

CHIAROSCURI DELLA BELLEZZA  
Sguardi sul processo artistico e terapeutico

A cura di Roberto Boccalon,  
Rosaria Mignone e Cristina Principale



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del CIPA Meridionale*

MARILYN LAMONICA

## Psychic Balance and Aesthetic Balance

*This paper is dedicated to Martin Bergmann, my teacher, who celebrates his 100th birthday this month. Over the years in a weekly seminar, he has conveyed his far-reaching knowledge of psychoanalytic ideas and he has shared his unique, joyful approach to thinking and learning. Many of the ideas in this paper were generated from readings and discussions in his weekly seminars.*

When I heard the theme of this conference was *Bellezza and Bruttezza*, I asked myself what I could add to the considerable literature on aesthetics from a psychoanalytic perspective. About beauty much has been written: Freud tells us that the aesthetic object: painting, music, sculpture, literature, allows us to experience forbidden longings in a “preserve” free from guilt and anxiety, all made possible by the *ars poetica* of the artist (Freud, 1908). How does the artist allow us to indulge in the pleasure of our comparable fantasies without self-reproach or shame? By altering and disguising the personal and sexual nature of the fantasies.

The essential *ars poetica* lies in the technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us [...]. The writer softens the character of his egoistic daydreams by altering and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies [...]. He goes on to add that our actual enjoyment of an imaginative work proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds [...]. (Freud, 1908)

The focus of this paper is this “liberation of tensions in our minds” and its relation to aesthetic experience. This psychic aspect of creativity is a dynamic process within the artist as well as a communicative process with the beholder. In his paper *Poet and Daydreaming* written in the simpler days of Freud’s topographic theory with an emphasis on forbidden wishes, and its focus on the content of fantasy with its transformation into artistic work, we see that as early as 1908 Freud went beyond a discussion of what was occurring only

in the artist by introducing the relationship between the artist's attempt at a psychic solution embodied in the art work and its effect on the viewer's similar dynamic struggle. In doing so, he anticipated object relations theory's contributions (Loewald, Segal, Bollas) to our understanding of aesthetics by some fifty years.



Fig. 1 - Anonymous , *Unknown*, n/a.

If the disguise or repression of the *ars poetica* is too strong the work is flat and decorative. Boring. If there is not enough disguise the work cannot bypass the superego and it is disturbing or repulsive. Ugly.



Fig. 2 - M. Cook, *Succi*, 2009, Atlanta, Marcia Wood Gallery.



Fig. 3 - Caravaggio, *Bacchus*, ca. 1595, Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

If the work has enough freedom of expression as well as disguise we can enjoy the libidinal instinctual longings in it with little shame or guilt. Beautiful.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 4 - Caravaggio, *Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge*, 1601-1605, Denver, Denver Art Museum.

As he revised his theory, Freud added other tensions in our minds, forces within us that comprise the life-long project involved in seeking psychic balance of contradictory internal forces: libido and aggression, primary and secondary process, the pleasure principle and the reality principle, the life instinct and the death instinct, masculine and feminine; and with his structural theory (1923), the dynamic interplay of id, ego and superego.

### 1 - *Ego Aspects of Beauty*

Some late Freudians have focused on the ego aspects of the aesthetic object. In a lovely spare monograph, *Psychoanalytic Avenues to Art* (1965), Waelder expanded on Freud's ideas making use of structural theory. Waelder reminded us that in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud posited the beginnings of a psychoanalytic aesthetic theory in saying that the pleasure we feel in a clever joke is only partly the release of inhibited sexual and aggressive impulses, but lies also in the surprise and the form. The ego is a problem-solving agent and the aesthetic yield of pleasure in form lies, as Waelder's points out, first in the fact that a solution has been found when the task had seemed unsolvable, or would have been unsolvable by ordinary human efforts; second, in the perfection of a solution; and finally in the elegance, the economy of means (Hagman, 2003). To illustrate these ideas about form, I have chosen four depictions in painting, sculpture and music of one tension in our minds: the tension between libido and aggression in relation to Oedipal themes. If we compare these three representations of Saturn (or Chronos/time) devouring his son, we see a horrifying cannibalistic act. The first, by Goya, seems to erupt directly from the id. Its formal qualities in composition, color and line lead to pure raw emotion – horror, terror, anxiety, revulsion; the indistinct edges of the kneeling father bleeding into a dark black background, the loose, even frenzied, brushwork all add to, and do nothing to mitigate, the primal horror.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that at 73, after his wife's death, Goya moved to his villa where he painted this on the walls of his dining room. At first he filled the walls with idyllic, pastoral



scenes recently discovered through radiography and stratigraphy. These were then covered with the *Black Paintings*. Here we can conjecture that the sweetness of the pastoral did not satisfactorily address the tension between libido and aggression. Further, we can think of the “covering over” process in the *Black Paintings* as a psychic solution of splitting which did not allow the integration of the two.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 5 - F. Goya, *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons*, 1821-1823, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



Fig. 6 - P. Rubens, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, 1636, Madrid, Palacio Real Nuevo.

In the next one by Rubens, painted in a more traditional mode of representation, the balanced composition of a once virile now aging father, the placement in a cloudlike background, lend a “formal disguise” that allows us to think about the subject as a myth, and consider the implications of its symbolic meaning of devouring time, of aging, of Oedipal conflicts between fathers and sons. One critic described the formal qualities of the work as having been

[...] painted [...] with faith, dignity, and even beauty. The horror scene of a man consuming his child is veiled in classical values [...].

Despite the horror of the cannibalistic scene, Rubens fills his canvas with symmetry and light. The principals of classical beauty are employed by Rubens to add a sense of decorum and godliness to mask the grotesque. (Jay Scott Morgan)

Here we see how Rubens' painterly efforts, his *sprezzatura* beguiles us, at least momentarily enough, to allow us to consider implications of divine intervention or fate. Both concepts, of course, provide safe projective containers for our most primitive impulses. The third work of art depicting this theme is a sculpture, *Saturn Devouring One of his Children* from the Workshop of Hendrik de Keyser, formerly in the Marble Gallery at Fredericksburg (1560).



Fig. 7 - H. de Keyser, *Saturn Devouring One of His Children*, 1560, Fredericksburg, Marble Gallery.

One auction catalogue describes the sculpture as a “late-Baroque bronze [...] that is both gorgeous and terrible in form. Despite its apparent narrative of infanticide and cannibalism, the composition was intended as an embodiment of winter, the season of destruction and renewal”. It seems that the formal beauty of the sculpture, the serene composition, the smooth musculature, the classical style have even lulled the art commentator into a benign interpretation involving seasonal renewal.

My last example is the opera *Don Carlo* where Verdi made it easy for us to identify with the son and justify our oedipal outrage at a King who steals his son’s beloved. (Bergmann, personal communication). But Verdi does not leave it at that. He includes the King’s soulful lament, “Ella giammai m’amò” which creates in us a contradictory empathy for the old King and with the Oedipal father who destroys (devours) his son’s happiness. Here the formal beauty of the music allows us to resonate with both father and son and creates compassion where before only outrage existed thus providing us with another opportunity to rework our Oedipal conflicts. We can think of beauty in art as a function of tension and discharge of enduring conflicts, that no matter how settled or active they are within us, are there to be restimulated and reworked. When these conflicts are represented in art they resonate with our own struggle to find a balance with our own internal tensions. However, in my view the beauty of form does more than just resonate. Its transformative power is based on its offering us better and more satisfying compromise formations with our own internal conflicts.

## 2 - Object Relations

The Kleinians explained that the aesthetic object offers the possibility to re-experience and rework the life-long project involved in our aggression, guilt and reparation necessary to maintaining us firmly in the depressive position (Klein 1964, Segal 1991). In this way of thinking there is a continual need to balance internal experience of love and hate, with the hope that love will prevail. Later object relations theorists, notably Bollas, described aesthetic moments as re-

connecting us with the transformational object, that is, the experience of the early mother.

Another set of tensions laid out in object relations theory are those among depressive and paranoid-schizoid and autistic contiguous positions, all three in dynamic equilibrium (Ogden,1989). If there is a collapse into any one of the three modes of experience, the imbalance leads to psychic distress.

### *2.1 - Rothko*

For a fuller exploration we can consider the abstract expressionist, Rothko, to explore the tensions and discharge in form.

Rothko, whose diffused luminous, abstract paintings characterized by their blurry edges, color (English: colour/English USA: color) and sensation without discrete lines, were pure emotion. In the face of multiple losses, Rothko sought out solutions in luminescent color and form. In their presence we are enveloped by the size of the canvases; the sensory quality blurs distinctions of where one mass meets another. Peter Fuller, a Kleinian art critic, suggests that his paintings were an attempt to remedy loss of birth country, loss of father in the first year he arrived in US, and then loss of his mother to depression. He sought a regressive solution in the face of loss. We can think about the tensions in his mind as being torn between a wish for reunion and a rejection of separation and loss. His paintings were all about reunion, a merger fantasy. As long as he was working, the painting kept hope and him alive. In later life, they became darker, grayer, more transparent. They are desolate, empty images that represent despair. A despair as a result of the loss of hope for the regressive merger sought in the paintings, his search for a time before loss that ended in suicide. We may go back momentarily, for a respite, to play, but can never go back for a lasting solution, only forward (Bergmann). When asked what grey and black paintings were about he said simply "they were about death". We can think of Rothko's work as containing the tensions between fusion and separateness and between the pleasure principle and the reality principle. When the artist works with, or should I say, plays with this balance (Winnicott, 1971), often precariously, it can be

thrilling to the viewer. Because as long as the life instinct triumphs over the death instinct in the work, it confirms and supports us in our own internal struggles.



Fig. 8 - M. Rothko, *Orange and Yellow*, 1956, Buffalo, NY, Albright-Knox Gallery.



Fig. 9 - M. Rothko, *Untitled (Black on Grey)*, 1970, Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art.

### 3 - Clinical Case: Art-Making as a Bridge Between Primary and Secondary Process

C. is a performance artist and writer, who throughout her life, because of inadequate separation, felt engulfed and enraged at her mother. When her elderly mother was first ill she called me in a psychotic-like terror at the sight of her mother's blood in the emergency room. After her mother's death she transformed her mother's apartment into a studio and in an intense period of mourning-work used bric-a-brac to construct masks which were horrible and beautiful. Her work began on a level of symbolic equivalent (mother's actual apartment, mother's actual things) and then to symbolization that made a successful sublimation possible (Segal, 1957).

What can we understand about inner balance from this clinical vignette? C. had to come to terms with her destructive fantasies toward her mother. This is what terrified her in the hospital and led to a regression to psychotic primary process thinking. For C. the art-making activity acted as a bridge from the primary process thinking to reality based secondary process thinking (Noy, 1979). Once the bridge is formed to secondary process the experience is then communicable. (Noy, 1979)

I cannot end without a brief mention of Eric Kandell's book on art and neuroscience, *The Age of Insight*, in which he describes the biological response to beauty. According to Kandell, in the beholder beauty does not occupy a different area of the brain from ugliness. Both are part of a continuum, both are encoded by relative changes in activity in the same areas in the brain. In addition, attraction and attachment lead to increases in dopamine and oxytocin in the brain. In conclusion, I would like to mention an anecdote. Some of you may know that Mimma Della Cagnoletta and I first discussed the founding of Art Therapy Italiana sitting on a wooden porch in a rented house in Woodstock. This summer, 30 years later, I was in Woodstock again with a friend visiting galleries full of trite, third rate art. Afterward, we fell into a state of agitated exhaustion with no explanation. I jokingly said we were suffering from Bad Art Syndrome, of too much bad or ugly art. This is in contrast to Graziella Margherini's Stendhal Syndrome (1989) where hysterical-

like symptoms result from too much beautiful art. After reading Kandell, I realized that the galleries were unsuccessful in helping us form what we had anticipated so eagerly, an empathic (oxytocin/dopamine-releasing) relationship with the work and ourselves, and we experienced a depletion instead – a real “downer.” It reminded me of the baby sitting in a high chair in the early infant research videos (Beebe) with an expressionless mother until the baby dissolves physically and emotionally crying and drooping off the side of her seat.

I will end with a quote from Segal in her paper on *Aesthetics* (1952): “Ugliness – destruction – is the expression of the death instinct; beauty – the desire to unite into rhythms and wholes, is that of the life instinct. The achievement of the artist is in giving the fullest expression to the conflict and the union between the two”.

**MARILYN LAMONICA** - MPS is a psychoanalyst and art therapist practicing in New York City. She is a co-founder of Art Therapy Italiana, and has been a teacher, supervisor and is currently on the Board of Directors. She is also a teacher, supervisor and on the Board of Directors of the Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy Study Center, and a supervisor at the Institute of Contemporary Psychotherapy in New York.

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NOTE

<sup>1</sup> These examples are taken from Waelder’s monograph.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Porter describes the quality of painting in the *Black Paintings*: “Goya’s paint surface, ‘so thick, corroded, and mortared; while one admires the daring of its contrasts of tone, the deep chasms of shadow against the glaring highlights that establish the structure of a face, the way (Hughes, 380) a chin or a cheek bone is dragged into being against the surrounding dark by a single oily swipe of a wide, loaded brush”.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps with the exception of *The Dog* which captures sadness as well as desolation, an indication of the capacity for mourning which is only possible when splitting is not longer in ascendance and love and hate are more integrated.



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