

C. Stephen Jaeger, *Enchantment.
Charisma and the Sublime in the Arts of the West*
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Rainer Maria Rilke felt like he was being intensely watched by a headless statue. The eyes of John Singer Sargent's *Lady Agnew* and those of Albrecht Dürer's renowned self-portrait (1500) strike us with such a piercing vitality that we tend to forget they are not real. Due to his morbid obsession with chivalric literature, a respectable Spanish gentleman turned insane, decided to become a knight-errant and mistook inns for castles and windmills for giants. While admiring Leo Tolstoy sitting by the edge of the sea, Maxim Gorky had the impression that the entire universe was nothing but an emanation of the writer's will. When listening to David Bowie, Carolyn, a middle-aged woman, had visions of him wrapped in a glowing aura and was convinced that, through him, she had been given an immense power.

What do all these strange things have in common? According to Stephen Jaeger, it is the experience of charisma. Jaeger is Gutgsell Professor Emeritus of Germanics and Comparative Literature at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and he is the author of authoritative studies on the relationship between the humanistic culture of the X-XII century, courtly manners and chivalric literature. His book *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950-1200* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1994) presented us with a totally different picture of an epoch often regarded as obscure or culturally poor. The title of his new book, *Enchantment*, refers to the power of charisma, a topic already touched upon in his earlier works. According to Jaeger, such power does not belong only to people, as Max Weber thought, but also to works of art.

Weber defined charisma as a "certain quality" of some special individuals by virtue of which they are thought to possess "supernatural" or "superhuman" powers and are treated as leaders. With great originality, Jaeger extends this definition to include a certain kind of works of art and their effect on the beholder or reader. Rather than with *charis*

(“grace” – its etymology), charisma has to do with Pseudo-Longinus’ idea of the sublime, whose effects include intoxication, wonder, elevation, “amplification” of the soul, and ecstasy. Unlike the sublime, however, charisma is inseparable from physical presence and personality (there can be sublimity in a landscape, but not charisma): Jaeger defines it as “the sublime encapsulated in a human presence” (42).

As with the sublime, charisma lies not so much in some definable qualities of the object, but rather in the *response* of the recipient to such object. This response is called by Jaeger “enchantment”: a kind of magical fascination that captures us and breaks down our rational defenses by engaging our imagination and our need to be “rescued from the ordinary”. According to Jaeger, charisma – like love – generates a feeling of intensified vitality in the viewers and transports them in a dimension perceived as higher and more authentic than the daily one, which now appears poor and trivial. The greatness of the (real or represented) charismatic personality is communicated by contagion to those who perceive it and stimulates *imitation*: the disciple wants to be like the revered master, the reader or viewer like the hero of a novel or a movie. This way, followers and viewers are *transformed* in the image and likeness of their idol. Despite being well aware of the risks inherent in such dynamics, Jaeger wants above all to prove the existence of “a kind of art” that, through the transforming power of charisma, is able to restore humanity in mankind, that is, to bring back an “appetite for life” (27).

But what is the relationship between individual charisma and art? Actually, the step from the one to the other is quite short: personal charisma already implies, for those who witness it, a weakening of the distinction between the real and the imaginary (Tolstoy appears to Gorky as a god). And, for those who possess it, charisma entails some form of self-representation or even acting. On the other side, the charismatic work of art embodies and projects (in an extremely intensified manner) the vitality and intensity of a real and corporeal personality, thereby obliterating its fictional and objectual nature. In other words, the charismatic individual appears as a living work of art, while the charismatic work of art appears as an (illusory) living being (p. 3). Charismatic art, writes Jaeger, “sanctifies the immediate so as to create the momentary illusion of divinity in the individual, or of the eternal in the moment, or of indestructible existence, or of unfading beauty in what has long since passed, of happiness and its availability, or of the impotence of death” (35).

Such effects are not the result of a mere replication of reality, however, but of a mode of representing, which Jaeger calls hypermimesis, which

relies on a certain verisimilitude only insofar as it is functional to make a grand illusion appear real and plausible. The dreamlike and enchanted realm of the *Odyssey* (ch. 3), of courtly romance (ch. 6), of Goethe's *Faust* (ch. 9), or of the innocent and romantic atmosphere of Fred Astaire's and Ginger Rogers' movies (ch. 11) are all examples of hypermimesis. Our resistance to the snares of such illusions is overcome by the exhilarating heroism of the characters of novels and movies, and by their capacity for redemption and their extraordinary skills.

When does charismatic art emerge? Paradoxically, answers Jaeger, when personal charisma dies. In fact, personal charisma, no matter how powerful, is as short-lived as its possessor. At a certain stage in history, according to Jaeger, the Western man solves the problem by *transferring* charisma into art or in some other lifeless medium (paper, wood etc.), which is more durable than the body, whose vitality and charm it imitates. Through this act of "resignation" and "renunciation", charismatic art becomes a *surrogate of charismatic presence*. Such compensation works through a kind of illusion and deception: the work of art looks alive, but it isn't. In this sense, the artist is a *liar* and an "agent for the mourner" (66) – hence the combination of feelings of pleasure, pain and loss aroused by charismatic works of art ("Every portrait is a reminder of lost beauty and vitality": 65). It is no surprise that the book includes a chapter (the fourth) on icons and relics as repositories of the charisma of Christ and the saints.

According to this theory, human beings started producing charismatic art when they *ceased* to be charismatic – or at least when they no longer thought of themselves as such. In other words, the values of a charismatic culture tend to pass into art and literature precisely when that culture is *fading* and those values seem too perfect and distant to be reachable. As a consequence, many of the artistic and literary flowerings often regarded as "renaissances" are – according to Jaeger – the nostalgic "residue" of a fading charismatic culture (148-149). Charismatic or "heroic" cultures, be their charisma warlike, prophetic, magic, intellectual or courtly, "do not produce charismatic art because they do not need it" (160).

A paradigmatic case, for Jaeger, is the XII century renaissance (ch. 5), when the values and educational ideals of a waning culture (the classical/humanistic culture of the charismatic clerics teaching at courts and cathedral schools) were transferred to courtly literature and Gothic art (as with the beautiful *Wise Virgins* of the Strasbourg Cathedral). The moral authority and transformative power of the master were then re-

placed by the authority of the text and its interpreter, the professor: In this movement, the university as a place for the mere *transfer* of knowledge replaced the school as a place devoted to cultural *and* moral education (according to the formula *litterae et mores*). This is a crucial change within Western culture, according to Jaeger, and its consequences are still visible today.

Charisma takes other routes, and passes into art: it is the *enfabulation* of charisma (168). Less and less a real and physical quality of clerics and masters, charisma gradually turned into a fictional attribute of damsels and knights, but retained, and indeed *intensified*, its educational power. The result was a highly hypermimetic literature (not by chance produced mostly by clerics), whose charisma and transformative power were far more effective than anything the preceding culture ever wrote. Evidence of this lies, for Jaeger, in the “civilizing” role that such literature played within the ferocious feudal class. By merging with military ethics, the ideals of civility and courtesy celebrated by courtly literature gradually informed the social ideals of the European lay aristocracy. “A literary form and fashion – writes Jaeger – created social forms. Literature shaped life, not the other way around” (182). Even today, the hypnotic power of romance is evident wherever – as in American cinema – its narrative patterns are applied: adventure, conquest, self-realization of the hero and, most of all, the “from-fall-to-redemption” path.

The goal of charismatic art, concludes Jaeger, is to present as *achievable* – by means of an illusion that enchants and therefore conceals its unreality – some of the most deeply rooted human aspirations: happiness, immortality and invulnerability, the reawakening in adult consciousness of the dreams of childhood. The faith in the realization of such a promise, as also happens with religious faith, has a *healing, redeeming, and cathartic* effect on its holders, who feel brought back to life. The recipients of the work of art want to keep on living because they got a glimpse of a reality better, higher and truer than the daily one (which is full of pain, anguish and defeats), and believed in it. What induces our enchantment is not the prospect of a more or less durable form of entertainment, but – writes Jaeger – “the urgent need to believe in the reality of a higher world, one that is immanent and inhabitable. And behind that urge, the belief that adaptation to a higher world, transformation and redemption, are somehow available” (376-377).

These are just some of the topics addressed in *Enchantment*, which is, as usual with Jaeger’s books, extremely rich in terms of fascinating hypotheses and cues for discussion. The style is always clear and eloquent,

the authors and the works discussed cover a very wide span of time, from Homer to Federico Fellini and Woody Allen. *Enchantment* follows the path opened by W.J.T Mitchell, Alfred Gell and David Freedberg with respect to the pre-reflective reactions of the beholders to works of art and images, but it does not aim at introducing a systematic theory of representation nor does it rely on the neurosciences for corroborating its arguments (although this might have been a fruitful enterprise). Besides, the book fills a considerable gap: charisma is in fact a widely neglected topic in the field of aesthetics and has received no attention in the majority of European and American dictionaries and encyclopedias of aesthetics and literary themes (from the *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe* to the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* to the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*). Similar remarks could be made about the topic of the imitation of the work of art *by the beholder*. Yet, these are commonplace experiences: those who never felt enchanted before a work of art raise their hand.

