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Between Art and Philosophy. Patterns of Baxandall's Criticism

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ABSTRACT. In my paper, I outline a tentative philosophical reading of some core issues of Michael Baxandall's work in art history and criticism. To do this, I discuss his sustained reflection on two core philosophical aspects of his idea of art criticism: the problem of a possible historical explanation, and the problem of the relation between images and language. I underline the relevance of this second issue through a close reading of his article *The Language of Art History*. I then try to show how Baxandall's position can be clarified by reference to Danto's account of metaphor and aboutness in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Delving into the metaphorical ground of aboutness I discuss how, following Baxandall, the metaphor may be seen as a chief device by which language can say something about images.

1.

To begin with, I feel I have to clarify how my topic fits in the framework of a philosophical society, interested in aesthetics. Why should we dedicate our time to the work of an art historian, as Michael Baxandall was, since that is another type of attention to the artistic dimension? And, even more, since he himself, throughout the whole spectrum of his career, has always stressed that his views about art and art history were deliberately presented as "sub-theoretical"?[320]

Well, the first relevant thing we have to consider is another aspect of Baxandall's self-representation which has to be taken seriously, just as his many understatements have to. In interviews, he stressed his viewing his work as that of an art critic, rather than that of an art

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[319] E-mail: davide.mogetta@phd.unipi.it The present text is a very slightly revised version of the one I have read in Budapest. I wish to thank the participants for the discussion.

[320] See Baxandall, 1985a, p. 13. Later on in the book he discusses his (purported) moving "from a very low and simple theoretical stance" (Baxandall, 1985a, p. 35).

historian. Directing our attention toward art criticism can be an effective way to grasp the philosophical relevance of his work. Why would it be so?

If we do not understand art criticism just as the attitude of *evaluating* artworks, but rather as an attempt at finding the proper way of possibly appreciating them, its philosophical relevance comes to the fore right away, although still superficially. Seen in a deeper way, the point of art criticism might be seen as a continuously displayed (and exercised) attention to the conditions of possibility of discussing the artwork – while discussing the artwork itself. I think we see this in the exemplary instances of criticism. Walter Benjamin provides a notable philosophical example. Think of the beginning of his essay on Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*:[321] it does not just define the spectrum of art criticism, but also its being a problematic account – in the sense of going into the problems proper of the artwork, and of going by the same token and at the same time into the problem of developing that same account. But that would be another story to discuss.

2.

In his book on Aby Warburg, George Didi-Huberman has stressed this philosophical connection as the basis of art history and has further specified it. Reflecting on Winckelmann's model of historical explanation while aiming at explaining Warburg's, Didi-Huberman writes that "there is no history of art without a philosophy of history […] just as there is no history of art without a philosophy of art" (Didi-Huberman, 2017, p. 4).

The point at issue consists not so much in stating that every case of art historiography implies, on the author's part, certain assumptions in the fields of the philosophy of history and in the philosophy of art; this could either be a truism (be these assumptions conscious or not) or a false statement. It is false to some, if our imagined art historian does not hold anything relevant from a philosophical point of view; it is a truism to others, if, inquiring philosophically in the work of an art historian, we discuss philosophically the assumptions, or the induced assumptions, of the art historian's work. I say this briefly just for the sake of showing that these 'either… or…' are altogether irrelevant. The thing truly at stake is not so much that one art history holds certain positions in the philosophy of history or art, or implies something in these

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[321] See Benjamin, 1996, pp. 297-299.

fields; it is, much more, that every history of art *must* imply two fundamentally philosophical issues, which may be discussed by both philosophers or non-philosophers, but which remain philosophical in their tissue. These philosophical problems may as well be characterised as problematic clusters.

The first of them, under the label of "philosophy of history", could be seen reflected in the very general question: how is it possible to explain and understand works of art that have been produced in the distant past? This leads to a multitude of questions, some of which should be pushed up to the metaphysical level of asking if, and how, the past itself exists as a given, as something out of which these works come. But even without pushing the discussion up to this level (or for instance, pushing it up to that level and then going back), of the immediate form of the historian's challenge with his subject matter is about the said thing: how possibly to understand it properly (that is, not anachronistically) and explain its peculiar historical charge. (One could, obviously, enlarge this problem with or without the temporal factor in the transcultural one of anthropological studies.[322])

The second problematic cluster, to further use this expression, pertains to, in the broadest sense, what should the research object be: namely, what art is. To this, the historian may object that this question is far too large and that he may choose to adhere to the definition of art relevant for the period of his concern. What he will not be able to escape, though, is the specification of this question in one which must be seen as universally applicable while being specifically pertinent to each and every artistic genre. It is the question of how the historical, scientific discourse, can deal with the specifically artistic dimension it is about: how am I to discuss poetry? or how am I linguistically to discuss works of visual art? (Following Baxandall, this will be my chief interest.) These are specific instances of the more general question, which bears the characteristics of a fundamental philosophical issue.[323]

But we have met these problems by referring to the field of art history, and not of art

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[322] Baxandall's *Patterns of Intention* is open to be discussed under this viewpoint. A work in this direction should account for Baxandall's reflection on the philosophies of history of Karl R. Popper and especially of Robin G. Collingwood (a good starting point for this may be the wide panorama discussed in the first part of Ginzburg, 2015). I cannot discuss here, for reasons of space, why the reference to Collingwood seems to me more promising. In any case, this reference has been discussed in Iversen & Melville, 2010, and Davis, 2015.

[323] The critical relevance of this philosophical issue (and the other way around) seems evident, for example, in the case of Arthur C. Danto.

criticism. Even if we allow that the connection I have proposed between the two indeed holds, it may still have to be shown why it should be relevant, for these issues, to discuss art criticism instead of art history.

I would hold that art criticism should be regarded as a fundamental dimension of art history itself.[324] With reference to these two problematic clusters one could show how, in art criticism, they manifest with notable intensity. For example, because art criticism may imply the addition, to the historical side, of the question of understanding not only past but generally *other* cultures; on the side of the philosophy of art, because it implies a sustained discussion of its possibility which has to be shown the reader for art criticism to be convincing. I think that the relevance of art criticism in this constellation is that it is in this *practice* that the connection between these two problematic clusters comes to the fore. And although it is something present in art history itself, it is in art criticism that it is gained.

This connection is each time anew at stake in art criticism since the primary concern of the art critic is that of making the work trans-historically or trans-culturally available, through the means of a language that cannot be the same as that of the work (let alone non-linguistic works of art). The art critic's discourse, therefore, must have the peculiarity of being at the same time transparent and opaque. This duplicity of the critic's discourse reflects the duplicity of its chief problem. When coming close to the artwork with critical language one must never forget its historical (or cultural) alterity; when letting it sweep away in a distant time or cultural space, in order to understand its specificity, one cannot let it altogether disappear from the discourse. The same goes for the visual interest. Renounce to discuss it because it is not directly accessible to language, and you have lost it; assume it to be completely available to language, and it cannot be considered in its specific visuality anymore. This does not sum up to saying that these two clusters are poles between which one must find an equilibrium: they are the extremes that are continuously embodied in critical discourse and are posited by this discourse itself.

The relevance of studying Michael Baxandall lies in the fact that he has developed this issue in various ways – both directly and indirectly – across his body of work. I propose to

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[324] This, at least, if we think about it following Baxandall. At the end of *Patterns of Intention* he writes that "if one looks at the origins of modern art history and art criticism, which are in the Renaissance, it is noticeable that really it arose out of conversation" (Baxandall, 1985a, p. 137).

study the outlines of an idea of art criticism through the configuration it shows in his work, which showcases these issues clearly, I think. In this sense, the answer to "Why Baxandall?" is, mainly, for the fitness of his work to be used to study these problems; and I hope this will be – obliquely as it might – shown by my contribution.

A pivotal role in my research is played by *Patterns of Intention* (1985), his most 'theoretical' book. But for the sake of brevity, I will focus on how the issue of matching words and pictures can be explored from a philosophical perspective starting from a paper of his, tightly connected to the book itself.

3.

In the period ranging between the Sixties and the Eighties, the world of art history saw many upheavals and harsh discussions in the context of diverse theoretical approaches and methodologies: many paths seemed to open up.[325] Baxandall refrained from active engagement in the contemporary theoretical and methodological debates, even if his *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*,[326] had certainly changed the landscape of the discipline. Among other things, he introduced the notion of *period eye*,[327] still relevant today in art history as well as in visual culture studies.[328]

One should not infer from this that he was an uninterested spectator, obviously. An article published in 1979 in the "New Literary History", entitled *The Language of Art History*, demonstrates Baxandall's perspective: the foundation of that theoretical debate was fundamentally flawed.[329] Baxandall tackles the premises of 'theory' and 'interpretation' (and their connection) altogether. He wants to let aside discussions about method and explore the potential of art-critical writing. I will now closely examine specific aspects of this article, which, as said, are further elaborated upon in *Patterns of Intention*.

The article kicks off with a section slyly titled "dialogue declined": Baxandall refuses to enter the discussion on the status of art historical research without first discussing the premises

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[325] For an overview, see the last part of Rossi Pinelli, 2014, pp. 452-490.
[326] Baxandall, 1972.
[327] See, among others, Langdale, 1998.
[328] And he played a major role (even if, maybe, less directly) in the diffusion of the studies on *visual culture* itself, see Alpers 1983, p. xxv: "What I propose to study then is not the *history* of Dutch art, but the Dutch *visual culture* — to use a term that I owe to Michael Baxandall".
[329] Baxandall, 1979. The article was later republished as *The Language of Art Criticism* (Baxandall, 1991).

of that field. He asks, then, what should be understood as "theory": he implies that there are concerns in art history that transcend specific methodologies, such as 'Marxist' art history, as an example. And he writes, "the issues I most worry about in art history – a term I use interchangeably with art criticism – fall into two main groups. One group is connected with the visual interest of works of art; that is our staple. The other group is connected with how one can and cannot state relationships between the character of the works of art and their historical circumstances" (Baxandall, 1979, p. 455). We are becoming acquainted with this landscape, and together with the author, we will concentrate on the first issue.

The initial point he presents holds significant philosophical significance. The object of interest being works of visual art, one has to find a way to stick to the specificity of the visual dimension of the artworks themselves: their visual interest. Maintaining this clear differentiation between the visual dimension of artworks and the language employed to analyse them is characteristic of Baxandall's standpoint. He emphasizes that the words used by art historians to highlight visually compelling elements of the artwork "are not so much descriptive as demonstrative" (Baxandall, 1979, p. 455).

This includes the presupposition that, in fact, is a characteristic of art critical (or historical) discourse – the presence of the artwork, which is available in some way (physically or in reproduction or memory) to the hearers of the art critical discourse. This has the consequence that this type of discourse assumes the aspect of a sort of pointing; further, the spectator, and listener, are forced to compare between the discourse and its object. One instigates the hearer "to supply a degree of precision to broad categories by a reciprocal reference between the word and the available object. It [the language] is ostensive" (Baxandall, 1979, p. 456). The usage of terms specific to the artworld, furthermore, prompts a sophisticated reaction in the listener, who tries to match the word – such as *chiaroscuro* or even a straightforward term like *square* – not only with the specific artwork at hand but also with references to prior uses of the term and other artworks.

From these observations, two primary elements emerge. First, that there is an inherent problem in aligning universally applicable terms with the object to which they are ostensively referred; second, that understanding this relationship is something that sets the listener to work, not just by swaying between words and objects, but also supplying knowledge to sharpen the words in relationship to objects. The connecting tissue of these two elements is that the

language Baxandall discusses is *au fond* an indirect language, or, as he writes, "oblique or tropical" (Baxandall, 1979, p. 457).

The third section of the paper is devoted to an analysis of this indirectness. There are three types of "words" that can be summarised in the scheme on page 458.

Type I and I. *bis* words, *Similia* and *Matter of representation* "point to a kind of visual interest by making a comparison of some sort, often by metaphor" (Baxandall, 1979, p. 457), and in the particular case of those referring to the matter of representation, they take up the represented object as if it were actual. So, you will have a rhythmic figure, or an agitated figure.

Type II words are those that we refer to maker, that is, to the action or agent that produced them: so, you will have a calculated figure here or there, say, a virtuosity.

Type III words are supposed to work as to describe the effect of the artwork on the beholders, or a reaction on the part of the beholder, like, for example, a disturbing effect.

We define them as comparative or metaphorical (Type I), causal or inferential (Type II), and subject or ego words (Type III).

But if we take a closer look at the scheme and the relationship between the various kinds of indirectness that revolve around the object, we get the feeling that there must be a sort of theoretical, if loose, hierarchy between them. Baxandall in fact writes that all of these words are "projections of the subject, the speaking beholder" (Baxandall 1979, p. 458); and this may be obvious. However, what extends beyond this apparent truism is that indirectness is a characteristic essential to them all, and specifically this indirectness is not an inert element but something that the beholder must actively work with. It is because of this, I would say, that they are not just "in a weak sense metaphorical" (Baxandall, 1979, p. 458), as Baxandall writes. I note, in passing, that his analysis may well be extended to sentences and not be confined to words of the "artworld".

All we have seen brings to a reflection on the basic paradox of any activity that tries to linguistically make accessible works of visual art:[330] Baxandall contends that the linearity of language cannot be matched with the pace and gait of seeing a picture. This may well be true, but what to do, then, with our indirect art critical words (and sentences)?

Baxandall's answer could be thus summarized: one can only try to exercise the basic

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[330] See Baxandall, 1979, p. 461.

paradox with which we are faced. The possibility given to the art critic is to embrace the ostensive character of the critical language and to take it to its limits. Baxandall's own proposed way of doing this – inferential criticism – is defined in this connection. What I would like to emphasise, albeit briefly, is that at the bottom of this possibility, we meet what is construed as an impossible act, that is, finding words perfectly matched with pictures. There is a negativity at play in his definition of his own "inferential criticism", then, which has a peculiar form: images are such negatives of language, and vice versa, that nonetheless do not exclude each other, even if in an actual opposition. It is precisely because our description addresses our thoughts about pictures, and not these directly (or a mental event in the painter's mind) that this allows us to say something about the picture itself.[331]

Let us now focus for a little on Baxandall's "inferential criticism". In his practice, Baxandall tried to give particular focus to what we have seen are, in his scheme, Type II words: causal or inferential, in being inferential as to cause. These are, according to him, "the main vehicle of demonstrative precision in art criticism. They are active in two distinct senses. […] [C]ausal words deal in inferred actions and agents. At the same time they involve the speaker in the activity of inferring and the hearer in the activity of reconstructing and assessing the pattern of implication" (Baxandall, 1979, pp. 461-462).

There are two extremely relevant sides to this explanation. First, it implies the connection between the historical question and that on the possibilities of language with respect to visual artworks: the inferential activity Baxandall discusses is that of re-constructing the context of the artwork, and re-enact it in the understanding and explanation of it. It is worth noting that the requirement for historical references is not derived per se but as an essential element of the linguistic effort to understand an image. This connects us immediately with the second relevant side of this definition: the power of inferential words is, in Baxandall's account, their ability to prompt activity on the side of the speaker (and hearer) in rendering active – by inferring – the negative relationship between images and words about them. To put it concisely, I would say that inferential criticism renders evident how the historical dimension of the explanation of the

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[331]Michael Ann Holly has written that "the inadequacy of language and the impossibility of historical recovery are the two negative premises from which his ultimately affirming work derives" (Holly, 2013, p. 83); she tends to read Baxandall's point of view as fundamentally post-modernist and sceptic.

artwork is a dimension of the essentially metaphorical linguistic attitude towards it, while the metaphors themselves, through which we try to grasp the artwork, are historically tensed.[332] For how diverse may their type of attentive inflection be, "critical 'tact', writes Baxandall, and historical 'grasp' appear as very much the same thing" (Baxandall, 1979, p. 463).

4.

To delve into these topics, I will try to gain insights from Danto's philosophy of art, particularly his book *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*.[333] Definitive proof of as early, direct exchange between them remains unprovable. What is certain is that Danto's work on the philosophy of history[334] plays a significant role in Baxandall's book, and that, the other way around, not only did Danto write an insightful review of *Patterns of Intention*,[335] but over the following decades he remarked on his admiration for Baxandall's inferential criticism. It was, for Danto, particularly close to his own way of doing art criticism. [336]

To clarify the scope of my argument, I wish to emphasise that I will not consider later developments in Danto's work, especially regarding his subsequent acknowledgment of the significance of aesthetic ideas. To that I would only say, in any case, that it seems to me that such a development is not terribly at odds with his previous work.

However, it is essential to revisit a fundamental aspect of Danto's ontology of art. In brief, Danto's ontology posits that an object can be considered a work of art if and only if it embodies meaning. It hinges on the coexistence of two conditions: embodiment and aboutness. Both these elements must be present in the object for it to be designated and comprehended as an artwork. This short definition of the spectrum of the possible artworks is summarised in the catchphrase "embodied meaning" by Danto himself.[337] I would like to stress this. It seems to me that Danto, in later works, underlined the results of that book letting the arguments in their favour get a little out of focus. What I think we lose a little sight of is, mainly, the relevance of

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[332]See Williams, 2015, p. 94.
[333] Catherine Lord and José A. Benardete have linked Baxandall to Goodman, see Lord and Benardete, 1991. I think their account and the one proposed here may be integrated.
[334] Particularly Danto, 1965, and Danto, 1966 (see Baxandall, 1985a, *passim*).
[335] Danto 1986.
[336] "Michael Baxandall, a historian I totally admire, identified what he calls "inferential criticism". [...] And that is what I think I spontaneously tried to do" (Danto, 1994, p. 14).
[337] The catchphrase is still present as such in Danto, 2014, even if he further develops his theory in this book.

the metaphor: it is the metaphorical structure of the work of art that allows him to account for the embodiedness of meaning, and the projective force of the embodiment that the artwork is. The metaphorical structure of the artwork plays a pivotal role, enabling it to convey not only what it represents but also *how* it is about what it is about.

Now in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, the study of metaphor holds a prominent position, particularly in the final two chapters: *Works of Art and Mere Representations*, and *Metaphor, Expression, and Style*. However, the metaphorical dimension is subtly interwoven into earlier arguments. An illustration of this can be seen in Danto's critique of the theory of imitation, where he reframes the significance of imitation in the realm of the arts. Imitation can only be comprehended as an "*intensional* concept" (Danto, 1981, p. 68) so that something can be an imitation of *x* without implying that such an *x* must exist. It would be off-topic to discuss this account of imitation, but I wish to underline its discussion on the basis of its intensionality.

The intensional hero of the book is, of course, the metaphor itself. Its presence in Danto's argument ranges from the consideration of the structural relationship between art and descriptive language to its fundamental role in the definition of the transfiguration of the commonplace itself. As a matter of fact, Danto uses the expression of *metaphorical transfiguration* while explaining the difference between artworks and mere representations:[338] this distinction allows him to finally define the artwork firmly. The metaphorical device is a fundamental structure of the work of art. This, again, must be understood in an intensional way: the locus of metaphoric expression should be seen in the representation itself, and its modality, rather than in the reality represented, which may as well not exist.[339] The artwork is a *transfigurative representation*, and "to understand the artwork is to grasp the metaphor that [...] is always there" (Danto, 1981, p. 172).

Two aspects become particularly relevant when considering this in the context of Michael Baxandall's work. Danto draws a connection between the metaphor and the enthymeme, citing Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as a reference point. This reference implies that an essential aspect of the metaphor is that it "involves a complex interrelation between the framer and the reader of the

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[338] See Danto, 1981, p. 168.
[339] On the prospective power of the metaphor in Danto's account, and its theoretical consequences, see Goria, 2018.

enthymeme" (Danto, 1981, p. 170), compelling the mind into action. Danto, here, is thinking of the work's effect on the spectator. There is yet another facet of the metaphor that should be considered in this context: its significance within the language of the art world. Danto swiftly touches upon terms of the artworld jargon, initially highlighting that these terms are often understood as "jokes or metaphors".[340] He later explains that this is so because the structure of the artworld's language mirrors the relationship between artworks and mere real things. In other words, it is inherently metaphorical. Furthermore, this implies that criticism – the task of comprehending artworks and rendering them accessible – must delve into the concepts and presuppositions implicit (and covered) in the kind of collapsed enthymeme that an artwork is. This, by the way, reiterates the significance of the historical dimension.

5.

These structural similarities between Danto and Baxandall seem striking. However, it is important to note that the latter never embraced an ontological definition of art, nor did he construct a purely theoretical account of it. Nevertheless, I think that it is crucial to emphasize how Baxandall's acknowledgment of the inherent impossibility of language to fully capture the visual interest of the discussed artworks transforms, exactly because it does remain impossible, into an opportunity made possible through the use of metaphorical language.[341] Observing Danto's work, we could argue that this necessity arises because metaphorical language aligns perfectly with the metaphorical structure of artworks. If this sounds aporetic – because impossibility and possibility are in this case one, and yet they are opposite – let me conclude by recalling a point made earlier.

I suggested that there is a strange negativity at work in the relation between words and images as it is thought by Baxandall. With a last hint, I would like to point out that the same seems true for the structure of the metaphor as portrayed by Danto, even if we can only say this by taking his position to the extreme. The metaphorical structure enables artworks to inhabit a realm where they *simultaneously* exist as real and unreal. Even Warhol's *Brillo Boxes*, for instance, must be as real as the 'real' Brillo Boxes are, to *negate* their mere reality.

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[340] See Danto, 1981, p. 155.
[341] This active charge seems to me to offer enough ground to resist the "post-modernist" or "sceptic" consequences that otherwise may be drawn from Baxandall's work.

The opposition between words and images, as that between artworks and mere real things, or ordinary language and art critical language, may well not be overcome. And yet, at the same time, this opposition is not merely about the mutual excluding negation of opposites – due to the metaphorical fabric that enables a connection between them. These are, in my view, issues that demand ongoing exploration. Examining art criticism through a philosophical lens may provide a means to navigate the intricate relationship between art and philosophy.

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