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The Young Marx between 'the End of Art' and 'the Future of Art'

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ABSTRACT. Although the young Karl Marx does not develop a coherent aesthetic theory, my paper seeks to highlight the influence of the Hegelian “end of art” theory within some of his early writings—namely, in the drafts of his dissertation. I will proceed with the following steps: In the first section I will discuss *a)* the categories of “end of art” and “future of art,” providing *b)* a short sketch of the differences between the Hegelian and Left Hegelian theories. In the second section I will *c)* analyze the distinctive features of the young Marx’s considerations of art. I will show how his aesthetic conceptualization depends, in some respects, on the Hegelian conception, which argues that Greek beauty cannot return in modernity. I also aim to show some differences between Marx’s and Left Hegelians’ theory of art.

In her recent articles on the aesthetics of the Hegelian School, Bernadette Collenberg-Plotnikov (2011, 2014; see also Pepperle 1978) shows that the *differentia specifica* of the Young Hegelians’ aesthetics is a dismissal of the ‘end of art’ theory. This rejection, she argues, coincides with the gradual appearance of a ‘never-to-be-concluded-future of art’ theory. Referring to the *Paris Manuscripts*, Ernst Müller also argues that Marx refuses the ‘end of art’ theory (Müller 2004, p. 261; cf. also Müller 2010). To the best of my knowledge, the only counter to this position can be found in Giuseppe Prestipino, who, while reflecting on the famous utterances in the *German Ideology* about the role of the artist in the communist society, wonders if there is not, rather, a “Marxian version of the ‘end of the art’” (Prestipino 1976, p. 21).¹ Taking advantage of Collenberg-Plotnikov’s and Müller’s

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¹ Prestipino’s query, therefore, is not valid for the ‘young’ Marx. Many scholars correctly stress that the comparison between a ‘young’ Marx and a ‘mature’ one can be put

analysis, I will work to show that, in a certain sense, an 'end of art' theory *does* exist in Marx's earliest work. While I do not argue that the Hegelian theory of the 'end of art,' in all of its structural complexity, can be ascribed to the young Marx, I do contend that some aspects of his early thought can be understood within the Hegelian context and that the theory of the 'end of art' could clarify some of his early writings.²

My paper will proceed in the following steps: *a)* with a discussion of the categories 'end of art' and 'future of art,' which will provide *b)* a short sketch of the differences between Hegelian and Left Hegelian theories, and *c)* an analysis of the distinctive features of the young Marx's considerations of art.

I. The 'Future of Art': The Aesthetics of the Left Hegelian School

Collenberg-Plotnikov traces two paths within Hegelian School aesthetics after the death of Hegel in 1831. Although these two paths align themselves with the concept of a teleological development of art (*teleologische Entwicklung der Kunst*) (Collenberg-Plotnikov 2014, p. 85), the Old Hegelians subjectivise the 'end of art' thesis, deeming crucial aspects such as the creative and the imaginative skills of the artist. The main subject of this *milieu* was the genius conceived of as "a great individual" (Collenberg-Plotnikov 2011, p. 206). According to Collenberg-Plotnikov, Heinrich Gustav Hotho and Friedrich Theodor Vischer belong to this school of thought.³

in doubt on the basis of the new critical edition, *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA2), since it depends on a particular history of reception (Musto 2011, pp. 225-272). Here, then, my use of 'young Marx' refers only to the Marx of his doctoral dissertation and student period. For the new critical edition (MEGA2) cf. Fineschi 2008; Sgrò 2016.

² I wish to thank L. Kreft, V. Marchenkov, S. Bird-Pollan, and P. Stephan for their questions at the ESA Conference, which assisted me in further specifying my thesis. I'm also very grateful to A. Speer, M. Brusotti, A. Le Moli, E. Müller and G. Sgrò for their suggestions and K. Kawar for her careful proofreading of my paper.

³ It is well known that Hotho was also the editor of the Hegel's Aesthetics, which was published between 1835 and 1838. The reworking of the Hegelian lectures into a systematic work, along with Hotho's interpolations, have been recognized by several scholars (cf. Gehtmann-Siefert 2014; Farina & Siani 2014). For this reason, I will cite Hegel 1823 (2007).

The other path is that of Young Hegelians such as Arnold Ruge who emphasize the historicity of art, insisting on its political-teleological function. According to Collenberg-Plotnikov, the Young Hegelians “transform the so-called thesis of the end of the art” (Collenberg-Plotnikov 2011, p. 208), grasping it as a “function of social utopia” (*Ibid.*, p. 213; Collenberg-Plotnikov 2014, p. 96) and radically historicizing the Absolute Spirit. In contrast to this stance, the Hegelian theory of the ‘end of art’ also has a systematic foundation, being one of the forms—with religion and philosophy—through which the Absolute manifests itself; in this sense, art cannot be reduced to historical development. For the Young Hegelians, therefore, art becomes a ‘means for struggle’ against the contradictions of history and the (Prussian) State. The reason for this is that art, itself, expresses the harmonious unity of thought and being Young Hegelians sought to regain in modernity. One of the parameters of aesthetic judgement thus becomes the political content of the artwork (Collenberg-Plotnikov 2011, p. 214),⁴ with the artist serving as the “apostle of the future” (*Apostel der Zukunft*) (Collenberg-Plotnikov 2014, p. 96). Investigating the relationship between art and the philosophy of right in Hegel’s thought, Alberto Siani has argued that art can serve as a dialectical counterweight to the “politicization of each relationship” (Siani 2013, p. 234).⁵ Indeed, art can express the manifold nature of humanity, namely because art, in modernity, is no longer bound up with religion.

It is worth noting that for the Young Hegelians the aesthetic phenomenon becomes not only the *model* of a certain kind of dis-alienated activity of men, but the *task* of intellectuals working against the restoration of the Prussian State (Pepperle 1978, p. 157); the Young Hegelians were convinced that art was an expression of the Absolute in the present and, at the same time, capable of manifesting the Absolute Idea, becoming, for this reason, the *task* of intellectuals. Such a stance contradicts Hegel, who

⁴ Ingrid Pepperle also finds a “dualism of criteria” in the Young Hegelians’ notion of aesthetic judgement. The first criterion is the autonomous aspect of formal harmony and, the second, the engagement in political struggle (cf. Pepperle 1978, p. 158).

⁵ But the manifold nature of humanity does not mean that art can serve the purposes of the political. Rather, it would serve as an answer to this politicization. In modernity, art contributes to the establishment of a dialectical relationship between individuals and the state, because it serves as a “reminder of the individual” (cf. on this topic Siani 2010).

stresses that art is something of the past on the side of its highest possibilities (*Vergangenheitscharakter der Kunst ihrer höchsten Möglichkeit nach*) (cf. Hegel 1823 (2003), pp. 4f.; pp. 189f.). According to Collenberg-Plotnikov, the 'end of art' does not mean that artwork cannot be produced in modernity, but that art is no longer valid, as it was for the Greeks, as a ground for the prescriptive, ethical content of the community, in which the artist was the "master of god" (*Meister des Gottes*) (*Enz* §560); rather, art has, for Hegel, the status of "reflection, that is function of a culture, in which the individual understands itself" (Collenberg-Plotnikov 2014, p. 82).

The main yearbooks—*Hallische Jahrbücher* and *Deutsche Jahrbücher*—in which the Young Hegelians were active at that time, held the subtitle "for science and art" (*für Wissenschaft und Kunst*). The opening of the main article on aesthetics in the *Hallische Jahrbücher* reads:

Die Neue Zeit hat den Frieden des Selbstbewusstseins im poetischen und im freien wissenschaftlichen Geist errungen und mit Enthusiasmus seine Verkündigung begrüßt; aber sie sollte ihn nicht unangefochten und in ungetrübter Selbstgenügsamkeit genießen; es wird vielmehr um des Friedens ein erbitterter Krieg geführt, der immer mehr entbrennt. (Echtermeyer & Ruge 1839 (1995), p. 192)

Although Collenberg-Plotnikov only analyzes Ruge's conception of art, it seems to me that the same analysis could be applied to Bruno Bauer,⁶ who, in 1842, theorized a reconfiguration of the Hegelian Absolute Spirit, situating art on a higher level of the Absolute than religion. On the basis of the concept of the (self-)creative power of self-consciousness, in its dialectical sense, Bauer proposes, in his "Hegel's Doctrine of Religion and Art" (*Hegels Lehre von der Religion und Kunst*) (1842), the "dissolution of religion in art" (*Auflösung der Religion in der Kunst*) through comedy. Art, Bauer stresses,

⁶ Douglas Moggach states: "Bauer's doctrine of universal self-consciousness is deeply aesthetic in inspiration, based on an idea of formative activity in which, subjectively, the beautiful unity of the self is achieved through the transcendence of particular interest, and objectively, sublime and unrelenting struggle is waged to make the outer order accord with the demands of conscious freedom. He opposes the weight of substantiality, or of unreflective historical traditions, to the form-giving and critical power of the self, as the agency of cultural and political transformation" (Moggach 2011, p. 507; Cf. also Moggach 2003).

is an autonomous realm that cannot be subsumed into the heteronomous purposes or “practical interests”—as he writes—of religion (Bauer 1842, p. 107). Nevertheless, since art, in modernity, is not free and reflective, and it is bound by practical reason (Moggach 2011, p. 508), it can be used for political aims. Some months after the publication of Bauer’s aforementioned essay, Ruge writes:

eine neue Form der Tugend, die *öffentliche*, eine neue Form der Kunst, die *historische* ... (*die historische Lyrik* und die *historische Komödie*, welche im Gegensatz zu der Genrekomödie ... seine reellen geschichtlichen Stufen ... auflöst) ... werden wir jetzt schon bei uns entdecken können. (Ruge 1842 (1986), pp. 446f.)

Ruge names Bauer’s *Posaune* (1841) and *Hegels Lehre* (1842) as central works of this new historical genre, which, “regarded as artworks, are historical comedy” (Ruge 1842, p. 757). In spite of the fact that Hegel stresses that although comedy is one of the point of rupture of the classical art, it is humor that pertains to modernity,⁷ Ruge names “historical comedy” as a form that pertains to modernity.

2. The Young Marx Between the ‘End’ and the ‘Future’ of Art

In the most famous of his early works, Marx seems to devote little attention to art or the philosophy of art. What has to be doubted, nevertheless, is an innocent lack of awareness or disinterest with regard to the aesthetic

⁷ The Hegelian theory of comedy could be considered an antecedent to his theory of objective humor (cf. Gehtmann-Siefert 2005). Interestingly, against Hegel’s claim that the ‘not-beautiful’ could appear as an autonomous form of expression within modernity (Hegel 1823 (2007), pp. 168f.; Iannelli 2007; 2014; Collenberg-Plotnikov 2014, p. 84), the Young Hegelians conceive of the ‘not-beautiful’ as a stage to be overcome through artistic and philosophical action (Collenberg-Plotnikov 2011, pp. 208f.). For Hegel, the effect of the radical changes in the paradigms of art that occur within modernity is that art becomes a “formal, subjective ability,” or an “art of appearance” (*Kunst des Scheins*), since “the matter [is] external [*äußerlich*].” In modernity the artist can represent the manifold nature of humanity, since only the “Humanus, the universal humanity” remains interesting (see Hegel 1823 (2007), pp. 169-190).

experience. It is worth noting that Marx deals, again, with Hegelian aesthetics in 1842 while working with Bauer on “Hegels Doctrine of Religion and Art” (*Hegels Lehre von der Religion und Kunst*).⁸ Afterward, he continues to work on the treatise “On Religion and Art,” an article comprehensive enough to be considered a book, though it was never published and is today considered lost.⁹ Although it would be interesting to discuss some issues concerning this essay—I refer, here, to the notes and the letters—, I will focus on the drafts to the Jena dissertation.

To give a brief biographical account, in one of his first poetic works Marx wrote an epigram entitled “On Hegel,” in which he denies Hegelian aesthetics and philosophy. Marx argues that we must move beyond Hegelian aesthetics (MEGA2, I, 1.1, p. 644; MECW, I, p. 577). Nevertheless, it is notable that Marx’s first contact—some years later—with the Hegelians of the so-called *Doktorclub* was rooted in the aesthetic field:

Herr V. Chamisso sent me a very insignificant note in which he informed me ‘he regrets that the Almanac cannot use my contributions because it has already been printed a long time ago’. I swallowed this with vexation. The bookseller Wigand has sent my plan to Dr. Schmidt, publisher of Wunder’s firm that trades in good cheese and bad literature. I enclose his letter; Dr. Schmidt has not yet replied. However, I am by no means abandoning this plan, especially since all the aesthetic celebrities of the Hegelian school have promised their collaboration through the help of university lecturer Bauer, who plays a big role among them, and of my colleague Dr. Rutenberg. (MEGA2, III, 1.1, p. 17; MECW, I, pp. 19f.)

Thus, during his stay in Berlin, Marx declared himself to be a Hegelian (MEGA2, III, 1.1, pp. 9ff.; MECW, I, p. 18). He was “at the point of seeking the idea in the reality itself. If previously the gods had dwelt above the earth, now they became its centre” (MEGA2, III, 1.1, pp. 15f.; MECW, I, p. 18).

Marx’s approval of and accordance with Hegelian philosophy is also attested to, according to Roberto Finelli, in the Jena dissertation on the

⁸ Most scholars now agree that the work was written entirely by Bauer (cf. Tomba 2014, p. 10. Cf. also the debate between Meyer 1916 and Nettelau 1919).

⁹ On this topic cf. Rose 1984.

philosophy of nature in Democritus and Epicurus,¹⁰ where he interprets Greek philosophers within an aesthetic framework. The Greeks, even if they were determined by nature, were the first to “break” the relationship between man and the natural world, creating a spiritual world for men through “the Hephaestan hammer of art”:

The premise of the ancients is the act of nature, that of the moderns the act of the spirit. The struggle of the ancients could only end by the visible heaven, the substantial nexus of life, the force of gravity of political and religious life being shattered, for nature must be split in two for the spirit to be one in itself. The Greeks broke it up with the Hephaestan hammer of art, broke it up in their statues; ... [let] it pass away in smoke in the holy fire of the spirit, and as fighter of the spirit fighting the spirit, not as a solitary apostate fallen from the gravity of Nature, it is universally active and melts the forms which prevent the universal from breaking forth. (MEGA2, IV, I.I, p. 38; MECW, I, p. 431)

Marx stresses that the Eleatics and the Pythagoreans were the expression of ‘substance’ — “living images, living works of art which the people see rising out of itself in plastic greatness” (MEGA2, IV, I.I, p. 41; MECW, I, p. 436) — while Socrates and the Sophists represented the emergence of substance’s subjectivity. Nonetheless, both of them were seen as *sophós*, wise men, “as little like ordinary people as the statues of the Olympic gods; their motion is rest in self, their relation to the people is the same objectivity as their relation to substance” (*Ibid.*). As we have already seen, Marx nevertheless argues that the difference between the ancients and the moderns is the opposition between man and nature in the former and that between man and humanized world, “spirit against spirit,” in the latter. According to Andreas Arndt, however, it would be a mistake to think that Marx ascribes the contradictions of the Young Hegelians to the post-Aristotelian philosophers, because in modernity, both sides—man and world—are spiritualized (Cf. Arndt 2012, p. 21):

¹⁰ In his dissertation, Marx attempts an *inner* critique within the Hegelian history of philosophy, criticizing the judgement of ancient materialistic philosophers and judging Epicurean philosophy as a more developed stage of the Concept with respect to the Democritean one. On this topic, cf. Finelli 2004, Ch. 1. See also the English translation, Finelli 2015.

Das Altertum wurzelte in der Natur, im Substantiellen. Ihre Degradation, ihre Profanierung bezeichnet gründlich den Bruch des substantiellen gediegenen Lebens, die moderne Welt wurzelt im Geist und er kann frei sein anders, die Natur aus sich entlassen. Aber ebenso ist umgekehrt, was bei den Alten Profanierung der Natur war, bei den Modernen Erlösung aus den Fesseln der Glaubensdienshaft und wovon die alte jonische Philosophie wenigstens dem Prinzip nach beginnt, das Göttliche, die Idee der Natur verkörpert zu sehn, dazu muss die moderne rationale Naturanschauung erst aufsteigen.

Antiquity was rooted in nature, in substantiality. Its degradation and profanation means in the main the defeat of substantiality, of solid life; the modern world is rooted in the spirit and it can be free, can release the other, nature, out of itself. But equally, by contrast, what with the ancients was profanation of nature is with the moderns salvation from the shackles of servile faith, and the modern rational outlook on nature must first raise itself to the point from which the ancient Ionian philosophy, in principle at least, begins the point of seeing the divine, the Idea, embodied in nature. (MEGA2, IV, I.1, pp. 29f.; MECW, I, pp. 423f. *Modified translation*¹¹)

Nonetheless, in one of the hardest passages of the *Fifth Notebook* of the so-called *Vorarbeiten* to the Jena dissertation, Marx, while reflecting on the Hegelian School, describes what he terms the “carnival of philosophy” (*Fastnachtszeit der Philosophie*) (MEGA2, IV, I.1, p. 99; MECW, I, p. 491). Philosophy assumes, he affirms, a practical relationship with reality in the nodal points (*Knotenpunkte*) of its history (MEGA2, IV, I.1, p. 99; MECW, I, p. 491), when philosophy itself and the world are totalities and both totalities are separated from one another.¹² Thus, Marx can argue that it is a *historical necessity* that a systematic philosophy wherein thought and being are united should develop, dividing its unity with reality into two poles. It is for this reason that, when a philosophy becomes a totality, the world becomes divided in itself. In Marx’s terms, “the division of the

¹¹ Here, I modify the translation of “Substantialität” from “materiality” to “substantiality.”

¹² For a discussion of the notes (*Anmerkungen*) (MECW, I, pp. 84-87) of the dissertation, which are a reworked version of the *Fifth Notebook*, Cf. Arndt 2012, pp. 21-23.

world is total only when its aspects are totalities” (MEGA2, IV, 1.1, p. 100; MECW, 1, p. 491). Philosophy has to become worldly (*weltlich*) and the world has to become philosophical. Whereas the universality of thought and being vanishes, the development of practical-critical subjectivities—the “transubstantiation into flesh and blood”—follows these “iron epochs,” and only a struggle for a moment of totalization can occur. Art, however, could not constitute the mediation; only a titanic struggle could:

Neither must we forget that the time following such catastrophes is an iron time, happy when characterised by titanic struggles, lamentable when it resembles centuries limping in the wake of great periods in art. These centuries set about moulding in wax, plaster and copper what sprang from Carrara marble like Pallas Athena out of the head of Zeus, the father of the gods. But titanic are the times which follow in the wake of a philosophy total in itself and of its subjective developmental forms, for gigantic is the discord that forms their unity. Thus Rome followed the Stoic, Sceptic and Epicurean philosophy. They are unhappy and iron epochs, for their gods have died and the new goddess still reveals the dark aspect of fate, of pure light or of pure darkness. She still lacks the colours of day. (MEGA2, IV, 1.1, p. 101; MECW, 1, pp. 492f.; My emphasis)

Thus, Marx stresses that art cannot serve as the grounds for a moment of totalization and that modernity is imbued with the political. Art as a mediation of the contradictions of reality cannot serve as a task, because it represents something that does not correspond with philosophical, critical modernity. Rather, philosophical critique has to succeed. Marx ties these statements to a critique of that mythologization of the Absolute, which is rooted in Plato’s philosophy and which he finds to be still active in the Prussian State:

[A]t this point Plato has recourse to the positive interpretation of the Absolute, and its essential form, which has its basis in itself, is myth and allegory. Where the Absolute stands on one side, and limited positive reality on the other, and the positive must all the same be preserved, there this positive becomes the medium through which absolute light shines, the absolute light breaks up into a fabulous play of colours, and the finite, the positive, points to something

other than itself, has in it a soul, to which this husk is an object of wonder; the whole world has become a world of myths. Every shape is a riddle. *This has recurred in recent times, due to the operation of a similar law.*

This positive interpretation of the Absolute and its mythical-allegorical attire is the fountain-head, the heartbeat of the philosophy of transcendence, a transcendence which at the same time has an essential relation to immanence, just as it essentially breaks through the latter. Here we have, of course, a kinship of Platonic philosophy with every positive religion, and primarily with the Christian religion, which is the consummate philosophy of transcendence. (MEGA2, IV, 1.1, pp. 105f.; MECW, I, p. 497; My emphasis)

3. Conclusion

It seems to me that Collenberg-Plotnikov and Müller correctly emphasize the influence of the theory of the 'end of art' within the Young Hegelians' thought. Hegel's aesthetics provided them with a perspective that detached art from religion. Nevertheless, a distance between Hegel and the Young Hegelians exists and can be measured, for example, by Bauer's refusal of religion as a mode of expression of the Absolute. It was this detachment that, in accordance with the Young Hegelian struggle, allowed for the reactivation of art as a *task* of intellectuals involved in political strife. In radically historicizing the Absolute Spirit, they turn art into a means for struggle, entrusting the mediation of political contradictions to art and interpreting their own philosophical activity within a creative, artistic framework. For Young Hegelians, the theory of 'the end of art' thus becomes a theory of 'the future of art.' Against this, the young Marx (in 1839) accepted both the historicization and the detachment of art and religion, but he did not aim to activate art in modernity either as a means for struggle or as a means for the resolution of struggle, considering it, instead, as a form of the Absolute, which it had already overcome. Even though Marx speaks of a "carnival of philosophy" within "iron epochs," suggesting that philosophy could wear other costumes in other times, he seems to argue that, in modernity, philosophy may not wear the costume of art. Within the prosaic conditions of the (pre-)German State, art can only be something

of the past, because only philosophy—that is, the critique and its “titanic struggle”—owns the *task* of mediation.

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