

# Editorial

GRAZIA MARCHIANO

The essays I have the pleasure of introducing to readers of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* are a fairly representative sample of the situation, rich and varied in theories and methods, of aesthetics in Italy, reviewed here in its recent past and in some of today's most promising research perspectives.

I will not venture here to express general opinions on a tradition of thought whose roots in this country are far older than the age of *modernity* and the *post-modern* which a certain widespread critical tendency in Italy and elsewhere has almost made a category in its-own right in the phenomenology of contemporary culture. The notable investment of intellectual energy in theorizing an end of modernity by leading thinkers like, in Italy, Gianni Vattimo<sup>1</sup>, and the focusing on modernity as aesthetics in a number of provocative debates and analyses spanning East and West, from Canada to Spain to China<sup>2</sup>, strike one, when viewed from a somewhat ampler perspective, as a last resort on the part of disillusioned reason to cling to a speculative 'time' whose days appear to be number of which, however, it is loth to take leave, out of an intrinsic, radical uncertainty as to the future directions of thought.

A perturbing theme such as this/the future of thought and aesthetic thought in particular/is here treated by Gianni Vattimo in terms of his own theoretical perspective in the first of the six essays included in the present collection. The aim of this collection as a whole is to function as a 'reader' along the pathways of Italian aesthetics in this century.

Aesthetics in Italy/in so far as one can speak of it as an historical subject endowed with its own overall philosophical identity-seems at present to be going through a vital transitional phase. Open to the most prominent trends in European and, to a lesser degree, Anglo-American thought, the twentieth century tradition in Italy is in point of fact the result of a variety of local trends and 'currents' which have been consolidated around certain major thinkers and masters. Aesthetic research centres are today active at the universities of Turin, Pavia, Milan, Venice, Bologna, Florence, Siena, Rome, Salerno, Bari, Cagliari and Palermo. Journals, publishing houses, group projects, and the *Associazione Italiana per gli Studi di Estetica* (AISE) (Italian Society for Aesthetic Studies), founded in 1984 try to ensure that this variegated complex is kept together. In 1990 two conferences, the first at the University of Salerno and the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies in Naples<sup>3</sup>, and the second at the University of Siena<sup>4</sup>, called together

the entire academic community, and in the case of Siena, in two of the three working days, comparison and discussion extended to scholars from three continents (Europe, North America and Eastern Asia), who were invited to illustrate the major trends in twentieth century aesthetics in their respective countries. Considered globally, the two initiatives favoured a constructive stocktaking of the recent history of Italian aesthetics. The aim of this survey is to highlight certain milestones in that history.

The theory of art in Italian idealism and the De Sanctis-Croce line set beside the modern, are the themes around which Stefano Zecchi and Aldo Trione, thinkers who would hardly call themselves Crocean, shape their own original interpretation of Croce's legacy, and its influences in spheres allied to aesthetics: poetic and literary criticism, as well as the strong trace left by the idealist movement in a vast stratum of Italian culture and society.

What the Italian Marxist oriented intelligentsia owes to the seminal influence of Antonio Gramsci is the basic theme of the survey by Stefano Benassi of the University of Bologna. This survey starts from Gramsci, to widen out into a consideration of the influence of Husserl's phenomenology on a pleiad of notable thinkers, Antonio Banfi, Luciano Anceschi, Enzo Paci, Dino Formaggio and the new generation of scholars in Milan and Bologna. The opening up to structuralism and the impetus to semiotics that Umberto Eco has given, in the season preceding his activity as a world-famous novelist, complete Benassi's analytic and historical survey. The essay by Luisa Bonesio of the University of Pavia in its turn poses an important question. Beside the new generation of aesthetologists, deftly surveyed by the author, who is, for that matter, one of their number, is there, Bonesio asks, a 'generation' of new ideas and perspectives -in other words and opening towards extra-European cultural horizons on the part of a minority of scholars emerging today? And what in recent years have been the first fruits of the comparative enquiry in aesthetics? Bonesio is kind enough to mention my own contribution over the last twenty years to this type of enquiry and to the knowledge of Far-Eastern aesthetics. The initial intellectual solitude surrounding my first work as a comparatist, on my return from a formative period in India at the Tagore University of Shantiniketan<sup>5</sup> has been broken only in very recent years, thanks not least to the interest taken by Italian cultured society in Eastern philosophies and arts, and religions, But the integration of Oriental studies in the aesthetic academic community remains, for the time being, an unsolved problem. The first person to call attention to this problem was Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984), the eminent scholar, well-known and loved in India, Tibet and the whole of Eastern Asia. Tucci has the unquestionable merit of having renewed and developed Oriental studies in Italy, not least through the research activities of the *Istituto*

*per il Medio e Estremo Oriente* (ISMEO), which he founded in Rome in 1931, and directed with extraordinary energy and abnegation, before entrusting it to a group of scholars of his Roman school<sup>6</sup>.

"Up until a few years ago," wrote Tucci in the now distant 1934, "the Orient was almost ignored in the official programme of our culture. The history of philosophy began with the pre-Socratics; political history with the Egyptians and Assyrians, by virtue of their relations with the Mediterranean and Biblical world. Convinced that we were ourselves the inventors both of history and of science, we Westerners refused to consider a large part of mankind until it had started to have dealings with us.... A serious error, since modern research has detected neglected threads that, from remote times, link the most distant countries of the East with those of the West"<sup>7</sup>.

Unfortunately, our university studies have not encouraged an organic cultural vision. "Pure philology has been too dominant in our studies," observed Tucci, remarking that "the time has come to consider them no longer as ends in themselves.... University teaching, as it regards the East, must be modernized, and become the vehicle of intimate understanding of the fundamental aspects of the culture being studied"<sup>8</sup>.

An enormous job needs to be done in the field of comparative aesthetics in the direction indicated by Tucci. The survey recently carried out in Japan by Sasaki ken-ichi, in which Japanese and Western aesthetologists answered a questionnaire with a list of basic aesthetic concepts, highlighted, in Sasaki's words, that there exists today a repertory of basic concepts commonly recognized<sup>9</sup>. But, on the other hand, Sasaki drew attention to the fact that "the Japanese aesthetics in question is not a traditional one based on Japanese culture as such, but one based on Western philosophy"<sup>10</sup>. And this is another aspect or, rather, a damaging counter-effect of the mutual isolation of the aesthetic traditions of East and West. When a hundred and twenty years ago Japan opened its doors to the West, the European and Anglo-American models were adopted indiscriminately, to the serious detriment of the vitality of local traditions.

Local but not marginal, in being the living limbs of a speculative *ecumene* that knows no frontiers, the aesthetic traditions today need to be saved and strengthened in the place and language in which they historically took root, but also in a creative and illuminating comparison with one another. To Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, the Anglo-Sinhalese thinker to whom India and the East are indebted for a formidable contribution, of learning and insight, I have devoted the brief profile<sup>11</sup>, which closes this review of aesthetic studies in Italy. In these

studies the critical reception of Coomaraswamy's thought is today an important factor<sup>12</sup>.

## Notes And References

1. See his *The End of Modernity*, Oxford: Polity, 1989, reviewed at length by Brian Rotman in the *TLS* April 7-13, 1989.
2. I particularly have in mind Peter McCormick's remarkable speculations on Modernity, *Aesthetics, and the Bounds of Art* in his book of that title, Cornell Univ. Press 1990; the ample discussions in the textbook on *Postmodernism* (Thomas Docherty ed., Harvester Wheatsheaf 1992); and the analyses by Zhou Ping and Fei xingpei on *The Making of Modernist Art in China*, which these two scholars from Sichuan brilliantly rendered in the context of the XII International Conference on *La Modernidad como Estetica* organized by the 'Instituto de Estetica y Teoria de las Artes' in Madrid, September 1992.
3. Organized on the theme of *Twentieth Century Italian Aesthetics* by Aldo Trione, the author of one of the two essays on Italian idealism included in this volume.
4. Organized by the present author on the theme of *The Major Trends in 20th Century Aesthetics*. The trilingual collection of the proceedings (Guerini e Associati, Milan 1991) includes a chapter from Ananta Charana Sukla's book *The Concept of Imitation in Greek and Indian Aesthetics*, Rupa & Co., Calcutta, 1977.
- Among the reviews of the Siena conference mention should be made of Michael Mitias's 'International Conference on the Major Trends in Twentieth-Century Aesthetics' in *The American Society for Aesthetics Newsletter*, Vol.10, no.4, Fall 1990.
5. I briefly mention this experience in the introduction to the book cited in the previous note.
6. Among those who have achieved eminence in the field of Indian studies are Raniero Gnoli, Luciano Petech and Corrado Pensa. The specialist in Iranian studies Gherardo Gnoli is the current President of Is MEO ('Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East').
7. G. Tucci, *L'Oriente nella cultura contemporanea*, Istituto Italiano per il Medio e Estremo Oriente, Rome 1934.
8. *Ibid.*, p.11.

9. Ken-ichi Sasaki, 'Report Concerning a 'Research Questionnaire on the Fundamental Concepts in Aesthetics' *JTLA* (Journal of the Faculty of Letters, The University of Tokyo, (Aesthetics), Vol.16 (1991).

10. I examine this question in the section entitled 'A Letter from Japan' in the Introduction, cited above, to *The Major Trends in Twentieth Century Aesthetics*.

11. A much shortened version of this text, entitled 'La voie de l' Occident

et la voie de l' Orient', is in *Pourquoi l' Esthetique, Hommage a Mikel Dufrenne*, Editions Jean Michel Place, Paris (21,1992).

12. *La ricezione critica in Italia di Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* by Francesco Solitario, Prometheus Edizioni, Milan 1992, with an accurate bibliography, is a welcome contribution to this new line of comparative aesthetic research in Italy.