

**International Congress of Aesthetics 2007  
“Aesthetics Bridging Cultures**

**The Power and Its Disrupting by Art**

**(Notes on the Concept of Artwork in Jan  
Patočka’s Thought)**

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**Introduction**

In the year of the 30th anniversary of Jan Patočka’s death, one still recognizes the actuality of ideas of this Czech thinker.<sup>1</sup> In some of his essays, Patočka reflects on modern comprehension of reality. Patočka shows that modern science regards nature as absolutely inorganic, it means as a system of abstract scientific formulas. Nature is conceived as a totally predictable and exploitable system. It is a system of usable potentialities, an immense source of energy.<sup>2</sup> This modern scientific view of nature also concerns humans. Humans are considered to be the “items” in the process of accumulation and transformation of usable natural forces; they are “accumulated, calculated, utilized, and manipulated”.<sup>3</sup> This scientific view of nature determines life in all domains: in the social, economical, political, ecological, and even in the private one. Arising from this general scientific view of nature, the technological development of industrial production creates a self-governing system, a system of “untied production”.<sup>4</sup> Industrial production absorbs distribution, capable of planning future consumption. This production surpasses natural demands, creates unnatural ones and forces consumers to expend all their powers to gain products on offer. This situation inevitably results in a “hidden imprisonment” of mankind, the imprisonment of the consumer. In connection with it, Patočka focuses on the process of graduation of power “in the third person”. It is this power “in the third person”, which uses humans as tools in the process of its own development, in the process of its own strengthening. On the one hand, the process of industrial production is started by man. On the other hand, the humans become the part of this objective process.

In general, one could agree with Patočka’s concept of power, even if the present shows many new ways by which power realizes its domination, especially in the domain of publicity and mass media. Proliferation of advertising, of political and ideological images has created a very coherent and sophisticated system, which can be regarded as a new demonstration of extensive impact of the power on social reality.

One might also agree with Patočka’s idea that the domination of the power is not absolute. In his essay *Art and Time* (1966), Patočka considers art as one of the effective ways of disrupting the power.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps only art is able to confirm human freedom.

## **Different periods in the cultural history of art**

Reflecting on the role of the art in society, Patočka recognizes two different periods in the cultural history of mankind. The first period is called an “epoch of artistic culture”.<sup>6</sup> At that time, art was the predominant way of approaching the world. Man understood the truth of the world primarily through the works of art. Deity was revealed through art, and human gaze penetrated the art directly to truth, which governs the world. Artwork was not recognized as such, that is as an independent reality; the viewer's gaze went through the artwork as if through a window to the reality, which was to be grasped. Art presented a method of “living out, feeling and thinking” certain “religious or ritual questions”, an access to a “festive, extra-ordinary, deciding and divine” aspect of the world. This period lasted from the pre-historical ages through the 19th century.

Patočka supposes that the second period started in the 19th century, lasting up to the present. This period is called either an “epoch of aesthetic culture” or a “reflected epoch”.<sup>7</sup> Abstract terms were the predominant tool of approaching the world. All objects have been scientifically analyzed, including artworks, among others. This period has been characterized by the constitution of new scientific disciplines, aesthetics and historiography of art. The new scientific disciplines have carried out extensive research and offered important discoveries. Artistic production has been revealed as a special sort of activity distinguishable from purely technical activity. Concrete problems concerning artworks have been solved with the help of analysis, on the basis of determination of abstract relations and laws. The artwork has been recognized as such, as an independent reality. The viewer's gaze dwells on the artwork itself. The artwork does not refer to something outside of itself.

Patočka describes the process of changing function and character of artistic production with the help of Gehlen's and Ingarden's concepts of visual arts.<sup>8</sup> Gehlen's theory of the layers of the “image-rationality” presupposes that there are three layers of sense in the artwork: the layer of formal elements, the layer of primary objects and the layer of secondary ideas. Patočka shows the art has been gradually simplified in its layer structure. In the 19th century, the art lost the layer of secondary ideas, i.e., the layer of mythological and religious notions. During the 20th century, the layer of primary objects, which is the layer of imitated natural objects, disappeared. In spite of being partially restored by, for instance, Mondrian or Kandinsky, the layer of secondary ideas existed only as a part of the particular artworks in the 20th century. The spectator is no longer bound to believe in expressed philosophical or religious meanings. Correspondingly, Patočka interprets Ingarden's conception of “metaphysical quality”, or of a certain atmosphere, which gathers around objects depicted in the image. In the past, the metaphysical quality presented predominantly the mystery of divinity. It presented “harmonic grandeur” and this presentation created beauty of the artwork. Patočka also shows that the metaphysical quality of the image has lost its persuasiveness and is no longer binding. The result of this loss is a feeling of disharmony, resulting from a clash between many different metaphysical qualities of equivalent validity.

## **The artwork as an opening of a world?**

Patočka supposes that the artworks of both the “artistic epoch” and the “aesthetic epoch” always open a certain “world”.<sup>9</sup> He builds on Martin Heidegger's and Eugen Fink's concepts of the artwork as an opening of a certain world or, in other words, certain horizon

of human existence. This opening of the world is always considered as an opening of being itself. This world enables the fundamental orientation of human existence, this world shows what is a human, what is a thing, and what an animal, as Heidegger supposed.<sup>10</sup> Patočka assumes that the opening of the complete world remains a fundamental operation performed by the artwork. Patočka insists on this opening of the world by the artwork, on this opening of horizon even if – as he admits – the status of this horizon radically changed during the last centuries. The art is no longer able to open the objective and binding world, but the subjective one is offered. Patočka supposes that the art of the present does not depict the world, but expresses it. It is important that Patočka considers that expression to be conclusive evidence of human freedom.<sup>11</sup> The artwork is thus the evidence that man is not a mere “accumulator or transformer” of natural forces.<sup>12</sup> The artwork on the contrary proves that man is “a real creative source, freedom”.<sup>13</sup> The art presents a “massive protest” against the subordination of human beings to the objective process of untied production, to the process of strengthening of power.<sup>14</sup>

Patočka’s approach is certainly marked by the idea of modernism. Patočka calls the art of the first epoch the “traditional art”, and the art of the second epoch the “modern art”.<sup>15</sup> Patočka considers abstract art to be the only relevant art of the present, other types of paintings definitely belong to history. It seems that Patočka considers these types to be actually dead. In this respect we are reminded of Patočka’s numerous and interesting interpretations of Hegel’s aesthetic conception.<sup>16</sup> Also the essay *Art and Time* presents certain interpretations of one of Hegel’s fundamental aesthetic notions, the notion of the concept of a “past-character” of the art.<sup>17</sup> Aided by Hegel’s concept, the situation of contemporary art is shown: Patočka supposes that only the traditional art is dead, not the art as such, as Hegel thought. Patočka shows that Hegel was able to predict a deep crisis of the art nearly one hundred years before the crisis began and considers that this crisis of the art, originating at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, has deeply changed the character and the role of the artworks. All imitative art is dead, as well as all art with serious religious ambitions. But the contemporary situation at the beginning of the 21st century proves Patočka’s view to be wrong. No type of painting is definitively lost: figurative paintings, landscapes, and even religious paintings all exist along with abstract compositions.

It is also difficult to maintain that the contemporary art is able to create or open complete worlds, complete horizons of human existence. The contemporary art – multimedia installations, artistic actions and provocations as well as video clips – presents only a certain onset of the creation or opening of the world, indicating a certain horizon of human existence. This horizon is thus always incomplete, impossible, even subjectively, to live in. We also recognize the important role of humor and irony in the contemporary art, it seems almost impossible for the contemporary artist to be serious. It seems almost impossible to deal with something tragic or deep without a recognizable dose of humor. Amusedly, the artist turns towards the artworks of the past to comment on them, to counterpoint their meanings with the contemporary situation; quizzically the artist also turns towards contemporary ethical, political, economical or ideological opinions.

## Conclusions

If humor or irony presupposes a certain distance from reality and certain critics of it, we find convincing evidence of human freedom in contemporary artworks.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps, Ortega y Gasset's prediction of an approaching period of artistic playfulness has been fulfilled.<sup>19</sup> Art is just a game, it cannot save mankind, and it even cannot save the individual because it will not offer any world, whether objectively or subjectively valid. The art taken as a game frees us from the real world, said Ortega y Gasset, but it is also able to free us from the coherent system of proliferating images. Possibly, the art has undergone another death in the second half of the 20th century, another deep crisis which has changed the character and role of the artwork in society. It is not able to express a certain world of human existence, objective or subjective status of the world notwithstanding. What is dead is the artwork as an opening of a certain complete world of human existence, what is left is the artwork as an innovative or provocative human gesture, a gesture which disrupts or subverts the dominating power.

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Patočka (1907–1977) is generally considered to be one of the most important Czech philosophers of the 20th century. He studied in Prague, Paris, Berlin and Freiburg, where he was a pupil of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Patočka dealt mainly with the problem of „natural world“, especially with its structure consisting of three fundamental movements of existence. Working on the problem of natural world, he elaborated namely Husserl's, Heidegger's and Fink's concepts. The most significant Patočka's works are *Natural World as a Philosophical Problem* (Patočka, Jan. *Přirozený svět jako filozofický problém*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1992; first edition in 1936), *An Introduction to the Husserl's Phenomenology* (Patočka, Jan. *An Introduction to the Husserl's Phenomenology*. Chicago/La Salle: Open Court, 1996; first edition in 1965) and *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History* (Patočka, Jan. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Chicago/La Salle: Open Court, 1996; first edition in 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Patočka, Jan. *Umění a čas*. In Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2004. 311–312.

<sup>3</sup> Patočka, Jan. *Heretical Essays in the Philosophy of History*, Chicago/La Salle: Open Court, 1996. 116.

<sup>4</sup> Patočka, Jan. *Umění a čas*. In Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2004. 311–312.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 314.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 306–307.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 307.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 308–309.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 315–316.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*. In Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1963. 32.

<sup>11</sup> Patočka, Jan. *Umění a čas*. In Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2004. 315–316.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 316.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 306, 310.

<sup>16</sup> Patočka, Jan. *K vývoji Hegelových estetických názorů*. In Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2004. 216–226. Patočka, Jan. *Hegelův filozofický a estetický vývoj*. In Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*. Praha, OIKOYMENH, 2004. 227–302. Patočka, Jan. *Učení o minulém rázu umění*. In Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*. Praha, OIKOYMENH, 2004. 319–347.

<sup>17</sup> Patočka, Jan. *Umění a čas*. In Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I*. Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2004. 304–306.

<sup>18</sup> Bergson, Henri. *Le Rire. Essai sur la signification du comique*. Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1929. 128–133.

<sup>19</sup> Ortega y Gasset, José. *La deshumanización del arte*. In José Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte y otros ensayos estéticos*. Madrid: Revista de occidente, 1970. 59–67.