

Baldessari's art vs. Italian American reality - Ruberto and Gardarphe: "Postmodern Musings"

Tom Verso (August 30, 2009)



Is Italian American culture: geriatric nostalgia, postmodern abstractions, Hollywood fantasies? Or, is it in fact an observable measurable reality? "That is the question...!"



Preface

"[Baldessari's] work ...[has] layers of meaning that are not always visible, that may not even be self-conscious..." Laura E. Ruberto

"Although linguistic signs of Italianness are not obvious ...Even the most invisibly Italian American writers retain signs of their ethnicity that...can situate their works in a truly Italian American tradition." Fred L. Gardaphe

"I'm from Missouri - Show Me!" Empiricist to the Metaphysician

Introduction

As my i-Italy census data series "Italian Americans by the Numbers" indicates, school age children today of Italian descent are about six generations removed from the circa 1900 Italian migration to America. Accordingly: **The last living memories and oral histories of the "Little Italy" days are geriatric.**

Further, the same series suggests there is little difference between Americans of Italian descent and Americans in general. The typical Italian American is very much like the typical American when compared on hundreds of measures.

Thus, it is reasonable to ask: Is there such a thing (a real observable phenomenon) as Italian American culture, or is there just geriatric nostalgia, scholarly "Postmodernism" abstractions and Hollywood fantasies?

Art and Reality

In her recent i-Italy article "Searching for the Ethnic Angle in John Baldessari's Art", Professor Laura Ruberto included a picture of "...[Baldessari's] now-classic 'I Will Not Make Anymore Boring Art' (1971)".

I guess he forgot his promise when he made "Six Colorful Inside Jobs" a 32-minute video, in the same article, of a fellow paint a room in Charlie Chaplin time. People who think that's "not boring" must think Andy Warhol's "Empire", an eight-hour film staring at the Empire State Building, wildly exciting.

Aesthetics values (e.g. boring or not boring) are subjective and a product of experiences. This is especially true in 20th -21st century Western Civilization. At no time from the Paleolithic cave paintings to the present has art been so subjective.

My understanding of art history is that societies tend to define their aesthetic values rather specifically, and artist work within the material and conceptual aesthetic confines of the social milieu. In turn, art styles come to denote the society. Colors and geometric shapes of art works, for example, differentiate periods of ancient Greece society. Similarly, the art of the Renaissance society is distinct from the later Baroque period.

In the 20th century all that changed. Art is no longer socially defined. The only criterion for an object being a work of art is someone (emphasize 'one' as in anyone) calls it a work of art. When someone called a crucifix immersed in urine ("Piss Christ") art, it became art. Art is no longer defined by generally accepted socially defined criteria of masterful craftpersonship, beauty, or ideological expression.

When art is totally subjective, inferring objective realities such as ethnicity from a work is also subjective. The best a commentator like Laura Ruberto can do when critiquing the work of



Baldessari in terms of ethnicity, for example, is in her words "sense something ethnic"; or, like Fred Gardaphe who finds hidden meanings and "invisible signs" of ethnicity in literature.

Prof. Gardaphe writes:

"Even the most invisibly Italian American writers retain signs of their ethnicity..." He refers to "...the disappearance of a distinctive Italian American subject in light of the advance of postmodernism and uncovers submerged signs of Italianità that are imbedded, consciously or not, by these writers" (emp. added)

What does it mean to talk about the ethnicity of "invisibly Italian American writers"? Of course, Prof. Gardaphe has written whole book chapters and scholarly articles purporting to answer that question. However, empirically minded social researchers must decide if he in fact has answered the question. Can one meaningfully talk about things that are invisible or is this academic (postmodern) 'double speak', the stuff of scholarly yet epistemologically and ontologically wanting discourse?

Prof. Ruberto seems to be influenced by Gardaphe. She writes:

"Baldessari's art ...work suggests to us that artistic output might offer layers of meaning that are not always visible, that may not even be self-conscious, but rather speak to the multidirectional movement of ideas and identity...My search for the ethnic side to Baldessari's art...[is] a postmodern musing..." (emp. added)

Again, what does it mean to talk about "meanings that are not always visible" and "may not even be self-conscious"? Has language taken a holiday?

Thus, both commentators are looking for Italian ethnicity in the works of post-Little Italy artist of Italian descent. And, THEY CANNOT FIND IT! If finding it means seeing something "conscious" and "visible" that other viewers can see without resorting to what Prof. Ruberto calls "postmodern musings" about art and reality. If a work of art represents reality (material or ideal), then one should be able to "see" images that are generally understood to depict the objects or represent the concepts.

All of this is not to criticize the professors. Rather to suggest that their acknowledged inability to explicitly see objective ethnic reality in the art of Italian descendents, combined with the census data indicating that the typical Italian American is a typical American raises the question:

"Is there in fact (in reality) an Italian American culture apart from postmodern academic literati, nostalgic geriatrics and gullible movie goers?"

In Hamlet's words:

"THAT IS THE QUESTION!"

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