

## Action, Speech, and Meaning in Aristotle's *Poetics*

### The power of stories

#### Abstract

In this work I focus on Aristotle's *Poetics* and how the Greek philosopher developed a theory of arts based on his understanding of the element *μίμησις πράξεως* (imitation of actions), which helps to comprehend how artistic manifestation can have an implicit connection with the political discipline. In order to support this claim, I first analyze the aspects that define tragedy in the *Poetics* and then I explain the political elements present in text thanks to Hannah Arendt's theories on the subject and the commentaries of thinkers such as the philosopher Jacques Maritain and the Film theorist Juan José García-Noblejas. I also explain some key elements of Aristotelian fiction such as action, speech, and catharsis. I conclude by explaining how stories can have an impact on the reader or observer due to the fact that each of them brings into light deep human realities.

#### Abstract

Aristotle, Plato, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Maritain, Juan José García-Noblejas, Art, *Poetics*, Politics, *praxis*, *lexis*, catharsis, fiction, stories, inspiration.

#### About me

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Although Aristotle's *Poetics* has had an enormous influence on Western culture, the transmission of this text, and its study, has been quite irregular when compared with the rest of the Aristotelian corpus<sup>1</sup>. We know, for example, that during the Middle Ages it was hardly mentioned. Perhaps because of its author and because it addresses the Greek tragedy of that time, the *Poetics* has been studied through multiple approaches: philosophical, historical, linguistic, literary, etc. The problem with such interdisciplinarity lies in the fact that sometimes all of these perspectives have not been successfully integrated.

Thus, during great part of Western history, since Horace, inspired by the *Poetics*, wrote his *Epistola ad Pisones*, or *Ars Poetica*, the teachings of Aristotle's *Poetics* has been understood in a

strict normative way or a specifically technical manner. Many literary critics throughout history have understood the *Poetics* as a kind of formula by which to measure the accomplishment of a literary work. These critics judged stories depending on how well these followed a certain method. A similar approach could be found in painting, where several masters followed the golden ratio during centuries. It is clear that the application of this pictorial standard has produced effects of great beauty in the History of Art, but it would also be shortsighted to say that this is the only way to obtain an accomplished painting<sup>ii</sup>. Something similar can be said about literature or about any other artistic manifestation.

In this work I wish to focus on a rarely visited aspect of the *Poetics*: the political dimension within fiction<sup>iii</sup>. I plan to study the relation between these two disciplines through the articulation of Aristotelian action ( $\pi\rho\alpha\tau\acute{\iota}\varsigma$ ) and speech ( $\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\xi\varsigma$ ). With the help of Hannah Arendt's thoughts on the subject, I would like to focus on these items and see how they have an influence on the production of fictional works, which can be both literary and cinematographic. To this purpose, I will also support my argumentation with the help of thinkers such as the philosopher Jacques Maritain and the Film theorist Juan José García-Noblejas<sup>iv</sup>.

### **Relevant elements of the *Poetics***

Although at first glance a political approach to fiction may seem quite unconventional, it is not precisely new. Already in his *Republic* Plato noticed the relationship between these two elements, though he presents that relation in a negative way<sup>v</sup>. After a long discussion about the poets, Plato accuses them of being harmful to the  $\pi\acute{o}\lambda\iota\varsigma$  or city-state because very frequently their works did not adjust completely to true standards. Also, for Plato, poets did not always present good behavioral models by which the citizens could be educated. Due to these reasons, Plato considers that poets are potentially dangerous and therefore makes their expulsion from the  $\pi\acute{o}\lambda\iota\varsigma$  necessary. This applies even to Homer.

Such a reprobation of poets and their art was open to criticism at the time and is still controversial nowadays. In this matter, I share to some extent David Mamet's statement: "Art is not political, nor is it educational. And it only ennobles in the sense that aesthetic joy may dignify all human beings" (104). This is also the opinion of Aristotle, which separates himself

from what his master said in the *Poetics*: “Moreover, the standard of what is correct is not the same in the art of poetry as it is in the art of social conduct<sup>vi</sup> [politics] or any other art” (1460b 13-15).

Although Aristotle’s claim is true, that does not mean that there is not an inherent connection between the political discipline and the artistic *ποίησις*<sup>vii</sup>. Despite the fact that Plato condemns this relationship, he was right in noticing that there is one. But to understand how this is possible, one should stay away from any kind of technical interpretation of artistic creation. It is true that in the process of creating an art piece technical expertise is heavily involved. Aristotle suggests this when discussing the imitation of objects in the art of painting:

We have, then, a natural instinct for representation and for tune and rhythm □for the metres are obviously sections of rhythms□ and starting with these instincts men very gradually developed them until they produced poetry out of their improvisations (*Poetics* 1448b 22-23).

He admits, therefore, a kind of evolution of technique or mastery in the creation of things, including works of art. These considerations better help understand the word “masterpiece”, which would be the result of a refinement in technique. Nonetheless, the Stagirite himself is aware that this perspective does not completely exhaust this reality when he later says: “And that is why poetry needs either a sympathetic nature or a madman, the former being impressionable and the latter inspired” (*Poetics* 1455a 33-35). In the Greek original, the words "madman" (*μανικός*) and the expression "inspired" (*□κστατικός*) made reference to realities that were beyond a person and even transcended him or her. The use of these terms in the *Poetics* quickly brings to mind the Platonic doctrine, developed in the *Phaedrus* (244th-245C) and the *Ion* (533e y 535c), about the enthusiasm (*□νθουσιασμός*) or divine madness that made poets go beyond themselves because they were supposed to be possessed by Nature or the Divine. This kind of madness helped them create their works of art<sup>viii</sup>. Considering that in these texts Plato uses the term *μανικός* and *□νθουσιασμός* to describe this animic state so particular to the artist, then it is possible to discover some similarities between what is said by Plato and what Aristotle mentions in his *Poetics*. It is true that they may disagree in the treatment of this element. But surely both philosophers refer to the perplexity, already present in the classical thinkers, which was caused by the reality known as poetic inspiration: that strange force that impels some people to relate beautiful stories. Evidence of this special sensitivity to the issue of inspiration can be appreciated

in the fact that in the classical world, at the beginning of most stories, an invocation to the Muses and the divinity in general may be found. While it is true that such formulas were, in some cases, merely a rhetorical tactic, they suggest an important reality underlying all art and of which the classical thinkers were aware<sup>ix</sup>.

Taking into account all these arguments, it can be said that artistic creation includes two realities deeply related: inspiration and technique. The detailed treatment of these two exceeds the scope of this work<sup>x</sup>, but their mention allows us to see how a wide range of elements are involved in artistic creation. This is because, as Aristotle puts it, the key element in artistic *ποίησις* is the *μίμησις πράξεως*. That is, the imitation of human actions. As such, it relates to the practical reason and, therefore, is related to other disciplines such as ethics, aesthetics, rhetorics and politics<sup>xi</sup>. An analysis of the constitutive elements of tragedy in the *Poetics* will better help understand this idea. In chapter 6 of the *Poetics*, Aristotle gives a definition of tragedy:

Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action that is heroic and complete and of certain magnitude□by means of language enriched with all kinds of ornament, each used separately in the different parts of the play: it represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through pity and fear it effects relief to these and similar emotions (1449b 24-28).

Almost immediately, the Greek philosopher turns his attention to some key aspects of that definition:

And since tragedy represents action and is acted by living persons, who must of necessity have certain qualities of character and thought□for it is these which determine the quality of an action; indeed thought and character are the natural causes of any action and it is in virtue of these that all men succeed or fail□it follows then that it is the plot which represents the action (*Poetics* 1449b 36-1450a 4).

For this work, I will focus my attention on the terms "representation of an action" (*μίμησις πράξεως*) and the expression "relief to these and similar emotions". That is, catharsis (*κάθαρσις*). Also, I will analyze what Aristotle meant by thought (*διάνοια*) and character (*ἦθος*). Among all these, the term action or *πρῶξις*<sup>xii</sup> will have a key role. For Aristotle, *πρῶξις* is "an autoperfective activity in the intellectual and volitive order of nature" (González [ed.] 931). It is a goal-oriented activity that aims for a particular *τέλος* or final cause in its same operation and implies freedom of choice. It is known as an immanent operation. In Aristotelian philosophy,

“*praxis* is one of the three basic activities of human beings (the others being *theoria* or theory and *poiesis*, or skillful manufacture)”(Blackburn [ed.] 286).

This last statement about the different basic human activities can make us think of an actual opposition between  $\pi\rho\kappa\zeta\iota\varsigma$  and  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ , since the first one involves a final cause inherent to its same execution and the second one is performed as a mean to another thing. However, there is no contradiction with what has been said so far. It must be remembered that precisely because of this aspect, artistic creation in poetry is a very complex issue, since it consists of a  $\mu\acute{\iota}\mu\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  or imitation of  $\pi\rho\kappa\zeta\iota\varsigma$ , a "reproduction" or "reinterpretation" of an action. The artistic  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  is, therefore, a special kind of  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ .

A thinker that clearly differentiated between the more common productive  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  and the artistic  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  was Jacques Maritain. When he addresses this issue, he uses a different terminology, but all the same he clearly mentions two kinds of  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ :

Cognitivity and creativity are the two essential aspects of the intellectual nature. Now let us consider these two aspects of the intellect in three significant instances: Science [*theoría*], Art [productive  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ], and Poetry [artistic  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ] [...]. Poetry, as distinct from art, has no object. I mean to say that in the case of poetry, there is nothing to which the creativity of the spirit tends so as to be *specified* and *formed*, nothing which originally plays with regard to this creativity a specifying or formally determining part (Maritain 168-170).

Here, science refers to the *theoría* mentioned before by Blackburn in the definition of  $\pi\rho\kappa\zeta\iota\varsigma$ . Art<sup>xiii</sup> refers to the productive  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  and poetry to the artistic  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ . For Maritain, the only goal of artistic  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  is to give expression to that knowledge created by inspiration, which is made possible thanks to the poetic intuition. With the concept “poetic intuition” Maritain relates the artistic  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  or poetry to the free non-conceptual life of the intellect and the free creativity of the human spirit<sup>xiv</sup>. We shall return to this distinction of two kinds of  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$  when exploring Hannah Arendt’ theories on the artist.

For both Maritain and Aristotle, artistic creation is a free activity that leads to a non-conceptual product. For the Stagirite, this non-conceptual product has to do with the representation of an action, which somehow manages to imitate a real human situation. Indeed, when a poet writes a story, he or she does so through a technique that imitates something real. In this particular case, fiction is the imitation of a real action or  $\pi\rho\kappa\zeta\iota\varsigma$ . However, no matter how

genuine a story seems, its imitative character should not be forgotten. This is illustrated by what Aristotle says: “a poet’s object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably” (*Poetics* 1451a 37-38). The realm of the poet is the realm of plausibility, of the things that are possible. In this specific matter, Aristotle explains in chapter 9 (1451a 36-37) that stories should be made following the principle of verisimilitude, or of what is to be expected (*κατὰ τὴν ἐκκόσιν*), and the principle of necessity (*ἀναγκαῖον*). The first one refers to what is expected from a real human action or *πρῶξις*. The second one refers to what is expected from processes of nature. Stories should always be plausible in how they portray human behavior and in how the world the characters live in has a certain internal logic, be that world a fantastic one or a more conventional one. Nonetheless, Aristotle explains that verisimilitude should always be preferred to necessity (*Poetics* 1460a 28-29). That means that the plausibility of human actions is more important than a fictional world with an internal logic. This makes sense when we remember that for the Stagirite, the goal of fiction is to manage and achieve a representation of action or *πρῶξις*.

For Aristotle, the imitation of actions help constitute the plot or myth (*μῦθος*) of the story: a complex structuring of events and situations that gathered together compose a specific and unique *πρῶξις* or action that comprises the other lesser actions or events of a story. To achieve this, the poet uses the actions performed by each character (*ἦθος*) and what they say (*λέξις*). In this matter, it is important to remember that for Aristotle the speeches of the characters come from their thoughts (*διάνοια*). All these elements can be seen in Chapter 6 of the *Poetics*, where Aristotle states how action is the key element of tragedy:

Moreover, you could not have a tragedy without action, but you can have one without character-study [...]. A further argument is that if a man writes a series of speeches full of character and excellent in point of diction and thought, he will not achieve the proper function of tragedy nearly so well as a tragedy which, while inferior in these qualities, has a plot or arrangement of incidents (1450a 24-33).

The close relationship between *ἦθος* and *διάνοια* can be explained further:

as *ethos* is revealed mainly by action, so *dianoia* is revealed in *logoi* spoken or written, in demonstrations and in generalizations. [...] *Ethos kai dianoia* are the two aspects of the whole man, corresponding, though rather superficially, to character and intellect (Lucas [ed.], 106).

Indeed, Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of virtues: those that are ethical or moral virtues and those known as dianoethical or intellectual virtues (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a 5). According to the *διάνοια* or thinking capacity that a person has, he or she will ponder a specific situation differently. According to the specific *ἦθος* or character of a person, his or her reactions to certain events will differ. It is important to mention that *διάνοια* is not limited to mere ponderation, but it is also made evident through diction or speech (*λέξις*). In the *Poetics*, *λέξις* is more than the style in which things are said. It involves the entire process of combining words into an intelligible sequence. After all, in the material world opinions tend to be materialized through words<sup>xv</sup>. It is therefore through actions and speech, performed by characters who deliberate, that the myth or plot is built.

After all these considerations, we can understand that the final cause or *τέλος* of the tragedy, and any kind of fiction, lies in the creation of the plot, the myth or *μῦθος*. And to this end the *ἦθος* and *διάνοια* are articulated through action (*πρῶξις*) and speech (*λέξις*). Moreover, genuine poetic works not only achieve a certain myth or *μῦθος*, but they also succeed in obtaining the effect mentioned in the definition of tragedy: “and through pity [*ἔλεος*] and fear [*φόβος*] it effects relief [*κάθαρσις*] to these and similar emotions (*Poetics* 1449b 27-28)”. From ancient times until now, the phenomenon of catharsis and its meaning have been subject to many kinds of interpretations. García-Noblejas presents a fairly plausible interpretation that encompasses various aspects present in catharsis.

To talk about reaching catharsis in the poetic activity is to agree with Aristotle (*Poetics*, 1448b 6-20) on the human natural tendency to have pleasure in learning [...]. The human being experiences pleasure, for example, when he gets to understand when he knows *par coeur*  that certain action constitutes a moral evil. It is a pleasure to know this even though that knowledge of a life situation which is not to be mistaken with a simple theoretical understanding  is not completely conscious (García-Noblejas “Pensar hoy” 283-284).

With this comment on catharsis, García-Noblejas mentions a great variety of items which do not only include literary elements, but other philosophical and vital realities as well. The film theorist states that through catharsis fiction leaves in the reader or spectator a certain kind of vivid non-theoretical knowledge. Such an interpretation of fictional products has an enormous potential. The mention by Aristotle of pity and fear, when discussing tragedy, eventually brings into consideration the emotions or *παθημάτων* (*Poetics* 1449b 28) produced by the story. Through a complex process, these emotions are purged (*κάθαρσις*) and transformed by the same story in

order to create a specific vital experience. According to García-Noblejas, catharsis is the result of accomplishing a non-conceptual understanding *par coeur of* not only evil actions, but also of good deeds. For this film critic, fiction, both literary and audiovisual, offers people a different way to grasp reality aside from theoretical or philosophical reflections. It enables a person to have a vital or experiential knowledge about human situations without experiencing them firsthand. We will return to this process later and explain more on the subject. For the moment, after having considered all these relevant elements present in the *Poetics*, we shall now see how stories have an inherent connection with the political discipline.

**Hannah Arendt and the *vita activa*: the nexus between political theory and action.**

Perhaps one of those who noticed the huge political component in the creation of stories was the German thinker Hannah Arendt. In her book, *The Human Condition*, Arendt studies the various components of the *vita activa*. With this expression she wanted to designate three key non-theoretical activities that correspond to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to a person: labor, work, and action. Because a correct understanding of these elements helps us better understand the political theories of the German thinker, I will briefly explain each of them.

Labor is the activity that corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism and eventual decay are linked to the vital necessities produced and fed by this activity. The human condition of labor is life itself. Within this notion, one can speak of a person as *animal laborans*. The things less durable are those things necessary for the processes of life. Its consumption barely survives the act of its production. Anything that is procured for subsistence, after a short period is consumed and returns to the natural process that originally produced it. Thus, this activity is doomed to be dependent of the eternal cycles of nature. The human being may be the master of all living creatures, but still he or she is a servant of his or her own nature. Nevertheless, the *animal laborans* may redeem from this perpetual process of life through work, which relieves from the pain and discomfort of labor and also builds a lasting world, a world of things in which a person, once relieved from the burden of



procuring his or her subsistence, may engage in other activities that are more appropriate to the human being.

Work is the activity that corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not embedded in the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an "artificial" world of things, clearly distinct from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness. The human being, in this activity, is known as the *homo faber*. Through the work of his or her hands, a person produces an endless variety of things, whose total amount constitutes the human artifice. According to Arendt, work produces things of lasting nature and it brings, from a material point of view, some objectivity to the world because of the objects it creates. Without these objects, without a reality between men and nature, there would be eternal movement. But there would not be objectivity or stability. The essential difference between the things made by labor and the things made by work lies in the fact that the first group of things is made to be consumed. These things also tend to expire or decay very easily. The second group of things is designed to be used. And while the eventual destruction or decay of the products of both activities is inevitable, destruction is contingent to the things produced by work and inherent to the things made by labor. For Arendt, fabrication, the work of *homo faber*, consists in reification. Following a certain idea or model, the human being interrupts the innate processes of nature and alters them in order to produce something new: an object that is always artificial due to the fact that its existence is only possible through the mediation of a person.

Even though work is necessary to liberate oneself from life's cycles, this activity can lead to a potential risk due to the congenital element of instrumentalization underlying work:

Man, in so far as he is *homo faber*, instrumentalizes, and his instrumentalization implies a degradation of all things into means, their loss of intrinsic and independent value, so that eventually not only the objects of fabrication but also "the earth in general and all forces of nature", which clearly came into being without the help of man and have an existence independent of the human world, lose their value because [they] do not present the reification which comes from work (Arendt 156).

It could be argued that it is possible to find meaning through thought, but within the *vita activa*, *homo faber* can only be redeemed from the devaluation of all values, and from the

inability to find valid models in a world determined only by means, through the interrelated faculties of action and speech.

Action is the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter. This activity is the one that most comes into our interest, since it corresponds to the human condition of plurality, the fact that people, not one person alone, live on earth and inhabit the world:

While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition—not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam*—of all political life (Arendt 7).

For Hannah Arendt, action identifies with the Aristotelic term  $\pi\rho\sigma\zeta\iota\varsigma$ . It is autoperfective, immanent, goal-oriented and the result of human freedom. For the German thinker, action would be an unnecessary luxury, a capricious interference with the general laws of behavior, if all human beings were merely endless, reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing. Plurality is the condition of human action because, while we are all, to some extent, the same (that is, human), "nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live" (Arendt 8).

For Arendt, of all the activities present in human communities, only two are suitable for political life. Those are the same two that, according to Aristotle, constitute the *βίος πολιτικός* (the political life): action ( $\pi\rho\sigma\zeta\iota\varsigma$ ) and speech (*λέξις*), which is also a form of  $\pi\rho\sigma\zeta\iota\varsigma$ . Together, both constitute the sphere of human affairs. And to Arendt both are related:

Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: "Who are you?" This disclosure of who somebody is, is implicit in both his words and his deeds (178).

According to the German thinker, the *πόλις*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical and historical situation. It is rather the organization that emerges from people speaking and acting together. The true space of a *πόλις* transcends the material: it spreads among all people living together towards a common goal. In this sense, to act politically would consist on leaving the private sphere, at least for a moment, and reveal oneself to others in the public

sphere. To manifest oneself means to appear in front of others and individualize oneself through action and speech. These two cases of the *vita activa* have a *τέλος* or final cause inherent to themselves. And in this sense, they both redeem the *homo faber* from the trap of eternal instrumentality. This is because, unlike other activities, the purpose of action (*πρᾶξις*) and speech (*λέξις*) lies in their own realization. They exhaust their full meaning in their performance.

### **Fiction and power: catharsis as a way of dialogue**

At this point, it is now possible to understand the close relationship between what is said by Aristotle in the *Poetics* and the political reflections of Hannah Arendt, who closely follows the thought of the Stagirite. The previous argumentation has shown how some elements that once were only considered as part of the tragedy (*πρᾶξις* and *λέξις*) are now also essential components of the political life.

As seen before, the *animal laborans* is redeemed by the *homo faber*. And this one, in turn, is saved by the interrelated faculties of action and speech, who come to produce meaningful stories that bring to light the life of every person, allowing us to remove ourselves from collective anonymity. However, action and speech are fragile realities. Life in a non-biological sense, that is, the period of time that every man has between birth and death, manifests itself in action and speech. These two elements share with life its essential frailty. The great deeds and words of every human being are doomed to disappear with him or her. To conquer some kind of durability, it is necessary to resort to *homo faber* in his or her highest capacity. That is, the artist. In this way, Arendt also distinguishes between productive and artistic *ποίησις*, since she mentions a *homo faber* that produces things to be used and a *homo faber* that, paradoxically, produces things that are useless:

Among the things that give human artifice the stability without which it could never be a reliable home for men are a number of object which are strictly without any utility whatsoever and which, moreover, because they are unique, are not exchangeable and therefore defy equalization through a common denominator such as money; if they enter the exchange market, they can only be arbitrarily priced (167).

Through art, the intangible and fleeting essence of each human life is made tangible in the material world. Without the help of the artist, the story created by the life of each human being, the actual account that gives meaning to each person, would be doomed to disappear. The artist

manages to immortalize these by reification, which occurs by writing something down, painting an image, modeling a figure or composing a melody. In all these cases reification brings to the tangible world intangible realities.

The sphere of human affairs is made up of the web of human relations that any person establishes between others wherever they decide to live together. The revelation of “who” one is through speech, and the establishment of a new beginning through action, always take place within the previous human actions and speeches of a *πόλις*. Each person’s story affects other life stories while configuring itself at the same time. Each new beginning of a particular story brings a change to the whole interrelation of human actions and speeches in the public sphere.

It is in this process of perpetuating the meaning of an action through a story where Hannah Arendt appeals directly to Aristotle and his *Poetics*. For the German thinker, the specific content as well as the general meaning of action and speech may take various forms of reification in art works. Only through art pieces an extraordinary event can be shown in its full significance:

The specific revelatory quality of action and speech, the implicit manifestation of the agent and speaker, is so indissolubly tied to the living flux of acting and speaking that it can be represented and “reified” only through a kind of repetition, the imitation or *mimesis*, which according to Aristotle prevails in all arts but is actually appropriate only to the drama (Arendt 187).

This assertion should not lead to think that the imitative element lies only in the art of the actor. Aristotle and Arendt claim that it also lies in the making or writing of the play, at least to the extent that the drama comes fully to life only when it is enacted in the theater. According to Arendt, only the actors and speakers who re-enact the story’s plot can convey the full meaning, not so much of the story itself, but of the “heroes” who reveal themselves in it. This is the reason why Aristotle sometimes mentions how the representation or imitation of action (*πρᾶξις*) is shown through the agents (*πράττοντες*) (*Poetics* 1448a 1 ff., 1448b 25, 1449b 24 ff.).

In terms of Greek tragedy, this would mean that the story’s direct as well as its universal meaning is revealed by the chorus, which does not imitate and whose comments are pure poetry, whereas the intangible identities of the agents in the story, since they escape all generalization and therefore all reification, can be conveyed only through an imitation of their acting. This is also why the theater is the political art *par excellence*; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others (Arendt 187-188).

For Arendt, the fact that every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with a beginning and an end is “the pre political and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning or end” (184). It must be remembered that, even if it is sometimes visible, the unique identity of each person always retains certain intangibility. This has to do with the inability to reach a definition of each person, since all definitions are determinations or interpretations of what is a human being and, therefore, what is ultimately exposed is the set of qualities that every person shares with other humans. The answer to “who” a person is becomes tangible only in his or her life’s story. But as such, it can only be known completely as a palpable entity after it has finished.

The difference between a true story and a fictional one lies in the fact that the second one was made by a poet, while the first one has not been completely created by human hands. True stories tend to present a wealth of elements and circumstances abysmally larger than those created by a poet. For Hannah Arendt, it is much more difficult to reach the full meaning of a true story, an issue which creates some perplexity. This is because in any series of events that together form a story with a single meaning, at the most we can isolate the agent that put the whole process in motion, and although this agent is often the protagonist, the hero of the story, it is not possible to identify him or her as the sole author of the mentioned story.

However, it seems that in this particular subject Arendt doesn’t realize that there are fictional cases that may lead to the same perplexity. Stories like *Faust*, *Don Quixote*, *The Divine Comedy* and many more are proof of that. Their great complexity makes it very difficult to reduce everything to the unique story of a single actor. Don Quixote, for example, would not have been the same without his Amadis, Sancho Panza and Dulcinea. It seems that, at least in this case, Hannah Arendt forgets her notion of plurality, so many times mentioned as the condition for political life and as the true element by which human relationships really flourish. For all these reasons, it is important to go beyond finding who the protagonist is. Rather, it is better to search beyond the mere actors and understand the truth behind the human actions and speeches, those true reasons that actually motivate them in the first place. Indeed, it can be said that every human being is the protagonist of his own story, but it is also true that no one is entirely responsible of all the circumstances and situations that make up his or her life. Very frequently one’s story depends on oneself, but it also depends on others and the true motivations that drive both oneself

and others into action. Hannah Arendt said that the ability of reification of human actions and speeches was appropriate only to the theater. And she is right on that. But it is also true that, to some extent, any work of art that participates of that dramatic component can also manage to accomplish the reification of action, speech and their consequent meaning.

As already mentioned, according to Aristotle, one effect of the tragedy was catharsis, the purgation or relief of pity and fear. For such a possible purge to occur, these emotions must first have been created in the reader or observer. On the definition provided above, García-Noblejas mentioned a kind of recognition, a certain cognitive communication inherent to this process. Through a peculiar assembly of what is said and done by several characters, the story conveys a non-theoretical knowledge accompanied by emotions and vital experiences. This is because thanks to stories we get to know the identity of a person, with the precise meaning of his or her free human actions. With the help of stories the reader or observer reaches an understanding of the true identity of the acting characters (the *πράττοντες*) and manages to decipher the meaning behind their deeds. Garcia-Noblejas explains that a great pleasure underlies in recognizing oneself and the others as agents of immanent actions through the artistic *ποίησις* because it helps human beings reach some aspects from the human existence that theoretical knowledge doesn't fully grasp<sup>xvi</sup>. As the Spanish philosopher Manuel García Morente once said, one can get to know Paris in two different ways: by studying the entire city through its maps or by wandering through all its streets until they are strange no more<sup>xvii</sup>. For him, the second option was clearly more complete because it involved experience.

From these arguments, one can infer that behind the catharsis □and the cognitive pleasure it brings through recognizing□ lays the idea of communication. A communication that is not a mere transmission of a message between sender and receiver, but rather a dialogue in which not only the story but also the reader or observer actively cooperate to create such a recognition, to discover the myth, and its meaning, behind each fictional account. For Arendt, all kinds of reification are paid. And the price is life itself:

It is always the “dead letter” in which the “living spirit” must survive, a deadness from which it can be rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead shares with all living things that it too, will die again (169).

This statement better explains why there is always a dialogue between the work of art and the person that comes in contact with it. Though reification allows action and speech to linger in the material world, the collaboration of a reader or observer is necessary in order to prevent these from truly disappearing. The reception by another person is needed to bring these elements, and its meaning, back to life again. Only through the establishment of this dialogue can a work of art complete its goal. At the same time, only through reciprocity between people who share the meaning of what is done and said can a *πόλις* really be settled. That is, a public sphere based on a plurality that feeds itself from the complex web of human relationships. As explained before:

The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be. “Wherever you go, you will be a *polis*” (Arendt 198).

For Hannah Arendt, power is not material and comes from men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse. Power keeps people together after the brief moment of organization. The curious thing about this element is that it cannot be stored up and kept in reserve for emergencies, since it is only present where word and deed have not parted company. It only exists where words have not yet been emptied of their significance and deeds are not yet used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities. In short, power is only kept in the public sphere when it is based on plurality, because it is only through this condition that all the words and deeds are taken into account in a *πόλις*. And plurality is only possible when each of the members of the *πόλις* is revealed to others through their actions and speeches, something that occurs only when citizens are aware of living with others inside a community. This can only happen when citizens renounce solipsism and interrelate with others. Through the acknowledgement of others, each citizen reaches his own meaning and the meaning of a society as a whole.

### **Creating vital proposals<sup>xviii</sup>**

With this work I wanted to analyze the political component within fiction. As it has been explained, there are several points of connection. Though I have mostly focused my reflections on fiction, which can be literary or cinematographic, many of these arguments can also be used for other artistic manifestations. It must be remembered that Aristotle himself continuously uses

musical and visual examples when speaking about fiction on the *Poetics*. However, this connection with the political discipline should not lead to the conclusion that the artistic *ποίησις* has a political goal. According to Maritain, all artistic manifestations rather obey to what he called “poetic intuition”, which is based on the free creativity of the human spirit: “In poetry, there is only the urge to give expression to that knowledge which is poetic intuition, and in which both the subjectivity of the poet and the realities of the world awake obscurely in a single awakening” (170).

From this statement it seems that not even beauty is the specific object of artistic *ποίησις*. Indeed, an article of daily life can be beautifully made, have many ornaments, and by no means be called a work of art in the style of a *Picasso*. Arendt’s distinction on the production of useful and useless things should be remembered here. Both things can be beautiful, but one has an instrumental goal and the other one does not. For Maritain, beauty is not the object of artistic *ποίησις*. Rather, the defining trait of artistic *ποίησις* is the freedom to create without any kind of instrumental goal. That free creative condition feeds itself on the poetic intuition of the artist, on the things that inspire him or her and move him or her to create a new object that will have a meaning by itself. Beauty is rather a necessary correlative and an “end beyond any end” (Maritain 170) of artistic *ποίησις*. And if this is the case with one of the features that is most commonly used to define artistic creation, the same can be said about a political dimension within these. As mentioned before, in Aristotelian philosophy the *Poetics* relates to the practical reason and, therefore, it is in contact with other disciplines such as ethics, aesthetics, rhetoric and politics. This relationship between disciplines is based on the fact that they all study, through different perspectives, the same subject: the *πραξις*.

Therefore, although politics is not the object of artistic *ποίησις*, it is included within it. But we must not forget that artistic *ποίησις* should not be made for political purposes. If a story is made with that purpose, rather than artistic *ποίησις*, we would be referring to a pseudo artistic product, a devaluated story that, instead of presenting a particular *μῦθος* or representation of actions, would rather be presenting *διάνοια* or ideas. The non-conceptual knowledge inherent to stories would be replaced by concepts presented as a story.

Because of this, Garcia-Noblejas mentions that Aristotle established the *Poetics* “as an autonomous and practical philosophical discipline”(García-Noblejas, “Pensar hoy” 271). And



he did this because he was deeply interested in rejecting Plato's educational and extremely political focus on the poet's art. Only by understanding these distinctions can it be properly understood how the *Poetics*, through the representation of action and speech, can come in contact with the political discipline. They do so because both belong to practical reason. And it is because of this relationship that it is better seen how artistic *ποίησις* can contribute to the creation of plurality and dialogue within the public sphere, just as Hannah Arendt noticed. Indeed, each fictional work, each story, is a specific living proposal full of meaning. And because of this, it is capable of influencing those who connect with that story by changing their expectations, shaping their cultural universe or even, in the most extreme cases, moving them to action. It will all depend of the story presented and if the reader or spectator feels truly moved by that specific story. This process cannot be controlled scientifically, yet it can truly occur because, as it has been explained before, in every fictional work, in each story, there is a possibility that the reader or spectator may feel stirred by it. However, one must be careful with this particular statement. Stories shouldn't be made to influence or manipulate, because in those cases it would be more proper to refer to them as propaganda or, at best, education. As we have seen before, the specific trait of artistic *ποίησις* is that it is free. Propaganda may be beautiful, but it is not free since it is made with an instrumental goal: persuasion or indoctrination. It is because of all these reasons that true artistic stories may influence readers or observers only in the sense that they broaden their capacity for action, since they show him or her of what the human being is capable of. But that kind of influence is never sought. It is, as with beauty, a necessary correlative of art works. The representation of actions and speeches from others can lead a person to consider his or her own actions and speeches. And is in this way that the dialogue between a work of art and the person that comes in contact with it is created and Arendt's "dead letter" comes back to life.

A good story never leaves anyone indifferent. And for Arendt and Aristotle, good stories are those that bring to life the great deeds of humanity so that this heritage is not lost and the new generations can learn about important deeds of the past. These arguments gain weight if we remember that for centuries the Greeks introduced every new generation to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* because they considered that those works presented deep human realities every person should know. Something similar can be said about the Romans and the *Aeneid*, the Jewish with their *Torah*, the Indians with their *Ramayana* and their *Mahabharata* and the Christians with

their Gospels. A very interesting fact about all these traditions is that they all share the same trait: the telling of stories is essential to them and these particular stories have inspired human beings throughout the ages.

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<sup>i</sup> An insightful analysis on the history of the transmission of the *Poetics* can be found in the introduction to the Spanish version of the *Poetics* made by Valentín García Yebra. For this work I will be using the bilingual (Greek/English) version done by Page.

<sup>ii</sup> For Aristotle all arts are interrelated. That is why he continuously uses pictorial and musical examples in the *Poetics*. Even though most of these considerations can be applied to all arts, my principal goal will be to outline critical elements on the art of telling stories, may these stories be literary or audiovisual. But as it is seen in the *Poetics*, it is very difficult to discuss this issue without sometimes addressing elements that are common to all arts.

<sup>iii</sup> In this work I will be using the word “fiction” as a synonym of “story”. Here, the term “story” can apply to literary and cinematographic manifestations. I shall not address the classical discussion of how invented narratives can sometimes be confused with real life accounts. Nevertheless, one of the consequences of the theories presented here is that this confusion on what is real and what is not is caused by the fact that both kind of stories present the lives of human beings and they do so by retelling their actions and speeches.

<sup>iv</sup> For this work I usually have translated from Spanish into English all the quotes presented except those from Hannah Arendt and Jacques Maritain. For these two authors I have used official English copies of their work. I have also used two English editions of the *Poetics* and the Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy. The original language copies of the references used is in the bibliography. Sometimes I use square brackets ( [ ] ) in order to introduce a clarification inside the references or shorten a quote.

<sup>v</sup> More on this issue in Plato’s *Republic*, chapter 10.

<sup>vi</sup> In the Greek original, the word used by Aristotle is *πολιτικὸς*, which was translated by the English editor of the *Poetics* as “social conduct”.

<sup>vii</sup> In the original text, Aristotle continuously uses the term *ποιητικὸς* and *ποίησις*. Both meant “to produce” or “fabricate”. Here, the Stagirite uses this term in a very specific way because he applies it usually to the production of art works. When using the term artistic *ποίησις* or artistic creation, I will be referring to all artistic manifestations. As explained before, the term “fiction” will be referring to literature and film, which are both a kind of artistic *ποίησις*. I am completely aware that lyrical manifestations are different from narrative and drama. Due to lack of space, I will have to explain on another work how lyrical works can also be understood with the theory presented in the *Poetics*.

<sup>viii</sup> A complete analysis on this subject can be consulted in Pieper, Josef. *Entusiasmo y delirio divino: sobre el diálogo platónico “Fedro”*.

<sup>ix</sup> A detailed explanation on how the ancients understood inspiration can be found in Gil Fernández, Luis. *Los antiguos y la “inspiración” poética*.

<sup>x</sup> More about art and its theoretical and practical elements can be found at Maritain, Jacques. *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. In this book, Maritain proposes an interesting theory on how inspiration, which he calls poetic intuition, responds to a subjective and semiconscious faculty of human beings that strives to capture reality in a subjective way. Artistic manifestations would be the material result of that particular subjective grasp of reality.

<sup>xi</sup> A further discussion on the subject can be read at García-Noblejas, Juan José. *Comunicación y mundos posibles*, p. 206.

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xii I am aware that Aristotle considered that the essential elements of tragedy were six. In order of importance:  $\mu\theta\omicron\varsigma$  (myth, plot or arrangement of incidents),  $\pi\theta\omicron\varsigma$  (character),  $\delta\iota\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\iota\alpha$  (thought),  $\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\xi\tau\iota\varsigma$  (diction or speech),  $\pi\psi\iota\varsigma$  (spectacle) and  $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$  (song). For Aristotle, the last two of them,  $\pi\psi\iota\varsigma$  and  $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omicron\varsigma$ , were less essential for tragedy. Their study is not necessary for the purpose of this work.

xiii Here, Maritain uses the term “art” in order to emphasize the predominant technical nature of productive  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ . After all, it must be remembered that the original meaning of the term “art” in Latin was “technique”.

xiv With the term “poetic intuition” Maritain develops a theory about artistic inspiration. Please see note 10.

xv The complex relationship between thought ( $\delta\iota\acute{\alpha}\nu\omicron\iota\alpha$ ) and speech ( $\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\xi\tau\iota\varsigma$ ) are contemplated in the *Rethoric* and far surpass the purpose of this work. The relation between the *Rethoric* and the *Poetics* is a deep one and it also helps understand better the political dimension within artistic  $\pi\omicron\iota\eta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ . Nonetheless, this also should be left for another work, once the elements of the *Poetics* have been settled in this one.

xvi For more information on this topic, see García-Noblejas, Juan José. *Comunicación y mundos posibles*, ps. 257-258.

xvii See the Introduction to García Morente, Manuel. *Lecciones preliminares de Filosofía*.

xviii With the term “vital proposal” I refer to the fact that each story presents a specific way of living.

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