

Psychoanalysis of art: a matter of power abuse? Massimo Recalcati on Giorgio Morandi and Alberto Burri

The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, was the first psychoanalyst to investigate art and literature through and within the theoretical framework of psychoanalysis. As Lacan argues in Seminar XI, the psychoanalysis of art was 'crazy daring' on Freud's part, whilst 'in those who follow him, [it] soon becomes imprudence' (1998: 110). Lacan refers to a certain flawed Freudianism based on a pathographic approach to art, which models itself on Freud's *Leonardo*. As Nicky Glover states this 'approach centres on the experience of the individual artist, and, like a detective, reconstructs his subject's past, discovering possible complexes, repressions, and neuroses' (2009: 4). The risk is that psychoanalysts only approach an artwork in order to deduce the artist's psychology and, in doing so, they overlook the aesthetic artefact itself by considering it as a territory to be colonised. Therefore, a number of general issues concerning the legitimacy of the application of psychoanalysis to art arise and they revolve around this question: is it possible that the use of traditionally applied psychoanalysis in interpreting art, results in an authoritarian or normative hermeneutic method?

There has been a consistently large number of artists, writers, philosophers and scholars who have criticised the psychoanalysis of art for being authoritarian, inappropriate, and even abusive since its conception. For instance, in *Dr Freud on Art* (1925), Clive Bell claims that 'the artist's problem is aesthetics' and firmly states: 'to me it seems that Dr Freud may be an excellent psychoanalyst; but I'm sure he had better leave art alone'. In *Psicoanalisi e poesia* (1946), Benedetto Croce writes: 'non posso non essere d'accordo circa l'importanza dell'opera del Freud sia come indagine psicologica e naturalistica sia come terapeutica: sempre che non oltrepassi questi limiti, come talvolta ha fatto'.

Meanwhile in *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Theodor Adorno argues that 'artworks are not the *Thematic Apperception Test* of their makers ' and adds 'psychoanalysis considers artworks to be essentially unconscious projections of those who have produced them, and, [...] [it] forgets the category of form'. In short, it seems that artists perceive psychoanalysis as an intrusive and authoritarian discipline, which violates borders and attempts to impose its theories on their work. In my opinion, there are four circumstances in which psychoanalysis is most in danger of abusing its power:

1. When psychoanalysis neglects the formal and technical aspects of artworks.

Indeed, if psychoanalysts are more concerned in uncovering the supposed 'inner meaning' of artworks, they tend to overlook the formal and technical structure of aesthetic artefacts.

2. When works of art are overshadowed by an artist's psychobiography.

In adopting the pathographic model, psychoanalysts are inclined to analyse an artwork exclusively for the purpose of unearthing the artist's psychology so that the artwork is considered merely a product of an artist's complexes, or an instrument with which to map an artist's psychology.

3. When psychoanalysis utilises artworks as a means of explaining psychoanalytic theories.

Indeed, psychoanalysts often use artworks to find evidence, confirmations, or even to illustrate, their theoretical and clinical hypotheses.

4. When artworks are overwhelmed by psychoanalytic interpretations.

If this is the case, psychoanalysts treat the work of art as a symbol to be deciphered through their interpretations or projections, much like a dream or a symptom.

Well, I will now address the four approaches in which psychoanalysis risks exerting an authoritarian power over art, by examining the psychoanalytic analysis of Morandi's paintings, carried out by the psychoanalyst J. David Miller, and the psychoanalytic analysis of Burri's works by art historians. Later I will make reference to Recalcati's perspective in the field of the psychoanalysis of art. This will lead to a discussion on the notion of *immagine-segno*.

In his articles Miller tends to adopt a pathographic approach. He clearly states this from the outset:

'This study of Giorgio Morandi, the great twentieth-century Italian painter, departs from the model of Freud's essay on Leonardo, in which he creates a psychodynamic hypothesis by linking the art with facts and conjecture about the artist's life' (2011: 109).

The lack of data and information on Morandi, due to his 'monastic life', does not prevent Miller from utilising the paintings as a thematic apperception test of their creator. He writes: 'our knowledge of [Morandi] is so meagre that we have little basis for decoding his intent, conscious or unconscious. However, my sense of his work [...] is that it directly reflects his inner life' (2011: 114). Miller strongly believes that 'the artist externalizes his inner life onto a canvas, which contains it and reflects it back' (2011: 117). For this reason Miller takes into account some fundamental episodes in Morandi's personal life, including his strong desire to become an artist when he was an adolescent, of which his father disapproved, his close relation with his mother who supported him in his artistic career, and the sudden death of his father. Miller makes a number of speculations, conjectures, and Oedipal explanations based on this information.

Despite the scarcity of biographical data, according to Miller, 'Morandi would seem to be a natural for applied analysis' as 'his mode of working is remarkably similar to analysis' (2010:2). This quote introduces my third point: that psychoanalysis tends to exert an abusive power, and thus subordinate art, when psychoanalysts conceive artworks as mere instruments for the corroboration or visual representation of their theories. Miller writes that '[Morandi's] paintings make the core principles of the analytic process come alive on the canvas in a way that is more sensuous and vivid' (2011: 110, 118). The main aim of Miller's articles is to demonstrate that Morandi's works of art portray, and thus are particularly useful for understanding, psychoanalytic theories, such as the theory of object relation, conflict and compromise formation, and the psychoanalytic notions of repetition.

Apparently, Miller disregards explanations of the work from Morandi himself who stated, in a rare interview, that they are 'pure still-life compositions and never suggest any metaphysical, surrealist, psychological or literary considerations, at all' (Skira EN: 352).

With regards to the fourth point - that psychoanalytic interpretations can overwhelm artworks - it seems that Miller conceives of Morandi's work as a Rorschach test, to paraphrase Adorno. According to Miller, the ordinary objects of Morandi's work, such as bottles, vases, cans, and boxes 'enact an internal drama' (2011: 120). Morandi 'assigned roles to his still life objects' (2010: 11) Miller believes they represent the people in the artist's inner world and he provides some examples:

'the red metal pitcher, seen looming above the others, could be Morandi's father, the man who opposed his going to art school; and the pearly porcelain vase could be his mother, graceful and glowing, the woman who admired and protected his artistic ambition' (2010: 11).

If the ordinary, although enigmatic, objects depicted in Morandi's paintings stimulate the fantasy of psychoanalysts, Burri's works, in which there is no figurative image at all, do this even more. This is particularly true of his collection entitled *Combustioni* [*Combustions*]. Some critics try to establish a parallel between Burri's canvases and injured skin: wounds, abrasions, burns and stiches on the canvas recall the skin of an injured body. As noticed by Emilio Villa in his monograph on Burri, critics tend to interpret the work as a metaphor for bleeding pieces of flesh or a wounded body, which Burri, the artist/doctor, medicates. As Villa writes: 'ferire e medicare, mutilare e giustapporre, tagliare e ricucire, bruciare e spegnere'. The critics who favour this interpretation often cite as evidence Burri's previous career as doctor or his experience in a prisoner-of-war camp in Texas, during the Second World War.

On the contrary, Massimo Recalcati, one of the most renowned Lacanian psychoanalysts in Italy, is very sceptical of the pathographic model. He claims: 'io adotto questo principio: non possiamo interpretare niente della vita delle persone senza conoscerle' (2009: 194). Recalcati adopts the Lacanian principle according to which, and I quote from Lacan's *Écrits*, 'psychoanalysis is applied, strictly speaking, only as a treatment and thus to a subject who speaks and hears'

(2007: 630). For instance, when discussing the interpretations of biographers who have tried to find a link between Burri's tobacco addiction, his love relationships, and his works entitled *Combustions*, Recalcati firmly claims: 'Ma cosa ci dice tutto questo dell'opera di Burri? Niente' (2009: 194).

Recalcati pursues the development of a psychoanalytic aesthetics that pays more attention to what artwork *is*, than to what it represents. He believes that traditionally applied psychoanalysis adopts a decrypting or deciphering approach to art, according to which artworks are either thematic apperception tests of their authors' psychology or puzzles to be solved, and, in this respect, psychoanalysis is seen as nothing more than a mere enigma-solver.

In his *Il Miracolo della forma* (2007), Recalcati firmly criticizes this approach and argues that it rests upon an imaginary opposition, severely criticized by Lacan, between a visible surface, which is the manifest content of the artwork, and a depth, which is constituted by the inner meaning of the artwork (2007: XI).

This reductionist perspective on art also assumes that the artwork is a mere symbol which corresponds to a precise and unambiguous meaning, like an algebraic equation. In my opinion, the equation of Morandi's pitcher with the artist's father by Miller as well as the identification of Burri's burned canvases as the injured skin of a body are clear examples of this reductive and normative method.

On the contrary, what animates Recalcati's psychoanalytic aesthetics is the belief that 'la nozione classica di psicoanalisi applicata all'arte dovrebbe lasciare il posto all'idea lacaniana di una *psicoanalisi implicata all'arte*' (2007: XII). Thus, there is a shift from the psychoanalysis *applied* to art, to the one *implied* by art. Recalcati, reversing the classically subordinate role that art takes in relationship to psychoanalysis, claims that 'sono gli artisti che insegnano alla psicoanalisi qualcosa che concerne il loro oggetto più proprio' (2007: XII) and not the other way around.

Recalcati emphasises the conviction, shared by both Morandi and Burri, that an artwork 'non è traducibile in parole' (2009: 150). Morandi used to say very frequently that: 'le immagini [...] sono molto difficilmente esprimibili, o forse non sono esprimibili con le parole'. Likewise, Burri claimed that 'le parole non mi sono d'aiuto quando provo a parlare della mia pittura. Questa è una *irriducibile presenza* che rifiuta di essere tradotta in qualsiasi altra forma di espressione'. This means that aesthetic artefacts resist interpretations and meaning. Despite all the words used to articulate an interpretation or a meaning of the artwork, the artwork remains outside them and it is not entirely reducible to them. Therefore, a psychoanalytic approach, if non-authoritarian, should bear witness to the value of art in its radical extraneousness, or using Burri's words, to its *irreducible presence*.

This is the essence of the key notion of *immagine-segno* adopted by Recalcati, and around which his psychoanalytic aesthetics revolves. The *Immagine-segno* is neither the surface, nor the depth of an artwork, nor is it a symbol that refers to an artist's personal life. Rather, as Recalcati claims, the *immagine-segno* is a 'unità indissolubile che, sospendendo il principio della rappresentazione, non rinvia ad altro che a se stessa' (2007: 98). Both Morandi and Burri's artistic output epitomises this idea of artwork as an irreducible presence. To put it bluntly, Morandi's bottles or Burri's combustions do not represent and cannot be reduced, either to mere expressions of the artists' personal lives, or to expedients for explaining or illustrating psychoanalytic theories. According to Recalcati, they are *immagini-segno*, and therefore cannot be translated, decoded or interpreted in one simple meaning. Recalcati affirms that we should abandon the pretension to exhaustively translate an artwork and claims: 'la parola non è in grado di tradurre la forza, la potenza, il mistero dell'immagine-segno; l'opera d'arte non è traducibile in parole' (2009: 153).

In conclusion, it can be affirmed that Recalcati's psychoanalytic approach pursues the development of a psychoanalysis of art that does not try to subordinate art or merely utilise it for its own aims but rather that is able to pay more attention to the aesthetic artefacts in themselves, in their radical extraneousness, which is not reducible to any other discipline.

An artwork is an *irreducible presence*. Art resists meaning and opposes the power of interpretation, not exclusively those that are psychoanalytical. There is not a superior or inferior discipline.

As Parveen Adams, a Lacanian psychoanalytic theorist, states, in the matter of psychoanalysis and art 'the question is not who teaches whom but their mutual capacity to stay together long enough for something to happen' (2003: XIII).