


*Editoriale*

## *Diderot's Metamorphoses* Philosophy, Art, Science

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This issue of *Lo Sguardo* aims to investigate the figure of Denis Diderot in its many aspects. Diderot was, in fact, a philosopher, but also an art critic, novelist, playwright, and scientist. His role as a cultural promoter was also vital in the great project of the *Encyclopédie*. How do these different elements interact and contribute to the emergence of his philosophical thought? And what aspects of Diderot's philosophy remain relevant to contemporary times? These are some of the questions the issue seeks to answer.

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The first section is devoted to Diderot the philosopher, and his relationship with other philosophers of the past. In the essay that opens this part, Stéphane Lojkin addresses the heritage of Descartes in Diderot's thought. In *D'Alembert's Dream* (1769), in fact, Diderot criticizes the Cartesian view of animals as mere «imitative machines». Nature, for Diderot, consists of matter that is unique and always endowed with sentience. What changes, between different organisms and objects (between an animal and a man, but also between a stone and a living body), are only the *degrees* of their organization. To explain this, the philosopher invites the reader to visualize an egg, which develops from an inanimate object into a chick. The animal that emerges from the egg is certainly not a machine, as Descartes would have it, but it moves, stirs, 'suffers', 'loves', 'desires', and

'rejoices' just as we do. Thus, the first contribution of the issue immediately brings us face to face not only with Diderot's philosophy, but also with his interest in the natural sciences. It is not Diderot's materialism that is the focus of Lojkin's essay, however. Rather, what the scholar aims to show is that precisely in describing his anti-Cartesian view of nature, Diderot appropriates certain philosophical procedures that are typical of Descartes. In particular, according to Lojkin, in visualizing what happens inside the egg when the chick is formed, Diderot does the same thing as Descartes when he performs the experiment of the cogito, or that of the piece of wax. In both cases, what is accomplished is a «thought experience»: not so much an actual experiment (the philosopher cannot really see inside the egg), but a virtual or imaginary experience, which consists in «separating oneself from nature» in order to «better grasp nature again».

The second contribution of the section, by Viviana Galletta, also takes its starting point from the theory of matter, as elaborated by Diderot. It is well known that among the sources of Diderot's understanding of matter was a particular interpretation of Spinoza, which the eighteenth century reads in a 'pantheistic' and 'materialistic' sense, bringing it closer to the Renaissance philosophy of nature. It is nature itself, then, that is capable of passing, by a metamorphic process, from a 'latent sensibility' to a 'manifest one', from marble to plant. This idea of nature also emerges in Diderot's dialogue with an important Dutch thinker of the time, Frans Hemsterhuis. The two philosophers had in fact met in The Hague in 1773, while Diderot was on his way to Russia, and Hemsterhuis had given Diderot a copy of his *Lettre sur l'homme et ses rapports*. The French philosopher returned it to him the following year «enriched with comments, annotations and suggestions». The target of Diderot's criticism is, in particular, Hemsterhuis' Cartesianism, which attributes motion and life to a principle foreign to matter. Hemsterhuis's was still «a notion of inert and passive matter whose movement required the intervention of an external and heterogeneous cause of action (the soul or, in a broader view, God)». This is interesting, because the Dutch philosopher has often been considered «primarily responsible for the introduction of pantheism into late eighteenth-century Germany». The cause of this misunderstanding lies in Hemsterhuis' esoteric writing, which brings him closer to the 'clandestine' writings of the materialists of the time. Galletta shows, however, how his position in the exchange with Diderot is distinctly anti-materialist. At stake in the discussion between the two philosophers is the existence or non-existence of free will. Unlike Hemsterhuis, for whom the soul remains the principle of human freedom, for Diderot such freedom is never unconditional, but always emanates «from the senses and their exercise».

The third contribution of the section, by Alberto de Vita, considers the relationship between Diderot's and Nietzsche's philosophy. Nietzsche's reference to Diderot should be framed, according to the author, in the context of the rediscovery of French authors that characterises the period immediately following the *Birth of Tragedy*. De Vita identifies three aspects of Nietzsche's thought in which Diderot's influence is particularly evident. The first concerns

Nietzsche's idea of the actor: «The actor's talent, according to Nietzsche, cannot be (Wagnerianly) reduced to his histrionic, sensitive or passionate attitude, for the actor must never fall prey to sentimentality, to instincts; on the contrary, he must appear cold and alienated from the stage». A reference to Diderot is also present, according to the author, in the conception of becoming as the very essence of reality and in the consequent criticism of the Cartesian subject as a stable substance.

The second section of the issue focuses on Diderot as a writer of novels and fiction. In particular, by a fruitful coincidence, the authors of this part have chosen to examine, from different perspectives, the dialogue *Rameau's Nephew*. The first essay, by Rodrigue Bouilingui, investigates the presence of ancient Roman satire in this text. It is not, in fact, well known that the title *Rameau's Nephew* is not original, but was given by Goethe when he translated the dialogue into German in 1805. The text was originally titled «*Satire seconde* [Second Satire]». Diderot had therefore probably written it as part of a satire-writing project. Not surprisingly, the exergue reads «Vertumnis, quotquot, natus iniquis» («born under the malign influence of all Vertumni»). The verses come from the second book of Horace's *Satire VII*. Here Horace describes Priscus, a character who embodies human inconstancy, and who is reminiscent in many ways of the protagonist of Diderot's text (Rameau's nephew, called 'Lui', who converses with the narrator, 'Moi'). In *Rameau's Nephew*, Diderot also picks up some themes from the ancient satire. Among the most important is that of the banquet, with its ridiculous rituals, which the protagonist subverts during lunch at the rich Bertin's house. The theme of prostitution – which in *Rameau's Nephew* is not only sexual prostitution, but also the intellectual prostitution of the artists and scholars surrounding Bertin – is also typical of Roman satire. The most important element of ancient satire that Diderot takes up, however, is its structure. Indeed, as explained in the article 'Satire' in the *Encyclopédie*, satire is a literary genre characterized by a mixture of different themes and elements: a work «mêlé, entassé, sans ordre, sans singularité, soit dans le fond, soit dans la forme». *Rameau's Nephew* is also composed of extremely diverse narrative threads, themes and digressions. However, it is Bouilingui's thesis that Diderot makes a very specific and far from incoherent use of this mixture, employing it to subvert the traditional structures of the narrative. The ancient satire is thus interpreted in a modern key and is not simply imitated but transformed and brought to new life.

The second contribution of the section, by Nicolò De Gregorio, focuses on Hegel's interpretation of *Rameau's Nephew* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. «Anyone who wishes to approach the reading of *Rameau's Nephew* from a philosophical perspective», De Gregorio writes, «cannot help but seriously consider the Hegelian interpretation presented in decisive pages of the *Phänomenologie*». The contrast between the two protagonists of Diderot's text becomes for Hegel that between the «base consciousness» (represented by Lui) and the «noble consciousness» (represented by Moi). The noble conscience

recognizes itself in public power and respects it. In contrast, the base conscience, embodied by Lui, «sees in the power of those who command a chain [...] and therefore hates the ruler». His «lashing, irreverent, and provocative» language is a sign, for Hegel, of a disintegrated society at odds with itself. According to De Gregorio, however, the Hegelian interpretation of *Rameau's Nephew* loses sight of two essential elements of Diderot's text. The first consists in the *theatrical* dimension of the nephew's language. The non-verbal, but figurative and gestural aspect is fundamental to his way of expressing himself. It is precisely this theatrical component of Diderot's work that will be dealt with in the fourth section of the issue, again testifying to the profound connection between the different aspects of his activity. The second element that escapes Hegel, according to De Gregorio, is the dialogical character of the work. Despite Hegel's focus on Lui, Diderot's position only emerges from the *confrontation* between the two protagonists.

It is precisely this dialogical aspect of *Rameau's Nephew* that is the subject of Soumia Sadiki's essay, which examines the presence in *Rameau's Nephew* of dialectics, understood in the Socratic sense of the term. Moi's role in the work is similar, in fact, to that of Socrates in the Platonic dialogues: to «provoke» the interlocutor «to prompt him to speak, and lead him to reveal his thoughts and ideas». On the other hand, it is Lui who has the function, also Socratic, of revealing the prejudices and power mechanisms inherent in the common morality that Moi defends. The nephew thus becomes the spokesman of the oppressed: one of the main themes of *Rameau's Nephew* is that of «social injustice». It is no coincidence that one of the philosophers most interested in the Diderottian dialogue was, besides Hegel, Karl Marx. As Sadiki explains, what reveals the dominant ideology in *Rameau's Nephew* is precisely the extra-linguistic and theatrical element: the points at which, through pantomime and digression, language and ideology meet their limit.

The fourth contribution of the section, by James Clow, focuses on *Rameau's Nephew* from a different perspective, that of the concept of 'genius'. Clow first analyzes Diderot's reflections on art and beauty in the eponymous entries of the *Encyclopédie*. In both articles, the legacy of Francis Bacon is evident, together with the value the English philosopher placed on the advancement of the mechanical arts and knowledge. In Bacon, however, the totality of human knowledge encompasses, in addition to the three fields identified by the Encyclopedists in their *Système Figuré des Connaissances Humaines* – memory/history, reason/philosophy, and imagination/poetry – a fourth sphere, called by Bacon 'Inspired Divinity'. Diderot and D'Alembert – this is Clow's thesis – seek to incorporate the theological element of human experience within the other fields of knowledge. This means that, according to Clow, as far as art is concerned, aesthetic experience is also stripped of its most mysterious and inexplicable aspect. «Inspiration», which Bacon explained in still religious terms, gives way, in the article *Beau* of the *Encyclopédie*, to the definition of beauty as «perception of relations». The inexplicable element of artistic creation and

aesthetic experience survives, however, in the concept of genius, which finds one of its most effective depictions in *Rameau's Nephew*.

The division Clow draws between a writer Diderot, who is attentive to the more unstable and mysterious aspects of experience, and an encyclopedist Diderot, who aspires to explain and make comprehensible every element of it, is not shared by all the issue's authors. In particular, the third section considers Diderot's work on the *Encyclopédie* from two points of view that partly diverge from Clow's. The first contribution of the section, by Maddalena Mazzocut-Mis, highlights how the idea of beauty as «perception of relations» is profoundly innovative. Indeed, the 'relations' that Diderot discusses «cannot be measured with a ruler and compass, [...] they do not submit to cold reason, but [...] neither are they seized by an enthusiastic and irrational impulse». It is up to the observer to discover the «relations in nature», and this discovery lies on the border between rationality and chance, subjective impulse and objective, shared dimension. «The philosopher (one might also say today the critic or the user in general) must therefore», according to Mazzocut-Mis, «listen to the work, welcome it, feel it, because the perception of relationships is not an a posteriori intellectual synthesis of a series of perceptions, but an experience that it is right to define to all intents and purposes as 'aesthetic.'» This concept of beauty is perfectly in tune, according to Mazzocut-Mis, with the project of the *Encyclopédie*, which aims to build a system of knowledge that can never disregard experience and is for this reason always as «unitary and universal», as it is always provisional and open to the discovery of new connections and new aspects.

This idea of knowledge proper to the encyclopedist Diderot is also the focus of Valentina Sperotto's essay, which considers the presence of irony in the *Encyclopédie*. «Those familiar with Diderot's works of fiction», Sperotto writes, «know that, perhaps with the sole exception of the *Religious*, they are shot through with outbursts of laughter, there reigns a gaiety, at times biting, often giggling, the same atmosphere that characterized his gatherings at Baron d'Holbach's mansion». The same is also true of his philosophical works. One would not expect to find irony, however, within the *Encyclopédie*. In fact, latter's goal is to define the terms under consideration from time to time, whereas irony tends by its very nature to deconstruct any unambiguous definition and open up the «sense of discourse». Yet irony is continually present in the *Encyclopédie*, albeit in a subterranean and hidden way: in the cross-references between different entries, «in the connections between certain quotations or in the brief closures of articles», where it «induces one to reread in a new light what was previously stated». In all these cases, it has a demystifying role that is apparently opposed to the «clarifying intent of philosophical reason». And yet, as Sperotto shows through numerous examples, Diderot's use of irony in the *Encyclopédie* «goes precisely in a truthful direction of unveiling». The ideal that thus emerges is that of a knowledge that can and must «be always called into question».

The fourth section of the issue is devoted to Diderot's relationship with the theater. The first essay in the section, by Paolo Quintili, focuses on his



activity as a playwright. A common thread in Diderot's reflection on theater consists, as Quintili explains, in his revaluation of pantomime. In contrast to a theater still often based on rhetoric and the dominance of speech, Diderot emphasizes the importance of the body and gesture. From this point of view, the theatrical performance is like a «living picture [tableau vivant]». This idea will remain constant in Diderot's thinking and lead him to describe, in the *Salons*, paintings as theatrical scenes. However, according to Quintili, there is an important shift that characterizes Diderot's thinking about theater and his activity as a playwright. At an early stage, which coincides with the writing of *Le Fils naturel* and *Entretiens* (1757), Diderot focuses on the «conditions» in which the characters are immersed, on «the determining network of relations, of all kinds, which co-involve human beings in society (and outside)». This has an important connection, according to Quintili, with the materialistic philosophy that Diderot developed in the same period, according to which «the world is an immense web of relations, infinite, between beings, which are born, pass and change form». The dramas that result from these reflections, namely *The Natural Son* and the following year's *The Family Man*, however, are a «solemn fiasco». How then does Diderot, several years later, come to success with the drama *Est-il bon? Est-il méchant?* (1781). The answer is to be found, according to Quintili, in Diderot's new attention – beginning with *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1769-1777, posthumously) – to the role of the actor. Whether a drama can be 'true' now depends on the actor, his practice and sensibility.

The second essay in the section, by Fabrizio Vona, focuses on the reform of theater that Diderot proposed, dwelling in particular on the *Paradoxe sur le comédien*. «Eighteenth-century theater», Vona explains, «was characterized by superficiality and mediocrity. The acting was often unbearable, excessively emphatic, declamatory, fake». This leads Diderot to ask how to make theater more 'real'. The philosopher's answers to this question appear quite diverse and have often been accused of inconsistency. If in the *Discours sur la poésie dramatique* (1758) Diderot seems to sing the praises of the actor's ability to be moved by and empathize with the character, in the *Paradoxe sur le comédien* the ideal actor is described as endowed above all with control and intelligence. Vona disputes, however, the claim that the latter conception contradicts the former. What emerges, in the *Paradoxe*, is in fact not so much the need to *erase* enthusiasm and sensibility as to temper and 'tame' them through discipline. This interpenetration between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements makes Diderot anticipate, according to Vona, some aspects of the thinking of a great theater theorist of the twentieth century, K. Stanislavski.

The fifth section of the issue is devoted to the art curator Diderot and his *Salons*. In the first contribution, Matteo Marcheschi considers the numerous references to cooking in Diderot's work, particularly in the *Salons*, and questions their philosophical significance. In particular, in the 1767 *Salon*, Diderot refers to the «life» and «variety» that characterize a good painting as «what artists call ragout». This is interesting because by the mid-eighteenth century there had

been a veritable «Querelle» around ragout, now known as the «Querelle des bouffeurs». The advocates of modern cooking, who extolled the ability to mix ingredients to create a new whole, were opposed by the ancients, who saw ragout as a deception, a dangerous magic. The discussion had soon expanded from taste for food to taste as such: for the moderns, the love of ragout helped to sharpen aesthetic skills, to grasp the relationships between the different elements not only of a food but also of an artwork.

The second contribution, by Raphael Eslas, focuses on the idea of truth that continually emerges in the *Salons*. One of the most important requirements for a picture, for the Diderot of the *Salons*, is that it be «true». In asking what this concept of truth means in the *Salons*, Eslas shows that it arises from the outset as a critique of all preconstituted truth. Against the teachings of the Royal Academy of Painting, which claimed to provide pupils with pre-established models to imitate, Diderot calls artists to the necessity of observing the world with their own eyes, and to seek in their own emotions the ability to move viewers.

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