

A Traditional Critique of Humanist Art

by José Segura

This essay was first published in Volume 3 (1999) of the journal, **Sacred Web** (www.sacredweb.com), and is reproduced here with the kind permission of Sacred Web Publishing.

“ Logical and honest materialists are quite ready to admit that the abolition of God brings with it the abolition of art as such. What they will not admit is that such a development must inevitably lead to the abolition of man, to the transformation of man into something subhuman, into a machine, a robot. ”

Hans Sedlmayr

“ True aesthetics is nothing else than the science of forms and its aim must therefore be what is objective and real, not subjectivity as such. Forms, intellections: the whole of traditional art is founded on this correspondence. ”

Frithjof Schuon

Introduction

In this essay we shall talk about art from the standpoint of the *Perennial Philosophy*, the one revitalized in the West by authors like René Guénon, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. To be precise, however, we must say that we are going to talk about art as understood by metaphysical principles in a society whose main artistic productions are in line with postmodernity. This means above all that, if the reader belongs to the postmodern mentality, he will simply reject any view that is anchored in the very premise that characterizes the *Perennial Philosophy*, which is that every activity must be founded or guided by the principles that have been established by Tradition. With Seyyed Hossein Nasr we understand that Tradition means “truths or principles of a divine origin revealed or unveiled to mankind.”¹

In this sense Tradition is synonymous with Revelation. In the West the main source of Revelation is the Bible, a sacred book where we can find a statement about almost anything we need to know. The Bible, however, could be understood as the nucleus to which authors contribute on the basis of knowledge obtained by means of their Intellect. An example of such an author is Meister Eckhart whose *Sermons* are considered to be “an Upanishad of Europe.”² In the *Perennial Philosophy*, the Intellect is the cognitive organ that allows the individual to apprehend in an immediate fashion the principles of the metaphysical plane. In contrast to the superhuman character of the *Perennial Philosophy*, which, on account of the central role played by the Intellect, could be called “intellectualism”, we have “humanism”, which can be defined as the natural inclination of man to rely on his mere rational faculty to obtain knowledge.

Reason in Perspective

“ Reason, then, to the extent that it is artificially divorced from the Intellect, engenders individualism and arbitrariness. ”

Frithjof Schuon

“ What has never been seen hitherto is a civilization built up exclusively upon a purely negative basis, upon what might be termed an absence of principle; it is precisely this absence of principle which endows the modern world with its abnormal character, turning it into a kind of monstrosity. ”

René Guénon

In order to understand the real nature of humanism, which is the basis for modernity and postmodernity, we have to observe it from the point of view of intellectualism, its nearest opposite ground, for in the human plane nothing exists in isolation or without opposition. A period in which we can see humanism clearly emerging against intellectualism is the twelfth century, when the West is considerably well established in the Christian Tradition. And we say “considerably” because, in the West, Tradition has never been free from conflicts, for the simple reason that the natural tendency of mankind is to embrace humanism. And this is so because the normal condition of man is one in which the Intellect is obscured, and that obscurity affects reason, since the latter is a reflection of the former. The obscured reason in turn causes the sensual part of man to be the leading part of the soul, a situation that brings about disorder both in the individual and in society.

Despite this natural disposition of humans to disorder, twelfth century Europe could still listen to the voices of its greatest traditional leaders. Thus St. Bernard could act as an arbiter in political affairs and set forth the rules of the newly established Knights of the Temple, while Hildegard of Bingen could give advice to Pope and king alike. These are voices that arise from the universal knowledge of the Intellect or from inner visions that transcend the humanist’s delight, namely, personality. If we look at art at this particular moment in time we will notice that a work is not signed; if we glance at literature, what we will find are anonymous long poems. Yet, lurking beneath this apparent absence of human interference with the traditional *status quo*, reason is trying to revolt against the Intellect once more. For, if we watch closely what is happening in philosophy, we shall hear the voice of the best representative of the humanists in the heart of traditional Europe, Abelard. What is the problem with Abelard? According to St. Bernard, he “deems himself able by human reason to comprehend God altogether.”³ In a general sense he is convinced that logic is all that man needs to build a philosophical architecture or explanation of things. But, as Etienne Gilson points out:

“ Philosophy cannot be obtained from pure logic.”⁴

Philosophy in fact, if it is traditional in character, is never built by the human power of logical formulae; it rests rather on the assumption that it is the love of a kind of wisdom which, as Seneca declared, is “bestowed by the gods.”⁵

The point we are trying to make is this: If, in the midst of the twelfth century, the best epoch enjoyed by the Christian Tradition in Europe, a philosopher could take logic for a fitting tool to think about God and reality, it was not, as Gilson supposes, because medieval men “became intoxicated with the wine of formal reasoning and the abstract beauty of its laws.”⁶ It was rather because those who were unable to comprehend the *Perennial Philosophy* found in the then rediscovered Aristotelian logic the tool to express their human understanding—

which is an unavoidable misunderstanding—of the traditional philosophy, the philosophy accepted by the majority in those days and therefore the target for any opposition. This argument is crucial because, if correct, points to the very core of our present situation, not only in art, but in any given topic: degeneration.

Everything in modernity is the result of a long process of degeneration of the views that were upheld by those in the medieval world who understood Tradition. The following structure may be proposed for the comprehension of our present situation: generation—degeneration—regeneration. The first proceeds from the Divinity and is actually the establishment of the Primordial Tradition; the second is the inevitable situation created by the imperfect condition of mankind in any given period; and the third is the corrective response of a particular tradition to the degenerate condition brought about by those who try to understand things by their sense-based rational faculties.

According to Albert Borgmann, the main founders of modernity are Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes and John Locke.⁷ But, since these philosophers wrote their seminal works in the seventeenth century, Borgmann does not deem it necessary to explain what exactly is the role of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the rise of modernity. A somehow more comprehensive view is given by Ken Wilber when he says that:

““ Modernity, for historians, refers very loosely to the general period that had its roots in the Renaissance, blossomed with the Enlightenment, and continues in many ways to this day.⁸”

For Stanley J. Grenz:

““ The Renaissance laid the foundation for the modern mentality, but it did not erect the superstructure of modernity. The Renaissance cosmology elevated humankind to the center of the universe, but it did not establish the individual ego as the self-determining center of the world. Renaissance theorists pioneered the scientific method, but they did not reconstruct the pursuit of knowledge in accordance with the scientific vision... Perhaps we could say that the Renaissance was a grandmother of modernity, and the Enlightenment was its true mother.⁹”

If we accept Guénon’s view, these dates are not accurate. The reason for their inaccuracy is that, for judging the birth of modernity, Guénon considers the moment in which a definitive “rupture with tradition” takes place; and that rupture for him starts in the fourteenth century, and not “one or two centuries later.”¹⁰ The rupture is characterized by “individualism”, defined by Guénon as:

““ the denial of any principle superior to the individuality and, as a consequence, the reduction of civilization in all its departments to purely human elements; fundamentally therefore it comes to much the same thing as what was known as “humanism” at the time of the Renaissance.¹¹”

We can say now that the “rupture with tradition”, which, according to Guénon, took place in the fourteenth century and gave birth to the modern era, can be defined as a major form of degeneration. “Major” in that it severely handicapped the effectiveness of the next wave of regeneration. In the fourteenth century regeneration was undertaken by figures of the calibre

of Dante and Meister Eckhart; it was a time when St. Catherine of Siena, like Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century, was able to rebuke Popes if it came to that.

What we have with this kind of “rupture with tradition” which occurred in the fourteenth century, is the end of the traditional civilization in Europe. Henceforth, we can no longer speak of a society which, despite its occasional opponents, is ruled by metaphysical principles, but of the intermittent appearance of traditional authors in the midst of a secular society, just as before we would have spoken of the sporadic appearance of secular authors in the heart of a traditional society. As a consequence of this, the West has lost the sense of norm and can only offer its citizens an abnormal conception of life.

The history of the West from the fifteenth century onward is the ever-growing tendency to eliminate Intelligence altogether, which is supra-individualistic, and to establish rationalism, which is individualistic, as the sole guide for the understanding of human and divine things. Rationalism, however, once established, does not remain for long as the only ruler, for—as pointed out earlier—in the human plane there is nothing capable of existing without opposition. When something assumes protagonism, it automatically enters into relationship with its opposite as well as with its counterparts on other levels. In the case of rationalism, its opposite is intellectualism (the rule of the Intellect), and its counterparts, in the West, are irrationalism (the forces of surrealism and nihilism) and antirationalism (postmodernity). The moment that rationalism takes over the leadership once enjoyed by intellectualism, it has set in motion the composition of a new moving ground for the never-ending battle of reality. This is not determinism. This is the admirable display of the “logical” articulation of the components of reality. As Heraclitus states:

“ One must realize that war is common, and justice strife, and that all things come to be through strife and are (so) ordained.¹² ”

The protagonism of rationalism can only lead to its own overthrow, for sooner or later it will be forced to move toward its underground counterpart: the irrationalism of the so-called subconscious (Goya was already painting from the subconscious before the surrealists). The overthrow of rationalism will also come from the antirationalism of those who, like the postmoderns, deny that there can be any truth, without realizing the contradiction inherent in such an assertion; a denial of the truth does constitute another truth, its erroneous assumption notwithstanding. And finally, the protagonism of rationalism will also be forced to face its never-silenced opponent, intellectualism, the central player of the game, although for the present majority it might not appear to be so.

For the individual who is guided by human reason alone, the subconscious is perceived as that sphere where things move in a chaotic fashion; the truth of the matter, however, is that everything in man has its own kind of logic. In the case of the subconscious we are dealing with a material that Intelligence uses to communicate with the soul; for the most part, this communication is received by the individual during sleep as images of a symbolical logic. Subconscious images, however, can surface at any time, since what makes them possible is the receding of reason to the background of normal human consciousness. The subconscious images depict our spiritual condition with regard to transformation, a program that is always in progress, although we may be unaware of its presence within us. When these images are not understood as messages from Intelligence, they are mainly taken as either pure nonsense or as the reflection of a sickly soul that can be cured by psychotherapy. In fact, though, the therapy that counts cannot be founded on the rational knowledge of man; real help comes

indeed from a knowledge that bypasses the intervention of human reason and thereby challenges our common faculties of comprehension.

The belief that something in the constitution of human beings can be intrinsically alogical is the product of a degenerate conception of man. Degeneration first arises from the humanistic logic of rationalism. Detached from Tradition, the West enters the path of fragmentation where each fragment sees itself as the whole, asserting its primacy based on its own logic which is bound to be self-contradictory. And so it is that the latest modality of rationalism, postmodernism, may appear to be a novelty to many, though in reality it is but a new face for the old individualism. Look carefully at its logic: it negates validity to the universal so that the particular may assume the right that can only belong to the universal. In practical life, this abnormality imposed on Intelligence creates a series of impasses; in the so-called human rights field, for example, the individual's freedom of speech collides with society's right to protect itself from all kinds of dangerous nonsense, those which derive from that very freedom society has granted to the individual. In religion, the impasse consists in giving the individual the right to interpret for himself the Bible, overlooking the fact that an individualistic interpretation is contrary to the universal view that belongs to the Divinity, the inspirer of that book.

The Purpose of Art and the Artist's *Modus Operandi*

“ It is the business of art to grasp the primordial truth, to make the inaudible audible, to enunciate the primordial word, to reproduce the primordial images—or it is not art. ”

Walter Andrae

“ If the artist is to represent the eternal realities, he must have known them as they are. ”

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

The specific impasse that arises from the individual's right to create a work according to his personal understanding of the artistic creation constitutes the very end of art. For without rules that are universally accepted on the basis of metaphysical principles, the work dissolves within the private domain of each person. The problem here is that artistic individualism, or any kind of individualism for that matter, destroys itself by virtue of its own singleness. The reflection of something human on its own imperfect nature creates variations of useless narcissism. It is the universal rule that stimulates the will. It is the common principal ingredient that supplies the roots to the individual. It is indeed on account of the universal that the individual is possible. And in this, in the individual joined to the universal, the will never fails to have purpose and direction.

The end of art is well illustrated in the following statement made by the British painter Roger Bacon in 1963:

“ In my case all painting—and the older I get, the more it becomes so—is an accident. I foresee it and yet I hardly ever carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint. I don't in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are very much better than I could make it do. Perhaps one could say that it's not an accident, because it becomes a selective process what part of the accident one chooses to preserve.¹³ ”

We are witnessing here the justification of accidental “art” by an “artist” who has just confessed that he is not the maker of his own work. All Bacon can do in this conception of art is to select the best part—as it appears to him—of an accidental construction. What is the possible meaning of such a work of art? If none, what is its function? But before that: Can we see that in the face of accidental art these questions cannot be asked? That is because we are faced here with a particular case of impasse. Intelligence never appears brighter than when ignorance tries to show its best nonsensical mechanism. Ignorance has no place to run, for it is Intelligence upside down.

But let us consider a very interesting variation of meaningless art before pursuing the case of Roger Bacon. Let us take Cubism, a school which, according to Herbert Ferber, “fragmented the object in creating the work of art from its parts.”¹⁴ As explained by Jorgé Romero Brest, Cubism aims at abolishing the habit of presenting images in perspective, so that painting becomes a matter of intersections of planes within a sort of anti-perspective. Painting here is an interplay of forms intent at suggesting a relative independence from their naturalistic images.¹⁵ In fact, Picasso himself conceived Cubism as “an art dealing primarily with forms,” and thought that once “a form is realized, it is there to live its own life.”¹⁶ This type of art, together with the general trend of the avant-garde around the two first decades of the twentieth century, prompted the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset to write in 1925 his well-known essay, *The Dehumanization of Art*, in which he states that one of the main characteristics of the art he is analysing is its total lack of transcendence.¹⁷ This would indicate that “form” in modern art, in most cases anyway, is an empty abstraction.

It would probably be in order at this point to connect with Tradition in order for us to realize the degree of degeneration reached by modern art around the first three decades of the twentieth century. We may start by recalling that, as Coomaraswamy points out:

“The purpose of any art, and no less of that highest art of theology, in which all other arts, whether literary or plastic, subsist *per excellentiam*, is to teach, to delight, and above all to move.”¹⁸

In fact, in India art is conceived as a “means of reintegration,”¹⁹ as “a yoga.”²⁰ This of course is not exclusive of any country. Daisetz T. Suzuki reminds us that in Japan:

“Art is studied... not only for art’s sake, but for spiritual enlightenment. If art stops at art and does not lead to something deeper and more fundamental, if, that is to say, art does not become equivalent to something spiritual, the Japanese would not consider it worth learning. Art and religion are closely bound up with one another in the history of Japanese culture.”²¹

According to Marco Pallis, in Tibet, before the arrival of the Communists, the concept of “profane literature was unknown, all books being attached to the sacred interest in some degree or other.” Pallis is convinced that this situation is applicable to any genuine traditional society, whether Eastern or Western.²² Certainly, the view that the content of art is reserved for the sacred seems to be confirmed by the Tibetan language. In effect, the very fact that the term for a sculptor, *lha dzowa*, means “deity-maker”²³ indicates that the designers of the Tibetan language presupposed that the sole image that was there to be made by the sculptor was that of God. The same can be said of painting, since painter, *lha tripa*, which means “divinity scribe,” shows that such an artist was expected to deal exclusively with the graphic representation of divine things.

An important issue which comes to the fore in those Tibetan linguistic examples just cited is that there is reason to believe that language must have been the creation of intellectual man, the man who is in possession of the Intellect and is therefore capable of laying down the proper structure of a given civilization. A traditional language is thus sacred because it has been made not only to express a metaphysical (or spiritual and consequently revealed) message, but also because it possesses a built-in mode of Wisdom. It is like a temple: something made not only to contain the Divinity, but at the same time a construction that is the very (symbolical) reflection of the Divinity. Thus viewed, language (which is itself a work of art) is something that has been rescued from the profane order of the rationalist and placed in the domain of the sacred, where things participate in the divine. Traditional language is divine in the measure that it mirrors the Logos or Word of God. This is crucial for our topic. For painting, or sculpture, or literature, or any activity worthy of mankind, is only—and can only be—saved from falling into the trivial or profane state in which humanism forces it to be, if it is made by Wisdom. This is in fact the *modus operandi* of God himself, as we can see from the Bible: “*Omnia in sapientia fecisti;*”²⁴ literally: “You made everything by wisdom.” If we keep in mind that—traditionally speaking—the maker is an artist and that the maker of anything whatsoever is expected to operate in accord with the basic postulate of Wisdom, we will see why for Tradition, as Coomaraswamy so well put it, “the artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist.”²⁵

The first postulate of the traditional *modus operandi* of any maker is, then, that *whatever the artist makes is to be made by Wisdom*. Now in the traditional system the Wisdom needed for any making can be obtained by two legitimate ways. The first is by means of the Intellect, in which case the maker (the “artist”) apprehends that Wisdom directly, so that it coincides with the existing revealed material that constitutes the doctrinal basis for the society in which he lives—and it will so coincide because this Wisdom is purely universal. The second way is by means of what we can call Understanding, the cognitive organ that allows the individual to apprehend the reflected state of Wisdom in the visible plane of Reality. This type of Wisdom is universal in a very specialized way, because it is constituted by the universal within the particular. What makes it difficult, although not impossible, for someone to totally agree with the material that someone else obtained by equally applying his Understanding to the same subject (material that we shall call here “the understandable”) is the fact that the understander himself belongs to the realm of the particular, and this condition stains the degree of purity with which he apprehends the universal component of any object.

For this reason “the understandable” captured by the understander is subject to corrections that can be made by another person who has developed a higher degree of Understanding. Perfection here can never be attained, since, metaphysically speaking, perfection belongs to the state called *telos* (end), and *telos* is already present in the state known as *arche* (beginning). At this juncture we should point out that the metaphysical plane is that which allows something to be by itself, that is, without the constraints of any kind of opponent, since opposition here exists in a state of conjunction, one that is usually referred to as *coniunctio oppositorum*.

We can say that “the understandable” is captured by the Understanding and converted into a work of art. For the viewer to be able to apprehend the “understandable” material, he has to consider the work as an artistic object that shelters an “understood” reflected principle, just as its creator considered the original natural object as the bearer of the reflected state of the universal. In the traditional system the “understandable” in the work is what the universal is in the physical object: the invisible component of the visible. For, in the physical plane, the

visible is what enables the manifestation of a metaphysical principle. But the way this manifestation crystallizes is in itself a wonder: it hides in the visible by a natural disposition. This is why Heraclitus can say that: “φύσις κρυπτεσθαι φιλει;”²⁶ literally: “*the principle [of things] loves to hide.*” It is for man to love to uncover it.

In this context a traditional work of art cannot fail to be the vehicle of an intellectual or understandable universal. If we now go back to a modern work of art, such as that of Cubism, we can see that we are justified in judging it as a meaningless work, and as such it is merely a profane object, possible only in a society that has lost all sense of the real function of art.

The View from the Humanist Perspective: the Phenomenon as Reality

“ Appearance [phenomenon] leads us astray. ”

Plato

“ ουδεν φαινομενον καλον: (no appearance [phenomenon] is good). ”

St. Ignatius

Let us now see if we can approach our subject from the standpoint of the humanist, because his misunderstanding of things will help us to comprehend the traditional mode of viewing reality. For modern man, Cubism (to stay with our example) is a perfectly logical stage of the development of art. The modern artist sees himself as a legitimate heir of the past. He cannot suspect for a moment that, if we regard the Middle Ages as a period in which Europe embraced Tradition in its Christian version (one which includes, among others, Greco-Roman ingredients), what he takes as a logical development is merely a degeneration.

What complicates matters is that the latest version of humanism, namely postmodernity, has created an individual whose mentality is incapable of distinguishing the tenets of modernity, which he rejects, from the doctrine of *Perennial Philosophy*. The basic claim of postmodernity is that modernity was based on the Cartesian, Newtonian, rational and mechanistic paradigm of reality, one which in addition accepted authority and the universal character of truth. The case against modernity is made on the grounds that the individual believes that

“ you have the self or the subject, on the one hand, and the empirical or sensory world, on the other, and all valid knowledge consists in making *maps* of the empirical world, the single and simple “pregiven” world. And if the map is accurate, if it correctly represents, or corresponds with, the empirical world, then that is “truth.”²⁷ ”

From this description, which is mainly correct, we can easily see that both the conception of reality held by modernity and its epistemology are materialistic and rationalistic. Such a view, however, has nothing to do with the traditional philosophy, the basic premise of which is that the visible world has meaning only when considered as a reflection of its metaphysical model, the only one that is real. The so-called empirical world of the humanist, by itself, is just a “phenomenon,” a word which in the sacred language means “appearance,” that is to say, something which is devoid of that which confers a certain degree of reality on things.

It is extremely important that this point be clear in the mind of the reader, for the concept of “phenomenon” is the basis for understanding the difference between the humanist and the traditionalist *Weltanschauung*. Let us then dwell on this. When a humanist looks at a thing,

what he sees is something physical; for the traditionalist, that same thing is the hidden manifestation of a principle. Based on this, we can say that what the humanist does is to disembowel a thing, to take out the bowels or essential component from a thing, thus rendering it an empty, useless, shell. As such, the thing is now a phantom: it exists in appearance; it is indeed an appearance. But an appearance is that which exists without a substance, that is, without having in itself the very element that functions as the foundation on which its existence is possible. This is an impossible state. This is exactly the state of a phenomenon; the existence that consists in appearing to be while in fact there is no platform on which to stand. The truth is that in actuality there are no such things as phenomena; it is man who creates them as a result of his degenerate condition. It is precisely as phenomena that things can be the subject of physical measurement and analysis; it is actually because things are taken as phenomena that modern science is possible. When a human being is taken as a phenomenon, then we have the chaos that nobody likes and everybody helps to sustain.

If we want to understand the productions of the humanist, we must keep in mind his natural tendency to look at reality as a phenomenon. To be sure, scientists will build a theoretical model of phenomenal reality; but we have to realize that this model has been drawn from the partial study of a totality that can never be embraced by physical instruments, natural or artificial. Any attempt to obtain a total view of the physical plane leads inevitably to the realm of the metaphysical, for the total belongs to the universal, just as the partial pertains to the particular.

For his part, the modern or secular painter will create his work in such a way that it will be more and more in accord with the modern scientific mind, one which sees reality as a phenomenon or a conglomerate of phenomena. It matters little that the phenomenon be depicted in a photographic, a fuzzy, or geometric way; what counts for our analysis is that all of these treat the object as something detached from its metaphysical life-giving support system. Thus, naturalism will emphasize the sensuality of bodies; impressionism will focus on the transitoriness of its subject; and the so-called metaphysical painting will stress the psychological aspect of reality through desolation, the enigmatic and the like, as illustrated by De Chirico's work. With the latter the viewer is easily brought to believe that he is before the "metaphysical" themes of timeless mankind, yet the fact is that De Chirico's paintings are the product of the rational observation of an unbalanced soul. In the traditional anthropology the soul is that middle ground between the Spirit and the body; its destiny, as set forth by the revealed message, being voluntary death, not the damaging display of its pitiful disharmonies.

That a school of painting whose theme is psychological should have been labeled "metaphysical" is a clear example of the gross misuse of language, something that fits very well the state of confusion created by modernity and to which postmodernity, its fierce enemy, is adding its share of misunderstandings.

But let us see now some of the ways in which these two contemporary players (modernity and postmodernity) differ. Nigel Watson tells us that:

““ The modernist architects—like modernist writers and painters in their respective fields—rejected all previous forms and insisted that both traditional and classical forms of architecture should be replaced by buildings based upon rational and universal principles. In practice this meant an emphasis on plain functional design usually in concrete and glass. The building was decontextualized and universalized. ””

Watson goes on to say that, by contrast, postmodern architecture proposes that the new building should fit in its designated surroundings and include a variety of styles in “an ironic and eclectic way,” taking care at the same time to give equal value to the popular and elite components of the whole.²⁸

For Huston Smith modernity is based on three chief presuppositions. The first, which is actually one of doubtful certainty, is that “reality may be personal;” the second is that reality is “ordered;” and the third is that reason is an adequate instrument for recognizing this order in nature’s laws. Against this background, Smith defines the “Postmodern Mind” as “one which, having lost the conviction that reality is personal, has come to question whether it is ordered in a way that man’s reason can lay bare.”²⁹

This of course is too brief and broad a platform, and insufficient to account for the nature of all the phases that modern and postmodern conceptions of art have gone through during the past six hundred years; but it does give a general ideological backdrop which is useful for contrasting humanist art with traditional art. What is certain, though, is that from Leonardo to Picasso the loss of the sapiential content of the work is an ever-increasing fact, although we must allow room for intermittent exceptions, as the case of Blake, for instance, shows.

No doubt a glance at art after 1945 is sufficient to conclude that artists follow their own inclination to produce endless variations of their desire to reach for the extraordinary. But it is the extraordinariness of the ego, which cannot escape the ordinary: the self-expression of the particular. Hence, in his quest for uniqueness, the artist turns to the common longing of the average individual: self-gratification, which is the very opposite of what people want from anybody and has nothing to do with genuine art. We should not be surprised at this. For by now we should have realized that, unlike natural things, the aspiration for human uniqueness is a real phenomenon; it is indeed an illusion that vanishes as one insists on its fulfillment. “The art of our times,” writes Edward Lucie-Smith, “has been more notable for taking existing ideas to extremes than for new inventions.”³⁰ The novelty of any humanist art is a dream, for, whether its mode of representation is naturalistic or abstract, its subject is an imitation of a visual or rational rendering of phenomena. The ego-inflated personality of Michelangelo could only produce the gigantic conceptions that so well reflected the human craving for earthly glory. Likewise the robotization of our present society conditions its best artists to produce machine-like interpretations of reality, best seen in the conceptualized visions of the computer. We are in love with objects. Therefore we become objects; replaceable, disposable, pieces of plastic which have their market. The artist who may be able to doubt his own importance in a society where everybody feels so unique now has this choice: “[to sink himself] in technology; to imitate the procedures of science, and conduct experiments rather than make works of art.”³¹

The most ironic situation arises when the artist thinks that by denouncing the evils of society through a critical representation of them he is helping that society. Obviously he does not realize that a work which represents any negative part of reality, no matter how critical its intention may be, cannot avoid being some part of that same reality, unless the representation contains within itself its opposite. Poison can be used to cure its own effects only in so far as we know how to use it. To illustrate this we can remember that Cervantes wrote his *Don Quixote* to attack the distorted versions of the romances of chivalry that prevailed in his days. Yet he wrote his critique in such a masterful traditional manner that we are still today trying to uncover the perfect antidote that he included in it.

It is a matter of Intelligence. Ignorance can be employed to counteract ignorance if the operation is conducted by Wisdom. Art, literature, or music has no value whatsoever if its productions originate from a disordered mind within a materialistic society. The dangerous situation created by postmodernism is easily missed, for it is highly subtle. We are living in a society where people are satisfied with things they presume can be known without first securing understanding. This is indeed a society of knowers; books are there to prove it; institutions are there to authenticate it. *We have confused knowledge with information.* Information is that knowledge which needs no understanding. It is prefabricated, a ready-made mass of data. In the epistemological field of reality information is indeed the phenomenon that replaces genuine knowledge—with this particularity: that the possessor of phenomenal knowledge has no means of becoming aware of its fraudulent nature.

The postmodern is convinced that he has labored to obtain his knowledge, unaware that all he ever did was to react against modernity, gathering afterwards the broken pieces that issued from their collision. Thus we can say that the phenomenal knowledge of postmodern man emerges from the only position which is possible for a humanist: that of reacting to something which was pre-existing. This is actually the human predicament of any period in history. Man cannot generate knowledge; strictly speaking, generation (in the sense of creation) is the prerogative solely of God. Man-without-God (fallen man) causes something to degenerate by way of reaction, for he cannot act. And his primordial reaction is directed toward the primordial action in place: Revelation and any of its supplementary sources.

Active knowledge (Wisdom, Gnosis or Revelation), being something created *ex nihilo*, that is, something which is not the product of a reaction to a previous body of knowledge in the physical plane, is in fact timeless, changeless, and not susceptible of being reacted against. Active knowledge is thus principal, related to the “first principles” of Tradition; furthermore, it is archaic in all its possible meanings: ancient, primordial, related to the *arche* (principle, beginning, fountain of authority, ultimate foundation). This is a knowledge apprehended by the Intellect, the cognitive organ required by the operations of Intelligence. It is a knowledge which cannot be contradicted because it is founded on that totality which allows none of its constituents to be effective by itself. Intelligence can only be contradicted in appearance by that Ignorance which exists as absence of Wisdom. This is in fact the anatomy of humanistic knowledge; it is made of the absence of that Wisdom which is not missed because the humanist is lacking the organ to perceive the abnormality of his epistemology.

Modern art is the reaction to traditional art. Postmodern art, while being the reaction to modernist positions, does not coincide with the traditional ones for the simple reason that postmodernism is still a humanistic product. From the standpoint of Tradition, postmodernism in general is a convoluted, self-twisted system of ideas, since it is at least a twice-reactive position. This does not preclude postmoderns from stating a number of observations of invaluable merit. But the merit of the observations might very well reside in that they are corrections of a previous mistake made by modernity. Such a correction might still, on the one hand, be within the realm of the incorrect from the traditional point of view. A postmodernist correction, on the other hand, might be truly valid in the measure that it coincides with truth, in which case the correction is not postmodernist at all. If it is a case of true statement, then the matter is *ipso facto* within the boundaries of intellectualism. This is an example of how intellectualism is present in the game as an invisible opponent.

We find an illustration of this in the scientific field of inquiry. Here, modernist science, whose immediate object was the measurement and analysis of phenomenal reality, thought

that reason had found an unshakable explanation of the world. Postmodern science corrected that modernist position from the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1925 Alfred North Whitehead concluded that, on the basis of the discontinuous existence of the electron, “we have to revise all our notions of the ultimate character of material existence.”³² Thus we can see that it is in the spirit of freedom from the limitations of rational thinking that postmodernism proves to be an improvement over the old modernist stance. Yet the improvement is the result of a *quarrel among relatives*; it is still reason arguing with yet another type of reason. Science, whether modern or postmodern, has not ceased to be secular. Reason and its avowed enemies are yet to discover and recognize Intelligence.³³ Is there any sign that this will soon change?

The reason why postmodernism will not change its essential configuration is because it views change and variety as a friendly novelty. Given this viewpoint, change cannot become the instrument of stabilization. This would be a blatant contradiction. But contradicting elements in a distinct antirational system poses no problem to the antirationalist. If this were not so, then the history of mankind would have no degeneration periods. Of course in the rational camp things are no better, for, as Ortega has pointed out, reason does not function in mankind as perfectly as we would like to think³⁴—a problem that was very well known by Aristotle, who declared that by means of our “*ψυχῆς ο νοῦς*” (“the mind of our soul”) we are unable to look directly at those things that manifest themselves most clearly.³⁵ The Sufis make reference to this issue when they warn that, just as the eyes cannot look at the sun, reason is unable to gaze at absolute Reality.³⁶

Basically, humanism has two methodologies: rationalism and antirationalism, irrationalism being the extreme attitude of the latter; each one of these is unconsciously opposed to intellectualism and purposely against the other two. We say “unconsciously” because intellectualism does not exist as such for the three contenders; it is actually considered as nonsense by rationalism, antirationalism and irrationalism, since it cannot be comprehended by mere human reason or even by the normal intuition of the best irrationalism. Intellectualism can only be “understood,” and for that operation we need the Understanding.

The true state of affairs is that the very nature of mere human reason is such that it encompasses what the humanist perceives as being its opposite. The antirationalism of the postmoderns is no less rational than the rationalism of the moderns. A humanist can delude himself by thinking he is outside the field of rationalism just because he disagrees with a large number of its issues. He does not see that his real opposite would be the position he is unfit to comprehend. That is exactly what happens when any type of humanist meets the traditional doctrine.

In the field of art when the surrealist, for example, thinks that by portraying what he takes for absurd imagery of the subconscious he has distanced himself altogether from the rational, he is under his own delusions. For, as we mentioned before, the subconscious images may be incomprehensible for the humanist; in reality, however, they are moved by a logic that is no less comprehensible than that which rules the conscious level of the mind. The irrationalist rejects the rational position because of the latter’s failure to deliver a continuously convincing explanation of things; while the rationalist repudiates any view of reality which he finds difficult to comprehend by the limitations he himself sets on the rational sphere. Thus the two contenders (although the two can be three) are engaged in a game that shows the shortcomings of each as they enter the interplay of the two faces that reason is forced to assume in the field of duality, one that exists for fallen mankind alone. Behind the scene

Intelligence smiles, for she knows that the game, being endless, can only be the product of man's incapacity to view the structure of reality through helpless lens of reason. "Helpless" because reason cannot accept the very explanation that would solve its impasse. Any traditional explanation given to the humanist regarding the correct vision of things will not survive without being misunderstood. A great deal of the teachings of the Bible is dedicated to the correction of the individual who, having entered the path of transformation, is entangled in his incapacity to understand his misunderstood vision of spiritual things.

This is to emphasize that, like any topic of the *Perennial Philosophy*, the traditional doctrine of art, and the critique of humanistic art that emerges from it, are inextricably connected with things which a humanist would not include, were he to give his interpretation of that same theory.

The View from Tradition: a Reality for each Mode of Cognition

“ The thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower. ”

St. Thomas Aquinas

To be a traditional artist is to operate in conformity with the divine model. But before he can do that, he first must have a sound grasp of reality, something that is possible by steps. First he lets Tradition be his guide through the labyrinth that the humanist has created; for this he needs faith. Then he concentrates on the basic task of learning how to apprehend things in such a way as to escape the phenomenal vision of the humanist he himself used to be; for this he will need Understanding.

In Tradition, faith is not belief, if for belief we understand an inclination to accept something on the basis of its seemingly commonsensical content. Faith is a modicum of *logic*, taking that term here as that which participates in the Truth of the Logos, the fountainhead of metaphysical reality and thus the very support of physical things. *Logic* is not then what causes something to be humanly rational, but intellectually rational. In this sense, for the individual who is exercising faith, a modicum of *logic* is composed of reason that is illuminated by the intellectual nature of the traditional doctrine. Hence *faith implies knowledge*. Which is why faith must be something granted from above, or built in, the very degree of Being that exists in correlation with Goodness within a given individual. From the standpoint of faith, Beauty manifests itself already as the splendor of Truth, although only in a minor way. As far as the creative purpose of the traditional artist is concerned, archetypal Beauty is a principle and, as such, it is apprehensible only by the Intellect. But since at this point the artist is lacking that cognitive organ, he has to rely for the time being on his eye of faith.

The exercise of faith produces the Understanding, which increases the *logic* in the cognitive faculty of the individual engaged in the development of undeterminate, unlimited Intelligence. The artist at this level looks at things *logically*, intent on unveiling the principle that underlies the physical aspect of what is. This means that, if you are an understander, when you look at things you do not first see a physical object; you see the particular way a metaphysical principle has found for its best adaptation to the physical aspect of reality. In other words, you base your apprehension on the essential fact that reality is physical *and* metaphysical, and then you can see that the reality that counts is that which comes *through* the physical to the foreground. This mode of cognition makes it possible for you to detect whatever you see as a *hierophany*: a manifestation of the sacred. You have thus entered the sacred dimension

of Nature. Are you a painter by vocation? Then you will endeavor to paint what the eye of your own Understanding is capable of apprehending from the world as a *hierophany*. Are you a sculptor, an architect, a musician, a poet? Then, like the painter, you will do your best to translate the “understandable” (that which your Understanding has captured from the *hierophanic* aspect of physical reality) into a *logical* construction that is going to be, not an addition to the existing chaos produced by the humanist (modernist, postmodernist or otherwise), but an ordered object in tune with Wisdom and apt to create order in those who contemplate it.

It is in this sense that *the traditional artist is an imitator of the Divine Artist*: a creator whose creation is—and can only be—a *κοσμος* (cosmos), a unit so perfectly in harmony with Wisdom as to present itself as an ordered, beautiful enclosure, *autarkic* (*autos-arkes*, that which has in itself the power to assist itself), self-sufficient, since it is built on and by that which is the real foundation: the principle or *arche*.

If we have accepted Nature as the reflected state of the principle, we no longer see the physical as a phenomenon, something devoid of its underlying metaphysical core. Furthermore, and for that very reason, as artists, we cannot take the phenomenon as a model to create our work either. The model has now become the reflected principle, the one that points to the actual metaphysical principle which resides in the divine plane. It is there that the Logos has its dwelling, and there that it found the models to create its Great Work of Art: the Cosmos, we ourselves included. We are just that: God’s handiwork. Which is why we all are (potential) “artists” now and can be real ones once we actualize our potentiality.

To the extent that the traditional artist at the level of Understanding has employed the reflected principle for his work, we can say that he has followed the correct procedure. That procedure has been expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas in this general formula: “*Artifex autem per verbum in intellectu conceptum et per amorem suae voluntatis ad aliquid relatum operatur.*”³⁷ Literally: “Now an artist operates through the Word he has conceived in [and by] his Intellect and through the Love that his Will has directed to something.”

We have capitalized those words that are actually technical terms in the Christian traditional theory of art. Thus Word must be taken as *Verbum* understood as the Latin rendering of *Logos*, the Son, the very stuff and instrument used by God the Father in his capacity as Artist to create his work of art. Note how the *logical* nature of the operation is meant to coincide in God and man. This is the Logos that can only be conceived in and by the Intellect, the organ fit to apprehend and comprehend the things of the metaphysical order. We have introduced here the faculty of Understanding because it is by this cognitive organ that we believe the majority of well-known traditional works of art and literature were produced. There are indeed very few works done by means of the Intellect. The general formula of St. Thomas is valid for both, since the Understanding can be considered as a lesser mode of intellectual apprehension and comprehension. To be sure the capturing of the reflected principle presupposes a modicum of Intelligence. At any rate, art, unless it is a mechanical copy of a phenomenon, is, in the words of Aristotle: “ἐξίς τις μετα λόγου αληθους ποιητικη;”³⁸ literally: “a[n acquired] capacity for making something by means of true reason”—reason [*logos*] here being the term that corresponds to Intelligence in any of its various differentiated states. Hence to make something “by means of true reason” is to produce an “understandable” work of art or literature (Shakespeare’s love poems, for example) or an intellectual work (such as that of Dante, for instance).

Let us now assume that the traditional artist has conceived a particular Word (that is to say, has apprehended a specific reflected principle) from the *hierophanic* aspect of physical reality. We know that that operation has been accomplished by the Understanding. We have to add now the roles that Love and Will play in the artistic activity. For we cannot overlook the fact that, as suggested by St. Thomas, the operation of the Intellect (or of the Understanding) is prompted by its Will to know the principles in order to Love them properly.

Creation is an act of Love emerging from its seat, the Will; but that Love is directed toward the knowledge of what can only be the desired object of the Intellect, the Principles. Now in the case of God, His Love creates, motivated by a willingness to *give* knowledge to His creatures; in the case of man, he creates because he loves to *gain* knowledge from God's creatures.

If we now go back once again to the pure humanist conception of art, as illustrated by the British painter Roger Bacon, we should see more clearly this time why his paintings are the result of degeneration. For, if you remember, Bacon was not even in control of the outcome of his own work. He started with one project only to end up with a chance product. He was lacking the Will to Love his subject, for he was not painting what he had to know: a principle hidden in something viewed as a creature (the name for God's work of art). Bacon's is an empty aesthetic object destined to decorate the wall of a room; an object that will be admired by people who dare not criticize what so-called "experts" praise so much without understanding it, since, in actuality, there is nothing to be understood, no *logical* content to be loved, no hidden principle to uncover; just the personal sensorial and/or rational response provoked by aesthetic phenomena. Of course, there is the history of painting; the complicated explanation of a permanent search for new forms; the linkage with the past in order to destroy any trace of regard for the old or create a novel appreciation for the timeless. These are the phantom explanations of humanistic "aesthetics," a term that accurately defines the main factor governing the modernist and postmodernist conceptions of a work of art, namely, sensation (αισθησις, aisthesis, the faculty of perception proper to the senses). That, technically speaking, aesthetics is meant to signify "philosophy of art" does not change the fact that it is based on a materialistic, rationalistic and antirationalistic understanding of art.

It is by reason subjected to the senses that we see phenomena which are pleasant or unpleasant to the ego; things here are for the sensual gratification of the materialized Soul. It is by Traditional Understanding that we can "understand" things as reflected principles; things are here for helping in the dematerializing of the Soul. It is by the Intellect that the elect apprehend the very principle in itself; Intellection taking place now for the life required by the Spirit.

Rational man cannot avoid being a sensually-oriented individual, for, without the guidance of the Intellect or Tradition, reason turns its attention down to the sensual aspect of life. Thus, it is in its attempt to break with naturalistic painting that Impressionism claims victory over the past by representing the transitoriness of nature in a most sensorial way. It is by a deep desire to provide a new vision of reality that some painters today resort to the sharp lines of geometrical figures in combination with objects; while doing so, however, they are giving you the graphic version of a reality that any computer is able to produce. You are being asked to conform your mode of looking at things to the way a machine processes data through circuits; you are being robotized. Look at an icon now, any one in which the *theotokos* is holding her conception: You are invited to contemplate how the fruit of the Virgin Soul

would look at you if you were the person who had experienced the highest goal of mankind; you are being asked to witness how an authentic human is being divinized.

[1](#) Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (State U of New York P, Albany, 1989) p68.

[2](#) Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (Dover, New York, 1956) p61.

[3](#) St. Bernard quoted in Charles Homer Haskins', *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Harvard UP, Cambridge, 1971) p258.

[4](#) Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (Scribner, New York, 1937) p29.

[5](#) Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic* (Penguin, Middlesex, 1969) p162.

[6](#) Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, op. cit. p31.

[7](#) Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (U of Chicago P, Chicago, 1992) p22.

[8](#) Ken Wilber, *The Marriage of Sense and Soul* (Random House, New York, 1998) p41.

[9](#) Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996) p60.

[10](#) René Guénon, *Crisis of the Modern World* (Luzac, London, 1975) p56.

[11](#) René Guénon, *ibid.* p51.

[12](#) Heraclitus, *Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary* (U of Toronto P, Toronto, 1991) p49.

[13](#) Francis Bacon in Herschel B. Chipp's *Theories of Modern Art* (U of California P, Los Angeles, 1968) p621

[14](#) Herbert Feber in Herschel B. Chipp's *Theories of Modern Art*, *ibid.* p554.

[15](#) Jorgé Romero Brest, *Que es el cubismo* (Columba, Buenos Aires, 1961) pp13-17.

[16](#) Picasso in Herbert Read's *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (Praeger, New York, 1974) p78.

[17](#) José Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanizacion del arte* (Revista de Occidente, Madrid, 1970) p27.

[18](#) Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers:2 Metaphysics* (Princeton UP, Princeton,1977) p37.

[19](#) Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers:1 Traditional Art and Symbolism* (Princeton UP, Princeton, 1977) p145.

[20](#) Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By* (Bantam, New York, 1972) p109.

[21](#) Daisetz T. Suzuki, "Foreword" in Gustie L. Herrigel's *Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement* (Routledge and Kegan, London, 1960) ppixiii-xiv.

[22](#) Marco Pallis, "Living One's Karma" in Jacob Needelman's *The Sword of Gnosis* (Penguin, Baltimore, 1974) p270.

[23](#) Glenn H. Mullin and Andy Weber, *The Mystical Arts of Tibet* (Longstreet P, Atlanta, 1996) p59.

[24](#) Ps. 103:24.

[25](#) Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, op. cit. p64.

[26](#) Heraclitus, "The Fragments," in Charles H. Kahn's *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1981) p32.

[27](#) Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything* (Shambhala, Boston, 1996) p59.

[28](#) Nigel Watson, "Postmodernism and Lifestyles (or :You are What you Buy)" in Stuart Sim's *Postmodern Thought* (Icon Books, Cambridge, 1998) p61.

[29](#) Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-modern Mind* (Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, 1989) p6-7.

[30](#) Edward Lucie-Smith, *Movements in Art since 1945* (Thames and Hudson, New York, 1985) p8.

[31](#) *ibid.*

[32](#) Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Free Press: New York, 1967) p35.

[33](#) Someone could object that science concerns itself with the material world, not with the metaphysical realm, and that, consequently, the present quarrel is not called for. But the fact is that that is not the case. The scientific view of the material world is either applied to the understanding of the metaphysical reality (scientism) or is the only one possible on account of the validity blindly granted to scientific knowledge (materialism). There is nothing wrong with science if it stays where its place is: the rational or antirational consideration of the phenomena created by the humanist.

[34](#) Jose Ortega y Gasset, *La idea de principio en Leibniz.- II* (Revista de Occidente, Madrid, 1967) p179.

[35](#) Aristotle, *Metaphysics I-X* (Harvard UP, London, 1989) p84.

[36](#) Toshihiko Izutsu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things. Essays in Islamic Mystical Philosophy* (White Cloud P, Ashland, 1994) p9.

[37](#) St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I a, 45, 6.

[38](#) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Harvard UP, London, 1990) p334.

© Sacred Web

Republished with permission

The Matheson Trust