

# ART AND AESTHETICAL VALUE IN PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIETY

Gabriela RĂŢULEA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The paper aims to show the relationship that exists between art, philosophy, religion and the role of aesthetical value in society. Throughout history, the relation between art and philosophy has been established within the boundaries set by Plato, since the Greek philosopher was the first to set the terms of the discussion: thus, art was allowed to stand next to philosophy, provided that beauty is perceived as an ideal and that aesthetic contemplation is associated to intellectual contemplation.*

**Key words:** *aesthetics, art, society, philosophy.*

## 1. Introduction

The approach to the relationship between art and philosophy is marked by Plato's paradigmatic gesture, who, in *The Republic*, stated the programmatic incompatibility between art and philosophy, by claiming that poets should be cast out of the ideal city. In the 7<sup>th</sup> book of *The Republic*, Plato discusses the education of young people in the ideal city, wondering what the ideal means for such an education are. Based on his conception about knowledge and truth and on his assertion that education must be made in the spirit of truth, Plato answers that art would not be a suitable means for the education of young people, because art is a copy of a copy, a representation of a thing, which in turn only exists as part of the idea [8]; art takes us further away from truth, instead of bringing us closer to it, since it is associated to a „third degree” reality. Thus, for Plato, the artistic object becomes the ontological embodiment of error and of lying. However, the incompatibility

between truth and aesthetic categories, such as it is presented in *The Republic*, isn't Plato's last statement. In the *Phaedrus*, where Plato speaks of how the soul travels through the sensible world, the dungeon of the soul and the world of ideas, beauty, no longer separates these worlds, rather it brings them closer. This time, beauty – be it that of worlds, of bodies, of the soul, or of the artistic object – does not identify itself with the shape of things, but with the way in which it corresponds to the ideal form of which it is part. Now, beauty is the effigy that truth takes on, and the issue of the compatibility between art and philosophy is rewritten in a different manner. At the other end of western philosophy, Hegel will state the same thing: „ it is the free and adequate embodiment of the Idea” [3, 77].

## 2. Art and philosophy

Throughout history, the relation between art and philosophy has been established within the boundaries set by Plato, since

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Sociology and Communication, University Transilvania of Brasov.

the Greek philosopher was the first to set the terms of the discussion once and for all: thus, art was allowed to stand next to philosophy, provided that beauty is perceived as an ideal and that aesthetic contemplation is related to intellectual contemplation. Eastern Christian ethics has taken this conception to the limit, sometimes understanding images of God as inspired by God himself, therefore aesthetic contemplation becomes identical to knowledge *par excellence* [12]. Boethius, on the other hand, emphasizes the other alternative: beauty pertains to the exterior organization of things, not to their „idea”, it is appearance, it pertains to illusion and to the impossibility of seeing past the external forms.

In the context that we have discussed this far, philosophy is the one which grants a place to art. The dignity, or, on the contrary, the decay of art hinge on the relation between the philosophical concept of truth and the aesthetic concept of beauty. To the extent that the two can intersect, art and philosophy are in trine. If the two concepts exclude one another, philosophy believes art to be inferior (Boethius) or even dangerous (Plato). One important nuance to be noted, for a whole tradition, which defines western culture, starting with Plato and passing through Plotin and medieval philosophers like Bonaventura and ending with Hegel, is that the truth-beauty binominal is discussed in relation to the sensible-comprehensible binominal [12]. Because the truth is defined through terms which describe the idea, and not the sensible, its relation to beauty is discussed from the perspective of the definition of beauty: once beauty is defined through the sensible qualities of the thing, its relation to truth weakens. When beauty is defined in relation to the ideal qualities of the object (participation to the idea – Plotin; proportion – Plato; rhythm – Augustine) the connection to

truth and further on, the connection between art and philosophy gain a positive connotation.

The issue of the relation between art and philosophy has been a preoccupation of modern thinkers especially after Kant and the Romantic Movement (after 1800). In Kant's philosophical system, this matter is observed from the perspective of the discussion which concerns the qualities of the soul: each faculty has a function of itself, so that knowledge, moral (to which religion is reduced) or esthetic pleasure are well separated from one another [5]. Apart from this, the definition of genius and of artistic production in Kant's philosophy ensures a dominant role for reason. Thus, passing from beauty of nature to aesthetic beauty or from the sublime of nature to the moral sublime does not imply particular reflection about the relation of art to philosophy or to moral. This will only happen once that the traditional conception concerning truth and beauty is overthrown, during the age of German romanticism. First of all, Goethe and Schiller have extended the issue of genius from the field of artistic production to all the fields of human (cultural) activities, so that the reflection on the particular forms of the manifestation of human genius and on the relation between these forms became very important [12]. Concerning the distinction and the relation of art to philosophy, it became important once it was admitted, after Kant, that reason is not man's only means of acceding to the truth. Fichte and Schelling have accepted that there is an intellectual intuition (which Kant had denied), and Goethe spoke of a kind of sensitive intuition, capable of acceding to the essence of reality with no need for the intercession of the intellect (Kant had argued that sensitivity cannot be a form of knowledge if it is not backed up by intellect) [5]. More to the point, the matter of the relation between art and philosophy

could be considered (in other terms than those suggested by Plato) only once it was admitted that reason was not the only way in which one could relate to the world. Thus, romanticist poets felt that poetry was the true philosophy or the supreme form of wisdom. At this point we will approach some of the issues concerning the effects that the developments of aesthetics have had on the philosophical discourse and the reactions of some philosophers concerning the aesthetic grid of understanding philosophy.

One of the most important romanticist authors who have approached these matters was Friedrich Schlegel. Together with other romantic thinkers, he believed not only that poetry and literature are the supreme form of wisdom (of philosophy), but also that philosophy itself must take on the form of literature. Thus, romanticism manifested as far as means of expression are concerned, as a reaction to the philosophical system (firstly, as a reaction to Kant's philosophy and aesthetics, beginning with Schiller, but also as a reaction to Schelling's philosophical system). What romantics couldn't accept in systematical philosophy was, first of all, its scientific nature. As Heidegger pointed out, „the system is not a mere ordering of a school subject... and what is worth knowing in order to be transmitted...the system is the internal structuring of the very object that can be known” [4]. Among the features of the system, the following are to be detained: the predominance of mathematics, the supereminence of certainty over truth, the discovery of the first truth within the subject (ego cogito), the subordination of the being to the subjective certainty. The system is „the will for a mathematical system of reason” [4], and the history of the system intermingles with the history of modern science. Also, the construction of a philosophical system which addresses the

issue of art (as in Schelling's works) implies the fact that a totalizing grid (a scientific, rigorous one) must be applied, a grid which, according to the romanticists, has no ties to the artistic spirit.

For example, in Schelling, we encounter the idea, which is mathematically inferred from the system that „the true construction of art is a presentation of its forms as forms of things as those things are in themselves or as they are within the absolute” [11, 32]. Art is a real representation of the form of things; poetry, as *poiesis* (creation) – is the essence of any art – and it is its ideal side. Poetry creates the ideas and, in this sense, it is the principle of all arts: „ The universal form of poesy in the larger sense is that it portrays the ideas in speech and language” [11, 204]. However, this reference of art to the idea, the only one which allows art to be constructed as a system, could not meet the views of the romantic theorists who were attached to poetic creation and to the belief that art is the product of poetic genius; the creative activity of the poetic genius does not pertain to the „idea”. Truth in art is not the same as truth in science; therefore the form of art and of the discourse about art cannot be the form of science. Here is why romantic authors „wrote a different kind of philosophy, an aphoristic, subjective and convulsive one” [6]. The most important argument against the system is taken from philosophy: according to Schlegel, Plato did not practice the systematic form of thought, since, for the Greek philosopher, philosophy was „more of a search, an aspiration towards science than a science as such” [6]. Plato's writings are never finished, and turning to myths and to dialog shows that the aim of thinking is never attained. Just like poetry and art in general, philosophy has to be the product of the philosopher's life and, as the form of expression of the creative individuality, of

what is finite and unfinished, it needs to have a fragmentary form. With each philosopher, it takes on a different aspect. For the Romantics, the fragment is „a literary genre and a form of thinking” [6]; it is not the work of hazard, it is not a work which has become a fragment, it is a fragmentary composed work.

„The romantic fragment is from the outset a whole” [6] and it is evaluated from the perspective of the „laws of the work of art” [6]. Namely, because it signifies, on the level of form, that which any work of art is in its content (the expression of human finitude), the fragment has a symbolic function: a part carries within it the whole and symbolizes it as a finite work. Assuming that we could admit the existence of a philosophical system, this would only be possible in the sense that philosophy is a system of „letters, autobiographies, novels and fragments” [6]. The fragment expresses „the real breath of human thinking, of live thinking; in this instance, „system” does not mean an internal structure which provides its foundation and its established configuration, but a mere external congeries” [4].

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, brings an interesting inversion in the evaluation of this matter. Art is now in the position to decide towards philosophy, and vice versa. Postmodernism reconfigures the terms so that the concept becomes an „effect” of intuition. Philosophy, such as it has been defined up to this point, in the strong sense of seeking the truth of an ideal nature, comes to be perceived as a form of violence. Together with the loss of confidence in „the great narrations” [7] and the claims of ultimate foundation of modernity, it is no longer an exercise of science, but an artistic one, which comes to constitute a model for philosophical writing. One example is the closeness between philosophy and literature in

Richard Rorty’s writings. Philosophy oscillates between a self-image modeled according to the Kuhnian *normal science*, in which insignificant problems are dealt with one by one, definitively, and a self-image modeled according to *the revolutionary science* in which (...) philosophers are concerned with describing phenomena all over again, in a new vocabulary [9, 9]. This final condition of „ironist” philosophy, understood according to the model of literature, not of science in the modern sense, is the one which, according to Rorty, makes the discourse of contingency and suppression of cruelty possible.

Another understanding of the way in which art and philosophy come to enter into a dialog is that of taking into account concepts that belong to both fields and pointing out how their significance depends on the presuppositions of the artistic demarche, respectively on those of philosophical knowledge. Such a case has already been mentioned: beauty, which is par excellence an aesthetic concept, becomes for Plato, in *Phaedrus*, a means of transposing the sensitive form into the ideal form. Commenting on this passage, Martin Heidegger states that beauty „transposes us into the contemplation of the Being” [4], gaining an important philosophical function. Art becomes a philosophical gesture to the extent in which beauty is essentially mediator of meanings, which would otherwise be unreachable. As an aesthetic concept, beauty is consumed at the level of the object and of the relation of the subject to the object. Philosophical „beauty” is one which makes the transition from the object to something else, also making it a sign of the insufficiency of looking at things.

Hans Georg Gadamer [1] speaks in the same manner about the experience of truth which evades theoretical rationality, the dominant one in the modern concept of

philosophy. Art, acting or history are examples of fields in which modernity's concept of truth can no longer be effective. The aesthetic experience, for example, redefines the concept of truth as hermeneutical truth. Gadamer starts from the description of the experience of poetry as a particular experience of language in order to ask the following question: „in what sense there can be truth in such a word?” [1, 107]. Gadamer answers by pointing out the specificity of the poetic act, namely „the highest fulfillment of that revealing [...] which is the achievement of all speech” [1, 112]. Poetry neither describes the world, nor does it represent the simple objectivity of a subjective experience, that of the creator: it is a way of assuming a „familiarity with the world” [1, 100] by stepping out of the incomprehensible torrent of impressions. Poetry, according to Gadamer, brings the world closer, in the manner of a construction which makes it comprehensible, coherent and durable. The truth, in this case, does not mean a closed world adequacy between itself and a statement that attempts to describe. The truth of the poetic creation, according to Gadamer, consists in the experience of drawing the world closer: „A genuine poem, on the other hand, allows us to experience a „nearness” in such a way that this nearness it held in and through the linguistic form of the poem” [1, 113].

### 3. The aesthetical value in society

Aesthetics is not the only discipline which studies the matter of values; there are as many sciences of value as there are types of values. Of these, the ones that particularly command attention are ethics and economy, disciplines which cover very different values, such as moral value (in retrospect to a norm) and material value (in retrospect to the process of trading goods).

A classification of values is easily undertaken according to purely empirical criteria but it is difficult to make such a classification according to systematic criterion. Before we start classifying values, perhaps we should classify the criteria of classification. Still, we might be able to distinguish a principle of method if we take into account the fact that values are never found in a relation of coordination, since we are unable to perceive them in any other way than a hierarchy. Thus, a criterion for „classification” within everyone's reach would be that of the hierarchy of preferences, considering that the values that most people adhere to are *the values of necessity*, and those that an increasingly smaller number of people adhere to are *the values of freedom*. Through this we have also suggested a minimum classification, but we can simply consider that there is a scale of values that starts with material values and ends with spiritual values. We see such a classification in the works of Nicolai Hartman [2], who insists on the idea that values do not constitute a unitary series and suggests the following classes: 1) values of goods (of direct usefulness, of the means and of the ratio of fact; 2) values of pleasure (of agreeable); 3) values of a vital nature (favorable to the stimulation of lives); 4) moral values (of goodness); 5) aesthetic values (of beauty) and 6) values of knowledge (the truth). Each of the classes of values is hierarchically structured and is made up of subclasses. [2]. Just the category of knowledge includes only one value and perhaps this is why Hartmann places it on the top of the hierarchy. Concerning the first three classes of values, the author says they cannot be separated through a clear frontier, as is the case of pleasure and vital value, because pleasure is neither a characteristic of the object, nor a general form of reference to an object, but it is

actually related to subjective feeling. It is the same in the case of material or economic values, since a „good” is not considered good in itself, but related to the needs (including the vital needs) of a person. As far as the last three types of values are concerned, although they do not belong to the object, they are considered independent, as having certain autonomy in relation to the valorized objects. In Greek philosophy they made up the good-truth-beauty triad, which is especially present in Plato’s philosophy [2].

Max Scheler grouped moral, aesthetic and knowledge values in the category of „spiritual values” and to this class he has added religious values. Spiritual values refer neither to „something”, nor to „someone”, they are not named as such because their bearer is „the spirit”, but precisely because they objectify (and make autonomous) themselves both by reference to the natural world and to the „world” of conscience, and at the same time, they lack of validity in their absence [10].

The spiritual values would not exist in the absence of things that have validity or of the consciences which deems those things valid. Values have no existence „in themselves” they are „objectifications” of the world of life. For example, the category of aesthetic values has as its scope the entire existence, to the extent that one can say that „anything that is possible in the world can be the bearer of this value” [2]. The bond between beauty and the world of the sensible appearance brings closer the esthetic values to the inferior values and it justifies their setting below the moral values. One cannot say about the latter that they refer to anything that exists or may exist in the world, since their only scope is that of human actions. They are a sphere of phenomena that is independent from the natural world (from the „savage objects”), and therefore further apart from the material values, those of

pleasure and of life. „This is because aesthetic values can belong to anything that exists, while the ethical ones can only belong to man” [2]. However, the relation between the moral and the aesthetic values is one matter that has always been of interest to philosophers; there is the possibility of discussing the moral value of beauty, as well as the aesthetic value of a moral act. Truth, as the sole value of knowledge, could be considered a supreme value since it tends to the highest extent to become an *objective* value, meaning one which is universally valid. In other words, truth is the one value that is more likely to gain the unanimous approval of mankind. If Max Scheler introduces religious values among spiritual ones this is because in the discussion on values, the divine being represents the idea of the source of values, for which good, truth and beauty would hold significance without any need of referring to the world of good, truthful and beautiful things [10]. This idea originates in western metaphysics and it rather concerns the matter of the metaphysical status of values.

Concerning this matter, one of the most popular interpretations was given by the Neo-Kantians of Baden, represented by Heinrich Rickert and Wilhelm Windelband. Rickert believes that values should be situated in the proximity of ideal objects, since they are however similar in the sense that they are unreal, timeless and objective. The values are valid, autonomous and they depend neither on the individual subject, nor on the valuable things. From this point of view, they resemble Plato’s ideas, since they are transcendent. Their existence can only be assumed in the ontological sense by renouncing the realist approach, but this does not mean that they are not valid. Therefore, values are not mistaken for the objects to which they adhere. The distinction between goods and values is

meant to underline precisely this characteristic of values. *The autonomy of values* means, first of all, that they do not disappear together with the objects that embody them [2]. We cannot imagine that the physical disappearance of a beautiful object somehow alters the image of beauty as an esthetic value. *The bipolar nature* of values, the fact that values come in pairs, meaning that a positive value has an opposite negative value (and not the lack of value) essentially contributes to the perennial nature of values.

With regard to the matter of the autonomy of values [2] it is worth noting the special status which aesthetic values have in the ensemble of the values of the „world”. Namely, on the one hand, we cannot say that the aesthetic value of a work of art is equal to that of the materials used by the artist to create it. In the case of a painting, its aesthetic value is not given by the canvas, by the oils and by the colors that the artist has used. Considered independently, these are merely „goods”, their value is that of simple means. At the same time, the material of a work of art, especially in the case of imitative arts, has some aesthetic qualities in itself [2]. A block of marble is more beautiful than a block of stone, and colors, by their very nature have an aesthetic value of their own (as Goethe, who spoke of the symbolic value of colors pointed out). Such an example allows us to better understand the complexity of the issue of values, as, for example, the idea that each class of values contains numerous subclasses. In the case of aesthetic values, it can be said that the beauty of things is gradual. This idea would allow us to treat the matter of the hierarchy of aesthetic values from the Aristotelian perspective of the connection between form and matter, in the sense that the hierarchy of values would be determined by the idea of the finality of the aesthetic act. For example, we can say that

the beauty of a block of marble is „matter” for a superior „form”, which would be the beauty of a statue. When defining beauty, Kant used to say that it is finality without a purpose, it is an object which we use as reference disinterestedly [5]. Therefore, it cannot be thought of as an intermediate goal with a view to attaining another goal (this would imply the faculty of wish, which is not aesthetic). As a result, it isn't a relative value (it doesn't depend on another value) either. Still, we can conceive the situation in which a block of marble is considered to be „beautiful” only if it serves as the material for a „beautiful” statue, or in which granite is more beautiful than marble when considering a particular architecture.

The beauty of a material is therefore relative to the beauty of a work of art; in this case, the Aristotelian relation between form and matter works, the material is not raw matter, it is a matter invested with certain significances and values. Not only it is considered that gold is beautiful, it is also considered to be „noble”, or „pure” or „eternal”, and this fact places the evaluation of an object made of gold on a wider scale of values than one would expect. In respect to this matter, Tudor Vianu said that „art processes a material, but this material is not expressionless, it is illuminated and impregnated beforehand by the significance of certain values, and only when constituted as such does it enter the sphere of the artist” [13]. For Vianu, this finding is important in order to place the work of art under the sign of value heteronomy. The heteronomist perspective is opposed to some reductionist theories which have tried to reduce aesthetic values to ethic values, starting especially from the status of certain esthetic genres, such as poetry or literature [13] (where the opposition between good and evil is most often the axis around which the substance of the work of art is constituted).

The relation between the ethical and the aesthetic values has always been a subject of discussion for the philosophers who have researched the aesthetic field. Thus, in modern times, Hegel believed that the accomplishment of the spirit implies the priority of content over form and, since this content has a moral dimension (connected to the accomplishment of freedom), it is understood that the ethical values subordinate the aesthetic ones [3]. The opposite perspective has been supported by Neo-Kantian philosophers. For example, Herman Cohen supports the idea that „nature and morality are lowered to the role of materials for the arts”. When referring to this matter, Nicolai Hartmann drew attention to the fact that „the aesthetic value is not the value of the act, but the value of the object, while the moral value is essential to the act” [2]. When the act is integrated in the work of art, its value must be integrated to the aesthetic value which must prevail. The final argument of the mentioned author is that „what is humanly interior and pertains to the heart is not beautiful, as such, it is merely its sensitive appearance in that which can be seen or can be represented visually which is beautiful” [2].

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