From Transcendence to Kitsch: Have We Lost Faith?

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ABSTRACT
The role played by the artist and the nature of art are two of the most enduring and controversial themes in Western philosophy. Indeed, if we were to trace the history of aesthetics, it seems evident that the role of the artist and the effects of art have been called into question as history crosses over into another age. My concern in this study has to do with the function of art and the artist throughout Western history, which is not so much an emancipatory movement as it is a crisis of transcendence. Likewise, the secular intellectual dogmatism that, in our age, treats literary texts as open documents of linguistics analysis without consideration for the author's intention is less a democratic endeavor than it is a crisis of religious belief.

Artists and critics alike have struggled to define the exact nature, status, and social function of the arts and the artists. The answer is rather historical, that is contingent in character, in the sense that it is the "network of power" to define the ideas we think, the values we have.[1] However, we must have some working definitions. Art is a component of a word; in de Saussure's terms, it is a signifier that signifies something else. In this article, I refer to art in its literary and visual (plastic) expression, hence, I will not consider nonvisual art such as music or performing arts. *Nolens volens*, the concept of art I espouse has to do with culture, cultural phenomenon, or category, so to speak. Believing with Clyde Kluckhohn that culture is "a way of thinking, feeling, and believing" and "an abstraction from behavior" (Geertz 1973, 4), I take art to be a cultural

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1. In *The Order of Things* (1970), Michel Foucault (1926–84) uses the term *épistémè* to describe the leading idea(s) within a given epoch: "In any given culture and at any given moment, there is always only one *episteme* that defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice" (183). The network of power defines what we can say or think within the structure we live in. It defines what truth is. When the power network changes (the discourse of power), what we understand as truth changes along.

Signs and Society, volume 11, number 3, fall 2023.
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https://doi.org/10.1086/726198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

symbol that provides the degree of development of a civilization. The questions are multiple, and the answers change as the structure of power changes. What is the ultimate source of art? The ancients believed in divine inspiration, and Romanticism assumes artistic creation as self-expression, but since the end of the nineteenth century social forces shape the text. Does art as fiction, poetry, painting, and sculpture draw further away from or closer to some sort of universal truth? Next to those who believe that art is purposeless, functionless, or should be, there are those who believe that art reveals higher significance in various forms. Art might disclose eternal truths in a Platonic sense as well as the laws inherent in a society. Art represents an alternative to reality and offers utopian visions. Similarly, is the artist a tradesman working on a craft or a divinely inspired genius? In other words, is art a skill or a gift? Those are not simply academic questions. How we define the role played by art in society has a bearing on how we conceive ourselves, our purpose, and that of civilization.

This article is meant to answer a few of these questions, always keeping in mind three in particular: Why do we produce art? Is it useful? As society is becoming more and more technological, digital, and virtual, do we still need art? They must not be simple issues if we consider that we have been asking those questions for more than two millennia. I will immediately betray my point of view: Art is a weapon against oblivion when forgetting is a crime. This one point will take us to the relation between art and reality. Quoting the famous semiotician Juri Lotman (Lotman and Grishakova 2009, 79), "what is interesting in this case is not so much the work of art where the very possibility of recombination is predetermined by the freedom of fantasy," that is, the domain of artistic creativity, "but rather those facts that relate to a travesty of everyday behaviour"—that is, art functions with respect to reality. What strikes me as potentially controversial is the fact that by anchoring art to reality, we bring to the debating table the concept of ethical evaluation. More in general, the relation between the ethical and aesthetic, between morality and art, constructs the basic model governing the mechanism of culture. The intertwined relation between art and culture has to do with our psyche and the need for "externalization," which I borrow from Jaan Valsiner. Discussing the double process of internalization and externalization in the human body, Valsiner states that we communicate through signs and "*re-compose* them *into new intra-psychic* patterns which are then constructively brought to the sphere of accessibility by others" (2014, 63). The aesthetic dimension of our psyche implies that we cannot reduce the function of art to mere decoration; instead, it is "an essential dimension of meaning-making and of our affective relating to the world" (Tateo 2018,

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6).[2] In this vein, art is surely a sign related to one's uniqueness. But art is also a historical product. Art is dominated by and is an expression of history: "Wherever a society has really achieved culture . . . it has begotten art, not late in its career, but at the very inception of it" (Langer 1966, 5). Indeed, as we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service of rituals, first magical, then religious, and thus in the contexts of traditions and cults. In Walter Benjamin's words, "the unique value of the 'authentic' work of art always has its basis in ritual" (2008, 24).[3] However, the traditional view that arts capture truths that are eternal changed over centuries. In order to summarize the aesthetic discussion, this essay attempts to give an overview of the significance of art through a few defining authors in Western history. Why do I discuss Burke rather than Longinus, Kant rather than Hume? Obviously, because this is not a course on critical theory but rather an article only apparently wide in scope. In fact, I will deal with one specific aspect of art experience, namely, its progressive distancing from the realm of religion, which I do not hesitate to define in its consequence as a cultural decline. That is, the search for transcendence has gradually been replaced by the triumph of kitsch, which is synonymous with lower, in the sense of inferior, aesthetic standards. Therefore, the authors I have chosen are useful (while being enough) for framing the historical, although invisible, shipwreck into an apostate realm. Gabriel Vahanian's *The Death of God* (1961), responding to the death of God announced by Nietzsche, provides an analysis of Western culture and argues that we have entered a post-Christian era. Arthur Danto's *The Abuse of Beauty* (2003) traces with telling examples the dethroning of beauty as the essence of art. I believe that the two phenomena are indeed essentially connected.

The Metaphysics of Beauty

Plato (427–347 BCE?) is the first literary critic we know of. In book 10 of the *Republic*, Plato decided that his guardians should not read poetry and the poets should not be allowed inside the Republic unless they sang "praises on famous man" (2006, 35).[4] Accordingly, he indicates the need to "obliterate

2. For interpretive hypotheses about the shifting relationship between aesthetics and psychology, see Tateo (2018).

3. Important reference on the topic is *The Origin of the Work of Art*, a series of lectures given by Heidegger in Zurich and Frankfurt during the 1930s and eventually reworked it for publication in 1950. "The question concerning the origin of the work of art asks about its essential source" (1993, 143). Heidegger is clearly seeking the ontological conditions that make art possible. More hermeneutically and less abstract is the view that wants art as a human symbolic expression: "After all, art is an aesthetic expression of something more fundamental: the cognitive ability to construct symbols that communicate meaning" (Balter 2009, 709). In this sense, symbolic behaviors that seem to have originated in Africa as far as 200,000 years ago, communicate cognitive abilities that have to do with magical and religious activities.

4. Guardians are those who are trained to become the philosopher-rulers of the state.

https://doi.org/10.1086/726198 Published online by Cambridge University Press

many obnoxious passages" (20) of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* not because they are unpoetic but because they might have a fallacious influence on the youths and harm future warriors: "There is a danger that the nerves of our guardians may be rendered too excitable and effeminate by them." However, at the end of book 11, Plato adds that poets can come back to the ideal Republic if someone can write in defense of poetry (art) proving two shreds of evidence: on moral grounds, that poetry is socially useful and, on philosophical grounds, that poetry does not deceive but enhance our knowledge of the truth. Therefore, it is adequate to say that the intellectual debate that followed (critical theory) is the attempt to offer a rigorous answer to Plato in one way or in another, either mortal or philosophical. Accordingly, it is in Plato that we will find the first answers to this essay's queries.

The notion that earthly beauty and love foretell a Divine Beauty and Love is central to the Platonic system, which rather naturally later developed in the Christian tradition.[5] What is beauty? Nowhere does Plato give a full account of his aesthetic, and that has given scholars plenty of room to impose meaning on his writing. Socrates, in the *Gorgias*, as part of an argument to prove that it is better to suffer wrong than to do it, describes a beautiful thing as that which either is useful or gives pleasure to the spectator. In *Hippias Major*, beauty is beneficial and useful. Given that, beauty can be reduced to a common predicate and that is usefulness, and perhaps harmony. But more often, as in the *Republic* and the *Symposium*, the beautiful becomes the good: "All good is beautiful, and beauty is not without measure" (*Timaeus*, 87c. ff).[6] And because the beauty of the world reflects the beauty of its Creator, beauty must be synonymous with truth. Throughout the Western intellectual discourse, from the ancient Greeks well up until contemporaneity, beauty is understood as both spiritual and material, a spiritual attainment tied to the transience of material sort. According to Plato's theorization, the source of beauty is ontological and relative to the gods (the Forms), hence beauty is a manifestation of divine intelligence, frequently identified as the hallmark of divinity. In other words, by configuring an association between physical and spiritual beauty, Plato argues that contemplation of physical beauty enables the human mind to comprehend the divine: "And turning his eyes toward the open sea of beauty, he will find in such contemplation the seed of the

5. Plato does not provide an analytic elaboration of beauty in any of his writing. My research of Plato's view on beauty and divine is based on two main texts, namely, *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*.

6. Citations of *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Symposium* are from *Platonis Opera*, edited by John Burnet (1903). The in-text citations conform to the classical reference system commonly used for Platonian dialogues.

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most fruitful discourse and the loftiest thought" (*Symposium* 210d). What Plato is openly doing is gifting beauty with transcendental power, lifting the object of beauty beyond its material, hence corruptible form, into a more spiritual dimension, hence incorruptible. Charles Kahn, among others, has recognized the metaphysical dimension of Platonic beauty by arguing that "the emotional storm of physical passion aroused by such beauty contains within itself a metaphysical element, that is to say, an aspiration that transcends the limit of the human condition and that cannot possibly be satisfied in the way that hunger and thirst can be satisfied" (Kahn 1996, 268). Because "more than justice, truth, or even goodness, beauty shows itself most clearly as that which is the most manifest to the senses" (*Phaedrus* 250b–e), beauty becomes the element that at best is capable of transporting us beyond the here and now, evoking the remembrance of our primordial condition and our "true being."[7]

However, while beauty evokes remembrance and yearning for a metaphysical universe, rather surprisingly, in book 10 of *The Republic* Plato condemns painting and poetry as such for being a copy of a copy even further from the eternal Ideas, than ordinary phenomena. "For him poems just are simulacra of spontaneous human action; that is to say, he sees the phenomenon of literary representation as a species of illusion" (Karelis 1976, 320). Thus, Plato decided that the philosopher-ruler, the guardians of the ideal state, should not read poetry, which is a creation that has "an inferior degree of truth" (2006, 35). Art, as a copy of a copy, is an unreliable source of truth, and therefore artists will weaken the Republic by implanting in people's minds manufactured images far distant from the truth. Plato desires an Apollonian republic, rational and stable. He does not want Dionysian irrationality and ecstatic states. Poetry is contagious—it is madness, a form of possession, and the poet is someone who creates through divine inspiration. "And the same may be said of lust and anger and all the other affections, of desire and pain and pleasure, which are held to be inseparable from every action-in all of them poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue" (35). Not only is the poet a mere imitator of higher truths, but he is guilty of arousing and spreading passions that should be controlled for the sake of the Republic. Therefore, to prevent this "madness" being

7. The reference to the "true being" is clearly a reference to Plato's Theory of Forms based on which our physical world is simply a reflection, a remembrance, so to speak, of timeless, unchangeable ideas (forms) such as truth, justice, goodness, beauty, which we recall and reproduce, as some sorts of imitation, when our soul leaves Heaven to become human.

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passed to the audience and eventually breaking the Republic, Plato felt compelled to expel the poets from his ideal state.

Starting with Aristotle, and then Plotinus, the Renaissance, and Hegel, Plato's version of art has been harshly criticized. Art is a form of prophecy; it might as well be a possession, but it is a possession closer to the truth, a truer representation of universal principles. Aristotle disagrees with Plato on a few fundamental points. He does not believe that the poet is merely an imitator of appearances (phenomena), and he disagrees with Plato about where to locate reality. He does not believe that the world of appearances is an ephemeral copy of changeless ideas (forms). Indeed, he denies the Platonic Forms. He believes that change is a fundamental reality, a natural process, which is a creative force with a teleological direction. Art is created in analogy to this process; the artist takes a form from nature and reshapes it in a different way or matter. The poet is thus less an imitator than he is a maker, and imitation is, in fact, a form of making. Tragedy, in particular, uses *mimesis* of an action (imitation) to bring self-discovery. The story of Oedipus is the story of a man who has killed his father and married his mother. But the plot of Oedipus, because of *mimesis*, is the story of a man searching for truth.

Some seven hundred years later, with the ascendency of Christianity, the Platonic discourse develops into Neoplatonism. It still has philosophical intentions, but with an evident religious frame and with the clear intent to associate beauty and the divine.[8] Within beauty, there is an intelligible presence, far beyond our reason, grasped by our intuition that presents the form of beauty as another way to find virtue. The argument had already appeared in Plato when Socrates reveals to the other diners that "there is the life which a human being should live, in the contemplation of beauty itself" (*Symposium* 211d). That is, the activity of contemplating the form of beauty is in itself a virtuous action, it produces true virtue, and, Plato will suggest later, it is needed to achieve happiness.[9] More discernibly than in Plato, the Neoplatonic stance overcomes the tension between transcendental and material, contemplation and life of action, by making beauty the symmetry rather than a vehicle of the divine: "So then the beautiful body comes into being, by sharing in a formative power which comes from the divine

8. For a fuller discussion on the development of Platonism throughout the Middle Ages into Neoplatonism, see Dillon (2003) and Alexandrakis and Moutafaks (2002). Dated but well detailed is de Vogel (1953).

9. This position has been criticized for its intellectualism according to which people's actions are based on what they consider to be their best interest and for being selfish since it does not integrate concern for others. However, Plato seems to answer his future critics in the *Republic* with the Cave allegory in which the philosopher, who has freed himself and enjoys happiness in the contemplation of pure Forms, returns to the cave for sharing his knowledge and ruling the ideal city.

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forms" (*Enneads* 1.6.2).[10] Unmistakably, Plotinus (205–270 CE) is the most influential Neoplatonist of the Hellenistic period, with his systematic equation between beauty and goodness. While Plato had gone as far as to recognize beauty as one of the ideal Forms, Plotinus developed the Platonic system by identifying beauty and truth. His influence in the shaping of Western civilization is immense, being all at once a source of inspiration for the early Church theologians such as St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the philosophical background of Renaissance aesthetics, the demiurge of Keats's immortal line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know," and the intellectual ghost behind the Romantic-Hegelian identification between beauty, truth, and divine.

As a Neoplatonist, he believes in an ideal world that he calls "There" and a physical world that he terms "Here." In the *Enneads*, Plotinus discusses in detail the nature of beauty. Beauty is equated with purity and the good, while ugliness is equated with evil and mingles with the matter. The quest for beauty, therefore, is not simply a matter of aesthetics but also of ethics. In fact, the form of beauty is another way to find virtue with physical beauty being on the lowest grade, and the beauty of a soul being of higher value as it is closer to the ethereal world of forms: "A soul becomes ugly—by something foisted upon it" (*Enneads* 1.6.5). For Plotinus, the world we experience is an "emanation" from the ultimate idea or One, an image of the transcendent universe in the mind of God. Beauty, therefore, is in itself a moral quality because it is a manifestation of the good. The more beautiful a thing is, the closer it is to the One, which is identified metaphorically with pure light. The further away from the One, the more it is embedded in darkness and matter. Following the tradition of Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, beauty has not only the power to reflect or recall divine light, divine goodness, and the whole divinity, but also to provoke or inspire love that constitutes the essence of divinity.[11] From a Neoplatonic viewpoint, "if the whole is beautiful the parts must be beautiful too; a beautiful whole can certainly not be composed of ugly parts; all the parts must have beauty" (*Enneads*, 1.6.1). Beauty, according to Plotinus, penetrates beyond physical appearance, and it reflects in the sense

10. The Cave allegory in the *Republic* symbolizes the dichotomy: Where does man belong, in the cave of this world or in the higher realm of truth? Beauty is the element of connection. It is proper to recall here Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* in which Prince Myshkin screams: "Beauty will save the world." Plotinus's *Enneads*, sections 1.6 and 5.8, formulates the Neoplatonic philosophy of beauty in a more systematic way than Plato and Aristotle. All citations of Plotinus's *Enneads* are from Henry and Schwyzer (1951).

11. On the interconnection between Plato and Neoplatonism, Brendan Thomas Sammon writes: "With Neoplatonism's absorption of a more religious, spiritual dimension, the Platonic distinction between an eternal realm of truly existing beings . . . on the one hand, and the generated world (cosmos) of transient beings . . . on the other hand, becomes a theological principle" (2014, 82).

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that it has an active cause that beautifies and multiplies itself infecting its container.[12] In this vein, as Socrates had already suggested, beauty has a particular form of usefulness insofar as all things that are beautiful, whether bodies or virtues, share the fact that they benefit the one affected by their beauty. Following the reasoning, it is Plotinus who tells us what the benefit of beauty is: "And that which is beyond this we call the nature of the Good, and it has the Beautiful set forth before it" (*Enneads* 1.6.9)—meaning that the beautiful and the good are not the same, but we need beauty to reach the final goal, which is the good.

Art is about the freeing of form or idea from matter; the artist is called to bring the Idea to some degree of light like a sculptor who makes a statue "that is supposed to be beautiful, who removes a part here and polishes a part there so that he makes the latter smooth and the former just right until he has given the statue a beautiful face" (*Enneads* 1.6.9). The beauty of the work of art is not in any material object as such or any object imitated but rather in the Idea, or form that the artist imposes on his materials. In this vein, the artist's work is a cleansing, a purification of sorts. Thus, Plotinus departs from Plato. The artist is not an imitator but a creator ultimately connected with the One: "Phidias wrought the Zeus upon no model among things of sense but by apprehending what form Zeus must take if he chose to become manifest to sight" (*Enneads* 5.8.1). The artist, by working on raw materials taken from nature, links "there" and "here"; he reshapes the natural world, improves it, and participates in the divine plan. But art is never, for Plotinus, a perfect incarnation of beauty, which never fully appears, for art always remains to some extent material: "The art exhibited in the material work derives from an art yet higher" (*Enneads* 5.8.1).

His connection to the Renaissance and Romanticism notions of beauty is evident. The Renaissance produced a flowering in the visual arts rarely matched in the annals of world culture. The result was a unique and sophisticated body of art that set the standards for most of the painting, sculpture, and architecture produced in the West until the late nineteenth century. It is the Italian Renaissance that links beauty no longer to the object but to the observer. For the first time in Western history, the artist came to be seen as a hero or genius. Artists celebrate the beauty of the human body no more as a wellspring of sin (medieval view) but as a seat of pleasure, beauty, and perfection. "The central idea of the

12. I have used the word "reflecting" rather than "symmetrical" to avoid linguistic confusion. Famously, Plotinus rejects the conventional view that wants beauty to be the effect of symmetry. If that were true, then beauty would be found only in compounds, it would be an aggregate of parts; instead, Plotinus argues, beauty can be found also in nonsensible, noncomposite things such as virtues, laws, or human intelligence. An interesting analysis, although dated, is Anton (1964); more recent and wider in scope is Smith (2011).

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Italian Renaissance is that of perfect proportion. In the human figure as in the edifice, this epoch strove to achieve the image of perfection at rest within itself" (Wölfflin [1932] 1950, 9). Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), in a typically Aristotelian fashion, writes: "There are three requirements for beauty. First, integrity or perfection—for if something is impaired it is ugly" (1981, I, 39, 8). In the *Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), Venus is an idealized portrayal of womankind. She floats on a shell; to her right are two wind gods locked in a sensuous embrace, while to her left is the welcoming figure of Pomona, the ancient Roman goddess of fruit trees and fecundity. Many elements in the painting—water, wind, flowers, trees—suggest procreation and fertility, powers associated with Venus as goddess of earthly love. But Botticelli, inspired by Neoplatonism, renders Venus also as an object of ethereal beauty and spiritual love. He draws the Neoplatonic notion that objects of physical beauty move the soul to desire union with God, divine fount of beauty and truth. It is important to note that, in its rediscovery of the classical past, the literary doctrine of imitation was for the Renaissance man less about mirroring life and more about tracking the predecessors. To be original was not to create something absolutely new but to create art with moral values. Hence, the artist's task is to learn from the great masters, capture the spirit of the originals, and adapt them to the Christian perspective and milieu.[13] To the discovery of the outward world, Renaissance art added a still greater achievement in that it was the first cultural movement to discover and bring to light the whole nature of man and the expression of modern European feelings.

The Limits of Human Knowledge

The intellectual skepticism introduced by the Renaissance produced the Enlightenment: "The project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic" (Habermas 1983, 9). The idea was to use knowledge and rational mode of thought to emancipate human beings from myth, superstition, and religion. While the philosophers of the Enlightenment did not reject God, they assumed a deist position. God might as well have created the universe but then stepped aside. With the Copernican Revolution, the medieval conception of the universe guided by divine will is no longer credible. Instead, Newton's laws of motion show that the world (earth and universe) is run mechanically, like a clock. Of

13. Writers of the Middle Ages also practiced "imitation" in this sense, but did not have as many classical models to work from as those rediscovered by the Renaissance.

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course, arguing against the existence of any divine intervention in human affairs opens the door to the atheism that will be a twentieth-century phenomenon. Meanwhile, the combination of rationalism and the newly born science of historical investigation made possible the shift from the problem of being to that of knowing. From the eighteenth century on, philosophy's task was no longer an investigation into the essence of being (ontology) but a scrutiny of the human mind (epistemology). In other words, how does knowledge happen?

The intellectual hemisphere divided mankind into materialists and idealists. The former are those who believe in the five senses, and the latter are those who trust in consciousness, intuitive perception, which is a mystical spiritual union between the material world, which includes the finite self, and the infinite ideal world. *The Lyrical Ballads* (1798) changed the approach to literary theory because it changed the subject of poetry by bringing rustic life and children into poetry and by mixing natural and supernatural. William Wordsworth (1770–1850) wants us to see nature afresh, stained by imagination, for in that "condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity" (2006, 483). Nature, from the perspective of Romanticism, is the divine spirit. God is not beyond the universe—God is the universe. In *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Wordsworth redefines the status of poetry and the relationship between the poem and the poet. Poetry is less about nature itself as it is a contemplation of nature from the side of the poet. Wordsworth believes that expressing one's own feelings is expressing everyone's feelings, the eternal un-changeless of things. Unlike the previous age, Wordsworth wants to make the poet a common man but different in degree, with a more comprehensive soul, more in touch with his feelings: "a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply." Poetry, therefore, "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling" (484) reflecting the interaction between the poet and himself. This is perhaps a selfish narrative, but it is one that still connects man, the artist, and the public alike to one's inner quest for divine elements.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) differs from Wordsworth insofar as his source of poetry is the supernatural rather than ordinary life. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834) is indeed a magical journey that takes place in a supernatural dimension. In terms of aesthetics, Coleridge challenges the view of the mind as a passive receiver with no space for creativity and individuality. He understood that our mind does not work with mechanical associations but has an imaginative power for creation. Through imagination, the original division man-nature (God) can be recomposed. That is because the creative act of the artist is similar to the creative act by which God ordered the world out of

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chaos. The artist's creation is different in degree but the same in kind. Famously, Coleridge, rather ambiguously, distinguishes between a primary imagination and a secondary imagination. Primary imagination is the ability to receive impressions from the outside world through the senses—the power to perceive objects, our capacity to impose order on those myriads of impressions we constantly receive, to separate, to classify our perceptions. We always bring order out of chaos by making our reality intelligible; thus we act as some sort of designer. Primary imagination is universal. We all have it; it is "as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am" (Coleridge 2006, 504). Secondary imagination, on the other hand, is peculiar to the artist. It is a conscious action. It requires an act of will. It works on the raw material perceived by the primary imagination and selects and reshapes reality into objects of beauty. It is the poetic activity and fuses spiritual with physical, intellect with emotions, external with internal. While remaining ambiguous, Coleridge's position does not conceal the role of the artist as a demiurge of invisible beauty. And beauty was by far the dominant obsession of the Romantic age.

John Keats (1795–1821) made beauty and poetry the principle of his life. Convinced that he had made no mark in his lifetime, as he was dying, he wrote to Fanny Brawne: "I have left no immortal work behind me—nothing to make my friends proud of my memory—but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember'd" (Hebron 2009, 54).

Keats thinks of beauty as providing a form of knowledge that cannot be achieved by means of "consecutive reasoning" (Keats 2006a, 535), a knowledge superior to that provided by science because it is more profound and everlasting. This idea was ultimately expressed in the concluding lines of "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." Art, therefore has a specific function: "The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with beauty and truth" (2006b, 536). Next, Keats distinguishes between a life of sensations that he associates with empathetic experience—"If a sparrow come before my window I take part in its existence" (2006a, 535)—and one associated with thought, which, on the contrary, separates experience into subject and object. Poetry is meant to break the boundaries between sensation and thought, and, loyal to Wordsworth's belief, it has to be spontaneous: "If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all" (2006b, 536).

At this stage, Keats assumes a position that closely reminds of Theodor Adorno a century later. Art must have a "negative capability"; that is, art must

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be able to grasp beauty even when it remains in "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" (2006b, 536) as opposed to philosophical certainty. Indeed, since Keats, the term has been used by poets and philosophers to describe the ability to perceive and recognize truths beyond the reach of consecutive reasoning.

However, art is about to lose its supernatural power. The eighteenth century comes with secularism and naturalism and represents, therefore, a move away from transcendence. It treats beauty as a form of reasoning, thus located outside the object itself, referring instead to the experience of the person observing. Of course, we must be educated to feel beauty; this is why we do not agree on what beauty is. Edmund Burke (1729–97) is concerned with the problem of taste, whether it is universal or not. According to Burke, the principles of taste operate in everyone. He is an empiricist; that is, our knowledge comes from the five senses, not from revelation or a priori intuition. Therefore, we can set universal principles, general laws of judgment, because we all have the same senses. From our five senses bloom judgment and imagination (sensibility). From judgment and imagination blooms our aesthetic taste. In line with Coleridge's definition of "primary imagination," what imagination does is "[represent] at pleasure the images of things in the order and manner in which they were received by the senses or in combining those images in a new manner, and according to a different order" (Burke 1990, 16). Thus, the imagination can never produce anything "absolutely new" (16); it can only combine those ideas received from the senses.[14]

In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke anticipates the Gothic mystery proper of Romanticism. Indeed, he adds to the Renaissance notion of beauty the more Romantic theory of sublime, both notions defined in epistemological terms. Beauty and sublime are a subject's perception, they happen in our mind, they are not in the painting or in nature. The beautiful is more feminine and related to pleasure; beauty is small, gentle, domestic. Beautiful things are smooth and relaxing. On the contrary, the sublime is founded on pain; it is obscure, solid even massive, although without danger, for if there is danger, there is no sublime but terror. As in the idealist tradition, the human soul recognizes in beauty the true origin of love: "By beauty I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies, by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it" (83). The sublime, on the other hand, is "whatever is fitted in any sorts to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say,

14. According to Burke, we all have taste (Burke is here very democratic), but we all have different taste (Burke is here elitist). This is because people have more or less imagination or judgment. Those who are deficient in imagination, for example, those looking for material possessions, cannot see beauty. Those deficient in judgment, for example, those who have poor education, also have a bad taste.

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whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant with terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotions which the mind is capable of feeling" (1990, 36). The sublime inspires in us a feeling of terror, an overwhelming feeling of power and infinity. The sublime includes something terrible; it is a moment of overlapping between pain and pleasure where pain, according to Burke, is always more powerful than pleasure. The sublime is a passion that "always produces delight when it does not press too close" (42), but it is grounded in terror, with the fear of death being the core of it. Nature can be perceived as sublime: "Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime" (67). Astonishment is man's reaction, still in a state of suspension: "The passion caused by the great and the sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror" (53). The sublime overwhelms our faculty of reason; reasoning is put in stand by, challenged by the infinity of an object that cannot be understood distinctly. Broadly speaking, Burke's theory is directed toward the aesthetic of those experiences in which some elements are felt either as painful or as threatening. And the poetic verse can raise the reality to a degree of sublime.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) handled morality and aesthetics in parallel ways so that beauty symbolizes morality; otherwise stated, one's interest in beauty indicates one's predisposition to a good moral disposition. However, his treatment of beauty becomes, to some extent, paradoxical. In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) aesthetic judgments are universal, not personal; the judgment is shared by all, without disagreement. The beautiful is for Kant a "subjective universality": "Consequently the judgment of taste, accompanied with the consciousness of separation from all interest, must claim validity for every man, without this universality depending on objects. That is, there must be bound up with it a title to subjective universality" (2006, 422). How is it possible to be subjective and objective at the same time? This is possible because the nature of art is "purposiveness without a purpose" (428); that is, beauty does not have a function outside beauty.[15] Beauty, Kant insists, is free from prejudice, personal interest, and ideology. Therefore, when we contemplate beauty, we all have to see/feel the same. Such a position has consequences. In accordance with the enlightenment tradition, the beautiful is not in the object but in the subject that perceives. In addition, Kant liberates

15. "Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, so far as this is perceived in it without any representation of a purpose" (Kant 2006, 431).

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aesthetics from morality. In fact, unlike Plato, for Kant, the good and the beautiful are not the same. The good has a higher ending, while the beautiful is an end in itself. Hence, from an aesthetic perspective, while observing a painting, Kant suggests, I do not want to see a representation of divine, I want to see only beauty. A century later this concept will be called "l'art pour l'art" (art for art's sake) yet the nineteenth century will soon step away from it. Modernism will say that the aesthetic experience is not indifferent, for it is always ideological. Postmodernism will offer the rebuttal that not everything is ideology, but everything is relative.

Since Plato and for more than twenty centuries, Western civilization has produced art believing in a close association between art, truth, and divine. G. W. F. Hegel's (1770–1831) *Lectures on Aesthetics* ([1818] 1975) remains one of the most complete accounts of art theory with a clear indebtedness to Plato's metaphysis.[16] Nature is the immediate representation of an invisible power, so that art "arises from the necessity of representing this idea by sensuous images, addressed at once to the senses and the spirit" (Bénard et al. 1867, 92).

As the most systematic of the post-Kantian idealists, Hegel theorizes that art is somewhat associated with beauty and freedom in a triangular relationship in which the aim of art is beauty because freedom can be reached (experienced) only through beauty. It remains to understand what beauty is, and here Hegel leaves no room for doubts. The content of beauty must be expression of the divine; only the divine is truly beautiful when displayed by human forms, visible expression of spirit and reason. To Hegel, beauty is not an objective property of every given object, but it has a specific content, divine indeed, whose display can be achieved only through a more or less balanced relation between the idea (spirit) and the visible form of it (aesthetic representation). This is why he chose classical art in the form of the Greek sculpture as the perfect expression of the freedom of the spirit: "Classic Art constituted the absolutely perfect representation of the ideal, the final completion of the realm of Beauty," and "there can be nothing more beautiful than the classical; there is the ideal" (*Aesthetics*, 1, 427). However, even if the Greeks achieved unsurpassed heights of beauty, they did not achieve the deepest freedom of spirit. For that stage, Hegel continues, we had to wait for *Romantic art*, not to be confused with Romanticism, but to be considered as the whole art produced in Western Christendom. "The reconciliation of spirit with itself in its objectivity—a divine world, a Kingdom of God, in which the Divine (which from the beginning had reconciliation with its reality as its essence)

16. *Lectures on Aesthetics* is substantially a compendium of Hegel's notes and a student's transcriptions of Hegel's lectures between 1820 and 1829.

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is consummated in virtue of this reconciliation" (*Aesthetics*, 2, 540). Romantic art expresses not only the physical beauty of the Greek heroes, whose statues are relatively cold, but also spiritual beauty, a more profound inner freedom of spirit, the "beauty of inwardness." Hegel dies convinced that aesthetics has already begun its process of secularization, humanization, later dehumanization, for it slowly moves away from the ethical virtues exposed by the heroes in the Greek tragedy, otherwise so irremediably committed to the state, the *res publica*, the democratic *polis*. Romantic art, and what follows next, replaces the heroes and their Greek ethics with men of secular virtues: courageous men in pursuit of quasi-religious ends, men in love, independent men who in their magnificent search for freedom challenge the very same God they celebrate. Hegel conceives it as a post-Reformation phenomenon; the personal reading of the Holy Scriptures is the moment when the binomial art-religion finally breaks. Religion turns inward as a private experience, somehow a silent apostasy;[17] art turns outward, no longer a delivery of ultimate truth, but ordinary daily life. So it is that Hegel goes as far as to declare the end of art: "Art considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past" (*Aesthetics*, 1, 11). And on the ashes of transcendence, modernity rises.

Modernity: The Artist as a Technician

In the late nineteenth century, the attitude toward transcendence drastically changed: "Transcendent reality was reduced either to the noncognitive, or to the miracle of faith and revelation" (Long 1998, 3). Modernist writers believe that the great enemy of human (and of aesthetic) wholeness, was modern life itself. "Our civilization," D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930) comments in an essay titled "The State of Funk," "has almost destroyed the natural flow of common sympathy between men and men, and men and women. And it is this that I want to restore to life" (Boulton 2004, 223). Industrialization has cut man off from the past, mechanized daily life, and transformed human relations into a power struggle to acquire material commodities. Man has, Marx argues, thus alienated himself from contact with other human beings. But it is also an existential alienation that involves severing the divine potency residing in both nature and other men and women. Modern Europe, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was, therefore, an accumulation of dead or dying men, fragmented and spiritually void, whose inevitable fate was mass destruction. John Ruskin (1819–1900) felt

17. The reference to the silent apostasy is mine alone. Hegel did not foresee the soul of the twenty-first century.

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outraged by the ugliness of modern civilization, which he relates to the loss of religious and spiritual attitude toward life. Factories have mechanized men's bodies but modern science has mechanized their souls, and thus "existence becomes mere transition, and every creature is only one atom in a drift of human dust" (Ruskin 1963, 138). Aware of this gloomy background, art becomes a technique and the artist its technician.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–49) in the essays "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) and "The Poetic Principle" (1850) unfolds the principles for a good piece of writing, betraying a Romantic taste. There must be "unity of effect"; that is, all the textual elements must work cohesively to maintain the effect the author intends to create. The emotional effect is limited by the reader's brief power of attention; thus, in terms of length, a text, prose passage, or poem must be short. The province of the poem must be beauty, not truth or passion, because through beauty we "find it possible to attain that pleasurable elevation, or excitement, of the soul" ([1850] 2006, 584). The tone must be one of melancholy, for it is the "most legitimate of all tones" (580). The most melancholic of all tones is death, and the most poetical death is the death of a beautiful young woman. This is seemingly an exercise of formalism, yet Poe is not a formalist. His writing has a psychological intensity that formalism does not have; the focus is on the content (beauty), and the form is only a tool to reach it. Instead, Poe is a believer in "art for art's sake." Writings that are moralistic or allegorical are unacceptable because they fail to appeal to one's sense of beauty. Narrative has to create beauty, and beauty for Poe is about sadness, melancholy, and loss and is somewhat related to death. Beauty, therefore, is to be understood in terms of psychology rather than ethics. Hence, in the attempt to liberate literature from some sort of utilitarian value, he complains about the "didactic heresy" surrounding the text, that is, the morality attached to any kind of artistic expression. In this sense, Poe was the first major American writer to advocate explicitly the autonomy of poetry, the freeing of poetry from moral, educational, and intellectual imperatives and thus reintroducing, a century after Kant, the myth of "l'art pour l'art."

If with Poe we have a rhythmical creation of beauty, with T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) we have impersonality. Perhaps his best-known essay, composed early in Eliot's career, is "Tradition and the Individual Talent," first published in 1919 and soon after included in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (1920). Eliot's universe is one of fragments and disorder; the past can recombine the whole by giving sense to the present. With a loose structural organization, the essay explores the relationship between the tradition—that is, works already existing in a national or even multicultural body of literature—and the poet (the

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one with individual talent). He first recalls the past, the pure form of the past, so that modern artistic expression can take the right direction. He emphasizes the importance of history to writing and understanding poetry; thus the poet must possess "historical sense," which is a perception of "the pastness of the past" but also of its "presence" (Eliot 2006, 807). That is, the past shapes the present, and there is a glimpse of the past in any literary work, but by creating in the present we change our evaluation and understanding of the past. We determine how the past looks. By way of example, Keats's poetry changes the way we look at Shakespeare. Literature, in Eliot's view, is a sort of cubist painting in which all parts are connected. The view in which "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past" (808) requires that a poet be familiar with almost all literary history—not just the immediate past but the distant past and not just the literature of his or her own country but the whole "mind of Europe" (808).

Eliot's second point is one of his most famous and ambiguous. Poetry should be essentially "impersonal," that is, separate and distinct from the personality of its writer. No longer a prophet dominated by some external power, with Eliot the poet becomes a mere medium for expression. A poet's mind works by being a passive receptacle of images, phrases, and feelings that are combined, under immense concentration, into "a new art emotion" (2006, 810). Specifically, the Romantic notion that poets pour forth their souls in their poetry is dismissed by Eliot. Wordsworth's idea that poetry is a spontaneous expression of personal emotions that can no longer be contained by the poet unless one expresses them in one's poetry, is tout court rejected. According to Eliot, "it is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting" (808). Poetry instead is about concentration: "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality" (808). For Eliot, great poets turn personal experience into impersonal poetry, into something more universal. Through the "objective correlative," "a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion" (806), the medium (the poet) conveys feelings and thoughts that are the essence of the poetic work. What the poet has to transmit must first objectivize itself, and only then can the interaction between the poet and the reader possibly take place. By so doing, the poet can externalize an aspect of himself and represent a particular way of looking at his experience without becoming subjective. The artist surrenders his or her personality to something that is more valuable, and it is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science.

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Needless to say, this is an ironic view considering that Eliot's poetry is indeed very much autobiographical.

In a similar fashion, Ezra Pound (1885–1972), in the essay "A Few Don'ts," presents the rules of imagism, advising precision and proclaiming, among other standards, "Use no superfluous word" and "Go in fear of abstractions" (1913, 202).[18] Besides paying attention to the image, Pound dissects poetry in order to elaborate principles for what he believes makes good poetry. He discusses the language, rhythm, rhyme, and rigors of free verse, hence creating the bases for modern poetry. In contrast with Romantic self-expressions, the modernist poet is applauded for cultivating impersonality, objectivity, and detachment. For the imagist, the writer was like a sculptor, whose technique required that he carve away all extraneous matter in a process of abstraction that aimed to arrive at an intrinsic or essential form. Verbal compression, formal precision, and economy of expression were the new principles of beauty for the imagist experimentation.

At this juncture, it seems clear that with Pound and Eliot, the creative process becomes as calculating and conscious an endeavor as any other constructive action. Pound's imagism, due to its iconoclastic nature did not last long. Imagism was a transient phase of modern poetry; its limitations are apparent as an image cannot sustain a longer poetic effort. Eliot was a black hole in the universe of modernism, able to absorb every artist he met. Unfortunately, he is rather vague about how a poet is to reach impersonality—leaving others to ponder it at length. To be questioned are Eliot's insistence on canonical works as standards of greatness and his continuous reference to the necessity of impersonality. Is Eliot encouraging escapism? Nor does he seem original. Debates over whether artists express only their own personal experiences or whether they can express universal and thus objectified human situations are as old as Plato's *Republic*. Plato, as we have seen, argued that the poet is a medium for divine truths that have their origin elsewhere, consequently making poetry a sort of divine madness. With Eliot, the reference to madness disappears, but the conception of a poet-prophet is an archetype.

However, it was French naturalism, often described as a scientific project applied to literature, that won the battle against metaphysics and theology. Realism and subsequently naturalism in literature aimed at describing the horrors of modern civilization as seen in the lives of the poor wretches who labored in mines or factories, of prostitutes, degenerates, and criminals. But while realism

18. For the history of imagism, see among others Firchow (1981) and Castelli (2021).

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describes subjects as they really are, naturalism seeks to determine the underlying forces influencing the subject, the milieu conditioning the behavior pattern. By representing the interaction of human subjects and the objective world—in Émile Zola's (1840–1902) words, the study of "the reciprocal effect of society on the individual and the individual on society" (2006, 703), with an overemphasis on the external world—realist and naturalist writers offered a way of understanding historical causality. Naturalism is essentially defined by its methods. The Goncourt brothers and Émile Zola, much impressed by the achievements of science in the age of scientific progress, proclaimed that literature had to become as scientific as medicine. Zola in particular aligned his work with that of the physiologist Claude Bernard, who had attempted in his *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine* (1865) to reduce social behaviors to strict determinism: "It will often be but necessary for me to replace the word doctor by the word novelist, to make my meaning clear and to give it the rigidity of a scientific truth" (Zola 2006, 699). From the preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin* (1868) to his lengthy essay "The Experimental Novel" (1880), Zola's endeavor is to persuade the public about environmental and psychological determinism: "All things hang together; it is necessary to start from the determinism of inanimate bodies in order to arrive at the determinism of living beings . . . we can easily proclaim, without fear of being mistaken, the hour in which the laws of thought and passion will be formulated in their turn. A like determinism will govern the stones of the roadway and the brain of man" (2006, 702). Literature has to take the scientific path grounded in experimentation, observation, and generalization and thus arrive at the truth. Consequently, Zola and the Goncourt brothers assiduously collected material by carefully observing people, noting the information accurately and methodically, convinced as they were that if the experimental method leads to the knowledge of physical life, it should also lead to the knowledge of social life. Just as Marx held that economic life shapes all aspects of culture, so naturalists believed that material and social elements determined human conduct and behavior. Hence, Zola went beyond realism by conceiving his characters in accordance with psychological and sociological factors and as products of the laws of heredity. This deterministic approach showed human beings to be products of environmental and hereditary factors over which they had little or no control. As much as a chemist, the novelist is an "investigator" of knowledge. As much as a surgeon, the novelist dissects his own object of investigation. Ergo, Zola defends himself from the critical response to his book by saying, "I have merely performed on two living bodies the analytical work that surgeons carry out on dead ones" (2004, 35). Zola elaborated

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Bernard's findings into a deterministic fatalism, giving fictional shape to a world where "protagonists [are] completely dominated by their nerves and blood, [and are] deprived of free will, drawn into every action of their lives by the predetermined lot of their flesh" (34). Such a scientific approach based on objectivity and controlled conditions is the triumph of impersonality in art.[19] Literature is replaced by clinical analysis and social investigation. The novel, the Goncourts argue, is "turning into a great serious, passionate, living form of literary study and social enquiry . . . has assumed the methodology and the duties of science" (Travers 2001, 105). Simultaneously, the modern writer is no longer a creative observer of the contemporary scene; he is a "scientist," rather detached from, indeed indifferent to, his subject matter while delving into the social realm. Naturalism's and specifically Zola's influence on the course of literature in the late nineteenth century is immense. Not only had he opened up for the novelist entirely new areas of experience, but his style of writing, presenting everyday life and celebrating average characters, made it impossible for art to reintroduce metaphysical elements. The way to Barthes and Foucault is wide open: "The metaphysical man is dead. . . . No doubt 'Achilles' Anger,' 'Dido's Love,' will last forever on account of their beauty; but today we feel the necessity of analyzing anger and love, of discovering exactly how such passions work in the human being. . . . We have become experimentalists instead of philosophers. In short, everything is summed up in this great fact: the experimental method in letters, as in the sciences, is in the way to explain the natural phenomena, both individual and social, of which metaphysics, until now, has given only irrational and supernatural explanations" (Zola 2006, 710).

Postmodernity: The Triumph of Linguistics

Hegel's system was the last great metaphysical synthesis of European philosophy. His absolutist, optimistic, holistic, quasi-theistic, rationalistic, systematic metaphysics does not suit the temperament of the post-Holocaust age. The two world wars, civil wars, genocide, torture, and terrorism have eroded faith in Hegel's developmental conception of world history, within which the world progresses in terms of freedom, social harmony, mutual respect, and self-consciousness. And while in the nineteenth century Hegel's position still served as an ideological ground for the myth of progress, in the twentieth century tradition and transcendence are the two elements utterly rejected, the loss of which

19. In a comment on the realist writers, Nietzsche noted: "the smallest fragment in the world is infinite. What does one see, and paint, or write? In the last analysis, what one wishes to see, and what one can see" (Stromberg 1968, xviii).

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imprisons us in the present. By and large, centuries of metaphysical systems are today distinctly out of fashion. Postmodernity, with "its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic that formed the one half of Baudelaire's conception of modernity" (Harvey 1989, 44), discourages metanarratives. In tune with my line of research, the infusion of art with religion is rejected by postmodernist thinkers, who have learned autonomy against transcendence.

The history of Western philosophy has for two millennia been the search for an original logos—for instance, Plato's form, Augustine's Trinity, Descartes's mind, Kant's noumenon, Hegel's ideal, Coleridge's "I am that I am," and so on. These are all different names for expressing the origin of everything: "The entire history of the concept of structure . . . must be thought of as a series of substititions of centre for centre, as a linked chain of determinations of the centre. Successively and in a regulated fashion, the centre receives different forms or names" (Derrida 1988, 109). This pure origin of being wants to incarnate itself into becoming. As we have seen, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there is a transition from ontology—that is, faith in the original essence of things—to epistemology, that is, faith in the human mind. With the twentieth century, we enter the realm of linguistics, which places faith in the structure of language. In sum, it is language that creates the limits of my ideas and experience. Ergo, Wittgenstein writes, "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" ([1921] 1998, 5.6), yet it is a world in which the subject is no longer central. Postmodernity at large, and specifically its deconstruction version, brings to the discussion the notion of decentering, or rupture. With Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), "in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse" (1988, 110), that is to say, there is no presence (essence) or truth apart from language and its multiple interpretations. In the now classic essay "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946), W. K. Wimsatt (1907–75) and Monroe C. Beardsley (1915–85) reject the central position of the author, be it the writer, the poet, or the painter. By "intentional fallacy" Wimsatt and Beardsley mean a confusion between a text and its significance due to our mistake in interpreting a literary work by trusting the author's intention. Their argument is that true authorial intention "is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" (2006, 1027). For them, rather paradoxically, only what is internal to the poem, that is, syntax and grammar, is public and available and, therefore, knowable. Instead, what is external, that is, biographical information and the likes, is private and, therefore, inaccessible to the reader. Such a position is a rejection of much Romantic criticism, which, by conceiving the poem as an expression of the author's inner

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self, the interior made exterior, used the poem as evidence for biographical or psychological conclusions. On the contrary, with Wimsatt, Beardsley, and the New Critical theorists, the text assumes an independence of its own without primary reference to an outside context, whether of history, biography, or reader response, thus achieving objective criticism.

Later assault on the role played by the author, far more radical than that of Wimsatt and Beardsley, was mounted by Roland Barthes (1915–80). In the famous essay "The Death of the Author," Barthes deconstructs the empire of the author by affirming that the source of significance is not the author but the reader. The author (the artist) is transformed into a *scriptor* "born at the same time as his text" ([1967] 2006, 1257) and does not convey meaning, for he is part of the structure. His task is more a work of recording than interpretation; modern writers are basically just antennae transmitting all of the countless bits of information that pass through them day by day. But if the writer simply absorbs existing realities, it follows that the text can never be original but is only a multidimensional imitation of already existing cultural signs. In this sense, "a text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture" and "a tissue of signs, endless imitation, infinitely postponed" (1257). Such a position is far more radical than Eliot's inclination toward "the pastness of the past and its presence;" with Barthes, indeed, a text does not simply bear traces of "influence," but every word, phrase, or segment is a reworking of other writings that precede or surround the individual work. There is no such thing as literary "originality," no such thing as the "first" literary work: all literature is intertextual. A specific piece of writing thus has no clearly defined boundaries: it spills over constantly into the works clustered around it, thus provoking the "death of the author" as creator of meaning. It follows that if the text does not have an ultimate meaning, the meaning is always postponed in multiple interpretations. Afterall, if language is imperfect, how can the author ever communicate his intended meaning? In a coup de grâce, Barthes goes so far as to claim that the very "contents" of the text are related to the reader's own method of analysis (Marxism, feminism, New Criticism, psychoanalysis, etc.). Thus, by accepting the reduced role played by the artist's intention, with Barthes on trial for murder, the text's meaning does not depend on its origins, that is, the author's intention, but on its destination, that is, the reader: "The birth of the reader must be requited by the death of the Author" (1258).

The rise of aesthetics was the attempt to establish a response to the beautiful and the sublime. But the question of Being led eventually to ask about knowledge and language. Twentieth-century structuralism not only decentered the

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subject but also reduced the artist to a "function of discourse" (cf. Foucault), that is, an ideological construct within a larger discourse of power. In the present day, Hegel's infusion of art with religion has been rejected, as rejected as the notion of the artist as a bridge to the divine. Thus, to philosophize is no longer to learn how to die, as Montaigne said, but to learn how to read. With the advent of postmodernity, we are called to decide whether we are facing a cultural decline, in which case "the vulgarization of art is the surest symptom of ethnic decline," or a mere alternative style: "the growth of a new art or even a great and radically new style always bespeaks a young and vigorous mind, whether collective or single" (Langer 1966, 5). I will immediately set the tone of the narration by admitting that the collapse of high and low culture into each other has produced a cultural decline. The symptoms were already evident in the Dadaist experimentation. In 1919, Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) drew a mustache on a postcard of *Mona Lisa* and titled it "L.H.O.O.Q," which read in French and translated into English stands for "She is horny."[20] This mockery of the materialistic attitude behind artistic production irremediably opened a gap between art and beauty. To some extent, Duchamp was the coup d'état on the notion of aesthetics as we knew it. The "ready-mades," manufactured objects offered to the public as artistic products, raised the question of the nature of art. What is art then? The twentieth century has transformed art, and more pessimistically culture, into a commodity.

The culture of consumption tends to level differences by integrating everyone into the prevailing logic, which is a logic of capitalist accumulation and standardized consumerism. The anonymous consumer has replaced the old individual struggling between classes, thus bringing down the boundaries between high and low culture, that is, between "serious" artistic production and entertainment for mass market. All in all, we are witnessing a time-space compression of culture in which high culture is reduced to popular taste with acritical perspective. By Fredric Jameson's account, "surely what characterizes postmodernity in the cultural area is the supersession of everything outside of commercial culture, its absorption of all forms of art high and low, along with image production itself" (1998, 135). In this case, "image" is to be understood as the pseudo-aestheticism of a commodity. That the elimination of boundaries between the elite and the masses was not going to bring about either integration or art in its highest form was already clear to Theodor Adorno (1903–69), according to whom the phenomenon "contributes to the decay of education and the progress of barbaric

20. "Elle a chaud au cul," a vulgar expression for "She's got hot pants" or "She has a hot ass."

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incoherence" (Adorno and Horkheimer [1944] 2002, 130). The framework of decline is inherent in the lack of transcendence, that is, the stigma of twentieth-century aesthetic production. The logic of commodification takes over the world of art, hence preventing its utopian potential. The "culture industry," a term that Adorno and Horkheimer use to describe the commodification of cultural forms, produces a simulacrum of art that, due to its artificial essence, does not have the ability to act as a vehicle for utopian visions, projecting real life instead. Writing in the age of mechanical reproduction, they believe that the mass production of high culture is reason enough for cultural stagnation and aesthetic decline. Specifically, Adorno argues that, in the era of monopoly capitalism, art has ceased to be autonomous, for it is no longer free from the demands of the market. Consequently, not only has art's critical potential been undermined by removing the gap between art and reality but art has also been transformed into a tool of dominance, in tandem with the realm of culture, meant to maintain the status quo.[21]

The sense of decline behind the necessity of art is highlighted by the notion of "kitsch." The dominant logic of postmodernity is kitsch. There is no single definition of *kitsch* that is entirely satisfactory. The German philosopher Ludwig Giesz (1916–85) defines it as such: "Kitsch is bad taste; kitsch is dilettantism; it is moreover without any originality, or else totally conventional" (1970, 156). Umberto Eco, who extensively wrote on kitsch, suggests in his well-known essay "The Structure of Bad Taste" the equation relating kitsch and *aesthetic lie*: "Kitsch will appear as a negative force, a constant mystification, an eternal escape from the responsibilities involved in the experience of art" (1989, 185). Critics such as Hermann Broch (modernist writer), Clement Greenberg (art critic), Gillo Dorfles (art historian), and Umberto Eco (cultural critic) decipher *kitsch* as essentially an expression of bad taste and self-deception. Definitions are related to the field of study. The historic-sociological approach links kitsch to cultural industrialization, commercialism, and increasing leisure in society. The aesthetic-moral approach relates to kitsch as false art, a form of aesthetic lie. A more secular view considers kitsch as a self-deception for a large public in search of instant satisfaction.

21. On the contrary, Adorno concludes, art must remain negative—it is only through negativity that art escapes the trap of commodification and the culture industry: "at the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia" (2004, 41). In other words, art has to be negative in relation to empirical social reality, it has to be a reminder that society is insufficient in some aspects, it has to present the audience with a lack or a dissatisfaction. And this realization of a lack is the precondition of social critique. Simultaneously, art has to present to the audience an ideal vision of what mankind can aspire toward, in some cases an alternative vision of reality, not directly deducible from it.

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Originally, kitsch emerged as an expression of the taste of the middle class and of its bizarre spare-time hedonism; it is an illusion of taste, a "false aesthetic consciousness" (Calinescu 1987, 241). The problem is that in the present day, the middle class makes up the vast majority of our society, and thus beauty is regulated by artificial aesthetic ideals. According to Dwight MacDonald, mass culture "is a dynamic, revolutionary force, breaking down the old barriers of class, tradition, and taste, dissolving all cultural distinctions. It mixes, scrambles everything together, producing what might be called homogenized culture" (1957, 18). The corruption of high culture results from the disturbing equation between modernity and kitsch. Modernity implies making new out of the old (Pound); kitsch implies repetition. This is why in so-called Second and Third World countries, kitsch is taken as a sign of modernization. There is also a disturbing relation between kitsch and the avant-garde. Even if we accept Clement Greenberg's view that avant-gardism is radically opposed to kitsch, we have to realize that these two extremes are strongly attracted by one another. This is so for two reasons: (1) the avant-garde is interested in kitsch for aesthetically rebellious and ironical purposes, and (2) kitsch may use avant-garde methods for its aesthetically conformist purposes. A good example in point is Marcel Duchamp's treatment of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, the masterpiece that has probably been the most overworked by kitsch.[22] Kitsch is cheap—this is a secret of its success. No one today is surprised that any masterpiece, say Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, is available for "home use" in copies of different sizes and materials. Now one can buy the masterpiece and, after placing it near the fireplace, comfortably enjoy it every evening. However, even when it is cheap, kitsch is often supposed to suggest luxury or the hypocrisy of it: fake gold or silver objects and colored-glass jewelry sold in drugstores undoubtedly have something to do with kitsch. The loss of faith on the part of the artist has not only decentered his position but also contributed to the deterioration of his artistic standards. There is a widespread corruption of taste due to lack of historical depth. In this sense, kitsch is essentially a twentieth-century phenomenon, for the twentieth century killed transcendence. "The whole concept of kitsch clearly centers around such questions as imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and what we may call the aesthetics of deception and self-deception" (Calinescu 1987, 229). Kitsch may be conveniently defined as a

22. Many critics see Duchamp's aggressive treatment of the Renaissance masterpiece as a humorous case of avant-garde iconoclasm. I believe Duchamp had something different in mind. The *Mona Lisa* he abused was not the masterpiece but a postcard, a reproduction among many, an instance of modern falsification of tradition. He implies that in the modern world, tradition has become false, and that there is virtually no tradition that has not been falsified. Therefore, Duchamp insulted merely the kitsch object; he did not attack da Vinci's masterpiece but vindicated it.

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specifically aesthetic form of lying. As such, it obviously has a lot to do with the modern illusion that beauty may be bought and sold. Kitsch, then, is a recent phenomenon. It appears at the moment in history when beauty in its various forms is socially distributed like any other commodity, subject to the essential market law of supply and demand. Once it has lost its elitist claim to uniqueness and once its diffusion is regulated by pecuniary standards, "beauty" turns out to be rather easy to fabricate. Hence, Herman Broch's definition seems appropriate: kitsch is "the element of evil in the value system of art" (1970, 63).

Is kitsch bad art or false art? "Bad art is corruption of feeling" (Langer 1966, 12). I am not here to preach on good and bad art; however, the question remains relevant to the discussion. In the first case, we shall discuss kitsch in aesthetic terms; otherwise it shall be considered ethically. Generically, kitsch applies indiscriminately to architecture, landscaping, interior decoration, art, music, TV programs, literature, and virtually anything subject to judgments of taste. No matter how we classify its contexts of usage, kitsch always implies the notion of aesthetic inadequacy. Thus, a Manet hung in a lift would undoubtedly make for kitsch.

When the artist set to work in the "age of ontology," he meant to connect man and divine; in the "age of epistemology," the artist was less metaphysical and more ethical. Within postmodernity, the kitsch artist produces for the market and for an average consumer. Literary critics of kitsch, including the likes of Clement Greenberg, Matei Calinescu, and Umberto Eco, have an unequivocal understanding of the phenomenon. Aesthetically, kitsch artists apply a "principle of mediocrity," which offers the average consumer a product that complies with one's desires. Overall, the aesthetic realm is saturated with an instant beauty. From an elitist perspective, the widespread modern sense of spiritual vacuum is filled by another void: beautiful appearances. Following Adorno's and Horkheimer's lead, a substantial factor in the "kitschification" of culture has been cultural industrialization, that is, mass diffusion of art through diverse media: radio, TV, large-scale reproduction, records, cheap magazines and paperbacks sold in supermarkets, and the like. Media create "predigested" images (which do not require any effort to understand): passiveness and superficiality are important prerequisites of that state of mind that fosters kitsch. The secularism of contemporaneity has not generated an alternative artifact but rather a commodity on the open market. In the end, the leading Hegelian claim that art is a "thing of the past" does not sit well with postmodernity, which believes that art is everything and that everything is art.[23]

23. The methodological principle of anything goes is confirmed by Arthur Danto: "For example, shortly after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001, the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen proclaimed it 'the greatest work of art ever'" (2002, 35).

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Conclusion

If I were to simplify the history of philosophical aesthetics, there have been three phases: the ontological, the epistemological, and the linguistic. Ontology is interested in the essence of reality, that is, the nature of Being, and it dominated until well into the Renaissance. Epistemology, beginning in the seventeenth century, shifted the attention to the nature of knowledge, that is, how we perceive reality. The linguistic approach in the twentieth century changed the way we perceive language. Language does not create ideas or experiences but rather establishes limits as to how these entities can be conceived and created. Artists and aesthetic creations have moved within this frame, adjusting accordingly.

Traditionally, the beauty of classical art was understood in terms of Neoplatonic theory. Nature has defects that art can detect; the painter adjusts the original, the deficiencies of nature, so to obtain a reflection of ideal beauty and close the gap with the divine. For centuries of Western canon, beauty has been used interchangeably with the notion of truth along the shades of imitation, representation, and emanation. In beauty we have read and felt harmony and redemption from grief. Today this theory, which depends upon a pre-Copernican view that man is the measure of all things, is all but incomprehensible. Postmodernity believes that nothing is absolute but all is relative. The statue *Venus de Milo* is a goddess in ancient Greece, but it becomes an evil idol in the Middle Ages. That is to say, standards of beauty are historically variable, relative to traditional cultures, and purely conventional human creations. The dictatorship of mass culture made sure that absolute standards of beauty became obsolete. Reality invaded the canvas silently, and fiction became reality. Robert Rauschenberg declared, in his most celebrated statement, that "a pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric" (Stiles et al. 1996, 321). Indeed, his *Persimmon* (1964), together with a reproduction of Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* and Rubens's *Venus at Her Toilet*, contains trucks, helicopters, and car keys. Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) opens with people jumping from the Twin Towers during the 9/11 attacks. Bringing reality into art, when reality had been what art was to represent, changed the way people thought of art. It brings us to the Duchamp-like question of "what art is" today. After the avant-gardist experimentation and the battle against total reification, there has been a reconciliation between art and contemporary society, to an extent that it would be impossible to distinguish between art, non-art, or pseudo-art. Mass society has shaped an aesthetic landscape in which anything barely "artistic" is associated with the status of art. One cannot but wonder whether art can survive in a late capitalist world.

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In the search for a definition, there are three dimensions under scrutiny in this article: art's purpose, the artist's role, and the very notion of beauty in the age of high technology. The function of art has already been submitted to all-encompassing rethinking. Ergo, aesthetics (beauty) no longer identifies with ethics (good), as Neoplatonism demanded. And art no longer is an aim in itself, a purpose without purpose, as in Kant's view; no longer offers utopian visions in Adorno's sense; and no longer helps to regulate life and society, as Zola conceived in the experimental novel. Instead, it is a lesser endeavor meant to amuse, conceived of and created for the entertainment of the middle class. The function of the artist is also to be reexamined, for this figure is no longer a medium of universal truths as in Plato's metaphysics nor a receptacle of images to be combined into a new art form as in Pound's and Eliot's poetic. Instead, the author becomes a mere scriptor, a translator, and imitator, holding the pen or the brush, created by the structure that he contributes to creating. And, finally, the very concept of beauty is under reevaluation. Nowadays good taste is optional, bad taste is artistically acceptable, and *kalliphobia*—an aversion if not a loathing for beauty—is at least acceptable.[24] My understanding is that today's aesthetics is not part of the definition of art.[25] Writing about contemporary art in the 1960s and 1970s and reasoning about its aesthetic death, Eco writes: "There will no longer be any need to speak of a "beautiful" or "ugly" work, since the success of the work will have to do solely with whether or not the artist has been able to express the problem of poetics he wanted to resolve" (1989, 170). Indeed, today something is a work of art not when it is beautiful but when it has a meaning, when it is about something. In Danto's words, "beauty is one mode among many through which thoughts are presented in art to human sensibility—disgust, horror, sublimity, and sexuality are still others" (2002, 56). Yet, outside its metaphysical context, the relevance of art to human existence must find another explanation. The artist tends to be a businessman, art is reduced to a must-be-marketable product, and the sublime of its origins has turned into a kitsch of materialistic intents. For those few who still protest against kitsch and the standardization of taste generated by a manipulative mass culture, the paradoxical option is silence. Adorno's aesthetic negativity takes shape in all the Godot yet to be performed in the twenty-first century.

24. *Kalliphobia*, after the Greek words for *beauty* (*kalos*) and *fear* (*phobia*), is a neologism by Arthur Danto on the modern sensibility of the cult of ugliness.

25. Judging by the amount of public money spent subsiding liberal art as opposed to the sums set for all kinds of science the overall crisis does not simply concern beauty. Objectively, it is the very cultural structure of Western civilization, along with religion, that has been driven to the margin of its history.

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