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Psychoanalysis and Philosophy

JEP question: “How did your interest in psychoanalysis arise?”

Mario Perniola: Psychoanalysis came into my life-long before it entered my philosophical and aesthetical thought-due to two volumes I came across in my father’s library, two volumes that marked my adolescence. The first of these was *La psicoanalisi* by Enzo Bonaventura, published by Mondadori in 1938: it was a red hardback edition that was part of a collection of scientific works. The second was the first Italian edition of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, published by Astrolabio in 1952. I later wondered why Mondadori published Bonaventura’s book at the time of Italian racist legislation, discriminating against the Jews. That same year Bonaventura emigrated to Jerusalem, where he died in 1952. My father, who had a scientific background, was extremely interested in psychoanalysis and was in correspondence with Emilio Servadio-one of the founders of Italian psychoanalysis-discussing the interpretation of dreams.

These two books, which I read between the ages of 12 and 14, had a deep impact on my formation, equal only to that of the *Iliad*. From Bonaventura’s book I drew my mental asset focused on sexuality and psychopathology, one that has accompanied me throughout my life; from the latter work, I can trace back my extreme attention to the oneiric world, something that quickly led to my interest in Surrealism and which makes up my primary source of inspiration. I was very surprised, therefore, when I recently met a set of people for whom sexuality has no importance and more surprised still when I recently found out that there actually exists a sort of association of people who call themselves “asexual” and who want social recognition, so to speak. While, as far as Surrealism is concerned, my delusion came about very early on, dating back to the foundation of the “Gruppo 63”, the Association of Italian avant-garde artists and writers in the 60s. The birth of an avant-garde that did not consider itself the heir of Surrealism, even indirectly, was something that shocked me somewhat. After many years I finally read that Roger Bastide couldn’t wait to go back to sleep to take up again the dreams interrupted when he had to wake up in the morning. I’d like to be like Bastide, but unfortunately I’m distracted by my philosophical and aesthetical work.

Sergio Benvenuto: “So what aspects of psychoanalytical thought have particularly influenced your philosophical work?”

M.P. Psychoanalysis represents a constant point of reference in my work. However, there have been two periods when I’ve studied it more systematically. The first in the 70s, focusing on Freud and his school; the second in the 90s, focusing on Lacan.

My theoretical starting point is the question of opposites and their relation. This is where the decisive choice between a thought of conciliation and one of conflict comes into play. If one takes the former path one takes the Neo-Platonic stance and sides with Jung. For several reasons I’ve always been a stranger to this current, which has had such an influence on contemporary Italian thinking. I’m a stranger to it, first of all because of my philosophical background: my teachers at the University of Turin, the philosophers Nicola Abbagnano and Luigi Pareyson, were resolute in their stance against the line of thought of harmonizing opposites. The former’s entire *History of Philosophy* is an argument against Neo-Platonism and its 19th-20th century spiritual heritage. While the latter was a leading spokesman of a tragic thought that brings conflict even

within God.

Secondly, in the 60s and 70s Western society was pervaded by a conflictual fever that solicited a new theoretical interpretation: to me it's blatant that neither contradiction (Hegelian and Marxian dialectics) nor polarity (Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) are capable of supplying adequate conceptual tools to understand the radicalness of the conflicts in action. I take the other path-different even from Umberto Eco's return to Aristotle or Vattimo's ironic-nihilist vision of polarity-discovering that Freud has created an incredibly vast conceptual apparatus based on an opposition of the asymmetrical type, where one of the terms (the unconscious) is by definition hidden and can only be reached indirectly through the formation of compromise. A thought that remains on the surface is destined to naivety, in other words it can only fall victim to ideological and spectacular exploitation.

This is where some of the consequences I developed in the late 70s and early 80s originate. The first of these would be the link to the notion of difference, which must be understood as much stronger than just diversity or dialectical distinction. This notion, one that comes from Protestant theology (the abyss between God and man), was transported by Heidegger to philosophical ontology (difference of Being compared to being, *ens*). It was later introduced to French philosophy, which in the meantime had received a huge theoretical impact from Freud, concentrating on literary problems that went as far back as Mallarmé (the difference between literary and common language). A tradition that applied its thought to difference existed in Italy too, although it referred neither to God nor to literature, but to History. My attention to the three dimensions of human experience, where difference manifests itself historically-death (finiteness), sexuality (not two, but an infinite number of sexes) and the world (outcome, effectuality)-, derives from this.

The process of making difference worldly, which in Italy has distant roots (Machiavelli, Guicciardini, Loyola), makes the very notion of the unconscious come across as a crypto-metaphysical assumption one can easily do without, or, better still, as something that ought to be brought to the surface, for example in language, or in rites, ceremonies, clothing, forms, in everything that is exterior. This is exactly what happens with Lacan, who in the early 90s introduced me to a conceptual framework more suited than Freud's to the understanding of more serious individual and collective psychopathological modes of being than the ones I had met up with until then. Lacan's influence thus becomes an essential element of my theoretical production, especially in the books *Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, *Art and its Shadow* and *Against Communication*.

I would say that there are two key points to explain my theoretical interest in psychoanalysis: first of all the unconscious as an asymmetrical opposition and as the basis of all survival strategies in this biased mass-media society (Freud), then *extimité* (outwardness) as an outward appearance with no inwardness, the basis of all survival strategies in the digital society of Internet (Lacan). In a nutshell one could say: first the Baroque, then Mannerism.

SB: "Like Lacan and other interpreters of psychoanalysis-known as the 'post-structuralists' in the English-speaking world-your reading of psychoanalysis doesn't follow an intimist key but, as you say yourself, a perspective of 'outward appearance without inwardness'. I wonder whether this distrust of intimacy-and of all its sentimental, emotional, affections-centered and mentalist panoply along with it-wouldn't be the specific inheritance of phenomenology. Sartre rightly said about Husserl: "he has freed us from the inner life". And, according to phenomenology, subjectivity consists just in 'going towards things themselves'. It's no coincidence that the authors you say have influenced you-Abbagnano, Pareyson, Heidegger, Lacan-all have a phenomenological background. Now we, who deal with analysts, especially Italian ones, get the opposite impression: to psychoanalysts, apart from a few fortunate exceptions, psychoanalysis is a sort of intimist psychology, a psychological ontogeny of interiority. That's why notions like mind and self are so in vogue in Italy. I then wonder: why-apart from Lacanians-does the philosophical reading of psychoanalysis, of which you are an eminent representative, diverge so much from the image practicing analysts have of it? Are there not two psychoanalyses? One for the philosophers and one for the analysts?"

MP It's difficult to compare theory and practice. I wonder whether the practice of philosophers, the so-called "philosophical counseling", is less subjectivistic than the practice of the majority of psychoanalysts when it ventures beyond simply dispensing common sense advice. In the Jesuit tradition there's a figure who has,

let's say, a phenomenological aptitude, i.e. one for suspension and detachment with respect to subjectivity: this is the director of exercises, who, in contrast to the spiritual director, has nothing to teach and no advice to give. On this point Ignatius is categorical: "He who is giving the Exercises ought not to influence him who is receiving them more to poverty or to a promise, than to their opposites, nor more to one state or way of life than to another. [...]he who is giving the Exercises should not turn or incline to one side or the other, but standing in the centre like scales" (The Spiritual Exercises, the 15th Annotation). The director of exercises is not a confessor: his relationship is not with the thoughts and problems of the people exercising, of their conceptual or moral identity, but only with their consolations and grief. He acts as a catalyst in search of a solution he has no idea about, in a process the result of which he absolutely ignores: he can give no answers. This function of the director of exercises is repeatedly affirmed in the *Direttorii*, where he is defined as "an unworthy instrument of God": he must be wary of himself and be indifferent for the will of God to accomplish itself without his interference. I wonder whether the practice of Lacanian analysts isn't akin to this.

Concerning my personal experience, I have managed to overcome the crises I've been through alone, shifting my investment energy from the Self, intended as the narcissistic organization of the psyche, to something external.

SB: "Your reference to the spiritual exercises speaking about analytic practice is significant. As you know, the current cliché in Italy is that psychoanalysis is the lay version of the Catholic confession. That's obviously not what you're saying, but in any case you do compare it to spiritual exercises. But what then is, in your opinion, the difference between analytical practice and Christian spiritual exercises or, earlier still, the self-examination of the Stoics?"

MP The Spiritual Exercises are to Loyola a way of choosing and deciding upon important matters, for example finding a path to follow in life. They therefore have nothing to do with a confession, with a spiritual direction or with a retirement consisting of prayer alone. As a method they could also have been practiced by non-believers, provided that they managed within one week to reach a state of indifference regarding their fate and stay suspended like a scale, ready to lean with equal detachment towards anything the future had in store for them. This is the original sense of the Exercises, which however waned a little for the generations of Jesuits following Loyola, so that, by the end of the 16th century many followers no longer understood their essential characteristic as a method. But as long as the Old Society of Jesus, abolished in 1773, existed, something of this method did survive.

Of course one must look for the origins of this method in the ancient Skeptics and Stoics, who invented the word *epoché*, suspension. A notion that was taken up again by Husserl, by phenomenology, and which is opposed to the Cartesian *cogito*. Therefore, along with the subjectivistic current, there is in the West another great current that puts the stress on "becoming no one", on depersonalization, on looking at oneself with a stranger's eyes. Freud, by turning the human soul into a battleground where opposing impersonal drives fight each other, belongs to this second current. I have so far found my own survival by treading this path, because it has given me the guarantee of a higher degree of familiarity with the three great enigmas I have come across: illness and death, sexuality and the world. I'm about to finally buy some land for my grave: so I shall finally be able to carry there the remains of my first wife (something I've been waiting to do for almost 19 years) and make room for myself and for a few other people I'm close to. Indeed, due to various circumstances, I've been excluded from the larger tombs that still belong to me (one of which I haven't even seen yet). A few years ago I was told that it was about to collapse, but this was false and misleading information.

Cristiana Cimino: "Insofar as the old spiritual exercises, in the form of the Platonic dialogues themselves, consist of an itinerary of the mind towards the divine and of an emancipation from the senses and the chains of the body, they then approach analytical practice in some way, in the sense that the latter has indeed progressively taken up a path of mentalization and of 'spiritualization'. However, this path of distancing from its original corporeal, biological roots and drives, seems to me to have marked a taming of the psychoanalytic practice. Perhaps one ought to begin to think, in the psychoanalytical field too, about a backward path, already open in other fields: I'm thinking of Giorgio Agamben and his book *The Open*,

where he argues against the modern (Heideggerian) rupture between animality and humanity. What's your opinion on this?"

MP: Discourse on the human being can follow three itineraries, according to whether you compare it to the divine, to animality or to things. The first is the spiritualistic itinerary (which was widespread mainly in 19th century French and Italian philosophy): despite their name, the "Spiritual Exercises" have nothing to do with this itinerary, for they teach to choose and to behave in the world. The second itinerary branches off into two roads: one stressing the difference between humanity and animality (for example Gehlen's philosophical anthropology) and one stressing proximity in the name of "the naked life", i.e. life seen not as bios (human behavior in life in the ethical sense) but rather as zoé (life seen in its naturalistic crudity, common to the vegetal, the animal and the human). This second road is that of Italian Naturalism, expressed excellently by Pirandello, when against Neo-Idealism he opposed the "naked life" to the "clothed life" of culture and history. Pirandello's Naturalism (which originates in a 'way of being Italian' that has its roots in previous centuries) has remained submerged in 20th century Italian philosophical culture, but reemerged in the 60s with Giorgio Colli, Cesarano, Carla Lonzi, Sgalambro, Gargani and finally Agamben, who limits himself to inverting Pirandello's formula (*vita nuda*) into *nuda vita*, "life naked", and giving it a political revolutionary emphasis that was already present in Cesarano. My work has nothing to do with either spiritualism or naturalism, because it focuses on the comparison between the human way of being and the way of being of things. In my opinion this is today's real challenge, which manifests itself in so many spheres of individual, social and cultural experience: from genetic engineering to mass sensologies, from drug addiction to virtual technologies, from allergies to psychoses, from deconstructive architecture to post-human art, from diseases of the immune system and from agonistic sports to certain genres within the cultural industry, such as horror, science-fiction and rock music.

CC: "In your latest book *Contro la comunicazione* (Against Communication), you claim that the goal of the communication society is to remove reality altogether, more than that, to remove the very principle of reality. The consequence would be a psychosis-like pathology. With reference to what you call "performance subculture", you underline the attempt to keep up a state of excitement to guarantee a sort of inexhaustible performance through consumption, for example, of alcohol, drugs, but also any object capable of fuelling addiction. I wonder whether, in the light of the privileged role you think objects intended as things have for human beings, you might say that perversion rather than psychosis is the most representative pathology of the contemporary world. I'm thinking about perversion as a mode of reifying relations dependent on fetish objects, which tries to exclude temporality and favor the annihilation of differences and conflicts. On this point I also have in mind what you say about the communication society: that it considers a similar attempt at annihilation as one of its prerogatives."

MP: Perversions are big things. They have hardly any room in contemporary life. They were probably quite rare in the past too, but they occupied a fairly relevant place in the imaginations of cultivated and excitable individuals. Today the cultural industry and consumerism have trivialized them, turning them into something extremely banal: they have been sucked in by pornography, the sex and fashion industries, by advertising and the new poverty and slavery. This is how the meanness, pettiness and sloppiness that surround us have transformed perversions into other types of pathologies, more modest, but more opaque and harder to deal with, such as addictions and allergies. A few tiny sparks light up now and again and quickly disappear; our journals (JEP, *Agalma*...) and our books are like messages in a bottle thrown out to sea. What's essential is for them to reach the ocean and not just float in our local harbor: otherwise the chances of someone picking them up is more or less the same as before.

With regard to reification and fetishism, one must have a strong awareness of the dignity of human beings and their greatness to be able to perceive and practice them as perversions: lacking this awareness, it becomes impossible for anyone to reach the splendid shining status of a thing. One may feel, in the best of cases, like human capital; although even this is not very feasible, because on the one hand it is too much hard work, and on the other gives rise to too much hate. Most are not even a living commodity, because the supply is too high, but consumers of something lacking value. There's probably a certain parallelism between the decline of psychoanalysis and the decline of the economic mentality.

SB: “You say that today perversions are trivialized and banal. Yet pedophilia, today, isn’t at all. Pedophiles have always existed, but in the past they were more or less tolerated. Not so today. In the U.S. pedophiles de facto risk the death penalty: in U.S. prisons they are usually murdered by other inmates. Furthermore, susceptibility is so high that merely uttering the obvious—for example that there is such a thing as child sexuality—can immediately lead you to being charged with being a pro-pedophile, even by psychologists and psychoanalysts. If you write a clinical paper on pedophilia and don’t vehemently condemn pedophiles, you’ll never get published. The question of pedophilia seems to be going in the opposite direction compared to what you’ve been saying.

MP: It seems to me that under the name of “pedophilia” two very different phenomena are being confused: love for adolescents and sexual abuse on children. The former phenomenon, as you rightly pointed out, has a tradition that dates back several thousand years at least to Ancient Greek pederasty, and I don’t see why it should find a place amongst perversions. However, because of the collapse of family authority, the immaturity of today’s kids, youth consumerism, the democratization of pornography, the decline of censorship and the rise of sexual tourism, pedophilia has become an issue that concerns the statute of the bodies of all under eighteens: it is an interesting and complex problem that brings into play economic, educational, moral, social and legal aspects. Child abuse is something completely different, it is a criminal issue and has little or nothing to do with perversions, because it is practiced on children, the most vulnerable and helpless of subjects: but this is a matter that has to do with the psychopathology of aggressiveness and crime.

SB: “I’d like to return to more philosophical matters. Would I be right in saying that your interest in psychoanalysis can be inscribed in the tradition of what I would call the Modern Trinity, i.e. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud? When I mentioned this modern trinity to Jean-François Lyotard in a conversation we had for Italian Public TV in 1994, he almost took offence... this evocation of those philosophers as Trinity or Trimurti irritated him(1). As a matter of fact, a whole current of thought, known today as post-modern, is inspired by the three thinkers I just mentioned, with some adding Heidegger or Wittgenstein. This is the trio that Ricoeur defined as “thought of suspicion”. For example, papers relating the Marxist theory of commodities’ fetishism with the Freudian one of fetishism as a perversion, and so on... You were yourself a friend and student of Guy Debord, who was certainly a genuine Marxist. The question is, do you link Freud tightly to Marx and Nietzsche? And if so, in what way does this triangulation, so to speak, work?”

MP: Do I too think that the founding fathers of contemporary intelligibility are the five you just mentioned, because they assign to all that is silent and occult a power that belongs neither to the realm of pure spirit nor to the rhetoric of the world? In other words, they reject both the monastic, ineffectual and contemplative life and the political, ideological and spectacular one. Faith in the fact that rationality would be able to triumph in the world as on a stage with the curtains wide open permeates Idealism and Positivism together with their 20th century epigones: but this faith is nothing but naivety. The founding fathers of contemporary intelligibility take for granted that thought, rationality, morality have in various ways been totally excluded from the world’s stage and that their place has been taken over by ideology, false consciousness, rhetoric, will for power, shows, new ignorance; but instead of shutting themselves inside a contemplative and remissive mode of being, they pose a challenge of unseen proportions, countering all that with something silent and occult and concealed as the real motive of reality. For Marx this is the class struggle, for Nietzsche it is the Inactual, for Freud the unconscious, for Wittgenstein linguistic usage, for Heidegger abandonment to things. To put it briefly, they take for granted the political social destitution of reason (and thus also the possibility that this may have a real ethical and pedagogical influence on the West). Never has their heritage been as valuable and irreplaceable as in today’s world of globalized communication, and it naturally only appeals to the few who manage not to be dulled by the great clatter we’re all enwrapped in. This heritage teaches that we must not allow ourselves to be intimidated by the arrogance and conceit of whatever potentate we come across. The biggest danger, however, is naivety, that foolish candor the main victims of which are today’s youngsters. The highest result one can achieve is to bring across the message that whatever is of the highest importance is necessarily unapparent and silent, but not because of that remissive and impotent.

SB: “A certain professional bias leads me to quibble over a slip of tongue in your reply, the first sentence of which had an interrogative intonation. Did you not mean to give it an affirmative one? If it was a slip-Freud dixit-then it must really have revealed some truth you would call ‘unapparent and silent’ about your thinking. And perhaps not only about yours, but about anyone who follows the Modern Trinity. And I wonder whether this truth wouldn’t by any chance just be the following: that what you say in an affirmative or apodictic form about Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, shouldn’t actually be meant as a question, a doubt. Is it not time to be suspicious of “suspicious thought”, as Ricoeur called it? I would go as far as wondering whether this wouldn’t actually be the real turning point of the new century (provided that a turning point there must be): initially the Trimurti, plus Heidegger and Wittgenstein, were an apodictic truth, perhaps today they too should be deconstructed. In a nutshell, are you really sure that we can carry on being Marxian or Nietzschean, or Freudian, etc., as we could be-had to be, even-twenty or thirty years ago? Isn’t it about time we started questioning ourselves on this point too?”

MP: Rather than a slip of tongue, I would call it a typing error, as I’ve been writing with a new computer, which has a different keyboard from my previous one. To come to the point, I have no doubts on the founding role of these five philosophers, who will still be read and studied by future generations. On the other hand, I question myself about the intellectual strategy, works and, above all, human destiny of the French thinkers who constituted the so-called French Theory. I have the impression that one can no longer follow their path, especially since they have decided to rival the mass media.

SB: “This fact that you put the French authors known as the “post-structuralists” back into proportion surprises me somewhat (though I agree with you, they definitely do need to be put back in the right perspective). You were a friend of Derrida in the 60s and you often invited to Italy well-known French authors such as Jean Baudrillard and Bruno Latour. In other words, you’re renowned for your link-and not only biographical-with Parisian culture. Which French theory authors do you think particularly deserve criticism and why?”

MP: Not only I, but Italian philosophers in general, learnt a lot from French Theory: we learnt a new style of philosophizing, freer from academic concerns and closer to literary criticism. The development of such a style, however, would require a cultivated society and a type of journalism that didn’t merely review the books of their friends; it would require, in other words, a national cultural life where authors and their works were subjected to a conceptual mobilization and not merely exhibited spectacularly in the advertising style. It would also require publishing policies that didn’t merely churn out generally badly done text books and manuals for universities, but ones that encouraged the promotion on the international market of the works of the highest value. These conditions are no longer present. Guy Debord is a separate case, no less because he was not a typical French thinker, but rather a Neapolitan in Paris. Freud didn’t belong to the group of authors with his same background; furthermore, the influence of his thought is not an indirect effect of his success in the U.S., but followed other routes linked to the international historical avant-garde, to Marxism and anarchism. This plot of underground relations didn’t depend on the media, but rather, especially in the mid-90s, on the Internet. From this perspective, the role of the Internet in the international cultural world is more feasible than that of the mass media, because it is more direct, it is not confined to national boundaries and is based on a cooperation between people who, independently from their institutional or professional role, do have intellectual energy inside them.

CC: “A substantial trend in contemporary psychoanalysis has reduced the importance of the Freudian unconscious, and as a consequence the importance and the therapeutic power of self-knowledge. The stress is rather on new systems of meaning, on different perspectives giving rise to improved lifestyles, even on “narrative persuasiveness”. All this seems to be greatly modifying the relationship with what for Freudian psychoanalysis had always been the search for some form of truth. As a philosopher, what’s your opinion on this?”

MP: Just what is the unconscious from a philosophical point of view? It is an asymmetrical opposition where two terms don’t stand on the same plain: it is the most radical form of opposition Western thought has ever

come up with, and which follows the four types of opposition developed by Aristotle (correlation, contraries, possession-privation, contradiction); it is an extremely relevant theoretical invention and one that can be applied not only to the psychic life but to the description of any phenomenon, even collective, social, textual... Who denies the unconscious? Those who want to give a conciliated, harmonic, and thus ideological, image of experience and society (e.g. Neo-Jungians, the New Age movement and so on...). Finally, it seems of great significance to me that even the neurosciences are advancing the necessity to consider the unconscious, as one can see from Lionel Naccache's book, *Le Nouvel Inconscient: Freud, Christophe Colomb des neurosciences*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2006.

SB: "A weighty point... Could you be more specific with regard to this opposition? And could you give some examples from the social and textual spheres you mentioned?"

MP: The sentiment of the 20th century has taken the opposite direction from aesthetical conciliation, towards the experience of a greater conflict than dialectical contradiction, towards the exploration of the opposition between terms that are not symmetrically polar one to the other. This entire philosophical affair, which I don't hesitate to consider the most original and important of the 20th century, goes under the notion of difference, meant as non-identity, as a dissimilitude greater than the logical concept of diversity and the dialectical one of distinction. In other words, the entrance of difference into experience marks the abandonment of both the Aristotelian logics of identity and of Hegelian dialectics. No wonder, therefore, that the thinkers of difference (Heidegger, Freud, Wittgenstein and Benjamin) are also extraneous to aesthetics in the strict sense. Their extraneousness from the modern aesthetical tradition by no means derives, however, from an exclusive attention to purely theoretical problems, from a disinterest in feeling; it is rather the opposite: it is the study of feeling that has led them to put aside both Kant and Hegel. At the textual level, the Freudian unconscious has met up with the Heideggerian unthought (*ungedacht*), giving rise to deconstructive practices. My work, on the other hand, has focused on the unconscious of cultures, and one of the essential aspects of the project behind the journal I'm editing, *Ágalma*, is precisely the study of what individual cultures suppress, in other words of their unconscious. It is therefore a project that fits into the framework of Cultural Studies in a very special way. I'd like to give a few examples of this method of investigation, which has some important bearings in psychoanalysis itself. Regarding Japanese culture, the psychoanalyst Doi Takeo has invented the notion of *amae*. For Brazil, psychoanalyst Jorge Forbes has argued that the image of cordial man, theorized by Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, hides the Brazilian fear of confronting desire. On the topic of Italy, several years ago Alessandro Fontana wrote an important essay on the Italian unconscious. As far as I'm concerned, a conspicuous part of my work rotates around the notion of ritual, which could be a fundamental key to interpreting the ancient Roman world, which has some surprising affinities with so-called Confucianism, as I point out in my introduction, specially written for the Chinese edition, to my book *Ritual Thinking* (Beijing, The Commercial Press, 2006).

SB: "It strikes me that you include Benjamin among the 20th century thinkers who are extraneous to aesthetics. One would rather say that Benjamin's aesthetical texts-beginning with the essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*-have had a decisive influence not only on 20th century thought, but also on the aesthetical praxis of the century. Perhaps then, by 'extraneousness to aesthetics' you mean something different from what is commonly meant by this expression."

MP: Walter Benjamin has placed at the center of his reflections three issues that traditional aesthetics (of Kantian and Hegelian derivation) neglected or suppressed: death, the thing, commodities and sexuality. Benjamin's originality doesn't consist so much in his having made these the cornerstones of his reflections, but rather in his having related them to each other, giving a theoretical dimension to an alternative experience to vitalism, which-taking a cue from an observation by Benjamin himself on the subject of fashion-can be defined by the expression "the sex appeal of the inorganic". The theoretical nucleus of this experience consists of a mix of the human dimension and that "of the thing", through which human sensitivity is reified on the one hand and things seemingly endowed with a sensitivity of their own on the other. It is not a completely new type of experience, but in Benjamin it is applied to a vast multiplicity of situations and constitutes an extremely fertile key to reading the 20th century. The inorganic is not just the mineral, but also the cadaverous, the mummified, the technological, the chemical, the commodified, the

fetish object: thus the inorganic is dematerialized, it becomes something abstract and incorporeal, but without turning into something imaginary or unreal as a consequence; on the contrary, behind all these configurations of the inorganic, what is at work is something of the utmost reality and effectuality, that is to say money.

In his best known essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin examines the transition from the traditional work of art, characterized by a unique unrepeatable identity, to the modern forms of artistic expression, which, like photography and film, dissolve the *hic et nunc* of the work into a multiplicity of copies lacking an original. Such a phenomenon is described by Benjamin as a loss of “aura” and cultural value, whose place is taken up by its show value, i.e. by an accentuation of the work’s spectacular dimension, which ends up overshadowing its aesthetic specificity. These mutations go hand in hand with a thorough transformation of perception and feeling: the photo camera and the movie camera capture images that escape the natural eye, which finds itself obliged to identify with the technological apparatus. The movie camera’s vision, Benjamin observes, is similar to that of the unconscious: it captures a whole range of things that had previously gone unnoticed. This gives rise to an artificial perception that mutates the senses of closeness and distance, as well as the notion of reality itself, which becomes illusionistic on the one hand and hyper-naturalistic on the other. While in the theatre actors offer a unified performance, in the movies they are forced to go through a plurality of filming sessions that exteriorize their performing. Everything becomes plural and replicated, but it is a different type of repetition, which creates an infinity of variants within a common genre. Benjamin stresses the revolutionary potential of these transformations of perception and of the senses.

Notes:

1) See Lyotard, “Resistances. A Conversation”, on this same issue.
<https://www.psychomedia.it/jep/number2/lyotard.htm>