

Antoine Hennion. *Passioni: Vino e musica*

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The volume edited by Emiliano Battistini offers the Italian translation of two essays by Antoine Hennion, preceded by an extensive introduction by the editor. The stated aim of the volume is to introduce the Italian public to an author who, despite being a pillar of the sociology of taste and of Science and Technology Studies (STS), remains little known in Italy. A closer reading of the volume, published in the series “La tradizione del nuovo” of the “Umberto Eco” International Centre for Semiotic Sciences, however, reveals an editorial operation that merits attention beyond this. The volume, in fact, presents and introduces Hennion’s work and puts his pragmatics of taste in dialogue with an Italian semiotic tradition concerned with the construction of meaning in sensory competence. The result is a fascinating journey across disciplinary boundaries among the social sciences, semiotics, and STS, exploring the interest in taste, the construction of subjects and objects, and the attachments that unite them.

The essays chosen by Emiliano Battistini to present Hennion’s work are selected to showcase his extensive body of research on the pragmatics of taste. Battistini presents the author as a scholar who has spent decades working on an innovative research programme on taste influencing the sociology of culture and consumption, as well as the development of STS in cultural and arts fields.

Hennion interprets taste as the result of practices that involve a relationship between the object and the subject, in which they define each other. As Battistini explains:

Hennion’s pragmatics of taste avoids both flattening the dynamics of taste to the internal causes of the object – its properties to be objectified – and making them vanish into the external causes behind the subject’s preferences – understood as variable signs in the game of social class distinctions. (p. 15, *our translation*)

Battistini states Hennion’s work exceeds Bourdieu’s view (1979), which considers taste a main social distinction among ruling classes. Bourdieu’s critical take on aesthetics, rooted in the social origins of taste, became influential in France and beyond in the early 1980s and shaped debates in cultural sociology. Hennion instead aligns with the work of colleagues at the CSI, *Centre de Sociologie de l’Innovation* (Centre of Sociology of Innovation), promoting

Actor-Network Theory (ANT), and recognising the agency of objects to account for the fabric of associations that artistic and cultural objects are part of and for their forms of resistance. For Hennion, objects and things, and therefore an art work, are not passive elements but do something, put themselves into action (*messa in opera*). The author, referring to the work of Étienne Souriau (2009 [1943]), employs the concept of “*œuvre à faire*”, work to be made, as an open deployment of possibilities.

Battistini considers Hennion’s perspective a cousin of the one used by Latour (2005) and other CSI researchers in the field of science and technology. It is similar in that it shares the interest in presenting artifacts as nodes of relations, but it differs because, with art and culture as its target, it focuses not so much on what persists in translations – secured by passages, links, work, and evidence – but rather on interruptions, obstacles, and stumbling over things. In this regard, we slightly disagree with Battistini, as we do not consider any difference in the theoretical approach used at CSI. Indeed, Battistini draws a clear distinction between translation and mediation, whereas we believe they should be approached differently. We deem that emphasising mediation is valuable in both science and the arts for highlighting the agency of nonhumans, and that translation is merely one way in which mediation occurs. In other words, mediation always involves changing one specific configuration into another, in which the second configuration can be more or less connected to the first. Moreover, in our opinion, Battistini’s distinction between the two concepts hides the shared root of the ANT project across fields.

Focusing on mediation within aesthetic practices, Hennion’s two essays in this volume examine how objects and subjects construct one another through repeated practices in a solfeggio class and during various types of wine tasting.

In the essay on the solfeggio class (published in English in Hennion 2017), the author shows the network of relationships and mediations that enable an undifferentiated group of children and notes to be transformed into mutually defining elements. It closely examines the role of objects such as desks, notebooks, musical instruments, spaces, pupils’ and teachers’ bodies, exercises, and other mediators in the process that progressively brings music into being. Ethnographic examples show how notes and young musicians develop, or become, through relational processes. For example, a child learns to recognize a sound as a note with a teacher’s help, isolating and identifying it. Through practice, children learn to listen, differentiate, and name sounds, transforming them into musical notes.

In this process of music and musicians creating each other, a mutual becoming-with, objects such as instruments, notebooks, and sheet music serve as essential mediators. Musical signs initially emerge through the keyboard and the embodied coordination between sound, gesture, and listening, while written notation may come later as a supplementary transcription. Children become music readers, gradually developing their ability to recognise and vocalise notes, and music players, by tuning in between the body, the ear, and the instrument.

The focus on mediation – as Battistini explains – “helps to open up to the process that brings music into being, with its mediators, with its trials, with its always uncertain outcomes” (pp. 31-32, *our translation*).

This essay contributes to Hennion’s research programme, which, through the concept of mediation, focuses on the capacity of things and objects to act. As Battistini highlights, things are not merely manufactured, but they also manufacture us in turn. Hennion demonstrates

how listening (and learning to do so) entails reconfiguring the musical object. Music is made to exist through a set of practices involving children, teachers, parents, desks, instruments, notebooks, music sheets, and much more. Music is not a stable object but something that emerges through mediations, gestures, social and material relations. By following the mediators (teacher, instruments, teaching materials, classroom configuration), we can account for the co-construction of the music in the becoming.

The second essay is an English translation of a French version of an article (Hennion 2015b) for the collection “Moments of Evaluation: Exploring Sites of Dissonance” (Hennion 2015a). As Battistini highlights, Hennion starts with a question: what is a good wine? However, he does not aim for an essentialist definition in terms of properties (such as chemical composition or production techniques), but to understand the co-construction between object and subject. Here again, the object (good wine) does not pre-exist but is the product of collective sociomaterial practices: different tasting practices, discourses, rituals, shared knowledge, body language, attachments.

From an evaluation studies perspective, the essay describes the relationships among bodies, groups, objects, discourses, and agreements needed to develop acceptable public discussions of divergent evaluations. Hennion analyses specific devices in action by examining different types of tasting practices carried out by professionals and amateurs, revealing how objects, bodies, and attachments influence wine evaluations.

Like the music case, the essay aims to show how object and subject are constructed through situated practices, or as Battistini states:

Here too, it is the relationship between subject and object, the contact between the two, the constant mutual practice in a specific place and time, that allows wine to be constructed as an object and, at the same time, to define those who taste it as subjects, allowing the characteristics of the former and the perceptive competence of the latter to emerge together. (p. 44, *our translation*)

Hennion puts music and wine tasting in conversation. By imagining the practice of blind tasting in the field of music, he introduces the differences between “the object wine” and “the object of wine”, highlighting the role of attachments in taste “construction”.

The wine object, which interests blind-tasting professionals, comprises its organoleptic components, including terroir, production technique, and label. The wine object, or wine as a work of art, is instead what it does and makes others do and is the object of interest of “hedonistic tasters”. In the tasting-meal practice, the hedonistic tasters act as amateurs, dedicating a specific time and space for wine to express itself as a work of art.

Music cannot be restricted to its material and analytical features. Music must necessarily pass through transport; one needs to be carried away by it, to enter into it and to perceive its qualities even before knowing whether s/t/he(y) loves it or not. For Hennion, wine works in a similar way. Through this analogy, Hennion highlights the links between the subject and the work, showing how taste requires practices of unfolding the work of wine, in which the subject is taken and carried away by the wine.

The central idea here is passion, or rather, the way in which the subject is taken by the object and develops attachment. Being passionate means being carried away, captivated, but

at the same time, as Battistini highlights, it means “that in order to reach this state, it is necessary to do something: one must in some way ‘actively abandon oneself,’ do everything to let oneself be acted upon” (p. 52, *our translation*). There is, therefore, a relationship of mutual construction between subject and object. In other words, the good wine, like the hedonistic amateur, is the result of the practice of tasting.

Each attachment introduces different elements, and Battistini outlines four of them: the community of practice of amateurs (a collective that develops a language and discusses taste), the devices and situations of appreciation (sociomaterial practices with their techniques, tests, comments, and discussions), the body that experiences (the tasting body that perceives and is in turn perceived) and the object experienced (an active wine).

According to Battistini, it is precisely a capacity to reveal the unfolding of the complex web of mutual becoming between subject and object within attachment processes that lies at the core of the dialogue between the pragmatics and semiotics of taste.

We are thus entering into an interesting interdisciplinary dialogue we briefly mentioned earlier, which occupies the last 40 pages of Battistini’s extensive introduction. Here, Battistini relates Hennion’s work to a semiotic tradition, particularly developed in the Italian national debate, known as the semiotics of taste (Marrone 2016). According to Battistini, the dialogue between these two traditions can be prolific as they share an object of interest.

This communality, Battistini informs us, is based on a recent “turn” in semiotics that broadens the discipline to include the investigation of enunciations, passions, and the aesthetic dimensions of the unfolding of enunciation processes within specific practices, such as taste practices. Referring to Marrone and the Palermo school, Battistini discusses how semiotics actively seeks to understand signification processes by distinguishing between two different languages, plastic and figurative. The two languages enable a more sophisticated interpretation of the signification processes, which are, in turn, based on the semantic cultural grids (figurative language) or a new articulation of the visual material (plastic language) that highlights contrast, shapes, colours, positions, and textures. Marrone’s semiotics of taste is based on Greimas’s program, developed in *De l’imperfection* (1987), which extends the plastic/figurative distinction in signification processes beyond visual semiotics.

Marrone (2016; 2022) proposes distinguishing between “gustoso” and “saporito”; where “gustoso” is based on sensitive recognition of what is already known, and “saporito” refers to the affections that the gastronomic substances unfold. Battistini maintains that Hennion’s “attachment theory” can be interpreted as the art of shifting from “gustoso” to “saporito”, and that this is cultivated through practising encounters (repeated contacts between the subject and the object, the body and food) within specific practices. With Battistini’s words:

The more I practice, the more I can expose myself to the emergence of the sensitive by probing it in an increasingly subtle way, thus refining my sensibilities at the same time. (p. 86, *our translation*)

In this dialogue between the pragmatist and the semiotics of taste, Battistini emphasises a compelling convergence centred on the importance of the body, interest in multimodal phenomena, focus on aesthetics and cultural practices, and the role of amateurs’ expertise.

We believe this convergence indicates a growing interest in new directions for exploring fascinating everyday phenomena related to taste, expertise, judgment, practical knowledge and aesthetic practices, while moving beyond an anthropocentric perspective.

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