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Pseudo-catharsis and the art of scriptwriting.

Captatio for an academic audience.

When I give classes to scriptwriters and I teach university students the structure of long running tv series, I feel a widespread interest about a concept which has a pivotal role: the concept of catharsis. The idea of a strong emotional reaction to a plot is far from new, its noble birth going back to Aristotle's *Poetics*.

According to Aristotle, "catharsis" is the purification of pitiful and fearful emotions and it's elicited by the character's destiny in a tragedy. Aristotle observes that "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves". A man who is similar to the spectator is, in Aristotle's opinion, a "man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty".

In Aristotle's thought, catharsis is caused by "recognition" which "as the name indicates, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune.". Besides, later on, the philosopher observes: "In respect of Character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good".

Ari Hiltunen, in his book *Aristotle in Hollywood*¹, commenting the wide exploitation of aristotelian narratology in contemporary American cinema, says: "A good plot would also seem to have a certain kind of moral structure: undeserved suffering and the ultimate realisation of moral justice. This might be the explanation of the importance of the ending and the pleasurable effect of *catharsis*. Because *catharsis* is a release from pity, it means that the plot has to release the character from moral injustice by the re-establishment of moral justice. The pleasure this creates heightens that induced by the release from suspense.".

Starting from these premises, I will try to gain a point of view on catharsis complementary to the Aristotelian one. My argument is based on the reading of Karol Wojtyła's philosophical essay *The Acting Person*². I'll then shortly analyze the landscape of recent TV series to see which kind of catharsis they elicit.

The point.

If one considers a character for what it is, and if he regards it as a fictional substitute for a person, he will find that the personalistic philosophy developed by Karol Wojtyła is a powerful help in understanding the root of the spectator's engagement in cinema or tv series.

A character is a product of the craft of writing, but viewers are induced by their spectatorship to forget it (the suspension of disbelief phenomenon) and authors ground their work exactly on this state of mind in the viewers. What authors do, is to represent a human being, counting on the precomprehension that viewers have of it.

When an author creates a character, he depicts it only in some particular aspects of its existential experience, depending on the genre: for example, the human side depicted could be the fighting one (the action genre), or the intellectual one (the detection genre). An author counts on the help of the viewers' imagination in order to complete the picture of his character.

However, there is an element which is impossible not to suggest to the viewer, because it is the very essence of any character, in any story. Without this element, it would be impossible even to conceive the notion of character. Structuralists tried hard to avoid this crucial element while explaining how a character works, but they were regularly caught up in a whirl of contradictions.

¹ Ari Hiltunen, *Aristotle in Hollywood: Visual Stories that Work*, Intellect Books, Bristol 2002.

² Karol Wojtyła, *Osoba i Czyn*, «Polskie Towarzystwo Teologiczne», Kraków 1969; engl. transl. by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, D. Reidel, *The Acting Person*, Publishing Company, Dordrecht-Boston-London, 1979.

As a substitute for a person, a character is necessarily a being who is making an effort to reach happiness. There is no way: when the viewer decodes a character, he always perceives, at least on the existential background of him, the longing for an absolute fulfilment. Otherwise, viewers wouldn't see a character, but a mime.

Perhaps we do not focus on the "frame of happiness", for example because it is not immediately at stake in the situation showed on the screen, but we can not help relying on this knowledge. Something similar happens when we are driving a car: we do not think at the hundreds of movements we are doing, but we rely on the fact that we have learned them and, if we want it, we can direct our attention to them.

The light of happiness is what shapes characters as characters, and what makes them different from the objects of the fictional world which is built by a story. *Blade Runner* is written so that the light of happiness touches also androids: that is why we are moved to tears when replicant Roy Betty dies. On the contrary, we do not get sad when we see Wile missing for the millionth time Road Runner, because we know that Wile's existence is already fulfilled in a never ending hunt. But if Jack Aubrey, in *Master & Commander*, did not stop and cure his friend, he would really disappoint us, even if he defeated the French: we would realize that, in order to fulfil one's life, to enhance friendship is more important than to foster pride.

The thought of Karol Wojtyła stresses exactly this point: that every time a human being, as a person, does something – i.e. whenever he acts –, he makes a choice about his happiness. More precisely, Wojtyła concentrates on the experience of being a person, to show what it consists of, in a phenomenological perspective.

In Wojtyła's point of view, a person inevitably experiences that it is impossible to choose, or to want, or to aim at something, without, in the mean time, choosing, or wanting, or aiming at ourselves: everything matters in order to enhance the flourishing of our virtues or that of our vices. In other words, we are ourselves, with our potentialities, the clay to mould in order to shape the sculpture we're going to be. Every time we act, either we win the clay's resistance, or we loose against it, or we exploit the malleability of the material in view of the sculpture. To be a good father, for example, you have to be influential, which implies, sometimes, to say "no" to your children. If you do not do it, the sculpture will be lacking in something, ethically speaking and, therefore, in the light of happiness.

The fact is that sometimes it is hard to be a sculptor; sometimes it is tiring to "integrate" – in Wojtyła's word – your potentialities into the sculpture's shape. It takes an effort. And it can happen that, during this effort, you feel alone. It can happen that you are absorbed by the thought of how heavy you are to lift. Then – it is a case not so rare – you could start wondering if there is an easier way to do it; you could wonder if it is just you in such a tough game and you could start feeling discouragement. The sculpture, then, is in danger.

Precisely to "purge" his moral tiredness and to help the people to restore their sense of action, man invented storytelling. In the characters of stories, in movies, in TV series, people instinctively look forward to finding a tension toward fulfilment and to being reassured that any resistance, or strain, or heaviness are not solipsistic burdens. Spectators look forward to rediscovering that these troubles are the noble seal to the common enterprise of being persons. The cathartic pleasure of stories lies in this assurance. To get it, we agree to suspend our disbelief. Especially nowadays, in a so called postmodern society, crowded of electronic images, lacking in sense of community and, especially in big cities, pervaded by loneliness. All this is well said by *Collateral*, the last movie by Michael Mann.

The mapping.

It's now interesting to consider which answer the characters of TV series give to the viewers in terms of tension toward fulfilment and in terms of catharsis³. These stories usually consist of hundreds of episodes. Their characters are thus very familiar to spectators who, following them for so long, are able to easily tune themselves on the intimate emotiveness of their TV heroes.

I've drawn a map in which I've identified five typologies of series and I've placed them differently, depending on the involvement of their characters in the enterprise of being persons. The bottom of the map coincide with the lowest degree of existential tension.

Trash.

The lowest part of the map is an area of scriptwriters' imagery where the tension defining a person as a person is, simply and tragically, absent. Face and symbol of this area is Pamela Anderson, who features as the main character in *V.i.p.*, playing the role of the leader of a body guard agency in L.A.. The archetype here prevailing is the one of characters with an intrusive corporeity and with a less than elemental psychological level. They live in a toyland where they treat the world with the confidence of a baby, just experiencing the pleasure of moving, jumping, fighting the enemy, making sex... . There is not any substantial difference between the approach to life of male and that of female characters: it is as if their conscience was totally projected out of themselves on a coloured and shining universe where everything causes stupid surprise (because I'm sexy; because I'm a karate champion; because I'm driving so fast...)

Evidently, viewers do not get any catharsis at all from products like *V.i.p.*. In this case, characters are engaging in a "trash" perspective. If you are a spectator not so involved in getting the best from your watching experience – the most part of adolescent target – you will abandon yourself to the erotic stimulation coming from Pamela & Company. If your tastes are more refined, you will think that the low level of scriptwriting is a choice made to stimulate your irony, which will be, anyway, a coarse irony.

Heroes in action.

In the above area things are different. Here we find heroes in action. *Alias* and *The Pretender* are good examples of this archetype of character. They're *Supercar's*, *The Fugitive's* and *Miami Vice's* heirs. In these cases, destiny has forced the main character to freeze his growth as a person. There is a mission to accomplish and, until the end of it, any stable change in the life of the character will be impossible. Family is just an early and often traumatic memory; in prospect, family is a forbidden choice, by now, because enemies come first. The only kind of love the hero can have is the romantic one, which is by definition episodic and which is lived by the character only like a temporary relief from his battle.

In other words, this area is dominated by the myth of the lonely man. The scriptwriting formula of the "hero's journey" is, at its root, a metaphor of the passage from adolescence to adulthood. If ordeals and trials against the bad guys are repeated a thousand times without producing any improvement in the personal fulfilment of the character, they will lose real meaning in terms of existential catharsis. The basic human relationships and the emotional life of the spectator will not be touched.

We already know that to defend justice is the hero's job. We will certainly notice that the hero's courage has saved many families, but the fact is that it is never the hero's one. The adventure of the hero, thus, becomes for the young target a pleasurable metaphor of the freedom from the parents' eye and from the effort of being educated.

We can say, therefore, that the emotions elicited by this area's plots are produced by interrupting the tension of the character toward the fulfilment of the person that he or she is.

³ See on this Paolo Braga, *Dal personaggio allo spettatore*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2003.

Diverting companies.

The following area, where we find the coming of age series, is splitted into two parts. In the sit-com part, the characters are assembled so that their existential tension is wasted. *Friends* is the main example. It is widely known that Ross, Phoebe, Monica, Chandler, Joey and Rachel are in their thirties, but that they are less than teenagers in their brain. This would already be quite a problem in terms of potential self-fulfilment, but there is more: if you look well, you will find that the “fab six”, facing their upper class social contest, also offer a wide choice of psychopathologies and scruples, together with an insane and exhausting attitude toward self-analysis. Their sexual identity is often object of doubt and of debate. This archetype produces a lot of laughs, of course, but, because of its insistence on real problems like divorce, lesbian lifestyle and juvenile frustrations, it emotively hooks the public. The problem is that the most famous friends of the world, because of their hyperpsychologized and hyperchildish personalities, never choose their future. Everything is a good occasion to avoid thinking about it: they only try to exorcize the menace of growth with their witticisms.

The other part of the area is for dramedy. *Dawson’s Creek* perfectly represents the spirit here dominating the characters. Kevin Williamson, author of the show, describes his creatures as follows: “My teenagers are self-aware and smart and they talk like they have 10 years of therapy and they have all the answers. But their behavior completely contradicts that. Their behavior is that of a 15-year-old, inexperienced and not sure of the next step”⁴. It’s easy to understand that people like these suffer a lot trying to become adult. However, the series is written so that the real problem at stake is how to preserve and to cultivate the emotional, though painful inspiration, which is an essential part of the adolescence experience. In other words, the tension to self-fulfilment is so high, that it becomes itself the aim of the person. This way you will not have any substancial change in the character and any catharsis will be false, only apparent.

The predestinateds’ arena.

Next area is crucial. Its characters have a powerful existential tension, but its is vampirized by their work. Take, for example, *E.R.*. Crowds of patients in panic swarm into the hospital, making it impossible for the main characters to live private lives. Their only clear moral value seems to be resistance, like a soldier in war. In *E.R.* the enemy is death, the illness of patients which means absence of meaning. That’s why the existence of characters, like their job, rapidly shifts from sequences of stasis, waiting for the next attack, to moments of explosive tension, during emergencies. While not declaring it, characters feed the illusion of the end of strain, the illusory chance of ending their work forever. The consequence is that the hospital is like an arena in which guilt is everpresent. A normal everyday life where people tension is spent also in favour of their family is impossible.

Families in chorus.

Till now, we’ve registered only pseudo catharsis.

The last area of the map, at the top, is the one of family dramedy and of family sit-com. Traditionally, it has been the area where existential tension and catharsis in personal terms were represented at their best. In *The Cosby Show* and, much before, in *Bonanza*, characters had to solve problems which were never cause for loneliness or solipsism. Family values and the Frontier myth have always been associated and the latter still survives in those series which describe contemporary family commitment (*Savages*). Here, the effort of one character is purified as occasion of communion with the other member of the family and, in a wider sense, with social commitment. Unfortunately, this area is weakened by shows that depict family using types of

⁴ Ted Johnson, *Kevin Williamson who came of age on the real Dawson Creek, stays in touch with his inner teen in TV Guide* (march 1998) 7-13 digital version at the address www.silverwing.net/kw/articles/1998/tvguide.html.

character taken from the areas below, and thus unable to grow: think at Tony Soprano or at The Fishers in *Six Feet Under*.

Conclusion.

To conclude, it is in this last area that scriptwriters should commit themselves most, trying to give their characters the chance of “integrating” new moral skills and refined sensibility through the trials they have to face. In doing this, however, it is important to distinguish a safe form of catharsis, which is the one I have treated, from a dangerous one.

This latter type of catharsis follows the shock produced on a character who discovers, through a bitter and exceptional experience, that life must be accepted both in its sorrow face and in its happy face, which are the two sides of a secret and universal balance. The ideas of Grace and of a personal God are absent here, because a Gnostic atmosphere dominates⁵. When you have survived the shock, you can feel the mysterious energy that animates everything. Very often, this form of catharsis is caused by the moral resurrection of a character who comes out from the obscure side of existence, from depression and from dissoluteness. It is an exceptional and liberating experience and sometimes it is incredibly powerful on the audience (think at Al Pacino in *Scout of Woman*, or at Matt Damon in *Will Hunting*).

The problem is, however, that very often the protagonist’s resurrection – after all he is always an hero – somehow makes also his previous moral failings appealing: they appear to be part of the hero’s destiny (this happens in *E.R.*). Besides, it is through these failings that the hero finds the secret juice of life (think at *American Beauty* or *The Hours*).

On the contrary, the catharsis originating from the character’s effort to do his best, from the strain of fulfilling the project he consists, is not a shock. It is something stable, instead. It is, I dare to say, an every day experience which nonetheless is always exciting and new. Its satisfying flavour is evidence of the intimate assimilation of values granted by virtuous attitudes.

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⁵ See on this Paolo Braga, *Without God: Resentment and Utopia in Mainstream Fiction*, paper presented at the conference *Ethics Without God?*, Jacques Maritain Institute, Notre Dame University, Indiana (Usa), July 2003, www.nd.edu