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Viso.

**Does art have anything in particular
to do with democracy?**

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This question must be carefully approached, for we tend to answer it quickly with a sonorous “yes”. And the reasons for that answer are neither few nor weak. One of the strongest reasons to support an essential connection between art and democracy lies in the supposed origin of both in the ancient Greece. While the latter *cum grano salis* can be accepted to have been invented exactly at that time and place, one could say that the former is much older than that and yet in its Greek form, only an embryo of what it happened to be after the Renaissance.¹

The limitations of Greek democracy are very well known today, now that we take into account that not everyone was allowed to vote and to have her or his interests represented at the citizen’s assembly. Furthermore, since the slaves, women and children – numerically very important groups inside Greek society – were not seen as people in the proper sense of the word, they were consequently excluded of the political life. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the concept of democracy did not exist before the “classical” period of ancient Greece. And even if one does not need to be a political thinker to notice that the requirements and the scope of democracy today are totally distant from those in Pericles’ times (and immediately after), it would be a mistake to see the Greek democracy as completely different from – and even opposed to – our contemporary conception.

As for the supposed “origin” of art in the ancient Greek culture, one could say that, although since immemorial times there was already in the main civilizations of non-classic antiquity like Egypt and the peoples of Mesopotamia (and perhaps earlier – back to the cavemen and their rupestrian paintings) something similar to what we call art today, it was only in ancient Greece with the appearance of the notion of *mimesis* in Plato’s and Aristotle’s philosophy that we have got a concept under which we could include things as different as painting, sculpture, poetry, music, theater etc. Even if the Greek word *techné*, whose translation to the modern European languages is “art”, has an interesting ambiguity in its meaning of “handcraft”, the generality of the near related concept of *mimesis* – negatively by Plato and positively approached by Aristotle² – does not let doubts that, as in Greek politics with the birth of democracy, something new was born in the realm of ancient Greek culture – something closely associated with our modern conception of “art”.

One indication of that can be found in the fact that antipode-thinkers of modern times like Hegel and Nietzsche have their own ways to point to the existence of art in a superlative sense in ancient Greece. Hegel does it in the theory of the “forms of art” of his *Lectures on Aesthetics*³, according to which Greek art – especially Greek sculpture – means a perfect balance between matter and mind, the finite and the infinite, form and content. For that reason, Hegel conceives Greek art as “classical” – resulting of the fall of the previous form of art, “symbolic”, exemplified by the gigantic buildings of Egypt and Mesopotamia, in which there was a larger tenor of matter, compared to its little tenor of spirituality. As is well known, the further step in the dialectic development of art towards what Hegel calls

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“romantic art”, encompassing all the art made from the beginning of the Christian age, leads to his thesis of the “end of art”, according to which in modernity philosophical thought as the perfect form of spirit of the world would take the place previously occupied by art. I will return to this point later.

As for Nietzsche, we can find in his early work *The Birth of Tragedy*⁴ a very mindful consideration about the aesthetic peculiarity of the ancient Greek culture, concerning the harmony, in its authentic tragedies, of the two opposed (not only anthropological but also cosmological) impulses, the Apollonian and the Dionysian. While the former is a constructive principle and stands for the delineation of images – hence for visualness in general –, the latter means the tendency to return to the primitive chaos, previous to any form, and is near related to the lack of definite form of the sonorous phenomena (viewed under the standing point of its physical properties). To the young Nietzsche these two impulses were historically dissociated: the Dionysian one was typical for the barbarian folks of Minor Asia and the apollonian one meant the first civilizing efforts of the ancient attic tribes to overcome their precarious economic and social situation. Only when the conditions were ripe in the Greek civilization, there was the possibility of harmonizing the two opposed forces, so that a very peculiar genre of artwork appeared, in which the visual, sonorous and textual elements were so well fused, that also the social and political milieu was contaminated by that harmony. Such was, according to Nietzsche, the birth of Greek tragedy. As is well known, Nietzsche evocated the rising of the tragic age to criticize what he understood to be decadence in the Western culture of his time, which has again some points in common with the Hegelian thesis of the end of art (with the difference that in Hegel this thesis has an irrefutable optimistic tenor, which is not the case in Nietzsche).

Perhaps it may be productive to use both German thinkers to understand what happened with art after the end of Greek classical culture. With Hegel, we could see the “romantic” form of art, since its beginning in the early medieval painting, as more “spiritual” and less “artistic”, preparing the modern situation, in which the “prosaic contemporary states” would be the scene of the death of art. With the young Nietzsche, we could identify the turning point even before the fall of ancient Greece: in the efforts of some thinkers to extirpate the Dionysian impulse in their culture. In tragedy itself it was brought about by Euripides’ limiting the role of the chorus and introducing dialogic situations which overcharged the Apollonian impulse at expenses of the Dionysian one. In the realm of philosophy, the exterminator of tragedy was the Platonic Socrates, with his obsession for the dialogue which should not leave any space to the manifestation of the mysterious forces which challenged the will of the tragic hero.

It is not impossible that this interruption in such an aesthetical and social experience as the Greek tragic age was what made the Renaissance understand itself as – and effectively to look like – a new beginning, which in some extent is expressed in the very name of this cultural movement. The Modern Age brought new possibilities for democracy

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as well as for the artistic world, being the rise of subjectivity the true motivation of the three most important happenings of the sixteenth century: the Renaissance in the artistic realm, the Reform in the religious one and the beginning of the mechanist revolution in the scientific domain.

As much as the understanding of the displacement of the point of view is needed to contemplate a painting made with plain perspective, so the personal effort of a believer to understand the passage of the Bible he is reading with no help of the fathers of the Catholic Church, and the use of mathematical methods to grasp the movement of the planets around the sun are examples of the rise of a new kind of subjectivity which was known neither in the Antiquity nor in the Middle Age.

Although this conception of subject revealed its great philosophical and even political importance, it has been historically a target of many attacks due to vested interests; but it is undeniable that the hope of a true democracy still depends on the possibility of development of an emphatic conception of subject and its reflective inwardness.

To understand one of these attacks against subjectivity concerning specially the realm of culture and the arts, it is helpful to take into account the point of view presented in a paper by Herbert Marcuse, from the second half of the 1930s, entitled "The Affirmative Character of Culture"⁵, in which he reflects on the situation of the cultural life since the beginning of the Modern Age. For him, the rise of subjectivity gave birth to a conception of human interiority which was exploited by the bourgeoisie in its struggle for more political power and towards its present condition of incontestable ruling class. Since the rising bourgeoisie needed the support of the lower classes to reach its political goals, but was not willing to concede to them true material gains, the solution would be to offer them the possibility of experiencing a realm in which all that matters is the spirituality of the internal life, in face of which the physical goods would – ideologically – appear as only a source of the worst sins and corruption.

In this process, the arts play besides religion a very important role, since the notion of beauty, which was in ancient Greece a possible predicate only for material things (or perhaps also for platonic ideas), allows for the first time the meaning of something spiritual, associated with the purity of the personal soul. For this reason, the idea of a collective cultural patrimony gets socially stronger in virtue of its new ideological significance: someone very poor and sick, who were nevertheless able to recognize the beauty of an artwork, should be entitled to do so and the cultural institutions of society would provide the concretization of her or his aesthetics experiences. If Marcuse is right, we owe the creation of public museums and theaters (which still resist the privatization wave of the last decades) not to the generosity of an enlightened ruling class, but to its need to maintain the *status quo*.

So far we could answer the question contained in the title of this paper in the following manner: art does not have anything in particular to do with democracy, since it is committed to the necessity by the powerful of exercising social control throughout human history. This answer does not seem to be right, however, if we take into account that creation and reception of aesthetic constructs has something that escapes the ideological manipulation of the arts by the owners of power, so that the pedagogic role that these activities play over the senses – articulated with the understanding – could even have a liberating effect that would make the manipulative intent at least ineffective.

I would say that the act of creating artworks, as well as the one of having an adequate experience of them, mobilizes powerful psychic forces associated with the instinctual life, nevertheless without its potential destructiveness, so that the aforementioned subjectivity develops itself in a medium that, in spite of its ideal character, owns a kind of effectiveness.

For this reason – and with a nuance that is slightly different from the early Marcuse's exposure of the "affirmative character of culture" – Adorno thought, since his writing, together with Horkheimer, of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that, although art had always something to do with domination, it belongs to its essence being the depositary of the possibility of liberating humankind from the burden of exploitation and repression. The recognition of both sides of the authentic artworks, as opposed to cultural commodities, appears clearly in the following passage:

The purity of bourgeois art, which hypostasized itself as a world of freedom in contrast to what was happening in the material world, was from the beginning bought with the exclusion of the lower classes – with whose cause, the real universality, art keeps faith precisely by its freedom from the ends of the false universality.⁶

The outstanding idea of this passage is that the would-be exclusiveness of the arts in its superlative phenomena, crystallized in the lack of access to it by the poorer layers of society, means in fact the very universality denied them by the upper classes. If I am right, it is indeed fascinating to realize that there is not anything in the extremely sophisticated art of all times that is essentially opposed to the understanding of the masses, and the factual distance between the former and the latter is due to the manipulation's strategy of the dominant classes, whose major contemporary agency is the culture industry.

In this sense, it is almost comic to hear – as it happens very frequently – from fanatic supporters of mass culture that it is democratic while the "upper culture" is elitist, exclusive, and hence essentially anti-democratic. In my opinion, this charge against the more complex art is a practical way to obstruct the access of the majority of the people to the true aesthetic manifestations of the most interior needs and hopes of humankind. Furthermore, this argument is a trick to hide the falsehood of the anti-democratic

character of the culture industry itself, since its products do not count among the authentic aesthetic expressions, of which there are only two types: the popular culture and the “upper” art.⁷ The former would be an immediate, direct aesthetic expression of the wishes and expectations of a people, while the latter plays the same role in a very sophisticated and complex manner, although very frequently its inspiration comes from popular sources. As popular culture due to its constitutive simplicity is a preferential prey of culture industry and some agencies associated with it like the tourism branch, it tends nowadays worldwide to be extinguished, with some exceptions in Latin America, Africa and some regions of Asia. Although the culture industry tries to take over the “upper” art as well, its power in this case is limited exactly in virtue of its complexity, so that the former can commercialize sophisticated aesthetic constructs only when its initial strangeness was already overcome and it has already become part of the collective pantheon of the arts. The trade of artworks of consecrated painters and sculptors, as well as the selling of records of “classical” composers represent today in global economy a branch of many billion dollars. For this reason, Adorno, referring many times to the Hegelian thesis of the end of art, insists that its *avant-garde* manifestations are the only aesthetic expression which preserves its contestation’s power in all integrity, since the *nouveauté* in its language functions as a protection against the fast assimilation by mass culture.⁸ It is important to remember that, for Adorno, the explicit political content of an artwork is irrelevant to define its relationship to society: a very hermetic one can reveal deep layers of the collective consciousness which would remain untouched by a work explicitly political but aesthetically (that means in the aspect related to form) superficial.

Taking into account everything which was discussed above, my answer to the question proposed in the title of this paper is that authentic art has effectively something in particular to do with democracy. But not to the present state of things mistakenly called “democracy”, which is more a mass society in which people are given the possibility to vote A or B – frequently not quite different from each other – as it is given to customers to choose product x or y in the consumption’s market. Art as a true aesthetic expression of the possibility of humankind’s emancipation and its reconciliation with nature may have something to do with democracy only if this word is understood as a situation in which, according to its etymology, the people have the power effectively in their hands, which unfortunately is not the case in the present situation.

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¹ Arthur Danto, alluding to Hans Belting’s book *The Image before the Era of Art*, reminds us that, strictly speaking, the concept of art in the modern meaning is an invention of Renaissance, although it would be wrong to say “that those images [previous to the Renaissance/rd] were not art in some large sense” (*After the end of Art*. New Jersey: Princeton University, 1995, p. 3).

² The approach to the matter of *mimesis* in Plato is in the book III of *The Republic*, in which Plato’s discussion culminates in the exclusion of the poet from the ideal city (Cf. *The Republic of Plato*, v. I. Edited with critical notes, commentary and appendices by James Adams. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969, pp. 130 ff.). As for Aristotle’s discussion on the mimesis, the main source is the

chapter four of his *Poetics* (Cf. *Aristotle's Poetics/Longinus on the Sublime*. Edited with an introduction by Charles Sears Baldwin. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930).

³ HEGEL, G. W. F. *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I*. In: *Werke 13*. Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp, 1989, passim (English translation: *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. Translated by Bernard Bosanquet. London: Penguin Books, 1993).

⁴ NIETZSCHE, F. *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. In: *Werke I*. Edited by Karl Schlechta. Frankfurt/Berlin/Vienna: Ulstein, 1980, passim.

⁵ MARCUSE, H. "The affirmative Character of Culture". In: *Negations. Essays in Critical Theory*. Translations from the German by Jeremy Shapiro. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972.

⁶ HORKHEIMER, M.; ADORNO, T. W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Translated by John Cumming. New York: Continuum, 1996, p. 135.

⁷ Cf. DUARTE, R. "Kulturware und Volkskunst angesichts der 'Globalisierung'". In: *Thesis. Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Bauhaus Universität Weimar*, 4./5. Heft, 46. Jahrgang (2000), pp. 64-69.

⁸ Cf. ADORNO, T. *Ästhetische Theorie*. Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp, 1996, passim.