all simplify the situation, it nevertheless allows to focus exactly on the core of the problem. To move the burden of proof to the level of the comprehension of the world (this is the contextual criterion of the *metapherein*: a metaphor is good, if and only if “it is understood”)

means to clearly affirm that there is no real metaphor, if not as a reference to the world itself.

Is this just a vicious circle? Actually, it is not. To say it another way, if the sentence “this man is a lion” is metaphorical, whereas the sentence “this house is a lion” is not, that depends on the fact that the first one is still saying something about the world, whereas the second is not. And precisely the necessity of maintaining a referential link to the world is the limit beyond which the violation of norms cannot go: the violation of the set semantic rules — which we recognize in every metaphorical sentence — is always subject to a restriction, to a violation rule that guarantees its comprehensibility.

## ***II. The “Structure of Artistic Revolutions” and the Case of the Avant-Gardes***

Ontological vehemence, calculated error, and category mistake are therefore the fundamental elements of Ricoeur’s definition of metaphor. It is precisely the prominence of these notions which clarifies the aesthetic relevance of *The Rule of Metaphor*. Is not actually what Ricoeur says about the process of metaphorizing — as an introduction of “rule-governed violations” inside a given canon (in this case, inside a certain linguistic code) — another way of bringing to light what happens in *every* innovative process, particularly in the aesthetic field? Is it not true that, inside every symbolical system, evolution is a process of successive redefinition of confines between two systems — that of the continuity of set languages and that of their innovation, or much more often, of their twisting?

From this point of view, as we have said, Ricoeur’s analysis of metaphor seems to sketch out what we could identify as the general structure of artistic revolutions; that is to say, that outline of the history of styles according to which it acts as a continual catalyst of innovation and experimentation; a catalyst, however, that has its own counterbalance in the impossibility of eradicating the previous canon, so as to preserve the conditions under which an artistic product is made comprehensible to its public.

Considered through the history of styles, a structure of this sort — in which obviously one should hear the trace of the Kuhnian expression —

has a series of important precedents, and therefore adds nothing to a very classical discourse on aesthetics. What is much less expected is the use that one could make of such a paradigm, not referring to the upheavals criss-crossing the history of styles, but to that very “end” of the history of styles, which we recognize in the revolution of the avant-garde, at the turn of the century. And it is the fundamental passage to which we can bring — again far beyond his explicit intentions — Ricoeur’s discourse.

How that may be possible can be said easily. If in fact the avant-garde represents a point of no return for the history of Western art, it happens because (if not for the first time, at least with a clarity previously unknown) the consummation of the canons is such a central point in reflection and artistic practice, that it makes the avant-garde a fundamental laboratory for the nature of the aesthetic experience itself. A laboratory in which, as it has been noted, what is at stake is not the overturning of determinate traits of Western art, but a more general tension: that which, in a certain way, we can refer to the binomial between experimentation (in the sense of the will to innovate and to search for new paths) and experimentalism (as the tendency to consider breaking with the past as the only source of sense).

In other words, Ricoeur’s model of living metaphor contains a series of implications that seem particularly suitable for reflection on the form of aesthetic experience, in the context of the avant-garde. It is clear that this way of putting the question poses two preliminary difficulties, due — on the one hand — to the risk of dealing with “one” poetics of the avant-garde, as if it would be a programatically unitary model, and — on the other hand — to perform the same operation as regards the philosophical interpretations of art in the first decades of the twentieth century, something that is still more difficult than the first. But if these two operations are improper, what we can do is at least to identify a series of fundamental junctions of the avant-garde — junctions that in the different artistic schools of the avant-garde obtain very different results, if not frankly opposite ones, and yet fully mark the discussions of those years.

In this sense, the most relevant fact — but also the most banal — in any philosophical reading of the avant-gardes is without a doubt the *spreading*

of the manifestos<sup>3</sup>. And this is a decisive phenomenon not only in general terms, but also for the problem that interests us here. The centrality of the manifestos (and of the theoretical reflection by the artists themselves on their own production) represents in fact, in the most obvious way, the artists' will to think about the experimentation and the violation of the canon, not in generically opposing terms, but *through the lens of a new normativity*. Of course, this is a fundamental point for understanding the philosophical relevance of the avant-garde. And it is so, because it underlines a fact that is all but accidental in the way the artists of the early twentieth century intend the deflagration of tradition: a revolution which is always performed in the name of the search for a new norm, that controls — and this is the point — the operation with which the preceding normativity is overturned.

Here the hypothesis of reading the avant-garde through such notions as the rule-governed violation becomes clearer. But it is necessary to proceed step-by-step to justify it in all of its details. If in fact the proliferation of the manifestos is without a doubt a common element to the first avant-gardes, the moment in which it reaches a decisive point — for the avant-garde in general, and for the problem that interests us here — is represented by a group of artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, the *Blue Rider*, and the different schools of abstract art. What emerges with clarity in these authors, who are nevertheless different in their theoretical assumptions and outcomes? To say this in a very schematic way, what is clarified is the impossibility of reading their poetics in a purely *gnoseological* sense: a reading that would turn the technical-linguistic experimentation into the promotion of a different comprehension of reality, outside the premises of the conceptual knowledge; a reading that would individuate the reason for being of these poetics in the identification of an originary moment of experience, starting from which the world itself is rearticulated differently. Now, if a *gnoseological* reading is definitely true for some specific schools — from the cubist painting to the poetics of the “technical object” (Futurism, above all) — it seems particularly unsuitable to interpret the poetics that no longer propose to think of the origin, hidden beneath the factual, but — to say it with Kandinsky — to put “next to the ‘real’ world a new

---

<sup>3</sup> See for exemple Vattimo 2008, pp. 29-56.

world that apparently has nothing to do with ‘reality.’”

As we can see, such a characterization does not go just for Kandinsky, but is symptomatic of a more diffuse feeling in the first avant-gardes. And it explains exactly why in this sense the preference of some of these painters for the notion of “concrete art,” rather than contradicting the category of abstract art, more properly declines its inspiration: concrete art is, in fact, the specific language that — not inspired in any way by natural reality, and therefore not deriving any element from it — is not so much the result of an abstraction in the strict sense, but *tout court* the proposal of a *new* reality<sup>4</sup>.

This is the way in which the problem of normativity emerges in the theoretical context of the avant-garde. In the authors whose poetics goes beyond a purely gnoseological reading, a fundamental connotation in the twisting of the canon of Western realism appears. The experimentation has, without any doubt, a disrupting force in relation to the naturalistic principle of Western tradition. But behind it, a sort of “ontological charge” can be identified, a real “theory of reference” that transforms experimentation in the method most adapted to opening a privileged channel to the world: a method that is able to build significations, more and better than the expressive devices habitually used by tradition. In these terms, the affirmation may seem paradoxical and improbable. However, it says something fundamental, if one thinks about it from the perspective of what Ricoeur — in a totally different context — calls “ontological vehemence.” It affirms that the violation of a canon — the canon of occidental naturalism — is the path that a certain section of the first avant-gardes chooses in order to assure, nonetheless, a (new) reference to the world.

However, this is not enough. On the one hand, the model of the rule-governed violations clarifies the spreading of the manifestos which accompanies the revolution of the first avant-gardes, and it brings such a phenomenon to the necessity of *norm*-alizing the violation of norms. But on the other hand, this same model — given that it captures a fundamental trait of the first avant-gardes — imposes to retrace the way in which these

<sup>4</sup> The relationship between abstract art and reality is obviously one of the fundamental problems in understanding the philosophical impact of the avant-garde. From this point of view, the theoretical contribution of Mario De Micheli still remains significant, at least in the European debate. See, in particular, De Micheli 2008, pp. 264-290.

movements identify the threshold beyond which innovation loses its value, transforming itself into a pure exercise in style. If, therefore, these poetics have their theoretical core in the calculated violation of the canon, it is clear that their force is in the subtle equilibrium of experimentation, which founds the success of the work.

In this case, one element above all is central in the first avant-gardes: it is an element which the different schools develop very differently, at times in the sense of legitimizing it, at times in the sense of refuting it. At any rate, it appears fundamental to clarify the problem. The reference is obviously to the political-ideological charge that — sometimes asserted, other times explicitly rejected — animates the discussion of those years, especially in Russia. To reduce it to a schema, it is a debate that opposes, on the one hand, the refutation of “every social and materialistic tendency,” as in the case of the Suprematism of Kazimir Malevich, or the similar polemic contained in the Realistic Manifesto of Naum Gabo; and, on the other hand, the key role that the political element plays in Kandinsky and in the authors belonging to the *Left Front of Arts*, who explicitly affirm — it is at least the case of Kandinsky — that art has an *object*, if and only if it is *political*, in the sense of the projectual gaze into the future.

Therefore the reference to the political reality, as “object” of art, plays a fundamental role in these poetics. And it is a role that, more or less explicitly, reminds us precisely of the radical difference between experimentation and experimentalism. Authors like Kandinsky, Vladimir Tatlin, and — later — Vladimir Mayakovsky or Dziga Vertov shared, apart from the different technical means (painting, literature, cinema), precisely this conviction. If it becomes an innocuous evasion of the traditional canons, the art of the avant-garde loses its most proper political vocation: it overturns this vocation and betrays the revolutionary ideal. In this way, the revolution of the canons becomes artificial and — to use the binomial of which we are speaking — experimentation becomes experimentalism. As in every unaccomplished revolution, experimentalism stops at the breaking of a pre-existent normativity, but does not get to the new one; and in this way it loses not only the possibility of a new reference, but also the opportunity to tap into the reservoir of sense, in an authentic way.

From the perspective of the “ontological vehemence,” thus, the artistic revolution of the avant-gardes consists in this: it is the choice of combin-

ing the violation of norms with the maximization of the ontological consequences of such an act. The paradox of the avant-gardes — that of a norm to follow, in order to twist every other normativity — can be explained in this way: a declared and programmed violation nevertheless has its insurmountable rule in the claim — at once more explicit, at other times more problematic — to set up a world. Everything is permitted in the distortion of the set canon (disintegration of materials, overturning of methods, ambiguous relationship with mass culture, hybridization of genres), provided that it serves to construct a different horizon. And the avant-garde succeeds if the destruction of the forms is functional to a more revolutionary objective: that of creating new worlds.

*Translated from the Italian by Marika Josephson.*

### **References**

- De Micheli, Mario (2008). *Le Avanguardie Artistiche del Novecento* [1959]. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1967). *The Symbolism of Evil* [1960]. Trans. by Emerson Buchanan. New York: Harper and Row.
- Ricoeur, Paul (1986). *The Rule of Metaphor. Multidisciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* [1978]. Trans. by Robert Czerny. London: Routledge.
- Vattimo, Gianni (1988). *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture* [1985]. Trans. by Jon R. Snyder. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Vattimo, Gianni (2008). *Art's Claim to Truth* [1967]. Trans. by Luca D'Isanto. New York: Columbia University Press.