



Norman Lillegard

Spirit and the end of art

Has the end of art, the human need for decoration arrived? As art seemingly dissolves into theorization about art, has it become obsolete altogether, asks Norman Lillegard. This idea, first brought up by G.W.F. Hegel and more recently taken up by Arthur C. Danto inspires Lillegard to reflect on different philosophical thoughts about and search for the *spirit* in art.

Is it possible that art has come to an end? And if it has, would that be a bad thing? People flourished and developed high cultures long before there were novels or operas or art galleries. Why could people not exist and flourish without them now, or in the future? It has been argued, perhaps first by Hegel, and recently by Arthur Danto, that while there may always be in human life a need for decoration, entertainment, or for "the imprinting of a life enhancing surface to the external conditions of our life," as Hegel put it, that there will not be, or even is no longer, a need for art as something which brings home spiritual truths [...] to consciousness. Consequently Hegel asserts that "Art is, and remains for us, a thing of the past."¹ Danto comments: "I find it an extraordinary thought that the world should have gone through what one might call the Age of Art, parallel to the way in which, according to [...] Joachim of Flores the Age of the Father came to an end with the birth of his Son, and the Age of the Son with the Age of the Spirit." It does not follow that works of art will become extinct, but only that new works will "continue to exist past the moment of their historical mission, fossils, so to speak [...]"² Hegel thought that everything in human history, not just the arts, must necessarily dissolve into something like his philosophy, which traced, he believed, the return of Spirit, *geist*, to itself after that long alienation from itself which we call history."

Danto claims in effect that Hegel described something which has now in fact happened in the arts. Danto traces a history of the "art world" and the visual arts in particular in the last hundred years or so in which the *theory* of art has come to replace art, or in which what we call art is simply its own theory. It is not just that theorizing about art has increased exponentially in the last hundred years. Rather, art itself has shown a tendency to dissolve into theory. John Cage has given concerts in which certain gestures associated with the production of music take place, but there is no actual music. The music has disappeared into a certain kind of theorizing about and commentary on music and the arts in general. Many similar examples could be given. In cases such as these a concept (cf. "conceptual" art), or a theory about art, is no longer external to that about which it is the theory. Such phenomena are perhaps as close as we can get to that unity between subject and object, theory and its domain, thought and what it thinks, which Hegel considered the inevitable outcome of the progress of *geist* to true knowledge, that is, knowledge of itself.

When that knowledge is complete history as he understood it will be at an end. And then art as a significant moment in the evolution of Spirit will also be at an end, and be replaced by philosophy of art.

Although Hegel allows that art of some kind may continue even after the end of history, it will not be "free", not a moment *in* history, but a mere optional kind of play. Danto paraphrases Marx as follows: "[...] you can be an abstractionist in the morning, a photorealist in the afternoon, a minimal minimalist in the evening. Or you can cut out paper dolls or do what you damned please. The age of pluralism is upon us. It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means. When one direction is as good as another direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply."³ Danto further remarks that the "institutions of the art world— galleries, collectors, exhibitions, journalism— which are predicated upon *history* and hence as *marking what is new*, will bit by bit wither away" (my emphases)⁴ just as, on Marx's inverted Hegelian view, the state itself will wither away.

But perhaps it is Hegel that has come to an end, despite whatever protests contemporary Hegelians might raise. If Kierkegaard has been as successful in his attack upon Hegel's gnosticising rationalism as I believe him to have been, then perhaps we can dismiss Hegel's notion that history must come to an end, and therefore that art too, at least *as free*, must come, or has come, to an end. Perhaps we can hope to return to an art which once again brings spiritual truths to consciousness. What kind of spiritual truths? Spiritual truths which are not just the product of *geist's* evolution but rather arise from the hearts of striving individuals engaged in the conflicts and paradoxes of everyday life.

However, Kierkegaard himself does not give much encouragement to such a hope. He often seems to have associated the arts with an existence sphere which is, for spiritual reasons, essentially non-viable. For Kierkegaard "spirit" denotes an invariable feature of each individual human being which manifests itself in the constant anxious attempt to achieve continuity by bringing one's own self as a historical given into line with some ideal. The individual's spirit will come to rest, on his view, not when history ends but when the ideal which is achieved is the ideal of a self before God.⁵ I will not explore Kierkegaard's reasons for this conclusion here, but it should be understood that on Kierkegaard's account the failure to strive for selfhood is associated with a low grade aestheticism, an example of which would be someone who fritters away their life on the couch in front of the TV. However, Kierkegaard also portrays a highly developed aestheticism. Does it get higher grades?

The super-refined aesthete portrayed by Kierkegaard in pt. I of *Either/Or*, who is simply called "A," is constantly threatened by boredom and melancholy. "A" finds clues to the nature of his difficulties in the arts, and writes brilliantly about opera, comedy and tragedy. For "A," a perfect life would be a perfect work of art in just the way that Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is. That work perfectly presents the most immediate subject, namely mindless seduction, in the most immediate vehicle, namely music. But, of course, life is not art, Don Juan could not be an actual human being, and speech, and its commitments, could not be absorbed into music. So inevitably the highly reflective aesthete will either fall to pieces, or if he has enough spiritual energy, he will despair of the aesthetic life and be driven into an ethical (or perhaps religious) mode of existence.⁶

If on Kierkegaard's view the aesthetic life, in his somewhat technical sense of "aesthetic," cannot stand on its own, perhaps what is valid in it can be absorbed

into ethics. But Judge William, Kierkegaard's paradigm ethical persona, maintains that what is beautiful on the ethical view is not works of art but a committed life in which aesthetic enjoyment has no spiritual value of its own. The real artist is the one who would give up writing poetry or painting and *live* a life in which the sensuous is transfigured in the ethical. George Pattison has argued that Kierkegaard came to believe that only comedy might have some spiritual value for humans. For comedy, at least of the best kind, enables us to achieve an ironical distance from those immediacies in which immature people, that is, aesthetic individuals, try to immerse themselves.⁷ So for Kierkegaard too art is unable to bring spiritual truths home to consciousness. Those of us who hope to find spiritual values in the arts are thus confronted by some powerful denials of that hope. The denials come from two voices of the 19th century that perhaps command more attention now than they did then. They articulate two fundamentally opposed understandings of the notion of "spirit" and yet in both understandings the arts can no longer be joined to *spirit* in its authentic manifestations.

But there is one qualification for Kierkegaard which did not, and could not, exist for Hegel. Keep in mind that Kierkegaard's best known works are pseudonymous. He often does not speak for himself directly, so questions remain about his attitude towards the arts. He does however speak for himself in that signed work of 1846 titled *A Literary Review (En Litteraire Anmeldelse)*. There he praises the novels of his contemporary, Fru Thomasine Gyllembourg, for he believes that they bring to expression a developed life view that borders on the religious. What are some of the features of a "life view" in the sense given that expression in the *Literary Review*? Life views always require a sense for continuity, persistence of something through time. Now Kierkegaard attributes an absolutely central place to continuity in his understanding of spiritual values. So we should not be surprised that he finds in novels of a certain kind admirable vehicles for the expression or rendering of spiritual value. A story, if it is going to work *as a story* and not just as an incidental means to the expression of an ideology, must show the unfolding of life through time. And that in turn requires continuity in its subjects. Now *virtues* are precisely such formed traits as provide continuity in a life. Our ability to appreciate a life as virtuous depends upon our grasp of the way in which existence gets form through passionate commitment and formed response. Virtues are precisely patterns of formed response, dispositions of thought, feeling and action which continue and enforce a coherent life. Vices too take on significance in relationship to possibilities of achieved continuity. We understand what it means for a life to fall apart because we understand what it means for a life to come together.

Now it is arguable that the virtues are to some extent tradition-bound. It follows that an ability to take ethical, religious, and other cultural traditions seriously begins to look like a condition for the existence, and the understanding, of virtues. For, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, virtues can only be specified in relation to a concept of the good for humans (cf. Aristotle) and the good for humans is only specified in terms of particular historical moral/religious/aesthetic and other social traditions and practices.⁸

These facts may explain to some extent why philosophers, ethicists in particular, and theologians, are now busier than ever reading novels, and why at least some novelists are exploring their religious and ethical roots for powers that might shape their writing into something more than reflections of current cultural clichés, on the one hand, or mere symptoms of cultural chaos and collapse on the other.

It only remains to be asked whether the kind of spiritual value that can be found in novels might also be found in the other arts. Danto and others who proclaim the end of art have tended to focus on the plastic arts. The rapid alterations in painting and sculpture, and the shift towards theory especially in those arts, and only more recently in literature, lend themselves to a Hegelian analysis. But must it be so? Could not painters, photographers, sculptors, and musicians, as well as writers, find in a narrative conception of life, with its necessary connection to moral, religious and other traditions, a way back to art that does indeed "bring home spiritual truths to consciousness?" I do not see why it could not be so. In fact, I think it *has* to be so. The following anecdote may illustrate the point that traditional forms of life are inescapable conditions for artistic production, even where the artist is struggling against those forms. A few years ago I saw for the first time Eugene Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, which I admit I enjoyed immensely. This comic work might illustrate Kierkegaard's notion that only in comedy can art perform a spiritual function, for this play's aim is to distance, or in some cases to utterly divorce, the audience from every social, historical, and even scientific form of immediacy. To the extent that immediacy is associated with an immature aestheticism, such a work might thus help prepare the way for higher human development.

Following the play I read an exchange between Ionesco and Kenneth Tynan which took place in the pages of the *London Observer* in 1958. Tynan accused Ionesco of opening the way to "a bleak new world from which the humanist heresies of faith in logic and belief in man will be forever banished." Ionesco replied by in effect claiming that all social forms, even language itself, are ideologically corrupted, and so cannot claim the artist's loyalty. So far Ionesco's remarks sound like anticipations of the post-modern ironical stance. But he had more to say: "No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute" and, in words that anticipate Vaclav Havel, "it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa."⁹ It seems to me that Tynan and Ionesco were both partly right, and also both partly confused. Against Ionesco it must be said that there *is* no such thing as simply "the fear of death" or "our thirst for the absolute." Such expressions only allude to historically mediated and traditionally specified spiritual concerns. Anyone familiar with the history of artistic representations of death should know that the fear of death takes many historical forms. On the other hand, those histories and traditions tend to lose their value, their connection to a human core, when reduced to ideologies, and it appears that Tynan was not sufficiently attentive to the ever-present possibility of the ideological corruption of tradition and language itself.

I think the moral to be drawn from that exchange, which is remarkably apropos to our current situation, is roughly as follows. We need what literary critic Charles Altieri calls an "aesthetic ethics" (or what I prefer to call Aristotelian "ethical-aesthetics").¹⁰ Under the aegis of such an aesthetic artists will not be ashamed to draw upon very traditional themes, stories, and conceptions in order to give content to the notion of the good for humans. I am not speaking of a nostalgic return to lost immediacies, but of a mature sense for the very nature of human action as embedded in narratives. As MacIntyre has argued, human beings are by nature story telling animals, and they aspire to live their lives as stories, quests, realizations of narrative continuity. It is certainly open to us, then, to think of the artistic vocation in more or less the following way: the artist, working in any medium, must take up the task of assembling reminders of many kinds about the narrative forms of human lives, and about the many stories, traditions and symbols in terms of which those narratives are

constructed.

That is precisely what some artists do, whether consciously or not. Others, in particular those captured by post-modern irony, may attempt to avoid every form of continuity. Here I will mention a few who I think illustrate how art might still "bring spiritual truths home to consciousness." With a few exceptions I cite English/American/Canadian artists since they are the ones I know best, or know at all. I mention them as they come to mind, in no particular order, and with no intention of implying that I have chosen the best examples, and obviously with no intention of trying to be comprehensive.

In poetry, Scott Cairns, Denise Levertov, Wendell Berry. In fiction, Muriel Spark, Oscar Hijuelos, William Kennedy. In drama, Patrick Friesen, Arthur Giron and John Olive. In film, Robert Duvall (*Apostle*), Abel Ferrara (*The Addiction*), and Krystof Kieslowski (*Tres Coleurs*). In painting, Stephen Antonakos, Anselm Kiefer, and Stanley Spencer. In music, Arvo Pärt, John Tavener, and Henryk Górecki. I will briefly discuss works by three artists in order to provide a few indicators as to what I have in mind when I speak of an art that draws upon traditions which are still capable of thematizing a life, in such a way as to point to the good for human beings. Kieslowki's film *Red* concludes a trilogy which amounts to an ironical commentary on the ideals of the French revolution, namely liberty, equality and fraternity. The red in the French tricolor stands for the last of these ideals. The film begins immediately with broken communication, and continues with a litany of betrayals of the sort that make everyday life anything but fraternal. But Kieslowki's irony is tempered, even corrected, by a story line governed by a simple act of human kindness, the act, in effect, of a good Samaritan. By virtue of that act the personal histories, the narratives, of other characters are rescued from disintegration. In fact a sort of *redintegratio in statum pristinum* is effected in several characters, including a judge who has fallen into complete moral/existential cynicism. This is certainly not a moralizing film, and certainly not uncritical of the mores of the surrounding culture. But it clearly draws upon various traditional themes, stories, and images. For example, it has been suggested that the luminosity that appears in several scenes should be understood as an illusion to the Platonic form of the Good, analogized as the Sun in the *Republic*. It is also natural here to think of the gospel of John, chapter 1, which refers to "the light which the darkness could not overcome." Allusions to light as something more than a mere physical fact are in indeed pervasive throughout the film.

In a rather different vein, consider the photography of Inta Ruka, one of the three artists represented in Latvia's exposition at the 48th Venice Biennale (the exposition was titled, suggestively to me, "Stories, Storytellers"). Ruka's series, titled "My Country's People," consists of photographs, taken over a twenty year period, of the same people from the Naudaskalns district of the Balvi region. What is most significant, it seems to me, is the way in which these photographs reveal the achievement of continuity through time. That would be another way of putting the contrast between Ruta and Mapplethorpe which Helena Demakova mentions in her introduction to Ruta's photographs in *Inta Ruka: Mani lauku laudis*. What counts in Mapplethorpe, Demakova claims, is a "momentary tension that can in the next instant be dismantled."¹¹ In contrast everything is expected in Ruta, the surprise is in the intensity of the whole series. I would gloss that, in MacIntyre's terms, as follows: in Ruta, everything depends upon the way in which the individual is represented within an appropriated history, one which is constituted by customs, stories and rituals which are centered upon birth, family and communal life, suffering and death

(and which, incidentally, need not and probably should not be associated with "nationalism"). This is something that Kierkegaard also would understand perfectly, as the *Literary Review* and the novel upon which it comments amply attest. Ruta's photographs are indeed photos of stories, stories of persons with names, stories of birth, family and communal history, and death.¹² Finally, to avoid an appearance of elitism, and by way of recognizing that sometimes the most authentic manifestations of culture are not found in the official "art world," consider that musically eclectic phenomenon that used to be "country western" where you can find the likes of Jan Krist, Bruce Cockburn, and my friend Kate Campbell. Campbell's ironical and sophisticated take on southern culture is at the same time suffused with a deep sense of family history, regional history, and the biblical images and narratives which still figure importantly in that "Christ haunted, if not Christ centered" (Flannery O'Connor) part of America, the south.

All of these artists could be thought of as anti-Gnostic. All of them show a loyalty precisely to what all Gnostics hate, namely place, contingency, the bodily and historical limits within which and only within which a genuine human life can be achieved. All of them do that by recourse to narratives, traditions, the local, the provincial. All of them thus register a sense for what Kierkegaard called "spirit," which is essentially constituted by a relating of the contingent local self to an ideal to be achieved in time. For just those reasons all of these artists stand against the affected despair, "bad" irony, detachment, anti-humanism and sheer boringness of much recent art and the postmodern culture which produced it. I think they show up the superficiality of the idea that art has come to an end, and they manage to do that precisely by virtue of a spirituality that runs directly against the grain of Hegel's gnosticizing historicism. Spirit (but not Hegel's *geist*) may yet be shown to require not the end of art, but rather a certain kind of continuance and renewal of that still living form of life.¹³

¹ The quotes from Hegel's *Philosophy of the Fine Arts* in this essay are cited in Arthur Danto's *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (Columbia University Press, 1986) p. 113–114.

² Danto, op. cit. p. 84

³ Danto, op. cit. p. 114–15.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, tr. Howard and Edna Hong, (Princeton, 1980) p.25.

⁶ cf. Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Part I, tr. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton, 1987), in particular the section titled "The Immediate Stages of the Erotic."

⁷ George Pattison, "Art in an Age of Reflection" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kierkegaard*, ed. A Hannay and G. Marino, (Cambridge, 1998), p. 76–100.

⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 1981) *passim*.

⁹ The exchange between Ionesco and Tynan, and *The Bald Soprano* itself are anthologized together in *Drama in the Modern World*, ed. S. A. Weiss, (D.C. Heath: Boston, 1964), pp. 463–486.

¹⁰ Charles Altieri, "From Expressivist Aesthetics to Expressivist Ethics" in *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, Anthony Cascardi, ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989).

¹¹ *Inta Ruka: Mani lauku laudis* (Soros Center for Contemporary Arts – Riga, 1999), p.25.

¹² Note Helena Demakova's comments on the significance, for Ruka, of names, of birth and death, in *Inta Ruka* p. 23.

¹³ I am indebted to Andrzej Ekwinski and the Vårdo Seminar Foundation, Stockholm, and the Soros Center for Contemporary Art in Riga, Latvia, for the invitation to present an earlier version of this paper to a symposium held in Riga in 1999. It was there that I became familiar with the wonderful work of Inta Ruka. The comments of participants there, and

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