

## A WARHOLIAN DISCUSSION OF SOCIAL ONTOLOGY: ON DESCRIPTION, REITERATION AND CONTINGENCY

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*You need to let the little things that would ordinarily  
bore you suddenly thrill you.*

Andy Warhol

**Abstract.** The study approaches the realm of social ontology in a particular key. Capitalizing the pretext of the anniversary of a centenary since Andy Warhol's work, *Campbell Soup* (1921), the author makes it a metaphor for a "method" of social investigation; a fresh qualitative analytic look upon the social realm. The Andy Warhol type of analytic glance upon society bears the name of the intriguing artist born Andrew Warhola (1928-1987) – pop artist and film director. In a way, an anti-art artist, Andy Warhol denied to art the very artistic input and vibe, creating emotionless and affectless works of art that simply "copy" things. "Art is anything you can get away with," is among his most intriguing and reiterated famous quotes part of a pop postmodernism still "floating around" certain intellectual circles. His name is used here as an eponym for multiplication, actually, mechanical multiplication, as a process meant to be insulated outside the realms of art; which did not happen. Attitudes, forms of expression, patterns of speech, clothes and garments, social phenomena and social movements are influenced by the wondrous interplay of the one and the multiple, of uniqueness, multiplication, proliferation, reiteration, paradoxically, eventually affirmed, as creators of novelty: the Warhol "method", a particular discussion of social ontology.

**Keywords:** *Campbell Soup; Art and Representation; (Social) Uniqueness; (Social) Reiteration; (Social) Multiplication*

### *Introduction*

The Andy Warhol interpretative method in social ontology would be, simply put, the philosophical problem of the one and the multiple treated socially, or, the topic of individuality as reiteration. Not only that the more things change the more they stay the same, but also, the more things stay the same the more they

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change. Attitudes, forms of expression, patterns of speech, clothes and garments, social phenomena and social movements are influenced by the wondrous interplay of the one and the multiple, of uniqueness, multiplication, proliferation, reiteration, paradoxically, eventually affirmed as creators of novelty – the Warhol “method”.

The Andy Warhol type of analytic glance upon society bears the name of the intriguing artist born Andrew Warhola (1928-1987) – pop artist and film director. In a way, an anti-art artist, Andy Warhol denied to art the very artistic input and vibe, creating emotionless and affectless works of art that simply “copy” things. “Art is anything you can get away with,” is among his most intriguing and reiterated famous quotes part of a pop postmodernism still “floating around” certain intellectual circles.

So, his name is used here as an eponym for multiplication, for mechanical multiplication, as a process meant to be insulated outside the realms of art. But this endeavour is merely declarative and ironical as his works are somewhat surprising through colour or repetitive approach, eventually expressing the artistic victory against the anti-artistic odds and the “impossible copy”. A remarkable interpretation along this perspective was stated by Barbara Goldsmith who wrote: “He presents us with an enlarged mirror image (cool, clear, missing a dimension); he gives us surface. ‘If someone asks me, “What’s your problem.”’ ‘says Warhol, *I’d have to say, “Skin.”*’ [our emphasis]”<sup>1</sup> Is “skin” the limit of art and representation, the social limit or the self-imposed limit? Anyway, “skin” is what holds things together defined, tight, describable, indeed, the very core of the Warhol problem, if there ever were one. And there is a social metaphor in this problem with “skin” and with art as the reified and finalized expression of things.

### *No Art, No “Mirror”*

The “perplex fascination” that Andy Warhol rather brutally imposes on the audience is a deceiving one, creating the ultimate “betrayal” of the traditional artistic ideal: the attempt to impose the appearance and disconnect appearance from the “essence”. Art is no “mirror”. The article of Barbara Goldsmith mentioned above is a comment on Andy Warhol’s “Autobiography”. However, “The word ‘autobiographical’” is not used here because one can’t be sure that Warhol did the actual writing. It doesn’t really matter, which is his point exactly. The important message is how Warhol managed to make himself into a machinelike presence devoid of empathy.”<sup>2</sup> And his art apparently aims at the same result: “a presence devoid of empathy”, but this is probably the ultimate impossible message to impose. Any piece of art as a presence becomes to a certain extent part of a web of interpretative relations, which deny both uniqueness and reiteration in “strong” and absolute terms.

Denying art its metaphysical dimension was creating eventually a paradoxical, perplexing and hypnotising opposite effect. Similarly, denying reiteration its social effect of uniformization is fascinating. Our analysis shall emphasize how could this be possible. The insistence on reproduction creates a suspicion of difference and originality, a drive for movement and change or their

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Goldsmith, “Affectless but effective”, *The New York Times*, 14 September 1975.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

metaphors. The insistence on reiteration and lack of message, conveys, paradoxically, and at least for some, the message of difference and originality, of singularity and even criticism of consumerism.

There is no individuality unless we have the presence of multitude. Any individual builds her uniqueness as a derivation of the human beings encountered in meaningful interactions, with models, anti-models and boring others in a variation that cannot escape ultimately be a replica to whatever portrait of individual we construct. The portrait is always pale, always a reproduction, a reiteration, always “losing” colours, specimen reiterating a type, a copy or replica of something which has already been identified.

### *Individuality and Multitude via Contingence*

Individuality and multitude, solidarity and alienation or estrangement are the key dimensions of social ontology, although they may not be the only ones. To what extent can possibly one fail to be her own person?

If we recall the self-portrait of Warhol, a grid of various variations of colours, repeating the thoughtful face and the inquiring pose of his hand, the dominant colour engages other colours in the hope of capturing a definitive elusive description. It is as if the fitting portrait escapes description; and with the metaphorical pretext of this work of art we recall the centrality of description and metaphor to the Rortian social self.

In Warhol, art is no “mirror”, while in Rorty, philosophy is no “mirror”.

In order to understand the complexities and the focus of social ontology we define the individual, the human being is an inquiring person, able of feeling and empathy. This is the perspective behind the narratives of contractualism, even the one fashioned by Thomas Hobbes, not only the ones described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke. Closer to our days, for Fr. Nietzsche and then for Richard Rorty the human being is more than an inquiring person, able of feeling and empathy, but it is someone who is free enough and conscious of this personal freedom to the point that vindicates the right to her own descriptions (of everything and *of herself*).

The act of assumed description is an act of empowerment, of taking the world into your own power and responsibility. Living by your own description is the paramount level of individualism. Your assumptions are going to create your responsibilities, to “open” and “close” opportunities, paths to be followed and paths to be avoided.

It takes a while to appreciate that this vindication of the right to self-description and to a personal description (vision) of things and the world, or of the others is the root of a free attitude, of all freedom and of a deeper understanding of human rights. The traditional vision of human rights and the freedom granted and guaranteed by law implies also a certain significant level of acceptance of the other’s descriptions, while the Rortian and Nietzschean perspectives on individual freedom are much more radical, much daring.

The act of description is as much poetical as it is an act of power. Following the thought of Nietzsche and Rorty, we emphasize the act of description and affirmation as an act of personal manifestation of power, with various consequences:

from self-affirmation in terms of freedom, presence and power, to responsibility. By describing the world in her own terms, one is a poet, a free individual and an empowered individual, creator of her world.

Richard Rorty emphasized: “To fail as a poet – and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being – is to accept somebody else’s description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems. So, the only way to trace home the causes of one’s being as one it would be to tell a story about one’s causes in a new language. (...) Metaphor, linguistic novelty, seems out of place when one turns from simply relishing such novelty to explaining why these novelties, and not others, occurred. (...) Even in the sciences, metaphoric redescriptions are the mark of genius and of revolutionary leaps forward.”<sup>3</sup>

However, all descriptions bear similarities and differences when compared to the previous descriptions or to concomitant descriptions of which the protagonist may be aware or not. The art of comprehending and conveying one’s own identity is ultimately a subtle, yet intricate, negotiation between the original spin (contribution) and the repetition, or between one and the multiple. Personal identity presents the hallmarks of our quasi-shared sociality, always imperfect and always inescapable. Personal identity is a personal work of art, tragically and happily, paradoxically, a repetition of others (to a certain extent) and an original input into the social web and fabric.

On our self-descriptions and our unavoidable metaphors lay the attitudes and actions. Social solidarity is eventually the result of all these personal contributions which relate and differ, similarly to the puzzle parts. The general result may not be perfect, but it is possible. All in all, there are no irreducible pieces in this grand picture. Our descriptions inter-relate one another, maintaining differences and distinctions beyond the Rortian literal metaphorical distinction as the distinction between old language and new language and further beyond a distinction “between words which latch on to the world and those which do not”. Our language is contingent our self-descriptions are contingent and “truth is a mobile army of metaphors”.

As a consequence, we arrive at a different appreciation of the multitude, of the Warholian grid, for there is no unique description of a human situation, there is not a unique description of the text and context of human lives. And in other to be own person, that is, independent, autonomous and free individuals, we are to assume self-description and freedom as a metaphorical (artistic) exercise. In other words, we are to become Nietzschean<sup>4</sup> and Rortian “strong poets”, standing out from the multitude.

### *Draw me a Replica – Socialization and Individuation*

Socialization and individuation are the two sides of social ontology. Andy Warhol’s self-portrait is in itself a discussion of the self-description as a return

<sup>3</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann, New York, Viking, 1954; Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1985.

to the replica, which turns out to be a method of emphasizing the self as a multitude, or, the faces of the self.

The grids of Warhol are experiments into assessing the self through hypostases and perspective, repetitive, yet somehow different in certain detail. The colourful triumph over inherited detail of a portrait recalls the Nietzschean and Rortian approach. In Rorty's interpretation of Nietzsche the human being and the human life becomes triumphant only in overpassing the inherited descriptions of the self and the world. There is a will of overcoming in the affirmation of the self, in Warhol, Nietzsche and Rorty.

In all the creators mentioned above, art is no mirror and thought neither works as a mirror, but they are paths for redemption. the difference between the will to truth and the will to self-overcoming. Redemption, the act of creating and describing something or someone, becomes concrete in this interpretative line as an effort of self-expression. Coming to life itself, in a strong sense, in a fulfilled form, has all stakes in this effort of self-description. Otherwise, individuals and things, or whole worlds reduced to be the descriptions of others are in a status of dependence. The independent one is keen on describing herself and her world. And this is an expression of independence, existence and will.

In Rorty's description of the Nietzschean will to power dramatic is not having a goal and not reaching it, but the impossibility to overcome oneself through the dynamics of willed existence, manifest first and foremost in self-overcoming and self-description. The most successful instantiation of this sort of will to power is the genius who becomes who was not predicted by precursors, not envisioned and not even "cultivated" by them.

The horror of acknowledging oneself to be a replica is fully understood by poetic quest. Richard Rorty understands this and cites R. Bloom in this respect. The poet, Bloom, expresses best this "horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica." The revolutionary, poetic and autonomous relation to the world have in common the will to challenge the frontier between the old and the new.

The problem is not to consider the world colossal and worth of wonder (Rorty's interpretation of Aristotle's idea of wonder as the beginning of philosophy), but to find oneself in a world that is done, completed, foreign, totally inherited to which a genuine relation cannot be sustained, only a sort of repetitive and prescribed going through the motions...

In the Rortian vision, people learn (inherit), use and also produce language, which is a Wittgensteinian perspective about rising above the family similarities. Language used becomes language produced. Socialization proposes models (inherited best descriptions) and values them accordingly, but the will to individuation proposes novel description. Therefore, socialization does not produce replicas. Similarly, the Warholian repetitive grid expresses one as fertile and creative multitude, although it ultimately captures the reiteration of the same "face". The sameness expresses the vocation of multitude.

### *Conformism – the Pathologies of Solidarity*

The topic of individuality as reiteration brings us back to the topic of contingency: our world and ourselves are matters of self-description, of personalized

vision addressing the individuality and the world, a basis for attitudes and projects, for “horizon”. How “far” can one see, that is, how daring is her aims, goals and projects are profoundly dependent of the personal vision of the world and of the place and role of herself in it.

The opposite of the Rortian-Nietzschean view is the traditional, idiosyncratic and conformist one. The opposite of the strong poet, of the Superman and of the ironist is the conformist the one who does not mind or even looks for similarity with others out of veneration for tradition, lack of critical sense (but this is not compulsory: it may be just a – commendable – general modesty in personal image coming from upbringing, from a very realistic sense of selfhood, or from religious beliefs), or out of an endeared feeling of belonging. Although these terms (traditional, idiosyncratic and conformist) are not perfect synonyms, they have in common a certain strong adhesion toward the old as mark of quality, as revered roots of everything verified, solid and true, a powerful attraction toward the forms of the archetypes and myths of the golden age, which sustains a view of the present as superior to whatever is nowadays around and an aura of the precursors as superior heroes.

Truth, novelty and change seem to belong with minority or even distinct individuals.<sup>5</sup> At extreme even opinion belongs with the selected few. This is why we have “leaders of opinion” a quasi-spontaneous social reality rather speculated than induced by propaganda and indoctrination.

Conformism represents reiteration in social realm and it is a concrete equivalent of the metaphorical Warholian grid. A fascinating thing: people who manage to surprise themselves, to be different, to be worse than they knew themselves, or, to improve themselves and become better versions than themselves, might very well be subjects to conformist attitudes and gregariousness.

Three aspects stand out as the more important ones when discussing conformism. First, social theory and daily experience indicate that there is a certain comfort in sameness. Immersing into the crowds there are individuals who experience a warm and relaxing feeling of belonging; being with the others seems for many people as being in the right place, being safe and secure, and even being somewhat powerful and “right” next to the many. Second, this comfort in sameness often pairs with a personal view of modesty, a humble vision of oneself, which may or may not be also religious. At the same time, comfort in sameness may indicate a certain realistic epistemic view and social concern for consensus, solidarity and common purpose, associating humility as modesty with public virtue from this perspective. Humility and modesty, should not necessarily imply a loss of oneself as in fundamentalism, as in the contexts of indoctrination, or as in the case of “slave morality and worldview”. Third and less interesting, comfort in sameness, conformism, may be just occasional opportunism and/or demagoguery, depending on the social or political specific context.

There is both continuity and tension between individual and the crowd. Rorty offered a perspective that tips the balance toward the possibility of solidarity.

<sup>5</sup> See Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal influence*, New York, Free Press, 1957; G. Weimann, “The influentials: Back to the concept of opinion leaders?”, *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 2, pp. 267–279 and Matthew Nisbet, “Ambassadors for Science: Harnessing the Power of Opinion-Leaders across Communities”, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2018, pp. 30–31.



Nietzsche's perspective of *Übermensch* and will to power is rather elitist. S. Kierkegaard's perspective<sup>6</sup> is poetic and sophisticate, closer to that of Bloom and Rorty than to Nietzsche. In his *Diary*<sup>7</sup> he talks about the autonomous individual as of someone who "has formed his heart" (the poet, the religious person, or the thinker) and who will never be too popular, precisely because he would feel and think originally and differently by "prolonged working with oneself" and by "intimate knowledge of oneself as well as a certain isolation", *not* by Nietzschean superiority.

Varieties of repetitions, multiplication, copy, conformism we may encounter in fashions, activism, militantism, in social and revolutionary movements, as well as in propaganda, in cults, fundamentalism and indoctrination.

The core of the matter is that human creativity manifests socially and it is for a greater extent than imagined exercised in the experience of the copy, in a similar manner in which – we have to recognize – multitude and pluralism contribute to identity, sameness, reiteration and even conformism in their own manner. With this paradoxical observation we intend to emphasize also the fact that the absolute copy is as much an illusory thing as the absolute originality. This manner of looking at social ontology is only apparently paradoxical.

An illustration is found metaphorically in a literary observation encountered recently. As Javier Marias noticed, "same pages may not be identical [they are dependent on the reader and on the readings – our emphasis], Borges has shown, better than anyone else, in his story *Pierre Ménard, the author of Quichotte*".<sup>8</sup> Or, as Mihai Eminescu reminded repeatedly in a poem titled *We have both the same teacher you and me* [*Noi amândoi vem același dascăl*], *Non idem est si duo dicunt idem* – "Bearing same thought, each other to defy we seem"<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> This is a useful term of comparison, a twist and nuance of perspective, but just that: we do not consider necessary to describe and analyse here Kierkegaard's position in detail.

<sup>7</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *The Diary of Søren Kierkegaard*, Citadel, 2000, *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Javier Mariás, *Când eram muritor* [*When I was a mortal*], Bucharest, Univers Publishing House, 2009, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Mihai Eminescu, *Poezii* [*Poems*], edition, selection, chronology and notes by Cătălin Cioabă, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2014, our translation.