

Paper proposal

European Society for Aesthetics Conference 2010, University of Udine, Italy

After the “Death of Art”: Is there any Life for Aesthetics?

Keywords: aesthetics, aesthetic doctrine, death of art, eschatological rhetoric, philosophy

In a recent book entitled *Adieu à l'esthétique*, Jean-Marie Schaeffer claims that the belief or hope in the renaissance of an aesthetic doctrine has a deceptive character, despite the increasing debates and philosophical considerations on aesthetics, due mainly to the continuous association between aesthetics and art, by which aesthetic and artistic dimensions are identified and reduced to one other (Schaeffer 2000). Moreover, a correlation was established between the end of philosophical aesthetics and the “death of art”, seen as symmetrical aspects of a general situation described as the age of the end of metaphysics and of history (Vattimo 1985). Is this an apocalyptic diagnosis, a mere millenarian lament, or a genuine fear raised by the upheavals in the arts, philosophy and politics of the past century? Would be this the end of any aesthetic discourse or there is some place or life for aesthetics after the “death of art”? Which discursive form could this take in the latter case?

In order to answer these questions, the paper traces back the history of the topic of “death of art” attempting to clarify its relation to the aesthetic discourse, by exploring the different discursive strategies it implies and explaining the reasons for various theoreticians and artists have embraced it.

1. *The “death of art”: a trans-historical topic*

Alongside with the frequently proclaimed end of metaphysics, the “end” or “death of art” has been a concern for philosophers by the end of the millennium. One of the most famous views is that of Arthur Danto, first formulated in a 1984 essay called “The End of Art”, later developed in his book *After the End of Art* (1997). However, he was not referring to the end of art practice (people still make art) but like the art historian Hans Belting (1983), to the end of a certain story of art. According to Danto, “...the master narrative of the history of art is that there is an era of imitation, followed by an era of ideology, followed by our post-historical era in which, with qualification, anything goes” (Danto 1997). What is drawing to an end is the meta-narrative of the (art) linear progress, thus opening a post-historical age when art reaches the end of its philosophical investigation and is liberated.

The first claim of this paper is that the theme/fear of the ending of art, although current in the philosophical debates of past decades, is not a recent one but is a *topos* of a trans-historic eschatological rhetoric. The thesis of death of art in Vattimo's *La fine della modernità* (1985), which takes the figures of the "utopia of reintegration", "kitsch" and "silence", is a continuation of the questioning of art's destiny re-opened by Heidegger. In the seminal essay *Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* he was wondering whether art – in the age of technology and of subjectivity that tend to eliminate the traditional *poiesis* of the fine arts –, is still alive or still is "an essential and necessary means wherein appears the decisive truth for our existence bound to History" (Heidegger 1936/1957). The end of traditional art/painting has also been a familiar slogan of the avant-garde since the 1920s, when some artists proclaimed that "painting has lived its life, and the painter himself is nothing but a prejudice of the past" (Malevich 1920), and is reiterated by the post-war avant-garde, from Conceptual Art, *Arte Povera* and Land Art, to performances and multimedia genres. A similar ethos is expressed by other ideas under which this topic manifested, such as the disappearance of the artwork (literature dissolved in *écriture* or critical meta-discourse) and the "death of the author" as creator of meaning, proclaimed by Roland Barthes (1968) and Michel Foucault (1969). The idea that (fine) art is perishable and replaceable is a recurrent issue not only in the late modernity – from Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1821/1835) who stated that art, "considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past", and thus has come to an end being supplanted by philosophy, to Marx's (1859) end of art as form of illusion/ideology, and Nietzsche's *Aurora* (1881) and *Will to Power* (1901) –, but from the dawns of modernity, in the Renaissance historiography from Filippo Villani chronicles (1381) to Leon Battista Alberti's *Della Pittura* (1436) and Giorgio Vasari's lives of artists (1550/1568), until the theorists of the French Classicism like Roland Fréart de Chambray (1662). Moreover, the topic of art's decadence has also been frequently used in the rhetoric schools of the first century A.D. as proved by Petronius' *Satyricon* (61 A.D.), and has found a master place within the encyclopaedia of Greco-Latin antiquity, *Natural History*, where Pliny the Elder lamented the "eclipse of art" and condemned the degenerate painting of his time, labelled as *ars moriens* (Plinius 77 A.D.)

2. The "death of art": discursive strategies and meanings

This brief archaeological investigation highlighted the recurrent character of the eschatological rhetoric applied to art. A question raises then on the meaning of its "death": is this the disappearance of art traditional forms, as proclaimed by successive avant-garde movements or the dissolution recently announced of the progressive ethos of avant-garde itself?

The second claim of this paper is that the eschatological rhetoric, despite its trans-historic character, has different stakes and meanings according to the nature and aims attributed to art, as well as to the related theory of history. The various proclamations of the “death of art” depend on the aesthetic and temporal models underlying them.

The classical model – defined as an aesthetics of perfection based on the belief in a transcendent ideal of beauty related to a cyclic temporal model where progress and decay succeed each other –, gave a specific touch to the topic of “death of art”. The decay of art appears to be the consequence of its infidelity to the ideal it has to match and embody. Proclaiming the “death of art” is justified by the increasing distance between art and ideal, which should be recuperated in order for art to be reborn. Thus, in the classical doctrine, the eschatological rhetoric is but a propedeutics of art resurrection. It is the case with occurrences from Antiquity to Italian Renaissance that had for a central motive “the rebirth of long gone painting”, so that art history looks like a permanent play of death-and-rebirth. Vasari’s biographic exercise, *Vite de’più eccellenti architetti, pittori et scultori italiani*, has been conceived as a salvation from a “second death” thanks to remembrance. After underlining the idea of art decadence in the medieval period, he proclaims Giotto the initiator of the “rebirth” of painting that would culminate with Michelangelo, the artist who re-reached the perfection of art (Vasari 1550/1568). This way, and also using the term *maniera moderna*, Vasari attempted to legitimize the new ideal of beauty promoted by Florentine painting, seen as an overcoming of the old fashioned medieval style and, in the same time, the rediscovery of the true way of painting practiced in Antiquity. It is the same case with French Classicism and the episode of the Quarrel of Ancients and Moderns, where the eschatological rhetoric acquired a supplementary tint, that of contest for authority and artistic supremacy between the Italian modernity, interpreter of Greco-Latin authorities, and the French and Christian one. When Roland Fréart de Chambray, in his *Idée de la perfection de la peinture*, accused in a violent and polemic manner the decay of painting from the perfection it had reached before to the point where just “shadow” or “phantasm” was left of it (Fréart de Chambray 1662), he employed this topic in order to assert the superiority of French art over the Italian art and to ensure its domination. His attempt to define the principles of classic art was also a violent attack against Vasari’s theses, aiming to ensure the artistic pre-eminence of France that should have re-established the perfection of art.

With Hegel too – who has formulated the idea of art as “thing of the past” since the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) revisited in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* given between 1816-1830 – the end of art is inseparable from the dialectic of death-and-rebirth. For Hegel, the

decadence of Great Art firstly occurs as a consequence of its moving away from the ideal and of its incompatibility with the prosaic modern world that, replacing feeling with reflection, positions itself outside the realm of art (Hegel 1821/1835). As compared to the classical model, the novelty comes from the abandoning of the idea of a cyclic repetition in art history and the adoption of an increasingly larger temporal model – that of the becoming of the Spirit. At the deeper level of the absolute Spirit history, the “death” of art appears as a necessary, inevitable fact: the Spirit in its sensible manifestation must accept the negative determination of death as belonging to its own concept and must take the course of progressive disappearing. Hence, art stops being a living form losing the superior position it had within the dialectic of spiritual forms (the sensible expression of absolute Spirit) and human forms (the expression of a people’s spirit). The “death of art” means the end of the Great Art’s destiny that, unfolding in accordance with an inner necessity, fulfilled its essence in history (Hegel 1821/1835). Nevertheless, the ending prophesized by Hegel is not final. On one hand, because the death of art is just a stage in the life of absolute Spirit on its way to a superior form, that is philosophy. On the other hand, this ending of the Great Art marks the beginning of a new art form freed of any necessity: the art as free play of subjectivity, which, at its best, is an art of the present but also of the undying human nature.

The emergence of new aesthetic models and new artistic practices, related to the cultural mutations that occurred in modernity, changed radically the meaning and the stakes of the eschatological rhetoric. On one hand, with the imposition of the linear time model, the place of the ancient aesthetic of perfection has been taken by the aesthetics of immanence and transitory, having for principles “change” and “innovation” and as crucial values the “new” and the “originality”, found on subjectivity and devoid of their transcendence (Călinescu 1987). Thus, the crisis of what the aesthetic tradition used to name with functional terms “delectation” and “knowledge”, as well as of concepts as *mimesis*, “representation”, “beauty”, deepened. The result was the birth of a revolutionary aesthetic of innovation and rupture, defining the 20th century avant-garde, whose aims and values are criticism, negation, political activism, subversion, abstraction, etc. On the other hand, in the artistic practices area, the challenges become increasingly radical: from abandoning the great subject matters and the perspective as a means of organizing the pictorial space to the refusal of representation and even of the artwork as such. Also, the artistic creation, the display of art and its functions became problematic aspects begetting the cult of spontaneity, the refusal of the museum and a focus on the critical and subversive powers of art, whose field of action was to be identified with life itself. The focus has been moved from the ontological and aesthetic dimensions of

art on its critic-subversive dimension, as the practical function of changing life and society substituted the function of revealing the truth about the world or the hedonist function. The new meaning attributed to art and to its relations to its own tradition and to the world can also be explained through the transposition of the millenarian project of the Revolution in the art field. The avant-garde's artistic project has also been shaped by the political utopias: Marxism offered its ideological foundation, even if not always directly but, as with some trends of the post-war avant-garde, through the "aesthetic of negativity" like that of Adorno (1970).

After World War Two, both the ethos of historical avant-garde and its arsenal of artistic procedures were adopted by various neo-avant-garde trends, whose common ground remains the tendency towards breaking the traditional limits and constraints of art. One of this trend's embodiments is the transgression of the canonical genres, such as painting and sculpture, to the benefit of mixed or inter-media genres begotten by the new industrial-informational technologies. The difference lies in the technological leap, "the union between art and technology" (Rosenberg 1972) appearing as one of the present manifestations of the "end of art": history, in the form of technology, seems to condemn painting labelled as an obsolete medium that should be dissolved in the immediacy of mass-media. Another common tendency for most neo-avant-garde movements is that of blurring or suppressing the distinction between art and life, between the aesthetic phenomenon and other phenomena belonging to the personal experience of the artist or of the surrounding world: art's frontiers are shattered either through the mixing with cultural or commercial artefacts or through the identification with works oriented against aesthetic transcendence, such as ready-made, earth-works, actions, and installations. The continuity between the post-war avant-garde and the historical avant-garde movements lies not only in the aspiration of art to fuse with the realities of everyday life but also in the attacks against the "illusion of permanence", to which they oppose the exaltation of the ephemeral nature of artistic production or action, as well as their subversive potential. New post-war movements such as Conceptual Art, *Arte Povera*, Land Art, happening, performance, etc., reinvested art with a critic-subversive role, submitting to avant-garde logics: the artist's action domain is identified with both limitless formal experimentation and social criticism, as art is situated in an antagonist relationship to its own tradition and to society. The radicalization spiral launched at the beginning of the 20th century reaches again its extreme point: the disappearance of the artwork as a permanent object, like in performance, where the execution acquires a value of its own, in Conceptual Art, where the idea is a value as such, or in *Arte Povera*, where any technique producing commodities is refused (for ideological reasons).

In this new aesthetic and ideological context, “the death of art” – announced by the artists themselves – has different echo and stakes as compared to previous occurrences. In the case of historical avant-garde, the eschatological rhetoric has a critic-polemic function, implying the contestation of art’s traditional forms and functions and the overcoming of limits inside which art was traditionally thought. From this perspective, the “death” of art means the dissolution of its traditional forms, either through the disappearance of the border that separates art from life or from non-art, or through the renunciation to the production of objects as artworks. It also means the replacement of art’s traditional functions with the practical task of transforming social reality, as in the case of the Russian avant-garde wherein the proclamation of the death of art, associated with the rhetoric of Revolution (Tarabukin 1923), stands for the end of painting as a form of representation, followed by its dissolution as a creative force in the collective impulse to build the new Communist society. In the case of the post-war avant-garde, when the artistic contestation aims at the market and capitalist system, the eschatological rhetoric gets a new meaning: it implies the refusal to turn art into commodity and to instrumentalize it, that is to put it in the service of the dominant power, that of the technical-industrial and political capitalist systems, or of the consumption society eager to integrate art in its own economical functioning (Argan 1970). The avant-garde practical and discursive *thanatophilia* pertains to a double strategy of extracting art from the correlative processes of commercialization (participation in the production-consumption cycle) and of historicization (integration into the capitalist system). The first strategy consists in the refusal to produce artworks (“commodities”), as a way to avoid the exchange system and make the artistic work irrecoverable for the market; this way, the “death of art” is but the result of the suicidal effort to free it from the spell of consumerism, through the transfer of the artistic operation from the domain of object production to that of action or spectacle. The second strategy, somewhat more subtle, consists in permanently putting art into crisis: the avant-garde artist doesn’t aim anymore at a success that would give him the right to place his works within a determined set of values – that of objects with aesthetic qualities – but, on the contrary, the success means now precisely to render this set problematic and irrecoverable for the power. This lead to the modification of the artwork assessment criteria: art is now evaluated through the capacity to question its own status and its critical, negative, subversive function. This way, the crisis has become the proper status of art, and the “bringing to crisis”, the “questioning” or the “displacement” has become the proper tasks of the artist.

Nonetheless, the changes in the artistic practices in the past decades has led to a new configuration of the artistic field, usually described as sliding from avant-garde to post-avant-

garde: a positioning in the framework of post-modernity dominated by the feeling of the “end of history”, as well as the decline of the avant-garde ethos, in parallel with the exhaustion of the revolutionary ideology and the ideology of progress. “Rebellion” and “refusal” lost their force of fascination, and the dominant trend became the revival, the recuperation of lost traditions, among which the “rebirth” of painting in the 80s and 90s. In this new context, the eschatological rhetoric aims, on the contrary, at the end of avant-garde, understood as exhaustion of the ethos of negativity and permanent refusal, and reconciliation with the public and even the capitalist system.

3. *The crisis of legitimizing discourses: aesthetics versus philosophy of art*

From this point, the third claim of this paper is that the supposed decline of art could find another explanation, being related to the crisis of the legitimating discourse. The idea that underneath the crisis of art hides in fact a crisis of the philosophical discourse upon art is also on stage, even though from two different philosophical perspectives.

It was Heidegger who first established a correlation between metaphysics, aesthetics, and the crisis of art: the latter would find its source in the impasse of modern aesthetics that reduced beauty and artwork to something affecting sensibility, hiding the true essence of art as a privileged means for the truth of Being to put-itself-into-work. Thus, aesthetics – understood as a specific reflection upon beauty and art derived from the metaphysics dominated by the oblivion of Being – would be responsible for the “death” of Great Art or at least for its complete misunderstanding (Heidegger 1936/1957, 1961). On the same path, Vattimo (1985) ascertained the correspondence between the “death of art” and the end of philosophical aesthetics, as symmetrical aspects of the age of the end of metaphysics and of history. According to him, while the first manifestation of the “death of art” – the refusal of aesthetic limitation and its transgression towards practical-political action – was connected to the revolutionary utopia of historical avant-garde, its present manifestations are connected to the impact of technology on the post-war avant-garde: the “utopia of reintegration”, that is the disappearance of art as a specific fact, separated from the rest of human experience; the *kitsch*, i.e. the mass culture made aesthetic by the expansion of mass-media domination; and the “silence”, i.e. the suicide, as a protest, of authentic art. As for the philosophical aesthetics, it came to an end because the emphatic, metaphysic character of its concepts, such as the ideas of artwork as eternal and of values as absolute, derived from the thinking of being in terms of presence, plenitude, perfection, permanence, force, and authority. By refusing this view, the aesthetic discourse opens to the affirmation of both temporal and perishable character of the

artwork, but in a sense unknown to traditional aesthetics, and also opens to a new aesthetic experience, different from the previous “intense” living of values. This new experience is labelled as “abstracted reception” or “declining experience”, as it corresponds to the ontology of decline that is the rethinking of philosophy in the light of a “weak” conception about being (Vattimo 1985).

However, the explanation of present crisis of art through discursive reasons is also consistent with authors who do not affiliate to the heideggerian approach. Schaeffer (1992, 2000) remarks, on the contrary, a crisis of the speculative tradition in the interpretation of art, precisely of its major legitimating myth – the definition of art as ecstatic knowledge or revelation of the absolute truth. The negative consequences of this sacralisation of art were the reduction of beauty to the cognitive dimension (due to its identification with truth), the confusion between descriptive and evaluative approaches, as well as the excessive puritanism following the elimination of the problem of aesthetic pleasure. Furthermore, the speculative tradition would have marked negatively the artistic practice: from the moment it was defined through its content of truth, the art realm stopped being those of the encounter with works and was submitted to an artistic-philosophical discourse placing them in the framework of a strategy of historical intervention. Hence, the speculative historicism would have its share of responsibility for the dead end where some of the artistic activity sectors are now. As for the therapy, Schaeffer looks at the same discursive level. The solution would consist essentially in reorienting the thinking upon art towards an analytic discourse about the artistic facts and recuperating the hedonist dimension of the aesthetic experience. An aesthetic approach of the artworks would enable, at last, the extraction of art from the field of speculative philosophy and, thus, its “healing”.

Conclusion

The question remains whether or not art still needs today a philosophical justification. I would answer that one cannot speak of the irrelevance, the uselessness or even harmfulness of any philosophical approach to art. We have to take note of the exhaustion of speculative discourses that identified art with the revelation of absolute truth, or of revolutionary discourses that displaced its legitimacy from the aesthetic realm to the social-political one because regarding it only in terms of negation and subversion. But it is precisely this exhaustion that opens the way to a philosophical approach set free of metaphysical illusions, of ideological clichés, and open to the real issues of the art practice as well as to the justified concerns of the artists.

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