



Aesthetics and Philosophy of the Arts

Art and Republicanism

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ABSTRACT: Republicanism is contrasted with liberalism with special reference to the notions of presence, absence and representation. The contrast is more conspicuous in the Platonic tradition of republicanism than it is in the Aristotelian tradition, the former being more likely to degenerate into some form of totalitarianism. Examples thereof are given in accordance with the distinction between a strong and a soft iconoclasm, as it is found both in Antiquity and in Eastern and Western Europe's quest for absolute presence or—as in avantgarde art of modernity—for absolute self-presence of the work of art. Having left such political and artistic utopias behind it, the pendulum is now swinging back in the direction of representation, but no longer in the illusionist sense which has dominated Western art from the Renaissance to the beginning of our century. Tied to the question of iconoclasm is the debate about the end of art inaugurated by Hegel in the general introduction to his *Aesthetics* and resumed in our days.

There are two traditions of republicanism, one predominantly Platonic and the other predominantly Aristotelian. Both have several characteristics in common which set them off apart from the tradition of liberalism, such as the paramount concern for morals in politics, or the priority of politics over economics, or the mistrust of growth and riches as well as the preference for poverty over luxury, proximity over distance and—most important from the point of view of arts—direct presence over mere representation and immediacy over mediation. Still, surely the overarching characteristic is that of giving the common good of the *res publica* absolute priority over private interests with consequences such as the rejecting of factions and—in the last analysis—even of political parties.

But there are also differences. The most important of these is that in the Platonic as opposed to the Aristotelian tradition the issue of self-government of all citizens is, to put it mildly, not prominent. If only for this reason, the danger of sliding into totalitarianism is greater in the Platonic than in the Aristotelian tradition of republicanism. Nevertheless, one could, on the whole, say that totalitarianism is the perversion of republicanism in the same sense that anarchy is the perversion of liberalism. To realize this, one need only bear in mind that, republicanism being fundamentally suspicious of political parties as potential factions, it more naturally leads to one-party rule than liberalism does. In addition, the modern distinction between a sovereign state, on the one hand, and society, civic or

bourgeois, on the other, is alien to the original ideal of republicanism and so, too, the whole notion of human rights granted by a state from which citizens are more or less alienated.

Republicanism and liberalism were by no means always mutually exclusive. In his book *Plato and the Italian Renaissance* James Hankins writes: "Liberalism and republicanism, nowadays considered as distinct 'discourses', in the fifteenth century had not yet distinguished themselves into separate traditions" (p. 172, note 21). It is, nevertheless, hardly anachronistic to say that not just after, but also before, the fifteenth century *these* two traditions had already existed and had on occasion even sharply parted company with one another. For, even granted that liberal elements may be easily discerned in the Aristotelian tradition of republicanism, one could hardly say the same thing with respect to its Platonic counterpart in light of Plato's uncompromisingly critical attitude towards the liberal-democratic tendencies of Periclean Athens. Be this as it may, I shall in the following concentrate on the Platonic strand of republicanism rather than on the Aristotelian since it poses the greater danger of degenerating into some sort of totalitarianism. With this it is also implied that I am understanding republicanism in the sense of an overall conception of life style rather than exclusively as a matter of politics.

As already pointed out, among the several characteristics of republicanism the most important as far the arts are concerned is that of giving preference to immediate presence over distant representation—and in this, of course, there is no difference between the political dimension of republicanism and its conception of art. To take the case of art first, this is most strikingly so in the case of painting. From the Renaissance to the beginning of our century painting was dominated by the idea of representation as it was embodied in the discovery of linear perspective. Together with other devices such as shading (*sfumato*) and shortening (*scorcio*) this discovery led to a strong illusionist idea of representation. Now, as one can see not only from Books III and X of the *Republica* but also from the dialogue *Sophista* (235C-236E), this was precisely the kind of art against which Plato most uncompromisingly inveighed (cf., e.g., the explicit rejection of shortening in *Republica X*, 597D ff.).

Plato would have not had much to say against Byzantine icons, had he known them as he must somehow have known Egyptian art, revering so much, as he did, Egyptian culture as a whole. Both of them, Byzantine as well as Egyptian art, were in all probability as little ignorant of linear perspective as was Plato. Still, all three—Plato, Egyptian and Byzantine art—dismissed such a device as purely illusionist. Ironically it was the Russian Renaissance man Pavel Florensky who, in our century, launched a fierce attack against the Renaissance and, in general, Western illusionist painting from Giotto onwards. Florensky saw this style of painting as developing out of the backdrop decorations for the mysteries staged during Giotto's time which were enacted before the facades of cathedrals and main churches as a substitute for, and mere representation of, the mysteries, these mysteries being only really present within those sacred spaces. And it was Florensky himself who drew a parallel between these origins of modern painting and the origins of Greek illusionist painting which he located in the stage decorations for the secularized tragedies of the Periclean age. It was for these stage decorations that, according to Vitruvius (cf. *De Architectura*, VII, *praefacium*, 11) -, Pericles' philosophers-friends Democritus and Anaxagoras developed their theories of linear perspective.

Although himself an orthodox priest, Florensky lent his services as electrotechnician and as art curator to the Russian revolution before being sent to a concentration camp and executed in 1937 on Stalin's orders. Russian artists like Malevitch, Tatlin or Popova were

ideologically as well as politically surely more entangled than Florensky in the rise the Soviet Union—as one may ascertain by reading Boris Groys’ *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*. Malevitch’s platonism with its iconoclastic overtones might have predisposed him as well as other avantgarde artists to collaborate enthusiastically with a regime which with its system of soviets, at least officially, embodied the ideals of republicanism.

It is true that right from the beginning the collaboration between Florensky and the artists just mentioned as well as others was far from harmonious. But it is also true that all of them were unanimous in their rejection of illusionist painting which has since the early Renaissance been considered something like the quintessence of the concept of art. And although Florensky, as the main theoretician of iconic art, had great reservations towards most of the avantgarde artists of his time, it is nevertheless true that the latter drew an important part of their inspiration from iconic art. It is also true that none of them indulged—at least physically—in the strong sort of Byzantine iconoclasm, but all of them were, so to speak, soft iconoclasts—at least in the sense that they all strove for the republican ideal of presence and immediacy as opposed to that of mere representation and mediation, in so doing dismissing traditional Western art since Giotto. Byzantine strong iconoclasm went, of course, even farther in the direction of immediate presence, for, before physically destroying iconic works of art, its adherents rejected them on the theological grounds that the real presence of divinity must in no way—contrary to the *iconodouloi*—be sought in the icons themselves nor anywhere else than in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Another, even more extreme, example of quest for presence and immediacy is to be found in the iconoclastic Anabaptists who ruled in Münster in the first half of the sixteenth century. In their quest for immediacy Münster’s violent iconoclasts, despite deriving their Old-Testament inspiration from the times antedating the introduction of kingdom in Israel, went further than their Byzantine counterparts in that they rejected not only images but even the Scripture itself as means or mediator for salvation. Some of the Anabaptist were well-educated people who carried out a rather sophisticated program of image mutilation which simply cannot be dismissed as plain vandalism. Although they were probably not acquainted with Platon’s criticism of art, poetry and—as in the *Phaedrus*—scripture as a whole, their concern for presence and immediacy is strikingly similar.

If the Russian revolutionary avantgarde artists did not go as far as all that, their case was, of course, more momentous than that of the strong iconoclasts of either Byzantium or Münster as far as the art of our century is concerned. One might point in this connection also to the political and ideological entanglement of Western avantgarde artists in the totalitarian empire which arose from revolutionary Russia. This entanglement is only understandable against the background of the republican ideals they saw, or pretended to see, or hoped to see, realized in the Soviet Union with its rejection of petty bourgeois liberalism and its attachment at that time no less than today to illusionist art. But instead of dwelling on particulars I would like to finish by introducing some considerations of a more general kind. In so doing I shall be drawing broadly on those works that the German-Russian philosopher Boris Groys published after the book already mentioned *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*. From the highly complex fabric of these works I can only extract here some threads tying together the problems of presence, absence, and representation.

In his contribution to the *Festschrift* for Hans Belting, whose book on Byzantine art (*Bild und Kult*) has been published in English under the suggestive title *Likeness and Presence*, Boris Groys contrasted painting before avantgarde art with that afterwards. Before painting illustrated and recorded things or happenings in the external world. But soon after the turn

of the century it was progressively stripped of all such outside references and as a result became increasingly autonomous. The more the work of art freed itself of things that were present only in the sense of being outside it or that were, because already past, outright absent, the more it underwent a process of internalization, aiming in the end only at its own presence. Such a thoroughly self-referential work of art would not only be devoid of all content. It would be the last work of art. Like the political utopias of the time, this was, of course, an unattainable utopia. No less than history, art, and art history went on. But in the process art and art history were radically transformed. No one cognizant of the reasons as well as the implications of Hegel's thesis concerning the end of art, should have been very surprised by this—unless perhaps he was surprised by the fact that the leading role predicted by Hegel for philosophy after the end of art was in fact to be assumed by art itself insofar as art became a self-reflective art or, to put it another way, insofar as it became, so to speak, the only surviving Hegelian philosophy of art. In other words, art's death certificate issued by Hegel turned out to be the prelude for the resurrection of the transfigured body of art.

In the course of this transfiguration art ceased to reflect alien occurrences external to it in order to become for the first time the subject of its own history. That is to say, the self-referentiality of the new art is not restricted to single works of arts but extended to the whole body of art. To take one of Groys' examples, traditional European art illustrated the sufferings in the world as narrated in Holy Scripture and as culminating in Christ's crucifixion. But now art is no longer offering us those or other narratives. Art has itself become the subject of them and so it has in this respect become a truly suffering art. Similarly, traditional art was for its most part an art concerned with holy subjects. But after becoming itself its own subject it has become something like a holy art and, of course, also an unholy art, just as traditional art represented not only the holiness but also the non-holiness depicted in holy and other scriptures. In short, the representation of all those stories has been replaced by something like their presence in the very body of art.

One may be tempted to argue that this interpretation is reminiscent of the Byzantine-Orthodox conception of artistic images as something living, be they sacred, as the *iconodouloi* took them to be, or blasphemous, as the strong iconoclasts considered them to be. But such Eastern reminiscences do not diminish the accuracy of such an interpretation. On the contrary. The fact that artistic images are still considered in orthodox Eastern Europe as something alive and not a mere representation of life is fully in accordance not only with early Western art but also with medieval art theory as a whole. The medieval theory of the Beautiful did not, in fact, immediately adopt the shift from presence to representation taking place in artistic praxis as Florence was changing from a truly medieval to a more Aristotelian civic republic on the verge of modern bourgeois society with those liberal connotations that were to provoke the reaction of Savonarolian republicanism. As a matter of fact, medieval art theory remained attached to its Byzantine origins much longer than did medieval art itself. As far as the priority of presence over representation and likeness is concerned, this phenomenon has been pointed out by historians, like Rosario Assunto, who stressed the formal similarities obtaining between medieval art theory (and indeed early medieval Western art), on the one hand, and avantgarde art, on the other.

To a certain extent, the reversal in our century—back from representation to a new but this time secularized self-presentation of the works of art—applies not only to modern art as developed by the historical avantgardes but also to post-modern art. True, the deconstructivism of post-modernity has questioned the very possibility of a completely

self-referential or thoroughly transparent work of art and proclaimed instead the inevitability of some opacity and outer referentiality on the part of any one artwork. But that outer referentiality no longer refers to things or stories that exist or had existed outside individual works of art but rather to these works themselves in their external relationships to one another. Accordingly, although the utopia of a wholly transparent artwork as the ultimate end or true telos of art has already been surrendered, the internalization of art and art history has remained in place even after the deconstruction of modernity's classical avantgarde. At the same time, the utopia of a last work of art had given rise to the dream of art history as a linear process no longer marked by chronological data external to art itself but rather by art-internal data the significance of which depends on the relative distance of individual works of art from art's own telos of absolute self-referentiality. But with the collapse of the utopia of total transparency, the whole idea of a linearity in art history, be it internal, failed as well. To day it has become rather difficult to hold on to the idea of a single art history following univocally defined criteria. This has led art historians and theoreticians such as Hans Belting and Arthur Danto to speak rather misleadingly of the end of art history in much the same vein in which Hegel spoke of the end of art. Of course, neither art nor art history have—or, indeed, can—come to an end. But the need for a multiplicity of historical art narratives arising from the failure of modernity's utopias has opened up the possibility of permanent rearrangements and reinterpretations of the historical data making up a theory of art history, which is thus becoming a part of art itself.

The failure of the totalitarian utopias has been accompanied by the triumph of liberalism in the world. But, as has already been said, just as totalitarianism may be considered as a perversion of republicanism along its own lines, the perversion of liberalism is to be found in anarchy. Now, the possibility of permanent rearrangements and reinterpretations of the history of art as it applies to art theory and art praxis clearly points in the direction of anarchy. But, of course, as long as anarchy remains confined to an increasingly autonomous art no great harm to the political community is to be expected from it. Art's reinterpretations and rearrangements do not illustrate the changes or sufferings in external reality. They only affect the living body of art. But this is an enlarged body which embraces not only art producers but also arts viewers. And such an enlarged and at the same time autonomous body *does* reflect, though not in the way of direct illustration, the neither totalitarian nor republican but outright liberal society of today. Liberal society is regarded by sociological theory as the all-embracing system of present-day reality, one of whose main characteristics is precisely the becoming autonomous of its many subsystems, each one of which dealing not with some external or "real reality" but with a reality produced by each single subsystem itself. It is this fictive reality, if any, that is being reflected in the deconstructionist and seemingly anarchical art world of our time. In it, republican utopias promising an all-embracing presence, happiness and final rest have been replaced by the rather disillusioned awareness of the sheer complexity of a multitude of proliferating world-systems, each with its own autonomous subsystems and all of them, to be sure, somehow interdependent with one another, albeit in an increasingly unfathomable way. This gives our lives the smack of uneasiness and unrest that puts the ideal of final repose in a present happiness not only out of reach but altogether out of this world. For the elimination of a linearly extended time between past and future gives way, on the one hand, to the simultaneity of all past art-worlds in an all-embracing present time. But if, on the other hand, rest and happiness are not to be found in such an all-embracing present, then—it seems—they are not to be found anywhere. So it is not surprising that so many fundamentalisms, in the wake of which new waves of iconoclasm are to be expected, are now pounding the walls, or at least rapping at the doors, of liberalism with its proliferation of virtual images and fictive realities.