

# When Sociology Meets the Work of Art: Analytical Frameworks to Study Artistic Production and Reception

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## 1 Introduction

Within the last decades the sociology of the arts has grown to become an important field of analysis both in the USA and in Europe. The aim of this paper is to explore the implications of the sociological perspectives for investigating the work of art, both in relation to its production and reception and to its capacity to inscribe events in the public discourse of a national or international context. In the first perspective – the social construction of the arts – the relationship of the arts with other disciplines, such as semiotics and structuralism, is analysed and discussed. In the second perspective – the artistic construction of the meanings of public events – artwork is viewed as a code able to shape, for example, the content of public memories. This essay will explore especially some implications of the first perspective. A specific focus will be devoted to the analysis of the cases of non-recognition, defined as those cases, where the artistic value is not recognized as stable but is a shifting value during different periods and epochs. It will be argued that the sociological perspective implies a different explanation of those cases.

As Schmidt (1979b, p. 31) argues: “It is impossible to produce works of art, only something already produced can be considered a work of art.” Artistic value is thus, according to Schmidt, a quality that depends not on the intentions of the subject that produces (the artist), but rather on the evaluation dynamics of the subject that observes (the person that enjoys it). Schmidt’s approach, like that of textual linguistics in general, redefined, in the second half of the 1970s and in a radical and

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innovative way, the question of how artistic value is established. The present essay proposes to single out some of the most important analytical co-ordinates and to use them to outline a sociological theory of artistic value. The intention is to underline the eminently social nature of the process by which artistic value is formed, on the one hand questioning those conceptions (both scientific and common-sense) according to which artistic value is normally attributed to a work of art on the basis of its intrinsic qualities or exclusively on the basis of the author's talent and on the other underlining the existence of a series of social factors that play a decisive role in establishing the claim that an object belongs to the "art system" (Schmidt 1979a).

This paper will involve questioning the romantic conception of a work of art, emphasizing the inability of this notion to explain, on a sociological level, the processes of artistic production and artistic reception. The genesis of a work of art can, in fact, be explained: (1) in a metaphysical perspective by divine inspiration; (2) in a romantic perspective by referring to the extraordinary character of genius (or, in its psychoanalytical variant, through recourse to intra-psychical dynamics); (3) in a sociological perspective by posing the question of social dynamics that concur in producing artistic value, as underlined through a variety of approaches, by studies like those of Bourdieu (1980, 1993); Becker (1982); Zolberg (1990); and Wolff (1993).

## 2 Different Conceptions of a Work of Art

We can classify different conceptions of a work of art according to the way in which they solve the problem of genesis, that is, how they respond to the question: "Who produces a work of art?" In brief, even among the variety of perspectives, we can identify at least three different types of reply:

1. According to authorial theories, the genesis of a work of art is due entirely to the artist who produces it. They consider artistic production as a process occurring completely inside subjects. Included in this category are the psychoanalytical theory and its subsequent revisions (Klein 1948; Chassagnet-Smirgel 1971), the romantic conception of genius, and cognitive theories of the creative process (Wertheimer 1935; Guilford 1967).
2. Reception theories underline the role of the consumer process, which becomes a constituent part of the artistic event. These theories conceive the work of art as a product of the intersection of the vector of meanings inscribed in the work itself by the author, and the effective reception experience of a social actor who singles out which of the possible meanings to construct. They point out, therefore, the "not-concluded" nature of a work. Included in this perspective is the contribution of Czech structuralism (Mukarovsky 1936), the *Rezeptionsaesthetik* studies of the Constance School (Iser 1972; Jauss 1972), textual linguistic studies (van Dijk 1977; Schmidt 1979b), the vein of semiotic studies begun by (Eco 1979), the

phenomenological perspective (Ingarden 1965), and the contribution of reader-response criticism (Fish 1980; Tompkins 1980; De Man 1983; Freund 1987).

3. Finally, contextual theories examine more closely some of the theoretical implications of reception theories by studying empirically how and to what extent the receptive work of the spectator is oriented not only by textual information but also by contextual information, in order to document how both affect the social processes of formation and attribution of artistic values. This article sets out to document how a work of art is also created by the local contexts in which it is produced and, above all, by those in which it is enjoyed.

We can relate to the three different approaches to the genesis problem both the different definitions of artistic value and the different interpretations of cases of forgeries, imitations, and the opposing cases of “lack of recognition.” This brings us to the problem of the recognition criteria of forgeries or, more correctly, those of authenticity certification. In particular, as we shall see, the focal point of this essay will be cases of “lack of recognition,” in which a “true” work of art is not recognized, for example because it has been placed outside its own traditional reception context.

## *2.1 Authorial Theories*

According to authorial theories, a work of art is a product belonging completely to the artist. This perspective refers to a widespread romantic conception, which maintains that the subject is the exclusive creator of the work, which is the result of ability and extra-ordinary talent. The artistic value of a product is, according to this approach, independent of the existence of a public that consumes it culturally, that recognizes it as art.

If, on the one hand, this conception removes the author from the body of social and institutional relations in which he or she is placed (the artist is considered an abstract individual, freed from family and social context who, thanks to the extraordinary talent with which he or she is endowed, generates a work of art),<sup>1</sup> on the other, it removes the work from its reception context portraying it as a gift of God. Artistic quality is considered a characteristic selectively present in certain subjects, processes or products, like an objective quality generated by the author’s talent.

The image of the artist to which these theories refer is that of a solitary genius performing his extraordinary feats in an ivory tower. As Murray (1989) underlines, the concept of genius is a relatively recent historical product, born in the eighteenth century. The poetics of the romantic movement has associated it with a series of characteristics.

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<sup>1</sup>See for example Elias’ (1991) analysis of Mozart’s biographers.

- (a) In the first place, the myth of separateness. The rhetoric of the romantic conception extols the figure of a solitary, poor artist unknown to his or her contemporaries. The extraordinary character of his or her talent expresses itself in isolation and separateness. The artistic experience takes on an almost mystical connotation; it seems like a subspecies of sacredness that swoops down on the profane. This ideology of separateness has profound implications for the overall conception of the artist, insofar as it implies a scission of the artist from his or her context: Because genius is removed from the body of the social relations in which it is placed, one reaches the paradox of abstracting the artist from the rest of his or her personality. Referring to Mozart's biographers, Elias underlines the ideological nature of this conception: "At times one is inclined to treat the artist Mozart as a sort of superman and the man Mozart with concealed contempt. It is a type of evaluation . . . that is based on the idea . . . that his musical talent was a natural gift without any kind of relationship with the rest of his personality" (Elias 1991, p. 59). More correctly, the myth of the genius' separateness seems to imply two categories of abstraction: (1) the first "inter-individual" between the artist and the rest of the world; (2) the second, already indicated by Elias, of an "interpsychic" nature between the artist and the rest of his or her personality.
- (b) The myth of celebrity after death. The romantic images of the artist refer to a conception of a work of art which denies the constitutive character of the dynamics of recognition: The work of the bohemian is artistic, despite the fact that the artist is not recognized by the contemporary public, but only by a hypothetical future public. In this perspective, the question arising from the frequent contrast between the talent of an artist and the lack of recognition by contemporaries – more than an "unsolved mystery," as Elias maintains (1991, p. 50), appears as the logical consequence of the ideological scission between the individual and the context that romantic conceptions have helped to produce.
- (c) Art as an illness. A further distinctive feature is the link between psychic suffering and artistic quality: pain as the source of the sublime. Contrary to the previous case, what is established here is a close connection between existential anguish on the part of the subject and the artistic value of the created product: the artist, in the romantic imagination, is someone who has failed in life. This romantic conception of the maieutic, creative value of suffering has profoundly influenced the psychoanalytical theory of art, to the point where psychoanalysis itself may be interpreted as a creation of Romanticism:

The idea that the origin of art can be discerned in illness, in physical insufficiency or nervous excitability is of romantic origin . . . Certainly, there have always been neurotic artists but their chances of success in the different epochs of history, were very different. For the most part, they were considered oddities, and before romanticism, they never played a decisive role . . . Psychoanalysis itself is a creation of romanticism; without the spiritual heritage of romanticism and independent of the romantic sense of life it is unthinkable. (Hauser 1958, pp. 58–60)

In this regard, Poe's "The Oval Portrait" appears emblematic, in that it is inspired by the very same constructive conception of pain or by the same destructive

interpretation of art. The story tells of a portrait of great value that the artist paints of his wife, at the cost however of her life. In fact, as the brush strokes add colour to the picture, the colour drains from the cheeks of the loved one. In this case, the connection between art and suffering is evoked explicitly: The portrait generates a process of material destruction (culminating in the death of the subject who has inspired it) and moral destruction (through the sense of guilt and pain of the artist who has painted it).

## 2.2 *Reception Theories*

These theories consider the artistic event to result from the integration of two distinct phases: that of production and that of reception. Usually a cultural product is already destined to become an object of aesthetic reception when it is produced. But the artistic value of the work is completed by the spectators' reception activities. This takes place more precisely through the meaning-conferring activity which, though partly guided by the work itself, is always carried out by the spectator.

This interpretation of artistic production has its theoretical foundations in at least four distinct veins of research: (1) Mukarovsky's contribution and Czech structuralism; (2) the *Konstanz Schule* and the *Rezeptionsaesthetik*; (3) textual linguistics; (4) the semiotic vein of studies begun in the 1970s by Eco. To these must be added the "death of the author" theories (Barthes 1968; Foucault 1979), which we could place midway between reception and contextual theories, and the tradition of reader-response criticism (Fish 1980; Culler 1982; Freund 1987). Some of the studies mentioned take the literary text as their object; others have been subsequently extended to other kinds of text as well, such as the spectacular text.

These contributions have in common the centrality of the reception process which, taking a diversity of perspectives, refers to a common artistic-production concept definable as co-operative realization. The theories pertaining to this perspective move the definition of artistic value from a purely semantic level to a pragmatic one; the attribute "artistic" does not designate different objects according to their content, but objects that belong to a system of action (art, literature, the theatre) regulated by specific conventions. In this way, conventions in the aesthetic communication processes take on a fundamental role, making the communication itself possible.

If we define the dominion of art with reference to pragmatic criteria, terms like "artistic," "literary," "poetic" lose their traditional object referents. According to Schmidt, literariness does not exist as an objective value; it is a relational attribute which is constructed in such a way as to satisfy the social conventions regulating that specific "linguistic game" (Wittgenstein 1953).

In his theory, Schmidt has taken over the notion of linguistic game by elaborating the concept of "communicative action effect in which the text is situated." To study the concept, the author proposes the distinction between "communicated" and

“communicative base,”<sup>2</sup> which re-introduces the structuralist distinction between “material object” and “aesthetic object” (Mukarovsky 1936). Underlining explicitly how the notion of the value of a work was essentially a sociological matter, Mukarovsky supported the idea of the variability of all the values:

The work of art itself is not in any way a constant greatness: every movement of time, space or social environment changes the current artistic tradition through whose prism the work is perceived; the effect of these movements also changes the aesthetic object, which in the consciousness of the members of a given community corresponds to the material product, to the object created by the artist. Even when a work is evaluated positively in two different and distant epochs, the object of the evaluation is an aesthetic object different every time, thus in some ways a different work. (Mukarovsky 1936, p. 96)

Prague structuralism poses the problem of aesthetic value precisely in reference to the distinction between the material object and the aesthetic one. The variability of aesthetic value does not, in fact, depend, in this perspective, on the imperfection of human perceptive capacity, but is intrinsic to the very nature of this value “which is a process and not a state” (Mukarovsky 1936, p. 99). Or to put it another way, if a different artistic value is attributed to an object by changing the observer, or passing from one epoch to the subsequent one, it is unnecessary to resort to the cognitive scheme of error (either the observer at time t1 or the viewer at time t2 must necessarily be mistaken, in that the object observed is the same), but rather it is necessary to reflect on the processual, relational nature of each value.

The assertion of the variability of values raises, however, the question of their objectivity: Mukarovsky, who in the end does not seem to want to resign himself to anything but a somewhat bland form of historic relativism, is seeking a generally valid legitimacy that would characterize the relationship between a work of art as an aesthetic value and any type of community. The objective aesthetic value (that is, independent and stable) must be sought, according to the author, in the material artefact, insofar as only this lasts, while the aesthetic object is variable.<sup>3</sup> This contrasts with the traditional practice in the aesthetic field according to which, as Mukarovsky points out, the object of aesthetic evaluation is not the material artefact but the aesthetic object, its reflection and correlation in the consciousness of the person who enjoys it.

It should be noted that, once the distinction between aesthetic object and material object has been introduced, the crucial question becomes how the material object (or product) participates in the genesis of the aesthetic object.

The independent value of the material artefact will be all the higher according to how conspicuous the body of extra-aesthetic values that the product succeeds in linking to itself

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<sup>2</sup>While “communicated” corresponds to what is assigned to the text by the participants, the text or “communicative base” is the mere physical support.

<sup>3</sup>As Mukarovsky observes, even in the case of works that last for centuries, such as Homeric poetry, we are not faced by an invariable or eternal value, because even in these cases there are strong oscillations; the material object itself is associated in time with different aesthetic objects, according to the epoch in which it is received.

is . . . Thus the independent aesthetic value consists in all its aspects of a tension which it is the task of the spectator to surmount . . . (The fundamental task of art is) to guide and renew the relationship between man and reality as the object of human behaviour. (Mukarovsky 1936, pp. 126–129)

The author ultimately roots the objectivity of aesthetic values in their relationship to extra-aesthetic values which seem “deposited in a sort of collective consciousness” (Mukarovsky 1936, p. 159). The work, according to Mukarovsky, thus suggests to the beholder the way to construct a personal relationship with reality. This anticipates some features both of Adorno’s aesthetic theory (1970), according to which the artistic value resides in the capacity the work has to affect the spectator’s *Weltanschauung*, independently of the aesthetic pleasure it is able to arouse, and of Jauss’ theory (1972), according to which artistic value depends on the aesthetic distance between *Erwartungshorizont* and *Horizontwandel*, that is, on that effect of subversion of the spectator’s expectations which takes place during the reception process.

In point of fact, Mukarovsky’s aesthetic theory anticipates some of the fundamental lines of all the subsequent aesthetic reflection. The introduction of the distinction between material support and aesthetic object has radically changed the very nature of the definition of artistic value.

However, it has to be noted that the distinction between “material object” and “mental artefact” is analytical, not empirical: What the spectator sees is already at least partly endowed with meaning. That is, we see only aesthetic objects or, in the definition adopted here, mental artefacts. To speak of material objects means performing a deconstruction of the meaning whose main purpose is to draw attention to the plurality of possible perception processes before the same object which, however, is a pre-object.

From this approach, the focus of the analysis moves on to the manner in which the author succeeds in influencing the mental artefacts constructed by beholders (concerning this, see the two fundamental notions of model reader (Eco 1979) and implicit reader (Iser 1972)), and then on to the degrees of freedom that the spectators possess with respect to the operating instructions. The notion of the model reader was thoroughly worked out by Eco in 1979, but already in *Opera aperta* (1962) the author deals with the pragmatics of the text:“( . . . ) a text postulates its own receiver as an indispensable condition not only of its own, concrete communicative ability, but also of its own potential for meaning. A text is a product, the interpretative fate of which belongs, in part, to its own generating mechanism” (Eco 1979, pp. 52–54). A notion similar to Eco’s is elaborated by the Konstanz Schule: Iser defines implicit reader (*Implizite Leser*) as “the character of topicality of reading already traced in the text” pointing out that this is not the equivalent of the “typology of a possible reader” (Iser 1972, p. 9). A central criticism addressed to Iser’s notion of the implicit reader regards this very last point: the empirical nature of the reader. Can the latter become the object of a concrete study (Gentili 1985)? Iser’s position, with regard to this, is explicit: The reception aesthetic deals with the implicit reader, not the empirical one. Thus the author does not study the empirical reception processes of readers as, for example, they take place in a library, but studies texts to gather

the textual strategies inscribed in them. It was the studies of van Dijk and Kintsch (1975) that, some years later, supplied that empirical documentation lacking in Iser's approach.

A very interesting declination of the model reader concept is owed to De Marinis (1982), who analyses the case of the theatrical performance: The author proposes, for the analysis of the "performance as text," the notion of the model spectator, who is an implicit, ideal subject. The author singles out two perspectives for the study of text reception: (1) the intra-textual level of the implicit receiver and (2) the extratextual level of the real receiver. While the intra-textual level has been amply investigated (Iser 1972; Eco 1979; De Marinis 1982), the same has not been done for the extra-textual level. For many years empirical studies on reception have been few and far between, thus creating a partial levelling of analysis at the intra-textual level which, though decisive, does not exhaust all the relevant aspects of the phenomenon. In fact, if we accept a relational definition of the meanings and values inherent in the artistic event, we cannot then, in the empirical study, reduce the analysis to one of the poles, that is, to the author (even if, with regard to the latter, we deepen the level of analysis to the point of including the model spectators, that is, the representations the author has of his or her own public).

The risk implicit in such a reduction is evident in De Marinis' studies in the early 1980s, in which he transforms the model spectator from "textual strategy, an interpretative course variously inscribed in the text" into "theoretical meaning able to make clear the regularities and the invariants implicit in the real spectator's hermeneutic activities, categorizing them adequately" (De Marinis 1982, pp. 188–190). In this type of approach, one witnesses a sort of logical omission: The imaginary reader of whom the author of the literary text is thinking while writing, that ideal spectator at whose side the producer sits during the preparation of the theatrical performance, becomes a sort of average of all empirical spectators, in other words, a theoretical model able to categorize the effective reception experiences of the real spectators, as opposed to the ideal projection born in the mind of the author and the producer. This assumption, unless it is translated into a mere research hypothesis, is misleading. From this might be deduced the uselessness of empirical research in aesthetic reception processes: The model spectator, in fact, would already supply an a priori categorization of the effective reception experiences. From a methodological standpoint, this would be the equivalent of deciding to study the transmitters in order to find out what the receivers are doing, which appears at least open to question.

This type of theoretical approach has had a certain impact on the development of research on these themes; as has been said with respect to reception activities, most of the studies deal with the shape such activities take in the reasoning of the authors rather than focusing on the real experiences of the receivers. From the first half of the 1980s onwards, however, we have witnessed an inversion of this trend: In the last few years, in fact, research on consumer behaviour with regard to artistic products has undergone a certain development, though within very different perspectives.



### 2.3 *Contextual Theories*

This perspective focuses on the relationship between a work of art and production and reception contexts as a fundamental issue: The artistic product is defined as resulting from the intersection of individual talent and reference contexts, and not as a process occurring entirely inside subjects, as the romantic conception of art would have it.

According to how they define the relationship between artistic production and context, we can further distinguish within these theories a number of distinct veins; while some approaches underline the dynamics pertinent to the more general social and cultural contexts in which the work is placed (Bourdieu 1993; Wolff 1993; Tanner 2003), others try to reconstruct the social dynamics that have made it possible for genius to assert itself (Kermode 1985; Csikszentmihalyi 1988; Gardner 1988; Elias 1991; De Nora 1995) by focusing the analysis on the social practices of recognition. Still others underline the local relationship between artistic production and contexts both in its production and in its reception (Goldfarb 1976; Becker 1982; Wagner-Pacifiçi and Schwartz 1991; Zolberg 1990). Melucci (1994) underlines the importance of recognition processes, focusing on the dualistic relation between the social actor and the context in which the actor is placed. In his research: “Creativity is analysed, besides referring to theories and current models, considering the subjects it has been attributed to . . . the discourses characterising it . . . and the contexts which make it possible” (Melucci 1994, p. 8).

The second type of approach concentrates on recognition contexts: These are studies of the so-called politics of talent. They reconstruct the social dynamics that permitted a great genius of the past to achieve success. Emblematic, with regard to this approach, is the analysis of the material suppositions in Raphael’s works, carried out by Max Scheler (1926). Included in this perspective is Csikszentmihalyi’s study (1988) on the cases of Botticelli and Mendel: The former, held to be a mediocre painter up to the middle of the nineteenth century, becomes a talented artist only thanks to the reappraisal of his works by Ruskin (Csikszentmihalyi 1988) and above all, as Kermode (1985) underlines, due to the studies of Herbert Horne and Aby Warburg. And Mendel owes the fortune of his theory of natural selection to the rediscovery made by the evolutionists some 40 years after its original formulation. Following Inghilleri (1990), we can therefore ask ourselves where Botticelli’s creativeness lies: in his mind, in his work, or in the use future cultural consumers will make of it (like Ruskin and Warburg)? To the vein of so called theories of genius also belong Gardner’s study (1988) on the construction of Freud’s fame, that of De Nora on the social bases and social consequences of Beethoven’s success (De Nora 1995) and that of Elias (1991) on Mozart’s genius. In De Nora’s study Beethoven’s talent does not appear self-evident: the author analyses the ways in which Beethoven’s superiority has been elaborated and sustained by his contemporaries (by means of public relations, mobilizing other meanings able to produce evidence, etc.). The analysis emphasizes the role of the

power relations between the artist and his public or the artist and his patrons in making his talent possible. In this respect, the relationship between Beethoven and Prince Lichnowsky, his closest patron, is exemplary:

Lichnowsky underwrote the success of Beethoven's first publication in at least one way . . . he subscribed to 20 copies and, if we count the additional subscriptions by members of his family, between them the Lichnowskys and the Thuns (his wife's family) accounted for 21 percent (53) of the 249 copies . . . Underwriting of the publication costs was a way Beethoven could be made to look like an already successful published composer . . . Once again, we see how the dramatisation of Beethoven as corresponding to a preconceived imagery of success – in this case the achievement of a highly successful first publication – was part of the frame within which Beethoven could be constructed as worthy. (De Nora 1995, pp. 139–140)

Reflecting in general on the concept of genius, De Nora (1989) writes: “If we ask how Mozart was able to compose music, of such purity and perfection we can only answer, ‘because he was a genius, which is tantamount to saying that we do not know’” (De Nora 1989, p. 1). If the term “genius” appears to be an empty word, a label used to define the residual; it corresponds in fact to that which is not explained. However, according to De Nora, the implicit assumption that genius is unexplainable cannot be endorsed by sociology: To speak of genius as an unfathomable characteristic of the person means neglecting crucial aspects of this phenomenon. What remains, after having eliminated in Mozart's work the product of technique, of years of study and engagement that he shared with all the other musicians of his time, is just what we want to investigate (De Nora 1995).

Elias, on the contrary, has studied the assertion of Mozart's genius, which he defines significantly as “genius lived before the age of geniuses” (Elias 1991, p. 18). This study documents how Mozart, after being an *enfant prodige* of the European courts where he played during the *tournee* organized by his father Leopold, was appreciated much less than his contemporaries in the Vienna of the final stages of the eighteenth century. In fact when, counting on the support of the Viennese public, he decided to give up his post with the Archbishop of Salzburg, as he wanted to control his own music and become a “free artist,” he was no longer appreciated, to the point where he was unable to earn enough even to live on. At the beginning of his stay in Vienna, the artist gave piano lessons in the morning and almost every evening played in the houses of the nobility, but as time went by the situation underwent a radical change:

The 12th July 1789 . . . [Mozart] reminds the merchant Michael Puchlierg of the failure of the new subscription for a concert, as there was only one subscriber, Herr van Swieten, a close acquaintance of his. Viennese society had turned its back on him, the emperor taking the lead . . . he depended, all things considered, on a limited circle of local subscribers somewhat closed in upon itself and tightly integrated. If the word spread that the emperor did not think particularly highly of a musician, fashionable society simply abandoned him. (Elias 1991, p. 29)

Mozart, who had pinned all his hopes on the Viennese public, suffered greatly from the humiliations inflicted on him by the nobility. The situation of abandonment

that was created was such that Elias was induced to say that Mozart suffered to the point of dying from it. Elias' study rescues Mozart from the rapid isolation of the genius by linking indissolubly the affairs of Mozart the artist with those of Mozart the man. This contribution, on a level with De Nora's, by investigating the social dynamics that sustain and make possible the assertion of genius, addresses the relationship between the work and the politics of talent.

The third type of approach studies the context at a micro-level. The focus of the analysis is on the institutionalized components of artistic production and reception: In particular De Nora, in an article published in 1986, deals with the question of the meaning of music, assuming that this meaning is not located in the music itself (as the referential theory of language would have us believe) but in the listening practices of the receivers. Goldfarb (1976) in a study on "Student Theatre in Poland," analyses theatrical reception and focuses on the relationship between theatre and the articulation of public discourse in Polish society. Tota (1994, 1998) analyses the cognitive and cultural bonds of the theatrical spectator for the purpose of documenting how a spectacular event like the theatrical one is constructed. Macdonald (1995) studies the reception conditions of an exhibition in a museum, elaborating a typology of use models.

### 3 The Politics of Authenticity

*Kunstsein ist etwas ganz anderes als Kunstwert.* (Utzitz 1920, p. 5)

Already in 1920, Utzitz affirms that the belonging of a product to the art system, that is, its designation in terms of "artistic product," was a concept semantically distinct from that of "artistic value." In fact, this distinction poses a series of anything but marginal questions. If the quality of being an art work (that is, its designation in terms of belonging to the art system) is excluded from the value we attribute to it, what criteria do we choose to value a work with regard to the art context and not, for example, with regard to that of everyday life? According to Schmidt, it is a matter of pragmatic criteria: The object must satisfy a series of conventions pertinent to a given system, that is, to art.

In a sociological perspective, this shifts the focus of the analysis to the social practices of attribution, recognition, or construction of the authenticity of a work; a thorough analysis of these practices could most likely document how the categories of true/false are connected to those of artistic value or, at least, show how problematic it is to keep totally distinct the identity of a work (that is, its belonging to the art system) and its value.

Eco (1990) underlines the complexity of the terms true/false in the artistic field and, above all, indicates the inadequacy of the vague conceptions we usually refer to when applying these to the explanation of the social practices of authenticity certification. Available criteria appear inadequate for the foundation of a systematic

reflection on these categories.<sup>4</sup> To Goodman's (1968) question as to whether a perfect forgery, which can withstand every philological criterion, exists, Eco replies with the following story:

In 1921, Picasso stated that he had painted a portrait of Honorio Bustos Domeq. Fernando Pessoa confirmed in writing that he had seen the portrait and praised it as the greatest masterpiece ever produced by Picasso. Many critics sought the portrait, but Picasso said that it had been stolen.

In 1945, Salvador Dalí announced that he had rediscovered the portrait in Perpignan. Picasso formally recognized the portrait as his original work. The portrait was sold to the Museum of Modern Art as: "Pablo Picasso, Portrait of Bustos Domeq, 1921."

In 1950, Jorge Luis Borges wrote an essay ("El Omega de Pablo") in which he stated that:

1. Picasso and Pessoa had lied because no one in 1921 had painted a portrait of Domeq.
2. In any case, Domeq could not be portrayed in 1921 because this person had been invented by Borges and Bioy Casares during the 1940s.
3. Picasso had in reality painted the portrait in 1945 and had falsely dated it 1921.
4. Dalí had stolen the portrait and had copied it (impeccably). Immediately afterwards he had destroyed the original.
5. Obviously, the Picasso of 1945 had imitated perfectly the style of the early Picasso and Dalí's copy was indistinguishable from the original. Both Picasso and Dalí had used canvas and colours produced in 1921.
6. Thus, the work displayed in New York is the deliberate forgery of a deliberate forgery of the author of a historic forgery (Eco 1990, p. 189).

In 1986, Eco goes on to say, an unpublished text by Raymond Queneau was found, and the story becomes so complicated that the reader (perhaps even the mode) no longer succeeds in understanding: With this the author demonstrates to us the dubiousness of the certification of forgeries and the inadequacy of the criteria we commonly refer to.

Returning to Utitz's distinction and elaborating still further, we might surmise that perhaps it is precisely in the modification of the relationship between the quality of being an artwork (*Kunstsein*) and artistic value (*Kunstwert*) that we can discern a distinctive feature of the contemporary "art system." Benjamin (1955), regarding the reception of the work of art, underlines how, in the epoch of technical reproducibility, the nature of the art system has undergone a profound change. It could be added that, in mass society as well, the relationship linking artistic quality and artistic value seems to be changing, that is, the border between them tends to further disappear.

In mass society there appear on the art scene new participants in the act of consuming: these are new social groups which have economic, social, and cultural characteristics very different from the elites that have traditionally monopolized the consumption of artistic possessions. However, if we confirm the hypothesis that consumer practices have a constitutive and not an accessory nature with respect to

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<sup>4</sup>"Reflection on these objects more commonly counterfeited (artistic forgeries) should, however, tell us how risky our general identity criteria are and how concepts like Truth and Falseness, Authentic and False, Identity and Difference are defined circularly in tum" (Eco 1990, p. 192).

the art system as a whole, these new groups, although underestimated and ridiculed in somewhat archaic types of analysis (e.g., Ortega y Gasset 1930), have encouraged a structural change in the overall system. The fact that art is consumed by these new social groups as well, remote from the facile stereotypes of the “leisured Renaissance gentleman,” already criticised by Eco (1964), seems to have triggered an overall process of change in art and a partial redistribution of power within the system. In particular, it changes the relative influence in the construction process of an artistic fact by a part of the context; the latter seems to be taking on growing weight.

We are witnessing a process of contextualization of art, in the sense that the places of art acquire a growing importance in the formation of the mental artefacts of the receivers and, consequently, in the processes of the attribution of artistic quality to particular products. Access, therefore, to a particular network of institutional relationships, access to a particular physical location (museum, theatre, etc.) become determining elements within the “artistic career” (Zolberg 1990) of a particular object. It is reasonable to assume that the advent of mass communications has caused changes that affect all artistic environments, even those relative to the reception of a theatrical performance which, in most cases, is typical of an event reserved for the happy few. The prominent role occupied, in the case of the television medium, by being inside the box, even to the detriment of what is being shown inside it, also affects the art system, but not banally discrediting or cheapening art as a whole, as a superficial interpretation of the phenomenon might lead one to suppose. This is, on the contrary, a much more complex process which leads to a modification of the intermingling and relative weight of categories such as *Kunstsein* and *Kunstwert*, amplifying the role of Bateson’s (1972) “frames.”

This process does not take place in an abstract way but through consumer practices; what has changed is the mind of art consumers, that is, the way in which they construct the relevant mental artefacts according to what is perceived.

## 4 The Social Construction of Artistic Value

Czech structuralism is responsible for the establishment in the artistic field of the analytical distinction between material object and aesthetic object: While the first term refers to production support materials (the painted canvas, the paper copy of the book), the second refers to the corresponding mental reproductions of the cultural consumers.<sup>5</sup> These reproductions are the complex mental images that different receivers elaborate before the same material object. A long tradition of cognitive studies has documented the fact that different subjects observing the same object

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<sup>5</sup>Also, the phenomenological perspective (Ingarden 1965, first published 1931) played a very important role in this direction.

see different things; this can also be extended to the reception of cultural products.<sup>6</sup> We shall therefore speak of “material object” and of “received objects or mental artefacts.”

The multiplicity of mental artefacts is not infinite: We can reasonably assume that it can be categorized as a series of ideal types. In front of a specific material object, we shall therefore have the various types of mental artefacts elaborated. Once the plausibility of the distinction between material object and received objects has been established, empirical studies on reception acquire theoretical citizenship within a theory of artistic production, in that it is necessary to study the processes by which these mental artefacts are formed. A theory of artistic production that takes into account this distinction will analyse, with regard to the material object, the transmitters and, with regard to the mental artefacts, the “instructions for use” supplied by both the producers (the model spectator) and the organizational-institutional context (museum, theatre, and concert hall), and finally the effective reception activities. This detracts nothing from talent; it only enriches the understanding of the dynamics that makes it possible. In the next pages, we consider the theoretic implications of this approach for cases of “lack of recognition,” those cases in which an already highly successful artist exhibiting or performing outside the contexts of institutional reception, or simply in different contexts, is either not “recognized” or not appreciated by the public. These cases, less rare than one is prepared to admit, function as “breaching procedures,” (Mehan and Wood 1975, p. 113) where the breaching is in the first instance an ideological perspective in terms of which the researcher decides to reason.

#### ***4.1 Some Examples of Context***

The term “context” is decidedly polysemous, to the point of being vague. Let us consider some examples:

1. The theatre. In this case, the context is made up of: (a) a series of cognitive artefacts, such as the programme, the theatre-bill, newspaper articles with the opinion of the critics, photographs of the actors or producer that have appeared in newspapers, possible interviews featured on radio or television, etc.; (b) the theatre building with its interior organization of spaces (separation of auditorium and stage, the arrangement of the seats, the positioning of the lights, etc.); (c) the reception conditions on that specific occasion (presence of the public in the foyer, queues at the box-office, price and difficulty of getting tickets, etc.).
2. A cassette of classical music listened to at home. This involves a series of extra-musical devices, such as for example the label and design on the cassette which refer to: (a) a particular person whose image and story we know through

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<sup>6</sup>In the cultural field see for example Baxandall’s (1972) study on Piero della Francesca.

the mass media, biographies, school texts; (b) a record company that certifies the professional quality of the execution (this enables the piece of music to be distinguished from the one played on the piano by friends); (c) a certain conductor, etc.

3. An exhibition of painting organized in an old Venetian palace.

The artistic nature of the event is certified: (a) by the city which, for the non-Venetian visitor, is a symbol of culture and art; (b) by the building and all the organization within the space. Let us consider for example that in the rooms of the building we are visiting there are normally pictures and furniture. The fact that in that building there are now just pictures informs us that the intended use is different. The fact too that some pictures are lit up more than others, or have a whole wall devoted to them, informs us about their greater importance; (c) from a whole series of cognitive artefacts such as the programme, the posters, and the articles that have appeared in the press. In this case the plaque bearing the name of the author of the work on display functions as a guarantee certificate in the same way as “pure virgin wool,” and refers to all we know (or do not know) about that name. (d) Finally, there are a series of factors that are part of the context of a painting exhibition such as the names of the sponsor and the organizer, the period the exhibition is open to the public, the cost of the admission ticket, the exterior visibility of the exhibition through indicators like the queues of visitors at the entrance, etc.

4. The reading of a novel. When we are reading a book sitting comfortably in our favourite armchair, there is also a series of contextualization signals: As in the second example, the book’s dust jacket refers (a) to the author and everything we know about him or her; (b) in addition, it also refers to a publishing house and its image. Lastly the effect of the “printed paper,” which in itself gives authority to the text, should not be overlooked. All these signals play their part in the production of meanings; they are an active part of that process by which the reader transforms “the ink marks on paper” into a continuum which is coherent and meaningful.

In the case of artistic products, the underlining of the “communicative” aspect of these signals is particularly important because they function as a meta-communicative frame and tell the spectator: “This is theatre,” “This is literature,” and “This is art.” The analysis of frames shifts the artistic reflection from the level of content to the pragmatic level of rules, in line with what Schmidt (1979b) has already advanced. The context therefore is that body of messages which organizes the receiver’s perception of a given communicative event (the performance, the music, the book, and the exhibition). It is like the frame around a picture that Bateson speaks about:

‘Pay attention to what is inside and ignore what is outside’ . . . The picture’s frame tells the observer that when he is interpreting the picture he must not use the lame kind of reasoning that he could use when interpreting the wallpaper outside the frame. (Bateson 1972, p. 228)

The examples of context quoted concern different types of reception, precisely because a contextual approach is theoretically applicable to different spheres of

artistic production. We can reasonably assume, in fact, that a contextual perspective, with suitable modifications, could be useful for the different types of study of the artistic product.

## 5 The Shifting Value of Artworks: Botticelli and Warburg

The way we can explain these cases where the same artwork is evaluated very differently over time is linked to the implicit conception of artistic production, that is, to how we reply to the question: “Who produces the work?” Each of the conceptions mentioned before (authorial theories, reception theories and sociological ones) implies a different explanation of the cases of non-recognition. The example of Botticelli is here considered. The Italian artist, held to be a mediocre painter until the middle of the nineteenth century, was considered “talented” thanks to the studies of Aby Warburg (1932) and Herbert Horne (1980). *La Primavera* and *La Nascita di Venere* were first shown in the Uffizi only in 1815, but during the 1860s it was still a widely shared opinion that Botticelli’s talent was limited by his preference for very ugly women (Kermode 1985). The artist was in fact held to be a mediocre painter. His reputation was literally constructed thanks to the studies of Herbert Horne and Aby Warburg. Horne was not an academic, but a great admirer of fifteenth-century art. In 1908 he wrote a long monograph on Botticelli entitled “Alessandro Filipepi called Sandro Botticelli, Painter of Florence.” At that time, Horne moved to Florence, where he had an old palace renovated, which was to become the Home Museum. Warburg, who was 2 years younger than Horne, is a sort of cultural legend but, as often happens with legends, his image has long been misinterpreted. The institute, which today still bears his name, became almost more famous than its founder. Warburg’s students, such as Panofsky and Gombrich, re-interpreted the iconological perspective, but they also provided it with a new identity far removed from Warburg’s original conception. The iconology has ended up by obscuring in some way Warburg himself. In 1893 Warburg wrote his study on “*La Nascita di Venere e la Primavera*” in order to document how Sandro Botticelli interpreted the ideas which were generally accepted at his time (Warburg 1932, p. 58). His aim was to analyse the influence of the classics on Botticelli’s poetics. But the way in which he conceived this influence was to change with the passing of time: In “*La Nascita di Venere*” (the essay written in 1893), Warburg reproaches Botticelli for his compliant attitude and contrasts it with Leonardo’s ability to follow the classics only when they appeared to him as models. The Florentine painters of the fifteenth century tended in general to seek inspiration in classical models, but Warburg differentiated between attempts, which were merely reproduction and those which succeeded in reinterpreting the pathos formulae of antiquity. Botticelli, who in the first essay is defined as “being too adaptable,” (Warburg 1932, p. 58) is reconsidered in a second essay, “*Arte italiana e astrologia internazionale nel palazzo Schifanoja di Ferrara*,” (1912) in which Warburg redefines the relation between the Florentine painter and classical models, acknowledging his ability to use the past for creative and original



production. In this way the new interpretative tradition of Botticelli's poetics was born: In fact, the successful creation of a new reputation of *La Primavera* and *La Nascita di Venere* is due mainly to Warburg's work.

Analysing the case of Botticelli and the modalities of his most recent recognition, Kermode introduces the concept of "forms of attention of art work" (Kermode 1985); his aim is to point out that the reputation of an artist can be subject to wide variations over time, due mainly to chance and therefore totally divorced from the value of the work itself. The rediscovery of Botticelli is an emblematic example of the shifting value of an artwork insofar as it makes possible to show the specific contribution of social and cultural contexts and of receptive processes in constructing the reputation of an artist. Warburg's studies on the Florentine painter are fundamental for understanding not only the ways in which Botticelli's reputation is sustained, but also those in which it is literally created. It is particularly relevant to note that, in this case as in that of Beethoven, studied by De Nora, in order to permit an artist's reputation to emerge, a change in the interpretative and receptive canons of an epoch is necessary. In Beethoven's case, beside the notion of master composer, a new modality in the reception of the concert of classical music emerges, which is much more deferential than the previous one (De Nora 1995). In the case of Warburg the construction of Botticelli's reputation even marks the advent of a new discipline. In both these cases, the emergence of a reputation is closely linked to a change in the interpretative canons of an epoch which, in the perspective of this study, represent a determinant factor in the elaboration of mental artefacts. The pathos formulae become the new key to understanding Botticelli's paintings: After Warburg not only have *La Nascita di Venere* and *La primavera* become two different art works, they have even changed the canons of art history.

While in the romantic ideology of artistic production lack of recognition is explained by resorting to the notion of incompetence, when adopting the contextual perspective, cases such that of Botticelli are fundamental in that they reveal dynamics by now deeply deposited in everyday acts and therefore visible only in extremely denaturalized situations.

The different body of contextual information (e.g., the new theoretical frame elaborated by Warburg in relation to the artist) produces, together with similar textual information (the same paintings), a different artistic event. The contextual information being changed, the visitors of the museum elaborate different mental artefacts and consequently they enjoy a different event: They observe to the same extent a different and "new" Botticelli. This diversity can apply to many aspects: In particular in the Botticelli case it is translated into the different artistic value recognized in the paintings. In fact, the objects received by the visitors are changed, and these objects include the symbolic values that we attribute to a certain event, the emotions associated with it, and also the artistic values we recognize. Hence according to the contextual interpretation the artistic value of a Botticelli is also produced by the museum room in which it is exhibited. The reception conditions of an artwork (e.g., the theoretical framework available to consider the reputation of an artist) are a part of the event itself.

It is necessary to reiterate that to point out the contextual nature of artistic production does not in any way diminish the role of talent, of genius, of the capacity, and value of the artist. This approach limits itself to underlining a very relevant aspect in studies on artistic production, which has something to do with the role of contexts in the processes of attribution of artistic value by observers. The fact that with changes of context the recognized artistic value also changes does not in any way disqualify artistic production, it merely modifies it.

## 6 Conclusions

This article has tried to argue the advantages of adopting a contextual conception of a work of art based, on one hand, on the notion of consumer conditions and, on the other, on that of the relation of production of meanings. It has been underlined that the consumer conditions of an artistic event are defined by the institutional context in which it takes place; this context organizes and predetermines the course of the reception through the enunciation of a series of “contextualization cues,” (De Nora 1986) as, for example, the design of spaces used for staging a performance, the cognitive artefacts made available to the public, the arrangement of pictures in an art gallery, etc. It has also been confirmed that, while the social actor interprets these consumer conditions, he or she does not stop at fulfilling them passively, but has a series of degrees of freedom with respect to the instructions for use supplied.

The consumer conditions are fundamental in that they predetermine the relation of production of the meanings, that is, that body of processes through which a subject ascribes meaning to what he or she is enjoying. This meaning corresponds to what we have defined as “mental artefacts,” which are nothing more than the mental images of material objects endowed with the meaning of these objects (as has been said, it is in the very acquisition of meaning that the passage of material objects to mental artefacts lies). It should be noted that, among the different “meanings” we produce, there is also that on which artistic judgment is founded, and it is for this very reason that it becomes important to study the consumer conditions of an artistic event. The consumer conditions of a museum exhibition, like those of other artistic events, greatly influence and condition production relations of the meanings of the event itself, to the point of inducing us to contend that they are part of it and, to reiterate the structuralist position, when they change, the work itself changes as well. Extending Norman’s (1988) cognitive approach to art, we can conclude by saying that not all knowledge necessary to define something as art is in our head, a part of it is inscribed in the design of the spaces socially destined for its exhibition and in the practices traditionally codified for its aesthetic reception.

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