

Why form?

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Martin Heidegger starts his essay »The Source of the Work of Art« in the following way: »The source here means everything from where and through which a thing (*eine Sache*) is what it is and how it is.«¹

And Heidegger goes on, describing exactly what he means by poetry and its role in history as well as what he thinks about different ontic levels of a work of art. But let us limit ourselves for the moment to this »source« metaphor, which does not, of course, relate to some metaphysical archē-topos, but nevertheless does have a historical connotation: it focuses our attention on the primordial meaning of poetry and of a work of art as understood by Heidegger, to whom poetry does serve, as in the original Greek setting, as the basic, the essential and the truest work of art (in contemporary sense of the term). This metaphor appeals to us to see »through« and »behind« in the sense of the »Ur-Sprung«, in the sense of the pre- or archē- source, similarly to words like »truth« and many others that etymologically relate back to their primordial meaning, in the case of »truth«, of *alétheiā*, of being uncovered or, if we turn to something present also in English, of being dis-covered.

The source in the sense of the word that Heidegger uses signifies, as he himself writes, simultaneously »from where and through which a thing« – something – is what it is. Through this immediacy we become aware of some of the meanings of words, of terms, of their, if not hidden but certainly usually the not-thought-about, meaning. That is exactly what, in Heidegger's opinion, art and a work of art do: they uncover or dis-cover that which lies in the origins, in the sources and at the same time »behind« the phenomenal reality. Or better, that which *is* the origin and the source.

But can the same method of uncovering be applied to all terms or concepts? Do they, too, contain this hidden meaning that helps us to discern between the phenomenon and the »essence«, or is here at work a different approach, the chess-game approach, one that prevents us from searching for »hidden meanings« behind the ordinary words or words used in an everyday sense? Are we not in a situation in which certain words serve as empty signifiers into which different semantic contents can be invested? This is certainly true of words that serve as strong vehicles of power, words like democracy, ideology, freedom, politics, etc., words through which and in which relations of power

1. Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*, V. Klostermann, Frankfurt/M 1972, p. 7.

are embodied. Fortunately, the term »form« seems to be such that it cannot serve this function of power. We could say, and the history of the term and the concept as presented by Władysław Tatarkiewicz² shows this clearly and persuasively, that differences in meaning of this term arose more from translations into different languages and into different cultures. Tatarkiewicz distinguishes 5 meanings of form. It could certainly be argued that we could find other main meanings of the term and the concept, as well as question some of those that described by him. We certainly deal here with a loose notion, whose meaning is attached to a variety of other terms like *eidos* (signifying forms that can be seen) and *morphē* (signifying spiritual or non-concrete forms).

The interesting point made by Tatarkiewicz is defining form per negationem, stating that the opposites of form are content, matter, the represented thing and the theme.

As the same Tatarkiewicz writes, the merging of »*morphē* and *eidos* into form«³ caused the plurality of meanings of form. Thus form was historically used in different ways and many philosophers, like Aristotle and Kant, felt free to attribute the term special meanings, i.e., such which the term did not possess before.

In the *first* sense, form was the same as the arrangement of parts. Its opposite in this case were the elements, components and parts that the form unites into a whole.

In the *second* case, form is that which is accessible to the senses in a direct way. In this case, the opposite would be the content. In the first case, form is an abstraction and in the second, a concrete thing.

In the *third* case, form is the border or the limit of an object. All these three meanings were developed by aesthetics itself. The next two derive from philosophy. The first of these two – or the *fourth* – is the conceptual essence of an object, or Aristotle's *entelecheia*. The second of these two meanings derived from philosophy (or the *fifth* to follow Tatarkiewicz), is form in the sense of Kant, that is, the investment of the intellect into an object that is the object of cognition.

This certainly is nothing new, and something very similar is also happening to a term that is very close to most of us, that is, to the term »aesthetics« itself. But still we probably would agree that even today, when dealing with art, we associate form with a kind of symmetry, harmony and the like. This was especially true in classical aesthetics, when *mimesis* was the leading principle of art and *mimesis* meant imitating nature. With romanticist aesthetics, which

2. Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *Istoriја šest pojmova* (History of Six Concepts), Nolit, Beograd 1981 (in Serbo-Croatian).

3. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

had as its starting-point the expression of ideas, and especially with postromanticist – one which understood art as creation – the situation changed. In these last two cases form does not imply the outer, but the inner form: it signifies the *eidos* and not the *morphē*. Thus Herbert Read in 1931 gives an interesting example of this postromanticist and, we could also add, of modernist vision of form. »There is form as soon as there is shape, as soon as there are two or more parts gathered together to make an arrangement. But of course it is implied, when we speak of the form of a work of art, that it is in some way *special* form, form that affects us in some way.

Form does not imply regularity, or symmetry, or any kind of fixed proportion. We speak of the form of an athlete and we mean very much the same when we speak of the form of a work of art. An athlete is in good form when he carries no superfluous flesh; when his muscles are strong, his carriage good, his movements economical. We might say exactly the same of a statue or a picture.«⁴

Read here states that form does not imply regularity or symmetry. But then he continues and, by the example of an athlete, really applies the very same criteria, that he negates at the beginning. What he really obviously means and speaks about is the inner form, or the *eidos*. Read then goes on to explain his point on a color print by the great Japanese artist, Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849), and it is through this color woodcut and its interpretation by Read that we come to the second point, which is really also the idea or theory here defended by Read: it is the theory of empathy, or *Einfühlung*. Or, as he himself writes later: »We may conclude, therefore, that besides purely formal values, such as we find in a pot, there may be psychological values – the values arising out of our common human sympathies and interests, and even those arising out of our subconscious life.«⁵

It is not my aim here to discuss the ideas that can be discerned from Read's words that I have just quoted. I would simply like to point to the idea of empathy, which brings us to the present relevance of form, for the whole complex of the so-called »formalist aesthetics« might be something that concerns us today. It concerns us in two related, although distinct, ways. In the first case, we really must go back to Konrad Fiedler and to his distinction between the beautiful and the visual, which is a parallel of the distinction between aesthetic and the artistic. Art is a creative development of visual nature, and the artistic development of the form is, according to Fiedler, done under the strict laws of nature. Also, form is not the classical *eidos* anymore, but becomes active. »To see, speaking artistically, means to see forms, i.e., to go from undistinct to distinct, from undefined to defined. (...) Every representation needs as its basis an organic reacting, and this one, itself, is

4. H. Read, *The Meaning of Art*, Faber & Faber, London 1972 (1931), p. 36.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

correlative with a certain affective act which we include into representation, thus developing pathoedetic synthesis of the object. And this is the elementary basis of *Einfühlung*.⁶

Although the term remains ambiguous throughout its history, for it combines two Greek words but it was nevertheless never subject to big shifts of meaning. Also, it retained none of that deep meaning to which Heidegger refers, when speaking about a work of art and, on other occasions, of some other words containing a primordial meaning hidden in the origins of these words themselves. By contrast, form still means (1) a shape, form, exterior, good built, beauty (2) picture, sign, plan, the basis, quality etc. – to mention the original Latin meanings of the word. Especially those that I listed at the beginning are certainly those that still today mean exactly what they meant almost two thousand years ago. Obviously, there was something constant in the concept itself.

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By contrast, a certain term originating from form was subjected to a totally different reception and evaluation. This term is, of course, formalism. If we speak of formalist aesthetics, this connotation today has a different meaning than it had in its original setting, for it also implies all the debates of our century about the relation between form and content, the first and maybe also the most typical among them being the polemics about the so-called Russian Formalism at the beginning of this century. The name »formalist«, which as we know was really meant as a criticism, contained a hidden truth, for what it was about basically was the formalists' defence of the emerging Russian futurism and the critique of the Russian symbolism. It really meant a support for a typical modernist art, a support that went parallel with a method of research with long-ranging consequences in the later development of structuralist literary analysis.

In this sense the Russian formalists were symbolic defenders of modernist art, for which the hidden form, or the *eidōs*, was the basic category. This form could in a certain sense mean also the *Gestalt*, but one could say that this functions really on the level of reception, although this is of no lesser importance.

It is in our century that the relationship between form and content became an important one. This relationship was basically tied to the question or the relationship between realist (or figurative) and non-realist (or non-figurative or abstract) art. Abstract art was often subject to criticism and for similar reasons as the Russian formalists were. The idea behind all of this criticism was really the question of the representational and non-representational art, or

6. Guido Morpurgo Tagliabue, *Savremena estetika* (Contemporary Aesthetics), Nolit, Beograd 1968, p. 79 (in Serbo-Croatian).

as Pierre Bourdieu states, the intellectuals always search for the hidden truth, while the majority of the population prefers the moral and the pleasurable, and these two features are best accessible through figurative and representational art.⁷ Through this argument we can understand the rejection of formalism, and through it, also of modernist art as art based on the inner form, referential only to its own sphere and not that of the exterior reality – nature or society.

Still, when we say formal or formalist, this does not apply to all areas of art in the same way. We can speak about formalist painting or music, about poetry, but hardly about prose. It seems fairly obvious that today's art and culture are primarily visual art and culture. The sound of music plays here a special role, too, while the written word is being pushed – in the arts – into the background. This might be one of the reasons for the present philosophical criticism of postmodernist art or at least some of its interpretations and social or even political implications.

The basis of the classical formalist aesthetics, i.e., the one from the end of XIXth century, are the visual arts and music. Thus we return to the geometric or mathematical ideals or antiquity. Already Konrad Fiedler stressed that the laws of visuality are the laws of optics and geometry.

One of the features of so-called postmodernist art, or certainly art after modernism, was that is brought back what might be termed the »outer form«. Works of art again have more or less recognizable shapes, classical aesthetic criteria could be applied to a larger extent, and the inner form, usually of conceptual nature, gave way to a variety of forms and figures, which enabled double or triple reading or coding – a feature typical both of the visual arts and the literature. In this sense, the question of the eidos, of the inner form and thus also of the message of the work of art, changed. It changed from the classical modernist or the avant-garde incessant changing and negating the past forms – outer and inner – into an aesthetised product to which classical aesthetic criteria could often be very easily applied. That such tendencies existed already in modernist art at its prime is something that only now comes to light – whether dealing with literature – as shown, for example, by Martin Jay⁸ or in neoclassicist art from the time of modernism. From such a perspective the modernist art – or its prime exhibits – seems to be just another leaf in the history of art. As in some other areas the artistic one too, appears to

7. »The subjects of the popular classes, which expect from every image to explicitly serve a certain function (...) exhibit in their judgement often an explicit reference to norms of morality and pleasure. If they reprimand or praise, their judgement appeals to a system of norms whose principle is always an ethical one (...) We could say that the intellectuals believe into representation – of literature, theatre, painting – more than into the represented things, while 'the people' ask from representations and conventions, which put them into order more than anything else to enable them to believe 'naively' into the represented things.« Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction*, Minuit, Paris 1979, p. v-vi.

8. Cf. Martin Jay, *Modernism and the retreat from form*, p. 61.

have become more orderly. Modernism in its avant-garde form is turning before our eyes into a tradition.

This might be just a battle over interpretations, as in the case of the debate over the end of art, where it was asked whether this is something that is really happening or it might be just something limited to criticism and theory. But then, modernist art more than many others depended upon theory and criticism, it was really consubstantial with it. Even more: without it, it would often not exist as art. Nevertheless, to a certain extent it is true that art after modernism at the same time differs from it and is the same. Modernist art was to a large extent built on the myth of originality, as Rosalind Krauss showed and as is obvious from almost any modernist, and especially avant-garde, art that we take a look at. »All those terms – singularity, authenticity, uniqueness, originality, original – depend on the originary moment of which this surface is both the empirical and the semiological instance. If modernism's domain of pleasure is the space of auto-referentiality, this pleasure dome is erected on the semiological possibility of the pictorial sign as nonrepresentational and nontransparent, so that the signified becomes the redundant condition of a reified signifier. But from *our* perspective...« – continues Krauss – and that is the main point – for it is exactly from our perspective that we discern the vehicle of avant-garde modernist art, that is the originality as a myth, but which could not be identified as such when it still functioned. And, it could be added, when it functioned inside that epistemological formation in which it was tied to the all-embracing totality – to use such a modernist notion. And to continue with the quotation from Krauss: »But from *our* perspective, the one from which we see that the signifier cannot be reified; that its objecthood, its quiddity, is only a fiction; that every signifier is itself the transparent signified of an already-given decision to carve it out as the vehicle of a sign – from *this* perspective there is no opacity, but only a transparency that opens onto a dizzying fall into a bottomless system of reduplication.«⁹

If modernism, then, was built on a false myth and its basic trait was autoreferentiality, then the art after modernism is, as Krauss states, really built on the principle of unlimited reproductibility, copying and reduplication. We do not have to go far to see art like this in the making, for it is being made all around us.

What consequences does this have for form as such? The concept of reduplication and of incessant inclusion of past and present art into new or more appropriately, *other* artworks, does form an order, for repetition in itself is a kind of order and thus form. But here we are speaking about the series, about lines of development or change. Though, still, in artworks themselves, we can discern these features as those essential traits of contemporary art.

9. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., London 1988, p. 161.

Examples can certainly also be found in literature, whether this be Borges or Eco. But there is even more to this. As mentioned before, the modernist past is turning before our eyes into something partly different: the present reevaluation of modernism – from Jugendstil to neoclassicism in architecture of the XXth century – and the previous art history from the sixteenth century mannerism to French neoclassicism of the XIXth century, transforms the history that considered itself as a rather unchangeable one into a relativistic arena devoid of grand narratives that would guard the coordinate systems. Also, previous cases of contemporary methods or features are brought to light. What all this appears to turn into all the time – even in modernism – is that certain formal criteria functioned *all the time*. Today the inner form of modernist art is slowly disappearing, for it does not function as a value of the same order as before, in its own temporal setting. It is becoming aestheticized in a similar manner to what happened some time ago with the historical avant-gardes, which really represent the apogee of modernist art, and their aestheticization marks the end of modernism. If this renewed interest in the avant-gardes a decade or two ago seemed to be born out of curiosity, it caused them to start to function in an aestheticised way. Thus they soon became included into postmodernist art, whether this be El Lissitzky, Malevich or futurism. Their inner form, the idea in them that made them in their time a work of art only with difficulty and often with aggressive and violent practices, fused with their outer form, which was taken for granted in our time. Once these avant-gardes were conquered and assimilated, postmodernist art and culture swallowed up art history. Today, we witness the whole past of art merging into one enormous inventory to be used by contemporary artists. Form is becoming omnipresent. Art has, in a way, become traditional, and traditional also means of traditional form. This situation was well depicted by Arthur Danto,¹⁰ who in 1981 claimed that with Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes art history really came to an end. If such procedures and works contain a form, an art form, then it is obvious that art has lost its historical role and that it became a part of post-history, history meaning here history as we know it. If art lost its essential function as depicted and explained also by Heidegger, that is, of showing the truth, the uncovered reality of the reality, then its role remains the role of a play of forms. Whether this is true, I would not want to judge here. However, there is another interpretation of this Heideggerian idea, the one developed by Gianni Vattimo, who thinks that now art will really attain the position that it was prevented to play in modernism.¹¹

Still, it seems that contemporary art and the evaluation or reevaluation of past art, i.e., of art history, witnesses that art lost its role as the highest form of

10. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1981, p. vi, 208.

11. Gianni Vattimo, *La fine della modernità*, (The End of Modernity), Aldo Garzanti, Milano 1985.

creativity and the highest instance of truth. It is turning into an object of everyday use and here the visual and the musical fit well. This has more to do with general historical processes than with art itself, which, although it is an important part of our reality and totality, it may not be as essential as was long thought to be. That is why form in the arts is again becoming a crucial issue.

10. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1981), p. 128.

11. Gergely Vattimo, *La fine della modernità* (The End of Modernity) (Aldo Garzanti Milano, 1985).