Open digital platforms, places of connection: libraries and the challenge for inclusion

The sense and mission of cultural institutions inevitably evolve over time. In times when, to the majority of citizens, accessing knowledge was difficult and wide-range mobility was a reality that could only be imagined, access from close by to vast book collections or to an artwork or a theatre show was practically the only way to enter the dimension of cultural experience. The so-called patronage system for cultural production which dominated the cultural scene from Classic Greece to the half of the nineteenth century, still constitutes a key element in any cultural ecosystem, assigning to museums, libraries and theatres the role of 'temples of knowledge', places fundamentally accessed in order to elevate oneself, to enjoy exemplary aesthetic and mental experiences which at the same time tickle both our cerebral capacity and our emotions and foster our human development.

All human civilizations were shaped by this symbiosis with their cultural experience, but the acknowledgment of the importance of culture in everyone's daily life is too weak nowadays in our collective consciousness. The reasons for this situation are manifold, but one of the main ones is related to a limit of the patronage system: its fundamentally elitist attitude, where involvement is more or less explicitly veined in co-optation. Even if, in the last century, the history of cultural policies was essentially an uninterrupted endeavour to broaden the user base for cultural institutions, it must be conceded that the results have not always met the expectations.

Today, even in the places more clearly marked by the apparently irrefutable tradition of a culture of inclusion, events still happen which remind us how difficult it may be to feel at home and welcomed in a cultural institution, particularly for people who wear marginal social identities, who experience little acceptance and little protection. Because unfortunately museum, library, theatre are places where effective admission, and the ensuing situations, have been for centuries, and somehow still are, interlaced with the assets of education, social legitimacy and economic resources available to everyone. It was not by chance that the sociology of culture marked cultural participation as a high-level indicator of social distinction, which, due to its symbolic power, is capable of marking differences much more deeply than money and power can; in fact, the latter are much more fungible and accessible than culture.

It is possible to become, all of a sudden, rich or powerful, but not cultivated. Even in our country, the association of wealth and power on one side and ignorance on the other managed to rouse large social consensus over our recent history, precisely because it contained an implicit promise for social mobility which, on the contrary, culture seemed to refuse.

Translated by Matilde Fontanin

The concept itself of 'audience development', though strongly supported by many insiders of cultural policies, undoubtedly motivated by understandable and shareable reasons, does little but reaffirm this basic division, though apparently wishing to open new ways and possibilities to cultural inclusion. The idea itself of 'audience development', in fact, implicitly contains the patronizing assumption that the hosting party knows better than the guest what forms of cultural experience the latter could and should access to. In other words, the implied, benevolent paternalism, after all, betrays an irreducibly manipulative attitude.

The alternative that naturally emerged after the triumph of the post-industrial development model was that of the mass cultural industry, a phenomenon which was initially met with fierce hostility in Europe, though Europe had been its socio-cultural and technological cradle. Once adopted by the USA as the elective system for cultural production, genuinely alternative to the bulky European model, the cultural and creative industry rapidly became the creator of a new social space, where cultural differences seemed to magically disappear, and therefore to include everyone. This could happen in a country that was in need of supporting its most rapid conquest of a global economic and political hegemony with the creation of a suitable, vision, to be rooted locally but at the same time capable of involving a truly global audience. The large entertainment industries such as cinema, mainstream music, television, were largely built around the preferences of their audiences, instead of inviting them to continuously overstep their limits, to follow a continuing, challenging innovation route of forms and contents. It is not that cultural industry has not in its turn continuously evolved, but it did so following times and modes that were always 'one step' ahead its audience, not five or ten.

As a consequence, the cultural experience could no longer be distinguished for elevating its audiences, but for engaging them: the ability of capturing their attention, of entertaining, of offering pleasant experiences even in 'pleasantly' alienating or disturbing forms. In a patronage system the production of culture, alien to industrial logic, is only made possible by an essential amount of public or private funds; on the contrary, the cultural industry as an increasingly crucial production system in the social and economic setting was also favoured by the revenues generated, which may be consistent and, thanks to their economic impact, play a key role in the local development of the city or region. In this light, traditional cultural institutions like theatres, cinemas or libraries were put under increasing pressure, if not to turn to profit in their turn (they were not planned to and they cannot do so unless they distort their mission beyond recognition), to operate no longer as 'temples of knowledge' but as 'entertainment machines', a largely unnatural twist which often put to the test the endurance even of large institutions with a long history.

On the other hand, it is true that the cultural industry does not raise social and cognitive accessibility barriers comparable to those posed by the 'high culture' characterising the patronage system; yet, it does so from a financial point of view, since only those who can afford to pay are actually able to access to the rich cultural offer available. Naturally, it is the production system of contents itself, and above all their reproducibility, which enables to broaden astonishingly the pool of potential users, if compared with the more traditional forms of cultural experience. And nevertheless, for different reasons and less perceptively from a social point of view, even this second cultural production system does not truly solve the problem of inclusion, it simply modifies the nature of barriers.

What we are seeing nowadays, however, it is the rise of a new cultural system, which we might conventionally define of the open platforms. Here we can observe a

long-term effect of the social revolution produced by that transition towards a post-scarcity society which has started to show its tangible effects since the second post-war period, first in the United States, then in Europe and now progressively on a global scale (in spite of the resilience of many and alarming pockets of poverty): we can witness the proliferation of an impressive amount of sub-cultures, each one characterised by its aesthetical universe and by its systems of meaning, which are fragmenting what once was the mass cultural sphere into a real galaxy of microsystems interconnected in an extremely complex and fascinating way. This transition predated the digital revolution, but it is clear that the latter has incredibly sped up the change on a global scale. In this new system, the distinction between using and producing cultural contents blurs, because in the horizontal logic of the community animating a sub-culture, all members are authorised to co-create its codes and languages. This way a new sense of cultural experience emerges, no longer centred on the elevation or on the involvement, but rather on the connexion and belonging, in other words on the capacity of generating meaningful social bonds. More than a goal, inclusion becomes here the sense itself of the aesthetic experience, even if not universal but limited to those who are part of that particular community of meaning.

In this new scenario, the potential role of cultural institutions changes once again, and this time it does so in a particularly interesting way. What is now requested from cultural institutions is that they turn into enabling spaces, allowing these communities of meaning to cultivate an expand their capacity of expression, their cultural identity. From here the need to transform museums in places of experience, and libraries in '*piazze del sapere*' – squares of knowledge – in view of promoting socially relevant goals such as health, psychological well-being or transcultural dialogue. It is a new and challenging possibility, through which culture may find again a new centrality, finally overcoming the prejudicial objections which keep on weakening its social recognition and the awareness of the extraordinary relevance it has nowadays in promoting human development and the quality of everybody's life.

For cultural institutions, the challenge is to become aware of the new scenario, to assess its potential without prejudice, and to start exploring without fear.

Pier Luigi Sacco