

Dreamscape of **creativity**



written by Giulia Girardi

Interviewees:

Susan Jahoda

Antonella Gargano

Helen Sword



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PASSIONS

(Interviste a Personalità di Rilievo Internazionale)

INTERVISTE A:

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Introduction

creativity: /ˌkriːəˈtɪvəti/ [uncountable] the use of skill and imagination to produce something new or to produce art. (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries)

Pablo Picasso said: "Everything you can imagine is real". What if it is the same for all of us? Would everything we dream about become reality if we fight for it? Everything we live and everything we experience in life can increase our knowledge, improve our skills and change the way we see the world. Knowledge and skills can be used for many different purposes and one of them is creativity. There are many different ways to express creativity depending on personalities, characters and experiences. Mine are basically three: art, languages and writing.

I started to get passionate about art when I was eleven years old. The beginning of middle school was my first opportunity to study art and get to know a bit more about it as a school subject. While I was growing up I realized that there were many aspects of it which I was interested in and that I could read more about them. Suddenly, as soon as I became a teenager, I realized that visiting museums, cultural and historic sites, had become more than a simple cultural experience for me. It had become a way to escape from the monotonous reality of my little town, Isernia. The last concrete demonstration of what art means for me was my trip to Paris. My university friends and I were there last winter, before the Coronavirus and the lockdown completely changed our life-style. What I mostly remember about that is having had the opportunity of looking at Monet's paintings with my best friend. She is incredibly passionate about French Impressionism and this has allowed me to get to know new details about the paintings and start looking at them in a different way. Therefore, having had the opportunity to interview Susan Jahoda about her project "Making&Being" was a further chance to enrich my knowledge about art and to understand how visual arts can be applied in a wide context and linked to the theme of learning in a collective virtual space.

Differently from art, languages have been a critically important aspect of my life. My dad had spent part of his childhood in the United States and I remember myself, as a child, trying to emulate him while he was speaking English to my grandmother. On the contrary, my passion for the German language and culture has begun during high school. I realized I liked the language, its grammar structures and its syntax rules while studying authors such as Goethe and Thomas Mann. Therefore, this project aims to be a demonstration of my love for a peculiar culture and language... The same language that I heard being defined as irksome, though, and arduous. Won't the time have come to dispel this myth? The interview with Professor Gargano, which questions are based on quotations from German literary texts, aims to be a frame of all of this.

It may sound cliché, but I also love writing in the languages I study. I started writing at the age of six, during primary school. Certainly, most of my love for the activity of writing itself is strongly linked to my passion for books. I have always tried to learn something from my favorite writers' books. As a consequence, the interview with Helen Sword was incredibly formative for me, as I got very useful tips to improve my writing and to make it more clear and candid, at the same time. I also investigated some fascinating suggestions she gives to her students in order to help them improve their writings.

This project aims to be a sort of "summary" of this all. The interviews, which have incredibly enriched my knowledge about these themes, are the central part of it. I would also say they represent an attempt to get closer to what, as a child, I wanted to do in life, and it was becoming a journalist. This was the typical answer I used to give, when someone asked me: "Who do you want to be when you grow up?". Therefore, I hope you appreciate it. Enjoy reading.

Giulia

Susan Jahoda and Making and Being

Susan Jahoda is an artist, educator and organizer. Her work focuses on video, photography, text, performance, installation and research based on collaborative projects. Currently, she is a core member of BFAMFAPhD, and a co-founder of NYC *To Be Determined* and The Pedagogy Group, collectives of socially engaged artists and educators based in New York city. Jahoda resides in New York City and is a Professor of Art at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

*BFAMFAPhD (2012) is a collective formed in order to make art, reports and teaching tools in order to promote cultural equity in the United States.

Making and Being: Embodiment, Collaboration and Circulation in the Visual Arts, written by Jahoda and Caroline Woolard, describes a peculiar way of teaching art, which puts emphasis on contemplation, collaboration, and political economy. In this book, they share innovative ideas and teaching strategies for both professional artists, teachers and art students.

(susanjahoda.com, makingandbeing.com)

«When the collective meets we begin with a contemplative practice and a check in. These practices help us to be present with each other before we begin working. They also support the building of trust and create a sense of shared purpose and belonging»

- *In chapters 5 and 6 of Making&Being you underline the importance of being in a “learning community” (quoting the social learning theorist E. Wenger), and, therefore, in “a group of people who share a concern or a passion for sth they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. How can we deal with that in the Covid era? Is it still possible to feel part of a learning community even if we are experiencing “social distancing”?*

This is something that I feel I have been fairly successful at doing. I focus on building a learning community in the virtual classroom to create a sense of collectivity and accountability. We begin each class by engaging in a contemplative practice to focus attention. This includes, for example, meditation, breathing and humming practices, We also discuss group and individual agreements, empowering approaches to critiques and we create an asset map.

I think it is important to slow things down. I mix asynchronous and synchronous. Learning, peer learning, and most importantly emphasize deep listening.

- *Chapter 5 also contains another great quote, the one of Gayatri Spivak, according to which “the task of a teacher is to provide a non-coercive rearrangement of desire”. As a professor, how do you manage to reach this “non-coercive rearrangement of desire”?*

I think that I actually answered this question as it was implicit in your first question. All of the learning strategies I described are about creating an inclusive and collective space of mutual learning. It’s vital that everybody feels valued and heard.

- *My roommates and I have tried the “Individual Agreements” activity and we found out that it truly created collaboration and support between us, just as it was expected and that each of the experiences told in the group perfectly fit in that context. How was the making of it? How can a short but contemplative activity be suitable for every context?*

Individual and Group Agreements are very helpful when people are working together in classrooms, self-organized learning spaces and all other contexts that require collective action and collaboration. Incorporating contemplative practices into our classrooms helps to calm the nervous system, enabling presence and focus. Stress and anxiety interfere with listening and learning, so if these very prevalent conditions can be reduced by contemplative practices why not make them an essential part of any curriculum. When the collective meets we begin with a contemplative practice and a check in. These practices help us to be present with each other before we begin working. They also support the building of trust and create a sense of shared purpose and belonging.

Antonella Gargano: GDR, cities and Avant-garde

This interview aims to be a frame of Antonella Gargano's personality and work as an expert of German Culture. She is currently a Professor at "La Sapienza" University of Rome. She has been asked about excerpts concerning the three main themes of her research: GDR, cities and Avant-garde.

Specifically, she was asked for insights into the narrative style of the GDR historical period. The other questions consider the intersection between the two themes of cities and artistic Avant-Garde, in the architectural context of Berlin.

«Non ho mai dato un'interpretazione dicendo "E' questa, questa dovete seguire". Lo dico expressis verbis, ai miei studenti, che non voglio ripetano meccanicamente la mia interpretazione, bensì di ripeterla se la condividono, ma se mai non fossero d'accordo...

Sarei più contenta! Bisogna cercare di fornire gli strumenti per una critica: essere un'insegnante vuol dire proprio questo»

- *Prima di entrare nel vivo delle tematiche da Lei approfondite, avrei piacere di porLe una domanda di carattere generale: esattamente, cos'è che ha suscitato in Lei la passione per temi quali Avanguardie, città e DDR? Ci sono stati eventi, dinamiche, personalità nel Suo percorso di vita che L'hanno ispirata e spinta ad approfondire questi temi?*

Grazie per questa domanda perché mi pare una buona domanda introduttiva e perché è sempre importante capire come si arriva ad interessarsi a determinati ambiti o, ancora, perché si cerca di approfondirli... Beh, devo dire, il tema è un doppio tema: uno è le avanguardie, l'altro è la città, la metropoli e, in modo specifico, Berlino. Questi sono tre temi che si intersecano tra loro, che interagiscono tra loro e che nascono da una doppia ragione: da una ragione professionale, forse ancora precedente alla mia professione, ovvero alla mia attività di studentessa, perché mi sono occupata di avanguardie e, in modo specifico, di espressionismo durante i miei studi universitari. Questo perché uno dei miei maestri, colui che è stato per me il più significativo, fu Paolo Chiarini, uno dei maggiori studiosi italiani di avanguardie storiche. Il primo interesse per queste tematiche nasce, di conseguenza, quando ero come lei: una studentessa; nasce, quindi, anche dal mio lavoro di tesi sull'espressionismo, in particolare sulla Doppelbegabung delle avanguardie, che è quella potenzialità doppia dove lo scrittore e il pittore diventano la stessa persona, si sovrappongono. A tutto ciò si è aggiunta la mia frequentazione della città di Berlino e andai alla ricerca di quelle poche tracce significative della Berlino espressionista. Vediamo, quindi, l'interesse per le Avanguardie nonché per la città di Berlino, che ho frequentato e sto continuando a frequentare anche oggi. "Berlino" non significa solo città, bensì anche il processo di "metropolizzazione" che ha subito la città, da piccolissima città, a città ampia, che si è ingigantita, allargata, diventando, appunto, metropoli. È importante il nesso espressionismo-avanguardie-metropoli. Per rispondere più sinteticamente alla sua domanda, direi: fase della formazione, professione e primi studi sulle Avanguardie e poi, in un secondo momento, ciò ha preso corpo nella città. Sono passata dagli studi sull'espressionismo alla città, non viceversa.

- *In "Tour Eiffel, cattedrali del futuro e grattacieli", Lei sottolinea come, sostanzialmente, la stessa Tour Eiffel sia stata un modello di rilevanza fondamentale per le avanguardie europee. Nonostante ciò, mi ha ampiamente colpito la citazione di Borgese in "nuova Germania", e, soprattutto, una frase di essa: "Chi vuole vedere l'America, ed una più grande America, deve venire a Berlino". Come mai in numerosi, nonostante il modello francese, quindi più vicini a noi, si mostrarono invece propensi a sottolineare la "vicinanza" con quello statunitense? Si cela qualcosa di più specifico dietro al "criterio" puramente dimensionale ed architettonico della dimensione verticale?*

E' una domanda molto interessante. Le dò una risposta riflettendo in questo momento su quello che mi sta chiedendo. Direi che la Tour Eiffel rappresenta il rapporto con la cultura francese, nonché con la grande metropoli, che allora era Parigi. Esso è stato, però, da certi punti di vista, un rapporto, prevalentemente legato alle arti figurative: da un lato, la Tour Eiffel è un modello che ritorna nelle arti figurative, che viene importato e diffuso in esse. Dall'altro, è anche il modello della modernità: la spinta verso l'alto, nonché la spinta a cercare materiali architettonici, di costruzione e urbanistici nuovi... L'America è un'altra cosa: essa è il rapporto con la musica jazz, con la vita sociale: è

un'altra modernità. La Francia è quindi un modello di carattere più artistico-figurativo, non che questo non ci sia per l'America, ma questa si presenta più come un modello artistico che riguarda più la musica: il musical, l'importazione del teatro e, in qualche modo, la vita sociale. Rispetto a Berlino e a Parigi, a partire da un certo momento si crea una sorta di collisione tra le due realtà, perché Berlino diventa ciò che era Parigi una volta e si viene a creare un conflitto, una sorta di rivalità tra le due grandi città. L'America è molto lontana e, di conseguenza, crea meno problemi nel contesto europeo dal punto di vista conflittuale.

- *Leggendo la sua pubblicazione "La Berlino dell'espressionismo" (in "Atlante della letteratura tedesca", a cura di F. Fiorentino e G. Sampaolo), viene citato il romanzo "Der Zwanzigjährige" e, più nello specifico, mi ha colpito la seguente frase: "Tutti sono Berlino e anche io lo sono. Non posso pensare di voler essere qualcosa di più che una parte di questa città". Partendo da ciò, è possibile parlare di un certo senso di nazionalismo culturale? Si cita Berlino come se fosse un'entità che vuole rappresentare il cambiamento di una cultura che, pur essendo appena iniziato, si avvia a diventare rappresentativo. E' possibile affermare ciò?*

Altra domanda molto interessante... Ma ho delle perplessità a rispondere positivamente: credo che qui ci sia più un dato più che politico emozionale, emotivo e di corrispondenza quasi fisica e fisiologica con la città. C'è un'interpretazione della città anche in senso antropomorfo: la città è un corpo in cui io entro e mi identifico. La vedo più da questa prospettiva delle Avanguardie, che non da un punto di vista più ideologico-politico. È chiaro che ciò significa impossessarsi della città e farne una sorta di modello. La vedrei più secondo questa prospettiva.

- *Per quanto riguarda, invece, la Sua pubblicazione "Fabula", in cui illustra le strutture narrative nel periodo della DDR, in "La Valigia di Heidelberg", si focalizza sulle voci che sono, in un certo senso, "fuori dal coro", dove vi è un "senso nascosto" che non è peculiare di un autore, bensì vi è l'assenza di un "senso", che deve essere cercato con l'ausilio della nostra esperienza. Di conseguenza, secondo Lei, esiste un metodo d'approccio adeguato ad una tale narrazione? Se Sì, ce n'è uno che consiglia ai suoi studenti?*

Sì, mi sono interessata molto alla modalità di scrittura di quegli autori o intellettuali non omologati al sistema, che non usavano più il lessico, il vocabolario e il percorso narrativo stabilito dalle autorità e ideologicamente corretto. È interessante, soprattutto nella fase della vita politica della DDR, il percorso che stimola il lettore a fare le proprie deduzioni: è una strategia narrativa che dal sistema era vista come proibita, pericolosa, poiché al lettore non doveva essere lasciata la possibilità di deviare la linea proposta dal regime. Era il lettore che doveva inserirsi in certi spazi vuoti lasciati dallo scrittore e della narrazione, che rendeva la scrittura porosa, lasciando spazi alla riflessione. Il mio consiglio di lettura è, innanzitutto, quello di andare in questa direzione, quindi di andare verso quegli scrittori che hanno lasciato tali pori nella loro scrittura.

Come docente, mi è sempre interessato poter dare allo studente la possibilità di essere autonomo nella sua critica. Credo che l'insegnamento sia piuttosto questo: quello di aprire la mente, l'intelletto. Io non ho mai dato un'interpretazione dicendo "E' questa, questa dovete seguire". Lo dico expressis verbis, che non voglio ripetano meccanicamente la mia interpretazione, bensì di ripeterla se la condividono, ma se mai non fossero d'accordo... Sarei più contenta! Bisogna cercare di fornire gli strumenti per una critica, essere insegnante vuol dire proprio questo.

Aggiungo qualcosa lateralmente: ci sono stati studenti nella mia esperienza didattica che venivano a propormi tesine o singole letture di un autore che non conoscevo a fondo. Dico sempre che un'insegnante non deve conoscere tutti gli autori della letteratura di cui si occupa, bensì deve conoscere gli strumenti... Deve avere chiarissimi davanti a sé gli strumenti critici che consentano di

arrivare a conoscere quell'autore: ecco perché gli strumenti critici sono fondamentali. Conta l'interpretazione che ciascuno può dare sulla base di indicazioni che vengono date. Bisogna che voi studenti siate il giusto lettore, che sappiate inserirvi in questi pori. Essi, proprio perché pori, lasciano spazio a più interpretazioni. Più si legge, più si capisce di quest'autore, perché si colgono le ragioni di questi pori. E' uno spazio bianco, in altre parole, che lo scrittore lascia all'interpretazione del lettore e ciò è molto creativo e suggestivo.

Helen Sword and “The Writer’s Diet”

Helen Sword is a poet, scholar, master teacher, and international expert on academic, professional, and creative writing across disciplines. She is a professor of Humanities at the University of Auckland and runs a private consulting company, called “Helen Sword Consulting Ltd”. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, she specialized in facilitating experiential online workshops, masterclasses, and retreats which bring together writers from across the globe in a virtual space.

In her book *The Writer’s Diet*, Helen Sword explains how to “transform stodgy sentences into active, energetic prose”, by offering a set of writing-principles and illustrating them through examples from Emily Dickinson, Martin Luther King Jr., William Shakespeare and others. This book helps

writers at different levels to “strengthen and tone their sentences”.

(helensword.com, writersdiet.com)

«For me, it's all about craft and control and having a clear understanding of what you're doing and why and when you do it. Sometimes long sentences can be very effective, but you shouldn't use them just to impress people, you use them because they are the right thing at that moment»

- *The introduction of your book contains a sentence which has immediately caught my attention: "Over time, as the core principles outlined in this book become habits of mind, you will probably discover that you no longer need the WritersDiet Test". How much time do you think this process could take? Would it be difficult for a professional writer to revolutionize his/her own way of writing, distinguishing the "bad fat"?*

That's a good question. Learning always depends on the level you're starting at and where you want get to; but *The Writer's Diet* is not asking you to revolutionize your writing, it's helping you tidy up your sentences and think about how to express yourself more clearly. My book *Stylish Academic Writing*, that is much more about trying to help people really change the way they write on a larger scale, to bring new stories, more examples, more attention to the craft of writing. In that book I've tried to make it incremental — very small steps, so that you don't have to feel you have to change everything at once, so that you don't feel you have to change everything at once, you can change one small thing and gain some confidence from that. So both books actually are about confidence really... With *The Writer's Diet* if you make some changes and then you get a better score, you say "Oh, I can do it! I can do this!" And then the next time you're more motivated.

- *At the beginning of chapter 4, you start underlining how pupils are usually encouraged to use many adjectives or adverbs. This has happened to me many times and it still happens right now, especially with nominalization, which - as you claim in chapter 2 - does not allow us to be "on a diet". Therefore, I would ask you: why are we usually encouraged to write using increasingly complex verbal forms and nominalization?*

Well, I think there are two different questions there: one is specifically about adverbs and adjectives and one is about syntax and longer structures of sentences, right? So, if you think just about adverbs and adjectives, my anecdote was really about primary school — you know, my children being told at age six that they should describe "a fluffy cat". I hope I made clear in the chapter that I love adjectives and adverbs, they are a very important and energetic part of language, but they're not the only way to convey description, so I think that they were just not taught or probably our teachers were not taught. The primary school teacher just says: "Write about a fluffy cat or a scary cat" instead of teaching you to write about how the cat *flounced* through the bushes or *crept* through the bushes, using the verb instead of an adjective to do the descriptive work. That teacher is missing out an important writing technique, they may have never learned that principle themselves. Some of my favorite writers use a lot of adjectives and adverbs and there's certainly nothing wrong with vivid, certain words like *fluffy* or *scary*. *The Writer's Diet* mainly looks just for adjectives with certain word endings — those indicating abstract concepts — in the same way that it looks for nominalization because those word endings alert you to the fact that you are using a lot of abstract nouns. So, my argument is not with *all* adjectives so much with boring, predictable, abstract adjectives — and above all I want to emphasize the power of the verbs and nouns to convey the same kind of sensory information.

Then, your second question is much more complex, a more "adult question" I guess, which is: "Why are we trained to write these longer, more descriptive sentences rather than shorter ones?"

Again, it depends on the teacher and on the teacher's background and learning. I don't know, it's so difficult! I think it's very easy to reward students for using big words! We're so delighted to see students thinking in a more complex way, so when they start using more complex concepts, so then we reward them, saying: "Good! Good! Great! Yes, more of that!" And then it goes too far... so than the student says: "Okay, big words, long sentences" but actually, for me it's all about craft and control and having a clear understanding of what you're doing and why and if you have that, you know that sometimes long sentences can be very effective, but you don't use them just to impress people, you use them because it's are the right thing at that moment.

- *Another aspect of your book which has immediately caught my attention is your striking way of concluding chapters - ex. King at the end of chapter 2 and Churchill at the end of chapter 3. As a Professor, are there any suggestions you give to your students in order to do that - so, to write in a striking way even if "on a diet"?*

Well, again, I think you have to go to the book I wrote after *The Writer's Diet*, which is *Stylish Academic Writing*, because many of the techniques I use as an author in *The Writer's Diet* I then wrote about more explicitly in the next book. There's a whole chapter which is about, not so much endings but about openings, and about how to open with a story or example, something your reader will remember. So, that's exactly what I'm doing with those conclusions: I'm ending with an example that you'll remember, it's concrete, it's emotional, it's human... all of these things, plus it's a great example of language being used well. I would certainly love to have my students learn these techniques but they're part of the whole big complex picture of learning to write well: we start by building strong sentences, then we use those sentences to tell stories. If your sentences are coherently structured and concrete — concrete nouns, concrete verbs, concrete adjectives, things your readers can experience with the senses — then every sentence becomes a miniature story, something your reader can easily remember. Once you've learned that technique, you can apply it to entire academic articles and assignments; for example, when you feel your argument becoming woolly and abstract, it becomes easier for you to say "Oh, yes, I could bring in an anecdote or example here, I can bring in a story", because you've already been thinking about concrete language at the sentence level. It's like starting with a single brick and then building a whole house, a whole village.