

## **On Marina Bianchi's "The Magic of Storytelling: How Curiosity and Aesthetic Preferences Work"**

The paper addresses an eminently relevant issue. An increasing proportion of consumer goods is predominantly immaterial in nature. Products like films, e-books and videogames consist of symbols that have meaning to their readers. They are in demand because their buyers expect a kind of satisfaction that consists in making an experience whose outcome is somewhat uncertain, and it is the uncertainty that makes prospective users curious. That is why they go to movies, read detective stories and shoot their way from level to level.

Bianchi draws on a strand of literature that brought these issues to the fore decades ago, and connects them to more recent work. She wants to find out why "creative goods and activities... have a transformative power that allows for sustained stimulation and interest".

She focuses on experimental psychology, notably on the work of Daniel Berlyne, who studied aesthetic preferences in the 1960's and '70's. In testing the "arousal potential" of an aesthetic event, he isolated the effect of references to external conditions that were not physically present, yet referenced by a piece of music, a drawing or a poem, and the effect of variables that relate to novelty and surprise. Bianchi argues that these findings contain all the ingredients that make storytelling so compelling. She goes on to outline a number of recent studies on aesthetic preferences that confirm various aspects of Berlyne's work, particularly the "shifting balance between ... the expected and the surprising".

The argument takes a new turn when it addresses the work of Tibor Scitovsky, a renowned welfare economist. It was Scitovsky who, since the 1970's, brought Berlyne's findings to the attention of economists. Scitovsky found the results of experimental psychology helpful, but his insistence on the relevance of factors like curiosity and stimulus stems from his more complex interpretation of artistic activities and other "creative goods" (The term, to my knowledge, is recent and not used by him - I also question the correspondence between similar concepts from Plato to Keynes claimed in Footnote 10.) Such goods demand skills of consumption because their references and allusions are only decodable by those who have knowledge and experience within the web of cultural meanings. It is this interpretive dimension, which goes beyond the triggering of mere cognitive effects. It shapes and changes

preferences and, in the long run, even changes the very identity of their users. Small wonder that an economic approach throwing fixed identities of its agents over board was, after a brief flurry of attention, forgotten.

Given the changes in consumption mentioned above, it is a distinct merit of Bianchi's paper to bring renewed attention to Scitovsky's ground-breaking contribution. It is understandable that she puts emphasis on the dimension of psychological stimulation since the rise of behavioral economists conveys reputation and acceptance to contributions from that field. But an extension to the dimension of interpretation skills would fit well to the topic of story-telling and story-hearing, and it would put Scitovsky's work and his concern with arts and culture into a broader, more effective perspective.

Such an extension might be a worthwhile substitute for the two final sections of the paper that appear somewhat incongruous. Much of what is said in the section on storytelling could be integrated in the introductory discussion of the phenomenon, and the "conclusions" are a misnomer, because the argument moves forward to a particular new development, namely social media, which could be quite plausibly discussed as an extension in the range of storytelling.