

## Negative Memory, Art and the World Peace

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### Abstract

In the world agitated by terrorism, solidification of identity, paranoia, xenophobia and genocide, art indeed expresses the negativity, that is, the void, the chaos, or the spiritual blindness of the socio-cultural plight. But it also serves as a diagnostic tool for identifying the disease; a process of intensifying and heightening our perceptual awareness of the crises; a necessary visualization of the critical interface between body, mind and soul. Art renders palpable the ugliness, the meanness, the unbearableness of life, and this, in turn, will open the possibility to see what ultimately is more desirable, the deeper mystery of the soul, what we usually call 'peace'. It is in this spiritual sense that art can serve as the negation of negation.

The world peace has always been connected to politics or law, but rarely to art. While the importance of art for human soul is generally acknowledged, its connection with wider human socio-cultural life is often unrecognized. Negative experience in general, or negative memory in particular, can be taken as the bridge connecting art to world peace. This paper will explore the negative memory and experience: how they are related to the possibility of world peace, and how the arts, especially in its new development, can play significant role.

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## 1. Negative Memory and its Vicious Circle

Memory is the guardian of the ultimate dialectic of historicity, that is, the dialectic between the past, the present and the future. Memory renders the past constitutive of the present. By means of memory, history becomes history of the present. In terms of existential meaning and value, the past is not something merely elapsed or superseded, but rather, the 'having been' of an unfinished project, a part of an incomplete ideal, a mission to accomplish.

In the writing of history, keeping memory alive is tantamount to an 'act of sepulcher', 'an act of repeated entombment', a ritual, with its prolonged mourning,<sup>1</sup> a celebration of continuity vis-à-vis, or despite, the discontinuity. Negative memory, in particular, renders the discourse of history critical, hence 'critical history', where negative memory is never to remain a mere fact, but rather, to be taken as a protest demanding critical recognition. This means, negative memory is not to be viewed as a simple *mnémé* – a spontaneous irruption of images of an event into awareness, but rather, an *anamnesis* – an act of recollection. In this way negative memory expands collective memory, even corrects and criticizes the actual memory of a community. The work of negative memory is successful not only if it gives rise to a resurrection of the past, but above all, if it emancipates us from the negative past.

The dilemma, however, is that, as a negative experience, the memory is always at the risk of self-censorship or being deliberately forgotten. Indeed, as *mnémé*, memory is always in the midst of the undecidable polarity between forgetting through effacement and forgetting through reservation, between *ars oblivionis* and *ars memoriae*, between

<sup>1</sup> This is a poetic terminology used by Paul Ricoeur in emphasizing the moral responsibility for the past. The work of mourning separates the past from the present and makes way for a better future. See Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. trans. Kathleen Blamey et al, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, 499.

destruction and construction, *amnesia and anamnesis*.<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur calls this 'the irreducible equivocality' of forgetting, of which 'there is no possible balance sheet'.<sup>3</sup> As in the case of mass destruction or genocide (Holocaust, Hiroshima, Khmer Rouge, etc) the suffering is such that the negative memory, the experience of negation, is oftentimes really unforgettable. Hence there cannot be a happy forgetting in the same way as a happy memory; no possible balance sheet. On the other hand, if *anamnesis*, memorization or not-forgetting, means perpetuating vengeance, history will remain locked up within the deadly oscillation between eternal hatred and forgetful memory. It is here that forgiveness comes to be imperative. Forgiveness is the rational way out of the deadly oscillation between the memory of suffering or hatred and absolute forgetting. To break the vicious circle of anamnesis and *amnesia* there must be *amnesty*. Like *amnesty*, forgiveness is the silencing of the non-forgetting memory, the ceasing of vengeance, the forgetting of the unforgettable, the negation of negation.

## 2. The Role of Art

Forgiveness, in turn, requires a transformation of memory, from memory as affection into memory as reflective recognition, from *pathos* to *logos*. Forgiveness requires the belief in the power of reflection and speculation over the irreparable. And the most effective means to render possible such transformation is the arts: monument, film, theatre, painting, novel, poem, etc. Through its capability of touching the heart, the soul and imagination, art has the potential to expose the irreducible equivocality of negative memory, and at the same time to transcend the pain as well as to transform its destructive forces; it is capable of interweaving, in a recuperative and re-creating manner, the burden of the past, the attention to the

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 503-5.

<sup>3</sup> For Ricoeur, it is 'equivocal' in the sense that there is no superior point of view from which one could perceive the common source of destruction and of construction. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 503.

present, and the expectation of the future. Art brings the past into gestures of inauguration, as in rituals of initiation, for the sake of a new beginning, a new way of looking at things. It is no coincidence that in this case the term 'memory' or 'forgetting' is often related to the word 'art' as in the terms of *ars memoriae* and *ars obliuionis*.

In this context, however, art is neither simply concerned with skill (*ars, tékhnê*), nor merely with beauty, but rather, with 'creation', creating a new perception (*poiesis, aisthesis*); or even further, it is concerned more with 'truth', be it in the Kantian sense of the 'sublime', in the Psychoanalytic sense of the 'subliminal', or even better, in the Heideggerian sense of *aléthein*, that is, truth as the disclosure or the openness of new possibilities of meaning and of being in the world: truth as the lighting and concealing of beings.<sup>4</sup> Art is the "setting-itself-into-work of truth", the creative preserving of truth. Creative in that it brings the unsayable or the unthinkable into being, and simultaneously re-creates what is ordinary, defamiliarizes what is familiar, and in so doing transforms our accustomed ties to the world, hence the opening up of new possibilities of looking at things.<sup>5</sup>

To see whether or not art today is still capable of accomplishing the mission of revealing such truth, however, we have to consider first some significant changes in the world of contemporary art. The striking phenomena, among other things, are the contemporary tendency of art to eliminate its stasis and object-centred character in favor of interactive process, its tendency to dissolve itself in the banality of life, and its excessive obsession with violence, pain, terror, and *thanatos* in general. While this has returned art to its primal habitat, it also requires new modes of appreciation.

<sup>4</sup> See Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" in David F. Krell, (ed), *Martin Heidegger, Basic Writings*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, 184.

<sup>5</sup> This is the 'poetic' character of all the arts, which, like 'naming' by language, it bestows, grounds and sets up a new beginning of being in the world. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," 186.

### 3. Art Today

Today, when we come to the contemporary practices and experiences of the arts, our initial fascination often turns into bafflement, for the arts confront us with a disconcerting array of materials and perceptual activities. Traditional aesthetic theory seems at loss in front of the works of art with new materials, such as plastics, acrylics, gas, chemical ingredients, telepathic power, holographic images; electronically produced sounds; novels and plays without plots, and so on and so forth. And even basic distinctions within the arts fail to hold, for we are no longer able to draw the line between design, decoration, illustration, and fine art, or let us say, between musical sound and noise. Art seems no longer content with its special venues and discrete forms, but intrudes on building walls, subway stations and city streets. The perceptual modalities required for the appreciation of art have also changed and have broken out of conventional patterns. At times we have to enter into the space of the art work, as in environmental sculpture; contribute to its process, as in interactive theatre, installation or performance-art, etc. This involvement with the art objects and in the aesthetic processes, in turn, suggests a participatory attention or 'aesthetic engagement' in the place of the traditional account of 'disinterestedness'.<sup>6</sup> The enlargement of aesthetic sensibility has produced the deliberate elimination of perceptual distance between the artist, the work and the viewer. Henceforth art becomes more a process of creative interplay rather than a stasis.

But the more significant change is the integration of art and life in general, especially in the usage of the materials of everyday life. The music of John cage uses sounds of all sorts and considered any kind of noise as musical material. There are Happenings or Performance-art which deliberately draw their themes and materials from the

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<sup>6</sup> 'Aesthetic Engagement' is the term coined by Arnold Berleant in his effort to redefine 'Aesthetics' in terms of contemporary phenomena of the arts. See, Arnold Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004, 9.

ongoing course of ordinary life. 'One could view everyday life itself as theatre' says Cage. Pop art plays with the intimate relation between art and life. Robert Rauschenberg denies, for example, any division between what he calls 'Sacred Art' and 'Profane Life' and insists on working 'in the gap between the two'. Indeed, as he once remarked, 'There is no reason not to consider the world one gigantic painting'. Theatre, too, has joined the other arts here. Everything is a fitting subject, and in the most candid, graphic terms, from race relations to homosexuality, deformity, and the sex act. The distancing logic of a plot has receded and in its place the focus is on the ordinary details of life that we never trouble to notice, such as the series of movements by which a man sits in a chair, or a woman handles a cup or moves her lips, etc. All this illustrates what has become a motif in the twentieth-century art: a deliberate dethroning of art and its reintegration into the course of normal human activity.

Thus, the world of contemporary art has been characterized by the extension of the art object, the intensification of appreciative experience, the enlargement of art to include the total environment.<sup>7</sup> Corollary to this is the significant shift of focus from objects to process and awareness. What counts in art today is not the object in itself. The object may be absorbed into the totality of the aesthetic field or even 'disappear', in the case of 'non-object' art, like conceptual art or social project. The art object is a means, an instrument, for the heightening of perceptual awareness and the intensification of experience. The object can even be anything. This may sound like a radical upheaval from the point of view of conventional aesthetics, but this new development is perhaps simply a return to its origin. For art in its earliest meanings, as we can still find particularly in pre-modern societies, was neither the cultivated fineness of high civilization nor a matter of disinterested contemplation on a particular works of a genius, but simply the shaping, the joining together, and

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Berleant sees this as stages of evolution of awareness, which I take simply as different characters with no distinct period or stage. Cfr. Arnold Berleant, *Rethinking Aesthetics*, 111.

the celebration, of things, for the sake of infusing human feeling, imagination and meaning into them. It is a sort of multiplication and proliferation of human soul in various activities; sundry modes of incarnating the spirit in the world of things. It is a matter of sensitivity to the qualitative shape of human experience in their surrounding world, but also of various efforts to re-create the world in accordance with human aspirations. This explains why in the pre-modern life, as it is also now, the arts include any practices of creative human activity, such as festivals, crafts, ceremonies and rituals, even the culinary arts, the art of gardening, the art of flower arranging, etc. It is not without reason if today we still retain this general meaning of 'art' in the terms such as the art of conversation, the art of management, the art of politics, etc.

Indeed art has no longer any frame or distinct boundaries, for now it encompasses the whole range of human activities. While it might look like a degradation of aesthetics, it may precisely indicate the opposite: the radicalization of aesthetics, the aestheticization of life and environment. In this kind of art, it seems that the traditional key-concepts such as beauty, the sublime, contemplation, technical ingenuity, or formal configuration are no more central. Perhaps what is essential in art today is precisely its 'poetic' character, poetic in the sense of 'making' and 'creating' life itself. For sure here 'making' in the sense of 'craftsmanship' is retained, even extended and broadened, but what counts even more is creative making in its deeper sense: that the formless experience is given a form, the unsayable is articulated, the imaginable is made conscious, the conscious is made perceivable and tangible. And equally essential is the converse: the visible is set in the invisible, what is tangible and seen is connected to the untouchable and the ungraspable. This surely echoes the basic thoughts of Heidegger, but also in line with John Dewey's emphasis on the centrality of experience in the appreciation of art.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York: Perigee Books, 1934, Ch. II & XIV.

#### 4. Art and Negative Experience

Notwithstanding its positive side, taken at its face value indeed the art of the twentieth century may well show a serious degradation in that it is so much characterized by terror, cruelty, brutality, perversion, folly, void, necrophilia or thanatophilia, and includes all kinds of abjections. Just take for example, the actionism of Rudolf Schwarzkögler who cut his penis to death; self-destruction of Paul Celan, Chris Burden or Mark Rothko; theatre of cruelty of Artaud; the suspension of the pain of living of Stelarc's body-art; or, more recently, the exhibit of 200 human corpses by Günther von Hagens, to name only a few of them. In this sense, contemporary art is undoubtedly the art of negative experience par excellence. In its 'decomposition' or 'dematerialization', art derives its power not from a sense of unity, but from the intimation of the fragmentary, the broken. Rather than suggesting wholeness or redemption, it represents the breach itself, the ongoing need for reconciliation and forgiveness, while at the same time claiming its impossibility and becoming emblematic of its sufferings. Art-work becomes a token of the absence of meaning, of a void; the void made palpable.

All this negativity, however, cannot be attributed exclusively to the arts, for the art-world is itself the expression of the broader cultural body, albeit it also feeds back into and affects the culture, in subtle ways. Therefore, when we talk of contemporary art, what is important, yet often neglected, is contemporary cultural symptoms.

In fact the cultural atmosphere at the end of the second millennium was marked by depression, desacralization of life and human body, and disenchantment of the modern secular world, due to the absurdity of two World Wars. Modern transactions of meaning and value had also resulted in the invalidation of traditional frames of symbol, hence the loss of symbols, which, in turn, has generated the difficulty in articulating profound existential experiences. The extremity of art correlates also with the praxis of extreme sciences, that -like extreme sports- were striving some pointless experimentations transgressing the limit, by creating a life genetically programmed and



producing abnormal chimera of all kinds. The shock of images, the meaninglessness of words, the overexposure of obscenity and folly in the art world were basically also analogous to the desensitization by the media that was exploiting the 'spectacle of abjection' or 'reality show', with its fake documents and conjuring tricks, simply in order to gain high ratings.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, our problem today is not concerned simply with the memory of certain negative experiences, but rather, with the whole general mode of existence of the past to the present, which seems to be severely saturated with negativity. Today the situation is even exacerbated by the production of fear, contradictory certainty and intolerance toward differences. Hence there exist terrorism, solidification of identity, paranoia, xenophobia, and genocide. Nevertheless, art does not simply express the negativity, that is, the void, the chaos, or the spiritual blindness of the socio-cultural plight. It may serve also as a diagnostic tool for identifying the disease; a process of intensifying and heightening our perceptual awareness of the crises; a necessary visualization of the critical interface between body, mind and soul; a process of integrating the dark side -the shadow- into human psyche; and an essential mapping of the extremes of human desire and consciousness. Art renders palpable the ugliness, the meanness, the unbearableness of life, and this, in turn, will open the possibility to see what ultimately is more desirable, the deeper mystery of soul, the new and different possibilities of existence, what we usually call 'peace'.

## 5. Art, Forgiveness and Peace

Whatever it may mean, 'peace' can be taken as a sort of umbrella term for anything emancipatory, for any expectation of a better future, for more meaningful and more desirable quality of coexistence with

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<sup>9</sup> For more insight into the correlation between the arts and the modern cultural plight see Paul Virillio, *Art and Fear*, Trans. Julie Rose, London: Continuum, 2003, 50-55.

the 'other'. When negativity is not mere memory of the past, but rather, the general human condition of today, then the focus should be the expectation of the future, while the agent is anonymous, a matter of complex web of interrelationship in which the whole human race are involved and take part. In this context 'forgiveness' would mean 'negation of the negation' in the sense of, first, seeing the negativity as the clue toward what is more desirable, which otherwise remains unknown; second, negating the impossibility for us to be the perpetrator, and recognizing the possibility that the ultimate root of the negativity may be our very selves; each of us is the agent, not the victim. And here art plays double role. First, by means of its intimacy with negativity, the art discloses this truth of human illusions, sufferings and dreams, somehow that they can be personally recognized, in somatic, cognitive, imaginative or even spiritual way. Second, the integration of art with the daily life returns the poetics of the ephemeral, the sensibility to see further beyond banality, the celebration of ever new beginning, the courage to recreate one's own life in accordance with higher ideal. And thereby art becomes again the procreation of human soul in their sundry activities. Yet, when all is said, one still wonders whether without beauty and transcendence, art will really be able to help humans transcend their own trap or reach the desired 'peace'.