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**Chosen Topic:** 4 (art)

“Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the damn things is enough.” Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (1976).

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The value of art, its meaning in the world and to the world, poses many questions concerning its essence, what it represents, and what its purpose is. Few can argue that art – here seen to encompass all forms including visual arts, literature, theatre, cinema, music etc. – is essentially an expression of emotion. In order to be considered art, a piece must be seen to express the feelings of the artist in one way or another, and possibly convey these feelings to a larger audience who can empathize through introspection. Problems arise, however, when we begin to ask what is the meaning of art, what *should* be the meaning of art? Does art have a social mandate, or is it merely art for the sake of art? We ask ourselves, is art supposed to represent the world as it is, and if so, with what aim? However, if art is not a copy of the real world, then what is it?

The juxtaposition between truthful representation of the world and representation inspired by emotion seems to be the dividing line between art and the real world in Goodman’s assertion. If we consider an untouched photograph of the Eiffel Tower, and then contrast it with a painting of the Eiffel Tower, what do we see? Obviously both representations depict the same cultural icon, but when viewed side by side in such a way we can possibly see very different ways to experience the same thing. While the photograph shows the tower in the same way that most tourists regard it, surrounded by trees and set against a clear blue sky, the painting perhaps presents us with new shapes, sizes, and a completely different color scheme. In contrast to the photograph, the painting may offer us a new way to look at something which we thought to be familiar with completely new eyes. It may even inspire us to see the world, and ourselves, in a completely new way.

Particularly within the last century, art has become a powerful tool of social critique. Goodman’s statement expresses a rather pessimistic view on the world, and indeed states that art is not a copy of this world but something completely different, and a good thing too. As in the case of the Eiffel Tower, we can clearly see that art is not the same as the real world but rather depicts it through the eye of the individuals, groups, or even nations. Subjectivity is inherent to art, and in this way it differs from what we perceive to be the objective real world. But how can we say that art is completely separate from the real world, when it clearly is a product of its culture and has the power to affect, change, and even destroy this culture? Indeed art has a profound impact, but should it have a purpose? If so, what should this purpose be?

Ernst Fischer identified the purpose of art to be to inspire change in society, and asserted that in order to be truthful, it must represent the world in the way it is, as an incentive for change. Furthermore, he stated that if a civilization is in a state of decay, the art produced in it must also represent this decay. We can see that art can rarely be separated from its historical and

cultural context, and that contemporary art and popular culture inexorably echo the current *Zeitgeist* of the civilization in which it is produced. If we choose to analyze the state of popular culture in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western civilizations, we can see that most mainstream “art” today represents extremely decadent and even nihilistic culture, for what else could reality television such as *Big Brother* represent?

Art is not so much a representation of the actual, real world, but rather a representation of the thoughts and feelings of the people living in that world. When examining today’s popular culture in our societies, we can see that it truthfully depicts the state of mind in which people have found themselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: dependent on other people and nations for economic security but hopelessly divided by our mentality and values, becoming alienated from one another and ourselves and slipping into mundane and trivial nothingness, a feeling of neo-nihilism that discourages us from thinking critically and encourages us merely to accept the *status quo* and become and remain passive consumers. When we compare the 20<sup>th</sup> century art’s representation of the world with that of today’s, we can deduce that we see the world in a very different way than we did decades ago. Much of 20<sup>th</sup> century popular culture had a political mandate that called for change and emphasized a feeling of solidarity. Today such a feeling of solidarity seems to be vanishing and although we are becoming more and more globalized, on the other hand we tend to cling even stronger to the differences that divide us instead of the similarities which unite us.

Art has the immense power to affect the way we see the world and our society. But is it most effective when it represents an ideal world, an apocalyptic world, or the real world? Literature that depicts a potential utopia may give us the incentive to move towards such a state of being, whereas literature depicting potential dystopia may work as a warning for us to avoid letting the world to slip into such cataclysm. However, a strong case for the representation of the real world as it is in order to provoke change can be seen in Brecht’s epic theatre. Through his form of art, Brecht wanted to make it clear to the audience that theatre was not an illusion but a reality that clearly depicts real world as a changing entity. The audience was never to be allowed to forget that they were sitting in a theatre, watching a real play about real people. According to Brecht, this form of epic theatre would ideally result in making the audience see the atrocities committed in the real world and in their everyday lives, and activate them to take action against social injustices. This desired effect was achieved by means of not presenting a solution to the problems presented onstage, but contrarily imposing the responsibility of finding a solution to real life problems on the audience itself. Thus, if we deem art to have a social mandate, we can see that presenting the real world as it is may be very effective indeed in order to reach the desired change and make people realize the decay of their culture and activate them to fight for a better one. In this way, perhaps even *America’s Next Top Model* will one day make people realize the decadence and trivialness of the culture we live in today, and make us seek change at any cost.

When we speak of the power of art in relation to the power of philosophy and the power to invoke change, we see our *interpretation* of the world – rather than an objective representation of the real world – to be able to wield this power. Nietzsche believed in what he called perspectivism, the notion that no objective truth exists, but the closest we can get to say we know something is by examining it from as many perspectives and possible

interpretations as possible, and that a truly wise man can accept the fact that all truths are subjective and should be viewed in that way. This is precisely what art does. Even when it represents the real world, as in Brecht's drama, it represents a *perspective* on the real world, and it can well be argued that we will never come closer to knowing what the real world is than merely examining a range of perspectives and possibilities. Nietzsche believes that this is the way to truth, and, in his own philosophy, the will to power, which is an even more life-defining life force for all living beings than the will to live itself. This will to power, the very essence of life, can be expressed precisely through the act of strong, creative, life-affirming artistry.

In Nietzsche's analysis it is the lack of such creative action that led 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe into a state of nihilism, but even in our modern culture our lack of a creative drive and incentive to do anything has led to the creation of a popular culture that pacifies us into a state of destructive neo-nihilism and alienation from ourselves and one another. The history of art is full of flourishing followed by regression followed by flourishing again: the fall of the Roman Empire led to the reign of one-dimensional medieval art whose main purpose was to amplify the dogma of the Church, but with a new inquiring interest in the world and human nature, the renaissance showed a new flourishing of creative energy. Through these examples we can see that art is indeed not a copy of the real world but a reflection of the minds of the people living in a certain place and time with a certain mentality. The stagnation of contemporary art and popular culture today shows us that as a civilization we have no new direction; no distinct, unifying purpose. Our modern culture, or lack of it, tells us not about the world in itself, but of our place in it. The difference with our culture's present stagnation and that of the past is, however, that we have never before been so succumbed by it, never has it been so much a part of our everyday lifestyle as it is today. We have reached another peak in our development, a peak from which we see no direction in which to continue, no unifying ideal, no common goal. Technological advancement is no longer a means to an end, but on the contrary, *a means in itself with no end*. It is no wonder that most of the popular culture our civilization is capable of producing, the popular culture most of us are succumbed by, represents the stilted, one-dimensional, shallow banality of our modern mentality.

When we are confronted with the question of the meaning of art, we cannot avoid being confronted by the question of the meaning of philosophy itself. Along the lines of Fischer's assessment of the purpose of art, we can also see how Marx crystallized the purpose of philosophy: "Philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." The assumption Marx makes is that philosophy has a social purpose, and it should forget mere interpretations of the real world and strive for the desired change in society. Although Marx would probably not have advocated for changing the world without knowing anything about it, Heidegger explicitly criticized this statement, arguing that the world can never be truly changed by such a purposeful, even artificial, act. On the contrary, cultures, societies and our world are built and maintained by our way of thinking, so in order to change the world; we must ourselves change at a much more fundamental level first in terms of our thinking, our being, and our humanity. Change cannot come from without, it must come from within. In this way we can see how art inspires the incentive to change through representation and understanding of the real world.

Heidegger's argument connects these several contrasting ideals on the purpose of art and philosophy in a way in which we can see them to share a common desire: the discovery of truth. Picasso said, "Art is a lie that brings us closer to truth", and indeed it would seem that through subjective representation of the world, art strives to reach objective truths about the world. By creating and understanding art we do not understand something about the natural world in the way we do by understanding physics, but rather we understand something new about our own lives and the world we live in and create for ourselves. By allowing ourselves to see the world in different ways from the whole range of perspectives, to experience it in new spheres of understanding, we gradually begin to change our own way of thinking, seeing, and experiencing.

What then, can we derive from art? What conclusion can we come to relating to all these notions on what art is, should be, could be and can be? We have established that art is not to be equated with the real world and should not be, for then it would not be art. The power art has, however, as a representation of our perspectives on the world is something truly immense, no matter if it follows a dogmatic social mandate, is a by-product of the creative expression of our will to power, or simply stagnates with no apparent reason or message. All these interpretations, all these perspectives, when seen together, widen our understanding, shape our picture of reality, set us on the path towards truth, and ultimately, give us the incentive, *the urge*, to change ourselves, and the world.