"Society at Large Is Heteronomous": Cornelius Castoriadis and the Poietic Creation

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Abstract

Why is society at large heteronomous? How can imagination cope with the heteronomous drifts of social dynamics? Castoriadis' theory of the imaginary construction of society provides some insightful reflections that allow a better understanding of how the "poietic" works in our hyperconnected society and how the "functional" impacts on the construction of society through the stifling and channelling of imagination. The aim of this paper is to theoretically investigate Castoriadis' emphasis on the "pulsating process" that turns "instituting" societies into "instituted" ones through the power of symbolic and creative pathways, focusing on the conference *Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads* (1996). This paper emphasizes not only Castoriadis' connection to the sociology of the arts and culture (from Vico to Becker, through Pareto, Adorno and Bourdieu), but also delves into his criticism on contemporary art, in line with denunciation of the "subversion of simulacrum" stigmatized by Jean Baudrillard in reference to the "conspiracy of art". To the fore is the attempt to interpret the "loss of meaning" boosted by hyper-connectivity and permanent reproducibility of symbols, signs and contents, in a time of short-comings between the functional and poietic within the intramundane praxis of social and communicative acting, as Jürgen Habermas has recently pointed out.

Keywords: imaginary, sociology, heteronomy, communication, art.

1. Introduction

"Even in our societies, enormous numbers of people are in fact heteronomous: they only judge on the basis of "conventions" and "public opinion" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 75). This is one of the most meaningful

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reflections shared by Cornelius Castoriadis in a lecture given in Portugal in November 1996, entitled *Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads*. His emphasis on the heteronomous nature of society concerns the role played by imagination in the construction of those imaginary patterns belonging to a more creative dimension in daily experiences. In the era of hyper-connected relationships and communicative platformization (Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018), the permanent exchange of images, contents and symbols engenders new forms of shared imaginaries closely tethered to the interactional habits of everyday communicative exchanges, as the proliferation of online communities and teaching activities seem to confirm (Coe, 2021).

Therefore, Castoriadis' dialectics between heteronomy and independence appears to be epistemologically meaningful, if we only consider the significant juxtaposition of creativity and homogenization in history (Sennett, 1996). Conformism and heteronomy are two of the most incumbent risks lurking in the public sphere described by Jürgen Habermas also in reference to Castoriadis' attempt to analyse the imaginary institution of society, with the aim to understand how commonplaces and informative stereotypes may shape the public sphere. Furthermore, it is important to understand how metaphors and symbols reveal new individual and collective imaginaries destined to be part of human identity and heritage (Maffesoli, 2013; Durand, 1960). The sociological debate on the arts developed by Marshall McLuhan (1964), Robert Nisbet (1962), Pierre Bourdieu (1996), Niklas Luhmann (2000) and, above all, Jean Baudrillard (2005), is boosted by the convergence of creativity and functionality in the social environment, with a specific focus on the profound transformations imposed by technology and digitalization (Lombardinilo, 2017; Jenkins, 2006, Alexander, V. D., 2003).

In this perspective, Castoriadis' harsh criticism of contemporary art, inspired by the "simulacrum of subversion", refers to a process of signification implying simulation, provocation and nothingness. Likewise, Baudrillard probes the "conspiracy of art" and its unstable simulacra concealing the inconsistency of symbolic reproducibility. To the fore is the role played by information and art in an era marked by new symbolic paradigms and expressive solutions, as the "poietic creation" needs to match communication and social narrations, despite the risk of heteronomous and traumatic representations (Alexander, J. C., 2012). Social autonomy can be pursued only through the clever use of imagination and the construction of those imaginaries capable of being shared on a large scale, as Castoriadis clearly points out: "Only a social and political awakening, a renaissance, a fresh upsurge of the project of individual and collective autonomy – that is, of the will to be free – can cut that path. This would expect an awakening of imagination and of the creative imaginary" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 86).

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The dialectics between the functional and the poietic expresses the permanent fluctuation between logical and non-logical actions which, for instance, Vilfredo Pareto has constantly investigated, with the aim to better understand the way the "centrifugal" and "centripetal" forces may shape the social environment (Lombardinilo, 2021a). The exploration of the imaginaries that built societies is paradigmatic about how the poietic function may influence social dynamics in a way that it is destined to mould collective and individual action. In the foreground is the everlasting creative boosts giving form to society and its immanent becoming, in line with that "pulsating process" that Castoriadis probes inheriting Giambattista Vico's metaphor of the "historical courses and recourses". The aim is to study the poetic function in everyday life from a philosophical and cultural perspective, since – as Castoriadis would say – imagination can be stifled or channelled but not repressed, especially when instituted societies have to be renewed and regenerated by means of the power of "radical imagination".

2. Pulsating processes: society and radical imagination

"Let us consider the imagination of singular human beings. It is the essential determining element (the essence) of the human psyche. This psyche is radical imagination, first of all inasmuch as it is an unceasing flux of or stream of representations, desires, and affects. That stream is continuous emergence" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 74). Cornelius Castoriadis has highlighted the role played by imagination and creativity in the history of societies that "is marked by pulsating processes", as Giambattista Vico already did from a philosophical and philological point of view (Berlin, 2013, pp. 51-71), and as Vilfredo Pareto, Isahiah Berlin and Marshall McLuhan pointed out also in reference to Vico's metaphorization of history as a recursive process. In this perspective, it is useful to remember that the power of imagination is one of the greatest epistemological groundworks that Georg Simmel, Émile Durkheim and Vilfredo Pareto investigated to shed light on the irrational and creative dimension of everyday social activities (Goodstein, 2017).

Sociology as a science has the task of describing facts and deducing social norms as reliable as they are universal. For instance, in *Transformation of Democracy* Pareto wonders whether "one should avoid the risk of generalizing beyond the boundaries of present experience and roaming in imaginary space" (1984, p. 33), thus emphasizing the "limits of reality" and the historical role played by myth in human life, as the juxtaposition of logical and non-logical actions concerns the management of rational and irrational inputs belonging to the sphere of the poietic processes that do not belong to the logical dimension of

life (Susca, 2021). Therefore, the study of the past reveals the unfathomable force of narrative and aesthetic representations that still nowadays publicly show the immortal power of genius and its symbolic patterns. Both Vico and Pareto attentively investigated the "social imaginary" inspiring ancient Greece and Rome, without neglecting the amazing relationship between power and artists throughout history and civilizations.

In a philosophical perspective, Castoriadis highlights the never-ending tendency of social actors to cope with the heteronomous boosts of the social environment through the definition of new representative processes: "Societies in which the possibility and the ability to call established institutions and significations into question are exceptional, a minute number in the history of humanity. We actually only have two examples. The first is ancient Greece, with the birth of democracy and philosophy; the second is Western Europe, after the Middle Ages, that long period of heteronomy" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 75). We inherited a great number of ancient significations, both symbolic and aesthetic. What is the relationship between ancient Greece and the Middle Ages in a cultural perspective? Castoriadis would remark on the "pulsating processes" leading to artistic and philosophical development within a clear institutional order, as Dante Alighieri emphasized in his political treatise, *De Monarchia*, long before Niccolò Machiavelli's parenetical writings. Politics often collide with imagination, even though values and symbols diffused in political discourses frequently have recourse to rhetorical strategies exploiting metaphorizations and abstractions (Edmondson, 1984). Castoriadis' emphasis on the "pulsating processes" shaping societies that underwent decadent and prosperous phases seems to concern the historical "courses and recourses" that characterize social aggregations. The search for the historical identity of the past depends on the literary proofs showing the immanent evolution of narrative techniques, with a particular reference to the shift from orality to literacy (Ong, 1982).

Vico's investigation of the "true Homer" concerns the impact of "radical imagination" on the construction of collective imaginaries, as Castoriadis helpfully points out: "An extremely important phenomenon, one that is central to today's discussion, is that the history of societies is marked by pulsating processes. Phases of dense, intense creation alternate with lulls, sluggishness, or regression. There are many instances of this. They are all taken from historical cultures of course, since we can say very little about the others. There is a real possibility that 'Homeric' (that is, Minoan and Mycenaen) civilization did not disappear solely or even primarily because of invasions or earthquakes, but through some 'internal' disintegration processes. We know nothing about that, at least for the time being" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 75). What are the factors triggering the "pulsating processes" shaping social environment? How must the tenet of "social environment" be framed from a historical perspective? How

long can a pulsating process impact on the aesthetic and cultural framework of a society? The juxtaposition between civilization and regression features the historical perspective of our civilization, in line with those centripetal and centrifugal boosts determining social balance. Once again, "the limits of reality" that Pareto analyses in his sociological writings seem to concern the fluctuations between reason and imagination, in line with the semiotic and communicative paradigms destined to change in compliance with the media paths of daily life (Femia & Marshall, 2012).

Vico and Pareto's epistemological approaches are extremely useful to understand Castoriadis' interest in the social imaginary and its unforeseeable evolution, as the techniques of representation change in terms of cultural and aesthetic perception. The search for social balance stems from this perpetual circularity of inventions and destruction, as Castoriadis' hint at invasions and earthquakes seems to suggest. This what Jeff Klooger underpins: "Castoriadis argues that the existence of a world *for* the self must presuppose a capacity of the self to create *presentations* (that is, meaningful images), since presentations do not exist outside the self and cannot be assembled from elements alien to the self. What is more, this capacity must be intrinsic to the self" (Klooger, 2009, p. 103). The fact that presentations belong to the sphere of self and its psychic patterns implies that every external input may stimulate or engender the semiotic process leading to the iconic definition of psychic fragments, as George Herbert Mead (1934) and Erving Goffman (1956) highlighted from an interactional perspective. Nevertheless, the construction of imaginary worlds also concerns the way we deal with historical heritage, as Castoriadis underpins in *The Imaginary Institution of Society* in reference to language and symbols: "Reality, language, values, needs and labour in each society specify, in each case, in their particular mode of being, the organization of the world and of the social world related to the social imaginary significations instituted by the society in question" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 371).

The convergence of instituting/instituted societies that are intrinsically embedded in the historical evolution of the world is in line with the solidification of symbolic practices and semiotic experiences. This is why "the social construction of reality", as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann would say, depends on the institutionalization of thought and relational strategies, since the power of language concerns both subjective and collective spheres. The pulsating processes that Castoriadis deals with can be interpreted in a historical perspective just to find out how the relationship between imagination and imaginary can influence our representative mindset: "As instituting as well as instituted, society is intrinsically history – namely, self-alteration. Instituted society is not opposed to instituting society as a lifeless product to an activity which brought it into being: it represents the relative and transitory

fixity/stability of the instituted forms-figures in and through which the radical imaginary can alone exist and make itself exist as social-historical" (Castoriadis, 1987, pp. 371-372). Radical imaginary and radical imagination are two fundamental keystones of a theoretical approach to society in which the tenet of "fixity/stability" plays a relevant sociological role (Tovar, 2001).

The difference between the instituted and instituting society resides in the never-ending process of individual and collective transformation that Ulrich Beck (2016) has described through the metaphor of "metamorphosis of the world". This means, according to Castoriadis, that the stream of symbols, signs and thoughts inspiring literary and artistic representations relies on the social impact that "radical imagination" can have from a semiotic and behavioural point of view. In other words, the convergence of imagination and rationality leads to the institutionalization of society and fuels the sedimentation of values and ethical principles, in line with the "pulsating process" triggering human and social development. The imaginary construction of society is founded on the perpetual juxtaposition between reason and imagination, which has to be unavoidably filtered and interiorized. This what Castoriadis points out in *Imaginary and Imagination at the Croassroads*: "The radical imagination of human beings has to be tamed, then, channeled, regulated, and brought into line with life in society, and also with what we call 'reality'. This is achieved by socialization, through which individuals absorb the institution of society and its significations, internalize them, learn language, the categorization of things and what is right and wrong, what is acceptable behavior and what is not, what must be adulated and what hated" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 75).

In regard to this, internalizing implies channelling and regulating all those irrational impulses that may appear excessively original or sometimes extravagant, in a way that every single actor has to comply with. The dramaturgical perspective developed by Goffman effectively express this interpretative process influencing daily interactions, especially when we consider the way social actors exploit rhetorical practices to claim roles, status and thoughts (Lombardinilo, 2024). Castoriadis sheds light on the social influence of imagination and its aesthetic paradigms, thus probing the creative sphere of social actors and exploring the "sociological imagination" that Charles Wright Mills (1959) has investigated and the "art worlds" analyzed by Howard Becker (1982) and Robert Nisbet (1962). The pulsating processes shaping the daily environment are inspired by the convergence of rationality and irrationality and the channelling of what is extravagant and what is categorized, in order to manage with the stereotyped forms that prevent from social stigmas and public ostracism. This is the essential factor differentiating instituted from instituting societies, in a time of symbolic and iconic complexity (McIntyre, 2018).

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Socialization implies a sort of normalization of radical imagination which can be expressed through the tenet of semiotic neutralization (Barthes, 1953). This is why the "pulsating process" that Castoriadis investigates gains a relevant sociological meaning, especially when taking into account the deep influence that imagination can have on social dynamics in line with the fluctuation of centripetal and centrifugal boosts. The final result is the internalizing of centripetal inputs and their channelling into acceptable categorization through the proper aesthetic, behavioural and linguistic patterns. This is what socialization means, as Durkheim successfully demonstrated in reference to religious and symbolic practices that strongly influence social behaviour. Before channelling, radical imagination needs to be tamed and regulated through the pulsating process of socialization, as Castoriadis (2007, p. 75) underlines: "When that socialization occurs, the radical imagination is stifled, to a point, in its most important manifestations: it expresses itself more conventionally and repetitiously. Under these conditions, society at large is heteronomous". How does socialization lead to heteronomy? Is heteronomy the product of the incessant process of symbolic normalization of imagination (Durand, 1964)? Are our imaginaries the product of such semiotic stifling linked to the process of socialization? Once again, the dialectics of instituted and instituting societies relies on the normalization of imagination and its revolutionary impact, so as to make socialization a pulsating process aimed at matching stereotypes and attributes. This is why society is essentially heteronomous, as Castoriadis seems to assume from a critical perspective sociologically inherited from Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1972) and theoretically developed by Habermas (1986).

The social function of stereotypes and commonplaces concerns the pulsating process often leading to behavioural homologation and interpretative neutralization (Silverstone, 1999). As a matter of fact, heteronomy belongs to the sphere of human adaptation that can be improved through the study of collective interpretation. In regard to this, society at large is heteronomous, since people tend to judge on the basis of "conventions" and "public opinion" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 75): "But so are individuals heteronomous, for they only apparently use their own judgement, whereas in fact they apply social criteria when judging" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 75). Standardization is only one of the side effects of this epistemological approach, in line with the constant influence of radical imagination in human action, shaped by the eternal juxtaposition between reality and imagination that takes form through the old and new practices of aesthetic and representative creations.

3. The poietic and the functional: culture as the domain of the imaginary

"There was no great creation, but eclecticism, endless commentaries – very valuable ones, in fact. Philology and the art of the grammarians flourished, techniques and knowledge continued to "progress", but (with the noteworthy exception of mathematics) there was no powerful expression of any truly innovative radical imagination" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 77). What happened during the Hellenistic civilization, Castoriadis points out, effectively shows how long it takes to make radical imagination a social factor fuelling the "pulsating process" shaping and changing social behaviour, values and collective practices. Since radical imaginary "exists as the social-historical and as psyche/soma" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 369), it is fundamental to remember that imagination slowly but incessantly shapes human actions and collective identity, in a way "it is representative/affective/intentional flux" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 369). Indeed, radical imagination can be considered the perpetual engine of such a poietic process concerning the atavistic force of symbols and signs. What Castoriadis calls a representative flux regards what Vico expresses in terms of "heroic mind" and Pareto through the tenet of "residues", in compliance with an epistemological tradition founded on the central role played by phantasy and imagination in the semiotic process leading to the transformation of instituting societies into instituted ones. "That which in the psyche/soma is positing, creating, bringing-into-being for the psyche/soma, we call radical imagination" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 369).

The creative phases of history are often the result of the somatic embedding of radical imagination in the way it gives shape to works of art, monuments, and narrations, as in the case of Homeric poems. The representation of ancient worlds deals not only with the "art worlds" investigated by Becker, but also with the "crafted worlds" probed by Richard Sennett (2008) through his attentive historical retrospective. "The Homeric poems are Castoriadis' main source for the contents and directions of this original Greek imaginary. He understands the Homeric world as a framework within which the transformation of the *polis* towards autonomy could be initiated. Thus, the result is a strong emphasis on the archaic period as a formative phase of the whole Greek civilizational trajectory" (Arnason, 2012, p. 295). Homeric poems are the outstanding proof of the possible convergence of reality and imagination through the poietic processes inspired by myth and narration. Homeric poems can be considered as irreplaceable cultural products and, in the meantime, as the outstanding heritage of a creative effort inspired by the juxtaposition of legend and real facts. Novels, tales, poems, dramas and comedies, paintings, statues, symphonies, operas and other works of art are the

result of such imaginary need that societies have from a representative side, even before printing. The immortal secrets of artistic masterpieces reside in their poietic autonomy exalting the power of creation and imagination, as Evangelia Danadaki (2023, p. 3) points out: "The work of art, therefore, presents dimensions of the world that have been lost or they are not visible on the everydayness of social life within heteronomy. The description or explanation of an 'absolute' work of art is impossible for Castoriadis pointing out the impossibility of its translation to another language".

Symbolic languages cannot be translated into other languages, since symbols own a semiotic force that cannot be compared to other communicative means (Elias, 1991). The work of art represents the most proper way to escape from heteronomy through the practice of imagination as an individual and collective creative medium. This is what Castoriadis highlights in the second part of *Imaginary and Imagination at the Crossroads* focusing on the aesthetic power of radical imagination, somehow following what Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 55) emphasized about the process of the social construction of reality: "Language now constructs immense edifices of symbolic representations that appear to tower over the reality of everyday life like gigantic presences from another world. Religion, philosophy, art, and science are the historically most important symbol systems of this kind". The metaphor of the "immense edifices" built with symbolic bricks successfully expresses the unfathomable complexity of art and its meaningful declinations, as Nisbet (1962, p. 68) underlines: "Nothing could be farther from the truth. Any art form that is serious, be it in the novel, poem, or painting, is concerned first and foremost with reality". The dialectics of imagination and reality has the power to shape the historical pathways of societies in tune with the representative needs of human beings through explicable and inexplicable symbols. The juxtaposition between the poietic and the functional allows Castoriadis to interpret the social imaginary according to a social dimension that may echo what Berger and Luckmann explore in terms of social constructions of reality: "Aesthetic and religious experience is rich in producing transitions of this kind, inasmuch as art and religion are endemic producers of finite province of meaning" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 39).

Both art and religion are the domain of the symbolic in a way that they contribute to build imaginary fields consumed and admired by the masses. In a sociological perspective, the construction of "finite provinces of meaning" is related to cultural productions and aesthetic creativity, as culture is not only the domain of the imaginary, but also the reign of freedom and imagination, despite the "heteronomous" influence of cultural industry described by Couldry (2012). In Castoriadis' perspective, symbolic transitions and aesthetic translations represent the misleading attempt to replace one form with another. The final

achievement is the betrayal of the original effort and the counterfeiting of the work of art. This is why a product of culture is an expression of autonomy as the irreplaceable nature of art relies on its semiotic uniqueness, as Walter Benjamin (1969, p. 2) would remark: "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence".

In this regard, Castoriadis' references to Hellenistic and Roman Empire civilizations emphasize the dichotomy between the poietic and the functional in terms of social categorization, since "the technical development continued to some extent" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 77). The distinction of technical and poietic dimensions is one the most meaningful epistemological solutions found by Castoriadis to explain the inner force of the imaginary in the social environment, as historical observation enables us to highlight: "This leads us to make a distinction that is also necessary for other reasons: the distinction between culture, in the strict sense of the term, and the purely functional dimension of social life. Culture is the domain of the imaginary, in the literal sense, the domain of the poietic, of that element of society that goes beyond the merely instrumental. No society is devoid of culture. Of course. No society is reduced to functionality or instrumentality; no known human society lives like the 'societies' of bees or ants. There are always songs and dances, decorations, things that are 'useless'" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 77).

What is culture for? What is its social impact? What can be considered culture and what cannot? Is culture devoid of any technical or instrumental solutions? Finally: does culture require a specific of particular literacy to be consumed and understood? These are some pressing questions stemming from Castoriadis' smooth reflections of the symbolic sphere of our daily life, in which culture plays a relevant collective role. This is a philosophical way to interpret Max Weber's well-known definition of culture, *considered* "a *finite* segment of the meaningless infinity of the world process, a segment on which human beings confer meaning and significance" (Jäger & Wiskind, 1991). Imagination influences the "pulsating process" triggering the symbolic construction of the "finite province of meaning" that digitalization and hyper-connectivity can nowadays turn into mass shared environments. Since "no society is devoid of culture", Castoriadis delves into the imaginary impact of symbols and signs emerging from the poietic dimension of social actors searching for semiotic pathways contrasting heteronomy and homologation. In this regard, the ambivalence of symbols can even ignite an interpretative complexity attracting and stimulating public debate, as Jean Baudrillard explained in *The Conspiracy of Art* (2005). Castoriadis has stressed Weber's tenet of culture in a philosophical

direction also focused on the question of symbolic and linguistic translatability: "Throughout his life, and it seems that a study of his bilingualism and biculturalism would be something to reveal important aspects of his work, Castoriadis grappled with what could transcend the cultural and linguistic barriers of its origins and be transmitted and transpositioned on another semantic and cultural territory" (Karalis, 2014, p. 17).

Institutionalization is a semiotic process that exploits the power of language according to the attempt of externalization, objectification and internalization characterizing the immanent expressive contingencies influencing daily representations (Lombardinilo, 2021b). Since every society is imbued with cultural productions, institutionalization concerns the way we shape the "meaningless infinity" of our world through the search for the proper aesthetic signification that cannot rely on linguistic solutions. Radical imagination can satisfy this immanent pressure through the definition of imaginary expressive pathways outlining the blurred horizons of our mind. In this way institutionalization complies with translation and translatability, in line with the process of externalization inspiring communicative efforts. Since our societies are imaginary institutions, human beings should not forget that they create the laws ruling social environment, as in the case of religion, as Berger highlights in *The Sacred Canopy* (1967). This means that societies depend on the same forms and paradigms they created, thus developing a deep interdependence between social actors and the institutions they create. These factors lead to heteronomy, which can be considered additional to, and not opposite to, autonomy. Only through the acknowledgment of self-institution is it possible for social actors to be autonomous from social influence.

As Serge Latouche (2014) underlines, "radical autonomy" is founded on the disclosing of social mythologies ruling the order of things through which social representations are possible. The more imagination is radicalized, the more social practices comply with shared values and symbols, insofar as imagination may be considered as the real means of autonomy that human beings can rely on. How does the distinction of the poietic and the functional work in Castoriadis' epistemology? When does the functional get the better of the poietic? And how can the radical imagination influence the pulsating process producing shared social symbols? The distinction of *legein* and *teukein* helps understand the incessant fluctuation of those logic and non-logic impulses that Pareto investigated to explore the way we often logicize illogical actions. Likewise, Castoriadis intends to critically denounce the risks of heteronomy stemming from the stifling of imagination and deviating it into conventional schemes, as Christos Memos points out: "From this vantage point, Castoriadis' meaning of 'critique' is unfolded in a dialectical relationship with the concept of 'crisis'. In his work the crisis is significant for theoretical and political reasons

as it reveals the contradictions that are deeply rooted in the social relations of capitalist society and pinpoints the available alternatives that point to a radical transformation of existing society" (Memos, 2014, p. 4).

The way we look through the lens of time is influenced by that alternation of crisis and stability determining the counterbalance of centripetal and centrifugal boosts. Therefore, culture can be considered the "domain of the imaginary" in a sociological perspective only if we consider the collective impact that art, music, cinema and literature have on our daily life. Crises are often the result of political and civil upheavals deriving from cultural shifts and symbolic renewal, according to the incessant transformation of cultural paradigms across the centuries. Castoriadis' reference to Hellenistic civilization and the Roman empire effectively expresses his interest in the analysis of the cultural dimension and symbolic phenomenology featuring the juxtaposition of the creative and instrumental dimension of social acting: "Clearly, the distinction between what I call the poietic and the functional does not reside in things themselves: it is in the relationship between the way things are done and their finality" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 77). The case of the vase that can be a functional tool and a work of art is a reliable way to express the semiotic dynamics concerning time and space, objects and simulacra, form and emptiness, as Richard Sennett attentively highlights in *Flesh and Stone* (1994).

History can be considered not only as the Paretian "cemetery of aristocracies", but also as the "psyche/soma of radical imagination" in terms of the imaginary construction of society. The permanent fluctuation of the poietic and the functional is in tune with the effort to escape from heteronomy without conflicting with norms and conventions. Autonomy can be reached through the search for freedom and the practice of the poietic, in line with the permanent effort of communicative and expressive institutionalization, as Schismenos, Ioannou and Spannos (2022, p. 24) point out: "As a collective and as individuals, we both make and are made by society. Thus, for Castoriadis, autonomy corresponds to a partial-determinist ontology, one which allows for both the determinate *instituted* and the collective-self-creating *instituting*. Castoriadis posits direct democratic forms of self-organization as approaches to collective life that most closely approximate autonomy".

4. The loss of meaning: art and the way to heteronomy

"I have defined heteronomy as thinking and acting in ways imposed (overtly or subterraneously) by the institution or the social environment" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 86). The ancient issue concerning human freedom within society regards not only physical freedom, but also (and above all) freedom of

speech and thought, especially in a time of hyper-connectivity and the risks of globalization (Furedi, 2018). In regard to this, the role played by poets and artists on the public scene deals with the power that creation and creativity may have on a collective scale, thus empowering the myth of the artist as an outstanding interpreter of current times. The contrast to heteronomy may require a resolute aesthetic engagement in line with the "pulsating process" triggered by originality and innovation. In other words, freedom of thought and speech concerns the process of democratization of our social environment, as Holman and McMahon (2015, p. 163) point out: "For Castoriadis, an autonomous society is not one in which every individual is somehow or other transformed into a great artist, but rather one in which all individuals are open to social-historical creation, one mode of which is affirmed via their creative reception of artistic creation. It is precisely such reception, however, that is more and more closed off in contemporary liberal-democratic - or what Castoriadis calls liberal-oligarchic - societies".

Artistic creation may be the field both of poietic autonomy and expressive heteronomy, as Becker (1982, pp. 68-92) thoroughly emphasized in reference to the "mobilizing resources" influencing the artistic field and its industrial apparatus. Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu (1996, pp. 109-111) probed the "rules of art" with specific reference to the "ethical conditions of the aesthetic revolution". Both epistemological approaches show the close relationship between sociology and art, as Niklas Luhmann (2000, p. 22) argued on the relationship between perception and communication: "Art can exist only when there is language – this is less trivial than it sounds. Art is unique in that it makes possible a type of communication that, in the strict sense of the word, avoids language along with the routines involved in language use. The forms of art are understood as communications, but without language, without argumentation". Art lives within the social boundaries that it has created and shared, since art worlds cope with the symbolic and aesthetic patterns of daily life and concern both the fields of the functional and the poietic, insasmuch as "art communicates by *using perceptions contrary to their primary purpose*" (Luhmann, 2000, p. 22).

This is particularly true for what has happened in art since the end of the nineteenth century, starting from the impressionist renaissance and the Futurist avant-guard to the blossoming of post-modernism and Andy Warhol's revolution. The great number of works of art inspired by provocative aims is the proof that the field of the poietic is often considered as an anarchic space in which the search for freedom turns into an unfathomable domain of inexplicable perceptions. The principle of technical reproducibility intertwines with the tenet of aesthetic experimentation which does not always comply with communicative effectiveness, as Luhmann wonders: "But how can a work of

art, created for perception or imaginary intuition, be the bearer of communication?" (Luhmann, 2000, p. 22). Luhmann's question seems to match perfectly Castoriadis' reflection on the way the poietic and the functional converge in line with the social patterns of reality and the haunting forms of the imaginary. The communicative aporias that many contemporary works of art produce stem from a creative audacity that rarely complies with the communicative expectations of the spectator (Tota, 2014), of whom is required an interpretative effort that is often totally devoid of logical sense, as in the case of Marcel Duchamp. This is what Baudrillard argues about the contemporary "conspiracy of art" and the translation of creative ideas into a sterile process of signification founded on the reproduction of objects and the proliferation of their simulacra by "confiscating banality, waste and mediocrity as values and ideologies" (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 27).

The replacement of the work of art with its simulacrum is the result of a semiotic process that may shock and bewilder the audience, with the risk of turning nothingness into a technique of signification. Communication is a cooperative process, as much as art is to be considered a creative process founded on the convergence of creativity and signification. This is what Castoriadis hints at: "The shock the work provokes is an awakening. Its intensity and its grandeur are inseparable from this shaking up, this vacillation of established meaning. There can be such a shake-up, such a vacillation, if and only if this meaning is well-established, if the values are strongly held and lived as such" (Castoriadis, 1993, p. 306). The "vacillation" that Castoriadis refers to is related to the poietic force of artistic creativity that accomplishes the goal of changing the "established meaning" of things and thus unveiling the hidden sides of the human psyche. The way radical imagination can take form complies with the "awakening" effect produced by art in its ever-changing dimension. Is this symbolic "vacillation" functional to contrast heteronomy and its social effects? Is the "awakening" produced by the work of art and its semiotic implication linked to the communicative effects it can produce on the audience? These are some questions inspired by Castoriadis' epistemological approach to art and its communicative implications, since the best way to contrast alienation and heteronomy is imagination, as Vicky Iakovou (2022, p. 222) points out: "Following Marx, Castoriadis distinguishes objectification from alienation: the latter is that version of the former where the products of human activity do not only acquire an independent existence but also dominate the producer, the creator, instead of being controlled by her".

Aesthetic creation is a challenging process stimulating an intense interpretative process through a cooperative synergy that the observer is called upon to boost and share. Nevertheless, contemporary and avant-garde art radically changed the tenet of artistic proposals into extreme experimentations

and unabashed provocations, as Castoriadis emphasizes with harsh criticism: "What has happened in art during the last forty years? At first there was a fake 'vanguard' and a simulacrum of subversion. What is a vanguard?" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 84). Romanticism and Impressionism, Castoriadis assumes, fuelled a creative break between artists and "established society", deeply influenced by bourgeois dynamics. Thanks especially to Baudelaire and Manet, vanguard could be interpreted as a profoundly innovative attempt to wipe away stereotypes and academism both in poetry and art, thus generating the well-known fracture between the artist and the audience that can lead to ostracism, censorship, banishment, hyper-criticism. "Initially, and for a long time, official public opinion rejected the innovations in form and content created by art in every field" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 84).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Lautréamont in poetry, Manet and the Impressionists in painting, Wagner and Stravinsky in music – Castoriadis points out - were behind the "definitive break" between the old and the new vision of art. Since then, the "vanguard" started to turn into the "simulacrum of subversion" that seems to echo the metaphor of "the vanishing point of art" that Jean Baudrillard endowed with a sociological implication. Both Castoriadis and Baudrillard agree in the criticism of contemporary art seen as a practice of vacuum representation deprived of any possible creative substance. Baudrillard's vehement criticism of Andy Warhol's aesthetic engagement complies with Castoriadis' postmodernist search for novelty and provocation, thus emphasizing the tenet of false, fake and imitation: "Now, that vanguard really and truly seems to have worn itself out after World War II. And what we see, then, at first, is the development of a false vanguard, a series of artificial efforts to produce novelty for novelty's sake, to subvert for the sake of subverting, by people who have nothing new to say" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 84).

What does subversion mean in sociological terms? What does simulacrum express in a semiotic and visual perspective? And, finally, what effects can the subversion of reality produce in a poietic direction? Having nothing new to say implies the search for what cannot be found, *id est* inspiration, contents and forms. Castoriadis' words seem to echo what the critic Daumier says to Guido Anselmi in the conclusion of Fellini's *8 1/2*: "Of an artist, one really worthy of that name, we should ask only this act of loyalty: that he should teaching himself silence. Do you remember Mallarmé's praise of the blank page? and of Rimbaud? A poet, my dear, not a film director, knows about Rimbaud finishing a poem then no longer going on writing, departing for Africa? If you can't have everything, nothing is absolute perfection". Even today, Fellini's genius can provide some useful aesthetic insights into the complexity of artistic creation and the difficulties that such a poietic challenge imposes, as inspiration does not

always match productive contingency and shared priorities. Nothingness may stem from the lack of inspiration, but it can also lead to symbolic hypertrophy, as both Baudrillard and Castoriadis seem to emphasize in reference to the degenerative process regarding art in the era of technical reproducibility and provocative stimulation? Baudrillard's harsh criticism of contemporary "passion for artifice" deals with the side effects of frenzied consumption: "this passion for illusion is the seductive joy of undoing that all too beautiful constellation of meaning" (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 175).

In a different epistemological perspective, Castoriadis stigmatizes all the "false vanguards" that postmodernist theories produced in line with the obliteration of style and its canonical forms. Nonetheless, aesthetic renewal does not always match inspiration and originality, as experimentation may lead to insane iconoclasm and simulated imitation, as Pareto emphasized in *The Virtuist Myth and Immoral Literature* (1914). This is not art, Castoriadis advises, "this is the triumph of sterility" (2007, p. 84). The contemporary evolution of cultural processes in music, cinema, art and literature show the unforeseeable and complex drifts that some well-known aesthetic pathways had in the second half of the nineteenth century, as in the case of Luciano Berio, Marcel Duchamp, Thelonius Monh, Milan Kundera, quoted by Castoriadis in rapid succession. Nevertheless, it is cinema that can be particularly probed from a productive point of view, as Castoriadis underlines somehow echoing Fellini's character: "Cinema, the other great creation of the twentieth century, is on the way to being lost in industrialization, facile effects, and vulgarity. One may easily list dozens of great filmmakers for the early period, but practically none for the recent period" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 85).

Can every movie be considered a work of art, in the light of the huge economic interests and costs that many movies need? In this perspective, the functional and the poietic are subdued to a compulsory productive process that often stifles creativity and imagination. The risks of reification uttered by Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectics of Illuminism* converge with the fear of heteronomy denounced by Castoriadis in contemporary times, in which imagination and imaginary seem to be at an ambiguous crossroad: "This reversion to conformism is an overall relapse into heteronomy. I have defined heteronomy as thinking and acting in ways imposed (overtly or subterraneously) by the institution of the social environment" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 86). The "vanishing point of art" turns into "the simulacrum of subversion", in an era featured by the heteronomous attempt to link freedom of thought and imaginary landscapes.

5. Conclusion

"Reality, language, values, needs and labour in each society specify, in each case, in their particular mode of being, the organization of the world and of the social world related to the social imaginary significations instituted by the society in question" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 371). This quote retrieved from *The Imaginary Institution of Society* emphasizes the role played by individual and collective significations in the process of the social construction of reality as it is pivoted on the shared interpretation of signs and symbols. This is why the sociology of knowledge tends to focus on the way societies are both instituted and instituting through the influence of symbolic patterns having an effective poietic and functional impact. In regard to this, Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* can shed light on the close relationship between heteronomy and autonomy in everyday life starting from the observation of works of art in their historical and immanent evolution: "A special kind of 'realism' permeates the realm of art. The idealism of the bourgeois philistine of the middle nineteenth century has vanished and, as long as a productive tension between the ideal and existence persists, transcendent values, which are henceforth conceived of as embodied in actual existence, will be sought in the near and the immediate" (Mannheim, 1948, p. 222).

The observation of the artistic evolution across the centuries deals with the incessant attempt of social actors to give form to the chaos of thoughts and symbols hovering around collective environments, thus making culture a social medium functional to prevent the risks of heteronomy and homologation. What is the role played by imagination in relationship to historical contingencies? How long does creativity take to endow instituted societies with new aesthetic tenets? And, finally, what is the connection between imaginary, society and expression? Castoriadis considers that the "pulsating process" fuelling the imaginary institution of society is closely related to a dynamic interpretation of history deprived of its Marxist influence, as McMorrow (2023, p. 28) points out: "Castoriadis's conceptualization of the deep complicity between the imagination and history completely abandons Marx's insistence on a substance/essence driven historicity, and in its stead, he develops a thoroughly political conception of cultural creation that attempts to present simultaneously a theory of historicity and a practical explanation of the potential for social transformation".

The "radical imagination" owns a significant role in the semiotic process that gives form to our conscious and unconscious thoughts, along with the symbolic pathways shaping the public sphere. As Castoriadis observes, the convergence of radical imagination and human psyche determines any chance to construct those social imaginaries stemming from the influence of the poietic

and its functional impact. This sort of aesthetic compromise allows social actors to confront one another in the heteronomous drifts of society and thus oppose the risks of homologation and standardization that undermine freedom of speech and thought. "Society at large is heteronomous" (Castoriadis, 2007, p. 75) because we apparently use our own judgement, whereas we have recourse to commonplaces, stereotypes and informative approximations to simplify reality and thus judge complexity. The compromise between *legein* and *teukein* produces social imaginaries closely connected to intramundane praxis and contingent significations. This is what Jürgen Habermas points out about "the collective stream of the imaginary" (Habermas, 1987, p. 333) precisely in reference to Castoriadis' theory of the imaginary, thus emphasizing the compulsory communicative compromise between the functional and the poietic: "If, with the help of this pragmatically expanded notion of language, one reformulates the concept of praxis in the sense of communicative action, the universal characteristics of praxis are no longer confined to *legein* and *teukhein*, that is, to the conditions (requiring interpretation) for contact with a nature that is encountered in the functional circuit of instrumental action" (Habermas, 1987, p. 335).

The communicative action concerns the "pulsating process" that leads social actors to give form to chaos and, in the meantime, to counterbalance heteronomy and autonomy. In this perspective, language gains a normative and expressive dimension contemplating any shift of validity among social actors: "Social praxis is linguistically constituted, but language, too, has to prove itself through this praxis, in terms of what is encountered within the horizon disclosed by it" (Habermas, 1987, p. 335). Artistic creation, Castoriadis argues, is no exception, especially when considering the communicative backdrops that contemporary art have sometimes produced in the search for innovation and experimentalism. Baudrillard's "conspiracy of art" confirms that the communicative action is not always the best epistemological solution to contrast heteronomy, despite the tendency to simulation and provocation that some post-modernist artists pursued, as in the case of Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. Castoriadis' analysis of the "imaginary and imagination at the crossroads" is also about the proliferation of images and the visual serialization of contents and experiences in the era characterized by the end of great narrations denounced by Jean-François Lyotard (1979).

The "loss of meaning" is one of the most incumbent risks afflicting our digitalized society, in which the intramundane praxis is often reduced to content consumption and relational hyper-connectivity (Castells, 2007). The proliferation of objects and the circulation of their simulacra exalt the tendency to symbolic paroxysm that our society fuels in line with an apparently sterile search for new and original narrations. The tendency to conformism and

heteronomy is one of the most incumbent risks connected to the cult of "consumption for consumption's sake" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 86) echoing the well-known decadent manifesto of "art for art's sake". This is why only "a social and political awakening, a renaissance" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 86) can contrast the creative "degeneration" that post-modernists followed in tune with the search for new forms of expression, sometimes leading to thunderous provocation: "That path leads to the loss of meaning, the repetition of empty forms, conformism, apathy, irresponsibility, and cynicism", along with the productive pressure and the economic incumbency triggering the "capitalist imaginary" (Castoriadis, 1987, p. 86). The distinction between the poietic and the functional can thus highlight the communicative effort that social actors have to achieve in a society that is largely heteronomous, in which the radical imagination still has the power to contrast standardization and its oppressive drifts. Castoriadis' emphasis on the epistemological crossroad where imagination and the imaginary find themselves reminds us of the need for creative originality and semiotic independence through the search for a communicative compromise, since every instituted/instituting society depends on the sedimentation of significations that social actors have to interpret and interiorize, in line with the slow but significant action of "radical imagination".

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