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Art and the Politics of Peace: An Ambivalent Relationship

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You can take your horse to the water, but you can't make it drink'. The proverb provides a fine illustration of the deeply ambiguous and very complicated relationship between the contemplation of art and moral action. To disentangle this Gordian knot, we need to do a lot of intellectual work. First, we have carefully to examine the cultural landscape we happen to be in: its geography and its climate, and we have to search for the pond the horse *can* be watered on. Next we have to determine the quality of the water: whether it is drinkable, healthy or excellently refreshing. Third, we have to take an inquisitive look at the horse's mind to determine whether the animal has the intelligence and the right disposition to appreciate, esteem and enjoy the drink offered. And lastly, whether its conscience is disposed to take the refreshing experience of the water as a guideline for modelling its future behaviour, whether the 'harmony' of the experience can be and will be successfully transmuted in the realities of the horse's life. Whether it will graze more peacefully or, once again, run wild. That is quite possible because, after all, the horse got an invigorating drink. The right answer or answers to these questions depend on a lot of factors, most of which, given the circumstances, are more or less unknown and, if known, not easily manipulated. Given the geography and the climate, there could be no watering place at all, the water could be foul, and the horse could be temporarily bad-tempered, ill-bred or have an awful, uneducable character. Here, more than anywhere else, the proof of the pudding is in the eating and in the proper functioning of digestive tracks.

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The appreciation of art as well as its creation depend for their existence and flourishing on the conditions culture itself, as an outgrowth of our biological nature, is subject to. Extreme circumstances that endanger the substance of our life, due to natural causes such as floods or catastrophes such as wars, caused by misguided civilizational beliefs, make both impossible or at least highly improbable. And certainly ineffective. Paradoxically, when we most need to further peace, artistically or otherwise, conditions to do so generally fail us. Total war is a case in point. The thin layer of civilised life is swept away and what remains is our drive for survival and the brutal politics this entails. Art becomes a loud cry of pain and a muffled call for help. However resilient man proves to be, there is a biological and a mental limit to his powers of symbolisation and their effectiveness. To be able to promote peace a certain amount of peace is required. And this peace is a given. It is not man-made. We have it by the grace of nature and by cultural luck. With this luck and this grace our civilizational endeavours can get started. But without them nothing substantial can be done.

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Art, as most human things, is culturally embedded. What art is, how it functions and whether or not it can have an impact on moral behaviour, depends on the overall structure and the essential properties of the cultural set, on the tradition, we are looking at. This is true for the creation of art as well as for its appreciation. As it is true for our morality and our

longings. General answers therefore cannot be given: they turn out vague and elusive. The notions used, in this case ‘art’ and ‘morality’, are too underdetermined and may easily lead to contradictory results. However, with some plausibility the following can be said. In any tradition, in any view of man and the world, which always and everywhere is the core of our cultural identity, art can be seen as the symbolic expression of this identity. Art, in many diverse and divergent ways, ‘mirrors’ our so-called ‘second nature’, the end-result of our self-cultivation. In works of art we recognise our deepest selves, our essence, our cultural successes and our failures. In art we celebrate the kind of humanity we have made of ourselves. It is expressed dramatically in the core rituals of our civilisations, in literature, oral and written, in our myths, in our holy books, in our incantations and our prayers, etc., in dance, in songs and in music, in our architecture, our temples and our homes, and in all kinds of paraphernalia and requisites in our visual arts. We need all this because such concretisations of our cultural perspective are necessary: they are the only way to transfer our identity to the next generation, to establish, in the full sense of the word, a ‘tradition’. Man as a symbolising being cannot be conceived without it. Otherwise he cannot maintain his humanity. At least it is so for ‘traditional’ art and ‘traditional’ morals. Or, more precisely, for stable societies. As change is omnipresent and unavoidable, this does not mean that there is no evolution at all. ‘Stability’ in this context means that the changes are of the periphery, that they are not substantial: the cultural core remains the same. There are no disruptions, there is no revolution, there is no despair. The cultural set is stable because it can cope with its vital dangers, internally and externally.

It is clear that the question of the moral impact of art in such societies has to be answered in the affirmative. Art as the regulated, well-formed, formal expression of the contents of the culture ideally expresses precisely those contents it is living and thriving by. In such cases art is pedagogical throughout: it paradigmatically provides the education people need to become and remain the kind of ‘humans’ they happen to be. The moral impact therefore is enormous. And this impact is a ‘given’ as well, as long as the society reproduces itself and remains what it essentially is: ‘the same’. Moreover, this ethical import is self-validating and self-reinforcing: creating, contemplating, appreciating these cultural devices, this kind of art is what *is* done and what *has to be* done. There is no divide, at least no substantial divide between the so-called ‘morality’, implicitly or explicitly, of the work of art and the morals of the people living and enjoying it. On the contrary their ethical stance is validated and affirmed, even if one has, occasionally, to deplore one’s moral failures. Art is an ‘exemplum’, even if it happens to be a negative one. It is classical drama, not Brecht’s non-Aristotelian theatre. Traditional art, as the cultural set it is embedded in, is not made to change the world. It is made to make man’s world remain what it is. Paradoxically therefore, where art evidently has the deepest impact, it leaves everything as it is. It doesn’t *really* teach us a lesson. The lessons it clearly and impressively teaches, we already know. In consequence in these circumstances the idea, the question of ‘art for peace’ does not occur. The peace there is, is the peace we have. And if there is conflict and war, this war is just, even, sometimes, holy. Our problem therefore arises and becomes pertinent only if and when societies become unstable. And then, as we all know, principles no longer work properly and ideals prove not as relevant as they were. Or seemed to be.

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Hence the question: 'Can art save the world?'. Realistically, the only possible answer is a resounding 'no'. But, from another point of view every work of art is, in a certain sense, a 'world saved'. In art, properly understood, the world is 'always already saved'. Effectively, whatever its medium, its formal characteristics constitute a closed, a self-referential universe of time and space. It is a semblance of reality, a world complete and adequate in itself, validated and valuable according to its own unique, inherent, constitutive criteria, whatever its contents may be. As such it is past hope, past care: it is a kind of paradise. In other words, in art the problematic properties of reality, which make for good and bad, for comedy and tragedy, for joy and misery, are in a sense left behind. It creates a fictional universe ready-made for our contemplation and our satisfaction. Its medium is its playground, the work itself is the play we, godlike, contemplate, appreciate and enjoy. In this unity of form and content, of symbol and reality, of object and event, all that happens, all that is presented, simply is, and ideally has always been and always will be: if there is eternity in time, it is in art it can be apprehended. This playful essence can absorb every content from the most frivolous to the most serious. But it is and remains a semblance, a fiction. It remains 'play': nothing really happens. And this rift between the seriousness of reality and the reality of fiction is abysmal. It cannot be bridged. The world at large may be a stage and our doings may be theatre. But as far as it is theatre we are looking at it from the outside. In art we always take God's point of view. We don't have to act, and we don't: it would be beside the point. In contemplating art we actually exist beyond good and evil: all theatre-goers are heavenly guests: our joys are pure and our sorrows are irrelevant. All that is real, effectively real, is a disturbance, a nuisance to get rid of as soon as possible. Accordingly, the contemplation of art takes place in a state of sublime harmony that is given by all successful art and that can be and will be enjoyed by all who have the necessary feeling for symbolic play. But this universal characteristic of art as well as our universal capacity for enjoying it, is morally empty. These formal properties are indifferent to whatever content. Art can incorporate them all, it excludes none, and it promotes nothing: it merely presents them. As 'aesthetic form' it has no implications, neither epistemological nor ethical. As far as content is concerned, it is trivial: it is indeed mere playfulness, pure happiness, so to speak. If we are concerned with the plight of man in the world, we have to look at art's contents. It is not the play that will catch the conscience of the king, but what effectively is said and done in it. The play is but the means.

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Looking at the content of a work of art from the perspective of its putative influence on our ethical stance, the nature of the implementation of morality in art, the moral constitution of man in general and of the art-lover in particular are to be taken into account. What is the pedagogy of art and what is its impact? There are at least two kinds of artworks: those that are explicitly pedagogical in conception and design and those that are so hardly or not at all. The distinction is essential. And there is a problem here. For the more a work is explicitly pedagogical, the less attractive it proves to be as a work of art. In other words, its artistic quality is diminished, it becomes less impressive, and hence it has less impact on the art-lover. Hence the paradox: pedagogical intentions and designs in art are the more counter-

productive the more explicitly they are expressed. The reason evidently has to do with the fundamental characteristics of artistic expression and the unavoidable nature of our ethical stance in real life. In art as a symbolic construct, the subject matter, whatever it is, can be and normally is worked out in all aspects relevant for the expression of the specific content envisaged; as such it is as dense and as complete as possible, it has the properties of an individual: ethics in art is densely contextualised. Its moral stance exclusively counts for the individual in question: it is not and it cannot be generalised. But generalisation is precisely what our moral guidance in real life presupposes: our individual behaviour in society is essentially determined by laws, rules and habits, moral precepts and commandments. And these are valid, or are thought to be so, for everyone. And they have to be so for society to have the required minimum of consensus, coherence and harmony: otherwise they are not workable. Hence the paradox of ethics and morality: we all act as individuals individually in medias res, yet all our actions are always explicitly informed and directed by the abstractions the ‘moral metaphysics’ we happen to have requires. Moreover we have to believe that these guidelines, abstract as they inevitably are, are nevertheless sufficient to fully realise the kind of life our cultural goals imply. In fact this is an illusion, if any is. But we can’t shake it off, first, because that would mean that we wouldn’t have the means at hand to act morally as required and, secondly, that our individual initiatives, which we cannot but have, couldn’t be controlled by society. In other words, our civilisation would lose its grip on us. Up to a certain point, we would be set free. And we are. But then anarchy looms at the corner. We have to conclude therefore that our moral behaviour unavoidably turns out to be more or less kitschy. For kitsch can be characterised by the illusion that the harmony required –in life and in art– individually and collectively, can be and must be reached, because it can be calculated exactly, because it can be computed. Because our morality is, or is wishfully thought to be, adequate and complete. If this were the case, in this kitschy hypothesis, art indeed becomes fundamentally pedagogical and it cannot become anything else: in other words, it is merely kitsch. Doubtlessly admirable for kitschy people (who believe in the putative adequacy and completeness of their systems of morality), who by these pseudo-artistic means are efficiently educated by the works they so much admire, in all things, and only in those things, they already know. The work then becomes, whatever the appearance to the contrary, vacant and meaningless. Moreover kitsch, aesthetically and ethically, is dangerous, precisely because its trust in abstractions makes it blind to reality. Art, really valuable and eventually influential art, morally and otherwise, has to be something else.

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There’s a minimum of ethics in almost everything human. So in art. In stable societies art reflects, sustains, validates and furthers the cultural powers that be. There is no rift between cultural givens and its content. There are no ‘essentially contestable’ concepts concerning the definition and the function of art. Art in its full sense is the all-round handmaiden of its cultural set: it essentially helps to safeguard the tradition. In unstable

societies its function shrinks, it succumbs to the sickness of abstraction and artificiality, it becomes explicitly pedagogical and propagandistic. In consequence it tends to lose its substance. It cannot function properly any more.

For art to become a positively pedagogical force for the betterment of man and society, it has to regain its metaphorical impact. It has to present its contents in a semblance, in a symbolic form, that in full honesty and as sharply as possible presents the problems and the conflicts of the day in all their subtlety, complexity and depth. It cannot ventilate, let alone preach solutions, because art as such has none. By its nature the most it can do, thanks to its unique suggestive force, is stimulate our thinking and feeling, sharpen the consciousness of the predicaments, dilemmas and conflicts circumstances and our cultural doings have brought upon us, in the hope to stir up our moral creativity so that we are enabled to invent solutions that are not reductive, stifling and finally self-destructive. Only this kind of art can suggest, encourage and help us to become as nuanced, as sensitive and as subtle as needed. This is our hope. And hope it remains. For it can have no effect, if the work is not apprehended by a subject that is receptive, subtle and intelligent enough to appreciate its metaphorical force, to integrate it in its own mind so as to think, feel and act in a spirited and inspired way. Otherwise nothing will come of it, the work will fall on deaf ears and on blind eyes. Kitschy people like kitsch, superficiality and brutality in art breed brutality and superficiality in the minds of men. Like only recognises like. And again we are confronted with a paradox: if art *really* is to promote peace in ourselves and in the world, it can have this function only for well-educated persons, people who tend to the self-same values, that is, to the 'democracy' of a peaceful mind. In times of change art can fulfil its proper function only in societies with a democratic mindset. Then and only then, material conditions aside, the mental space and time required for the 'free play of the mind', which is necessary for the development of workable answers to the queries at hand, is available and can be appreciated, or at least tolerated. 'Democracy' in this sense, evidently does not imply that this mindset can only be developed and thrive in 'parliamentary democracy'. 'Democracy', politically, is a kind of government that is formal, a conception of society designed by majority vote, to avoid chaos, violence and the dictatorship of some groups over others. In other words, it is designed to guarantee peaceful co-habitation between factions that can very well and often are not 'democratic' at all. The mentality 'real', mental democracy requires is peculiar: it means that one is prepared to recognise one's uncertainties and is able to live with them, that one can look man, society and the world straight in the face, that one is honest to oneself and to others, and that one has developed a large measure of empathy with points of view one doesn't share. For short, that one can live with change, and can change one's own opinions without losing one's equilibrium. Democracy so envisaged can be defined as the 'art of creative thinking and feeling': it is the self-creation of a creative mind. In consequence, it doesn't exist as frequently as one would wish. Not only as such, but also because the cultural and societal circumstances it requires to flourish are exceptional as well.

In stable societies the moral impact of 'art' broadly conceived is quasi-automatic: it incarnates the ethics of the society it is created in. In unstable societies, certainly when cultural presuppositions become uncertain, insecure and changing, art tends to become consciously programmatic and propagandistic. It easily turns out to be kitsch. Only art that is artistically rich, hence only implicitly pedagogical, can be ethically and mentally stimulating. However, only an open mind can fully appreciate, understand and endorse this kind of work. And last but not least, there always remains the gap between fiction and reality. As said: you can take your horse to the water, but you can't make it drink. And that is true for the best of them.