

## CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE FUTURE OF ART

*Some general reflections on the relation of past  
and future and on the significance  
of art for cultural identity*

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In this paper I should like to discuss four subjects in a rather theoretical way:

First, cultural identity is a matter of historical memory, it is especially dependent on the past and its interpretation;

Second, in this interpretation the art of the past is — as a matter of reference — of important concern;

Third, cultural identity is not only determined by looking back at the past but also by looking forward towards the future;

Fourth, cultural identity needs art, actually modern art when scheming the future, this is a very important aspect for the future of art.

Let me begin with the historical dimension of cultural identity. What is culture? It is the very contrary of nature. Nature is a matter of fact of world and man beyond the dimension of the human mind; culture, however, is the result of the human mind's working with nature. Therefore man has two identities: a natural identity by attributes preconditioning social actions (for example: sex, age, race etc.), and a cultural identity by attributes patterning social actions. Man is defined by the necessity to transcend nature into culture, and social actions form the process of doing so. Therefore only cultural identity is human identity.

What is cultural identity? It is the answer to the question, what somebody (a single person, a group, or a whole society) is. We can only answer such a question by telling a story. We are told, what happened as having caused somebody to become what he is. People tell each other such stories in order to assure themselves of themselves in the change of time. Doing so they realize themselves as continuous, released from the steady changes of their world and lives.

If we agree that natural time in human life (which is not identical with physical time in nature) means that all things are passing and all men must die, then telling stories in the described way can be considered as transforming natural time into human time. By doing so man gains a consciousness of himself, in which he has overcome the transiency of all things and has defeated death. Good examples of such stories are myths in ancient societies or the story of Buddha, of Jesus Christ, of Mohammed

and other historical founders of religions.

Such stories show that the identity of a human subject is a mental and spiritual accomplishment. It has been brought about by an interpretation of what man experiences when the changes of his world and of himself threaten him. We call this kind of interpretation *history*. Human identity is therefore an accomplishment of historical knowledge and cognition. History is the special medium in which human subjects reflect their identity. It presents those events and processes of the past, which brought about the essential characteristics of ourselves, in which we differ from others and find our identity.

An outstanding example for such a historically presented identity is the national identity of modern societies. We all know that this kind of identity is unthinkable without the great achievement of national historiography, the typical pattern of which were designed in Europe in the nineteenth century, the century of historicism. We all know that in our time all the states rising from colonial dependence to national independence need and use a nationally minded historiography for their political identity. They appeal to cultural traditions, by which they confirm their special qualities, characteristics and values against the imported Western traditions of their former colonial rulers. They use their own cultural traditions in order to achieve the spirit of independence and liberty, and gain political self-reliance.

How does the future of art fit into this line of thought, which is mainly concerned with the past? This is rather hard to answer upon the first look. It seems as if only the past of art is considered, when people look for their cultural identity. Without any doubt art is one of the essentials in those historical presentations of past, by which cultural identities are realized. We all know how important ancient works of art are for modern states, which want to document their cultural identity, take for example the pyramids for Egypt, the Taj Mahal for India, and Borobudur for Indonesia.

Let us first analyze this fact. What is the role of art in a history, which reflects the cultural identity of a society? In such a history the facts of the past are organized by the value orientation of a present social system, that is, the facts are selected under the aspect of their relevance to the self-esteem of human subjects. Let me call the structure of this organisation and selection of facts the pattern of historical interpretation.

In such a pattern of historical interpretation you always find assumptions about the general significance of special human actions in the past. These assumptions focus expectations, needs and hopes for a successful self-identification in the present and transfer them to the experience of the past, in order to fill them with historical reality. How does this work? People who question the past in this way must be sure, that there is a reality to be found in it, which might give an answer. Indeed, there is an

answer to be found in the past: namely there, where cultural patterns of human action are manifest in such a way, that they are of some concern to people of our time. There is evidence of past human life, in which the past is not gone but present, not dead but alive. Art is an evidence of that kind<sup>1)</sup>. Different from other manifestations of culture as for instance religion, art is easy to receive and to assimilate into present cultural patterns of human life. Therefore art is most efficient in establishing cultural traditions.

I have already mentioned that cultural identity is brought about by the transformation of natural time into human time. Art is a document of such a successful transformation, it is a document of human time. At the same time it is a document of human life in the past, of societies which have gone. If we take these two perspectives together, we may draw the following conclusion: Historical reality is presented by art not only as the change of man and world, but also, at the same time, as the transformation of this change into a cultural pattern of human self-reflection. That means in art historical evidence speaks the language of human time. It is the language people of today must learn, too, in order to say who they are.

Now that we have realized this significance of art for the historical identity of societies, it is time to ask: What has this significance of art to do with the future of art? Is art not only meaningful for the cultural identity of modern societies as a past art? Is the future of art not exempt from this matter? Is it without sense to connect the question about the future of art with the question about cultural identity? I think the contrary is the case because of two reasons:

First, projections of the future are essential for a historical self-reflection of societies.

Second, such projections remain insufficient if art is not included. We therefore can say, if the future of art is not taken into account, it will be impossible to remember the past in such a way that we arrive at a reasonable cultural identity.

I should like to substantiate this idea and draw some conclusions for the future of art.

My first point is that projections of future are essential for historical thinking and, therefore, also for cultural identity. In each pattern of historical interpretation there are assumptions and intentions for the future. Each historical recollection is moulded by expectations. Take for example the national historiography in Germany in the midst of the nineteenth century, which based its reconstruction of Germany's past on the political hopes and intentions of a unification of Germany to a nation state. (This was indeed

1) I have tried to draw the outlines of such a view on art and history in my book "Ästhetik und Geschichte. Geschichtstheoretische Untersuchungen zum Begründungszusammenhang von Kunst, Gesellschaft und Wissenschaft." Stuttgart 1976. Cf. Philosophy and History, vol. XI, 1978, Nr. 1, pp. 40-42.

achieved in 1871). I am sure that there may be found similar examples in the historiography of Indonesia and other countries rising from colonialism.

Projections of the future appear as expectations of progress. In the process of self-identification of a social system future and past are thought together as one pattern of orientation in the present course of time. Let me describe the way this orientation has been achieved:

Expectations of progress serve as criteria for the historical reconstruction of the past. Thereby the past is actualized as cultural tradition, and at the same time the future is visualized as a realistic anticipation. If past and future were not connected in this way, the cultural identity of a social system would be threatened by a rupture between past and future. To realize this is of outstanding importance for times with rapidly changing social structures. This is true for nearly all societies today. In the face of rapid social changes it is impossible to confirm traditional identities only. But traditional identities hinder societies from developing and deliver them to crises of identity. Historiography can help to avoid or overcome such crises. To do so it must be critical of traditions and widen the horizon of experiences and values at the same time. The most important criterium for such a new concept of identity brought about by historiography is the idea of mankind and humanity. A famous German historian of the nineteenth century, Leopold von Ranke, formulated this idea in the following way: "There is an unconditional progress in leading the various nations and individuals to the idea of mankind and culture<sup>2)</sup>."

This is a projection of the future for history<sup>3)</sup>, and I think that every history should be pledged to this idea, if history, which realizes a reasonable self-reflection of a society, wants to be able to meet the demands of the present social changes and the challenges of a growing planetarian society.

Let me come to the second point. I think art is necessary to meet the condition of a reasonable cultural identity, as I have shown above. You remember, cultural identity in modern societies needs a realistic projection of the future. As far as such a projection depends on a value-orientation of a society, professional historians are at a loss. They are empirically minded scholars and no prophets. They are not competent to create the basic values, which render their historiography prosperous. These values must be manifest and vital in the society the historians live in, so that the historians can take

2) Leopold von Ranke: "Über die Epochen der Neueren Geschichte." Historisch-kritische Ausgabe, ed. by Theodor Schieder and Helmut Berding. München 1971, p. 80.

3) The Theoretical framework of such a concept of history has been worked out in my book "Für eine erneuerte Historik. Studien zur Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft". Stuttgart 1976.

them up and use them for their work. We see these values manifest and vital in contemporary art, for contemporary art interprets the experience of present social life in the light of possible alternatives of mankind and humanity. Through the works of art future becomes translucent.

Only modern art can perform this task. Whereas traditional art affirmed and legitimated closed systems of social values and modelled the order of the universe in positive figures (for instance cathedrals, temples, statues of deities and gods etc.), modern art questions such closed systems. It refuses to exhibit a totality of social order. It is no longer bound by a closed set of rules, which state the forms and contents of production and reception of art. Modern art is an emancipatory art; it is aesthetically autonomous.

This is what Hegel meant<sup>4)</sup> with his famous thesis about the end of art. Hegel did not want to say, that art was dead in modern societies but he pointed out a decisive quality of modern art: it would no longer be regarded as a sufficient articulation of a cultural pattern of human identity. Instead it would have to indicate concepts of human identity, which could be no longer positively depicted by art itself. These concepts are represented by criticizing social reality and by designing a Utopian scheme of humanity.

Modern art *criticizes* the general tendency of modern societies to define man only by the ensemble of his social conditions. Doing so it clings to possible alternatives of human self-realization, without articulating them expressively. Art makes an option for humanity, yet undefined and undefinable by art itself. It is only able to keep open the place for possible patterns of human identity. In so far art must be characterized as Utopian. Art transcends real conditions of human life by playing with them in a contra-factual way. (By the way: by knowing this we can understand, why modern art is suppressed in totalitarian societies, the patterns of identity of which are officially prescribed. It is consequent, when in such societies, artists who through their work criticize forcible identities and plead for alternatives, are being put into prison or into the madhouse.)

As I said before, art makes us experience an anticipation of the idea of mankind through our senses. Such an idea of mankind is necessary for a reasonable concept of cultural identity in modern societies. On the other hand cultural identity is only brought about by a historical memory of the past. Now we have come to the point where art and history meet. It is up to the historians to induce the experience of the future endowed by art into their pattern of historical interpretation. When they do so their historiography gains a new quality. They present the factual development of the past in

4) Georg Friedrich Hegel: *Ästhetik*, ed. by Friedrich Bassenge. Berlin 1955, p. 57. I have depicted the fundamental importance of this thesis for the understanding of modern art in my book *"Ästhetik und Geschichte"* s.a. p. 30 sqq.

the light of possible expectations of the future, thereby intensifying and increasing the cultural identity of their society. The introduction of the idea of future has rendered dynamical the temporal structure of cultural identity. It has been enriched by the aspect of an open future. The fetters of tradition blocking social progress are broken or at least loosened. The experience of rapid and radical social changes is no longer a threat but a probation for the identity of the people concerned. We must learn to accept modern art and its critical and utopian play with the experience man makes with himself and his world. We look at it as a chance for an improvement of the pattern of cultural identity.

And in that, I think, lies the future of art. By depicting the future as a present experience art has won the future for itself. Nothing else but art can present future as a sensual experience. Science, letters and ideology can think, predict, and project the future, but cannot present it as an experience. Future must be presented as an experience so that it might be integrated into the experience of the past which is necessary when we speak of cultural identity. Only by unifying these two kinds of experience of time we can realize the dynamical structure of the human mind, and it is this structure which enables man to bear fundamental changes of his world and of himself and remain himself.

I think the significance of modern art lies in its special quality of inducing a dynamical movement into the cultural pattern of self-reflection in modern societies.

I do not want to finish this discussion without hinting at two further interesting qualities of modern art concerning its role in relation to the communication between different societies and its need of being interpreted by the humanities.

Every work of art appeals to us by moulding a general significance into a particular form. In traditional art this moulding has been regulated by a set of rules. These rules reflected a general order of social life and man was obliged to follow them, and by obeying them he could understand the works of art, and vice versa when the artists observed the rules they were sure to be understood. Quite differently modern art has its own rules. It is no longer a definite order of social life that defines the general significance of its particular products. We have to do, instead, with an unsettled order of aesthetic autonomy. Practicing aesthetic autonomy modern art induces the idea of freedom into the struggle between the rivalling systems of social life. One social system dominates another by forcing it to accept its own rules of interpretation, its own symbols. Modern art does not accept such a domination. It pleads for a free play of various symbols. In the face of the actual struggle between different social systems art realizes and practices a peaceful kind of coexistence. It is a coexistence of different patterns of interpreting social life. Through its aesthetic autonomy art is thoroughly

peaceful. It cannot be used as a weapon in the struggle between different social systems. It integrates different cultural traditions, widens the horizon of self-reflection and pleads for humanity. Therefore, I think, art pledges for the future.

But there is still a problem. Modern Art has to pay for this emancipation by leaving behind a definite order of significance, by imagining alternative orders modern art loses its clear and distinct meaning; it becomes ambiguous. It needs a special interpretation by rational argumentation, by a discursive reasoning. Here we see the important task of our academic disciplines. By their interpretation of art the humanities fulfil that task of the arts which I have tried to explain. You remember, I said above that cultural identity was a matter of historical interpretation. The humanities which manage this interpretation integrate art into the pattern of cultural identity. Therefore they guarantee the future of art.