

Art, truth and social responsibility

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Abstract

Art has frequently arisen in extreme circumstances. Berthold Brecht created "Mother Courage" in response to Nazism, Pablo Picasso painted "Guernica" in answer to Fascism, Arthur Miller wrote "The Crucible" in response to McCarthyism and Dmitri Shostakovich wrote his Seventh ("Leningrad") Symphony in protest against the Nazi invasion of Russia and Stalinist totalitarianism. The idea that artists should respond to crisis idea raises a number of conceptual puzzles, which require discussion.

It makes sense to ask ourselves how to understand the relation of art to the social world, how to understand the social responsibility of the artist. Different responses are possible. One is to say that by no means all art is born of crisis. Another is to point to the difficulty of formulating an adequate response to the most extreme social situations, such as, to take Adorno's example poetry after the Holocaust.

The view that art has a special social role to play derives from often unexamined assumptions about the relation between art and life. One answer lies in the historic connection at least in the West between art and religion, where the artist can be said to inform us about the sacred realm. This answer is now out of date. The natural tendency to turn to art to tell us about the world and ourselves, but also to help us cope in a wide variety of circumstances, suggests that the artist still plays an important, arguably undiminished social role at a time when the link between art and religion has been decisively weakened.

This assessment is countered by a well known, overly intellectual Western view, which implies that social responsibility is based on access to truth, which is the exclusive appanage of philosophers. According to this view, the artist does not and cannot know, and hence cannot play a socially responsible role. This theoretical view of art runs counter to artistic practice. The aim of this paper is to bring our normative, or theoretical, conception of art more closely in line with artistic practice in identifying and criticizing this view and suggesting another one, closer to what we know about the acknowledged social role of art.