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THE “CHANNELING” PHENOMENA IN ART: MEDIUMSHIP OR CREATIVE DISSOCIATION?

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ABSTRACT

The *mediumistic art* is a psychic phenomenon in which an individual appears to be possessed by an *entity* that guides the artwork creation process. Until today it is preferred to classify this kind of creative skill or performance as parapsychological or paranormal events, calling them *channeling phenomena*. Through some case studies, *mediumistic art* has been analyzed by a scientific point of view, classifying this particular phenomenon of artistic creation as abnormal or anomalous manifestation of human creativity, that in some neurophysiologically predisposed individuals and in specific cultural contexts, may emerge in an anomalistic way. According to our hypothesis, mirror neurons might have a role in the emergence of that particular form of creative dissociation detected during the manifestation of the *channeling phenomena* in Art: gifted individuals would be able to reproduce the *art genome* of famous deceased painters (unique patterns of style and technique owned by these artists), by accessing to a specific *aesthetic memory*, that is a distinctive ability of the *mediumistic artists*.

Keywords: Creative Dissociation, Neuroesthetics, Psychology of Art, Psychological Anthropology, Mediumistic Painting, Channeling

INTRODUCTION

The *mediumistic art* is a psychic phenomenon in which the subject appears to be possessed by a disembodied entity that would drive the artwork making process. The *automatism* that characterizes these creative performance has been the topic of few psychological studies until today, because it is preferred to classify the artworks created by the *mediumistic artists* as parapsychological or paranormal events, calling them *channeling phenomena*: the artist would be a *channeler*, namely a sort of *medium* towards a transcendent and spiritual dimension. In fact, the *possession* by a force extraneous to the subject was the popular explanation used to describe this kind of psychic phenomena [1].

The most recent interest by cognitive science towards the *mediumistic art* phenomena arises from the fact that these manifestations show a very evident state of psycho-motor dissociation during the execution of the artworks, accompanied by the presence of trance and hallucinatory states, for which it was noted a certain analogy with some kind of psychopathological and psychiatric disorders, that could partly explain these phenomena [2]. Because the psychogenesis and the etiology of these events is still uncertain, and the explanation of *mediumship* is not convincing, our research aims to investigate by a scientific point of view these phenomena on the basis of some research activities conducted through the last modern diagnostic technologies, trying to set

psychodynamically the *mediumistic art* as a form of *abnormal* expression of human creativity, that in some neurophysiological predisposed individuals is expressed in a different way compared to the socially accepted standards of human creativity.

If we consider the artistic creativity as a journey taken by the artist within the unconscious, we may accept the existence of a *channel* through which it is possible to access the hidden intricacies of human psyche. In fact, the concept of *channel* it is useful to explain the entry of a person into a dimension that is *parallel* to the sensible reality, in which the subject would acquire the art skills/abilities or receive instructions about the use of the conventional techniques of artistic representation, that the subject apparently is not aware of having on a conscious level. The concept of *channel* can therefore explain how it is possible that certain ordinary people, without being in possession of conventional artistic skills and with no art competence or know-how, are able to create (at some point in their lives and under specific conditions) some artworks that they would never have been able to perform in normal conditions.

But by which psychic mechanism this artistry is activated? Under what conditions and why this *channel* is opened and, above all, where it leads?

The difficulty in giving a plausible explanations has relegated until now these abnormal manifestations of artistic creativity in the limbo of parapsychological phenomena or paranormal events, considering the artists as a sort of spirit *medium* and the artworks they produce as a kind of message from a dimension unrelated to sensible reality, transcendent and spiritual: their *art* were defined as *mediumistic*, *spirit* or *psychic* and its particular manifestations as *channelling phenomena* [1]. In fact, in ancient times, the *medium* was considered to be a means, a bridge between real life and the afterlife, while the artistic inspiration was considered a means to the transhuman or divine world: the artist was the intermediary between the Muse, or a God.

But there are some specific features so that it is possible to talk about *mediumistic art* or *channelling phenomena* in Art:

- 1) The majority of the subjects is art untrained, namely they do not have any artistic know-how, but start to create suddenly and spontaneously as if they were moved and drive by an inner urge or *possessed* by a mysterious force alien to their own will.
- 2) Such inner urge or force often occurs after a major physical or mental trauma.
- 3) If the subject is an art expert, the phenomenon occurs in a state of altered consciousness, automatically and unconsciously, by means of a different artistic technique or style, extraneous to the individual expertise of the subject, which disavows it as soon as he/she is back into him(her)self.
- 4) Who paints is not aware of what he/she is doing and finds out the painting only when the work has been completed: the *channeled* is unaware of his/her own work and has not planned any artwork in advance.
- 5) The subject can work even in the dark.
- 6) The artworks are carried out in automatic way and with amazing speed.
- 7) The artwork, especially if that represents figures, corresponds to an enlightening vision seen or perceived by the subject.
- 8) The creative *impetus* is irresistible, involuntary and independent both from the will and the consciousness of the subject.
- 9) The subject can also paint with the fingers, both hands and feet, or work on more than one work at the same time, using different artistic styles, sometimes attributable to those of famous dead painters.

- 10) The subjects undergo a physical and emotional stress during the artwork execution, through an appreciable change in vital signs, such as blood pressure or heart beat, presenting in some cases sweating and weight loss.
- 11) Almost all the *channelers* report that they have felt inspired by otherworldly entities, disembodied, transcendent and spiritual, working in a sort of abduction and ecstatic rapture. Some report that they have a guiding spirit.
- 12) Some of them have had paranormal experiences or manifest paranormal abilities (and this may be the explanation of a kind of subliminal conditioning in the artwork execution) and, during some of these experiences, they have had the illumination or revelation of their *gift* or power.

METHOD

Through some case studies, occurring worldwide (although more frequently in Brazil at the time of this research), we have analyzed the *mediumistic art* by a scientific point of view, trying to classify in psychodynamic way these psychic phenomena as a kind of abnormal or anomalous manifestation of human creativity, that in some neurophysiologically predisposed individuals would be expressed in an anomalistic way, compared to the social and cultural standards of artistic creativity. The method we have chosen is based on the analysis of international case studies reported to date in the literature, starting from the first descriptions of this phenomenon until to get to the most recent investigations carried out on some Brazilian painters, who currently represent the most interesting phenomenon, even by a psycho-anthropological point of view, because they are related to religious or mystical experiences similar to shamanic practices, typical of specific cultural context [3].

These studies used the following investigation instruments:

- some basic biographical and socio-demographic information;
- artistic material;
- observational data: photographs of paintings, observation of the mediumistic painters in action;
- psychophysiological measures: electrical brain activity (through EEG), heart rate, hand temperature, bilateral skin conductance, muscle tension (through electromyography);
- psychological measures: Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, Tallegen Absorption Scale, Revised Transliminality Scale and Dissociative Experiences Scale.

The thing that struck immediately is that *channeling phenomena* in Art have occurred and still occur more frequently in people belonging especially to Latin cultures (Italians, French and Brazilians): probably there are specific connections (that would involve culturally different cognitive processes) to Stendhal Syndrome or *Hyperkulturemia*, which statistically affects individuals belonging mainly to the Eastern cultures, classically or religiously trained, who often live alone. [4]

RESULTS

The altered states of consciousness that induce these *abnormal* manifestations of artistic creativity may have several scientific explanations, particularly of neurophysiological and psychobiological nature, without neglecting the influence of the human unconscious. They would be unusual forms of irruption or emergence of creativity, which are beyond the control of the conscious mind, but that are not necessarily related

to psychopathological or neuropsychiatric disorders, such as Savant Syndrome and Schizophrenia. Cognitive Sciences and Neuroesthetics, but also the neuroimaging techniques such as the Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), are able to make an important contribution to the scientific studies about this *psychic* phenomenon [5].

Through direct observation and diagnostic investigations, it was noted that the *channeling phenomena* in Art appear as automatic actions outside of the conscious control by the subject: they burst into the ordinary state of consciousness of the individual in the form of psycho-motor automatism, or takes the form of altered states of consciousness as a trance, semi-trance, hypnosis or hallucinatory state. Other times instead they are induced by external stimuli to the subject, such as music or sounds, or are self-induced by the same subject, for example through prayers or invocations to disembodied entities, as in the case of some Brazilian painters. The dynamic of self-induction of a state of *ecstasy*, in which the artistic abilities of the mediumistic painters occur, resembles the swirling motion of the whirling Dervishes or the deep immersion of some Zen Buddhism practices. In this altered state, very often the artist also experiences synesthesia, or rather a sensory confusion that pours into the artworks. It is very important to note the force exerted by auto-suggestion, also determined by the cultural and social expectations, which consider the *mediumistic artist* as a modern shaman, a repository of unfathomable mysteries, but especially a person with the *gift* of being able to come into contact with a superhuman or divine dimension that guides the humankind. Each artist experiences different states of consciousness, characterized by various shades of alteration: there is a varied range or *levels* in which the vigilant, conscious, critical and rational attention fades until it disappears into pure automatism and in a trance. Creativity could be considered a paranormal phenomenon when the subject does not possess the skills necessary to create materially an artwork, and is not conscious of what he/she is doing: in this case it is not possible to give a definite explanation to creative phenomenon despite the in-depth scientific investigations.

For the aim of this study it is better to replace the concept of *mediumship* with that of *channeling*, because the first focuses on the nature of a paranormal or spiritualist phenomenon, while the second allows us to frame in a more objective way the passage of the individual through a *channel* that connects he/she with the deepest dimension of the being, by determining the automatism of such abnormal form of human creativity. In fact, those specific phenomena of artistic productions by the *mediumistic painters* happen without the conscious participation by the authors and have characteristics completely outside of the standard: first of all they occur suddenly by the hands of art untrained people. When these individuals begin to work they have no idea of the final result and realize this only when the artwork is completed: therefore they do not have a plan and do not make preliminary sketches or outlines; sometimes they do not even know how to explain what they represented [6]. No changes or corrections are made: the work produced is already perfect and finished. The artworks are often produced under impossible conditions for any ordinary artist: darkness, paintings backward, huge brushes and coarse, or the colors are distributed with the fingers. Sometimes there is no difference between a conventional work of art and a *mediumistic* artwork; in other cases the artworks have a strong analogy with the Surrealistic style, or are similar to artworks produced by artists under the influence of psychotropic and hallucinogenic substances (LSD), or look like artworks produced by people suffering from psychiatric disorders: certain *channelers* reproduce some artworks of the great artists of the past, others - and

these are the most amazing – realize new artworks by using the exact style of the most famous departed painters, from Van Gogh to Modigliani, from Michelangelo to Renoir. Other *mediumistic artists* even manage to draw the portrait of unknown deceased persons, almost always relatives of a person present at the public performances.

Graphic and pictorial forms and techniques through which the *mediumist art* occurs are very different: figurative, surreal, visionary, dream-like, symbolic, schematic, graphic, decorative-morphogenetic, decorative with embedded figurative elements, griffonage, manifold, multiform and miscellaneous [7]. Most of these forms are very similar to contemporary painting, either for a certain simplification of the formal language, both for the extreme freedom of the compositional schemes: in fact, Contemporary Art is born by the detachment from the classical forms, and from the pursuit of simplicity, spontaneity, the desire to return to primitive art, especially in relation to Surrealism, which is the explicit attempt to bring out in a direct way the dream world, the subconscious and archetypes; or the Art Brut, that spontaneous painting apparently devoid of learned rules and techniques, such as the children's art; or the art produced by schizophrenic artists, as well as some forms of Naive Art.

With specific regard to Brazilian painters, their art can not be separated from the spiritualist associations, typical of Brazil (*centros*), which act as a real incubator for such forms of creative expression, to the point that there are some schools where the *mediumistic painters* are initiated in this type of activity with group lessons of mediumship or *channeling*. Very often the interpretation of these phenomena is naively spiritualist: the pictorial expression would be direct evidence of the contact with afterlife. Painting in the style of a deceased artist is popularly considered as a proof that the mediumistic painter is a psychic intermediary (just a *channeler*) with the afterlife and the world of the dead [8]. The *channeling phenomena* in Art seem to have without any doubt a close relationship with some psychiatric disorders such as autism, schizophrenia, and paranoia: some mediumistic paintings are very similar to the drawing made by insane persons or patients with psychopathological disorders, and seem to be an expression of the so-called Outsider Art. Moreover, it is known the connection between art and madness, and the history of many painters and artists suffering from alienation and psychiatric disorders, which were fatal in some cases (e.g. Vincent van Gogh). But regarding the *channeling phenomena* in Art, only a small part of the *mediumistic art* production can be compare to a psychopathological art.

The comparative study of art created by alienated or insane people and by *channelers* opens up new research horizons that involve the symbolism, the unconscious, the depth psychology and the structure of the psyche. Carl Gustav Jung, who studied deeply the *mandalas* (namely Hindu and Buddhist esoteric diagrams) called *European Mandalas* some psychopaths' artworks, similar to the initiates' diagrams [9]. He perceived a parallelism between Eastern philosophy and the Western unconscious mental processes. Undoubtedly, *mediumistic art* is a manifestation of creativity rather anomalous and mysterious, so much to offer in some cases artworks of higher quality compared to *conventional* artworks. Sometimes *mediumistic art* occurs in already established artists, as if there was a superposition process of different personalities, or various aspects of the same personality, as in the case of patients with schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder. We should focus in particular on those people who turn suddenly into *mediumistic artists*: they provide in a completely unexpected way a creative production totally devoid of a previous model or manifestation, and above all they have the feeling of being driven by a transpersonal entity or by an afterlife presence. But by

what such irruption of creativity is activated? Is the social and psychological experience of the *mediumistic artist* enough to determine the inspiration, or this is related to separate centers of consciousness? Or again, maybe is there a kind of *higher* consciousness (or a secondary center of consciousness) that coordinates the automatic execution of *mediumistic art*?

CONCLUSIONS

It is still unclear what active the *switch* that opens the *channel*, allowing the unconscious creativity of a *mediumistic artist* to emerge and manifest itself in the form of automatic movements capable of creating materially a defined artwork. It seems that the brain is somehow programmed beforehand and contains in itself the *instructions* provided to the subject, who is able to create only in a state of trance, once this has been activated (even by means of specific culture-based rituals or practices). The state of trance involves therefore an estrangement from reality allowing the artist to tap into latent and unconscious artistry by creating artworks independently of his/her will, that is under full automatism. According to its specific activation modes, *mediumistic art* is an anomalistic form of expression of human creativity, whose etiology could be located in a specific sensitivity of some predisposed people, probably due to a singular brain structure and a specific activation mechanism of the mirror neurons, that somehow would be able to take a *snapshot* or capture a frame of existing artworks, sending them subliminally to separate centres of consciousness, where they would be stored in a latent memory like computer data, to be retrieved at the appropriate time, involving specific psychomotor skills related to the artistic expressiveness: the activation of this *aesthetic memory* is a distinctive ability of the *mediumistic artists*. The emergence of this specific form of creativity would be also facilitated by the social, cultural and anthropological context, suggestion phenomena, beliefs, rituals and religious practices (shamanism), ascetic and mystical experiences, esoteric and spiritualistic practices, hypnosis and use of drugs or psychotropic substances, which activate that form of creativity determining its abnormal irruption in apparently ordinary people in everyday life: it would be therefore a psycho-anthropological phenomenon related to specific *cultural ecosystem*, that affects neurophysiologically predisposed individuals.

In our opinion the *channeling phenomena* in Art may be classified as a particular form of creative dissociation, that could be defined *aesthetic trance*: the *mediumistic artworks* are probably the result of an inspiration received in a specific state of mind based on temporary consciousness stasis, a sort of *daydream* (or *rêverie*), during which the subject retrieves content imprinted inside the *aesthetic memory*, while the brain coordinates the artwork execution mode (artistry, style and technique), through the control of the psychomotor mechanisms that coordinate the movements able to create the artwork by means of the *ritual* dynamism, that drives the executional automatism of the *mediumistic art*. At the core of the automatic creative process, typical of *mediumistic art*, could be specific art images *photographed* by the subject and impressed inside the *aesthetic memory*: our hypothesis, susceptible to further and in-depth investigations, is that the creative expression of *mediumistic art* may depend somehow by the function of mirror neurons that, once activated in a specific way, would be able to take *snapshots* of reality (e.g. a specific work of art), impressing and fixing them into the *aesthetic memory* in a subliminal way, bypassing the individual consciousness and its limits: these would be activated unconsciously in specific conditions (e.g. inspired or ritualized by cultural practices), letting emerge latent skills

and artistry in the form of psychomotor activation of gestures finalized to artistic representation, recalling to the mind past visual experiences and translating them into artistic motions: the individual materially reproduces mental images that he/she is looking at in a state of *aesthetic trance*.

The *psychopictography*, characterized by unconscious and automatic movements, is one of the most common form of mediumistic art production. Anticipatory phenomena have been observed in some *mediumistic artists* before the manifestation of the main phenomenon, or rather a prodromal phase characterized by a certain number of symptoms of a physical nature, such as itching, tingling or burning sensation in the arms and hands, followed by loss of consciousness which gives rise to the phenomenon. The subject is then detached from reality falling into a trance, which can be more or less vigilant: in some cases the *mediumistic artist* may interact with the surrounding reality, or also answer the questions from the beholders. The most striking feature is the rapidity and fluidity of artwork execution compared to the worktime normally required by a professional painter, as if the subject were drawing merely an already done sketch, by knowing in advance what to draw exactly, or foreknowing the direction of the brush stroke. In fact, the ability to working also in the dark (or with closed eyes) suggests that the *mediumistic artist* is completely *dissociated* from reality-sensitive and is rather in contact with a supersensible reality or plunged into a state of consciousness, which taps into a specular dimension of reality and suggests the optimal conditions of the artwork creation even in the absence of light, that is essential in the painting execution.

The *mediumistic painter*, by working in an altered state of consciousness, becomes a *channel* to a supersensible dimension or, as claimed by many *mediumistic painters*, the *medium* of famous deceased painters, according to specific cultural context and popular beliefs that affect the subject. In fact the mind of some individuals, psychobiologically susceptible and conditioned by a cultural context, would have the ability to carry out a *psychic switching*, once this is activated by specific stimuli, rituals, practices, past psychical trauma, or by using psychotropic substances: a sort of *gate* to a state of altered consciousness, through which the subject gets in touch with the depths of the psyche, outside the normal construction of the conscious ego. This is evidenced by the amazing automatism and speed of the artwork execution, but mainly by the lack of technical and artistic know-how in the analyzed subjects. It is as if the individual had a wealth of knowledge stored beforehand in the mind, a sort of internal *software* that provides instructions by driving the artwork creation in a completely automatic mode. Even in those rare cases where the subject has an artistic know-how, the artworks produced in a state of aesthetic trance are placed completely outside of his/her ordinary artistic production.

The most characteristic aspect of this particular form of artistic activity remains anyhow the *automatism* [10], which suggests a kind of alternative way of manifestation of the human creativity: it is like opening a direct *channel* between the subconscious and the conscious ego, from which the flow of artistic production comes out in an aesthetically significant form, that drives the expression of latent creative abilities, bypassing completely the conscious control in a peremptory and authoritative way: it is evident that a similar phenomenon is experienced by the subject as something alien from himself/herself and, at the same time, closely connected to the Self. Furthermore, the presence of hallucinatory voices or messages in injunctive or mandatory form (often through *automatic writing* or *psychography*), when the subject is not known to suffer from psychiatric disorders, or nothing unusual or anomalistic has been detected,

strongly corroborate the popular interpretations (which are predominantly *spiritualistic*), but these are strongly influenced by the cultural *milieu* in which people live, as it is evident in the case of Brazilian painters, providing interesting material for a psycho-anthropological research.

In fact, the automaticity of the *mediumistic painters* is different by the technical automatism or by *working memory*, that is the result of learning processes (such as swimming or cycling). In fact, there is a split between the conscious or programmed aspect of the execution, and the immediate, instinctive and uncontrolled creative production by the *channelers*. In *mediumistic artists* we are witnessing a process of emergence of an abnormal creativity, as if this resurfaced from the depths, when it is activated by specific stimuli or particular and evocative conditions, or rather as if the artistic technique was already stored in the *mediumistic artist's* mind until it emerges when the subject falls into the *aesthetic trance*. Therefore it is possible to imagine that the *mediumistic creativity* is somehow already located in the psychocognitive sphere of the subject in the form of latent abilities: at neurophysiological level, a particular activation of the left brain hemisphere would facilitate the spontaneous emergence of the creative-organizational abilities of the right brain hemisphere. This may be even more true in the case of involvement of mirror neurons, adding a neurobiological component to our hypothesis. The imitative dynamics, typical of mirror neurons, confirmed by the synchrony between action and observation (i.e. mental vision, in this case) [11], would allow the subject in a trance (which looks like a state of hypnotic regression) to retrieve and watch art images stored in the brain and, once activated the psychomotor system, to reproduce them through the art working by automatic and unconscious movements. Some sensitive and predisposed individuals would be able to identify the *art genome* of famous disappeared painters, enabling them to reproduce the their style and technique. The emergence of an *abnormal* creativity, or creative dissociation in this case [12], is anyway a creative process useful to the individual, because it supports the development of cognitive processes and allows the person to live new and increasingly complex experiences, providing new representations of reality never experienced before, and increasing the expressive possibilities of the human over the ordinary limits: the individual is directly in touch with the unconscious, in which the subject comes from the pure dynamics of imitation of the reality. Creative dissociation corresponds somehow to *rêverie*, that is a state of mind in which the cognitive abilities of the subject are freely floating, and the possibility of representation of the reality are extended and potentiated compared to the actual subject's expertise [13].

Generally, the ability to access a *primordial* creative dimension are lost over time due to the psychobiological growth of the individual and by means of learning and acculturation processes imposed by society. But in some individuals the access to such an *archetypal* dimension would be a sort of *passage channel* between real world and the primary and ancestral creative sphere of humankind, that in particular conditions may be opened, putting the individual in a fit state of accessing to normally unattainable and apparently unknown forms of creative expression. It is also possible that the *mediumistic art* may be a sort of escape from reality or *escapism*, that the same individual is induced to implement in order to sublimate anxieties, fears, sufferings, traumas, stress, pressures, strains and frustrations coming from reality. Therefore *mediumistic art* might be an ego defense mechanism implemented by some psychobiological and neurophysiological predisposed individuals, able to bring out their latent abilities [14]. Sometimes they are creative potentials undone and suppressed by

everyday life because of the social conditions in which the subject is forced to live, and that unexpectedly emerge forcefully breaking the barriers imposed by the superego. But this process is still largely unknown, as if it was hiding something that goes beyond the knowledge abilities of human being in its current stage of evolution.

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