Sensus communis aestheticus and the project of emancipation: the utopian frame of the avant-gardes

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Kant considered the sphere of taste a privileged setting for a social manifestation of the Enlightenment’s aspiration to an agreement on ethical behavior. This universal validity depended on the subjective feeling of belonging to Humanity in general, called by Kant sensus communis. The avant-gardes linked the Kantian idea of an autonomous art to their emancipation project, taking their critical task as a guarantee of an “ethical project”, in common with political ideas like Progress or Revolution. But the implications of what is considered by some to be Kant’s failed ambition to bring the ideal of the Enlightenment to completion are visible in the art sphere, not just in the utopian and critical basis of the historical avant-gardes, but also in the aesthetic ground on which subjectivity has survived in contemporary art. The conceptual basis which would be later developed by the artistic avant-gardes was settled by German Romantic and Idealist thought, whose utopian dimension could be easily recognized in The oldest system-program of German Idealism (1796), a text that resulted from the early collaboration between Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin in Tübingen at mid-1796. This text undertook to ground Kant’s idea that feeling – and not cognition – may be the ground for the unity of knowledge. It provided Idealist thought with the claim of a new rationality – mythology of reason in Hegel, intellectual intuition in Schelling or Humanity in Schiller. Although the emancipation project of avant-gardes has lost its credibility for us – due to the fact that recent history has shown how the political can betray the ethical and the ideological, the aesthetic – the idea of this article is not to discuss the possibility of an ethical implication of art or to see to what extent today’s art can maintain a social function, but to point out certain idealist concepts in light of a philosophy of art modeled along lines sketched out in Kant’s Critique of Judgement and that have contributed to the history of avant-gardes.

Keywords: sensus communis, aesthetic idea, philosophy of art, emancipation project, avant-gardes.

1. An Approach to the Kantian Ideas of Sensus Communis and Aesthetic Idea

In Kant’s Critique of Judgement (1790) and Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795) we have for the first time in the modern
aesthetics the idea of the unity of knowledge throughout the aesthetic experience, the both texts attributing to art an autonomous dimension and the power of social reconciliation. This idea of the aesthetic experience as a kind of non-contaminating form of communication would be a referential point not just for the Hegelian Marxist tradition until Marcuse, but also for neo-conservative thinkers as Heidegger or Gadamer, who have seen in art a post-metaphysical force resistant to the rationalization process. I wish to begin by a brief introduction to Kantian concepts sensus communis aestheticus and aesthetic idea.

The Kantian sensus communis as the communicability and community of taste, which has its own logic and modes of recognition, inscribes itself right into the philosophical tradition of the rational and sensitive human beings, members of a concrete social and political community and that generated the aspiration of art as a social public sphere. Indeed, Kant was the first one to surpass the category of an empirical public, which dominated the debate on taste in the XVIIIth century and linked beauty with a potentially universal disposition called by him “a kind of sensus communis”. According to Kant, this universal or social dimension of the judgement of taste is not based on human nature, nor on the education of a concrete public, but on the autonomy of the faculty of judgment of taste:

By the name sensus communis is to be understood the idea of a public sense, i.e., a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (a priori) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, as it were, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective, an illusion that would exert a prejudicial influence upon its judgement.

In other words, sensus communis is a mode of reflection: if human being is rationis capax, such a “universal feeling” is precisely the faculty to recognize in others the same faculties he has: it is neither a mystique, nor an appropriation of universality either, but the name for the own condition of communicability of our knowledge in general.

With regard to the judgement of taste – in Kant’s language, “a faculty”, i.e. a transcendental or synthetic a priori principle, which mediates between imagination and understanding – Kant considers that it is always subjective, that there is no objective concept which could determine what is beautiful and what is not. Nevertheless, Kant maintains that we all own an idea of beauty, a kind of archetype or an internal intuition whose expression is the own beauty: “Beauty – whether it be of nature or of art – may in general be termed the expression of an Aesthetic Idea.” Which means that there is no beauty either in nature nor in art,

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2 Ibid., § 51, p. 226.
unless there is an expression of an aesthetic idea. It is not clear how or why beauty should apply to the expression of aesthetic ideas, but our concern here is not to solve this puzzle, but to indicate how these Kantian ideas open the door up from the aesthetics as the theory of sensibility (aisthesis) to a philosophy of art which would be developed by the Idealist thinkers.

We might indicate first that Kantian reference to the aesthetic ideas, quite frequent in the third Critique, served as an inverted analogy to what Kant named rational ideas or ideas of reason. In the paragraph 49, Kant pointed out that “it is easy to see that an aesthetic idea is the counterpart (pendant) of a rational idea, which is, conversely, a concept to which no intuition (presentation of the imagination) can be adequate.” The reason these are called “ideas” is to indicate “that they at least strive toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience.” Kant explains that the aesthetic idea is the representation of the imagination – a mental image – that gives rise to a free play of imagination and reason at the same time. Thus, the aesthetic experience involves the harmony of all our cognitive faculties – imagination, understanding and reason. An aesthetic idea is “a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] concept, can be adequate, so that no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it.” Is the language of the Critique of Pure Reason, i.e. the language of philosophy, the one uncapable to express the aesthetic idea, who owns to the sphere of art. Kant conjures up an example in this respect: “a certain poet, in describing a beautiful morning, says: ‘The sun flowed forth, as serenity flows from virtue.’ The consciousness of virtue... spreads in the mind a multitude of sublime and calming feelings and a boundless outlook toward a joyful future, such as no expression commensurate with a determinate concept completely attains.”

The famous idea of “the beauty as a symbol of morality” in the paragraph 59 and the remark of the paragraph 49 about the aesthetic ideas as a result of the imagination process that uses association and analogy suggest that Kant, as Robert J. Yanal observed, considered that every artwork was a metaphor or a symbol of the aesthetic idea. Unfortunately, Kant’s theory of symbolism is relatively unsophisticated. He assimilates metaphor, personification, synecdoche and other tropes, and he does not distinguish them from other forms of symbolism. Nor does he argue for his stated view that such symbols are ineffable. Consequently, “many of the details of Kant’s view are unenlightening.” In the paragraph 49, Kant explains that “a poet ventures to sensible expression to rational ideas of invisible beings, the realm of the blessed, the realm of hell, eternity, creation, and so on. Or, again, he takes [things] that are indeed

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exemplified in experience, such as death, envy, and all the other vices, as well as love, fame, and so on; but then, by means of an imagination that emulates the example of reason in reaching [for] a maximum, he ventures to give these sensible expressions in a way that goes beyond the limits of experience, namely, with a completeness for which no example can be found in nature.” Therefore, aesthetic ideas are for Kant attempts to illustrate rational ideas, that is suggestive of the famous claim from Chapter IX of Aristotle’s Poetics that the poet differs from the historian in being more “philosophical” by which he meant “expressing the universal” though both poet and historian are in a way recounting the same set of facts.

Many scholars, following the two “Introductions” Kant wrote for the Critique of Judgment, suggested that Kant’s theory of beauty is in part motivated by a problem left over from the first Critique, the problem of how concepts apply to percepts. That is, how does imagination – i.e. the faculty of imaging, that in Kant means a connecting of elements or intuitions by forming an image – so he meant something rather different from what we now mean by the term “imagination” – manages to interact with the understanding – the faculty of applying concepts to percepts. Thus, it might be said that what really interested Kant was not “what beauty is”, but “how is an agreement possible on beauty”, since we cannot prove it empirically, nor demonstrate it logically. A reasonable hypothesis would be, then, that Kant has never been interested in the aesthetic questions and that the third Critique played for him a more ancillary role, with its significance deriving from architectonic considerations rather than from the intrinsic interest of its subject matter, more precisely as a way to solve the difficulty generated by the radical separation between liberty and nature in the first two Critiques. Odo Marquard, for example, suggested that the Critique of Judgment is the result of the failure of pure reason and practical reason concerning the problem of the finality of the human being and this explains the linking of man to the idea of emancipation. Since the concept of practical reason – “as if” – is incapable of obtaining the emancipated life (because the faculty of desire is always subjective), this led Kant to produce a shift in the direction of aesthetics and found the judgment of taste on a transcendental subject. In Antinomies of the two first Critiques, Kant had already formulated the question about freedom: how can nature be both determined according to the laws of science and have “room” for the freedom necessary in order for morality to have any meaning? Ultimately, for Kant this would be a conflict of our faculty of reason against itself. He thought that the problem would be solved by “an aesthetic turn” when finding a certain sphere of life that could be independent of the private interest and legitimate the autonomy of the subject, according to the ideal of the

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Enlightenment. The judgement of taste was to solve the problem by relating to both sides and therefore Kant speculates that it may be the mediating link that can unify the whole of reason, that is the subjective principle of judgement in general. Nevertheless, the famous sentence “beauty as a symbol of morality” in the paragraph 59 (emphasis added) although eliminating the conflict, it does not actually unify the two sides of reason, nor the two objects of reason (what is and what ought – the aesthetic judgement owing to the last one).

On the other hand, some commentators, as D. W. Gotshalk, think that Kant held in fact two theories of beauty, because of the apparent contradiction between the two directions the Critique of Judgement opens, i.e. the theory of pure and autonomous beauty and the theory of aesthetic ideas. Robert J. Yanal is more subtle when concluding that is not that Kant had two theories of beauty, but that he has one theory of beauty that cannot accommodate his theory of fine art. This remark could be seen as a correction to the usual reading of Kant’s Critique of Judgement as the ground of the modern apparatus of the aesthetic. “The ideas of disinterestedness, of a special mode of attention that later is called the aesthetic attitude, and of formalism in art criticism are traceable to Kant who, if not quite the first to formulate them, is credibly held to have installed them firmly into modern thought”. The mistake comes, thinks Robert J. Yanal, in finding Kant on the side of aesthetic merit alone. We have to remember that, although the Critique of Judgement gives an extensive analysis of the autonomy of judgement of taste, this autonomy however does not at all imply that aesthetic judgement simply lacks relation to the two other spheres, the cognitive and normative. In fact, it establishes a rich network of connections – analogies, bridges, “as-if” relations, as Thierry de Duve says – that weave together the unitary fabric of reason. Kant’s concept of beauty has in fact allowed a future transformation of it which remained opened to all kind of external determinations.

The cognitive direction in Kant’s Critique of Judgement allowed many later thinkers, even those in the Kantian tradition, to find new dimension of it. Ideas like “the beauty as a symbol of morality” and the work of art as an expression of an aesthetic idea, generated a theoretical climate where idealist thinkers like Schiller developed them speculatively in the key of a platonic transitive bridge between art and morality. The idea that “a free art” implies “a free society” was one of the most important bases of the Enlightenment and of Romantic thought. But when it was to be taken much further, from Schiller’s idea of an Aesthetic State to the avant-gardes progressive vision, this idea was to lead to dangerous alliances with the political. Even Adorno, who was one of the staunchest defenders of the autonomy of art, will privilege in his Aesthetic Theory a certain aspect of the Kantian aesthetics which promises to rescue certain form of “pure”

communication that the logical and the practical thinking can not preserve. Although he was often very critical with the avant-gardist claim to change life through art, Adorno thought that art can generate a radical contrast with the alienated and non-conciliate character of the social reality. Far from being a means of reconciling the internal contradictions of society, art participates with the dialectical dynamism of society and culture; it realizes itself as a product of this dialectic and, as a result, mobilizes itself as a counter-culture of accepted culture or ideology:

Artworks are afterimages of empirical life insofar as they help the latter to what is denied them outside their own sphere and thereby free it from that to which they are condemned by reified external experience. ⁹

From this perspective, the role of art would be a kind of reminder of a lack – that the present society lacks something and the realization of a lack is the precondition of social critique.

2. The Kantian Tradition of Moral Beauty. The Oldest System-Program of German Idealism

From Schiller to Marcuse, the aesthetic dimension ¹⁰ has been conceived as a kind of moral forum, a critical mirror for society and as a dimension in which a more affirmative mode of existence is possible. From the perspective of this German Idealist tradition, Kant’s aesthetics proved to be as much challenging as inspirational.

On the one hand, although the implicit structure of the third Critique supported the sovereignty of aesthetics, Kant denied aesthetic experience any metaphysical role. Aesthetic judgement is not cognitive, but only expresses a universal pleasure. From this point of view, in aextremis, one could argue that in Kant the aesthetic experience is “demoted to a status worse than in Plato’s cave: it tells us only about our feelings about appearances, and so, nothing even about appearances, let alone things-in-themselves.” ¹¹ The emphasis on the autonomy of the aesthetics implied by the Kantian concept of “purposiveness without a purpose”,

¹⁰ I refer here to what Jaques Rancière called “the aesthetic regime”, i.e. “the specific mode of being of whatever falls within the domain of art”. The aesthetic of both senses is invoked here: as practice of art-making and on the subjects capable of receiving meaning (J. RANCIÈRE and G. ROCKHILL, The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006, p. 22).
means that art must be made free of all constraint by theoretical or moral concepts and that it must only be judged by the yardstick of aesthetic categories, which determined the separation of the judgement of taste from the moral sphere and laid the ground for l'art pour l'art, an initially literary movement which later in the XIXth century determined a radical conception of art who rejected of any kind of educational and humanizing functions for it.

On the other hand, the Kantian “aesthetic turn” – by introducing the first full account of aesthetic experience as a distinct exercise of rational mentality – and the idea of beauty as a symbol of morality – taken as a revival of the Aristotelic kalos kai agathos – generated a major influence for idealist thought and for the emergence of a philosophical aesthetics as an independent discipline mainly through Friedrich Schiller, F. W. J. Schelling and G. W. F. Hegel, whose philosophical contributions will be considered here only from two perspectives: the epistemic role attributed to art and beauty and the social function these thinkers located in aesthetic experience. My task here is not to offer a systematic view of these seminal thinkers, but to see how they supplement Kant’s formalist aesthetics. I will focus not on the specificity of their philosophical systems, but rather on their common points on art as a cognitive and social dimension, resumed in The oldest system-program of German idealism by the idea of a new religion – a synthesis between the spheres of the truth and the good, which Kant had tried to maintain separated. This dualism was precisely what Kant’s younger contemporary, Schiller, although deeply impressed by the Kantian aesthetics, felt he had to correct.12 We might remember here that if when Kant’s third Critique appeared in 1790, the French Revolution was in its first hopeful phase, but when around 1792 the Revolution took a bloody turn, Schiller rejected it, convinced that without authority, the deep division in the human soul lead to chaos rather than to freedom. For this reason, Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, written between 1793 and 1795, claim that it is not the political, but the aesthetic turn, that will bring freedom without chaos. As remarked Lerry E. Shiner, knowing that his exigency for the redemptive power of the aesthetic experience “seem grandious, he set up to prove it in a spiraling argument based in part on Kant’s theory of the disinterested character of the aesthetic, in part on a vision of human nature divided between human and sense and desperately needing integration.”13 If not direct, Kant did claim an indirect connection between aesthetics and morality: beauty is a symbol of

12. In a series of letters dated 1795 and sent by Schiller one to two years earlier to Herzog Friedrich-Christian von Augustenburg, Schiller himself declared his loyalty to Kant’s principles, saying that his own ideas are not original, but rather committed to the philosopher’s basic concepts; see ZVI TAUBER, “Aesthetic Education for Morality: Schiller and Kant”, Journal of Aesthetic Education, v. 40, nr. 3, 2006, pp. 22-47.

morality since both aesthetic and moral judgements are similarly free of external rules and the sublime reveals our dignity as rational-human beings. Although he stressed that an aesthetic experience of beauty or of the sublime does not teach us a particular moral lesson, nevertheless, he suggested that it makes us aware of our freedom as moral agents. Schiller developed these ideas and argued that though it is disinterested, the aesthetic experience becomes the true vehicle of moral and political education, providing human beings both with the self-identity that is their fulfillment and with the institutions that enable them to preserve their liberty, an idea that Hegel will develop later.

The mediator function of art, that was to resolve the difference between nature and liberty, is expressed in the notion of Spieltrieb ("the play drive" or "the play impulse"), which for Schiller is synonymous with artistic beauty or "living form", which is no longer a subjective dimension, but a principle of reality. When we achieve – in art making and in the capacity we have for play in general – the most harmonious balance between the "sense impulse" (Neigung, "the inclination", linked with our experience of space and time; humankind's lowest common denominator, who operates within the material world, within what is subject to time and change, within the phenomenal and the finite) and the "formal impulse" (Pflicht, "the duty", linked with the affirmation of our rationality; invokes the power of reason to arrive at harmonies and laws that annul the chaos of time and change in favor of the continuous, the immutable, and the universal) – then the human being reached his true liberty or humanity. In his twenty-second letter, Schiller said: "By this operation we are no longer in time, but time, with its complete and infinite succession, is in us. We are no longer individual, but species." Subjective man will be ennobled by objectivity. This last statement is important because Schiller states here the overcoming of the individualism through out the idea of the aesthetic man, capable to act as species or society as a whole, which is indispensable, from Schiller's point of view, for us to understand, express and respect the state. This harmony is named by Schiller humanity and the aesthetic experience is that force that preserve it: "he [man] possessed his humanity as a predisposition, before any definite condition into which he may come; but in actual practice he loses it wit any definite condition into which he comes and he must, if he is to be able to make the transition to an opposite condition, by newly restored to him every time by means of the aesthetic life."

Aesthetic education – that is the spontaneous synthesis of senses and reason – will be about the reconciliation between man and state, between modern man and his nature, that is his original sensitiveness. There would be two aspects we could refer to here. First, although he inspired himself with the

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ideal of reason proper to the Enlightenment, Schiller didn’t consider nature as an external object of mind, but he thought that a human being belongs to nature or that he is nature – as humanity, human being is “no longer in time, but he is time” – aspect which allowed some commentators to value Schiller as one of the fathers of the ecological thought. Second, when we say, from a Schillerian perspective, that man became one with the state we have to have in mind that the Schillerian state is an aesthetic one, i.e. the ideal of beauty applied to real life. In a letter to Wilhelm von Humbold of 1795, Schiller explains that when humanity is complete, “it is no longer sentimental, but ideal.” Naïve poetry is followed for Schiller by sentimental poetry, but only ideal poetry achieves the ideal of human being. In a 1793 discussion of a work by Humbold, Schiller observed: “During the first phase, they were the Greeks. We are in the second phase. We can only hope for the third phase, and then one won’t want to wish the Greeks back either.”  

The internal tension between two projects inherent in the Schillerian concept of freedom is shown here: the tension between the aesthetic utopia of a “beautiful humanity” as the philosophical absolute and the social-pedagogical program of the aesthetic education of man – starting from beauty and aiming at “higher” values over and above aesthetics: cognitive, moral and cultural values. A similar utopian image of society we’ll find later in Goethe’s “Pedagogical Province” in book two of his 1821 allegorical novel Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years, where he uses the example of music to illustrate the ideal art form who, throughout the continuum of the formation (Bildung) leads to the cultivation of both the individual and the society as a whole. Wilhelm’s son, Felix, learned various languages, arts and crafts, but music is the fundamental element of this educational process, harmony being evoked repeatedly here as a metaphor for the development both of the individual and the social ideal.

For absolute idealism to be born, considers Frederick C. Beiser., it has to go four steps beyond Kant’s formalism and Fichte’s critical idealism. First, it has to deny that the subject-object (thought and being) identity consists in the self-consciousness alone, and it has to stand instead that this identity exists only in the universal substance, of which the subject and the object are only appearances. Second, it has to dispute the purely regulative status of the absolute and to stress its constitutive role – that is, that the absolute is not only an ethical ideal, but an existing reality. Third, it has to overcome the Kantian-Fichtean limits of knowledge and to claim the cognition of the absolute and fourth, it has to affirm that nature is not a projection of consciousness, but an organism with its own reality and inherent rationality. 


17 C. FR. BEISER, op. cit., p. 375.
According to P. Szondi, the German romantics shared the aspiration to recover, by means of speculative thought, that what Kant had abandoned.\(^1\)

There where Schiller speaks of “ideal poetry”, Hegel speaks of “beautiful religion” and the both refeer to a synthesis between the freedom and nature, between subject and object. Just as Schiller had taken Kant’s epistemology as a basis for the explanation of the relation of aesthetics to ethics, so now the Kantian position was used to explain the relation of religion to aesthetics. The Schillerian “aesthetic drive” of free “game and play”, already involved the idea of art as a manner in which to change the world and will be connected to a new wave of utopian thought. “This is how Schiller’s aesthetic state became the aesthetic project of the German Romanticism summarized in the rough draft written together by Hegel, Hölderlin and Schelling: the material realization of unconditional freedom and pure thought in common forms of life and belief.”\(^2\)

Thus, the aesthetic solution supposes here the resolution, in its sphere, of what fails in the political one and will be resumed in a generalized conviction: that “beauty will make us free”. This synthesis expressed by the artistic beauty implies a new rationality, which is not abstract, nor argumentative, but concrete, sensitive and imaginative.

The idea of an “intellectual intuition”, present in Hölderlin, Shelling and also in Hegel, assumes the possibility of some form of knowledge or experience of the absolute, through the unity between the subject and the object, that is not attainable theoretically, but aesthetically. The idea of a new mythology of reason, which would fulfill the Enlightenment's project of the human emancipation through the power of reason, arose in the so-called Oldest system-program of German idealism – a manuscript dated from mid-1795 and which was first published in 1917 by Franz Rosenzweig. Initially attributed to Schelling, nevertheless others felt Hölderlin or Hegel, close friends and roommates of Schelling from their days at the Tübinger Shift, were most likely the author. In recent years, however, a consensus seems to have developed around Hegel's authorship.\(^3\)

Anyway, this short text could be seen as showing the influence of the three thinkers and is mainly important as “a founding-text” for Romanticism. In their debate from “The Literary Absolute” on Rosenzweig’s discovery of the Oldest System-Program of German Idealism and of its relevance for the German Idealism, Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy pointed out the incompleteness – both in its structure on paper and as a Program – of this manuscript. But for others, like Rebecca Gagan, its failure – that is it's utopian goal, it's incompleteness – could be relevant precisely for it's opening as a founding moment of Idealism: “The System-Program

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\(^1\) P. SZONDI, Poética y filosofía de la historia I, Visor, Madrid, 1992.

\(^2\) J. RANCIÈRE, op. cit., p. 27.

would then serve as a frame through which Idealism itself could be viewed in it's ruinous glory."

This fragmentary sketch projects the idea of a new humanity and a new philosophy of spirit, which are to unify the spheres of freedom, nature and art, though a new “mythology of reason” – referring to “a complete system of all ideas (...) or of all practical postulates” based on a disagreement with the authoritarian state of the epoch: “In the idea of humanity (...) there is no idea of state because the state is something mechanical; just as little is there an idea of a machine. Only that which is an object of freedom is called an idea. Thus we must also proceed beyond the state! For every state has to treat human beings like mechanical-wheels; and it should not do so; hence it would cease.”

This particular historical aspiration of Hegel’s generation for “the universal freedom and equality of spirits”, where man is able to act as a free and decided person, follows an antiquity-oriented ideal of a republic of free citizens that also appears in the idea of a modern democratic state, at first conceived by Rousseau and is perhaps, as an ethical project, an idealist counterpart of Spinoza’s Ethica. Ideals like “the eternal peace”, “the absolute freedom of all spirits”, etc. are all subordinated and united by beauty, taken in its higher, Platonic sense. The author of the Program affirms: “For I am convinced that the supreme act of reason, because it embraces all ideas, is an aesthetic act; and that only in beauty are truth and goodness of the same flesh.” At this point, the text connects Fichte’s idealist metaphysics of “absolute” and Schiller’s idea of the pedagogical task of aesthetics, the author raising art to the highest principle of philosophy: “The philosopher must possess as much poetic force as a poet (...) The philosophy of spirit is an aesthetic philosophy (...) poetry will thereby attain a higher dignity; in the end she will again became what she was in the beginning – the instructress of humanity.” This great work of humanity implies also, for the anonymous author, a sense of religion, because “the great mass of men must have a sensuous religion. Not only the great mass of men, but also the philosopher, needs it”. Therefore, it concludes that “monotheism of reason and polytheism of imagination of art, this is what we need!”

The final sentence of this text reveals that the central problem – the collective actualization of the ideal identity of freedom and nature – still remained unresolved: “A higher spirit sent from heaven will found this new religion among us; it will be the last, greatest work of mankind.” But within a few years, Hegel, Schelling and Hölderlin, as well as other idealist contemporaries, thought that they themselves were ready to fulfill such a messianic role. The

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23 G. S. WILLIAMSON, op. cit., p. 57.
“absolute” of Schelling and other romantic thinkers such as Hölderlin and Fr. Schlegel, the "ego" of J. G. Fichte and the Geist (spirit/mind/consciousness) of Hegel are basically attempts to circumvent the various dualisms that dominate Kantian thought, especially that of perceptible (phenomena) and non-perceptible (noumena). As John Edward Toews remarks, “this collective appropriation of the mesianic mantle was based not only on any practical success in finding a new religion or educating the people, but on a new conception or visualization of the problem, on a transcendence of the inherited intellectual framework that had made the task of unifying and actualizing the ideals of autonomy and wholeness inherently contradictory.”\(^{24}\)

Although Kant and Schiller did open the theory of sensibility to a philosophical aesthetics and Hegel will fulfill the idea of “the higher spirit” as spontaneous unity of all the antinomies, Schelling is perhaps the philosopher of art par excellence. Emphatically overcoming Kant's definition of beauty as merely a state of conciousness and Schiller's stress on the socio-political functions of beauty and art, Schelling glorifies art as "the capstone of the philosophical system" that transcends the dichotomy of subject and object and provides access to the otherwise incomprehensible primordial "absolute".

One might say that with Schelling’s Lessons on the Philosophy of art we have for the first time the aesthetics integrated into a philosophic system. In his utopian system, only art is capable of catching the absolute, i.e. the unity between the subject and object, history and nature, liberty and necessity. In Schelling’s System of transcendental idealism, the discovery of art as “a universal organum of philosophy” carried with it a cultural imperative. For if science was to inform art, philosophy would have to return to its original poetic sources. As the mythology of the Greeks – as the model for such a synthesis of philosophy and poetry – can’t be duplicated under the modern conditions, what was needed was, therefore, a new mythology: “But now a new mythology is itself to arise, which shall be the creation, not of some individual author, but of a new race [Geschlecht]”.\(^{25}\) An important aspect to indicate here is that, for Schelling, this new mythology could rest on neither the Bible or the Roman Church, but it would have to express the totality of the modern experience. The modern mythology would than be an inversion of the mythology of ancient Greece, that is, a deification of history:

[The Gods of Greece] were originally natural beings. These natural gods have to extricate themselves from their origin and become historical beings in order to become truly independent, poetical beings… Precisely the opposite will be the case in modern culture. It views the universe as history, as a moral realm, and to that extent it manifests itself as antithesis. The polytheism possible within it is possible only through delimitation


in time, through historical delimitation. It’s gods are gods of history. They will not be able to become truly gods, living, independent and poetic, until they have taken possession of nature, or until they have became nature gods.\textsuperscript{26}

3. From the Maxim to the Project of Emancipation

The idea of “a religion of art”, that would bridge the deep divide between the unenlightened and the enlightened, will exercise a profound influence not only for later generations of Romantics, including Heinrich Heine, Richard Wagner and early Nietzsche, but will retain its appeal for many avant-gardist cultural projects to come. As Dieter Henrich pointed out, the aesthetic judgement is one of the “most powerful images of freedom” for that idealist philosophical tradition in which the autonomy of the subject and the autonomy of the aesthetic object are fundamentally connected. Especially Schiller’s displacement of the aesthetics to the ideal, would produce an approach to the transcendental subject towards the empirical one and prefigure the epoch of social utopias. In \textit{Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man}, the aesthetics is thought of in a more extended project of emancipation where the aesthetic ideal of Humanity is opposed to the bourgeois society that generated it. The projection of aesthetics to the social field was called by Jacques Rancière the \textit{modernatism}, that is “the identification of forms from the aesthetic regime of arts with forms that accomplish a task or fulfill a destiny specific for modernity.” \textsuperscript{27}

Oversimplifying, we could say that the Romantic idea of an “aesthetic state”, where the ideals of the French Revolution are fulfilled, had became the new paradigm of the social revolution and allowed the brief but decisive encounter between the “artisans of the Marxist revolution and the artisans of forms for the new ways of life”.\textsuperscript{28} The historical conditions around 1910 allowed the “strategic convergence” of various avant-garde fronts (from aesthetes to radical political activists, a formation of diverse, conflicting impulses mobilised against “a common enemy”) to reach a “critical mass”. This encounter faced the artist with an important dilemma: he had to choose between what W. Benjamin called, in \textit{The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility} (1935), “the theology of art”\textsuperscript{29} – an art that serves to no ulterior purposes but is purely an end in itself (and assuming that the art neither affects, nor reflects the social circumstances) – or, on the contrary, to adopt the critical position according to which art must involve itself in social life. If l’art pour l’art doctrine finally led to anemic decorativism in the artistic practice, socially critical avant-gardes,

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{27} J. RANCIÈRE, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 26.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid.}

on the other hand, prepared another “end” of art when identifying it with life: they declared the end of art and the identification of its practices with the practices that “construct” the common life, which seems to be directly dependent on the Schillerian and Romantic reinterpretation of Greek’s art as a community’s way of life. By waving a political flag, radical avant-gardes such as Futurism and Constructivism thought that they could achieve the idealist social sensus communis derived from the idea of Humanity generated by art. Their critical function was, in this case, the guardian of the adjustment of means to achieve the aims, i.e. a critical vigilance on the ethical domain.

To take a graphical case of how the ideological can betray the aesthetic, let’s think in Paris World Fair in 1937 – Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne – where Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – the two regimes which best understood and exploited the political potential of art – were literally confronted in an artistic competition. The demonstration of force was an epic show in both cases, thus the confrontation was in fact a symbolic battle between the two political powers, which appealed to the services of prestigious creators of the moment like the visionary architect Albert Speer and the sculptor Arno Breker, in the case of Germany and Konstantin Melnikov y Vera Mukhina, in the case of the Soviet Union. The protagonism of Vera Mukhina’s sculpture representing a worker and a kolkhoz – a communal paysane – was to symbolize the power of the proletarian, while Arno Breker’s muscle-bound classical nudes were to express Hitler’s image of the future. Nowadays, Mukhina’s Worker and Kolkhoz is just another dismantled Soviet monument, waiting in Moscow for the restoration from the summer of 2003. It was planned to be exhibited in Expo 2010, but because the World’s Fair 2010 was not awarded to Moscow but to Shanghai, the restoration process was hampered by financial problems. Same as the communist utopia, it seems difficult to find a proper place for this monument today. The only thing we can do meanwhile is to contemplate its ruined condition.

On the other hand, radical movements as Dadaism (of nihilist ideology and anti-art aesthetics) and Constructivism (initially implicated with the communist political ideals of the Russian revolution) could be seen as two halves of the same coin: they shared in the end the same prejudices, derived basically from a structural connection between the ethical and the aesthetics – that if there is artistic freedom and equality, then there will be social freedom and equality too. Therefore, “the problem of the avant-gardes”, according to Thierry de Duve in his book Kant after Duchamp, would be a long range effect of the confusion between the maxim described by the Kantian “as if” of the famous statement “beauty as a symbol of morality” and “the project of emancipation” – the romantic belief that Humanity will be free, equal and shared in common. This prejudice would lead not just to those avant-garde art works in service of the State, like certain Constructivist’s practices, but also to the identification of “the
advanced art” with its critical function, like in the case of Dadaism. Robespierre’s revolutionary maxim “No liberty for the enemy of liberty” was to become the avant-garde the prejudice that modern and relevant is only the critical art, whereas other forms of modern art – like the ones satisfied with pre-modern functions as the decorative one and little interested in the social critical task, would be reactionary. For the socially critical direction of the avant-garde like the one described by Peter Bürger in his seminal Theory of the Avant-Garde (1974), the only valid criterion would be its critical function.

Insofar as it has remained only a project, the emancipation has been necessarily postponed and denied by the successive avant-gardes. This failure determined the destiny of the modernism in two phases: on one hand, the critical avant-gardes which had an authentic revolutionary potential opposed to the degeneration of the political revolution (Dadaism, Surrealism in the artistic field and the Frankfurt School, in the thought field, established the vector of this “antimodernity”); on the other hand, the failure of the ontological aesthetic model was considered as the cause of the failure of the political one.

Is quite clear today that the avant-garde’s utopian aspirations for a fundamental transformation in culture and society that would break down the barriers between art and life, never proved to be achievable and within its historical conditions, it only succeeded in stimulating gradual productive transformations. One can say that the avant-garde inherently worked in a tragic movement of cyclical self-destruction, so it remains insufficient to look back at only the aesthetic side of the movement. Which means that a retrospective view on the avant-garde has to change the idea of a static antagonism between the avant-garde and technology with a more nuanced, dialectical and dynamic one. In fact, the avant-garde was never as cut off from the industry as its most ardent polemics like Adorno, for example, liked to proclaim. In Herbert Marcuse, for example, art appears not as antagonistic to technology, but rather informing it through sensitizing people to the potential of their objects. This is how Marcuse explains his position in Towards a Critical Theory of Society:

For only if the vast capabilities of science and technology, of the scientific and artistic imagination direct the construction of a sensuous environment, only if the work world loses its alienating features and becomes a world of human relationships, only if productivity becomes creativity, are the roots of domination dried up in the individuals. No return to precapitalist, pre-industrial artisanship, but on the contrary, perfection of the new mutilated and distorted science and technology in the formation of the object world in accordance with ‘the laws of beauty’. And ‘beauty’ here defines an ontological condition – not of an oeuvre d’art isolated from real existence… but that harmony between man and his world which would shape the form of society.

30 J. RANCIÈRE, op. cit., p. 27.
Obviously, something like Schiller’s idea of an “aesthetic education” would be at work here, but it would not be confined to the individual character – as in Schiller – but would extend to our technological environment.

In *Eros and Civilization* (1953), Marcuse openly discusses Schiller’s thesis according to which the very far reaching “the true human liberty” is beauty, contrasting it with the historic secondary position of aesthetics in relation to philosophy as the discipline of reasoning and logic. According to Marcuse, philosophy historically followed the repressive domination exerted by the Occidental civilization against the sensuous potential of humanity – proof of this alliance between thought and domination, the very philosophical definition of man as animal rationalis. The following quote is clarifying at this point:

> Whereas philosophy accepts the rules and values of the principle of reality, the aspiration for a sensitivity (*Sinnlichkeit*) free of the dominance of reason will not have its place in the philosophy; quite modified, it found refugee into art theory. The truth of art is the liberation of the sensitivity throughout its reconciliation with reason; this is the central concept of classic idealist aesthetics.\(^{32}\)

We don’t have here an inverted hierarchy between senses and reason, but, like in Schiller, a sensual reason, a dialectic reconciliation between the modern human being and liberty. According to Marcuse the separation between the spheres of art and ethics is just an historical one, generated by the instrumental reason which historically tried to relegate the sensitive dimension of the human being. Following Marx, Marcuse proposed what in the Unidirectional man just suggested: that liberty is possible as an overcoming of the necessities in an non-repressive order of society characterized by the “play drive”, a kind a non-alienated or “erotic” labor, that is not exclusively economic-productive, but also mainly gratifying. Marcuse does not pretend here to dispense with the technical basis of society, but to reconstruct it following different ends.

According to Andrew Feenberg, we can make sense in contemporary terms of Marcuse’s utopian vision of aesthetized technology because “the traditional notion of technology as a pure rational ‘means’ to subjective ‘ends’ has been decisively refuted by philosophy and the sociology of technology in recent years. We no longer believe that technology is value-neutral. Rather, contemporary technology studies argue that technological design always incorporates values through the choices made between the many possible alternatives confronting the designers.” In fact, Freenberg adds, “we are better able to understand and develop this idea today than we were in Marcuse’s day.”\(^{33}\) At the core of our environmental crisis lies our relationship with nature: extinction, pollution, depletion of natural resources, ill treatment of animals and people etc are only “symptoms”. Certain

\(^{32}\) *Id.*, *Eros y Civilization*, trad. Juan García Ponce, Editorial Ariel, Barcelona, 1989, p. 174; my translation where the translator is not indicated.

\(^{33}\) A. FEENBERG, *Marcuse on Art and Technology*; online: http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/issue8/feenberg.html
lines of the idealist and avant-gardist thought, like Marcuse’s project of a radical philosophy of technology, seem not only to have sense today – the age of nuclear proliferation – but to be an imperative.

4. As a Conclusion: Critical Function and Aesthetic Reason after Duchamp

A revision of the aesthetic question in pragmatic terms, besides any social utopian frame, send us inevitably to a tautological definition of art and probably this is the only specific ground for it. We finally have to assume the contingency of all interpretations of art, something that in principle appears incompatible with the universal claims of the project of emancipation of the Enlightenment. But in fact, Kant did not deny the variability or historical contingency of concrete aesthetic answers. Now, what does the Kantian “as if” mean for the implication between beauty and morality? Does the Kantian statement mean that the art stimulates the realization of the moral life, as Schiller thought? In Kant, as I tried to explain, sensus communis has nothing to do with such metaphysics or such an inherent telos, therefore must be exclusively identified with the regime of the sensus communis aestheticus. The universality of such a feeling belongs then to the sphere of ought. The Kantian argument here is somewhat circular: if the receptivity of the cognitive faculties is required for cognition in general and assuming that cognitions can be communicated, then, the free play of imagination and understanding must be likewise universally communicable and this universal communicability of the feeling supposes a common sense. Therefore, Kantian sensus communis does not mean “community spirit” or “communal spirit”, it is not a feeling of solidarity with the community or a general will, in Rosseau’s sense.

With respect to this point, Christoph Menke draws attention to the fact that the Kantian judgement of taste is only analogue to morality “insofar as both cases are a way to think extensively who is made there where universal exigencies are formulated.”34 Therefore, this universality is not a condition just for the aesthetic and ethic judgement, but for all the situations that require an exigency of universal validity. Thus, sensus communis means for aesthetics, the same as the idea of the totality of rational practical human beings, for ethics. By means of this remission to an analogical implication, the linkage between beauty and morality loses its metaphysical sense and gains a pragmatic one. If sensus communis, in the sense of human solidarity or of a reasonable community of human beings, is not a fact – as Thierry de Duve said, if it were, the maxim of emancipation would not be in need of a critical function and “love

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would draw us together all by itself\textsuperscript{35} – than it has to do more with “communicativity” than with “community”. We have here then a regulative subjective principle of reason or a maxim: though we actually presuppose in our judgements of taste a sensus communis – “a feeling necessarily assumed to be common to all men and women” – we do not know, as Kant clearly says in the paragraph 22 of the third Critique, if there really exists such common sense as a constitutive principle of possible experience. Whether it is constitutive or simply regulative cannot be determined, so that the claim to universal aesthetic judgements merely testifies to the necessary presupposition of a sensus communis. In the mentioned work, Thierry de Duve explains that no causal link or logical implication binds art to politics in the material domain of social history, nor aesthetics to ethics in the spiritual sphere of ideology. At most, there is just an analogical implication, a kind of “pact of freedom”, which would have to be thought as if it extended to everyone although it is not real. Whether creativity exists, as inscribed in the genetic code of the human species, for example, or whether it is a regulative or a cultural idea, it is not the important point here; but it is an intellectual obligation to suppose that it was a fruitful regulative idea of modernity. Similarly, if creation is still fruitful today, this is not any longer a question of taste, but “a question of conviction”. For example, it is a fact today that the Duchampian “Urinal” – rejected in 1917 by the committee of the Society of Independent Artists as “non art”, is displayed today in the museums as one of the icons of modern art. Therefore, the sentence “Duchamp is art”, though not necessarily any longer a judgement of taste, it still remains an aesthetic judgement, i.e. a question of conviction, if not a ground for judging, at least a reflexive outcome of judgement itself.

Therefore, Kantian statement in relation to the maxim of emancipation would have to be reformulated as followed: “one must act, in art as well as in politics, in aesthetics as well as in ethics, as if men were free, equal and brothers, that is, as if one were adult, rational and a reasonable being. One ought to regulate one’s conduct on the Idea of humanity.”\textsuperscript{36} It is true that art does not entirely exclude a potential association between aesthetic experience and moral being, and it is this possibility that the Idealist and Romantic thinkers pursued. But it is also true that the judgments of beauty are incontrovertibly free of moral interest and external constraints. Therefore, the analogy of art with the morality today would be, at the most, a reminder of which the same exigency ought to regulate the ethical action in its own sphere. I would conclude by paraphrasing Tzvetan Todorov and say that, although today we cannot go back to Enlightenment ideals, because its world is not ours, nevertheless, in criticizing it, we might remain faithful to them.

\textsuperscript{35} TH. De DUVE, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 446.

\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 443.
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