

# The Tintoretto effect: Longhi, Sartre, Bernhard

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Many scholars wrote about the work and the artistic personality of Jacopo Robusti also known as Tintoretto. From Ruskin (1843) to Fontane (1882), to mention only two of those who suggested a transgression from art criticism to literary commitment in the Venetian artist. Since the Post World War II period, there has been renewed interest in the Venetian painter presenting itself in various works like Jean Paul Sartre's essays *Le Séquestré de Venise* (1964) and *Saint Marc et son double* (1981) and *Alte Meister* (1985) by Thomas Bernhard. These works reveal questions on this sixteenth-century artist, also concerning contemporary aesthetics. With regard to the core of 'modern' thought on Tintoretto and his attractivity answers can be found in Roberto Longhi's *Viatico per cinque secoli di pittura veneziana*.

Written for the 1946 exhibition in Venice, the *Viatico* presents Tintoretto as one of the eighty masters of circa two hundred exhibited Venetian paintings. Longhi reminds us of the fact that almost a century earlier Ruskin had brought his name back into public awareness, celebrating the fame which since the early twentieth century, for many reasons, accompanied the Venetian artist with growing enthusiasm. While the author of *Modern Painters* (1843) praises Tintoretto because of the Romantic correspondence between intentions and realizations, in Italy one would praise him rather for his skills than for his imagination, admiring his technical titanism which makes him the role model for the 'great captain of the painting industry'<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The English translation of the words quoted – «gran capitano dell'industria pittorica» (Longhi 1997: 656) – is mine.

Longhi defines this way of painting as being 'shrewed' and 'quick'; he accuses Tintoretto of being a 'machine operator', who 'pops through the wings a little too much, which' – as he says – 'is never good theatre'<sup>2</sup>. Among the works shown (*San Demetrio, La Cena, I Quattro Evangelisti, La Cattura di San Rocco a Montpellier*) there are no examples of the master's portrait paintings, which Longhi called so 'ephemeral' and unlasting in memory that he complains of remembering scarcely a face.

Fame and reception as subjects opening his discourse on Tintoretto refer to the crucial role of interaction between the artist and his public. They also show an analysis of the art critic beyond the work's content level. Asking questions on the recent rediscovery of the artist, Longhi favours the relationship with Venice and sees the succession of the critical opinions as distinctive signs and traits of the various historical eras. Beyond the images they depict, the pictures therefore show those who watched and appreciated them. Venice can be found within and without the works in the form of technical tradition and painting subjects, as well as in the public's expectation and the art market. This is where Robusti intervened by forcing the rules and provoking the tensions which later isolated him from his fellow citizens.

It is the same perspective that Sartre thoroughly examined. *Le séquestré de Venise* (1957) – first systematic study after the critical notes compiled in *La Reine Albermarle ou le dernier touriste* (1951) – focuses on those elements of Tintoretto's concept of art which break with tradition, exaggerating them to a point at which they became indicators of the conflictual relationship with the city of the Dogi.

In 1567, Vasari reported that, due to his jealousy, Titian expelled the young Jacopo from his workshop (1530). After quoting that anecdote, Sartre mentions other examples of that fate of being excluded, from which Robusti apparently escaped in 1539, when he became master in a town threatened with economic crisis. In 1548, though, when he painted *San Marco libera lo schiavo*, this fate returned

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<sup>2</sup> The original Italian translated is founded in Longhi 1997: 656.

powerfully. Sartre comments on this matter: «Venise et son peintre se regardent et ne se comprennent plus» (Sartre 1964: 295).

The decisive act of observation shows the possible crossing of the frontiers, from the artist individuality to the space in which his art expresses itself and is received, even though, oft with little sympathy. From the kind of clients to whom Tintoretto turned his attention and even more from the means of recruiting his customers one can deduce a feature of modernity that may have affected the painter's rediscovery. Also Longhi mentions this as a significant trait.

Tintoretto, complying with productivity rules, sees a new source in the secondary market of painting, i.e. that of workshop's copies. Although the artist eliminates the idea of copies by disallowing the reproduction of his paintings, his assistants could yet use them as inspiration for new 'original' paintings. Certainly, if copying paintings with only little modifications is sufficient to produce authentic pictures at the cost of regular reproductions, the age of mechanical reproduction of the work of art is heralding itself.

This is the shrewdness to which Sartre refers when he mentions other sensational evidence: in 1564, he rigged a sketches competition by handing in a painting which then had to be exhibited because the rules of confraternity's prevented from refusing any believers' gifts. In 1571, he tried to play the same trick again at Doge's Palace.

The art market, or rather its extension, displays the relationship which the artist establishes with the exterior, i.e. with a city consisting of public and walls to furnish with art. In the «[...] privilege de transformer sa ville en lui-même [...]» (*ibid.*: 304), which Tintoretto believed to have received by birth, the pictures represent the threshold between Venice and the artist, who, when painting, bears in mind the spectators' reaction: their magic attraction to the paintings. Tintoretto therefore aspires to plan and realise the entire creative process himself.

Sartre ventures beyond the relationship between the artist and the city. The description of *San Marco libera lo schiavo* (1547-48) in *Saint Marc et son double* (1981) shows the works as the main place for a new approach to the depiction of space. According to Sartre, the scandal which the picture caused was actually provoked by the saint who,

against any convention, falls from the heaven in order to save a slave from the martyrdom.

The picture neglects the theory of natural place, which explains the hierarchy of sacred values in the profane order of matter and was shared by nobility and artists. This is where the clients' immediate indignation is situated, because one must not depict matter if the contract provides for the display of a religious subject. Their resentment proves that they understand Tintoretto's intention but they do not want to see the muddle on that painting, which is dense and jammed with matter, so writes Sartre, pointing out not only the intensity of the relationship between the artist and the public but also the threats of an art which overcomes social orders.

Sartre is so stricken from the fact that the painter expects the spectator's participation in following the depicted movement, that he thinks of the viewer's perception as being a part of the picture: «[...] La peinture fut une école de vision» (Sartre 1981: 190). This view is of course Tintoretto's view, but also the beholder's. The view produces a depth, which pulls also the observer, as if the picture saw him, hence gaining a third dimension.

In *San Giorgio et il drago* (1558) – analyzed in *Saint Georges et le dragon* (1976) – the killing of the dragon is depicted in the background and the perceiver will not discover it until he re-enacts the victim to the vanishing point. The beholder, who is thus made aware of his responsibility of examining the picture attentively, embodies therefore the reference system for the positioning of the objects. This is one aspect of Tintoretto's so called 'subjectiveness': according to Sartre, it is an improper word, used as if Robusti had invented the public's participation in a painting's constant resurrection.

Il est vrai qu'il fait entrer le public dans ses tableaux. Mais ce n'est pas à la façon du prestidigitateur qui prie un spectateur de monter sur la scène. Il ne veut pas convaincre et moins encore duper en soulignant les composantes réelles de la fiction: il montre une image et nous oblige à l'approfondir en nous affectant de

déterminations imaginaires – c'est-à-dire: en développant les composantes fictives de nos perceptions réelles. (*Ibid.*: 197)

What is emphasized is not reality, but fiction. In this way the artist cultivates the perspective innovation which was discovered by the Florentines, because «Il a exploité nos ressources et fait de nous ses auxiliaires. Mais il n'a jamais confondu le réel et l'imaginaire» (*ibid.*: 197).

In the age of imitation, Tintoretto offers a more modern approach toward the relation with nature, because he attributes an autonomous concreteness to art. At stake is the definition of realism in sixteenth century Venetian painting – «[...] la hauteur et la largeur vraies de la toile fournissent aux personnages imaginaires leurs dimensions fictives» (*ibid.*: 193), by which Sartre measures Tintoretto's eccentricity: «Il prétend remodeler la Création dans l'épaisseur de ses toiles et que l'espace infini s'y rencontre [...]» (*ibid.*: 196).

Through his innovation he shows his standpoint contrary to the ancient masters: «Le premier qui a dénoncé l'imposture de ses maîtres, c'est le Tintoret. Masaccio, Uccello, Mantegna lui-même, prétendaient donner la chose elle-même quand ils n'en donnaient que le signe» (*ibid.*: 190). The tremor Tintoretto inflicted on tradition therefore leads to a redefinition of the artifact's boundaries and reception. This kind of discourse, of course, can be applied beyond the sphere of visual art.

In his *Le séquestré de venise* Sartre executes the main lines of his own aesthetics: for example the theory of perception in *L'Être et le Néant* or the *milieu's* importance in the evaluation of an artist's consciousness and of his freedom in *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature*. This way, Tintoretto seems to be chosen by Sartre in order to exemplify the applicability of his own method. The French philosopher sees his favored arguments concerning the artist's responsibility and the work's *milieu* reflected in all activities of the Venetian artist. According to Sartre, Tintoretto exposes the question of the possibilities of expression in front of a public who does not share the artist's opinions. This disagreement concerns anything that can be depicted: while according

to Tintoretto «bien entendu le tableau se fait passer pour une ouverture sur le monde : de l'autre côté de la fenêtre, on ne peut rien nous refuser [...]» (*ibid.*: 192), the contemporaries' opposition refers to the subject of direction, a main feature of cultural patterns<sup>3</sup>.

The perception and reception themes that Sartre deals with reappear in *Alte Meister* in an extensive and incisive way. Almost the whole plot of Bernhard's novel takes place in the presence of Tintoretto's *Uomo dalla barba bianca* (1568-1578, late period; 92,4 x 59,5), a picture watched by the protagonist, the eighty-two-year-old music critic Reger, and by Atzbacher, who observes the scene from a hideout within the gallery which is located next to Bordone Hall. From this perspective Atzbacher retells his friend's monologues.

The background and almost the pretext of the novel are not any other pictures of Tintoretto's that are kept in the Kunsthistorisches Museum but the portray of an anonymous old man, a symbol of wisdom and decline. The author selects a part of Tintoretto's works which was not much appreciated by the public, as we know from Longhi, because within Tintoretto's portrait-painting it lacks identity. The civil servants of the Serenissima, immortalized by the painter, mainly represent their social function. So, rather than being individuals they seem to be parts of an anonymous entity. In particular through the portrait of old men Tintoretto expresses tiredness and disappointment, turning them almost into a topography of lived experience<sup>4</sup>. This very general human trait is perhaps the reason why *L'uomo dalla barba bianca* is chosen to express a universal *Weltanschauung*.

The painting, rather than being described, illustrates the art as a metaphor for peculiar cultural patterns. Not by accident *Alte Meister* is set in a museum, which hosts the fundamentals of Austrian national identity. This identity is closely connected with the Habsburg past: «dieses ganze Österreich ist ja nichts anderes, als ein Kunsthistorisches Museum» (Bernhard 1985), Reger says polemically and then he

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<sup>3</sup> Lotman 1969: 460-77.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Ferino-Pagden 1994: III-IV.

challenges the masterpieces' untouchability with the only exception of Tintoretto's *Uomo*. Then he refuses the museum's collection that is a symbol of the Habsburg cultural policy's poor quality.

By juxtaposing artists of various ages and genres, Reger discourse represents an antithesis to the organization of museums in general and of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in particular. His monologues change the museum and unhinge its structure based on the notion of progression and periodisation, i.e. the frame within which art is available to the public. Reger's way of reception, indeed, is a celebration of discontinuity.

His readiness in moving from a picture on the narration of a tradition corresponds to the idea of a constant exchange between criticism and art. Reger puts forward such an idea while defining himself as a *kritischer Künstler*, with reference to the Romantic idea of *Kunstkritik* that Benjamin outlines in *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik*.<sup>5</sup> Benjamin's hypothesis that criticism dissolves the artifact's finished and empirical form reappears in Reger, who, following Friedrich Schlegel's theories, actually removes any barrier between art and criticism and demolishes any difference between the arts. He states that writing for the *Times* he feels to be a painter, a musician and a writer, all in one. 'Ancient masters, ancient sisters': in the title of his fine interpretation of Bernhard's novel Michele Cometa restores the link between painting and poetry.

The general designation "Ancient masters", including painters, sculptors and the protagonists of the German cultural tradition, implies the possibility of exceeding the boundaries between genres through critical discourse. Through meticulous observation and search for mistakes, that, according to Reger, is in every masterwork, the critic questions the art canonized in the museums, because he refutes the idea of its perfection.

The fact then that for many years, he focused on a single picture and even a minor one of the Venetian painter meets an aesthetic of fragment that joins painting and sculpture: looking at *L'uomo dalla*

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<sup>5</sup> On this subject see Kaufmann: 105 ff.

*barba bianca* is the same as reading few lines of a text in depth. This is the Reger's way of reading: in order to understand books' real meaning, he states that he glances through instead of reading them. Reger himself forces narration towards a non verbal expression. The written text is read in a way typical for the perception of visual art, a way that extends the textual meaning and that sees the text as a spatial extension<sup>6</sup>.

The merging of reading and painting corresponds with the observer's position taken by the main character and amplified in Atzbacher's narration. He gazes at Reger sitting on *his* benches and at Tintoretto's picture. Atzbacher's double view confirms the transversal function attributed to the painting, which becomes the pretext – caused by Tintoretto's intervening in the public's involvement – for the remarks on the meaning of artistic reception on which the novel subsists. Contemplation brings a visual act into reading that extends to the reader, enabling him to imagine the scene and to identify himself with the observer.

This way, the dynamic participation implied by Tintoretto gets a literary transposition that exploits also typical narrative means: for example the deictics used in order to confuse the reader and to place him consciously in front of the aesthetic objects.

One of the novel's longest scenes, expressly dealing with Tintoretto, concerns the new market that the Venetian painter invented by transforming copies into original works. It deals with the fundamental question of the artistic originality told in the episode featuring an Englishman. He makes the authenticity of the *Uomo dalla barba bianca*'s waver, because – according to him (being Welsh, he is not a very Englishman) – the painting actually hangs in his bedroom and at the same time in the Bordone Hall. «Es ist, als ob es nicht nur das gleiche, sondern absolut dasselbe wäre, sagte der Engländer, sagte Reger» (Bernhard 1985: 156). And continued «*Eins von beiden muß eine Fälschung sein [...]*» (*ibid.*: 158), said the Englishman, «[...] und dann,

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<sup>6</sup> More on this subject in Long 2001.



daß es aber auch durchhaus möglich sei, daß beide *Weißbärtigen Männer* echt sind, also von Tintoretto und echt sind» (*ibid.*: 160).

Original and imitation here are no more opposite, but any feasible mediation can be found only outside the text, because the possibility that both the men with a white beard are authentic, so they are by Tintoretto and authentic is no answer. Talking about 'authenticity', in the case of the two men with a white beard would not be appropriated. A solution has to be found in the history of art, in which there are no originals in the sense of created for the first time and every painter can only refer to what was before him.

In the novel's approach to original and imitation a critic of the romantic cult of genius that talked great personalities of art and philosophy up to as 'ancient masters' may be hidden. Through the ideas of originality and genius, the novel hits the subjectivity's inherent overestimation. The fact that a genius raises such objections is coherent only if by the end Reger, who at the novel's beginning was presented as being a genius, erases himself<sup>7</sup>.

*L'uomo dalla barba bianca*, who gazes after the observer for 16 meters, shows the mutual simplification of the observer and the observed; and it is at the same time the representation of the past running after the present, of tradition seizing originality.

To refuse the ancient masters (at the same time being unable to live without them) means to understand their lesson in the present and sharing moment of observation, setting free art for its survival: it is not about the masters in the loneliness of their principals works, but the men who, reflecting on art, think rather of themselves. Accordingly, Sartre sais:

un tableau cesse d'être une surface plate, hantée par un espace imaginaire pour devenir un circuit monté par le peintre, qui se referme sur l'aimable clientèle et la force d'intégrer sans en altérer la nature les objets à la réalité. On ne sert plus le client : il fait le service lui-même. (Sartre 1981: 179)

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<sup>7</sup> Further remarks on this argument in Walitsch 1992.

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