

ON THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY. A READING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ART

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ABSTRACT: In this article I propose a reflection on art as an expression of the redefinition of modern culture. Art, in effect, expresses the lines that define the world, but at the same time produces a different form of truth. That is why a discourse on art cannot ignore an analysis of the world in which it originates and that somehow it tries to express. In this direction, three readings of the question of modernity are considered: the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno, *Barbarism* by Henry, and *The End of Modernity* by Vattimo. In the second part, the discourse focuses on the manifestation of the crisis in art, trying to offer other meanings, from different philosophical approaches, to the transition from modernity to postmodernity.

KEY WORDS: modern art; modernity; Adorno; Horkheimer; Henry; Vattimo.

Sobre la crisis de la modernidad. Una lectura desde la perspectiva del arte

RESUMEN: En este artículo se propone una reflexión sobre el arte como expresión de la redefinición de la cultura moderna. El arte, en efecto, expresa las líneas que definen el mundo, pero al mismo tiempo produce una diferente forma de verdad. Por ello un discurso sobre el arte no puede prescindir de un análisis del mundo en que este se origina y que de alguna forma intenta expresar. En esta dirección, se consideran tres lecturas de la cuestión de la modernidad: la *Dialéctica de la Ilustración* de Horkheimer y Adorno, *La barbarie* de Henry, y *El fin de la modernidad* de Vattimo. En la segunda parte, el discurso se centra en la manifestación de la crisis en el arte, intentando ofrecer otros sentidos, a partir de diferentes enfoques filosóficos, a la transición desde modernidad a posmodernidad.

PALABRAS CLAVES: arte moderno; modernidad; Adorno; Horkheimer; Henry; Vattimo.

1. INTRODUCTION

The discourse I present here can be seen as a reflection on the the dimensions in which modern art expresses itself, and which it tries to shape. These two aspects correspond in some way to the character of exposition of the work of art, in its attempt to express the lines that define the world, and at the same time to the production of a different form of truth, understood as the definition of the experience of the world. For art may be defined, perhaps, as the desire to express the 'other' of the world, the possible still unrealized, or as Theodor W. Adorno writes in *Aesthetic Theory*, «the sea of the formerly inconceivable»¹. It can even refer to a world that will never be, in the proper sense of utopia. But in any case, it originates *from* and *for* the world in which we live.

¹ ADORNO, T. W., *Ästhetische Theorie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970, trans. *Aesthetic Theory*, London, Bloomsbury, 2013, p. 1.

That is why a discourse on art cannot ignore a reflection on the world in which it originates and that it somehow tries to express, even though it is to escape from it or to reject it. Perhaps it has always been so; but in our epoch this demand is perceived as an internal necessity of art itself. For it is the very 'right to exist' of art that is brought into question, as that absolute freedom reached by the artistic movements of the twentieth century «comes into contradiction with the perennial unfreedom of the whole»². This contrast is one of the factors that has accelerated the dissolution of modern art and the splintering of what can be defined as postmodern art, and which in any case expresses contemporary reality.

Still, although this dissolution manifests in the second half of the twentieth century, its origin should be sought at the beginning of that century, at that moment of enormous tension that gave rise to a radical change in worldview, thus affecting any field of culture. As Wassily Kandinsky affirms in *On the Spiritual in Art* (1912), «when religion, science, and morality are shaken (the last by the mighty hand of Nietzsche), when the external supports threaten to collapse, then man's gaze turns away from the external toward himself»³. It is precisely from this demand for interior immediacy that expressionism was born, in painting as well as in music and literature, along with other artistic and social revolutions that affected the entire modern society. All this implied a transformation not only of the expressive means, but of the very ability of art to reflect and shape the truth of its time.

Thus, in order to deepen some of those contradictions to which Adorno refers, it is necessary to dwell first on the reflection developed around the question of modernity. Of course, I do not intend to propose here an exhaustive discourse on a subject that it is certainly not possible to define from a univocal point of view. Rather, I will follow some of those paths trying to offer other meanings, from different philosophical approaches, to the transition from modernity to postmodernity.

2. THREE READINGS ON THE QUESTION OF MODERNITY

Dialectic of Enlightenment, by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (1944)

The starting point of our reflection is a fundamental text in the philosophical debate on the question of modernity: the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Horkheimer and Adorno. It is a reflection that addresses the very idea of a European cultural identity, seen in relation to the concept of reason and its connection with the domination of nature. Still, it is not about a historical

² Ibid.

³ KANDINSKY, W., *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, München, Piper, 1912, trans. «On the Spiritual in Art», in *Complete Writings on Art*, vol.1, Boston, G. K. Hall, 1982, p. 145.

digression, since the 'core to truth', according to the two authors, is linked to the movement of history and cannot be understood as something invariable. For this reason, although this critique seems powerless in the face of history, it reveals the need to take up the cause of the 'remnants of freedom', thus contributing to the construction of a real humanity⁴.

The recognition of the situation of barbarism of their own epoch constitutes the starting point of the essay. In the prologue to the first edition, written in 1944 when Horkheimer and Adorno lived as exiles in the US, the two authors make immediately clear that their aim is «to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism»⁵. This analysis necessarily leads to an aporia, which thus constitutes the first object of investigation: the self-destruction of Reason⁶. It is not only a critique of the Enlightenment, because Horkheimer and Adorno do not doubt that freedom is inseparable from enlightened thought. Still, they perceive with the same clarity that «the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, [...] already contains the germ of the regression»⁷.

It is a critique of philosophy, then, that does not intend to sacrifice philosophy as such, but that highlights the need for Reason to acquire consciousness of its own 'dialectic'. Only then can the complete fulfillment of the Enlightenment project be realized, so that the values of freedom and justice, which are at the heart of our culture, can be saved. Hence, the central point of such a critique is not so much culture as value, but rather, the necessity to include this regressive moment of progress. Without this consciousness, thinking loses its transcendent character, and therefore its relation to truth. Horkheimer's and Adorno's theoretical effort, therefore, seeks to explain the dialectic between rationality and social reality, or between Reason and domination, in order to build a positive concept of enlightenment that frees itself from the blind domination in which it is enclosed. It is precisely to this task that the essay on the concept of *Aufklärung* is devoted—the first of the 'philosophical fragments' that compose this work, which constitutes the theoretical basis of the entire work. From there, the fundamental theses derive: «Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology»⁸. This dialectic between myth and

⁴ Cf. HORKHEIMER, M., ADORNO, T.W., *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1984, trans. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002, p. xi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁶ The concept of *Aufklärung* clearly refers to the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Still, there is some ambiguity as to the translation of this concept. Without entering into a philological analysis, I merely observe that it would be necessary to distinguish between the concept of Enlightenment in a historical sense and the broader sense of a 'philosophy of progress', which the authors generally use in this work. In what follows, I will use this distinction to underline the fact that their critique should not be understood only in its historical character, but also in the sense of a 'critique of Reason'.

⁷ HORKHEIMER, M., ADORNO, T. W., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cit., p. xvi.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

Reason is then verified in two excursus devoted to the *Odyssey* and to the 'consummation of enlightenment'.

Horkheimer and Adorno observe that the cause of this regression must be sought not so much in the modern nationalist mythologies devised specifically to cause such a relapse, «as in the fear of truth which petrifies enlightenment itself»⁹. It is the fear of departing from the facts, of freeing ourselves from the preconception that governs our very perception of reality. Still, it is a fear that also affects language and thought, thus imposing that 'concept of clarity' to which art, literature and philosophy must conform.

Art, in particular, plays an emblematic role in the critique of enlightened reason. For Horkheimer and Adorno, «the work of art constantly reenacts the duplication by which the thing appeared as something spiritual». It is the same terrible event that was experienced in the magic of primitives: «The appearance of the whole in the particular»¹⁰. Or, as Charles Baudelaire defined the very idea of modernity, the presence of the eternal in the instant. It is this appearance that constitutes its 'aura', which modern art would contribute to questioning. As an expression of totality, then, art claims the dignity of the absolute. For this reason, philosophy has occasionally given art primacy over conceptual knowledge. According to Friedrich Schelling, art begins where knowledge abandons us, and therefore «wherever art is, there science must go»¹¹, for the separation of image and sign is entirely abolished in artistic representation. Yet, arguing against the bourgeois world of conventions, Horkheimer and Adorno observe that this faith in art has rarely had space in our society: «Where it restricted knowledge, [the bourgeois world] generally did so to make room for faith, not art»¹².

The theme of the separation of image and sign returns in other points of the essay on the concept of *Aufklärung*, developing from another perspective some arguments similar to those proposed by Edmund Husserl in *The Crisis of European Science* (1936)¹³. For Horkheimer and Adorno, however, the problem of the Enlightenment does not lie in the analytical method, that is, in the reduction and decomposition of reality through reflection, but in the fact that with this method the process is judged in advance. Thus, thought is reduced to an automatic process in which the mathematical procedure becomes ritual, transforming thought into 'thing'.

At the same time, with this mimesis the mastery of the factual imposes itself on the requirement of an authentic thought to indicate the 'other' of the world.

⁹ Ibid., p. xvi.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

¹¹ SCHELLING, F.W.J., *Erster Entwurf eines Systems der Naturphilosophie*, quoted in *ibid.*

¹² HORKHEIMER, M., ADORNO, T.W., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cit., p. 14.

¹³ Cf. HUSSERL, E., *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*, Den Haag, Nijhoff, 1976, trans. *The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970, pp. 22 and foll.

Hence the consequent devaluation of any reflection that departs from the merely existing, either in an artistic or metaphysical sense. This is the main danger that Horkheimer and Adorno see in any objective reduction of thought. Indeed, one of the central notions in Adorno's aesthetic thought would be that 'more' [*Mehr*] that prevents the work of art from regressing to the dimension of thing among the things of the world, and that precisely through the 'appearance' can art manifest, thus rebelling against the predominance of what simply exists.

For positivism, on the contrary, which has assumed the 'judicial office' of enlightened reason, the deviation from the factual is considered as senseless and self-destructive as the exit from the magic circle of existence was for the magician. In this manner, the whole aspiration of knowledge is abandoned, because knowing does not consist only in perceiving and classifying, but implies the negation of the immediate. Otherwise, knowledge is reduced to the repetition of what Reason has placed into the object and thought itself becomes mere tautology. It is precisely this objective reduction of thought that is read as the consecration of the world to its own measure. And yet, «what appears as the triumph of subjectivity, the subjection of all existing things to logical formalism, is bought with the obedient subordination of reason to what is immediately at hand». Enlightenment, which believed itself safe from the return of the mythical, thus regresses to mythology, from which «it has never been able to escape»¹⁴.

This mythical dimension of the Enlightenment reflects the interpretation of myth as an expression of domination over nature, and therefore as an anticipation of the Enlightenment project. It is what Horkheimer and Adorno highlight in their reading of the episode of the Sirens of the *Odyssey*, and what they will deepen in the excursus devoted to the dialectic between 'myth and Enlightenment'. The melody of the Sirens belongs here to that mythical dimension that the Homeric hero, by asking to be tied, tries to overcome through Reason. But in this he is converted into the audience of a beauty that has lost the possibility of transforming the world, that is, of revealing the 'other': «He listens, but does so while bound helplessly to the mast, and the stronger the allurements grow the more tightly he has himself bound, just as later the bourgeois denied themselves happiness the closer it drew to them with the increase in their own power»¹⁵. The bounds with which Odysseus is tied to the mast neutralize the seduction of the Sirens, which is thus converted into an object of contemplation, into 'art'. Odysseus's fate, then, resembles that of a modern man who listens to a concert, contemplating a work of art like the other products that he enjoys in his free time, which he still calls, hypocritically, spiritual. «And his enthusiastic call for liberation goes unheard as applause»¹⁶. The contemplation of art, in this manner, definitively excludes itself from praxis.

¹⁴ HORKHEIMER, M., ADORNO, T.W., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cit., p. 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

The episode of the Sirens includes in itself the relationship between myth and rational labor, just as the *Odyssey* as a whole offers a testimony of the dialectic of enlightenment. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the few philosophers who recognized this dialectic, expressed in its ambivalent relation to power. Through Nietzsche we thus come to consider the problem of modernity from other philosophical perspectives. Among them, because of its implications in a discourse on art, a view in which the question of modernity is connected to the relationship between culture and life deserves our attention. The separation between them therefore affects the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of all social activity. This contrasts with a view in which the crisis of modern culture cannot be identified only with the affirmation of instrumental reason, but rather has to do with a redefinition of the relation between subject and object, forcing a discussion of the very concept of humanism.

Barbarism, by Michel Henry (1987)

The initial question of Henry's essay is the observation of the paradoxical situation of our time, 'what was never seen' throughout the different cycles of expansion and decline that have occurred in the history of mankind: «For the first time in the history of humanity [...] knowledge and culture are diverging to the point of being opposed in a titanic battle—a struggle to the death, if indeed it is the case that the triumph of the former entails the disappearance of the latter»¹⁷. For Henry, the origin of this situation goes back to the beginning of the modern era, when the new wisdom of the mathematized science, characterized by rigorous, objective and incontestable knowledge, allowed us to approach the ideal of 'true' knowledge. This would be confirmed by the power of its proofs and by the extraordinary results it has generated, which have forever transformed the face of the Earth. Still, the new science has not only determined a transformation on the theoretical plane, but has changed the very essence of the human being. Hence the question at the basis of *Barbarism* arises: «If the increasingly comprehensive knowledge of the world is undeniably good, why does it go hand in hand with the collapse of all other values, a collapse so serious that it calls our own existence into question?»¹⁸ For Henry it is life itself that is wounded, and this inevitably affects all its values, both in the ethical and the aesthetic plane.

The development of this exceptional knowledge, then, whose theoretical and practical means mark a complete rupture with the traditional knowledge of humanity, means the neglect of humanity itself. It is this estrangement that imposes a critical reflection on the very idea of modernity. How and why this kind of knowledge has been able to subvert all other values, and therefore culture and humanity as a whole, is what Henry tries to reconstruct in his

¹⁷ HENRY, M., *La barbarie*, Paris, *Quadrige/PUF*, 2004, trans. *Barbarism*, London, Bloomsbury, 2012, p. xiii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

essay. To do this, he starts from an argument that had already been proposed by Husserl in *The Crisis of European Science*. From a phenomenological perspective, the latter had affirmed that modern society arises fundamentally from an oblivion: that of the 'lifeworld' [*Lebenswelt*]. It is an estrangement generated in the Galilean illusion that gives rise to the process of reduction or mathematization of nature, thereby abstracting the sensible properties of the world. Yet the essence of life, Henry claims, resides precisely in our ability of sensing ourselves, not just in a biological sense but in that of a true life, «whose essence consists in the very fact of sensing or experiencing oneself»¹⁹.

The illusion of Galileo, and of all who after him have considered science an absolute knowledge, was to have taken that mathematical world, destined to offer an objective knowledge of nature, as the real world, which we can only experience in the concrete modes of our subjective life. The whole universe is thus reduced to an objective set of material phenomena, abstracting their sensible qualities and retaining only the 'geometrizable' forms as constitutive of their true reality.

And yet, for Henry it is not so much this process of abstraction that leads to barbarism, as the fact of understanding science as the unique true domain of being, thus rejecting in non-being or in the appearance of illusion everything having to do with life, and therefore with culture. In this way, modern science has been advancing in an unstoppable but unconscious manner, moving away from the true dimension of life. This growing gap is what characterizes modern society. From there the anguish and the dissatisfaction in the face of the world arise, because it is a world from which the very essence of life has been removed. All this is reflected in the progressive regression of all forms of culture, since every culture is fundamentally a culture of life: «Life is both the subject and the object of this culture. *It is an action that life exerts on itself and through which it transforms itself*»²⁰.

This is the tragic paradox of our epoch: if the source of every culture is life, its self-transformation and self-growth, life's exclusion means the collapse of culture in all its forms. It is possible, then, to have a hyper development of scientific knowledge along with the decline and finally the annihilation of culture. For Henry, this is precisely the situation of the world in which we live. The unfolding of the impressive instrumental devices of science knows no other laws than those of its own self-development, which forgets and finally turns against the same humanity from which they were generated.

All this is seen by Henry as the result of the solitude of science, whose direct expression is technology. Nevertheless, the original essence of *techné* is life itself, as praxis: «A knowledge in which life is at once the power that knows and what is known by it»²¹. In higher forms of culture, such as art, the

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

²¹ Ibid., p. 18.

connection between praxis and life is more evident, since the aesthetic creation is an immediate expression of subjectivity. But in any case, Henry observes, action is only possible through subjectivity, as praxis. When action ceases to obey the prescriptions of life, the ontological reversal that leads to the crucial event of modernity occurs: «*Action has become objective*»²². Thus, the idea of aesthetic, intellectual or spiritual progress, which originates in the life of the individual and in the self-growth of his subjective potentialities, is left aside along with the essence of life itself. There is no other reality than the objective one knowable by science, and consequently the only notion of progress in the implicit ontology of our times is that of technological progress.

For Henry, in conclusion, barbarism is not an incomprehensible or accidental event, but the inevitable consequence of this process of abstraction. «Its successive contamination of every domain of social activity, the gradual disappearance [...] of its aesthetic, ethical and religious dimensions, can also be understood. It is a process that affects the essence of being, understood as the principle from which all culture [...] proceed»²³. Opposing barbarism, then, means reintroducing life into knowledge, since no theoretical question is really separated from life. It means rejecting the autonomy of instrumental reason, opposing the intellectual decision to exclude subjectivity from all areas of knowledge; with this decision «life turns against itself»²⁴, generating the tragic feeling of impotence of the contemporary individual before some 'facts' stripped of their own essence.

Still, after this *j'accuse* launched by Henry, the 'phenomena of self-destruction' described in *Barbarism* have seen a violent intensification, as the author himself observed in the preface to the second edition: «There is no longer any more room to challenge the omnipresent objectivism of modernity. After the unilateral objectivism of science, there is the media which tears the human being away from him or herself. At every moment, it produces the content that comes to occupy the mind»²⁵. Each of us has the difficult task of recovering this meaning, so that the desire to communicate an idea that lasts more than a single moment is not extinguished, and the utopia of a different world can continue to exist. This is the mission of art. As Henry reminds us, art does not constitute a domain apart from life, but arises within human experience as one of the fundamental forms of all culture.

The End of Modernity, by Gianni Vattimo (1985)

In *The End of Modernity* Vattimo proposes a reading that tries to surpass a purely critical and negative description of the post-modern condition, which originates for him in the *Kulturkritik* of the early twentieth century and in

²² Ibid., p. 47.

²³ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

²⁴ Ibid., p. xvii.

²⁵ Ibid.

the successive analyses of the Husserlian phenomenology and the Frankfurt school. In his view, this is possible only if the *contents* of the humanistic ideal are discussed in a substantial way, and not just the possibilities of its historical survival under the new conditions of modernity. His analysis, in this direction, focuses mainly on the questions of Nietzsche's nihilism and Heidegger's overcoming of metaphysics, in order to construct a horizon of post-modernity no longer as the 'end' of a historical process but as an opportunity to define a new model of 'truth'.

For Vattimo, the decisive step for understanding this connection is the attitude that, in different terms, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger have established with respect to the heritage of European thought, which they have radically called into question. Still, both Nietzsche and Heidegger have refused to propose a means for a critical overcoming of this tradition, for «any call for an 'overcoming' would involve remaining captive to the logic of development inscribed in the tradition of European thought».²⁶ Their radical questioning is thus directed to a vision of modernity understood as an 'era of history'—as opposed to a cyclical conception of the course of the world—characterized by the idea of thought as progressive enlightenment. In this process, the 'new' is affirmed as a fundamental value through the recovery and re-appropriation of an 'origin'. It is precisely from the concept of the value of the new, or of the new as value, that the ontology of modern being develops: «Modernity in that era in which being modern becomes a value, or rather, it becomes *the* fundamental value to which all other values refer»²⁷.

This vision eventually converges on the usual description of modernity in terms of secularization, as a result of abandoning a sacred conception of existence. Thus, the 'ideology of progress' takes shape from the Judeo-Christian vision of history, from which all transcendent elements are progressively eliminated: the faith in progress, devoid of providential references, is then identified with the faith in the value of the new. In this process, art assumes a central role in modern culture, a position that Vattimo defines as 'anticipation' or 'emblem' since the metaphysical foundations have fallen much earlier in art than in science and technology, which are still limited or directed by the values of truth and usefulness.

The post-modern, then, should be seen not as 'something new' with respect to the modern, but as a dissolution of the category of the new, as an 'end of history'. The concept of post-modernity refers precisely to this taking leave of modernity, to this «search to free itself from the logic of development inherent in modernity—namely the idea of a critical 'overcoming' directed toward a new foundation»²⁸. Therefore, it is not about a new overcoming, which once again expresses a 'new' vision with respect to a previous conception of history

²⁶ VATTIMO, G., *La fine della modernità*, Torino, Garzanti, 1985, trans. *The End of Modernity*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, p. 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

as progress. It is about a vision that can open us to a different way of thinking Being, no longer as a stable structure but as an 'event'. According to Vattimo, this is what Nietzsche and Heidegger sought in their peculiar critical relation to Western thought, and for this reason these thinkers established the basis for constructing an image of existence in the new conditions of 'post-historicity'.

The difficulty of this attempt to redefine postmodernity is evident even from a formal point of view, since a historical definition —the idea of 'post'— is used to refer to a rupture with a historicist conception of modernity. Vattimo himself, while criticizing the emptiness of purely formal arguments, admits that this objection points to a real difficulty: «If it were simply a question of an awareness —or assumption— of representing an historical novelty which constitutes a new and different figure in the phenomenology of the spirit, then the post-modern would be positioned along the lines of modernity itself»²⁹.

It is to overcome this circularity that Vattimo refers to the themes of nihilism and the overcoming of metaphysics, which in his view constitute the basis for constructing an image of existence outside a historical horizon. The question of 'accomplished nihilism' —through which Nietzsche defines the attitude of those who have understood that nihilism is their only opportunity, and which Vattimo contrasts with passive or reactive nihilism— thus leads to the concept of 'fable': «The world in which the truth has become a fable is in fact that place of an experience that is no 'more authentic' than that offered by metaphysics»³⁰. For it is the authenticity itself that has disappeared with the 'death of God' and the consequent devaluation of all values. Thus, the effort to oppose this dissolution and to restore the domination of the subject over the object is seen as reactionary, because it maintains the same characteristic force which belongs to objectivity. It is precisely with respect to this attitude that nihilism is seen as an opportunity. This does not mean, however, giving up to the 'laws and games' of technology. On the contrary, it means admitting, with Heidegger, that the essence of technology is not technological, but belongs to the same metaphysical current that began with Parmenides. Even technology, therefore, is a 'fable': «When seen in this light it is stripped of all its (imaginary) claims to be able to constitute a new 'strong' reality that could be taken as self-evident, or glorified as what Plato calls the *ontos on*»³¹.

Here Vattimo's proposal moves away from those philosophies centered on a critique of instrumental reason, considered as the cause of a process of dehumanization which leads to the obscuring of humanistic ideals. This interpretation sees in technology a threat to which thought must respond with a deeper awareness of what distinguishes the human world from the world of scientific objectivity. And for this reason, it is an interpretation that gives thought a task of resistance to the attack of rationalization against humanity,

²⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 25.

³¹ Ibid., p. 29.

defined once again in terms of subjectivity. In Vattimo's view, however, even this conception is a fable that we continue to read as reality. Indeed, other currents of contemporary thought, directed towards an overcoming of the notion of subject along with its transformation in the plane of social existence, oppose this conception.

It is precisely to this critique of the subject, which alludes to the 'prophetic overtones' of Nietzsche and Heidegger, that Vattimo refers in his attempt to think the crisis of modernity as a positive opportunity, enabling a different possibility of existence for the human being. It is not a matter of proposing a providential view of the process of rationalization, but of becoming aware that, if this process has created the conditions for the elimination of the subject, at the same time philosophy, psychology and even artistic experience have made it clear that this same subject may not merit defense. Thus, following the Heideggerian analysis of the relationship between humanism and technology, Vattimo affirms that it is the subject itself that lies at the root of dehumanization, because a subjectivity that defines itself only as the subject of the object inevitably tends to become an object of manipulation.

In conclusion, what Vattimo proposes is a different relationship between our Being and the 'truth' of the world around us: «A non-metaphysical conception of truth which would interpret truth not so much on the basis of a positivistic model of scientific knowledge as, for instance [...] on the basis of [...] an experience of art»³². Still, this recognition of aesthetic experience as a model to approach truth is not reduced to the affirmation of a subjective feeling, but implies a discourse that questions what exists in order to understand it, thus contributing to the creation of a new horizon for postmodernity. It is precisely in this aspiration to a critical dimension, and at the same time to the expression of an inner reality that surpasses the representation of what simply exists, that a point of contact between the art and philosophy of the twentieth century can be found.

3. THE MANIFESTATION OF THE CRISIS IN ART

Art as an expression of the lifeworld

The different readings I have tried to delineate, as we have seen, have very distant narratives and interpretations, constructed around a reevaluation of the relation between reason and domination, a critique of the estrangement from the lifeworld, and a redefinition of the subject in the new conditions of modernity. Still, the possible answers offered by these readings leave open the initial question about the world in which modern art expresses itself and which it tries to shape. For the very possibility of expression is contradicted by the

³² Ibid., p. 12.

'perennial unfreedom' of the world, even though the necessity of giving shape to this same contradiction is still present. It is what Samuel Beckett puts in an enigmatic and at the same time irrefutable way: «There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express»³³. Hence the search for a form that does not limit itself to describing or reproducing reality, but that calls it into question to disclose its still unrealized possibilities, as well as the rejection of the autonomy of art with respect to life: these are precisely some of the ethical and aesthetic foundations of the twentieth-century avant-gardes.

Art represents in this sense the ideal way to rediscover the authenticity of the world. It is here that the need to 'express life' appears, to finally recover its essence. Thus, returning to Henry's view, we can now understand why the departure from the lifeworld would culminate in that 'struggle to the death' between knowledge and culture. For the French philosopher, in effect, just considering the criterion of art to assess the situation of our time's culture provokes a sense of vertigo, since we are facing a nothingness: art realizes the potentialities of sensibility, while modern science defines itself by the exclusion of this same sensibility. At the root of this exclusion, Henry observes, would be the error of considering the world as apprehensible by a 'pure consciousness', forgetting that nature is in itself a sensible nature.

Sensibility, in turn, is not only the condition of every possible world, but also defines the very essence of art. It is precisely in relation to the recognition of sensibility as an ontological dimension of art that Henry refers to Kandinsky's theoretical reflections. In *On the Spiritual in Art*, one of the first manifestos of the formal and spiritual renewal of twentieth-century art, the Russian painter affirmed that «what is right artistically can only be attained through feeling [*Gefühl*]». Even if the overall construction can be achieved through theory, that *something extra* that constitutes the very essence of artistic creation cannot be created or discovered if it is not inspired by sensibility. That is why, Kandinsky concludes, art «can only exert its effect by means of the emotions»³⁴.

From this claim, Henry observes, derives another fundamental consequence, which would be brought to its extreme conclusions by some of the twentieth-century avant-gardes: the elimination of distance between art and life. «Art does not constitute a separate domain. It enters into harmony with the world [...]. The lifeworld—which is the real world in which humans live—thus falls entirely under the categories of the aesthetic and is only comprehensible

³³ BECKETT, S., «Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit», in *Disjecta*, London, John Calder, 1983, p. 139.

³⁴ KANDINSKY, W., «On the Spiritual in Art», cit., p. 176. It should be noted that in the French edition referred to by Henry (Paris, Denoël-Gonthier, 1954), *Gefühl* is translated as *sensibilité*, which clarify the meaning of the reference to Kandinsky in the context of this discourse.

through them»³⁵. Hence comes the idea of art as a fundamental dimension of every form of culture, belonging to the same lifeworld in which we live and develop our affective potentialities. And at the same time, it follows that every human being is potentially an artist, since the specific activity of the artist is nothing but an actualization of life, its implementation *by* itself and *for* itself.

For Henry, then, the exclusion of sensibility leads to an internal contradiction: in the only world that really exists, the lifeworld, its sensible qualities have been replaced by ideal determinations that are valid only in the domain of science. Yet sensibility does not disappear, but remains as a fundamental element, creating even those idealities that pretend to ignore its own essence. In this way, determinations that originate in our sensibility are no longer disposed according to the inner laws of sensibility. It is here that this contradiction appears: «*An essentially aesthetic world will cease to obey aesthetic prescriptions*»³⁶. This is the principle of the new 'barbarism' of our times, and for this reason such exclusion inevitably affects every area of culture.

Henry's conception of sensibility is certainly subject to attack both from the side of scientific objectivity and from an idea of art that focuses on the constructive element of the artwork, rather than its natural appearance as an expression of the lifeworld. Yet, according to my reading, what deserves our attention is the way in which he derives his conception of sensibility as the substrate of the totality of the world. For Henry, it is an illusion to believe in an objective totality that constitutes the world, as a great stage containing both the beings and the things of the world, side by side. In such a radical exteriority, left to itself, each element would be so foreign to the others that no relation could be conceived, not even of exteriority.

It is a theme that constantly appears in twentieth-century art, even if through different paths, all in search of an image that surpasses the illusion of an objective reality of the world³⁷. This aspiration can be read in works as distant from each other as Kandinsky's *Compositions* or Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* (1915), rightly defined by its author as an 'icon of his time'. Thus, through his paintings and his theoretical reflections, Kandinsky proposes a program of regeneration to affirm that spiritual dimension that is proper to art. It is in this sense that the critique he addresses to the culture of his time can be understood: a time marked by an exteriority that extends its power over the totality of Being, reduced to the pure objectivity of things. Therefore, in his view, only by releasing itself from the weight of the objects and turning its gaze towards the inner reality, can art fulfill its mission. Likewise, Malevich's 'iconoclastic fury' concerns the image as representation of an external world,

³⁵ HENRY, M., *Barbarism*, cit., p. 26.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cf. MALQUORI, D., «Sul senso dell'invisibile in Kandinsky e in Malevič», *Aretè. International Journal of Philosophy, Human & Social Sciences*, 2016, vol. 1, pp. 228-242.

leaving intact, however, its iconic character as non-imitative similarity.³⁸ This means that with such a release from objectivity Malevich does not intend to reveal the invisible, but rather to make visible the disappearance of the visible, that is, of objectivity itself. In his view, true salvation can only come from non-objectivity, whose signs mark the beginning of a new era in which the truth of non-objective art reveals objective truth as an illusion³⁹.

This same idea is what Henry reads in the icons painted on the walls of the Daphni monastery, as manifestations or emanations of the power of the primordial icon: «We are not empirical individuals, as if we were some fragment tied to the objective world through a number of connections, delivered over to the same blind fate and just as unintelligible as it. Instead we are living beings who have the feeling of ourselves [...]. That is what is written on the walls of the Byzantine monastery»⁴⁰. It is not by chance that in abstract art we find a strong attraction to the painting of icons, characterized precisely by the rejection of realistic representation. The icon does not imitate, does not represent, but allows the invisible to appear without explaining it, and for this reason remains impenetrable both to the sensible and intellectual knowledge. As Giuseppe Di Giacomo observes, «in the icon, in fact, the invisible is given as invisible, and since no image could depict such invisible, unless it is given as an 'idol', the icon rejects everything that belongs to the image»⁴¹. Thus, the *Black Square* does not represent nothing, but *is* the experience of nothingness. This is its iconic character.

In conclusion, the knowledge to which modern art opens us is of a totally different nature with respect to what defines the very idea of modernity. Its 'ontological medium' —as Henry observes in his analysis of Kandinsky's abstractionism— is life itself, its starting point is an emotion, its purpose is transmitting to others this emotion, as a more intense mode of life⁴².

Art as an expression of the redefinition of culture

Considering these same reflections in the context of the question of modernity, it is reasonable to ask about the possible parallelism between the sense of rupture in the artistic movements of the early twentieth century and the global transformation of the image of the world that in the same years affected all spheres of modern culture. It is not simply a matter of seeking mutual influences in the relationship between art and society. Following in this

³⁸ Cf. MARTINEAU, E., «Préface», in MALÉVITCH, K., *Écrits II. Le miroir suprématisme*, Lausanne, L'Âge d'Homme, 1977, p. 33.

³⁹ Cf. DI GIACOMO, G., *Malevič. Pittura e filosofia dall'Astrattismo al Minimalismo*, Roma, Carocci Editore, 2014, p. 89.

⁴⁰ HENRY, M., *Barbarism*, cit., p. 37.

⁴¹ DI GIACOMO, G., *Malevič*, cit., p. 111.

⁴² Cf. HENRY, M., *Voir l'invisible. Sur Kandinsky*, Paris, François Bourin, 1988, trans. *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, London and New York, Continuum, 2009, p. 18.

sense Adorno's theoretical effort, which tends to 'dialectize' this same relation, the aim is rather to capture in the inner movement of the works of art, in their aesthetic immanence, the social tensions that appear at this moment of crisis. As Meyer Schapiro observes in *Nature of Abstract Art* (1937), art changes and takes shape in relation to the reality in which the artist lives: «There is no 'pure art', unconditioned by experience; all fantasy and formal construction, even the random scribbling of the hand, are shaped by experience and by nonaesthetic concerns»⁴³.

The different spheres of culture certainly have their own paths of development, which can sometimes be read only from within. This is even more true in the case of sciences, which are more autonomous from the rest of culture the more effectively their abstraction from life has been realized. Nevertheless, there were moments in the development of modern society in which fundamental ruptures or paradigm shifts simultaneously appeared in different fields. Although a simple historical coincidence cannot be considered as a demonstration of a common cause, it is interesting to analyze some of these changes in light of the above arguments. We can observe that true revolutions took place during the first decades of the twentieth century, shaking every area of culture along with the global questioning of the image of modernity. Think of abstractionism, of atonal music, of the syntactic and semantic dissolution in Expressionism and Dadaism, and finally of Beckett's theater, which for Adorno witnesses the non-sense of the world and for that reason is the most authentic expression of modern art⁴⁴. And at the same time, think of the paradigm shifts that made the very foundations of modern physics waver—the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics—altering our relationship with the concepts of space, time, and matter. All these changes, in fact, can be seen as the reflection of a transmutation of values that affected all of modern society.

A possible objection to this observation might be that art and science not only follow different paths, but try to express something different: the world as it *is*, and the world as it *could be*. It is a distinction, in fact, that goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics*: the poet's object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen, either probably or inevitably. For this reason, Aristotle observes, poetry is 'more philosophical' [φιλοσοφώτερον] than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts⁴⁵. All this finds reflection in what modern art puts in the foreground: the need to indicate the 'other' of the world, instead of representing what simply exists.

⁴³ SCHAPIRO, M., «Nature of Abstract Art», in *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York, Braziller, 1978, p. 196.

⁴⁴ In this sense, the relation between abstract painting and atonal music is particularly evident, as an expression of a questioning of the objectivity of the world. See for example MALQUORI, D., «Form, dissonance, and life in Schoenberg's expressionist music», *The Musical Times*, 2018 (in print).

⁴⁵ ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*, 1451a36-1452b7.

This first objection, indeed, can be seen as a confirmation of Henry's thesis: it is in modernity that science separates itself from life and focuses on the *ob-ject* (from *ob-iacere*, to throw before or against, and therefore to oppose), and it is also for that reason that art assumes the function of a utopian vision, giving life to what remains invisible to the gaze of science. Nevertheless, if we follow the reasoning that underlies such ontological differentiation between the different spheres of culture, we are again faced with our initial question about the simultaneity of such moments of rupture: whether they are related or independent.

In this sense, it may be useful to consider Vattimo's discourse on 'the structure of artistic revolutions', where the possible analogies and differences in the evolution of art and science are analyzed in light of Thomas Kuhn's work⁴⁶. At first, in fact, it would seem that the concept of revolution can be applied more easily to the case of arts, since the transformation of models and artistic canons should not be measured by the conception of 'truth' that dominates scientific activity. Thus, the play of paradigms that in Kuhn's view is connected to scientific revolutions develops freely, in its pure state, without the bonds of the requirement of validity or verifiability of theories.

And yet Vattimo observes, «the distinction between a notion of science in which progress is possible (as a cumulative process that comes ever nearer to the truth of things) and a notion of art in which this relationship with the true does not appear in such cut and dried terms, is itself already deeply in crisis»⁴⁷. The overcoming of this distinction would also derive from the debate generated by Kuhn's essay, as well as from the trend towards an 'epistemological anarchism' promoted in particular by Paul Feyerabend, on the basis of which it is legitimate to ask whether feelings have any function in the process of knowledge. All this has contributed to situating the development of science in terms of an aesthetic model, among other reasons because the choice between incompatible paradigms is ultimately based on a process of persuasion rather than on demonstrative arguments.

This process of aestheticization of the history of science is connected at the same time to a wider phenomenon, which can be traced back to the 'centrality of the aesthetic' in modernity. Schelling's thesis on the role of art with respect to philosophy, to which Horkheimer and Adorno refer, would be just one of the expressions of a theme that characterizes the whole of modernity. Still, in Vattimo's view, it is starting with Nietzsche that this centrality becomes recognizable. It is about a complex process, announced at a practical level by the transformation of the social role of the artist in the Renaissance, pursued at a theoretical level with the romantic perspective of an aesthetic origin of civilization, and confirmed in contemporary society

⁴⁶ Cf. KUHN, T., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962.

⁴⁷ VATTIMO, G., *The End of Modernity*, cit., p. 91.

by the affirmation of aesthetic models of behavior and social consensus, characterized above all by the strength of the mass media. «Yet, perhaps only in Nietzsche do we find an awareness of the authentic meaning of the function of *anticipation* that the aesthetic possesses in relation to the global development of modern civilization»⁴⁸. Once the faith in reason and in the development toward a final condition is denied, the world thus appears as a work of art that makes itself.

Coming back to the crisis of modern culture, a new question imposes itself to our discussion: how can art be an anticipation of the evolution of modern culture, and at the same time a reflection of the lines that define it? In other words, what is the meaning of the manifestation of this crisis through art? The fundamental point is the relationship between the objective spirit of the time and the discussion of a vision of the world that had dominated throughout modernity. In this sense, as Barnett Newman observes in *The Plasmic Image* (1945), the revolutionary turn of modern science requires a mental attitude that constitutes in itself a denial of the previous worldview. This negation interests us, as does its expression through the artistic experience of the twentieth century. Thus, Newman continues, «just as we have accepted the new mathematics, the new symbolic logic, and the new physics as the beginning of a new concept of the world, so must we accept the new painting as the beginning of a new concept of beauty»⁴⁹. That is why, in his view, the artist who emerges from this moment of redefinition of modern culture is the only true revolutionary, because he or she places the artist's function on its rightful plane: that of exploring the world of idea, not the world of the senses.

In this way, the rupture of the cognitive experience of traditional art—which was based on an irrevocable distance between subject and object, or between a spectator who contemplates from outside and a work that contains within itself an objective meaning— finally leads to an emphasis on the concept of 'now'. It is what appears in a key work in Newman's artistic development, *Onement I* (1948), which is interpreted by Jean-François Lyotard as a paradoxical idea of *beginning*: «Like flash of lightning in the darkness or a line on an empty surface, the Word separates, divides, institutes a difference, [...] and therefore inaugurates, a sensible world. [...] Without this flash, there would be nothing, or there would be chaos»⁵⁰.

Considering now this moment of rupture in its wider sense, precisely in this yearning for transformation, which affects the relationship between the subject and a world so far considered objective, we can see perhaps the true connection

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

⁴⁹ NEWMAN, B., *Selected Writings and Interviews*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1992, p. 147.

⁵⁰ Cf. LYOTARD, J.-F., «L'instant, Newman», in *L'Inhumain. Causeries sur le temps*, Paris, Galilée, 1988, trans. «Newman: The Instant», in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 82.

between such different paths. Even in the world of science, the questioning of inherited certainties was accompanied by the need to investigate *our* relation to the new reality, so that knowledge of the external world could lead to a deeper understanding of ourselves⁵¹. Figures like Albert Einstein or Erwin Schrödinger, in this sense, appear distant from both the Galilean mathematization of nature and the pretense of objectivity of contemporary science. And yet, their attempt to recover the connection between 'science and humanism' would remain unheard: after the first separation of science and life, the original meaning of science would be definitively hidden by technology—in a sense of 'veiling', or of anti-*aletheia*.

At the same time, this estrangement is connected to a change in modern society's vision of science, which Husserl referred to in *The Crisis of European Sciences*. Because a science 'left to itself', away from life as well as from all reflection on reality, and therefore linked only to the merely existing, can no longer respond to the fundamental questions of existence. As Ludwig Wittgenstein claims in the *Tractatus*, «even when all *possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer» (TLP 6.52)⁵².

In conclusion, finally returning to the question of the manifestation of the crisis in art, we can see in this double movement the reflection of a contradiction that was already implicit in the very birth of modernity, but that only later would become visible as an expression of the lines that define the world. Like a voice offstage, able to hear what exists beyond that imaginary space but for that reason difficult to comprehend for the audience who listen to the concert—as immobilized as Odysseus in the face of the Sirens—, art would thus maintain this character of anticipation, faithful at the same time to its mission to express the 'other' of the world. «And his enthusiastic call for liberation goes unheard as applause»⁵³.

4. CONCLUSION

In the different approaches of this reflection on art and modernity it is possible to see the expression of a contradiction that remains difficult to understand, leading to some questions that accept no answer other than

⁵¹ This kind of philosophical questioning can be observed in many of the protagonists of the new physics of the twentieth century. See for example SCHRÖDINGER, E., *Nature and the Greeks' and 'Science and Humanism'*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014; cf. also MALQUORI, D., «Einstein, Gödel, Heidegger. Algunas consideraciones sobre el concepto del tiempo», *Pensamiento*, vol. 67, n. 254, pp. 1007-1027.

⁵² WITTGENSTEIN, L., «Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung», *Annalen der Naturphilosophie*, 1921, XIV, vol. 3-4, pp. 184-262, trans. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 149.

⁵³ HORKHEIMER, M., ADORNO, T. W., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, cit., p. 27.

silence. In the end, this is the limit and at the same time the obligation of philosophy: to try to say what is not possible to say, even if it is to express the requirement of silence. It is what Wittgenstein indicates in the last thesis of the *Tractatus*: «What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence» (TLP 7)⁵⁴. Still, this imperative of silence has even given rise to a mystical reading: the essence of things may lie beyond the limits of language, or beyond the world of the visible. It is precisely from this rejection of the objectivity of the world, in the attempt to express the inner essence of life, that abstract painting emerged, in a process of reduction from the exterior to the interior, from the visible to the invisible.

What, then, is the dimension in which modern art expresses itself, and in what direction does it direct its gaze? None of these questions has a univocal answer. What definitively changes—in that moment of rupture that constitutes the passage from traditional to modern art, and from there to dissolution in postmodern art—is not only a language or an artistic attitude, but the very concept of openness that was at the basis of traditional art: the possibility of giving meaning to life, saving it from its finitude through the ideals of Beauty and Eternity. Art can no longer indicate this possibility, because it has lost its utopian dimension. And yet, as Adorno observes, it is precisely from this denial of a reconciling meaning that the ‘other’ emerges, towards which the gaze of authentic art is directed.

At the same time, the rejection of art as a representation of an external world means a change of focus from the visual element to the ‘appearance’ of the work, thus revealing its invisible dimension. It is what happens, as we have seen, in the artistic movements of the early twentieth century, in which, however, there still exists that notion of originality expressed by the search for an ‘origin’. Even this originality is definitively lost in the new avant-gardes, thus establishing the dissolution of the work of art in a multiplication of copies: with it, the transition from modernism to postmodernism is definitively accomplished. The loss of all distinction between the work and its reproduction, or between art and reality, translates into an explosion of perspectives, a reflection of the fragmentary nature of the world itself. As Rosalind Krauss observes in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde* (1981), «it is thus from a strange new perspective that we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splintering into endless replication»⁵⁵.

We thus return to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, from which I began these reflections: a text that in its very nature expresses this contradictory relation between art and life, between consonance and dissonance, or between the autonomy of the work of art and its character of ‘social fact’. For Adorno, it is through a fragmentary and ‘not closed’ form, through a «nonviolent synthesis

⁵⁴ WITTGENSTEIN, L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, cit., p. 151.

⁵⁵ KRAUSS, R., «The Originality of the Avant-Garde», in *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA, MIT University Press, 1985, p. 170.

of the diffuse that nevertheless preserves it as what it is in its divergences and contradictions»⁵⁶, that art can express the reality of our time. This is the utopian dimension of modern art, «the true message in the bottle»⁵⁷: it is precisely the denial of reconciliation that gives rise to the possibility of a different future.

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⁵⁶ ADORNO, T.W., *Aesthetic Theory*, cit., p. 197.

⁵⁷ ADORNO, T.W., *Philosophie der neuen Musik*, Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1949, trans. *Philosophy of New Music*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p. 102.