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Values and Art: Aesthetic and Meta-aesthetic Issues*

Abstract

The paper examines the disappearance and re-appearance of aesthetics as an acceptable way of dealing with artworks during the 20th century. Starting from the transformation of the awesome metaphysical trinity, The Good, The True and the Beautiful, into a system of so-called values, the paper analyzes the rise of different varieties of relativism and the signs of a reversal of fortune. Post-normative positions seem no longer to reject strict evaluation.

Before an outline of my specific topic a few general remarks as to the general concept of value.

*I consider it necessary to warn against an over-extension of the concept of values, against using it as a surrogate expression of central metaphysical concepts, of Truth, Beauty, Good. Valuing expresses a preference, a choice and the object, idea, action so **valued** has to be analyzed and scrutinized, not elevated. Values do not exist in privacy, isolated: they are a feature of the public domain.*

For the last hundred or even more years in all types of reflections and comments on different aspects of the production and consumption of art we have a constant seesaw: movements condemning aesthetics as a discipline and activity are followed by movements resurrecting aesthetics.

A potted history of aesthetics as a concept explains some of it. As a philosophical discipline aesthetics is a latecomer, regardless of the long history of

* The paper is printed as submitted.

philosophical reflections on art and beauty. The concept was introduced by Alexander Baumgarten, a follower of Leibniz and Wolf, in the middle of the 18 century, motivated by philosophical problems, but at a time when the autonomy of art (used in the singular) was broadly acknowledged as a widespread feature of Western culture. The objectification of beauty according to aesthetics, needed no additional legitimating: luckily, as the holy trinity of the good, the true and the beautiful was falling apart, creating the separate spheres of modernity. But the differentiation of spheres was not to be a stable division. The value-relation determining modernity is the exchange/use value relationship. Merchandize must be sold: the promise of usefulness and, even better, pleasure must be present in advance. The promise of happiness artworks gave was so transmuted into an economic factor.

Aesthetics is a specific historic regime for the identification of art.¹ It is an approach stressing the specificity and autonomy of art precisely because it is an unstable achievement. There is a price to be paid for of the autonomy of art. Court or Church do not give orders any more, but there is the merciless market, there still is toadying, the life on the margin. Still, art is time and again used as a paradigm of desirable things, as the only really human activity.

Still, there is really nothing simply natural in our aesthetic experience; nothing happens „naturally” when we produce and when we enjoy so-called works of art. Levi-Strauss explained it as a double shift; we perceive products of nature as cultural and vice versa.

The very question of the origin of art, for instance, is an embarrassment, a distraction. Consider the outcome of so different positions as Croce's and Adorno's. Croce states the impossibility of looking for the historic origin of something that is not the product of nature but the precondition of human history. According to him expression is a form of consciousness, so aesthetic facts can not be compared with transient human institutions like marriage etc. Adorno's position upholds exactly the opposite. A historical reduction of art to its prehistoric origin goes against its character, against the fact that art is „ein Gewordenes”, a product of development.

And then of course there is the other side of the question, the almost equally tedious question about the end of art. It starts with Hegel's often simplified diagnosis about the waning importance of art and goes on and on. Again it is

¹ The most interesting work regarding this approach is done by Jacques Rancière.

anthropologist, Mary Douglas, who expressed it in a simple way: she said that art might be becoming impossible the moment its function becomes too conscious, the moment people producing art would be too clearly aware of their enterprise.

In addition, there are connections between understanding prehistoric men and understanding the impact of newest media. Half a century ago it was done in an impressive way by André Leroi-Gourhan; somewhat later this kind of approach led to the popularity of Vilém Flusser. Can or does anything really go badly wrong because of new technology? There are libraries of interesting books written about changes brought on by technological changes, from the both over- and underestimated McLuhan to Jack Goody and his research of the interface between oral and written cultures. McLuhan formulated the need for experimental, inventive, daring art. Let me remind you: according to him the mechanical ages extended our bodies in space. The electric technology brought on the final phase of the extension of man – the technological simulation of consciousness. It is now becoming impossible to retain the aloof, detached, fragmented „role of the literate Westerner”. McLuhan’s idea seemed to be that electric implosion compels commitment and participation, quite regardless of any point of view. What is of special interest to us is the special role, that is, the function of art. In a quotation: „The new media and technologies by which we amplify and extend ourselves constitute huge collective surgery carried out on the social body... the area of impact and incision is numb... each new impact shifts the ratios among the senses... no society has ever known enough about its actions to have developed immunity to its new extensions or technologies... art may be able to provide such immunity... the artist picks up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs.”² McLuhan’s expectations carve out a really heroic role: the artist is supposed to be a man of integral awareness and someone whose function is not only quite legitimate but crucial, necessary. (“The artist can correct the sense ratios before the blow of new technology has numbed conscious procedures” and more: so art is crucial, has a clear-cut function and has to be preserved.) For the great French anthropologist Leroi-Gourhan³ all art is utilitarian, in his own example there is no difference in the utility of Lascaux or the Sistine Chapel and on the other hand no way to separate the collective and the individual nature of art. Before we deal with his construction of the origin of what we call visual arts (and compare it with some new

² M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, London 1964, p. 64

³ A. Leroi-Gourhan, *Le geste et la parole*, I, II, Paris 1964, 65

ideas in the field of what now is emerging as „architectural anthropology”) let us start with his sombre predictions of the possible impact of new media. In a marginal, short chapter at the end of his first volume in *Le geste et la parole* he writes about the audio-visual. He too sees it as a major change in mental adjustment, in the necessity of imaginative (used etymologically) effort.

In architectural anthropology Nold Egenter gives us a new classification of the whole field of architecture into so-called „sub-human architecture (nest building behaviour of the higher apes), semantic architecture (non-domestic structures with the function of territorial, social and symbolic signs), domestic architecture (structures which provide internal space and protection) and settlement architecture (higher, specifically conceived unit, combining several semantic and/or domestic elements.”⁴ The author is warning against a diachronic use of this classification, for all sorts of reasons, but he does give a „phaseological scheme”, and a scheme that implies a „semantic” phase *between* sub-human nesting and domestic architecture. The signs here are „functionally independent of the human body,,: some can be made very quickly with no tools in a small scale and some require co-operation of other persons. To simplify the whole matter: they seem to be, without of course denying the obvious explanations of creed and cult, idols, fetishes and spirit houses, part of the game of abstraction.

According to Steven Mithen, who writes convincingly about the role of early artifacts, the making of an object „without function”, a „cognitive model for perception”, leads to advances in „problem solving”, to „cognitive fluidity”.⁵

„Art” would then appear to be a particularly cunning way to deal with nature (and as such could be seen as well as part of the exploiting and degrading treatment of nature leading to disaster) but only to a certain point, because you have to forget about function to obtain an improvement in functioning.

I do not hesitate to take this to its extreme consequences. Consider once again Leroi-Gourhan and his conviction of the utility of every known kind of art. But against his ridicule aimed at *l'art pour l'art* I would like to propose the view that the emphatic conviction of art for its own sake was and sometimes still is a wonderful way to preserve the functioning of the whole institution,

⁴ Nold Egenter, *Architectural Anthropology*, vol. 1, The Present Relevance of the Primitive in Architecture, Lausanne 1992

⁵ Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind*, London 1996

the way of finding solutions, giving satisfaction and enlightenment without the usual pragmatic starting point of a problem, a task or a set of rules. Theodor Adorno famously claims that art is at the same time autonomous and a *fait social*: he also claims that an alternative version of „reality”, the „as if”, is *subversive* almost per se: an unlikely and late confirmation of Plato’s ideas. According to Adorno, the artwork, by crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as something „socially useful” criticizes society by merely existing. Niklas Luhmann, in response, explains art as a sub-system developing auto-poetic capacities, but without being necessarily critical or subversive. According to that viewpoint, autonomous art stabilizes the whole system of Western organized knowledge: the process of differentiating art is part of the process of establishing science and religion and law and economy...

Still, aesthetic elements are non-coercive. A modernist cultural strategy means faith in progressive evolution, development of self and society and world as goals: social modernization and economic growth. Deviations from such strategy always considered negative. They are: a consumerist and cynical distancing from all identification, a narcissistic dependency on the presentation of self via the commodity construction of identity and then ethnic or religious solutions: conservative, „reactionary”. There are some high-level variations: nostalgia, camp, pastiche. Style as in the definition of Niklas Luhmann: a specific cultural identity can be seen as a way to assure the production of element by elements of the same system and to secure the field where this is going on: „the auto-poetic dimension” of a project based on the affirmation of a separate identity. Concerning art and aesthetics it means an awareness of the fact that the so called aesthetic approach, the so-called fine arts institutionalized as independent activities (independent from religious and courtly activities) are part of the cultural modernity in the Weberian meaning of separation, of the division of spheres mentioned at the beginning of this text: things are not any more supposed to be good, true and beautiful at the same time, or in the language of our century: the spheres of cognitive- instrumental, moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive rationality are separated and have specific aspects of validity, such as truth, normative rightness, authenticity and beauty.

For decades already the so called intellectuals, i. e. all kinds of producers of artifacts and theories living in Eastern Europe were very well informed about the newest trends, with not much of a delay. Some actually were part of the mainstream, that is successful abroad, usually helped by a whiff of Mitteleuropa, oth-

ers pretended to be with it for domestic purposes and only a few did what the authorities expected (or pretended to expect). Successful or not, they were in a different situation. It was not so much the isolation, always persisting in some way, but the stabilizing effect it had. For instance, no deep experience of a crisis in culture is anywhere on record, even the already mentioned great names rather served as stimulating fervent activity. The vigorous state of the arts (it does not mean quality) was not the result of superior working conditions for artists (they were not all that good) but of a deep, unshattered belief in „Europe”, in what I have to call „western civilization”, unthinkable in the West itself.

The concept of a „crisis in culture” may, of course, be of limited value. Nowadays it is commonplace in all the countries of Eastern Europe to regard the whole post-war period as such a crisis and to speak of a new era as if political freedom and the expected affluence would per se bring a cultural revival. Borrowing the ideas of Hannah Arendt’s seminal essay of the same title („Crisis in Culture”) I would once again want to introduce the old-fashioned notion that culture depends on a difference between use objects and art works, on the possibility to achieve durability, to remove a certain set of objects from the process of consumption and usage, to isolate them against the sphere of human necessities. Most products delivered under the heading „cultural” nowadays are obviously made for quick use, they are a part (an important one) of life, but do not create an enduring world. Most of the post-socialist products seem to emulate those usable goods (or are made for quick use pretending not to be, as in the thriving nationalistic production of so-called masterpieces).

The works of classical modernity, now for the greater part themselves part of the great tradition of durable artifacts, were meant to be difficult to use, „hard to swallow”, but certainly did not want to be a link in an unbroken chain; and the avant-garde projects even less. Isolating a part of those tendencies into the Central-European-identity-myth, a not so small number of artists and writers did achieve the illusion of durability, of a firm position against the all-pervasive ideology. One of the tenets of this myth was the conviction that cultural world-making is still going strong, that there still exists a culture one belongs to, even though there are forces wanting to cheat us out of our birthright.

What we now have to face is something we avoided or just did not notice: the reign of cultural relativism, the necessity to cope with different cultures and cultural divergences. The special experience and defense strategies developed under what used to be called socialism are completely devoid of tolerance.

Not that tolerance is a key concept or even an important one in the production of art. In a crude formulation: there is no sense in producing artworks if you are not convinced yours are better than the already existing. The broader aspects are more difficult: if you really respect the rationality and autonomy of every culture you do lose the blind faith in the superiority of your own that makes you produce works in its framework. Some state the conviction that the utopian dimension is a constitutive element of the world-making effect of art. Consequently, for them, the diagnosed loss of this dimension means the end of art as we know it. This is familiar enough and has to be specified by looking at the usual way of attributing an utopian dimension to specific works and effects on one hand and on the other hand by looking at the way transcendence is called in to explain the „more than meets the eye” aspects of artifacts, their „transfiguration of the commonplace”.

Terry Eagleton rejects the so-called bad or premature utopianism, grabbing instantly for a future: motivated by useless instead of feasible desire. Good utopia is possible because oppressive social forces can not help to generate forces and desires that can overthrow them. So it is all about a more desirable condition, and various ways in which artists collaborate in instant or more patient, long-term projects.

Pre-drafts of the future are more or less disappearing and they never were particularly good for artworks. So the utopian dimension is looked for in the so-called aesthetic turn, in secret subversion, refusal, in the dissolving of traditional form and meaning, in something styled as the ever surging flow of desire.

Something of this utopian spirit but more related to the usual conception of art lives in the sentences of Fredric Jameson: „I will briefly suggest, that the willed and violent transformation of a drab peasant object world into the most glorious materialization of pure color in oil paint is to be seen as an utopian gesture: as an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new utopian realm of the senses, or at least of the supreme sense – sight, the visual, the eye – which it now reconstitutes for us as a semi-autonomous space in its own right – part of some new fragmentation of the emergent sensorium which replicates the specializations and divisions of capitalist life at the same time it seeks in precisely such fragmentation a desperate Utopian compensation for them.”⁶

⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”, *New Left Review* 146, 1984, p. 81

Trying to define „fundamentals” nowadays is easier in other fields of knowledge, the fabled „distant look” of ethnology with its blurred genres (the best there is), looking at art „as a cultural system” comes up, that is Clifford Geertz comes up with the following, helping as to define what is Eurocentric in our utopian dimension: „If there is a commonality (=in things we know all call „art) it lies in the fact that certain activities everywhere seem specifically designed to demonstrate that ideas are visible, audible, and – one needs to make up a word up here – tactile” that they can be cast in forms where the senses, and through the senses the emotions, can reflectively address them. The variety of artistic expression stems from the variety of conceptions men have about the way things are, and is indeed the same variety...”⁷

In Geertz we also find some proposals about „the study of art”, semiotics of a very developed kind but basically centred on finding the contextual meaning, the connection with everything else.

A vague concept of the utopian might be confused with something like the „idea of creative imagination, as it sprang up in the Romantic era and is still central to modern culture... ‘epiphany’ ... the notion of a work of art as the locus of a manifestation which brings us into the presence of something which is otherwise inaccessible, and which is of the highest moral or spiritual significance; a manifestation, moreover, which also defines or completes something, even as it reveals” in the words of Charles Taylor⁸. He then continues with an attempt to describe two patterns of epiphany, one with „significance shining through” while the work portrays something and the other where „the locus of epiphany has shifted to within the work itself”.

Since the middle 1970 s critical theory has served as a secret continuation of modernism by other means: after the decline of late-modernist painting and sculpture, it occupied the position of high art, at least to the extent that it retained such values as difficulty and distinction after they had receded from artistic form. Hal Foster wrote that critical theory has served as a secret continuation of the avant-garde by other means; radical rhetoric compensated a little for lost activism. So, *difficult* and *distinctive* theory is a *form* compensating, substituting shortcomings of artistic production and political actions. It only goes to show the need for artistic production: its *value*.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, „Art as a Cultural System”, in *Local Knowledge*, London 1993

⁸ Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self*, Cambridge 1992. p. 419