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SAVING MODERNITY. AN AESTHETIC DISCOURSE

The paper presents the attempts of such philosophers as J. Habermas, G. Vattimo and J. F. Lyotard to “save modernity” from the perspective of postmodern culture. The paper focuses on the issues of aesthetics used to illustrate the genealogy of several essential features of contemporary culture, including individualism, freedom, creativity and performativity. The case of the development of art is used to demonstrate the consequences of these values’ promotion in public life and in science.

Key words: *modernity, postmodernity, art, culture, autonomy, performativity.*

Пенкала Т. Рятуння модерності. Естетичний дискурс

У статті представлено спроби “порятунку модерності” з перспективи постмодерної культури, що належать таким філософам, як Ю. Габермас, Дж. Ваттімо, Ж.-Ф. Ліотар. У центрі статті лежить естетична проблематика, за допомогою якої проілюстровано генеалогію кількох суттєвих ознак сучасної культури: індивідуалізму, свободи, креативності, перформативності. На прикладі розвитку мистецтва показано наслідки популяризації цих цінностей у суспільному житті та в науці.

Ключові слова: *модерність, постмодерність, мистецтво, культура, автономія, перформативність.*

Пэнкала Т. Спасение модерности. Эстетический дискурс

В статье представлены попытки “спасения модерности” с перспективы постмодерной культуры, принадлежащие таким философам, как Ю. Хабермас, Дж. Ваттимо, Ж.-Ф. Лиотар. В центре статьи лежит эстетическая проблематика, при помощи которой проиллюстрирована генеалогия нескольких существенных качеств современной культуры: индивидуализма, свободы, креативности, перформативности. На примере развития искусства показаны последствия популяризации этих ценностей в общественной жизни и в науке.

Ключевые слова: *модерность, постмодерность, искусство, культура, автономия, перформативность.*

The title phrase “saving modernity” is not used purely descriptively in order to show the condition of society or culture as one that needs repairing. Such a treatment of the problem would have to be regarded as belated or premature. It would be delayed in relation to the debate on “the end of modernity”, which was particularly intense in the nineteen-seventies and eighties in philosophy, social sciences and science of art, and participated in, inter alia by J. Habermas, G. Vattimo, J. F. Lyotard, and R. Rorty. Conversely, attempts to comprehensively sum up theories of modernity after postmodernism and to conclusively discuss their relationship with early modernity would have to be considered premature. This description is not possible for historical reasons, because, like it or not, we are still in modernity even if we do not fully identify with everything that constitutes its legacy. The way of thinking proposed in the present text is close to the meaning of the category of *Verwindung* used by G. Vattimo and borrowed from Heidegger: a category which denotes a special relationship with modernity, which consists in “ambiguous relations of being part of and not being part of, continuity and discontinuity, [...] acceptance and distortion [...], identity and difference” [17, c.VIII-IX].

Saving modernity from the perspective of *Verwindung* currently, being effected more in the context of “the end of postmodernism” rather than “the end of modernity”, emphasizes other themes. The main theme in the present paper will be the aesthetic one, by means of which I will seek illustrate the origins of several essential characteristics of contemporary culture: individualism, freedom, creativity, and performativity.

The concepts of modernity and postmodernity are used in very different meanings in discussions on transformations in culture. The meanings attributed to modernism and postmodernism by many disciplines also have a limited power of explanation. What seems decisive in this matter is the historiosophic strategy, which ultimately decides whether the successive stages of historical development examined in terms of “discontinuity” and “crisis” or “long duration” and “common horizon of understanding”, or from an entirely different standpoint.

One of the most active participants in the modernism-versus-postmodernism debate, J. Habermas, stresses that the most often used strategy of the opponents of modernity is to call its historical uniqueness into question by excessively extending the concept of modernity, or, quite the opposite, by narrowing the understanding of modernity to the processes of socio-economic modernization, or by identifying the modernity project with rationalization of the world [7, c. 30-34]. Some of the interpretive strategies mentioned by Habermas surface in the history of the concept of modernity described by H. R. Jausse and recalled by Habermas in the context of the issues discussed here. These strategies speak of successive modernities understood as the consciousness of time harmonized with the spirit of the times, as “contemporary relevance” opposed to the old, the past, and

not new. Jausse points out that *modernitas* expressed the consciousness of the new era much earlier: at the end of the fifth century it helped to distinguish the officially Christian present from its pagan-Roman past; people considered themselves as "modern" in the age of Charlemagne, or in the age of the Enlightenment: whenever the consciousness of a new era developed in Europe through a new relationship to antiquity. Antiquity gave way to the Middle Ages only after the famous quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. Then Romanticism, as another kind of modernity, redefines the opposition between the old and the new, echoing philosophical disputes on history and tradition into art [11, c. 11; 7, c. 27]. Because changes in art on the turn of the eras were particularly noticeable, and its role increased as civilization dangers arose, the modernity discourse is sometimes identified with what is going on in art. The spectacular course of the process of autonomization of art and aesthetics was the reason why the concept of modernity was narrowed down to transformations in culture or even to artistic modernism by some theorists.

Without attempting to present the whole problem here, I agree with the standpoint of these scholars who believe that we can speak of modernity discourse only after the modern division of culture expressed in Kant's system. For the author of the *Critique of (the Power) of Judgment* the division of the mind's cognitive faculties did not mean the division of reason and the loss of the unity of the world, because reason was well-established in the principle of subjectivity. It is only in Hegel that the problem of identifying the sources of conflicts in his times and the attempt to remedy this condition appear. From the postmodern perspective it should be added that the one that was more far-sighted was Kant's project, which referred to experience, i.e. to the sphere of the subject, than Hegel's project, in which art together with religion and philosophy were forms of "dissemination of truth". In view of the impasse in defining the boundaries of modernity and postmodernity, Kant's perspective seems cognitively more promising. Contrary to Hegel's intentions, sciences contributed to loosening the idea of wholeness, while it is difficult to treat the knowledge that they carry as fragments of the knowledge of the absolute.

However, before the autonomy of scientific, moral, and aesthetic discourse went so far that they became untranslatable, attempts were made to save the idea of wholeness through the idealized image of the philosopher, the intellectual, or the artist. As Z. Bauman writes, this was about "the right to address the rest of one's own society in the name of Reason and universal moral principles" [2, c. 27].

An inspiration to seek the threatened unity of reason was Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. It encouraged attempts to find the lost unity, the absence of which Kant did not yet feel. It was later that his successors interpreted the division of cognitive faculties as the splitting of reason and the disintegration of the modern world into insurmountable conflicts between the spheres of freedom and necessity, morality and nature, as well as subjective thinking and the objective world.

Under such circumstances, the myth of rationality is replaced by the myth of the aesthetic. The history of "saving modernity" through aesthetic experience is best shown by *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* by Friedrich Schiller. Written in 1795, they were the first aesthetic utopia that assumed that the lost identity would be restored by means of art. The introduction of the aesthetic state, as the third state between the natural state and the state of morality was at the same time the first criticism of modern dualisms.

Anticipating this discussion, one could say that attributing to art a unique role of reaching the sources of sense in opposition to the sphere of *ratio* turned out to be modernity's false alternative. "The myth of the aesthetic", observes I. Lorenc, "arisen in discussion with European rationalism, strengthens its own foundation" [12, c. 7]

Z. Bauman rightly draws the sociologist's attention to the moment, in which the commonality of the status and goal of the artists, and of the philosophers in later conceptions, is postulated more and more widely. This happens at the time "when the original unity of Reason was already in the state of far-reaching disintegration" [2, c. 26].

As has been said before, Hegel failed to reunite culture broken up in the modern era. The post-Hegelian discourse of modernity sought to restore philosophy's role of the critical self-knowledge of the era. It was only F. Nietzsche, who approached this discussion in a different way and criticized reason as the overriding principle, thereby opening the way out of "the dialectics of the Enlightenment. Not all modern thinkers accepted the idea of going beyond the horizon of reason and remained, Habermas claims, within the oppositions defined by post-Hegelian discourse. According to Habermas, the Young-Hegelian Left includes T. W. Adorno, M. Horkheimer, J. P. Sartre, and A. Heller, whereas the Hegelian Right comprises contemporary Neo-Kantianism: J. Ritter, A. Gehlen, H. Schelsky, D. Bell, R. Nisbert, and I. Kristol [8].

In contrast, the criticism of modernity outside of the standpoint of reason is represented by two trends which refer to Nietzsche. Members of the first are the authors who expose the will for power in different forms of reason: G. Bataille, J. Lacan, or M. Foucault. The other trend, in turn, is represented by the thinkers who continued the Nietzschean way of going beyond the rational foundations of Western metaphysics, such as M. Heidegger and J. Derrida [5, c. 90-91].

In order to show the oppositions and contradictions in modern culture, it seems essential to point out how great a role is accorded to art in sustaining the most important ideas of modernity. Although critics of modernity differ in their assessment of the role which art and aesthetic experience played in the advent of postmodernism,

everybody notices this aesthetic inspiration. Fundamental significance for the defense of modern societies against crisis is accorded to art by Martin Heidegger. His already classic lectures "...poetically lives the man on this earth" of 1951 and *The Question Concerning Technology* of 1953 directly oppose technology, blamed for forgetting the truth of being, to art, which defends the memory of being, or more precisely, to poetry. A rescue can be to remember both the essence of art and the essence of technology by resorting to the old meaning of *techne*. In poetic but explicit words Heidegger blames modern people for the fact that follies of technology are organized everywhere [10, c. 37], or he writes elsewhere that the inability to maintain moderation comes from the singular excessiveness of insane measuring and calculating [9, c. 180]. He accuses people of forgetting about the world of things and about language which, treated exclusively as the means of communication, may be degraded to being merely a means of pressure [9, c. 167]. Poets and philosophers can be entrusted with regaining the truth of being because it is only they who can still notice in language something more than a message but also something more than fantasy and illusion, they see in language a chance of discovering the essence, sense and source of our humanity. In the discourse of modernity Heidegger's myth of the aesthetic occupies a particularly distinguished position.

Another theme was initiated by the abovementioned *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, which saw the instrument of the process of emancipation in art and aesthetic experience. The theme of emancipation through art is continued by the Frankfurters: T. W. Adorno, W. Benjamin, H. Marcuse, and L. Lowenthal, i.e. also by the authors who, in Habermas's opinion, criticize modernity from the standpoint of *ratio*. Disputing Habermas's conception, G. Dziamski maintains that Habermas "was fully aware [...] that the Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean criticism of reason would have been impossible without the emergence and strengthening of the autonomous sphere of aesthetic experience, specific to modernity" [5, c. 101].

The ambivalence of attitudes in the assessment of the role of art in strengthening or in the collapse of the idea of modernity, as exemplified by Habermas's views, does not undermine the belief of the majority that the idea of modernity is closely related to the history of European art [7, c. 34]. The same Habermas does not share the optimism associated with the influence of *the Enlightenment's rearguard* of the artists and philosophers. He contends that the processes of understanding in the world we experience require a cultural tradition *that embraces all spheres*. That is why the rationalized everyday cannot be brought out of cultural poverty by forcibly opening only *one* domain of culture, in this case – art [7, c. 40].

When reconstructing the next stages of disillusionments and hopes in rescuing modernity which are associated either with philosophy or with art, it is time to repeat J. F. Lyotard's question: "what kind of unity does Habermas have in mind?" [13, c. 49].

Lyotard himself, as we know, regarded the yearning for unity as an illusion, a harmful one. He contends that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries gave us too much terror. We paid too much for our longing for wholeness and unity, for reconciliation of sensuality with concept, and for transparent and communicative experience [13, c. 61].

The same text by Lyotard contains the word "event", which is crucial to the change of the viewpoint in assessing the legacy of modernity. Instead of the "work" and "text" which always relate to the existing rules, to certain wholeness, the focus of attention will be "an event". Events are finite and individual by nature. The concept of nature must be challenged as a general one. Summing up J. F. Lyotard's view on modern art, W. Welsch lists five features of modern art which testify to its postmodern character: decomposition of the traditional essence of art, reflection resulting from the growing artistic self-awareness, departure from the aesthetics of the beautiful towards the aesthetics of the sublime, combined with some iconoclastic features in art and relation to the anaesthetic (this aspect seems important to Welsch himself, who will construct a large part of his theory around anaestheticism), unending experimentation, which has nothing to do with the quest for the lost absolute, and pluralism (eagerly called "radical" by the postmodernists) [18, c. 436-443].

"*The artist and writer work without rules* in order to formulate the rules of *what will have been done*" – for many years these words of J. F. Lyotard opened debates on the postmodernist character of modernist avant-gardes. In these contexts Lyotard will add that hence the work and text have the characteristics of an event [13, c. 61]. This version of art based on the sublime and on experiment turns critically against all claims about finality" [18, c. 442].

M. Foucault regards as crucial to modernity the very moment in which reference to the absolute is no longer a validation of human existence, arguing that contemporary culture thinks of the finite, starting from the finite [6, c. 134]. Focusing on the finite restricts the role of philosophy, which is emphasized from different standpoints by H. G. Gadamer and P. Ricoeur. The philosopher recognized the stimulating role of experiment and criticism of artists, therefore they eagerly referred to art, which did not necessarily mean transition to the positions of aesthetics. Aesthetic experience and the language of art as a specific message were useful in solving anthropological or axiological problems that resulted from the adoption of the thesis of finitude and rejection of the idea of the absolute.

If one recognized the moment indicated by Foucault as a *signum temporis*, then both in modernism and in postmodernism we are dealing with the philosophy of finitude, i.e. the philosophy of modernity. Both M.

Foucault, J. Derrida, and later G. Deleuze become part of the Western culture they contest, although not always directly and not with complete approval [14, c. 429]. One could, at best, speak of the change in attitudes and the change of the object of interest as a response, first to the process of disenchanting the world, and then to the change in the position of philosophy itself. From the perspective allowed by the most representative works of thinkers associated with postmodernity, the division into modern and postmodern philosophy is not sharp.

The pace and duration of changes in philosophy are not analogous to transformations in art. Before postmodernist philosophy responds to the disintegration of the world, it focuses on the problems concerning man. One of the leading subjects of philosophical thought starting from existential philosophy and philosophy of life has been the consequences of loosening up the feeling of the relationship between individual existence and the wholeness of that which surrounds us. Modernity emphasizes the autonomization of human existence through liberation from routinized forms of the actualization of one's existence. No wonder that when the "condition of the spirit" of the times demanded a response from philosophers, it was the figure of the avant-garde artist whom they considered a rewarding analogy to illustrate what Lyotard calls the "paradox of the future anterior", which is how, he believes, postmodernism should be understood.

Lyotard's attitude towards postmodernism made him different from art theorists such as Ch. Jencks, who were supporters of a periodization approach. Lyotard discerned the process of cultural transformation, which resulted in the challenging of many assumptions of modernism at the close of the nineteenth century, yet he did not regard postmodernism as a new historical era. He rather meant a new state of the spirit permitting the critical "reworking of modernism". The adoption of this position allowed Lyotard to include the twentieth-century artistic avant-garde into postmodernism. He believed that avant-garde art could, by continually challenging its own rules and opposing the unity art, be a good example both for philosophy and other sciences. In Lyotard's conception, sciences are in a better condition than philosophy because, except for general ideas that place them within one paradigm, they did not unconditionally yield to philosophical metanarratives. The emancipation of the subject or the historiography of sense were attempts to reduce the multitude of discourses to one metadiscourse based on the criterion of truth. However, sciences have produced a multiplicity of discourses, which restricts their claims to being universally valid. Hence when in crisis, sciences, like the artistic avant-garde, are more ready to verify their assumptions [19, c. 31].

Like other philosophers who challenged the existence of one metadiscourse and firmly opposed "the outdated and suspicious values" like wholeness, unity and consensus, Lyotard did not fully realize the consequences of translating their concepts into other fields of study. The giving up of general ideas, such as justice in Lyotard's interpretation, is not necessarily convincing even as a theoretical postulate that tries to meet sensitivity to diversity. Postmodern thinkers have so far failed to develop some other ways of responding to conflicts and injustice without referring to the "outmoded idea" of justice. The introduction of new rules was not at all their goal after all.

Even in avant-garde art, regarded as a model in the field of experiment and sensitivity to otherness, the putting of one's own intentions into practice led to many intractable problems. This is also the case with many, once enthusiastically accepted postmodernist ideas. In response to the loss of utopian faith in ethical and historical foundations, late postmodernity expands the area of freedom but the consequences are discernible only from the perspective of today. The history of the avant-garde revolution may serve as an example.

The artists' striving for pure creativity and individual autonomy must be accompanied by the giving up of artistic autonomy. This is one of the many paradoxes of the avant-gardes in the twentieth century. They create a new vision of man, and radicalize the value of freedom and the right to transgress all boundaries. However, the consistent realization of their postulates leads to the self-liquidation of the positions from which criticism was leveled. This is not an exclusive paradox of the development of art. Similar attempts have been made with the ideas of freedom since the French Revolution. The evolution of art from modernism to postmodernism allows inspection into a number of social processes which have taken place and still do in Europe.

Postmodern axiology, which strongly emphasizes particularism, autonomy and individual responsibility, is an axiology of risk, which is why it is so important to create transparent mechanisms that regulate relationships between micro-ethics and macro-ethics. The fates of the twentieth-century artistic avant-gardes are a glaring example of the disruption of these relationships, as a result of which the ethos of the uncompromising rebel-artist collapses. The striving for liquidation of art as a set of universal laws that govern artistic creative work, of necessity deprives artists of the authority to speak on behalf of anyone but themselves. To prevent this, the avant-garde artists reluctantly give up the institution of art, which inevitably leads to self-limitation of the scope of freedom. The same takes place with many freedom processes that regulate human actions on the basis of the idea of communication utopia.

"Despite the fact that artistic and social utopias pertain to different problems of arts and the world, they develop in a definite order in accordance with the general hierarchy and special significance of issues within culture" [16, c. 7-8].

As long as the artist bears exclusively artistic responsibility, he is assessed within the codes of art and the rights granted to him. When art gives up autonomy, the sphere of artistic responsibility enters, by choice or

of necessity, the sphere of the rules of collective life. The relationship between the feeling of freedom of each community member and the reign of freedom in a community is not necessarily obvious. "Upon the natural unruliness of the moral drive it is difficult to build social justice, which requires rules and their universal observance" [1, c. 21].

The ambivalence of the artist's fate is unavoidable, which is not a revealing judgment: almost all the modern era is grappling with the problem of limits of freedom. I refer here to the figure of the artist because owing to its distinctiveness the figure of the artist can be used as an expressive cognitive metaphor. There are many observable analogies between the traits of the artist's behavior and the position of the individual in late-modern society described by contemporary sociologists and cultural scholars. The evolution of artistic attitudes distinctly shows a gradual departure from stable identity, co-created by tradition and strong ties with the community, towards dynamically constructed liquid identity. Several stages of the process of individualization can be distinguished in creative activity from modernism to postmodernism. For the sake of study, sincere efforts should be made to interpret changes in art in terms of cognitive metaphors. The first stage covers the period of the first avant-garde, which is characterized by the prevailing feeling of negation towards art, a sense of the necessity to distance oneself from and overcome art. The centuries-old tradition arouses disillusionment but it is still a point of reference, the best examples being the names with the root "art" such as "anti-art", "anart", or "non-art". The first avant-garde attempted to expand the concept of work of art, and save some of the values that make up the aesthetic paradigm. The activities of the early modernist artist, including representatives of the artistic avant-garde, can be described as an attempt to save modernity by taking on the burden of individual responsibility. Art in the generally applied meaning is a cultural, superindividual phenomenon.

"In contrast, many avant-garde artists suggest: I am art. It is upon me, upon my activities that its greatness or insignificance, and its existence or demise depends" [15, c. 234].

As G. Sztabiński writes, the fate and importance of art are made dependent on individual decisions of particular artists. The lonely artist, with a sense of mission, tries to combine utopian visions of the unity of the world with immediate social goals. This was the path followed by, for example, Wassily Kandinsky, a representative of the metaphysical trend in the avant-garde. It is in the solutions adopted by artists of such stature as Kandinsky or Malewicz that theorists devoted to the traditions of early postmodernity seek arguments for the defense of the idea of the universality of art work.

The examples of similar ways of saving the products of the avant-garde practices are provided by the strategy adopted by P. Bürger. The interpretation of the modernist program of art's autonomy in *Theory of the Avant-garde* demonstrates the difficult situation of sciences, including philosophy and aesthetics associated with it. On the one hand, aesthetics, like other sciences which sought to strengthen their position, faces the necessity of finding its position in the new reality. On the other hand, it is surprised by the "aesthetics of artists", which thwarts the plans of building a concept with a universal scope. Almost the whole of postmodernist knowledge was in a similarly paradoxical situation, in which the order of the paradigm came to be threatened.

An even greater theoretical challenge was the creative activities of the neo-avant-garde, which entirely gives up attempts to save art and expand the notion of work of art. Behind the discussion between P. Bürger and R. Bubner lies the prophesying of the crisis of art, which would be a form of the fulfillment of Hegel's vision concerning the end of art. Observe Bubner's assertion that attempts towards a fluent transition from "art" to "life" are experiments in the field where there is no longer any room for a special position of the work of art [4, c. 39].

I refer to the so-called performative turn in aesthetics (which took place by the agency of the neo-avant-garde) not for historical reasons, although its importance for aesthetics is of no small consequence, but for methodological reasons. The emphasis on the category of event not only deconstructs the assumptions of autonomous aesthetics but it also questions the foundations of the modern division of sciences. From the sociological standpoint liquid modernity also strikes at ideologies supporting the institutions that serve the modern "division of labor", including all its degenerations. In the *Rules of Art* P. Bourdieu shows how deep were the involvements of theorists and scholars, including aestheticians, in the laws governing the institutions which protected their autonomy [3]. The concept of the performative turn in the culture of the mid-twentieth century and its corresponding performative turn in humanities can be treated as a continuation of the idea of the aesthetics of events, but above all as a theoretical response to the challenges of postmodernity. It should be remembered, according to D. Mersch, that just as the ethics of response and responsibility at the same time becomes part of the aesthetics of an event, so too with each of us living in the performative culture rests the greater the responsibility the more rights we have been granted and the more freedom we have obtained.

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