ART AND DEMOCRACY IN HABERMAS

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We should begin by restricting the scope of this inquiry by specifying our orientation to the theme chosen for this round table, "The Critique of Society and Problems of Democracy." We will discuss the theme of the "critique of society" by examining the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, particularly the work of its most well known heir, Jürgen Habermas. Our investigation of the modern "problem of democracy" will be confined to the phenomenon of art and the social role of art in democracy. What is at stake, therefore, is the relation between art and democracy in the recent texts of Habermas.

The following preliminary observation will serve as our point of departure. With the publication in 1985 of Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne Habermas implicitly abandonsthe terrain of philosophical aesthetics in the sense that, for him, art no longer represents a privileged object of philosophical discourse. This observation is drawn from a reading of the appendix to the chapter devoted to Derrida.¹ Philosophy is no longer responsible for the interpretation of the work of art as Habermas implicitly delegates this task, as well as the integration of the work of art into society, into art criticism. The innovative potential of art is manifested in a way far too unpredictable and sporadic to be amenable to philosophical discourse. In brief, art bears the mark of "contingency" ²; it can be apprehended only empirically, reflected upon only a posteriori. This attitude appears to be a reversal of Habermas' earlier position, particularly
if one considers the hope engendered by the well-known lecture delivered in Frankfurt in 1980 entitled "Modernity versus Postmodernity". Gérard Raulet, Martin Jay, and Richard Bernstein perceived this lecture as a promising break-through for Habermas' critical theory of society. The Theory of Communicative Action, which appeared in 1981, confirmed the importance of aesthetic considerations for the architectonic of this social theory, to the extent that it was reasonable to expect that the problem of art would be central to the argumentation presented in Der philosophische Discurs der Moderne. Moreover, Habermas is forced to acknowledge that the aesthetics of modernity constitute a privileged approach for those who wish to define the characteristics of modern times in general. In the short Preface to this book, however, Habermas, sets aside this aspect of the question.

Since the late 18th century modernity has been raised to the status of a philosophical topic in this discourse. The philosophical discourse of modernity has much in common with its aesthetic counterpart; they overlap each other in many ways. I was obliged, however, to limit my topic; these lectures do not deal with modernism in art and in literature.

Habermas excuses this omission by appeal to limitations of space and refers us to the works of three theoreticians of aesthetics: Peter Bürger, Hans-Robert Jauss, and Albrecht Wellmer. Wellmer's important role in the development of Habermas' aesthetic theory will be examined shortly. For the moment, however, we will merely reiterate our initial observation that in his latest book, Habermas shows signs of disillusionment with respect to the problem of art. This disillusionment is manifested in the sharp distinction he draws between philosophy and art criticism, the latter having henceforth an exclusive competence in the aesthetic domain.
In what follows, we will attempt to explain why Habermas’ efforts in the field of aesthetics ultimately led him to such a negative account of art. We will seek the cause of this disappointment in the heart of his critical theory of society. In short, it is Habermas’ theory of communication that prevents him from appreciating the specificity of the aesthetic phenomenon. Our discussion will proceed by way of the following three stages: 1. the paradox of modernity, 2. art as a medium of learning and as a medium of communication and 3. the cognitive potential of art.

1- The Paradox of Modernity

While the theory of communication was adumbrated in Habermas’ earlier works, it is not until the publication, in 1971, of “Vorbereitende Bemerkungen zu einer Theorie der kommunikativen Kompetenz” that it enters forcefully into his writings. Before 1971, Habermas had developed his critical theory from the perspective of a theory of knowledge, whereas since then, it is the theory of communicative action that dominates the development of his theory of society. As is well known, the elaboration of his theory of communicative action remains the central aim of all of Habermas’ inquiries. Knowledge and Human Interests sets out to be a critique of positivism, and in the 1960’s, it is precisely in this sort of critique that Habermas sees the potential for emancipation. A certain number of internal difficulties induce him, however, to reorient his enterprise. He realizes that his epistemological critique is still far too dependent on traditional philosophy and on its claim to be able to delineate absolute foundations. Recall that Knowledge and Human Interests appeals to a certain form of transcendentalism (or quasi-transcendentalism). One
of the problems incurred by this approach is its complete dependence on the subject-object relation (here Gattungssubjekt). With the assistance of his theory of communication, Habermas intends to eliminate the aporias of the philosophy of subjectivity by relying directly on a theory of intersubjectivity that is secured from all relapses into the monologism of instrumental reason. According to Habermas, the theory would have a much greater chance of realizing its ideal of emancipation if it were founded, from its inception, on communicative rationality. Only the theory of communicative action can provide the normative foundations necessary for a critical theory of society. In fact, the theory of communicative action is intimately related to the Enlightenment ideal of the accession of all to maturity, to democracy. In the Preface to the 1981 edition of Philosophical-Political Profiles Habermas insists that the task of the Aufläraung must not be limited to the establishment, from the perspective of a theory of science or an epistemological critique, of a mediation only between science and the life world. The task of philosophy is to consider and show the fruitfulness, for this life world, of every dimension of modern rationality, including morality and art. Only the theory of communicative action is in a position to integrate, in addition to the perspective of the cognitive-instrumental sphere, the dimensions of the moral-practical and aesthetic-expressive spheres.

The revival of the Weberian scheme of the rationalization processes familiar to Western society is evident in the preceding enumeration of the three cultural spheres. The gradual severing of modern culture from tradition results in the institution of autonomous spheres which develop in relation to the logic internal to each. We also witness the increasing specialization of the three spheres: a) science and technology b)
universalistic morality and positive law and c) autonomous art and art criticism. In each case, the specialization of tasks is pushed to the point that only an expert can perform them competently. The efficacy of the process of rationalization increases in relation to the autonomy, and yet also to the esoteric nature of each of the spheres, to such an extent that they become inaccessible to the public. Having adopted this Weberian diagnosis, Habermas sees the paradox of rationality as the greatest challenge now facing philosophy. The challenge must be met since the project of modernity still demands completion. In his article "Modernity versus Postmodernity" Habermas poses the question in the following way.

The differentiation of science, morality, and art, which characterizes, according to Weber, the rationalism of the Western culture, means that the segments treated by the specialist have become autonomous and, at the same time, that these segments have split off from a tradition that continues to develop naturally in the hermeneutics of everyday communication. This splitting off is the problem which results from the development, according to their own sets of laws (Eigengesetzlichkeit), of the different domains of values; ...  

The problem may be summarized as follows: on one hand we witness the increasing and necessary autonomy of each of the cultural spheres, on the other, there is a rupture in the continuity between these cultural spheres and daily life. Modernity is an unfinished project so long as the gap between culture and the lived world remains to be filled. It is actually the Enlightenment ideals of emancipation and democracy that are slow to be realized and that, ultimately, is the source of Habermas' fundamental motivation. It is not that he wishes to renounce the specialization of the expert, (on the contrary, for Habermas, specialization is the indispensable
condition for the development of modern reason) but that he wishes to show the fruitfulness of specialization for everyday life.

It is from this perspective that we must grasp the intervention of the theory of communication in Habermas’ work. Our modern societies are characterized by this sense of rupture; there are break-downs in the communication among citizens, between society and culture, even among the cultural spheres themselves, and this is due to the specificity of the inner logic of each. The imperative of communication, that is to say the ideal of the Enlightenment, is so determinative for Habermas that the theory of communicative action founded on the formal pragmatics of language dictates the entire architectonic of his cultural system. In this way, science, morality, and art are divided according to the three validity claims which are reunited in every speech act: the claim to truth, the claim to normative rightness and the claim to authenticity (or truthfulness). For example, in the conclusion of his great work, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas provides a glimpse of the development of the three philosophical disciplines which correspond to the three validity claims: a) the theory of science b) the theory of law and morality and c) aesthetics.

2- Art as a medium of a learning experience and as a medium of communication

The preceding overview is essential for an understanding of the status which Habermas accords philosophical discourse concerning art. Here aesthetics takes its place within a theory of modernity or, more precisely, within a theory of modern rationality. The inclusion of art in a theory of modern rationality is also explained in the following way - to the
extent that an argument (one which brings to light diverse motives and reasons) is possible and even legitimate in this case, art harbors a cognitive potential. Art implies a certain "type of knowledge" and for this reason is of philosophical interest. The corresponding philosophical task is the articulation of the conditions of the possibility of such knowledge. Thus art is correctly viewed as the "medium of a learning experience" to the extent that the "reconstructive sciences," inspired by Piaget and adopted by Habermas, may be applied without difficulty to aesthetics. Thus in the early 1980's Habermas' project in the aesthetic domain parallels his agenda in the realms of science and ethics for he claims, particularly in The Theory of Communicative Action, to be able to identify the conditions necessary for the production of aesthetic knowledge by showing that aesthetic experience is intimately related to the "intuitive mastery of a system of rules." Here we can see that Habermas is ready to study the inner logic of the aesthetic phenomenon and, in so doing, to preserve intact its autonomy against all attempts at reduction. Habermas has, moreover, always respected the fundamental autonomy of the of the movement of art in modernity, and he has clearly indicated his reservations concerning a desublimated art and the "profane illumination" in the art of the masses. (Benjamin)

The problem which arises from the heart of Habermas' aesthetics, however, is provoked by a theoretical interference: the arguments put forth in a discussion of a work of art gravitate toward a validity claim presented in terms of authenticity. This concept refers back to the notion of expressiveness with which Habermas circumscribes the sphere of art: the aesthetic-expressive. That is to say, the intrinsic quality of a work of art
depends on the degree to which the artist's expression in the work of art is authentic.

In this context reasons have the peculiar function of bringing us to see a work or performance in such a way that it can be perceived as an authentic expression of an exemplary experience, in general as the embodiment of a claim to authenticity.\textsuperscript{16}

Shortly thereafter Habermas is warned that the categories of truth and authenticity are inadequate for the task of discerning the cognitive specificity of the work of art. Habermas soon became sympathetic to Albrecht Wellmer's view that the claim to authenticity is too restrictive. In \textit{Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne} Habermas makes the following observation.

A. Wellmer has shown that the inner coherence of a work of art, the so called artistic truth, cannot so easily be said to rely on authenticity or truthfulness.\textsuperscript{17}

We should not underestimate the consequences of this concession but it would be advisable to pause here to consider the causes of the first error.

The theoretical interference to which we alluded earlier is presented in the following way: the requirement of authenticity originates in the theory of communication. The pragmatics of language here determines \textit{a priori} if not the content of art, at least the standard of measure which by which it will be judged. Does not the primacy of communication interfere here with the inner logic of art? Habermas formally maintains his respect for the autonomy of art but, in fact, he subjects art to the logic of communication. Because he wishes to use communicative reason to resolve, at all costs, the paradox of rationality, he is led to introduce into the aesthetic domain a completely extrinsic standard of measure. We have seen
that modern reason has the two opposing characteristics of specialization and autonomy on one hand, and social emancipation and Aufklärung on the other. The dominance of the latter in Habermas' position leads him to overemphasize the theory of communication and to let it interfere with the specialized cultural spheres, with the culture of experts.

In sum, communication is primary in Habermas' approach to art. This is manifested by, among other things, the occurrence of the theme of "reception" 18 in the article "Modernity versus Postmodernity". Art is truly a "medium of communication," 19 to borrow an expression Habermas applies to Schiller. Thus for Habermas, the conception of art as a medium of communication takes precedence over its construal as a "medium of a learning experience" 20 in which the cognitive potential of art is acknowledged. Moreover, since the rigid and all-encompassing validity claim of authenticity is no longer at his disposal for the definition of the aesthetic sphere, Habermas relinquishes the hope of being able to highlight in advance the direction taken by diverse artistic experiences. The following sentence constitutes a clear admission.

I do not know whether or not the results of Piaget's genetic psychology are as appropriate for the analysis of this "level of learning" as they are for the analysis of the stages of postconventional conception of law and morality. I tend to be rather skeptical. 21

In this assertion Habermas implicitly abandons the philosophical aesthetics proposed in The Theory of Communicative Action. Just as in the case of the theory of science and the theory of morality, philosophical aesthetics was supposed to be edified with the help of the reconstructive sciences, as is the case with the genetic psychology of Piaget. In Der philosophische
**Diskurs der Moderne** Habermas still retains the hope of isolating the conditions for the possibility of scientific and moral discourse (*Diskurs*), but he no longer believes this can be done for the aesthetic critique (*Kritik*). Such is the meaning of the dichotomy he henceforth establishes between truth and taste. Only science and ethics have univocal access to the truth; the concept of truth cannot be applied to art except in a metaphorical sense (in the passage cited below concerning Wellmer, Habermas introduces the expression "artistic truth" in quotation marks!), unless art reveals itself in a communication process with the life world. Yet in that case philosophy no longer plays the role of the mediator between art and the life world, as is the case for science and ethics. This mediation is now the task of art criticism construed as an empirical investigation. Philosophy is prepared to play the role of "interpreter" between the culture of experts and life world only in the realms in which philosophy succeeds in bringing to light the criteria of the relevant procedures (i.e. apophatic truth for science, moral rectitude for ethics), that is to say, only in the realms in which philosophy was originally able to play the role of "Platzhalter." In Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne Habermas only draws out the consequences of this position: in the absence of an all encompassing criterion such as authenticity, philosophy cannot function as a mediator.

3- The cognitive potential of art

Once the communicative criterion of truthfulness proved to be insufficient, the cognitive potential of art was no longer of primary importance for Habermas. Before concluding we should no doubt examine
more closely the reasons for which Habermas ultimately adopted this position. In fact, the criterion of truthfulness does not linger over that which is expressed by the aesthetic subject. We have seen that when the artist is viewed as a transmitter in communication with his public, the demand for authenticity qualifies his mode of expression. How then does Habermas characterize the content of the aesthetic experience communicated? It is important to refer to a article, published in 1964 and entitled "Questions and Counterquestions," which is very explicit on this subject. At first Habermas applies himself, with good reason, to the task of circumscribing the aesthetic sphere within the exterior world. After delimiting this sphere, Habermas proceeds to define its contents.

 Authentic experiences of this type are possible only to the extent that the categories of the patterned expectation of organized daily experiences collapse, that the routines of daily action and conventions of ordinary life are destroyed, and the normality of foreseeable and accountable certainties are suspended. [...] At the same time, this decentering indicates an increased sensitivity to what remains unassimilated in the interpretive achievements of pragmatic, epistemic and moral mastery of the demands and challenges of everyday situations; it effects an openness to the expurgated elements of the unconscious, the fantastic, and the mad, the material and the bodily—thus to everything in our speechless contact with reality which is fleeting, so contingent, so immediate, so individualized, simultaneously so far and so near that it escapes our normal categorical grasp. 24

 In a close reading of these lines, one is first struck by the marginal role of art in daily life and in the other cultural spheres. This depiction of art's marginal position is reminiscent of a point Habermas makes in Reason and Legitimacy: art is interested in "residual needs"25, that is to say, in all that left unfulfilled by the economic and political systems, as well as by the cultural system in the form of science and morality. As mentioned in
the above passage, in all these domains a "mastery" asserts itself, be it pragmatic, epistemological, or moral. Art therefore appears to be the domain of non-mastery, perhaps even of the non-masterable: art concerns itself with the residual, with that which is "unassimilated". From this perspective, the content of art is seen to reside in that which "escapes our usual categorical grasp". In the beginning of the extract, Habermas alludes to the collapse of these "categories" of daily experience. This is surprising because one ends up with the impression that the content of art has to do with that which eludes all categories, with that which is particular, singular, and immediate, to the point that the general concept is excluded. It is as though Habermas considers aesthetics in terms of its etymological sense of *aithésis*, as an object of pure sensibility. But in the domain of art, such an exclusive dualism between concept and intuition borders on the dogmatic. Habermas no doubt considers himself here to be the legitimate heir of his mentor, Adorno. Yet it is important to note that for the latter, the categories of material life are also present in a work of art. This does not mean that they are denied but that they are often transfigured. Let us turn to Adorno himself, to whom Habermas' lecture, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," is officially dedicated.

The formative categories of art are not simply different in kind from those outside. They actively seek to impart what is particular to themselves to the outside world. In the latter the prevailing forms are those that characterize the domination of nature, whereas in art, forms are being controlled and regimented out of a sense of freedom...If art had nothing to all to do with logic and causality, it would be an idling motion without any link to its other; if it took them too literally, it would succumb to their spell. What allows art to pull away from the spell, and not by much, is its dual essence which causes permanent conflict.
Habermas also speaks of the "inner logic" of the autonomous work of art, yet he does not indicate how the concept fits into this logic, if in fact it does.

It is possible to trace the difficulties Habermas encounters in grasping aesthetic experience by closely examining his reading of Kant’s Critique of Judgement as it is summarized in the extended version of the lecture "Modernity versus Postmodernity." At first he acknowledges his complete agreement with Kant concerning the delimitation of art in modernity as a distinct cultural sphere. Habermas enumerates the following four traits: 1- art is concerned strictly with "taste" 2- it takes refuge in fiction, in "appearance" 3- it is detached from all "interest" and 4- it "transcends" daily reality. 29 Later Habermas attempts to provide a "positive determination" by proposing a reinterpretation of the theme of genius centered around "authentic expression". This interpretation is far removed from Kant as well as, if one may trust the criticisms of Wellmer, from the aesthetic phenomenon itself. Even more telling is Habermas’ brief account of the principal elements of Kant’s aesthetics. Though we need not suspect Habermas of deliberate concealment, in each case he omits all references to conceptuality and, therefore, to the cognitive aspect of art. Thus while elsewhere he claims to be willing to acknowledge the cognitive element of art, all references to it are suppressed in his reading of Kant. As a result, Habermas considers the "free play of imagination" but not the free play of imagination and understanding. He considers the "play of the faculties of representation" (Vorstellungsvermögen) but not the play of the faculties of knowledge (Erkenntnisvermögen). The expressions cited are indeed present as such in Kant, but they disclose only one dimension of the problem. Moreover, Habermas speaks in general of the "laws proper"
(Eigengesetzlichkeit) to each of the three cultural spheres, yet he avoids this expression in speaking of art in particular, preferring Weber's more neutral term, Eigensinn. Nevertheless, for Kant, it was a question of the "legality" (Gesetzmässigkeit) proper to the faculty of judgement as a superior faculty of knowledge (at which time this faculty recovers its autonomy in the aesthetic domain). In fact Habermas emphasizes the dimension of sensibility, not to mention sensuality (zweckfreier Kunstgenuss) of the aesthetic experience to such an extent that eventually the connection between art and modern rationality is obscured.

Communication is certainly not a category entirely foreign to aesthetic experience. It is well known that for Kant, communicability (Mittelbarkeit) is constitutive for the judgement of taste. The claim that this judgement will be shared by all is indicative of its universality even though, in this case, universality is connected not to a determinant concept but to an exemplification, that is to say, to something concrete and beautiful, the work of art. Kant did not dismiss the communicative moment, this social moment proper to beauty. On the contrary, in his transcendental critique he devotes himself to an explicit justification of the claim to universal communicability made by the judgement of taste. Habermas, in turn, ventures into the terrain of philosophical aesthetics, but only long enough to understand the defeat of a category derived from his theory of communication after its unfortunate integration into the aesthetic sphere. From that point onward, the only thing Habermas would recognize was a critique which Kant would have characterized as empirical and psychological. But this raises the following question: is Aufklärung well served when art is reduced to the role of an exit, when it is nothing more than a safety valve which releases the pressure of the residual and
irrational needs of society. What distance then separates autonomous art from the art of the masses, which is subject to economic recuperation through its commercialization and to political recuperation through ideology. Occasionally one gets the impression that Habermas acknowledges the cognitive dimension of art only when it filters by osmosis into the two other cultural spheres, science and morality, and this position leads to the heteronomy of art to the extent that it becomes either realistic or "engagé".

We must hope that Habermas will be led to reexamine and reinforce his thesis, so pertinent in other respects, concerning the cognitive character of modern autonomous art. Perhaps it is when one fully acknowledges the inner logic of a work of art that the work best serves democracy.

Translated by Elizabeth Ennen

NOTES


2 J. Habermas, PDM. p. 373.


4 J. Habermas, PDM. p. 7 (translated and underlined by C. P.)


For this change in "paradigm" and its consequences for the concept of classical critical theory, see the author's "Entre la philosophie et la science: le reconstructionnisme hermèneutique de J. Habermas," Dialogue XXV, Spring 1986. p. 119-142.


J. Habermas "Die Moderne..." p. 453.


Ibid. p. 201.


J. Habermas, Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns. Volume I, p. 41 (cited from Thomas McCarthy's translation, The Theory of
Communicative Action: Volume I, p. 20.) On the following page, Habermas speaks of an "authentic work," which is something entirely different!


19 J. Habermas, PDM, p. 64. Cf. A. Wellmer, "Reason, Utopia, and Enlightenment," in Habermas and Modernity, p.63

20 J. Habermas, "Questions and Counterquestions," p. 201.

21 Ibid.

22 J. Habermas PDM, p. 245.


29 J. Habermas, "Die Moderne...", p. 456.

30 Ibid., p. 453, 454.

31 Ibid., p. 455, 456, 458.


33 J. Habermas, "Die moderne...", p. 456.