

Ludwig of Bavaria: Brief Psychological Considerations on the Historical Character and Visconti's Adaptation

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to evaluate the relationship between the concept of creativity and its practical application in relation to the historical figure of Ludwig II of Bavaria. The analysis took into consideration the monarch's construction of Bavarian castles in terms of both their building and their landscaping. This work demonstrates that the construction of the castles was a product of the monarch's imagination and creative genius. It also shows that Ludwig's historical events anticipate the fragilities, weaknesses, obsessions and anxieties of the modern man. In order to make the article complete and exhaustive, it was decided to make a comparison between the historical figure of Ludwig and the artistic and cinematographic interpretation proposed by Visconti in the film of the same title. Our objective is to make some psychological considerations about the historical Ludwig as well as Visconti's Ludwig.

Keywords

Ludwig, Creativity, Psychology, Genius, Madness

1. Introduction

The purpose of this investigation is to offer the reader an introspective analysis of the figure of the Bavarian King Ludwig II. It also presents a psychological reading of the character in relation to the concept of creativity and normality. The design and construction of his castles are the most striking external aspects of the personality of this enigmatic and unusual man. Ludwig was a contested historical figure in many ways, as his life and actions appeared to his contemporaries.

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aries to be remote from the cultural, social and historical reality of the time. Even today, this monarch is erroneously labelled as “mad” as it is difficult to understand his creativity and his ability to imagine, design and realize creations beyond the common artistic sense. In the course of this study, we will aim to show how Ludwig’s fantastic and imaginative creations put him at the same artistic level as authors such as Richard Wagner, William Shakespeare, Caspar David Friedrich and Miguel de Cervantes. Moreover, we attempt to demonstrate, from a character and social point of view, how his inability to correspond to the common model of a sovereign and his incredible sensitivity put him at the same level of his cousin Sissi (Elisabeth of Bavaria) and personalities such as Arthur Schopenhauer or Friedrich Nietzsche. Ludwig’s ambiguities and peculiarities of character were also highlighted through the comparison with the interpretation given by Luchino Visconti in the film of the same title. All in all, this research tends to clarify the more peculiar aspects and shadows that still characterize this monarch today.

2. Objectives

This research aims to analyze the relationship between the historical events, the architectural choices and the creative ability of Ludwig II of Bavaria. In particular, the Bavarian castles he designed and built were examined and then the real Ludwig was compared to the cinematographic Ludwig created by director Luchino Visconti in the film of the same title.

The specific objectives of the research are:

- 1) Recognition and examination of the creative aspect in the realization of Ludwig’s castles;
- 2) Knowledge and analysis of these constructions in relation to the king’s psychology;
- 3) Analysis and comparison between the real-historical Ludwig and the cinematic Ludwig of Luchino Visconti’s film.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted through the analysis of documents and texts relating to the monarch, the psychology and the behavioral analysis. As far as the psychological approach to the character is concerned, the Psychology of Literature was also taken into account.

It researches the psychological motivations that led to the creation or the interpretation of a character and the environmental situations that characterize him, as well as the symbolic elements present in a verbal or non-verbal text. The aim of the Psychology of Literature consists in a motivational analysis of the characters, taking into account the conscious and unconscious endoceptual mental contents of the character, as can be deduced from the historical data obtained from the testimonies studied. It is one of the complementary readings that complement other types of analysis such as psychoanalytic, literary and philosophical (Tomassoni, 2020). The methodological study of the psychiatrist S. Arieti was

also fundamental for this work. It was taken into account in the research of the psychoanalytical interpretation, especially regarding the concept of “tertiary thought” as a moment of synthesis and overcoming the unconscious, conscious and emotional elements that are the basis of everyone’s actions (Fusco & Tomassoni, 1995). Analyses and personal critical-interpretative reflections were also carried out on the figure of King Ludwig, examining some moments and peculiar instants of his existence and the creativity that can be recognized in his castles.

4. Psychological Analysis of the Character

In the drafting of this research, we started from the concept expressed by the psychiatrist Arieti, who stated that creativity is a human prerogative, through which man does not create from nothing. He starts from something that already exists to try to model it and adapt it according to his needs. Consequently we can say that creativity is not divorced from common thought and everyday reality, it is rather an original way to approach the world and this approach produces works such as poems, paintings, music, philosophical or mathematical theories, etc. We agree with Arieti that the creative act becomes a way for man to expand his knowledge and objectify new and different desires and experiences (Arieti, 1990). We reckon that King Ludwig’s creativity is not only one of his most distinctive features in the historical, cultural and artistic panorama, but is also the *conditio sine qua non* for the construction of his castles as works of ingeniousness and creativity (representing the peak of his creativity). The figure of this enigmatic and unconventional character was a turning point in the field of creativity. This can also be seen in the relationships that King Ludwig had during his life with other characters who were certainly out of their time and who were able to express their creativity in poetry and music. We are referring respectively to Elisabeth of Bavaria, better known as “Sissi”, Empress of Austria and Queen of Hungary and the German composer Richard Wagner. We are convinced that one of the fundamental points of the concept of creativity is the motivational one, *i.e.*, the set of the motives and reasons that lead an individual to carry out or tend towards an action. Creative people often tend to think that their individuality consists in overcoming the limits of the reality in which they live and their works originate from the need to express this necessity to isolate and differentiate themselves from others. Based on the analysis of documents and biographies concerning Ludwig, we can see that all the castles he wanted were built in remote and isolated areas, in some cases inaccessible and difficult to reach. In addition we believe that all this may be due to fulfill his need to reflect himself, to his research for the “I” that was the main theme of his life. Moreover it depends on the existential crisis, which in a certain sense seems to recall Hamlet’s dilemma of living while suffering (being) or rebelling while risking death (not being). It is our opinion that, all this has led him to create and materialize a world that in some way could represent him, a world we might say, conceived in his image and likeness; a dream that

becomes reality.

To the best of our knowledge, the monarch's refusal to adhere rigidly to certain rules, his desire to break out with that conventional world which does not suit him and his need to escape from the monotonous, everyday life, lead him to express the necessity for escapism from the real dimension. In other words this means to "fly", to enter a dimension between reality and imagination and to travel from one castle to another, *i.e.*, from one safe "nest" to another in which he can find refuge, or escape from the "cold winter" of reality and the demanding and responsible role he plays as King of Bavaria. We could define King Ludwig as a restless character who finds peace and calmness only when he is able to immerse himself into a world of dreams and imagination, far away from everything that represents rationality, material security and the illusion of denied happiness. We could represent King Ludwig figuratively, just as the artist Friedrich represented the *Wayfarer on the Sea of Fog* on his canvas: a true visionary of the impossible. The difficulty of understanding and, above all, the inability of the masses to accept different life choices, in our opinion, resulted in the definition of King Ludwig as an "artist-creator-mad". Contrariwise, we believe that he was a creative person who was able to imagine and create particular architectural structures that went beyond the simple common reality. Ludwig imagined, dreamed and finally realized architectural works for their own sake, which were not utilitarian and not open to the public because they were the product of his mind and intended to satisfy his needs alone. Needs that, like his genius, his contemporaries did not understand (Davidson, 1974). Among the castles designed by the Bavarian king, Neuschwanstein Castle (The New Swan Stone) certainly deserves its own description. The castle is not only King Ludwig's personal shelter, but also a tribute to the composer Richard Wagner, for whom he had a great admiration. The castle appears to us at the top of a hill as a theatrical proscenium, both externally and internally. On the outside it stands out with its white stone and dark roofs, while on the inside the manor presents some rooms with pictorial representations that evoke the most representative tales of chivalric, medieval and German epics which were staged in the most important works of the German composer, such as *Lohengrin* (Cresti, 2012). We can observe how the atmosphere, the aura evoked by this castle with its rooms and its strategic position, represent especially the world evoked by Wagner's music. It goes without saying that it expresses the dimension which was able to satisfy the monarch's restless soul and spirit. It is therefore easy to understand what led the king to his mysterious disappearance that took place on 15 June 1886. This happened as a consequence of his disqualification from holding public offices and consequent suspension from his position as ruler of the kingdom. He was subsequently transferred to the palace of Berg and at last he returned to the harsh reality that he despised and repudiated. We think that all this seems to recall Don Quixote's inability to survive the impact with the truth, without having any faculty of choosing the chivalrous world in which to live. This castle represents the acme of Ludwig's creativity with its turrets and pinnacles, it is so imaginative that it has inspired several Walt

Disney's castles to the point of becoming their official symbol (Howse, 2015). Another element that is present in Ludwig's castles and also in Neuschwanstein Castle is the swan. We consider that there is a subtle thread linking King Ludwig and the swan, a noble and elegant animal, through which the monarch would unconsciously identify with the bird itself. This is a clear reference to solitude, to the search for individuality, the need to reflect one's own face in the "lake", as Narcissus would do, thus achieving a narcissistic vision of life, living exclusively for oneself. The next person would become only the "mirror" in which to "reflect" his own image. At this point, we believe we can link the figure of Ludwig to that of the Sun King (another historical character highly appreciated and idolized by Ludwig) and the absolute monarchy, reaching an exasperated absolutism in his daily life. We believe that this solitude and closure of the king led, at the same time, to his opening up to the dimension of the fantastic and the imaginative. A creation that we consider equally important for that concerns of the creativity and the personality of Ludwig, is the Venusgrotte (Venus Cave), an artificial cave requested by the monarch, located in the park of the Castle of Linderhof, his favourite and the only one that he saw finished. This cave is made special by the presence of a lake where there is still a boat shaped like a shell with a cupid in the act of shooting his love arrow and the whole is enriched by a large painting of the *Tannhauser*, Wagner's famous opera (Schmid & Hojer, 2007). The king used to sit and think for hours, being lulled by artificially produced waves (Herre, 1987). We reckon that this is one of the monarch's most noble and sublime moments, in which he is immersed in a cathartic dimension, in a dream-like world unknown and incomprehensible to others. It seems to be the maximum moment in which he is truly happy, when he can be himself and reveal his true being and consequently time inexorably stops as it ceases to exist. In our consideration it is precisely in those moments that the king has the possibility to express and conceive his creative freedom to the utmost. He has the ability to fantasize and imagine with his mind, to make journeys towards unreachable and remote destinations. These journeys take him far from everything that in a certain sense bordered on his role and position, so far from useless pomp and vacuous wealth. Linderhof Castle was built in the Baroque style, a style which seems to have allowed the monarch to fully express not only his creativity, but also his fragility and his inability to accept reality through the creation of particular and sometimes bizarre furnishing, such as a carpet of ostrich feathers or tables with no real function. The dining room with a table with a lift, designed explicitly by Ludwig, is also interesting, as it seems to evoke the magic formula "Table, set!" from the Grimm brothers' German fairy tale *The Wishing-Table, the Gold-Ass, and the Cudgel in the Sack*. The park surrounding this castle is considered one of the most beautiful and combines Baroque elements with Italian and English gardens (Quarta, 2017). Furthermore there are fountains and various water features which symbolize, the king's creative and artistic vein. We can imagine how traumatic and disorientating the monarch's return to social life could be, as soon as he is called to respond to what should have been his duties. He will always try

to reject the rationality of existence as he sees it all as something alien and meaningless to him that makes him more impatient and restless. We can ask ourselves what motivated Ludwig to build and live in such isolated castles. As a child, the king loved to stay in his dark rooms, isolated from everything and everyone, claiming that he could see and dream wonderful things. As an adult, the king fell into the habit of sleeping during the day and staying awake at night when he loved to read numerous books by candlelight in the Linderhof mirror room, which the monarch used as a living room. The mirrors in the room generated an extraordinary effect as the candlelight was reflected hundreds of times (King, 1999). As a consequence, the monarch does not see or conceive darkness, night and gloom with their traditional meanings. They are, therefore, not experienced as something in a negative way on the contrary, they are not associated, at times, to oblivion and death, but they evidently constitute a sort of barrier, a shell, a protection from what the outside world represents and a beforehand closure towards the modern man. We then think that Ludwig's creativity has been alive and strong since he was a child, and with the passing of time this has led to the reification and realization of his innermost wishes, which he desired so much to become reality: castles. Even today, there are still many mysteries and uncertainties about the figure and psychology of this monarch, who represented and still represents the coexistence of the imaginary and the real, the feeling of omnipotence, the total and all-embracing narcissism that coincides with his refusal to assume the responsibilities of his role. Many psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and psychologists have subsequently analyzed the monarch's character and his controversial. They started, however, to examine the castles as often considered to be "parts of a sick mind" due to their magnificence and non-reality. Today the most accredited hypothesis is that he was affected by paranoia and that this was the reason that led him to distance himself from others and from common sense in order to seek shelter in an ideal world (Tatossian, 2003).

This hypothesis would be confirmed both by his biography and by the wealth of symbols he chose to represent him: the swan and the peacock. The former symbolizes innocence, purity, wisdom, solitude, but also death. His figure can be traced back to an image of feminine beauty and is associated with light, the sun and the arts, as it was believed that before he drew his last breath, he sang a song of otherworldly beauty. In medieval tradition, the soul was also thought to travel through the sky in the form of a swan. The second is a symbol of love, longevity and rebirth, also known as the hundred-eyed bird and it represents the sun, the moon, the stars and the universe. According to the Romans, the peacock represented royalty, beauty and immortality. In general, it is the symbol of positive change as it represents spiritual perfection and complete mental purity. Finally, the peacock is also a symbol of vanity (Morabito, 2003). Other symbols that can be traced back to the figure of Ludwig are Wagner's impossible heroes: the Sun King (from whom he took his motto and lifestyle), Romeo (as a representative of the emblem of impossible love) as well as his dream-fantasy-nightmare castles, which become fetish objects *par excellence* (Desing, 1996). As a matter of facts,

in hindsight, it is not possible to make a definite diagnosis.

It goes without saying that his life was characterized by fragility and vulnerability, accompanied by an obsession with the difficulty of managing interpersonal relationships, as well as with his inability to understand the emerging capitalist-bourgeois society which no longer accepted his concept of absolute monarch and his narcissistic logic.

As a consequence his wellbeing was identified with the state's wellbeing. The coexistence of rational and imaginative elements inside the castles has led us to hypothesize that they could represent the relationship between madness and genius, the detachment from reality and the sense of the fantastic that characterized Ludwig's life. In reality, the main characteristic of Bavarian castles is essentially that they originated from the dream of a king who was borderline between genius and madness (Dalle Luche, 2001). We regard that the psychological characteristics of this enigmatic and forerunner character, almost "ethereal", were captured very well by the Italian director and screenwriter Visconti (1973) in the film *Ludwig*. In his adaptation Visconti reinterprets and revisits the monarch by emphasizing and even exasperating some of the traits of the historical Ludwig hyperbolizing them. In doing so, the director manages to update and recontextualize the character through the fragilities, weaknesses, obsessions and anxieties of the modern man. In reality the film represents the third chapter of the German trilogy and includes two other films, *La caduta degli dei* (1969) and *Morte a Venezia* (1971), which Luchino Visconti dedicated to the social-political-historical nation (Bencivenni, 1982). In his cinematographic production Visconti represents the monarch during his long process of detachment from reality. At the beginning of the film he is the symbol and celebration of power (*cf.* the coronation scene which is particularly striking for its use of the golden color). Conversely, at the end, he is presented to us alone and tired as he wanders around through empty halls with his body shattered and swollen (Russo, 2006). This last scene seems to evoke the concept of ineptitude proposed by Svevo increasingly defeated by his fragilities and anguishes. The cinematic character Ludwig is seen through his anxieties and fears, the outside world remains almost entirely out of the scene, as if nothing exists beyond the monarch's thought and reality. The characters that appear in the film exist almost exclusively as extras, they basically serve to explain the monarch's thought and actions: even his cousin Elisabeth (Sissi) appears to us as an extra in Ludwig's dream world. The film's images allow the director to visualize the monarch's ideas and emotions, they overcome the objective reality in favor of an opening towards the unconscious and a fantastic, dreamlike reality. Through the analysis of the cinematographic images, we have observed that the film contains several evening scenes, in which the protagonists move through the dim light of the moon and torches, in a natural and, often, wintry setting Visconti (1973). It is our opinion that it is possible to trace these choices back to the interpretation that Visconti wants to propose to us: the darkness of madness or death is illuminated by beauty and art. Whereas as the surrounding nature adapts to the protagonist's soul, the snow and bare trees

seem to represent Ludwig's isolation and the sterility of his character. Visconti's adaptation also deals with themes such as homosexuality, the concept of death, the immortality of the soul, God's justice, the pursuit of happiness and the materialistic vision of life, but these themes are merely mentioned and not explicitly discussed. This allows the viewer to better know the man Ludwig beyond the monarch, always maintaining freedom of choice and opinion. Furthermore the director's vision of the film tends to confirm the hypothesis of Ludwig's paranoia. Conversely Visconti does not attribute it to hereditary factors or childhood traumas, but rather to the king's personal inability to adapt to the changing world and society. In other words, we could say that the monarch was a dinosaur with respect to the contemporary reality in which he lived, therefore, inevitably destined to become extinct through madness. We believe that Ludwig's weaknesses and frailties are highlighted in the film through dialogued scenes in which he contrasts himself and his own neuroses with the reality of his interlocutor. In the dialogue with Count Duerheim Ludwig contrasts his own romantic idealism with the historical and materialistic realism of the Count. He then defends his right not to conform to the demands of the court in the name of the pursuit of happiness. The scene of the dialogue with Father Hoffmann highlights the non-acceptance of his own homosexuality and, at the same time, the repudiation of his duties. Father Hoffmann asks him to renounce his individualism in the name of his role, but he claims to be different. The dialogue with Count von Holnstein represents Ludwig's decision not to accept impositions from foreign countries and his choice to claim independence and freedom. Through a review of the scenes of these dialogues in rapid succession, we can then see an escalation of individualism and the claiming of one's right to the pursuit of happiness and the impossible. It is almost an anticipation of the concept of extreme individualism and rejection of the militarism of the "flower children". We can observe how the figure of Ludwig was presented by Visconti taking into consideration different points of view: the psychological aspect of Ludwig, the rational and military trait of Count Duerheim, the religious point of view of Father Hoffman, the romantic angle of Sissi and the political perspective of Count von Holnstein. Hence, it is our belief that all these different visions enable the viewer to understand the multifaceted and complex personality of the monarch. To introduce an ending the various characters in the film then appear as bearers of a univocal and personal interpretation of the king's personality and only the service staff accepts completely Ludwig's behavior and choices. It almost seems as if Visconti wanted to make his protagonist a Pirandellian mask which somehow personifies the collective conscience of the concept of the different.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of the considerations and the research conducted, we can put forward the hypothesis that Ludwig developed his creativity on the basis of his relational and social difficulties and his inability to deal with the difficulties and realities of the world around him. We think that he was afflicted by Montale's "male

di vivere” and that his castles can be considered verses “versi scritti con e nella pietra”. The analysis of the figure of Ludwig, in particular, seems to allow us to understand how the common definition of “artist-creator-mad” is linked to comprehension difficulty and, above all, to the inability of the “normal” to accept those who seem different. We reckon that King Ludwig summed up this concept exhaustively: his ability to imagine and create particular architectural structures indicates his creativity, which was defined as “madness” by those who could not understand his imagination and who were unable to go beyond mere observation.

As far as Visconti’s work is concerned, in the making of the film *Ludwig*, the director carried out a reinterpretation, a sort of revisitation of the historical Ludwig, emphasizing and highlighting all the distinctive features of the character himself. These aspects seem to elevate, in a certain way, the cinematic Ludwig to a paradigm as an example of all those weaknesses, fragilities, obsessions and anxieties, which belong to modern man and his loneliness that pervades his soul deeply.

It seems, therefore, that Visconti intentionally represented the emblem of the human being carrying out a very accurate investigation of both the spaces in which the character moves and acts (castles, palaces, between reality and imagination), and of the analysis and vivisection of the protagonist’s psyche in all its aspects.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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