

The Italian Academy for Advanced Study in America.

Pre-paper for the Seminar - Wednesday, March 22nd, 2023

Eric Michaud – Visiting Fellow

**Breeding Humans and the Model of Art:
Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde**

I'm currently writing a book the title of which is *Jacob's Trick. Breeding Humans and the Model of Art*. The chapter I start writing at the Italian Academy is the fourth one, devoted to three great figures of “breeders” in the late nineteenth century : Charles Darwin, Friedrich Nietzsche and Oscar Wilde. It will be the subject of my presentation.

In order to clarify my purpose, I add some explanations below as well as the outlines of the first three chapters of the book.

The book *Jacob's Trick* is the third part of a long investigation initiated in the 1990s. *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany* (Gallimard 1996, Eng. transl. Stanford UP 2004) showed how Nazism, placing culture at the heart of its racist ideology, had made art the guide that would lead the "Aryan" people to its greatest purity, free of any mixture of blood. Thus, the models and counter-models of Nazi imagery were to guide the sexual choices of the community of the people: the production and biological reproduction of the superior race was channeled through innumerable figures, some attractive in order to exalt the production of the same, and others repulsive in order to exclude all dissimilarities threatening to dissolve the identity of the Germanic People. But Chamberlain, Richard Wagner's son-in-law, opened a new perspective by declaring early on (1899) that "even if it were proved that there never was an Aryan race in the past, we want there to be one in the future": with him, faith in the capacity of art to create the new race became unlimited.

Later, *The Barbarian Invasions: A Genealogy of the History of Art* (2015, Engl. transl. MIT Press 2019) focused on the birth and development, towards the end of the 18th century, of a new anthropological knowledge: each people, Winckelmann asserted, necessarily produces an art in its own likeness, and this art determines in return the physiognomy of this people by providing its models. A process that Michelet, firmly anchoring art to biology, will name the "natural *circulus*". However history of art, the birth of which is contemporary of the emergence of the myth of the Germanic Invasions, opposed soon the art of the North, produced by the "Germanic races", to that of the South, produced by the "Latin races". It supposed that these two "races", which would have divided Europe since the fall of Rome, had made the figurative arts not only the spontaneous expression and the incarnation of their respective biological and spiritual identities, but also the instrument of their reproduction.

Jacob's Trick. Breeding Humans and the Model of Art aims to grasp again but otherwise the place given to art by the West in this natural *circulus*. Otherwise and from farther away. By borrowing, from biblical sources first, some of the paths opened and many times traversed along the centuries since the narrative of a foundation: that of the new people stemming from the patriarch Jacob who, after his fight with God or his angel, receives the name of "Israel" (Gn 32:28). Now this narrative combines the birth of his twelve sons with the building up of his own flock, so that between the breeding of animals and the breeding of humans a unique relationship is woven, the latter striving to imitate the former. The one and the other will henceforth use the same technique or the same art: zootechnics and anthropotechnics will have recourse both of them to the model of an image for the production of these new beings.

Jacob's Trick. Breeding Humans and the Model of Art

There is an unbroken tradition since *The Book of Genesis* that gives the image the power to suspend the laws of natural reproduction and to form a new generation in its likeness. Jacob's trick consists in putting branches "spotted, striped and dappled" under the eyes of Laban's sheep when they come into heat and are mated by rams: thus he can form and increase his own flock, with very distinct colors, and found his own house. (Jacob's sheep remain for a long time the allegory of the formation of Israel, then of the constitution of the Christian Church – of the *Verus Israel*).

In the West, the tradition - which is actually universal - immediately splits into two: Hellenistic medicine abounds in narratives of begetting in the likeness of the image; and if Genesis 30 only deals with sheep, it is with humans as much as with horses that the Greeks deploy tricks similar to those of Jacob. It is a question for them of embellishing their descendants as much as of increasing their herds (Plutarch, Galen, Oppian, Soranos...).

In all these narratives, humans and animals occupy the same place: to submit their reproduction to the order of chosen images is to guide and derive a natural process to obtain certain desired forms. And it is of course the experience of the monstrous and pathological begats that teaches the art of producing new forms and new norms.

Magical, theurgic or simply domestic, the practices that aim at controlling procreation make a specific use of images: they must be offered to the sight of the female sex during mating, so that the offspring is marked with the seal of a visible model.

In this respect, anthropotechnics does not differ from zootechnics: just as Jacob makes his sheep give birth to young in the image of branches, the tyrant Denys - reports Augustine after Soranos of Ephesus - finds himself so ugly that he puts before the eyes of his wife, during the carnal act, the painting of a handsome young man "so that, by the violence of her

desires, she would somehow detach the beauty of it and reproduce it in the children that she conceived" (*Against Julian*, V, 51).

Thus, while zootechnics engages in practices of massive reproduction, the desire to control human procreation first concerns only the individual, in the intimacy of the conjugal home. It is only from the 17th century onwards that Europe begins to think again about human reproduction on the model of zootechnics, as Plato had done (*Republic*, 458c-459b), but explicitly resorting to Jacob's trickery.

How to make beautiful children: if the domestic discourse remains (Claude Quillet's *Callipaedia* (1665) nevertheless envisages the "improvement of the entire human species"), it gradually fades away in favor of that which calls for the intervention of the legislator (Campanella's *City of the Sun* (1602), Vandermonde's *Essay on the manner of perfecting the human species* (1756)). In the 19th and 20th centuries, calls to the legislator multiplied in favor of massive and reasoned human reproduction, taking as a model the techniques of breeding. All the metaphors that turn the breeder into an artist and his productions into works of art are reactivated by Darwin, mainly in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871): they will be, until today, at the heart of almost all the discourses on the manufacture of humans.

1 - The moment of conception.

Thus everything or almost everything is played out at the moment of conception. Certainly, innumerable narratives have as their object the action of images on the fetus of the pregnant woman, but they are variations of the great narrative of the creative instant, or if you like, of epigenetic developments. In the same way, scholarly or popular accounts of the "cravings" of pregnant women are minor variations of the above. If the resemblance to come of the child to the image is thus played out less after than at the moment of conception, it is because this moment - confused with the moment of coitus - contains and delivers the

concept. Because "there is in the living one logos, registered, preserved and transmitted" (Canguilhem, "The concept and the life"). The womb, writes Harvey, conceives the fetus as the brain conceives the idea: does not the same word conception apply to both operations ("Of the Conception", 1653).

All the commentaries on Genesis 30:25-43 insist on this, beginning with the allegorical commentary of Philo in the first century: Jacob's sheep and rams are signs, and "the signs are matings and births of concepts (logoi) as if they were animals" (*De somniis*). The *logos spermatikos* of the stoics is substituted here for the Word of YHWH, the seminal reasons or logoi are the male seed, pure concepts fertilizing virgin souls.

But later Saint Augustine as well as Saint Jerome, heirs of the Johannine logos which affirms the power of the Word becoming flesh, insist both on the moment of "sexual emotion" (*The Trinity*, III, VIII, § 15). Finally, Jerome associates the moment of conception with the pleasure of the flesh: where we say "in order to influence the conception by its branches, the Hebrew says *Yeamena*. I can only express the force of the Hebrew word by a circumlocution. *Yeamena* is, in the procreative act, that moment of ultimate passion, when the whole body convulses and the final pleasure approaches" (*Hebrew Questions on Genesis*). Thus, the reproduction of the similar is linked to the moment of pleasure.

Since Pliny the Elder, for whom "the images recorded at the precise moment of conception" determine the resemblance of children to parents (*Natural History*, VII, XII, 52), up to the most astonishing speculations of the 19th century on the photographic character of human reproduction, it is the conceptual instant (Bernard Moulin) which is determining and gives its shape to the child to come. "For the sperm is the artist like Phidias in his kind" wrote already Galien (*On the Natural Faculties*, II, III).

2 - The device: from Jacob's Trick to photography.

Jerome is the first to give a literal, clear and rigorous interpretation of the optico-biological device by which Jacob makes his sheep conceive according to the "mirror of the water", that is, according to the images of the branches superimposed on those of the rams which protrude from them. Remarkably, the general structure remains almost identical in all the stories. And what seems at first to be only a breeding technique of ancient Mesopotamia, putting face to face the image to be reproduced and the living instrument of reproduction, becomes in the modern West a technique of aesthetic improvement of the human being to be implemented in the domestic space.

In the Renaissance, Alberti (*De re aedificatoria*, 1452) recommends hanging in the bridal room portraits of men of good appearance who, contemplated by the wife, will give her beautiful children. Later, Giambattista della Porta recommends in his turn "to place in the bed-chambers of great men, the images of Cupid, Adonis, and Ganymedes; or else to set them there in carved and graven works, in some solid matter, that they may always have them in their eyes: whereby it may to passe, that whensoever their wives lie with them, still they may think upon those pictures, and have their imagination strongly and earnestly bent thereupon: and not only while they are in the act, but after they have conceived and quickned also: so shall the child when it is born, imitate and expresse the same form which his mother conceived in her mind, when she conceived him, and bare in her mind, while she bare him in her wombe. And I know by experience, that this course will take good effect." (Natural Magick, ca. 1612, Book II, Ch. XX)

The adage "like begets like" applies in both directions: since an engraving of St. John the Baptist hanging in the room is capable of giving birth to monstrous beings, as hairy as the beastly skin that clothed the saint (Montaigne, Ambroise Paré, Boaistuau), it is possible to convert the teratological power of the image into a eugenic power.

Strikingly, the device of the darkroom that is at the foundation of photography repeats that of the bridal chamber, and both have lent themselves since the 19th century to the comparison with the maternal womb - as the literature of this century testifies. It is a neutral device, which records, transforms and reproduces the pictorial information it receives, whatever it may be. But it is in a famous work on heredity that, for the first time, the metaphor appears: "It is (...) the organic repetition of life by generation, as it is the artificial representation of forms by photography. As "the electric image that the light engraves", "the lightning which propagates (the life) does not transmit only the print of the physical and moral type of our being; it transmits, with it, the latent expression of the physiognomy that it surprises to the life, in the instant when the pleasure of it fecundates the ecstasy (Jerome, *Questions on Genesis*)" (Prosper Lucas, *Philosophical and physiological Treatise of the natural heredity*, 1850) The metaphor of the daguerreotype used by Lucas to define heredity (it is the "principle of the similar" which passes from an individual to another, he writes: the resemblance, it is "the heredity itself"), comes to represent the natural generation as an automatic process carried out by and within a technical object from which comes out, in fine, a human.

Just as Galen had written that "the sperm is the artist like Phidias in his kind", Bernard Moulin, animated by an ultramodern stoicism, declares that if an "exact reproduction phenomenon" occurs "at the decisive moment of copulation" thanks to a "powerful perphotograph", it is because "electricity is in the sperm, with its spontaneity, its actuality, its photographic and generative elements (which) can only represent the present state of the heart and brain from which they emanate" (*Phrényogénie*, 1868).

Thus, contrary to the photographic reproduction thought as production of resemblances, the suspension of the laws of the natural generation by the mean of art implies a theory of the production of mimetic dissimilarities in the generation.

3 - The eugenic power of the images concerns the State.

The great political utopia of Campanella opens a long time where the power of the images must work to the procreation to "correct" and surpass the nature, appropriating the means and the goals that the classic aesthetic assigns from now on to the fine arts. As for the animals, Campanella returns to the simple model of the Jacob's Trick and the role he assigns to the fine arts in human procreation is simultaneously eugenic and civic, or political:

"Painting and sculpture preserve the memory of the only great men, [that] beautiful women contemplate when they work to ensure the perfection of the race" (City of the Sun, 1602).

Ignoring Plato's condemnation of art, the successive sketches of ideal cities drawn by philosophers, physicians and hygienists always give works of art as models to modern citizens in the making of a regenerated nation. The physician Vandermonde thus appealed to the legislator to apply the precepts of his *Essay on the way to perfect the human species* (1756). If "our bodies do not have all the perfection of which they are susceptible", we can however find this perfection prefigured in the works of the "great Statuaries" because "these great masters of art copied nature, not as it is presented most often, but as it must be."

As it becomes more political, the story of begetting according to the image rediscovers its Greek origins and also becomes Promethean: "It is impossible to assign limits to the most perfectible being of nature; man may one day become a new Prometheus" (Robert le Jeune, *Mégalanthropogénésie*, 1801).

As for Lessing, he emphasizes how the plastic arts "have a power that must attract the attention of the legislator." Thus in Sparta, "if beautiful men generated beautiful statues, these in their turn acted on those, and the State was indebted to the beautiful statues of the beauty of its men" (Laocoon, 1766). Thus stated, this circularity of the links that bind art and the living, contemporary of Winckelmann's theses, anticipates on Michelet's views on the "natural circulus", or on the "coevolution" in the most recent theses as for the role of the culture and

the art in particular in the process of the genetic evolution (Richard O. Prum, *The Evolution of Beauty*, 2017). But the dreams of an exploitation of the eugenic power of art by the State seem to end in the 20th century, notably with the authoritarian regimes of Europe and Mexico. Thus National Socialism, by its condemnation of "degenerate" art and the massive diffusion of images of "Nordic" bodies, wants to guide the sexual choices of the Aryans: to untie the links with what it declares "foreign to the race" and to fix the reproduction of the similar by the similar for the thousand years to come.

Perspectives:

From the point of view of science as well as philosophy, the moment of conception loses its formative power to the benefit of the prenatal moment, which the 19th century sometimes calls "previous education". With the 20th century, a long period begins which is marked by the theories of traumatic birth (Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, Sandor Ferenczi), quickly raised by those of the saving regression towards the maternal womb.

"*Intra-uterine life* and the initial phase of childhood are much more of a continuum than the very marked caesura of the birth process might lead us to suppose," wrote Freud in 1926 (*Inhibition, Symptoms and Anxiety*), the year Louis Bolk formulated the hypothesis of the neotenic nature of man. Later, showing that the fetal growth of the human race continues after birth, Adolf Portmann names "social womb" the highly developed world that replaces the protective environment, uniform and poor in stimulants, of the maternal womb (1960).