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Recensioni, rassegne, autopresentazioni, note

Recensione

Henry John Pratt, *The philosophy of comics. What they are, how they work and why they matter*
Illustrated by Kurt F. Shaffert
New York, Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. xxii + 200

Le configurazioni contemporanee del gusto non sono più esclusivamente appannaggio dell'arte, tanto meno dell'arte relegata nei musei, ma coinvolgono pratiche più pervasivamente quotidiane. L'esperienza estetica si configura sempre più in relazione agli oggetti della vita ordinaria, e la ricerca estetica contemporanea ha progressivamente ridefinito i propri confini e i propri oggetti, tradizionalmente ancorati a un'idea del bello e dell'arte nella loro eccezionalità. In questo contesto si spiega il crescente interesse accademico per soggetti di natura pop. Ne è indice significativo la collana di Routledge *Research in aesthetics* che spazia dai videogame ai film all'*everyday aesthetics*. Va segnalato anche il volume quasi omonimo a quello preso in esame apparso per Bloomsbury un anno prima: *Philosophy of comics*, di Sam Cowling e Wesley Cray. La stessa Routledge, al di fuori della medesima collana, ha pubblicato altri due volumi di estetica del fumetto negli ultimi sette anni: *Comics and the senses*, di Ian Hague, e *Comics beyond text and image*, di Benjamin Fraser. I fumetti, arte popolare per eccellenza, spesso associata alla letteratura per l'infanzia, godono di una rinnovata attenzione teorica negli ultimi anni, soprattutto in ambito anglosassone.

Il volume di Henry J. Pratt si colloca all'interno di questo filone. È tuttavia opportuno segnalare, come fa lo stesso Pratt nell'introduzione: che la cosiddetta filosofia continentale si è già occupata da tempo dei fumetti. In particolare si potrebbero citare molti lavori di semiotica su questo tema tra Francia e Italia, principali ambienti di riferimento tanto della semiotica quanto del fumetto europeo, nonché tra i principali mercati mondiali del fumetto, assieme a Giappone e USA. A questo proposito, si rileva l'anglocentrismo dei riferimenti filosofici, fumettistici e linguistici del lavoro di Pratt. Si rimarca l'insularità di questo approccio, la quale è comune alla maggior parte dei lavori analitici, come è il caso del già citato saggio di Crowling e

Cray. Si ritiene utile segnalare questa caratteristica al fine di evidenziare come lo stesso metodo e le stesse argomentazioni potrebbero portare a conclusioni diverse se confrontate con esempi e tradizioni fumettistiche o linguistiche differenti. Anche la ricostruzione storica del fumetto nel primo capitolo risulta parziale e legata alla produzione statunitense. Pratt si dimostra tuttavia consapevole di questo limite e affronta il tema anche nelle conclusioni. Nelle stesse auspica un allargamento dello studio alle diverse tradizioni, oltre che ai diversi generi del fumetto. Come altri medium popolari, viene infatti troppo spesso superficialmente assimilato a un genere a sua volta anziché a una vera e propria forma espressiva o narrativa. A difesa dell'autore, va notato come per *comics* si intenda spesso esclusivamente il fumetto statunitense (così come il *manga* si riferisce a quello giapponese). Rinunciando alla traduzione del termine in un più generico e meno connotato *fumetto* le precedenti critiche di insularità perdono di peso. Le ambizioni del volume ne risulterebbero tuttavia ridimensionate (tanto più che non esiste un termine più comprensivo di *comics* anche in inglese).

The philosophy of comics è concepito come un manuale, senza velleità innovative, ma con l'intenzione di fornire un'introduzione sistematica al tema, adatta anche a un uso didattico. La lettura dei capitoli può essere affrontata anche separatamente e non in ordine cronologico, a seconda degli interessi di chi legge; tale modalità di accesso preclude però il dispiegarsi di un'argomentazione filosofica coerente dall'inizio alla fine. Le tre parti che strutturano il volume sono quelle presentate dal sottotitolo: *what they are* (una ricerca definitoria: §1 e §2), *how they work* (un'analisi più operativa del funzionamento del fumetto: §3, §4 e §5), *why they matter* (un'analisi valoriale: §6 e §7). Ogni capitolo è dedicato all'approfondimento di un tema o di un taglio particolare, pur risultando propedeutico ai successivi e strutturando un discorso progressivo.

Coerentemente con le sue intenzioni manualistiche, il volume non risulterà sorprendente per un lettore esperto di fumetti o di filosofia analitica. Il suo punto di forza risiede piuttosto nel dialogo tra i due ambiti. L'autore cita e si confronta con autori del fumetto statunitense molto famosi, come Will Eisner, Art Spiegelman o Alan Moore, così come importanti filosofi e teorici dell'arte, da Hume a Danto a Beardsley. Uno dei riferimenti principali e più ricorrenti è il noto libro di Scott McCloud, *Understanding comics* (1993). Vale la pena ricordare come questo sia un volume di teoria dei fumetti realizzato a sua volta sotto forma di fumetto. Non si tratta di un testo accademico, ma *Understanding comics* rimane un riferi-

mento imprescindibile e costituisce un punto di partenza per l'analisi filosofica più rigorosa di Pratt. *The philosophy of comics* fa ricorso a sua volta a numerosi fumetti esemplificativi (piccoli riquadri, composti da un minimo di una a un massimo di quattro vignette) di Kurt F. Shaffert. La scelta si rivela felice, così come lo sono i fumetti stessi: stilizzati ma efficaci, rendono giustizia al tema in maniera operativa. La loro presenza segnala inoltre una posizione filosofica implicita: l'esperienza del fumetto è irriducibile a un'analisi filosofica o a un'ecfrasi letteraria, per quanto approfondite. Il fumetto viene così accostato alle altre arti fin dall'impostazione del volume, con un'attenzione didattico-esemplificativa che lo distingue, tra gli altri, dal volume di Crowling e Cray, che include poco più di una vignetta o tavola per capitolo.

L'argomento più importante e ricorrente all'interno del volume è quello riguardante la specificità del medium (*medium specificity*). Il tema viene affrontato direttamente nel terzo capitolo (facendolo risalire a Gotthold Lessing), ma emerge naturalmente dalla ricerca di una possibile definizione essenzialistica condotta nel secondo. Attraverso il confronto con altre arti, e in particolare con il cinema (§5), Pratt sviluppa un'indagine sulla duplicità costitutiva del fumetto, conteso tra parola scritta e arte pittorica. Pur incline a privilegiare la dimensione figurativa, Pratt riconosce, sia nelle sezioni definitorie (§1-2) che in quelle più operative (§3-5), la difficoltà di prescindere dalla funzione letteraria del medium. Questa ambivalenza attraversa anche le scelte filosofiche ed estetiche richiamate nel corso della trattazione. Pratt recupera il criterio del *visual-verbal blend* da Robert Harvey trattandolo come uno degli approcci più fecondi, con ricadute anche sul piano valoriale; tuttavia, sia nel secondo sia nel sesto capitolo, ne mette in luce i limiti, secondo un procedimento ricorrente nell'intera trattazione. Un fumetto senza testo è facilmente concepibile, e gli esempi non mancano. Al tempo stesso, come mostrano le vignette di Shaffert (pp. 39-41), è possibile comporre un fumetto fatto di solo testo, o prevalentemente di testo: il confine con il testo illustrato diventa in quel caso labile. Ciò che rimane insufficientemente esplorato è la dimensione organizzativa spazio-temporale del fumetto, che potrebbe offrire strumenti per uscire dalle categorie preesistenti. Persino negli ultimi due capitoli, dedicati all'analisi valoriale, le teorie presentate da Pratt spaziano da quelle più legate al mondo dell'arte (figurativa) a quelle più prettamente letterarie o vicine alla filosofia del linguaggio.

Verso la fine del volume, Pratt avanza una proposta (minimale) del fumetto come esperienza, un'idea coerente tanto con l'impianto teorico del volume quanto con il suo ricco corredo grafico. Il fumetto viene ancora una volta ricondotto all'arte e ai suoi problemi filosofici in modo operativo, senza che sia possibile ridurlo a un'altra forma espressiva o a un'analisi teorica preesistente. È questo quindi il punto di interesse centrale del medium e del volume stesso, che riesce a evidenziare la specificità del fumetto e, con essa, l'assenza di una teoria estetica che ne sia all'altezza.

Valerio Monti

Review

Afroditi Angelopoulou, *The body and the senses in Greek tragedy*
New York, Oxford University Press, 2025, pp. 240

The inherent connection between senses, language and meaning in Greek theatre lies at the heart of *The body and the senses in Greek tragedy* by Afroditi Angelopoulou. Published by the Oxford University Press in 2025, the book seeks to underline "the *inter*sensory dynamic processes that undergird – and bridge the gap between – tragic narrative and performance, at the center of which is the body as the root of human thought and experience" (p. 3), and also point out how "our sensorimotor system plays a crucial role in shaping human concepts and underpins central cognitive processes such as language comprehension" (p. 2). The embodied model, serving as a hermeneutical device, could help "to evaluate Greek *drāma* also as 'a communication through action'" (p. 2), bearing in mind that action inherently encompasses emotion, as reflected in the Greek concept of *kinesis.*

Angelopoulou's aim is to stress "the role of the body as a powerful tool of communication" (p. 10) in tragedy, against the notion that sees Greek theatre as a disembodied art form, based also on the Aristotelian emphasis in the *Poetics* on written plot itself rather than on performance. Angelopoulou focuses on select plays and scenes by Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles "that have the potential to trigger the spectators, bringing them back into self-conscious somatic-awarness" (p. 10). The reading suggested by the author points out the way bodily experiences can be crucial to define *how* the play communicates with the audience. Therefore, it is

not a coincidence that a key role in Angelopoulou's book is occupied by the Aristotelian notion of *sunaisthanesthai*. This conceptualization anticipates the concept of embodied interaffectivity, meaning "'a together sensing' that intimates the corporeal basis of the intersubjective bonds of *philia*" (p. 11), which is, above all, one conceptual link analyzed between the tragedies, both in its violation or its fulfillment.

By choosing a non-authorial approach to structure her work, Angelopoulou explicitly declares the primacy of somatic themes over chronological order in her following study. Each of the three parts of the book is dedicated to the analysis of a specific bodily trope across different tragedies (with the notable exception of the *Oresteia*, which is the focus of the entire first part). This structure aims to "illustrate the interesting points of convergence between the three tragedians in terms of their concern with embodiment" (p. 16), while simultaneously revealing "the distinctness of each individual approach" (p. 16). Whether the second of these purposes is actually achieved, however, remains a question the book ultimately leaves open.

As anticipated, the first section of the book – from which it takes its title, "The body and the senses in the *Oresteia*" precisely – focuses on the Aeschylean trilogy, shedding light on many topics further examined by the author. In particular, the first chapter shows "the role of the body in shaping the iterations of violence and suffering throughout the trilogy" (p. 18), whose first play, *Agamemnon*, is the perfect example of how the body can really be the centre of the ethical thinking of the play, in this instance concentrating on the belly. The greed-eating connection seems to be the framework along which the play progresses; the absence of food is the reason behind the suffering of the Argive army, to the point that the army itself seems to desire Iphigenia's sacrifice "in near-cannibalistic terms" (p. 28). For that matter, "the language of transgressive consumption is associated with the House of Atreus" (p. 28), whose members cannot escape the "endless cycle of voracity and cannibalistic excess" (pp. 28-9). Clytemnestra herself additionally embodies this, to the extent "that we should think of the House of Atreus as a body whose 'belly' is 'overstuffed'" (p. 31). The *Oresteia*, relying on senses such as smell and taste, questions our moral disgust, creating a "quasi-experiential feel of 'smelling with the mind's nose' or 'tasting with the mind's tongue'" (p. 34).

The last two plays of the trilogy, *Choephori* and *Eumenides*, especially the latter, focus on the sense of touch, "for the question of who is morally and physically unapproachable is the heart of the drama's conflict" (p. 44). With the final play, we witness a shift in the object of disgust, which in the

Eumenides is displaced outside the dramatic space onto anyone who poses a threat to civil order: "disgust, then, is transfigured, and becomes, together with anger and fear, institutionalized, functioning as a useful psychological and political tool in decision-making processes, and more broadly, in government and stabilization practices" (p. 49). This analysis of the *Oresteia*, together with the example addressed in the following chapter, which concerns the meaning of suffering, makes it possible to not only consider "how stories make us think […], but also how they make us feel" (p. 50).

A complementary interpretive lens for the *Oresteia* is offered by the concept of weight, as the author demonstrates in the second chapter, underlining the corporeal dimension of the trilogy's famous motif – "the doer suffers". Weight is indeed the central topic of both *Agamemnon* and *Choephori*, referring to "a new form of pressure, tyranny's oppressive weight on both body and voice" (p. 59) in the former, and to "the enslaved, female body" (ibid.) in the latter. Moreover, "it is the marked use of the weight metaphor that intimates a genuine feeling 'with'/'for' Orestes and the entire *oikos*" (p. 67), pointing out once again how the concept of co-suffering, as suggested by Angelopoulou, lies in the roots of *Oresteia* (cf. p. 66).

The theme of co-suffering also leads us to the second part of the book: "Moving enemy bodies". This section focuses on the concept of movement, however paradoxical it may seem to explore two plays of which the main topic (and reason for criticism) is *stasis*: *Persians* and *Trojan women*, particularly the latter. Both tragedies highlight enemy bodies as the principal object of the audience's kinesthetic attention. Aeschylus's play, presenting the perspective of the Other compared to the Greek – namely that of Persians – challenges the Greek audience to "project their own body onto that of their enemy, as well as to (co)participate in the construction of the Persian body as it moves through space – the 'scenic' space of Persia and the 'distanced' space of Greece" (p. 73). The play invites the audience "to handle and feel the enemy body with their mind's eye, and to ultimately realize its (but also their own) all too human status" (p. 83). In other words, an embodied reading of *Persians* could show how the characters' somatic features "create and contain meaning" (p. 87), by also shaping "the processes of participatory sense-making, whereby collective pride can coexist with, but also undercut by, a sympathetic engagement with the suffering enemy" (pp. 87-8).

On the other hand, *Trojan women* serves as an example of the invigoration of performance, for the strength of the Euripidean drama seems

to be in the performance itself rather than the written text. As Angelopoulou aims to underline both the physical and figurative dimensions of movement in the play, the author's attention is guided towards the action and the lack thereof in the drama. Indeed, by paying attention to bodily motions "all the subtle strategies on which the play relies to challenge the Greek/barbarian dichotomy" (p. 94) become clear, subsequently inviting a deep understanding of the processes that lead from freedom to enslavement.

Another trope that the play foregrounds from the outset concerns the positions inhabited by both characters and audience. The opening scene, as the author points out, features Hecuba's body lying on the floor, while two gods, Poseidon and Athena, are raised high above the ground, addressing the gap between gods and mortals. They encourage the spectators to investigate their status: "high and above, down on the ground with Hecuba, or somewhere in between" (p. 96). The rise and fall motif, beginning with Hecuba lying on the ground in the prologue, "initiates a series of movements that materialize the dynamic interaction between grief […] and endurance" (p. 96), between the collapsing of one's own body and the attempt to run from the down-grading suffering – a tension that is indeed somaticized by verbs that recall embodied dimensions such as direction, weight and motion. According to Angelopoulou, the challenge for Hecuba and for the other Trojan women is to bear their own bodies' heaviness through the process of grief (cf. p. 108). It is precisely the *heaviness* of the human condition that is witnessed while watching the Euripidean drama, forced to remember that our place is on the ground with Hecuba, like all humans. So, the embodied reading of *Trojan women*, as well as of *Persians*, "encourages us to recognize that knowledge and understanding of both self and other not only are something of the mind, but are also deeply embedded in embodied experience and practices" (pp. 111-2).

By showing how traumatic experiences manifest in the body, the analyses of the two war-plays connect us to the third and final section of the book, "Trauma in the body". The fifth chapter is dedicated to Sophocles's *Ajax*, where attending to the role of the body as a fundamental aspect of the play's interpretation can shed light on the hero's madness and isolation. Angelopoulou writes that "words indicating the various meaning of *aisthēsis* overwhelm *Ajax*'s prologue (1-134), which problematizes not only the meaning of sensory experience but also the ethics and aesthetics of sensation" (p. 117). Moreover, both vision and touch play a key role in the tragedy. Even Ajax's subjectivity is defined by sight, which is subsequently linked to pain; for the hero, "the clearer and sharper his vision, the

more painful it is" (p. 118). Once back from the darkness he grieves, as "*phronēsis* is the self-awareness that ultimately brings about paralysis" (p. 119). However, Ajax does not only grieve the loss of the former self – that is, the madness – but also the loss of his *philoi*. As a result, he experiences an isolation that is mirrored in his own body.

Philia is indeed based on the possibility of shared pain or pleasure, as claimed also by Aristotle and Plato, and as the use of *sun-* prefixed Greek words indicating bonds of kinship (such as *sunaisthanesthai*) recalls. Thus, when bodily bonds are broken, the possibility of feeling with and for Ajax (cf. p. 124) is lost in both his *philoi* and the spectator. "Indeed, Ajax's pain is an inclusive – social, mental, and bodily – phenomenon, and because of its exceptional interiority, it is challenging to convey on an affective level" (p. 130). The use of sensorimotor verbs, primarily grounded in tactile experience, aims to externalize the hero's otherwise internal experience. Put differently, Ajax's body becomes the tool through which the hero's suffering is shared with the audience. To conclude, *Ajax* calls attention to how emotional trauma resides in the body, that becomes a medium to communicate the distance between the hero and his *philoi*.

The body as a tool to express trauma is the primary trope that the spectator is confronted with in *Medea,* which the sixth chapter revolves around. The narrative shows "the somatic dimension of revenge, calling into question the hedonics of anger" (pp. 140-1), addressing both the "iretic" and "erotic" phenomena combined in *orgē* (cf. p. 141), each embedded in the figure of Medea. The antinomy of pleasure and pain is the central element of the play and of its distortion of *aisthēsis*. After all, pain is necessary to accomplish the so-called "good life" associated with women and with the pangs of labor; in this regard, Medea makes her famous declaration that it is better to go into battle than to give birth. When her relationship with Jason – her whole horizon – collapses, she exchanges the pleasure of the most intimate bonds of *philia* for the pleasure of revenge (cf. p. 147). However, in the end, by losing her children – who are her *ponoi*, the most intimate part of herself – Medea also loses her own body and becomes *untouchable*, as the loss of one's feeling body is the only way to extinguish grief (cf. 159).

Repairing the bonds of *sunaisthanesthai*, absent in both *Ajax* and *Medea*, the last play analyzed by Angelopoulou, *Philoctetes*, shows "how trust and moral restoration are fundamentally grounded in bodily experience and knowledge" (p. 160). The Sophoclean drama revolves around the internal suffering of the hero, mirrored as it is in his asocial habitat: "The narrative therefore centers on the lack and subsequent recovery of

intercorporeal processes, which are constitutive of the idea of *sunaisthanesthai*" (p. 163). Since Neoptolemus represents the idea of embodied ethics, his encounter with Philoctetes "will determine the intercorporeal ethics of the play" (p. 164). The hero invites Neoptolemus to testify to his suffering, as for a warrior being unseen or unheard is synonymous of being dead; what Philoctetes asks for is an act of recognition that relies on the senses (cf. pp. 166-7). The bodily contact between the two "marks the first step toward the repair of *aisthēsis*, which is the prerequisite for the achievement of moral restoration (and by implication, the healing of Philoctetes's moral wound)" (p. 173), showing how trust can be learned through the living body, thus bringing to a close the dialectical arc traced by the three tragedies analyzed in this section, from the warp of *aisthēsis* to its restoration.

In conclusion, *The body and the senses in Greek tragedy*'s proposal is to treat the body as a hermeneutic tool through which to illuminate Greek *drāma* as both literature and action. Angelopoulou's interpretations rely on words' visual dimension, grounded in the body, suggesting to rethink theatre as a sensory, kinesthetic art form (cf. p. 177). Despite Plato and Aristotle's anti-materialistic biases, the author aims to underline the link between the experiential, the sensuous, and the intellectual (cf. p. 179) that was not absent in ancient perspectives, as maintained in the book's conclusion. Drawing from Aristotle's *Poetics*, Angelopoulou concludes her analysis by reiterating that her study engages tragedy *both* as a text *and* as a performance (cf. 186), to demonstrate how language itself can constitute action, and in this sense, going back to the author's introduction, how the living body is a poet's main theme.

Sabrina Sicignano

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