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The Social Role of Art
A Reading of *Art and Truth after Plato*

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Abstract: It is well known that Plato wanted to ban the poets and artists from his perfect city. Indeed for Plato only philosophers, who have the knowledge of the reality, could be true artists. In his book *Art and Truth after Plato*, Tom Rockmore takes the above Platonic claims seriously and works out their major theoretical implications, showing that Plato's views on art are intimately connected with his epistemology. In addition, Rockmore explains that Plato's understanding of the relation between art and cognition has more influence on our tradition and contemporary aesthetics than we would usually acknowledge. His main thesis is that Plato's claim has never been satisfactorily answered. In other words, Rockmore's book not only provides us with an interesting account on the history of aesthetics but also an original philosophical investigation on the relation between art and truth which allows a renewed interpretation and understanding of the social role of art throughout history

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In *Art and Truth after Plato*, Tom Rockmore argues that Plato's interpretation of the relation between art and truth is at the core of our Western tradition of aesthetics.¹ The great moments of the Western aesthetics tradition could be read as a response to Plato's claims about art and truth. It is well known that Plato wanted to ban the poets and artists from his perfect city. Indeed for Plato only philosophers, who have the knowledge of forms, could be true artists. In showing the links between aesthetics and epistemology, Rockmore offers a compelling historical reading of the social role of art since Plato. The transformation of the social role of art follows the epistemological status of aesthetics.

Rockmore leads us through the history of the relations of aesthetics and epistemology from Plato to the twentieth century where the social role of "art for the sake of art" becomes more problematic, more difficult to grasp for non artists. Upon reading the book, the contemporary debates in Canada about the State financing arts and cultural activities occurred to me as relevant to Rockmore's discussion. On the one side of the argument there are those who believe that citizen's taxes should be better put to use than to finance artistic productions which are simply perceived as useless. This position is presented by our current conservative government who has imposed drastic cuts in the administration of cultural productions. On the other side of the argument there are those who favor an active support of the State in arts by arguing that art has a positive social role,

¹ Tom Rockmore, *Art and Truth after Plato*, Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press 2013, 344 pages. [Henceforth cited as *ATP*]

but what exactly is this social role is not always clear. With his historical and epistemological perspective, Rockmore's book could be read as an answer to these questions; as arguments for the defenders of art. As we will see his answer is resolutely Hegelian, and so is, at the end, his methodology.

In Ancient Greece, mythology was a source of knowledge and art which represented mythology had a pedagogical purpose. Plato opposes this view by arguing that mythology is not a source of knowledge. Moreover, art cannot represent adequately the mind-independent external world and could be dangerous for the beautiful order of his perfect city. His theory of forms is at the heart of his criticisms of poetry. If Plato wants to ban artists and poets from his perfect city it is because some forms of art are not reliable sources of knowledge, which could be dangerous and lead citizens into error. Most probably, Plato regards the condemnation of Socrates, the wisest man of the city, as the biggest error of the Athenian democracy. He believes that the majority of men are not able to distinguish between reality and appearance and should not rule the city. As Hannah Arendt remarks, when Plato is concerned with political philosophy, the idea of good is transformed into standards and measurements and in so doing acquires more importance than the idea of the beautiful. She writes:

This transformation was necessary to apply the doctrine of ideas to politics, and it is essentially for a political purpose, the purpose of eliminating the character of frailty from human affairs, that Plato found necessary to declare the good, and not the beautiful, to be the highest idea. [...] even in the Republic, the philosopher is still defined as a lover of beauty, not of goodness. The good is the highest idea of the philosopher-king, who wishes to be the ruler of human affairs because he must spend his life among men and cannot dwell forever under the sky of ideas.²

Rockmore explains well how for Plato the philosopher must not only rule over politics but also over art; the philosopher is not only king, he must also be artist. Plato rejects artistic imitation on epistemological grounds: art cannot properly imitate the forms. Art cannot make any cognitive claim; it cannot be associated with knowledge. In his perfect city, Plato wants to impose censorship on art to control its quality and content. Plato's attack on imitative

poetry links epistemology to politics (ATP 56). Art must not only be pleasurable but also beneficial to the city. In a way he keeps the ancient pedagogical role of art but restricts art to true art, namely art that is able to imitate the forms. Of course, only philosophers who have knowledge of the forms can grasp reality and can represent it correctly. Rockmore summarizes: "there is knowledge, or knowledge of the forms, but poets and other types of artists do not have it" (ATP 40). As he explains, "Plato did not anticipate a noncognitive use of representation" (ATP 47) nor a type of cognition that would be directed toward the subject instead of toward the mind-independent external world.

Rockmore's work allows us also to understand how Aristotle was able to redeem arts' status and social role. He argues that Aristotle's rehabilitation of artistic creation is anti-Platonic and is rooted in his reading and criticism of Plato's theory of knowledge. The author shows brilliantly how the question of art, of artistic representation is linked—maybe subsequent—to the problem of "what it means to know?" Aristotle opposes the theory of the forms and in so doing liberates art from the obligation to be an imitation of the forms. He answers Plato by transforming the understanding of imitation. For Aristotle art imitates human life, human actions, and not the forms.

If art is the imitation of human life it has an important social role as it can represent examples of good life, *eudaimonia*, and inspire citizens to act.³ Rockmore stresses that poetry has for Aristotle a higher rank than history because it is like philosophy; it is dealing with general truths and history only with specific events. But Aristotle escapes the Platonic problem of the epistemological status of imitation, of the truth of art, by changing the meaning of *mimesis* as making or creating. The artists do not simply imitate the real; they create as they construct plots. Rockmore explains that Aristotle, contrary to Plato, is interested in the actual State where philosophers are not kings. He also abandons the claim for truth in the Platonic sense. "In substituting life for a transcendent object, Aristotle attributes a positive function to forms of art situated

² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second edition, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 226.

³ Hannah Arendt is influenced by Aristotle in her understanding of tragedy. She characterizes revolution as a tragic event because it operates in a similar way on spectators. It provides a catharsis that purifies men from what could prevent them from acting. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, New York: Viking Press, 1963, and Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York: Viking Press, 1968.

within the social context." (ATP 69). Art can become true and useful in depicting human context especially in the case of tragedy which provides the *catharsis*. Of course, Aristotle is only changing the focus, he is not really answering Plato's problem: "mere imitation of human life does not substitute for imitation of mind-independent reality" (ATP 67).

The medieval Christian period is marked by religious faith and inference from world to God and consequently art can become a source of knowledge. Rockmore writes: "In this way, medieval theoreticians turn the Platonic critique of art against Platonism in suggesting that in artworks we honor and know the divine cause of the world." (ATP 74). The medieval artists are not concerned with the question if they can represent the world, but rather how to best represent the divine dimension. Therefore they remain consistent with the Platonic view that art imitates the mind-independent world, but are anti-Platonic in their understanding of the relation of art and truth. Artists claim to represent nature, thus to represent the divine creation. Like it was the case in Antiquity, art has a pedagogical purpose as it can educate the illiterate about the transcendent Christian reality. The social role of art is to link the individual to the divine (ATP 77); artistic representation has a cognitive function. Rockmore stresses the specific social role of art as adoration. He writes: "This adoration, which is basically representational in approach, takes place in a series of three kinds of works: the work of the creator; the work of nature, which resembles the divine ideal; and the work of artist who imitates nature" (ATP 93). Of course, this cognitive status of art is never rationally questioned since it is based on faith. God creates the world and its creation is beautiful; in knowing the world, man knows its creator.

From the medieval period, Rockmore goes directly to Kant and German idealist aesthetics. He recalls how Kant was facing the problem of taste, namely how to transform subjective judgements of taste into objective judgments. This problem could be read as a response to Plato in a shift of emphasis from the art object to the response to it. The focus is shifted from the cognitive value of art to the feelings of pleasure or displeasure of the subject. Kant is mainly interested in the spectator. This modification is linked to Kant's theory of knowledge: the noumenal world is beyond the limits of reason. Because Rockmore's study deals with the relation of art and truth, he devotes considerable attention to the Analytic of the sublime and sheds light on the links between the *First* and *Third Critique*. Indeed Kant explains that the faculty

of judgment is free only in aesthetic judgments, in the free interplay of imagination and reason. In teleological judgments, the faculty of judgment has to submit to reason through the concept of end that is, through the principle of the purposiveness of nature. But for Kant's argument to be convincing, we have to think that nature has a purpose. Rockmore summarizes: "Kant suggests he is a deep Platonist while taking an anti-Platonic approach to art and art objects. In denying that aesthetics yields knowledge, or at least knowledge as he understands it in the *First Critique*, Kant undoes Platonic link between art and truth" (ATP 143). As we know, this liberation of art from truth is very important in Arendt's reading of Kant's political philosophy – I will come back to it. Nonetheless as judgment of taste is a form of interpretation of art objects, it becomes a form of knowledge that can be valid for all observers. Rockmore seems unsatisfied with Kant's attempt to enlarge the understanding of knowledge in order to include interpretation. The problem lies in the restricted view of interpretation that fails to acknowledge its historical character.

Rockmore will find the answer to this problem in Hegel. Indeed, Hegel thinks that art is a function of the historical moment: art is essentially historical. Artists capture the *Zeitgeist* and art becomes a form of knowledge about human beings. Rockmore writes: "Art is a central form of expression of human understanding about the world and themselves, in short an indispensable window on the human soul" (ATP 184). The suprasensuous reality is not for Hegel independent as it is for Plato; it derives of the activities of finite beings. Hence art can make cognitive claims as a middle-term between the finite and infinite; between the here and now and pure thought. However, art can only display a part of truth. For Hegel, philosophy has a privileged position regarding knowledge. I found Rockmore's reading of Hegel's claim that art is dead very convincing. He argues that we cannot take this claim literally. Because of its historical character, art's role has changed and it no longer satisfies human spiritual needs or other needs in the same way it once did. We no longer seek ultimate truth in art; we no longer think that art can represent the divine. This understanding of the spiritual role of art or the use of art to know the divine is dead but the nature of art as a window on the human soul is not dead. Moreover, art has a cognitive function with respect to recognition: we recognize and know ourselves in and through what we do – or as Hans-Georg Gadamer puts it: "humanity encounters itself" in art (quoted in ATP 192). Rockmore

epitomizes: "art helps us to reach self-consciousness, and thus to know ourselves. And in this crucial role, it has in no sense been outmoded." (ATP 193). Hegel is anti-Platonic in denying that we can know a deeper reality separated from human beings. Rockmore's analysis of *l'art pour l'art* and cubism goes in the sense of his reading of Hegel; it supports it. These kinds of art make no claim to objective knowledge, they favour subjectivity. For example, impressionists turned away from the eternal or ideal beauty to promote a personal vision and to express feelings.

Rockmore concludes that Hegel takes his predecessors at their word. He remains Platonic in maintaining the imitative function of the art object, but anti-Platonic in understanding art as a relation between artist and object instead of a relation between forms and art object. To quote Rockmore: "Hegel's aesthetic theory is based on a further development of Kantian constructivism, or the insight, which forms the core of Kant's Copernician revolution, that we 'construct' what we know" (ATP 271). Hegel focuses on the significance of the construction of art objects for the subject. Artists express their intuition, their world-view and their creation can be evaluated in terms of the idea they depict and the ideal to which it approximates. Following Hegel, aesthetics has abandoned the idea that art is a representation of the mind-independent reality, so art is not evaluated through successfully imitating nature. The social role of art is associated with its cognitive role, namely to create beautiful objects in and through which we know ourselves. Humanity can know itself in a concrete form through artistic expressions. Art helps us to become conscious of ourselves. It is interesting to note that there is no free art in totalitarian regimes—I mean art that is not propaganda. As Arendt describes it, totalitarianism spares no effort to abolish this possibility of spontaneity and self-consciousness; paving the way for the banality of evil.⁴ Rockmore concludes by recalling that for Hegel art belongs to culture, understood as the educational project of the German *Bildung*.

To conclude, I would like to come back to Rockmore's reading of Kant and especially of the social role of art, which he finds difficult to grasp (ATP 270).

Rockmore makes a reference to Arendt's conferences on Kant's Political Philosophy (ATP 108), but does not make a discussion out of it. I think that a discussion of Arendt's reading of Kant⁵ allows a way to understand the social role of art according to Kant. Arendt's reading of the *Third Critique* is mainly concerned with finding an example for political judgment, but in so doing she uncovers a major role of art, namely the emergence of the common world. She follows Kant who argues that the faculty of judgment in aesthetic judgment is free from the faculty of reason and at the same time free from cognitive claims, that is from truth. Arendt insists on translating *allgemein* by "general," not by "universal" to point out the fact that the reflective judgment does not have the same validity as the determinant judgment. Aesthetic judgments, as political judgments for Arendt, do not impose themselves as true. We can only win the consent of others to our judgment. Thus these judgments acquire an inter-subjective validity and are historically contextualised. The norm is not truth, but the *sensus communis* which is our faculty to share the world together. The faculty of judgment is our political faculty *par excellence* because it includes plurality in its exercise: we visit the point of view of others while judging. Arendt does not emphasize the link between aesthetics and morality as Rockmore does, she instead proceeds to a politization of aesthetics. Art is not only a way to understand ourselves, as it appears to be for Hegel, but also a way to humanize the world. She emphasizes the Kantian idea of publicity and the fact that spectators are always plural in number; which we can read as an opening to other. Art objects contribute to create a community of spectators, a common world. Art becomes a way to fight atomization and world alienation. Beyond any doubt Rockmore's work is very important as it opens a new way to understand the relation of art and truth by unfolding the links between epistemology and the social role of art. This historical journey enables the necessary perspective to comprehend the nature of art and its influence on our understanding of the world and ourselves. *Art and Truth after Plato* brilliantly shows that art has a fundamental social function as it is a way to better know ourselves.

⁴ Hannah Arendt analyzes this negation of spontaneity in the third section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and the "banality of evil" is at the heart of her report of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, which was first published in the *New Yorker* and was later published under the title *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking Press, 1963.

⁵ This discussion of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* would probably have been an important moment of Arendt's third section of *The Life of the Mind*, but she died before finishing it. I rely on her archives and her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982.