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Power Play

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The paper examines once again the relation between art and politics, this time from the viewpoint of politically motivated enforcement of autonomy, not from the viewpoint of curtailing autonomy. The sporting term «power play» refers to the difference in the number of players in a match; here it is used as a reference to power relations. The starting point is once again the difference between Th.W.Adorno's and Niklas Luhmann's views on autonomy.

There is no shortage of insights concerning the influence of politics on many fields of human productivity, including on what is fairly recently (since half a millennium) called art in the singular: a word embracing a number of diverse activities. Power and politics require defining as well.

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. In the English translation: ”By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as something ‘socially useful’ (the artwork) criticizes society by merely existing”

Niklas Luhman (who is sometimes revered and sometimes ignored) explains art as a sub-system developing auto-poetic capacities but without being necessarily critical or subversive. The thesis to be examined is that political institutions may well insist on art being completely separated from their influence. When does “politics” try to keep “art” uncontaminated?

The first and obvious reason: to prevent direct criticism.

Art should ignore politics because it would otherwise be critical: the possibility of being praised is not enough, far better to promote a generally affirmative character of a separate realm..

The second is the so-called European and Western systemic reason.

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...

What is going on right now?

Venice, Kassel etc. show political art ; it is very much accepted and praised, even priced - and mostly needs more power support than any other kind.

So let us put art and politics in proper context to state the case. Whose power play should we fear or covet?

Where are we when we are thinking? Or, more to the point, where are the artists when they produce? We are more then used to questions of identity, that is, questions of *who* is thinking or producing art or being represented. The "who" is often defined contextually and identity presented as collective, preferably in need of recognition. For decades now, and with excellent reason, we have questioned claims of universality, outing the particular interests masked as universal. Their goal certainly was not create a world of self-sufficient particularities. We have to translate.

Translation is at the same time boring and fascinating.¹ Translating is possible and translation is limited. A very great number of us work with two codes, the vernacular and the international. We assume a fairly stable code of shared meaning but know at the same time that we can not presuppose a context that is exhaustively definable. In thinking we assume a free consciousness; able to oversee the totality of meaning, but thinking has taught us to allow for the pre-reflexive and the ante-predicative.

Pure presence is an unattainable goal, even if it appears to be the simplest of all demands. The body escapes our thought. We neither are bodies nor have them: we are displaced. We are constantly engaged in translation...

In a formulation of Jean-Jacques Lecercle²: theory's moment of imposture or intervention is translation. The incorporation of otherness is also the basic gesture of culture.

Using Jonathan Friedman's panorama of cultural strategies as a starting point I will try to construct a typology of aesthetic attitudes. Are aesthetic elements no-coercive? Friedmann assumes a complex process of global transformation, just as the modernist cultural strategy had a global impact and global aspirations so the decline of modernist identity. What is a modernist cultural strategy? 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". Then there are some high-level variations: nostalgia, camp, pastiche.

Concerning the traditionalist-religious-ethnic: the failure of the modern project leads to the acute need to join a larger project and such where identity is fixed and concrete irrespective of personal success, mobility etc. In religion: fundamentalist, ethnicity bound. We have to see the unique cause of bad and good choices. We do not mind local based, community oriented groups are anti-ethnic, mankind oriented concrete, ecological or green strategy.

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.

A preliminary conclusion about identity as occurring in the context of art and politics:

IDENTITY IS PRODUCED BY POWER OPERATING ON CULTURAL PRODUCTS.

Some further points: there are cultures with different rules and games, so that you have to know about the whole of a culture if you want for instance to understand a work of art (we may quote Wittgenstein on that and add there might be enjoyment without understanding)). We know as well that things happen, cultures disappear or deteriorate, we know we can change our cultural environment and we know we use culture to conquer, to manipulate (Todorov). We also know about the problem of radical objectivity, as stated by Bernard Williams: if one actually succeeds in viewing the interests and concerns of all agents, including oneself, from a genuinely detached perspective, there seems to be no motivation left for acting in any particular way at all.

A quote from a work of ethnography: "Constructed and migrating through a grid of sites that constitute fragments rather than a community of any sort, an identity is a disseminating phenomenon that has a life of its own beyond the simple literal sense of inhering in particular human agents at a particular site and time. Its meanings are always deferred in any one text/ site to other possible loci of its production through the diverse range of mental associations and references with which any human actor can creatively operate, literally through the contingencies of events and sometimes through an explicit politics for or against the establishment of identities in particular places." (George Marcus).

The first question we have to deal with wanting to determine our heritage or our exclusion from it. In the case of Europe the claim is to equal Europe with modernity, modernity seen as the outcome of a development, a project. 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: 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.

Modernity in the more narrow sense usually means the changes in the arts somewhere around the beginning of our century. That concept is rather difficult to handle because it usually unites two rather different approaches: what happened was, first, an even more radical separation of the aesthetic realm, aestheticism and the language of formal purity and, second (or more or less simultaneously), all kinds of attempts to abolish the difference between art and life, between fiction and practice, to do something about the irreconcilable nature of aesthetic and social worldviews: both the excluding and the merging attempts spanning the whole century in different and constantly renewed endeavors, in strong and weak varieties, wanting a revolution or just trying to connect artistic experience and everyday life on one hand and on the other just upholding the institution of art or claiming to be the ultimate and pure form of it.

Let me explain. For decades already the so-called intellectuals, i.e. all kinds of producers of artefacts 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, others 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. So we have to ask once again what might be a crisis in culture. Borrowing the ideas of Hannah Arendt's seminal essay 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 artefacts, 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.

If the great change in social life can be seen as the living proof of the validity of at least one principle, for instance democracy as a clearly defined procedure of making decisions concerning the life of the whole society: is there a way to order the other spheres? In Putnam's writings learning is explained as improving our standards of rationality, re-enforcing them through this very process. The arts should according to the concept of their autonomy be excluded from this obligation to advance but they obviously move and change.

Does aesthetization relieve us of the burden of ethical responsibility?

Starting with the expressive paradigm, with romanticism as the moment of expressivist turn, as Charles Taylor puts it: the assumption is that expressive fulfillment is compatible with morality, that an aesthetically realized life is also moral. Schopenhauer already questions it, Baudelaire and of course Nietzsche completely rejects it, seeing truth only as reality tamed for our needs and wanting "spirits strengthened by war and victory, for whom conquest, adventure, danger, and even pain have become needs; it would require habitation to the keen air of heights, to winter journeys, to ice and mountains in every sense; it would require even a kind of sublime wickedness, an ultimate, supremely self-confident mischievousness in knowledge that goes with great health." There are of course impressive statements about the aesthetic attitude, the aesthetic judgment as a force for good. Again with Hannah

Arendt I want to stress how Kant's *Critique of Judgment* deals with the political dimension of taste, with the public quality of beauty. Judgments of taste do not compel in the sense of demonstrable facts or truth, but we do with them "woo the consent of everyone else". The presupposition is the so-called "enlarged mentality", "eine erweiterte Denkungsart", an ability to put oneself in the place of someone else. Such judgment liberates itself from subjective private conditions, it means transcending individual limitations - tolerance and a easy burden of identities.

In the world we live we are often called to judge thing that indeed do challenge our ability to transcend individual limitations. Anthropologist are of course specially obliged to develop the described kind of moral imagination and someone like Clifford Geertz is trying to do exactly that, prepared to accept the necessity of blurred genres. It seems that the anthropological experience makes us somewhat uneasy about the possibility to isolate strategic actions. Geertz uses or tries out his refiguration of social thought on a really difficult example, a late 19th century description of human sacrifice on Bali, the death in flames of widows: a text he assumes to possess "the mysterious conjunction of beauty when it is taken as a work of art, horror when it is taken as actually lived life, and power when it is taken as a moral vision". We do not explore it know from the viewpoint of differences and similarities between us and others removed in place or period but from the viewpoint of the experience of high artistry and high cruelty, the structure of a ritual .

The next preliminary conclusion: *every aesthetic approach reverting to a kind of ritual obliterates the moral sensibility.*

In warfare you used to deal with geometry, patterns. Clausewitz warned that you have to subordinate it to the global strategy. We know about the most influential views on the aesthetization of war both from Walter Benjamin and from Ernst Jünger. Never again people will wage war with the pre-first war imagination. Ugliness, cruelty, filth, stench, atrocities, an awareness of ironic twists of fate:the general picture is changed. Only a small part of participants will feed their imagination on literature. There must be even coins and corners of our world without *M.A.S.H.*, *Rambo* and comics. But it seems that even the most unheroic elements can be fed back into a ritual. It seems to start in a strikingly simple way : snipers are making symmetrical patterns, not just chosing victims. There is form observed in destruction. To go once again back to an academic source, to Jane Harrison on art and ritual: ritual is a re-presentation or a pre-presentation, a re-doing or a pre-doing, a copy or imitation of life but - and this is important, always with a practical end, a strategic one. Art is cut loose from immediate action, it does not mediate, ritual is the bridge between real life and art. Rituals enacted today are a kind of secondary ritualization, a bricolage activity using up jet and flotsam and mixing it into orally transmitted memories. The primary orality is mixed up with the secondary orality of the electronic media, rituals of lingering faith interspersed by a strange choreography of new warriors waging the war of the forebears.

Others have recently written about a new approach to survival and the new relation between the heroic and everyday life. What is said enforces the view that strategic decisions made in the contemporary world are less and less clearly articulated, the global system prevents the clear defining of interests but does not offer peaceful resolutions of conflicts. Interests are usually formulated as unalienable rights of a collective nature, freedom, self-determination, the importance of national identity. Usually that means a rather simple way of justifying one's actions.

What is it then that we are talking about? The experience some kinds of action become more acceptable, easier to perform when the issues are blurred, when there are redundant elements, an addition seemingly unnecessary in terms of strategic decisions. The whole issue is of course connected with they way we analyze subjectivity and identity, on the simplest

level: do we live life as a unity or are we different, even separate persons at each stage of our life (cf. Galen Strawson). Is the biographical unity we achieve through narratives true or false: are human actions enacted narratives? Is the notion of character obsolete (and with it moral consistency and sincerity) and what we have now, if anything is rather a sort of self styling personality, seen through techniques of self-representation? We can not afford any more to muse about it in a detached and leisurely way. Living where we live and assuming responsibility for our actions we try to find out if there is a stable common ground, something we can take for granted..

"We live in exactly one world, not two or three or seventeen. As far as we currently know, the most fundamental features of that world are as described by physics, chemistry, and the other natural sciences. But the existence of phenomena that are not in any obvious way physical or chemical gives rise to puzzlement." Searle's opening sentences from the *Construction of Social Reality* are an example of the one-world view, a view, a view widely accepted as one of the "final vocabularies" a Rortyan ironist rejects. Still, even more people use some variety of a two-worlds vocabulary, constructed around a binary opposition of the type we have recently being taught to deconstruct. Pragmatists and neopragmatists have no trouble with "up to seventeen" and even more worlds; Goodmann explores ways of world-making concerned with the coherence and fairness of given samples, not with the futile effort to confront particular worlds or try to make them compatible. Cassirer's philosophy develops the idea of a multitude of worlds from the starting point of the mainstream tradition, Kant's critique of metaphysics.

In the first final vocabulary I have learned to justify my believe and my actions: nature was suspect as a ideological category, a secularization of a non-human agency beyond our control. Naturalizing, the process of representing the cultural and historical as natural, was the result of ideological discourses, a major force in the maintenance of hegemony.

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. 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. Almost, but not quite, not only because of Hegel's often simplified diagnosis about the waning importance of art but once again because of anthropologist, for instance Mary Douglas's almost random question about art may be becoming impossible the moment its function becomes too conscious, people producing art to clearly aware of their enterprise.

The system of Art (with a capital A uniting all of them) was founded on the agreement that art is the imitation of an ideal Nature and that imitation is the common task of different forms of art

For our purpose we just want to stress the *taming* of the nature/art relation when nature is primarily the subject matter and not the all embracing environment you have to make less real to be able to deal with it. Taming or simplifying is a way to insure the ongoing production of artworks.

I do not hesitate to take this to its extreme consequences. To go back to 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, the way of finding solutions, giving satisfaction and enlightenment without having in advance a problem, task or set of rules.

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 artefacts, their "transfiguration of the commonplace".

I Are artworks something else, are they somewhere else, do they tell about somewhere else?

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.

The problem, as expected from the acknowledged starting-point, is: does it concern the whole of art or not. Is the "negative" self-denying asceticism of what Adorno considered the only authentic art possible, utopian? What about concepts like "utopian rationalism" as opposed to expressionism: utopian rationalism meaning, presumably: modernism, that is the idea of art going somewhere or already having achieved the goal.

The icons from the Sixties, picked at random, like Dylan, Godard, Guevara stand for a comparatively wide range of things. Something of this utopian spirit but more related to the usual conception of art lives in the sentences of Frederic Jameson: "I will briefly suggest, that the willed and violent transformation of a drab peasant object world into the most glorious materialization of pure colour 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."³

An utopian compensation: does that mean a false solution? Or is it a preview? There is of course the whole new field of "Lebenskunst", the art of living saved from aestheticism and bound to new ideas about space, urban life, community. But I am interested in the possibility and future of the enduring, worldmaking, I would even say stable, fixed artworks, things we can go back to.

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..."⁴

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. That is all what's left : but do we want to *dispell* or *disenchant* ? Is our reluctance a private variety of the process that burdens the art of modernity, of the disenchanted world with a surrogate holiness?

The "Index" in Danto's *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* does not have an entry for "utopia" or "utopian". The elaborate and subtle analysis of borderline cases in contemporary art ends with a curiously flat statement: "As a work of art, the Brillo box does more than insist that it is a Brillo box under surprising metaphoric attributes. It does what Works of art have always done- externalising away of viewing the world, expressing the interior of a cultural period, offering itself as a mirror to catch the conscience of our kings."⁵

Goodman, finally, explains the differences the metaphoric eye encounters. Not only the eponymous *Ways of Worldmaking*, already in the *Languages of Art*. His work is less about construction and more about inherent rightness of different samples but the inescapability of symbolic systems and of their diversity can not avoid the result: we are making, shaping and changing worlds.

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 Taylor⁶. 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".

The line developed in this paper is openly ideological, burdening an open and undefined concept ("art") with compensatory functions, looking for an aesthetic surplus to warrant things are still moving ahead. Since the middle 1970s 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.

And the concluding remarks will be concerned with a difficult and distinctive theory on the politics of aesthetics: the work of Jacques Ranciere. His central idea is that the aesthetic dimension is inherent in any radical emancipatory politics.

In Žižek's summary: "The aesthetic metaphor in which a particular element stands for the Universal is enacted in the properly political short-circuit in which a particular demand stands for the universal gesture of rejecting the power that be."⁷

¹ But theories of translation are improving, for example Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, London 1998

² Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, New York 1999

³ Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism", *New Left Review* 146, 1984, p.81

⁴ Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System", in *Local Knowledge*, London 1993

⁵ Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, London 1981, p.208

⁶ Charles Taylor, *The Sources of the Self*, Cambridge 1992, p.419

⁷ In J.Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, London 2004, p.76