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The Secularization of art: Emancipation or the need to go further

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ABSTRACT

In this brief essay I outline the premodern, modern and post modern which are categorical items of thought under which can be subsumed the full history of art (of the West) and beginning with ancient culture. I noted the advantages and disadvantages of each of these paradigms and then suggest a way to embrace all three, without sided with any one perspective and used the metaphor of water to capture this "fourth position".

KEYWORDS: premodern, modernism, postmodernism, secular, aesthetic, "fourth position"

1. INTRODUCTION:

The narrative of Western art history may be divided into three overarching paradigms and their various stylistic manifestations, namely the premodern (from the ancient world to around the Renaissance), the modern (from the Renaissance to around mid-20th century) and the post-modern (mid-20th century onwards). The most obvious shift from the long history of the premodern toward the modern (post-modernism can be considered an extension of modernism, even where sometimes contradictory) can be characterized by a shift in the function and focus of art from that of the sacred to the secular.

While this paradigm shift might be seen as the emancipation of art and the artist, I will argue that neither modernism nor post-modernism actually resulted in freedom as such, but rather considering the calamities that beset the modern world, especially in the 20th century, such freedoms were not forthcoming neither in art nor in life, and that the post-modern revolution which would seem to answer the failures of modernism, fairs no better. I suggest a position then beyond both paradigms, which includes the best of each of them as well as of the pre-modern, and I offer a new discourse which overcomes the limitations of this tripartite system, a position I dub as the "fourth position".

2. PREMODERN: THE SACRED AND THE POWERFUL

Considering the great ancient cultures: Egypt, Ancient Greece, Rome, Babylonian, Persian and finally the dominance of Christianity and so on, one may note two important characteristics of art during these huge swathes of time: a) art has a very specific function and b) art is fused with other areas of life. These "properties" are not mutually exclusive.

In terms of a) this takes the form of religious didacticism and/or cementing the power of the Pharoah or Caesar or the ruling party in general. The former is such that the artwork is not an artwork in the ordinary sense, but a sacred, ritual object whose power is such that the object is an object of worship, an idol and in the case b) this also obtains, the kingly ruler as an incarnation of the gods on earth or an image of the gods/God itself.

Thus, in the modern sense of the word, this is not art as such, and neither are the creators and craftsman artists in the modern sense of the word. They were just carrying out a program dictated by the system and while there is ingenuity and rich ideas and highly evolved craft, it serves extra-aesthetic ends, and in particular the dominance of the prevailing ideology. In this sense, the art took an established form over many centuries: For example, the scale distortions of the Pharoah; the Roman Ceasor as a god; the ancient Greek gods as reflecting the beautiful proportions of seeming natural man, the symbolic power of the art of the Middle Ages and the visual expression of the Christian biblical narrative.

3. MODERN: A NEW WORLD

The modern is a revolt against all such established norms: religion overturned by reason, the so-called Enlightenment; art freed from its servile function to Empire and religion and the carving out of art and aesthetics as its own autonomous realm, setting in motion the tradition of the artist of genius, independent and fierce, the iconic masterpiece and a maelstrom of different stylistic advances. In short: art became secular and a new industry was born.

While this may appear liberating, insofar as art now had its own agenda: it focuses on everyday life (the traditional landscape, portrait and still life); it moved beyond all conventions (considered the great tumult of art movements from Impressionism until well into the 20th century) and innovated new areas of thought and expression, particularly through abstract or non-objective art.

However, there are a few problems with this shift in focus, meaning and new forms of art and expression. It eventually led to a loss of meaning, the kenosis of abstraction and what became the "end of painting debate". Secondly, although the power structures were different to that of the old world, art was still often ideologically motivated and served institutions of power and control. Thirdly, there arose an even greater gulf between art, artists and the public as art withdraw within itself, no longer serving a didactic function or antiquated notions of aesthetic beauty. It is for these reason that we find a further "revolt" – the development often referred to as post-modern.

4. POST MODERN: NO NEW WORLD ONLY REPETITION

Whereas modernism and its search for *the new*, free from history, did not lead to a brave new world; indeed; progress and advancement did not solve basic human violence and power-mongering, and the arts were ineffective to effect a change, so post modernism seeks to debunk all totalizing ideologies (whether in the guise of religion, philosophy or scientism and so on), including the autonomous realm of art itself and the narrative of art history as well.

However, in its relativism and deconstruction of art history and the like, rather than offer an alternative narrative, it led to a moral bankruptcy as it descends(ed) into anti-intellectual, superficial and an empty culture, bereft of meaning and function, save a vague notion of the anti-colonial, non-binary and social discourse with the apparent aim to liberate the oppressed. Such a social agenda has led in general to an artistic expression void of any conception of the true, the good and the beautiful.

Such ideas were set in motion in practice with the advent of pop art. This style and the "meaning" it assumed contrasted with the high seriousness of abstract art, highlighting instead the surface, popular culture and the lack of deep meaning or structure. At the same time, the rise of conceptual art, though often philosophical, undermined the sensory, while new media, installation, photography (as a fine art) and performance, appeared to open the field of aesthetic objects, as the art-life schism became ever more split.

1) A new turn for art – post post modernism: Reintegration of the arts and "the fourth position".

One can take the best of all three paradigms and assert a position that transcends them. Premodernism taught us the alignment of art with the sacred; modern art breaks with past traditions and created an autonomous artistic realm (Kants idea of "disinterested pleasure" in beholding an aesthetic object is perhaps the progenitor of this philosophically) and post modernism casts a skeptical idea that art has a deep essence or metaphysical presence and revels in the copy, pastiche and simply quoting history without offering a stable center in itself.

A fourth position embraces all three perspectives without dissolving into either one. It envisions an art at once, holy and profane, old and new. How might this manifest in theory and practice? Without the error of totalizing theories, one could theorize an art both steeped in history, yet beyond it; a philosophical stance at once enamored by its forms and meanings and yet hesitant to equate a given aesthetic with one and only one extra-aesthetic interpretation or application.

Such a conception imagines art as indeed but a surface play of signs (post modernism) but also capturing the possibility of aesthetic depth and meaning (modernism). Such an art is less about the ego of the artist and the money-making industry of the art-world; less about the have-have-nots framework of social discourse, and more concerned with a universal and common humanity, while casting a skeptical eye on the errors of simplistic generalizations.

The" fourth position" is akin to water – it allows for the co-presence of many paradigms, fitting numerous vessels, while not itself changing. This is the concept of art itself – sometimes sacred, sometimes purely secular – neither wholly right, nor wholly wrong. It is a space that navigates *between* paradigms, rather than dissolving into any particular one. It emphasizes the dialectic itself not any one pole – neither privilege, nor lack, but rather the very human reality that our history informs who we are now, without assuming current "progress" as the truth (even though post modernism might claim there is no such thing, it in fact advocates, contradictorily that it represents the truth – the relativism of a grand narrative is itself self-defeating).

Water allows for infinite possibility and creativity without settling on a given form or assuming a particular and uncontested meaning.

5. CONCLUSION

In this brief essay, I have outlined the dominant paradigms that serve as a philosophical overview of what we term the history of art, both in terms of stylistic convention and meaning or ideology. This is a global perspective under which the many details fit into and provides a salient account of the overwhelming complexity and number of forms that art has assumed over many centuries. This is a useful tripartite system which allows the historian to find a coherent framework to grasp the many changing forms of art into a system of categorization and also subsumes forms without getting lost – an overview that allows for a simple understanding of what may appear chaotic and impossible to grasp.

Other than allowing such a global perspective, we noted certain shortcoming of each of these paradigm: the premodern is locked into art as merely the tool of religion and politics, forming a part of the narrative of the sacred indoctrinating the masses within a belief-framework and while the modernist revolts against such notions, demarcating a particular independence to the artist and art itself, it still fails to improve the life-world. Post modernism sought to restore that, questioning all assumptions and a deep metaphysics of essence, but fails in its undermining of "grand narratives" yet becoming a paradigm-enforcing ideology itself.

I then suggested a "fourth position" which embraces all three perspectives. Rather than prescribing what forms this may take, it allows for the co-presence of the sacred, the new and the skeptical, while theoretically remaining open-ended and creative, allowing for a historical truth that encompasses this flow of history, a dialectic between the sacred and the secular, the ideological and autonomous freedom of the arts and the artist.

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