

THE POWER OF ART

In February this year I took part in a conference for university teachers in the Netherlands. The main issue at this conference was the following: Is it important that our students, the future teachers have standards and values? If so, is it our responsibility that they learn them? And in that case: how? How can art help us?

Art is mimesis, I think, or imitation: something is always displayed, even if it may be abstract or a phantasy. The urge to imitate is inborn in man's nature from childhood on, Aristotle writes in his *Poetic*. This applies to language, but also behaviour. When imitating, art must show us things the way they are *or* the way they should be, according to Aristotle. (Aristotle 1982, p. 85ff.; 1460b-1461a) Does it matter, then, if we show the good and beautiful, or the opposite? As the poet Robert Armstrong correctly notes: "Art may imitate life, but life imitates television." A French motion picture that was shown in Mexico City explained in great detail how to rob a jewellery store. It had to be withdrawn because it was so instructive that it quadrupled the rate of local robberies.

Plato would not have allowed that: We should not show any examples of bad behaviour, not in our life, and not through art, but force the poets to describe the good manners, or else cease to make poetry amongst us, he says. We should also control the other artists, even the musicians. (Plato 1982, p. 182f.; 401b-401c) The social responsibility is in the foreground, not the individual pleasure. This makes him very unpopular in our consumer society.

In his opinion, rhythm and melody penetrate the soul and make so strong an impression that if someone is well educated, he will see what is good and what is not as it should be, he will praise the good and beautiful and hate the bad and ugly, in all areas of life. This is the aim of education in music. Plato calls it "the love of beauty": for him the beautiful, the good and the true are one. (Plato 1982, p. 183ff.; 401b-403c)

This is the starting point in the history of aesthetics or art philosophy. Aesthetics is a broader term than philosophy of art, since it studies nature as well. For Hegel beauty made by man was far more important than the beauty of nature. Besides, beauty in nature was only a reflex of beauty in art. (Hegel 1964, p. 20f.) The Alps were nasty and ugly until the romantics

painted and described them in words and music. And Oscar Wilde claimed that the fog in London simply was not there until the artists showed it. (Wilde 1998, p. 45f.) If this is correct, art has an immense responsibility: dangerous, but with incredible possibilities.

This is why aesthetic knowledge is so important, especially in the narrower sense, as philosophy of art. For the study of art must be a study of humanity: it should not focus on causal explanations like the (natural) sciences, but rather on intentional explanations. This can teach us something about man, to understand more fully the nature of human reality, not considering the history of forms, but of the minds behind the forms.

Therefore musical understanding is for me the central goal of music education. An art work should be approached for insight rather than information. This corresponds to the difference between the *explaining* (*erklären*) of the natural sciences and the *understanding* (*verstehen*) of the humanities. A work of art tells you something, but, as Gadamer underlines, only if you want to be told. (Grondin 1997, s. 117.) It is our plain duty to make our students want to be told something, and then let them know how this process can take place.

Thus music education should use works that are capable of bringing this insight. And the teaching must be so arranged that aesthetic experience is central. Already Aristotle noted that some music was suitable for leisure, whereas other music must be used for education. (Aristotle 1989, p. 386ff.; 1341b-1342b) But I am afraid this is very far away from our reality today, at least in Norway.

In the works of art we find certain affects expressed. This can give us a better insight in different ways of experience, as well as increasing the ability of feeling ourselves in the place of others, and thus be a source of understanding each other better. However, it is not enough to catalogue and describe these affects and the rhetorical gestures. We need to know why they were used in just that way. Behind the gesture we must seek man in his spiritual context.

This increasing of the ability to put oneself in the place of others is an important effect of art. The word *empathy* was used especially by the romantic aesthetic philosophers and artists.

Rousseau, himself a philosopher, admits that philosophy isolates man. (Rousseau 1979, p. 1-7.) This is the dark side of enlightenment. The poet Hölderlin, on the other hand, states his visions and ideals clearly and beautifully: "To be at one with everything, that is the divine life, that is man's heaven. To be one with all that lives, in blessed self-denial to return

to nature's all, that is the peak of all thoughts and pleasures, that is the sacred mountain, the place of eternal rest, and all thoughts disappear against the impression of the eternal one world." (Hölderlin 1995, p. 9.)

The romantics are all longing for, striving towards this unity. Their art is supposed to help *us*, too, by showing us, with the words of Aristotle, things the way they should be. The true and genuine romanticism teaches us to feel at one with the world, with nature, with all mankind, with God. It also teaches us renunciation: to give oneself up.

As a reaction against romanticism, however, Brecht introduced *Verfremdung*, aesthetic distance. He wanted to replace the magical theatre with the scientific. Has he succeeded more than he ever expected? Has magic completely left art?

The ancient cult drama, which was art *per se*, and included all kinds of art, visual, literal, musical and dramatic, was explicitly meant to have influence on the world, it was believed to have powers to change, to recreate, to clean, to rebuild. This aspect we seem to have lost.

Hegel writes in his lectures on aesthetics: Art is for us "a thing of the past". It is no longer understood as a presentation of the divine in the way it had been in the Greek world, in their temples and in sculpture. Christianity had a more profound insight into the transcendence of God: it could no longer be adequately expressed within the visual language of art or the poetic language. The work of art was no longer the presence of the divine. (Hegel 1964, p. 30f.)

On the contrary: the slogan "Art for art's sake" turned up. In a small poem used as a foreword in the print of two of his dramas in 1852, the French poet de Musset wrote: "Imagine having got a ticket to the opera. You do not know the piece; perhaps it will make you cry, or maybe laugh. But yawn you probably will – that is the usual thing one does, and time passes by. This may also be the effect of my book. It costs about as much as a ticket. Whether you are dissatisfied or not, close it without repentance. There are many boring plays, and mine you can see without leaving your easy chair." (Hirsbrunner 1981, s. 178f.) This art is completely unpretentious.

Then came modernism: There is no aesthetic value, no beauty. All values are abolished, all means are allowed in order to destroy the old ideals. The music should let us see our naked, ugly self, full of boils. (Zoltai 1978, p. 75.) There should be no pleasant moods, no harmonious connections. Several aestheticians from Eastern Europe taught that only art made by Marxists is good, because only they had the correct understanding of life

and the existence. Schopenhauer had claimed that music expresses the inner nature of the world. (Schopenhauer 1987, bd. I, p. 374.) Many modernists would agree, but of course they think completely different about this inner nature, or they concentrate on describing the exterior ugliness.

In postmodernism, on the other hand, the guiding principle is more or less the aesthetic feelings of what is new and interesting, fascinating and refined, and not boring, worn-out or dull. We are no longer concerned about the contents, only the form, the texture, the material. The symbol (originally a ring or piece of pottery divided in two parts and kept by the owners as a confirmation of their unity) is reduced to a sign that can mean anything you choose. The work of art – a picture for instance – will not tell you anything. We should not even allow it to try, so says the (post)modern philosophy. One composer even closes his grand piano, to make sure he does not express anything, or he lets the pianist just sit there for some minutes without producing a single tone. And a spokesman for the undetermined, the accidental music claims: "There must be coincidence. Otherwise there would be no surprise, and surprise is needed to overcome boredom and monotony." (Ed. Barck, Gente, Paris, Richter 1998, p.311.)

And so Manfred Geier finds that a new form of indifference controls the post-metaphysical thinking and the post-modern feeling. The absurd, the nothingness and the emptiness have lost their semantic power. In their place entertainment, recreation and coolness have entered. The spectator's only fear is that he might miss something. Could it be that the other TV-program is better after all? (Geier 1997, p. 217f; 231.)

When art will no longer have influence upon society, it gives up the social responsibility. The painter Kandinsky complains: "The 'what' in art disappears, the question is of no interest, so we are left with the question of 'how'. This 'how' gets ever more specialized, only the artist himself can understand it, and he then complains that the spectators are not interested." (Kandinsky 1959, p. 32.) But precisely this 'what' is it that confronts man with himself, and thereby decides about art's place in the consciousness of everyone and its relation to society.

In the post-war generation: what did the young people in the Western world miss? Not food and clothes, but values. This is a paradox: in the name of democracy one would give the young people the chance to make their own choices, find their own values, not inheriting our points of view. But they wanted conviction, enthusiasm. So many of them turned to extreme political movements, where they found people who believe in something - without shame.

They wanted, and still want, meaning. With other words: they want contents. Why do we like tragedy? Susanne Langer asks, and answers herself: It gives the vision of a world wholly significant. Which is to say: Art gives meaning to the world. (Cited in Reimer 1970, p. 85.)

This reminds us again of Aristotle: in his *Poetic*: Art is more philosophical than history, because it tells you what *must* happen under given circumstances. (Aristotle 1982, p. 29; 1451a-1451b) And of Hegel, who says: "The work of art shows us the eternal powers that reign in history." (Hegel 1964, p. 29.) We still have much to learn.

Schiller's appeal is clear and strong: "Live with your century, but do not be its product. Give your contemporaries what they need, not what they praise." (Schiller n.y., p. 283.) Discussing the stage as a moral institution, he writes: "What a strengthening of law and religion if they go in alliance with the stage, where there is perception and living simultaneousness. Like visible presentation affects us more powerfully than dead letters and cold stories, just as certain the stage has a deeper and more lasting effect than moral and laws." (Schiller n.y., p. 84f.) And Wagner's words are still valid: In its time of blossom the Greek art was conservative, because it corresponded to society, but now it must be radical, because our society is so far removed from the ideals of art, that art represents a contradiction to the valid consensus. (Wagner 1976, bd. III, p. 28.)

The American composer George Rochberg also underlines art's responsibility for bringing hope and strengthening humanity. It must never get so scientific and technological that this aspect is lost: "Forms of art without any human content, and therefore meaning, are based on the values of machine technology ... How can we reconcile ourselves to a situation where art is unable to offer any hope, being beautiful to contemplate but having no power to affect reality?" (Rochberg 2004, p. 131, 139, 173.)

Schiller explains to us how the artist can bring this hope and thereby affect reality. He sees culture as striving for a state of harmony and peace. Man needs a confirmation that it is possible to realize this idea. Experience does not support this belief, he says, on the contrary, so art's task is to make this idea explicit and realize it in a concrete example. (Schiller n.y., p. 431f.) He is right. For if we lose this belief, we have lost everything.

We learn through the experience of art that things can be seen and felt in different ways. Does this mean that the philosopher Marquard's request that we should have many different convictions, and not just one, is the only solution? (Marquard 1996, p. 132ff.)

Not necessarily. In Lessing's drama "Nathan the wise man" he tells us a parable about a special ring which was owned by a king. This ring had the power of making its owner beloved by God and man, if he trusted in it. Every owner was instructed to give it to the son he liked the most, and this son should – regardless of age – become the new sovereign.

But then it happened that one king loved all his three sons equally much, and could not decide to whom he should give the ring. In fact, he had promised each of them that *he* should have it. He let an artist make two copies of the ring, and so well that nobody could discern the real ring from the copies. Each son got one ring, and as the father died, each of them claimed to be the new king. But it was impossible to tell which ring was the real, true one. Just like, as Nathan puts it, it is impossible to say which faith is the true and real. Of course, these three sons were Christian, Jew and Moslem.

They went to the judge, who said: "The ring makes everyone love you? Well then, whom do the two of you love most?" That one would be in possession of the real ring, for this was supposed to be its effect: to make its owner beloved by everyone. As there is no answer, he exclaims: "What? Everyone loves only himself? Then maybe all rings are false, and the real ring has been lost? Now each of you should try to demonstrate that *his* ring is the real one, by showing us that the power lies in *his* ring, and may meekness, tolerance, friendliness, charity, devotion to God help you. In thousand years you shall come back, to a wiser judge than me. Then we shall get the answer." (Lessing 1990, p. 71ff.)

This aspect is valid not only for religion, but for art as well. There, too, we find different ways of thinking and feeling, different schools and trends, eras and creeds. We should let them all speak to us, express their feelings and their beliefs to us, and try to listen with empathy and sensitivity. Art has no clear, unambiguous answer to the questions and problems of the world. Neither has man. So we shall not risk being one-sided.

In this way, then, art might not any longer be a "thing of the past"; nor a more ornamentation of our otherwise rather boring everyday life, but something that gathers us, challenges us, and tells us, with the famous words of the poet Rilke: *you have to change your life.* (Rilke 1975, bd. II p. 557.)

Works Cited

- Aristotle (1982): *Poetik*, Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Aristotle (1989): *Politik*, Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Barck, K., Gente, P., Paris, H., Richter, S. (1998): (ed.) *Aisthesis: Wahrnehmung heute oder Perspektiven einer anderen Ästhetik*, Leipzig: Reclam, 6. ed.
- Geier, Manfred (1997): *Das Glück der Gleichgültigen: Von der stoischen Seelenruhe zur postmodernen Indifferenz*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.
- Grondin, Jean (1997): (ed.) *Gadamer Lesebuch*, Tübingen: Mohr.
- Hegel, Georg F. W. (1964): *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 4. ed.
- Hirsbrunner, Theo (1981): *Debussy und seine Zeit*, Laaber-Verlag.
- Hölderlin, Friedrich (1995): *Hyperion*, Stuttgart: Reclam.
- Kandinsky, Walter (1959): *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, Bern-Bümpliz: Benteli-Verlag, 6. ed.
- Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim (1990): *Nathan der Weise*, Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag.
- Marquard, Odo (1996): *Apologie des Zufälligen: Philosophische Studien*, Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag.
- Plato (1982): *Der Staat*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 2. ed.
- Reimer, Bennet (1970): *A philosophy of music education*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria (1975): "Archaischer Torso Apollos", in *Sämtliche Werke*, Frankfurt a. M.: Insel Verlag.
- Rochberg, George (2004): *The Aesthetics of Survival*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press (rev. and expanded ed.).
- Rousseau, Jean-Jaques (1979): *Meditations of a Solitary Walker*, London: Penguin Books.
- Schiller, Friedrich von (n.y.): *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden* (Band V: Philosophische Schriften), Essen: Phaidon.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur (1987): *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Stuttgart: Reclam Verlag.
- Wagner, Richard (1976): *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag.
- Wilde, Oscar (1998): *Lyvekunstens forfall*, trans. Morten Claussen, Oslo: Solum. (Orig.: *The Decay of Lying*, London: Osgood, McIlvaine & co 1891.)
- Zoltai, Dénes (1978): *Menschenbild moderner Musik*, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiado.