

APPROACHES TO AESTHETICS: POSTMODERNISM

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Abstract: *This article aims to provide the postmodernist point of view on aesthetics. Nowadays a work of art can no longer be defined within an aesthetical discipline. Aesthetics itself as a discipline is contested, starting from the assumption that it is a form of metaphysical thinking that sees, in the appearance of things, the manifestation of a normative spirit. The postmodern condition of art would relate first to the emancipation from the main narrative discourse of modern legitimising: aesthetics.*

Key words: *postmodernism, aesthetics, discourse, work of art.*

1. Introduction

In our era, the subject of art is no longer considered as starting from aesthetical categories, because it is considered that a work of art can no longer be defined within an aesthetical discipline. Aesthetics itself as a discipline is contested, starting from the assumption that it is a form of metaphysical thinking that sees, in the appearance of things, the manifestation of a normative spirit. Unexpectedly, the departure point of contesters of art and aesthetics is the most important system of modern aesthetics, namely the Hegelian philosophical system. For Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, art is considered a form of the absolute spirit, together with religion and philosophy (Hegel, 1966). It represents the first step of manifestation of the absolute spirit, whose fundamental law is becoming. Becoming in Hegel is a movement of going forward and rising at the same time, each form (moment of becoming) corresponds to a certain purpose and plays a certain role in realising the whole. Once the respective form has realised its destiny, it turns into another form that constitutes its negation or “death”. Hegel uses the organic metaphor of the development of a fruit from a seed, in order to illustrate the mechanism of the becoming of the spirit. The becoming does not affect only the various forms of art (ideal contents, styles, or genres), even art as a form of expressing the real is questioned. “The death of art” is the death of an essence: it does not mean that people will not produce artefacts to which they can give significance and value, but it means that the spiritual function of art in “the education of humanity” (like Schiller would say) came to an end. The organic metaphor in explaining the life and death of a form of spirit provides an analogy to art from the plant world: blossoming, fulfilment, and death. “The universal spirit in his progression becomes more reflexive

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and more religious...morality and religion replace beauty as fundamental value" (Gilbert & Kuhn, 1972, p. 386).

2. Postmodernism and Aesthetics

The present era, increasingly called "postmodern" instead of "contemporary" equally proclaims "the end of philosophy" and even "the end of history", using as an initial argument still a suggestion of Hegel who talked about an Absolute Knowledge that could not be subjected to a dialectic negation process and to that of historic becoming.

Thus, according to Jean François Lyotard, "the postmodern condition" is characterised by the end of the great discourses (stories) of legitimising. Postmodern knowledge is no longer founded on a "meta-discourse", that is, it is legitimised neither through dialectics, nor through consensus, but through paralogy. Paralogy opposes the modern methods of promoting and recognising novelty: "innovation is ordered, or in any case used, by the system in order to enhance efficiency, while paralogy is a movement of an importance often not known on the spot, produced in the pragmatics of knowledge" (Lyotard, 1993, p. 102). This form of legitimising would ensure classification outside the normative-prescriptive framework of a "meta-narration". If in the field of knowledge, meta-narration is metaphysics, in the field of art, it is aesthetic. The postmodern condition of art would relate first to the emancipation from the main narrative discourse of modern legitimising: aesthetics. The end of modern philosophy means at the same time the end of aesthetics as a founding discipline. "The impression that aesthetic proves to be superfluous or, at least, that it is in crisis, and in a generalised one, has become inevitable" (Zaharia, 2002, p. 12). The crisis of general aesthetics seems to have been determined first by the development of an impressive number of particular aesthetics. Nevertheless, the conviction that the discipline still has resources is not lacking; talking about the possibility of a "postmodern aesthetics", the discipline still has enough resources. The first problem to which postmodern aesthetics should respond regards the concept of postmodern art. In this respect, the dispute itself regarding the status of art, known under the name of "the dispute modernism-postmodernism", has acquired special theoretical importance. From here derives the importance of defining postmodernism in art and philosophy. The idea presented above constitutes the first element that, in modernity, art has lost its function of revealing the absolute; this function being attributed rather to philosophy. "The death of philosophy" in its modern sense constitutes the second element, found as a theme in authors such as Nietzsche or Heidegger. In Nietzsche, we learn about a theory of the being that proposes the will for power as an art, as the author suggests from *The Birth of Tragedy*. This "art" was already directed against the Apollonian and Socratic categories, on which philosophical modernity was built: the principle of the individual, of "the mask", that camouflages the nature of the will under the culture of reason; the distinction subject-object derived from the principles of figurative art; and "the ascetic ideal" of metaphysics. Nietzsche proposes a Wagnerian music against figurative art) and Schopenhauerian view at the same time (music and tragedy as "a language of will") that will lead him to the idea that the assertion of the will for power in art would be a solution against nihilism (Raşiu,

2000, p. 117). One of the fundamental ideas of Nietzsche taken over within postmodernism is that, under various masks of culture, we must always see the games of the will for power. Metaphysics, morals, art, science, and knowledge in general are appearances of will, and the general imperative of will is that which proclaims the thirst for power.

Heidegger continued the reflection of Nietzsche on metaphysics and modern thinking, although he considered that Nietzsche still belongs to modernity. The critique of modern aesthetic thinking, of the principle of figurative representation, and of the autonomy of the aesthetic subject is equally firm. In fact, Heidegger accuses aesthetics for having contributed to the decline of art, just as various scholastic disciplines (logic, ethics, and ontology) would have contributed to "the oblivion of being". The resemblance with the idea of Nietzsche about the contribution of aesthetic Socratism to the oblivion of the Dionysian component of tragedy is worth noting, which in Nietzsche conflates with the original being. The discipline of aesthetics would be responsible for "the inexorable decline of art and thought about art (through) limiting aesthetics to a treatment of the affective state, of taste, and sensitiveness, which made art dependant on the experience of a subject" (Rațiu, 2000, p. 118). Through its concepts and distinctions ("work", "author", "matter and form", "subject and object", and "technique and nature"), aesthetics did not manage to think the essence of art, in which it should have seen the revealing of the being as openness. For similar reasons, it has been said that in postmodernity, aesthetics no longer has purpose. If we can still talk of a "postmodern aesthetics", this has no connection with the conception of Heidegger: the German philosopher was not familiar with vanguard art; he talked about art only from a classical perspective. In Heidegger, "the end of art" means "the oblivion of being".

The Nietzschean interpretation of knowledge, morals, and art as games of will for power induced the idea, taken over by a number of important coeval authors, that postmodernity is characterised by their place within power relations. Authors, such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, or Jean François Lyotard, showed this regarding the relation between knowledge and power: "the postmodern condition" would actually mark the end of knowledge understood as a disinterested and autonomous knowledge, not in the sense that knowledge is an expression of ideology (they also talk about "an end of ideologies"), but in the sense that art and knowledge are inscribed in the logic of power as elements that enhance its efficiency and confer it legitimacy. The word "strategy" resembles the word "vanguard", says Thierry de Duve: a strategy is pursued to obtain the social sanction of an object and through this, to succeed. Thus, we have either the strategy of revealing the artifice "to say the truth regarding the failure of art", or its overreaction to establish an artist's success (de Duve, 2001, p. 70).

The idea of "the end of art" is nothing but one of the most numerous forms through which the "end of modernity" is expressed in Occidental thought after Nietzsche. Thus, "an image of culture as a game for power" prevails (Rațiu, 2001, p. 86), supported especially by neo-vanguard theories. These theories are heirs of the older vanguard theories that would interpret culture from the perspective of social and political fight of class). In other words, we have to carefully distinguish between modernism and vanguard, on the one hand, and postmodernism, on the other hand. This observation is

necessary because, in philosophical discourse, they often say that postmodern philosophy starts with Nietzsche, because the Nietzschean philosophy is in accordance with the idea of the "end of modernity". They consider that between Nietzsche and present postmodernists there is an identity of programme. Following theories in the field of arts allows us to duly appreciate the relation between Nietzsche's philosophy and postmodern philosophy; it would correspond to the relation between modernism and postmodernism in art or between vanguardism and neo-vanguardism. There is a continuity of programme, but not an identity. More clearly, postmodernism represents a questioning of the European cultural heritage so that any logic of continuity is rejected, inherent to a discourse of a critic who would seek a "surpassing" through typically modern mechanisms of legitimising and arguing. The term postmodernism was used for the first time in the field of literature to indicate a reaction to modernism (in 1934) and it was extended after 1960 to visual arts and philosophy. In general, an anarchist and subversive attitude is attributed to postmodernism (especially in the field of philosophy), but there also is a neo-conservatory postmodernism (aesthetic) that opposes vanguard or post-structuralist postmodernism.

Within this framework, "the death of art" would mean at the first stage the end of aesthetics as a theoretical discipline and as a subordination of a work of art to aesthetical criteria; equally, the end of metaphysics means in Nietzsche, "the death of the subject" and of the categories of modern thinking. To this first stage corresponds modernism or vanguard in a strictly artistic plane, having as the main objective taking art out of the autonomy of aesthetics and its insertion into social and political action. This stage still remains "modern" in the sense it also admits the category of novelty as being central.

An argument for the idea of ideological overlapping between vanguardism and Nietzsche's philosophy is supported by the "three theses about Nietzsche" of Luc Ferry: (1) the aesthetics and philosophy of Nietzsche "open the way to a new form, even radically novel of individualism"; (2) Nietzschean individualism is the prototype of historicism and of contemporary relativism, without art being taken out of the classical ideal of truth – only that truth is sought under the form of difference; and (3) Nietzsche is the real thinker of vanguardism (Ferry, 1997, pp. 197-199). One could note that the three theses of Ferry are available all through postmodernity, but they do not have the same validity for newer directions in postmodernism. For instance, deconstructivist and post-structuralist postmodernists have explicitly appropriated the philosophical vision of Nietzsche on art and society. But they have also appropriated marxist ideologies, which bring to discussion "the purity" of the Nietzschean spirit of neovanguard: for example, the political theories of Leninist orientation regarding the strategy of class fight, as well as those of Maoist orientation regarding "the resistance" of the partisan fight, seem much more significant to us in order to define the neovanguard spirit. Nietzsche's project was to dissolve life in art and not art in life; from a certain point of view, he was the fiercest enemy of massification and of democratisation of art, of annulling authentic difference through "identical" difference (which we see in the world of postmodern art). On the other hand, a theorist of postmodernism such as Scott Lash (*Theories of Modernity and Postmodernity*), has noted that post-structuralists named "modern"

what was in fact “pre-modern” and “postmodern” what was modern. From this angle, Nietzsche is the thinker especially among postmodernists, such as Foucault or Deleuze, who remained loyal to the modernist project defined by de Bataille, Klossowski, Artaud, or Breton; they thought of the phenomenon of art in terms “of de machine de guerre, ligne de fuite, résistance and mort de l’homme”. In conclusion, we can state that, in the second stage of vanguardism, Nietzsche is not the only thinker of vanguardism; his thinking is less relevant for the theories of art, although it cannot disappear from the horizon of art, especially from the fight for cultural and normative authority. Even the standpoint of Ferry allows us to grasp this. Ferry distinguishes between three moments of postmodernism: (1) postmodernism as a climax of modernism; (2) postmodernism as a return to tradition, against modernism; and (3) postmodernism as surpassing modernism. In this last stage, “the death of art” means the very disappearance of art as a form of expression, under the pressure of technology, mass-media, reproduction techniques, and the kitsch. If the discourse regarding “art” still has any meaning, then this is because “the death of art” has become itself an artistic phenomenon: “the death of art” is announced through the presentation of artefacts or actions to which value and significance are conferred; the assessment judgement is still then present and we need to see in what sense this judgement can be (nevertheless) “aesthetic”. This perspective, that was supported by Gianni Vattimo, (1993, pp. 53-65) is not the only one; other authors consider that postmodernism is a trend that is hard to define and it could be situated in good continuity with modernity. Precisely for this reason, we find it worthwhile to keep in mind the remark of an author, such as Dumitru N. Zaharia, who understands the issue of postmodernism, starting from the idea that contemporary art is anaesthetical (Zaharia, 2002, p. 16). According to the author mentioned, there is a certain ambiguity in the relation between the terms “postmodern art” and “contemporary art”, which makes the term postmodern itself ambiguous and the term “contemporary” an object of dispute between specialists.

3. Conclusion

We cannot any longer make a clear distinction between “modern” and “contemporary” art, respectively “postmodern”, which allows talk about a break in continuity between modern art and postmodernism. Postmodernism would have exactly the same features that the postmodern authors attributed to modernism (in art): focusing on the modern categories of actuality and novelty. At a careful look, this perspective does not exclude the possibility of making a distinction, within contemporary art, between modernism and postmodernism (which would prove the ambiguity of the term “contemporary”), like two “aesthetic” phenomena that oppose modern “classical” art (for instance, to Romanticism or Naturalism). Taking into account the anaesthetical or anti-aesthetical dimension of contemporary art constitutes a negative feature; consequently, also results the ambiguity of the term “postmodern” that does not allow for new distinctions, in the line of aesthetic criteria. Precisely for this reason, a number of authors less interested in the aesthetic problem but more attentive to the extra-aesthetical aspects (such as the political and social programme of

contemporary art) could differentiate between vanguard modernism and “recent” postmodernism: “one can say that modernism, as an institutionalised model in academies, museums, and art galleries, opposes a new discourse launched in the offensive of conquering cultural authority: postmodernism” (Raţiu 2001, p. 87). Postmodernism is a heterogeneous phenomenon that includes a plurality of directions among which there often exists even open opposition, hence both the difficulty of its definition and a certain continuity (“in breaking”) with modernism.

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