

Syncretism and transdisciplinarity in art and life

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1. Conceptual terms and correspondent meanings

Why this title for the editorial? Because the aim is to give an answer that combines the meanings inherent in the two terms, “syncretism” and “transdisciplinarity”, through the vision and application of a “digital humanism” in the art sector as well: this is what prevails today and has a global impact on our lives that needs to be approached from a holistic point of view.

Syncretism, when it does not mean an uncritical mix of differentiated elements but instead expresses a creative hermeneutics of valorization and integration of the differences, and transdisciplinarity, when it assumes the meaning that will be explained later on, are two conceptual terms whose meaning testify to an intent and an understanding which, by intersecting but taking different paths, participate synergically in a single result with different purposes.

In particular, if it is true that there are an infinite number of paths leading to syncretism because it is fusion of different doctrines, stories and cultures, other than in the previous citation, the term is also found in the art world, as a synthesis of different artistic styles and languages in the creative act, in the study, research and consequent evaluation, attribution and authentication of the work of art. These are objectives that necessarily imply that the two historical-humanistic and technical-experimental cultures and, therefore, also the experts in the respective scientific branches, work together in a common synergic need and exchange.

On the basis of such synergy, we refer to multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity or crossdisciplinarity, for which it is appropriate to distinguish between the different corresponding meanings.

“Tout court” multidisciplinary, seen as going beyond knowledge that derives from a specific discipline, often risks being a mere summation of juxtaposed disciplines that, as such, are anchored to an individuality of contents and meanings.

Interdisciplinarity, which starts from the need triggered by multidisciplinary, takes into consideration other disciplines, opening up to them and interacting with them in a reciprocal need of completion and reaching a common objective, confirming the scientific content of each discipline.

Transdisciplinarity or crossdisciplinarity, sometimes regarded as “strong interdisciplinarity”, is the following step, which at least attempts to achieve something more: the

reciprocal enrichment and cross-fertilization of the different fields of knowledge which leads to confirmation of the above as a result of the methodology that implies a shared “locus” of wisdom and a close connection with the theories and methods of the scientific principles on which both the humanistic sciences and experimental sciences are based. A gnoseology, therefore, that has gained value and the ability to proceed which, on the one hand, are univocal, and on the other, not only respect singularities but also spread them. Transdisciplinarity should indeed promote that “extra” that allows each discipline to be enriched and fulfilled thanks to effective interaction.

It is important to point out that the first two terms mentioned above are both present in the various universities, research bodies and institutions, even though basically it is multidisciplinary that is encountered rather than interdisciplinarity, while transdisciplinarity is an objective that still has to be reached through a meditated and pursued philosophy of knowledge, in the field of art as well.

2. Research and formation in the art sector

However, the objectives not only derive from the aspect related to solving problems of protection and valorization in the cultural heritage sector by the experts working in the various historical-humanistic and technical-experimental areas, because the objective of training and shaping young people must also be included. Consequently, particularly in the sphere of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity – we refer to the two situations that clearly respond to the objectives that have been set – “Human Tech” knowledge and know-how is essential, entering the era of so called STEManism, a combination of knowledge and competences in science, technology, engineering, maths (STEM) and the humanities and digital humanities, which include language, logic, philosophy, and go beyond the educational models of the past: not strict degrees and vertical educational careers, but space and transversal continuous programmes.

The formation of new generations must take into account the richness of diversity and valorize transversal competences, those that are acquired in the field through direct experience and intercultural perspectives, so that young people are not discouraged, find they are unique owing to their origins, interests, passions, efforts and, on the basis of this “uniqueness”, know how to build their future professional and private life.

It represents a chance to help them take the time to develop, with the awareness that each experience, especially if it is duly accompanied, then personalized, molds their existence, gives them the joy to be able to look at new horizons, to build relationships and gain “*soft skills*” that can give shape to their own self and consequently to their working career.

We do not mean to develop a theory out of the two aspects: the protection of cultural heritage and the formation of new generations. However, we believe that it is not a casual convergence and that it tells us something about the “essence of time”. The world we live in is becoming increasingly more complex and competition is getting stronger and stronger; in this situation, nobody can make it alone: foresight, competence and team spirit are needed. At this point a third aspect arises that fits perfectly with what we pointed out with interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity and their intrinsic and fundamental correspondent meanings: the theme of alliance. The personal element is evidently still essential, but it needs to be put into the framework of reciprocal relationships and responsibilities that are consolidated in view of shared objectives.

What emerges then is the dimension of the “pact”, starting from the so called “Educational Global Pact” and the “intergenerational alliance” to which Pope Francis often refers, in the perspective of “networking” in a wider sense and promoting “an education that integrates and respects all aspects of the person, uniting studies and everyday life, teachers, students and their families, and civil society in its intellectual, scientific, artistic, athletic, political, business and charitable dimensions. An alliance, in other words, between the earth’s inhabitants and our “common home”, which we are bound to care for and respect. An alliance that generates peace, justice and hospitality among all peoples of the human family, as well as dialogue between religions.” (*Message for the Launch of the Global Pact on Education*, 12 September 2019).

The time when everything simply grew almost spontaneously and it was enough for one to grasp some of the opportunities that the system itself generated, is now over. On the other hand, to stand united we need authorities that are proactive in managing power and, for this reason, can open the doors of the future by valorizing the many existing abilities and acting as an antidote to the recurring self-assertion and self-referentiality, which are the origin of great conflict. A combination that is possible only in relation to objectives that are not only instrumental but also shared and convergent, and therefore able to motivate and overcome these limits and particular interests.

3. Digital humanism

We speak, therefore, about a new humanism, a digital humanism which is the result of the global impact that digital technologies have on our lives, as well as on art, and which need to be dealt with from a humanistic and holistic point of view. Matters which, with the Covid pandemic, have changed from being topics for Academics to being everybody’s problems.

On the inter-disciplinary/trans-disciplinary, human-technologies and expert-technologies relationship we therefore point out:

- a. One of the cruxes that the pandemic has raised is the impact of the digital world on human relationships that have moved from real to virtual: educational relationships, work relationships, friendships. How should digital technologies be used without them altering our natural essence? It is not only a simplistic and restrictive contraposition between technophiles and technophobes: there is much more.
- b. There is, moreover, “human enhancement”, in other words, overcoming natural limits by means of technological instruments, which despite offering wonderful opportunities, brings up very serious ethical questions, for which a good and strongly enlightened “*governance*” is needed. But can the rules keep up with the same speed as development? A phenomenon, which by definition is global, needs international regulations and the right transversal approach.

From an ethical point of view, there are also a series of implications that arise as a consequence when such sophisticated technologies cross those natural limits:

In art. The real and already repeated reproduction of art works, which makes it difficult to distinguish them from the authentic, poses problems of attribution, with significant repercussions, negative effects and consequences from the point of view of identity as well as from a mercantile-market one.

In the human being. The attempt to stop making mistakes, which determines losing the responsibility for the choice we make and/or a superpower, takes advantage of the “super human”. Consequences that are open and unsettling.

4. Considerations

From the above, it is clear that it is important to maintain our responsibility in deciding how to behave, and that algorithms should not be allowed to become an alternative and replace our faculties. As for the relationship between the well-known advantages of technology and the limitation of freedom, clear, set rules are needed. The idea that is developing is to anticipate the inclusion of ethics in the design of technologies and regulate them on the basis of ethical principles with the result that any fears connected to these technologies will put the human being at the centre of attention once again. It is precisely the concept of “human centric” that is at the base of the regulations on artificial intelligence proposed by the European Union. In the need for codes, also remembering how much still needs to be done, we should note that the intelligent machine-human being relationship has yet to be fully clarified and constructed: as a matter of fact, only in the last ten to fifteen years has it been possible to produce machines that come closer to our ability to think and foresee. We need time culturally, ethically and juridically, in addition to getting used to our coexistence with these technologies. One of the clear rules is *privacy*, but it is important that as technological performance advances, codes are updated at the same time. Technologies will not be used for everything, they will always be elitist, expensive and complex, and they will be used only when it is worth it: they are irreplaceable for routine operations and checks, and they can help us when there is a complex task for which the value added does not directly involve an ethical choice but, for example, the best one to optimize a process which however has already been evaluated from an ethical point of view.

In the art sector and, specifically, in the conservation of artifacts of historical-artistic interest, monitoring the wellbeing of heritage objects in confined spaces, such as museums, with the use of electronic instruments which helps maintain thermo-hydrometric parameters constant, as well as regulating the presence of airborne pollutants, is fundamental.

It is well-known that the control of physical agents and chemical species has positive consequences in the protection and prevention measures adopted for artifacts in outdoor environments, in particular, in historical centres. However, this happens in other sectors too, especially those with a great ecological impact, such as water consumption, electricity and raw materials or in remote surgery.

These are some emblematic examples that lead us to consider, at the same time, the correct formation of the experts, the usefulness of advanced technologies and their beneficial use which contributes to improving human existence, with a positive impact on the community and on the various forms of social responsibility, and a change that affects both our internal life, as well as the way of being on the market.