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Gombrich, Danto, and the Question of Artistic Progress

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(Article begins on next page)

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Gombrich, Danto, and the Question of Artistic Progress

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ABSTRACT. The question I am concerned with is the relevance of the notion of progress in the artistic field. Does the notion of artistic progress apply to art and, in the case it does, in what sense and how? In order to answer this question I will discuss Ernst Gombrich and Arthur Danto's view of artistic progress (§§ 2-3). Then, following the objections that the Spanish philosopher Gerard Vilar recently raised against Danto's ideas on the end of art (§ 4), I will suggest a modest view concerning the requirements a theory of artistic progress must satisfy (§ 5).

I. Introduction

In this paper I discuss the idea of “artistic progress”. The explicit question I will deal with is the relevance of the notion of progress in the artistic field. Does the notion of artistic progress apply to art and, in the case it does, in what sense and how?

In this respect at least another question may be raised as to the specific contribution of art to the articulation and the understanding of the concept of progress itself. Here, however, I will deal with this question only implicitly.

In order to reflect on the connection between art and progress I will benefit from Ernst Gombrich and Arthur Danto's view of artistic progress (§§ 2-3). Then, following the objections that the Spanish philosopher Gerard Vilar recently raised against Danto's ideas on the end of art (§ 4), I will briefly present my view on the matter (§ 5).

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2. Gombrich on Artistic Progress

The first part of my talk is a kind of close reading of Ernst Gombrich's book *Ideas of Progress and their Impact on Art* (1971). At the beginning of this book Gombrich claims on the one hand that the idea of progress does not properly apply to art. The reason for this is that art must be genuine and autonomous; so it must not care about past and future. Artworks cannot be placed along a rising line: for example Michelangelo is not better than Giotto; he is only different from Giotto. Let's call this thesis the "no-progress thesis" (NPT). However, on the other hand, Gombrich maintains that people living in "open societies" cannot avoid thinking in terms of progress and that, consequently, since the classical antiquity and up until our days progressive stories of art have been told in different ways (as we will see, also by Gombrich himself). Let's call this the "progress thesis" (PT). This apparent inconsistency between the two claims (NPT vs PT) depends on a semantic equivocation concerning the idea of artistic progress, which Gombrich himself wishes to clarify; yet, in my opinion, he sees the problem, but he does not provide a convincing solution.

2.1. *The Progress Thesis and the Classical Progress Thesis*

According to Gombrich, the first version of PT is about art as the ability to reproduce nature *mimetically* (= MPT). According to this ancient idea, art (= *techné*) progresses, as much as the *technical* ability of imitating nature improves from the good to the best and from the best to perfection. Hence, *artistic progress* is understood in terms of *technical progress*. A technique is the procedure or the set of procedures by which a (more or less) complex task is accomplished. Technical progress may be defined as a change which increases outputs for any given input. In other words, technical progress is an improvement in the means for achieving a certain result. Since art is the *techné* of reproducing nature mimetically, the progress of art depends upon the improvement of the means for imitating nature, which is understood as the goal of art.

This argumentative structure is still used as a kind of organizing conceptual frame in the famous book by Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the artists* (1550)¹. While considering that Vasari assigns an aesthetic primacy to Renais-

¹ However, properly speaking, Vasari does not identify artistic perfection with success

sance art on Medieval art, we may be right in claiming that the reason why Vasari is not able to understand the symbolism of Medieval art as its specific artistic value, which is incomparable with and equally good as other artistic values, is that Vasari rejects NPT and embraces PT. Still, Vasari's version of PT is through and through rational. It is an *instrumental and evolutionary notion of artistic progress* (IPT), according to which, once an aim is established, one can search for the best means required for achieving it (so MPT is a kind of IPT). Like scientific progress toward determined goals, art evolves progressively through a *learning process* by virtue of which some skills improve. So, the progress of art runs alongside the progress of science, i.e. by virtue of conjectures, falsifications and new conjectures.

This is precisely the version of PT endorsed by Gombrich himself. Representations, which are more and more adequate to reality (or, in general, more and more functional with reference to a given goal), are judged according to fixed standards of perception. Schemes of representations are applied and compared with visual reality, until they are true enough to it. So, artists are the first critics of themselves. They set a goal, and by a process of trial and error (and also thanks to negative feedbacks of critics) they see whether their means are adequate to the ends, while improving them through practice.

Gombrich observes that IPT may be combined with a notion of progress with which it is often confused, namely a notion accepted by Vasari, but not by Gombrich himself: the Aristotelian view of artistic progress as inevitable *organic growing toward the essence* or toward the internal finality of art, according to which *only one perfect model* exists (= OPT, a view analogous to *utopian* models of progress).

Both IPT and OPT are guided by the notion of a *perfect aesthetic creation* as the model for every artistic future, and can be both put under the common title of *classical PT* (= CPT). According to CPT, once a model of perfection is established (nature, beauty, etc.), only two possibilities remain: *imitation of perfection* and *decadence* (degeneration). Perfection, as such, can-

in the imitation of nature. The technical mastery of art consists rather in the fulfilment of another function: the expressive representation of the Holy History. Under the premise that representing the Holy History is the function of art, Vasari can reasonably claim that some artworks (for example some paintings by Raffaello) mark an improvement on other artworks, because of their prowess in illustrating events of the Holy History.

not be improved anymore: so every change turns out to be a worsening. Historical evolution ends once the goal of the evolution is achieved and perfection is reached. What follows is *decline* or, in the best case, *restoration* and *rebirth* (which, by the way, is the very etymological meaning of *Renaissance*). Therefore classicism (CPT) is a cyclic model of artistic progress conceived of in terms of three phases put along a circular line: 1. a primitive phase, 2. the phase of perfection, 3. the phase of decadence (like in Mannerism) and the return to 1. through a rebirth.

For example, according to Winckelmann and his neoclassical nostalgic plea for the classical ideal of uncorrupted beauty of the Greeks², degeneration is typified by Bernini and Borromini's Baroque art. In the frame of his (Vichian) CPT, he thinks that the historical trend of the arts begins with the state of necessity and the primitive style, continues with beauty and stylistic perfection ("noble simplicity and quite grandeur"), and ends with superfluity and decadence of style. In particular, for CPT virtuosity as an end in itself is an abuse of art, a corruption of perfection.

To be noticed is that in CPT beauty (i.e. the perfection of style) already nourishes the germs of decadence: since beauty is perfection, artistic beauty cannot be improved anymore; yet, since it cannot go forward, it must regress, before coming back to perfection, degenerating again, and so on³.

2.2. *Linear Progress without Comebacks and Pluralism*

However, Gombrich observes that already during Renaissance the new scientific discoveries elicited a *different notion of progress*. Progress can now be conceived of not only as the improvement of the means for an end, but also as the possibility of *setting new ends*. So in history no comebacks are possible anymore. Progress is a straight line that runs towards infinity,

² This scheme will be the background of Hegel's articulation of philosophy of art history in three artistic forms (symbolic, classic, and romantic).

³ According to Gombrich, Winckelmann was the first one who recognized the problem of *primitivism*, i.e. of intentionally produced archaic artistic representations: representations that intentionally imitate the primitive style instead of the classical style of artworks that embodied artistic perfection. Although archaic art is less perfect than classical art, it can nonetheless be also evaluated as less artificial and as incorrupt. Archaic art is thus seen as a kind of antidote to the degenerate taste of decadence. This means that a moral value, that replaces (or at least integrates) the aesthetic criterion of perfection, is understood as a criterion for the artistic success (and the progress) of art.

linear progress without comebacks (= LP).

The influence of this idea of art begins, according to Gombrich, with Romanticism⁴. Herder for example argues that CPT is wrong, because there is not a unique model of perfection. Each civilization has its own specific character and its own specific art. Hence, one should not evaluate, say, Egyptian sculpture with the standards of Greek art, because in the Egyptian civilization sculpture has a different meaning. From this *anticlassical and pluralistic notion of progress* (PPT) seems to ensue NPT (the radical, anti-Vasarian, idea that artistic progress is nonsense), because the lack of a unique aesthetic perfection seems to entail that great artists have no fore-runners. However, the plausible idea that great artists have no forerunners, because their specific artistic achievements are creative and cannot be anticipated by others, is not *per se* an argument in favour of NPT. Although one can reasonably claim that the criteria of artistic success are set by each artistic style or movement and even by each artwork, this (in my opinion proper) pluralistic stance does not imply or require the inexistence of cultural traditions (= normative orders) in which artists and artworks grow and that artists and artworks put forth and transform in a progressive, and understandable, way.

In the XIX Century, Gombrich observes, precisely the (firstly romantic and then positivistic) belief in LP (i.e. in the idea that the present can be understood only by looking at the future, as improvement on the past) offered the common cultural terrain for the multifaceted expressions of equally good artistic personalities.

In the XX Century, Modern Art (or Modernism) was characterized by the renunciation of every criticism raised on the basis of absolute (= unquestionable) criteria. Each artistic movement set its own criteria for artistic success (often published in a manifest), which were understood as new and as a progress on past art. For the Avant-Garde the spirit of progress was indeed the unique standard of evaluation. In other words, the unquestionable criterion of progress was... progress, *progress for its own sake*.

In this way, artistic LP was understood in terms of *scientific progress*.

⁴ However, the crisis of CPT in the artistic field began with the *querelle des anciens et de modernes* in the second half of the XVII Century.

Against the strong distinction between art and science, art began to be seen as an *experimental endeavour*, like science (and politics). The progress of Impressionism could be for example defined with reference to the fact that it taught a new way of seeing. However, Gombrich rightly observes that this answer cannot be accepted as universally valid. Artistic progress *may* be identified with scientific progress only in certain given contexts and artistic movements, but this is not generally true.

As I mentioned before, Gombrich himself has a theory about one particular way in which PT makes sense, IPT, a view anticipated by Vasari. However, differently from Vasari, Gombrich poses IPT in conditional terms, allowing for PPT:

If the goal of art is mimesis, the representation of reality, then the progress of art runs parallel with the progress of science.

However, this seems to be only one of the possible goals of art. So, generally speaking, in order to link PT to art one must return to the simple idea that progress can let us achieve very different goals (= pluralism) and that we (human beings) are the ones who set the goals, also in the artistic field (= internalism). This is the reason why Gombrich had elsewhere (*Norm and Form*, 1966) expressed some doubts about the idea that art progresses in the same way as science and offered hypothetically this other, rather metaphorical, explanation of artistic progress: you can say that art progresses the same way a piece of music lets each phrase or motif progress, while they acquire their meaning and expression from what has happened before and from the expectations that have been raised and are now met, ignored, bypassed or denied (see Lorda s.d.). This is indeed an interesting idea (and I am not sure whether it has been later further developed by Gombrich). In any case, I think that elaborating on this idea could help to find a plausible way to make PT and NPT consistent. I will do it by discussing and criticising A. Danto's view on the matter.

3. Danto and the End of (the History of) Art

Danto has interesting (but, in my opinion, wrong) ideas concerning artistic progress, ideas explained in particular in *After the End of Art* (1997). They

can be summed up shortly as follows: until our time, two main histories i.e. two main narrative models of art have been developed, but a progressive narrative of art is now impossible. Let's see how Danto's argument goes.

3.1. The Mimetic Narration of Art

The first narrative model partly coincides with Gombrich's MPT and IPT. It is the *mimetic model of artistic instrumental progress*, according to which each artist has a model of reality that he/she compares with reality. Hence, artistic progress means an improvement in the technical means for producing representations of reality. In this regard, Danto refers to Gombrich's explanation: painting progresses as it increases its ability to represent reality in a painted surface, by means of "making and matching". MPT offers a narrative structure to organize art history –that decides what is and what is not part of history ("primitive" African art, for instance)– and holds more or less until the last thirty years of the XIX Century.

3.2. The Modernist Narration

Then, this narrative model has been replaced by the *modernist model* (MoM), that according to Danto holds from 1880 (Manet) until about 1965. With modernism the attention moves from the way representation imitates reality to the conditions of representation. Art becomes, in a sense, the subject of itself. Danto understands the modernist narration as a new way of defining art in new progressive terms: thus, art does not progress in terms of representations of reality that are more and more adequate to reality, but rather in terms of philosophical representations that are more and more adequate to the nature of art.

The art critic Clement Greenberg has understood MoM as the one in which representation ceased to be seen as the aim of art. According to this model, the aims of each artistic form consist rather in becoming reflexively aware of the intrinsic qualitative properties as well as of the limits of its own specific medium. In this way each artistic practice distinguishes itself from the other artistic practices, reaching a state of "purity". Each art (painting, sculpture, music, etc.) defines itself by means of understanding the properties of its own specific medium and freeing itself from every unessential goal. Hence, painting must leave aside imitation, perspective,

etc. (that are goals of other arts too: sculpture for instance) and must pay attention to the flatness of the surface, the brushstroke, the rectangular form of the canvas, that is, to specific pictorial elements, in virtue of which art (in this case: painting) can be immediately recognized by the eye as art. This linear and progressive historical narration implies that, the same way some artists could not be included in the history told by MPT, every artistic movement that does not comply with the standard of progress set by MoM (for instance *surrealism*, according to Greenberg) is out of the pale of history.

The core of the issue, Danto claims, is that Greenberg defines MoM as a narrative structure that is the natural continuation of MPT, but the material substance of art now becomes the object and the goal of art.

3.3. Contemporary Art and the End of Art

According to Danto, the modernist narration is false, because it is too partial. In Picasso's *Guernika*, for example, the representational content is more important than the attention Picasso paid to the properties of the artistic medium. But, more importantly, contemporary art (beginning with *Pop Art*) does not meet the standards of Modernism. Now, artworks and "real" objects cannot be distinguished only by perception: so, while Greenberg –with a Vasarian gesture– could interpret contemporary art as a phase of decadence, according to Danto it is clear that the attention toward the material medium must be now abandoned. Contemporary art is not modern in Greenberg's sense anymore, because it does not fit the modernist narration; however, it does not even mark an age of decadence.

The main point is certainly this: Danto argues that MoM cannot be replaced by a new narration. Contemporary art is rather out of history, in that it is out of every kind of narration. It is pluralistic, in that it does not depend upon fixed aesthetic standards of success that are unquestionable in a given normative order (mimetic fidelity, medial purity, etc.). As a consequence, in contemporary art everything is possible: everything can be an artwork and artworks can be anything. But pluralism is, according to Danto, incompatible with PT. Hence Danto rejects PPT: he argues that due to its pluralism contemporary art cannot be captured in a progressive narrative.

Therefore, history of art has ended, because art has been freed from the burden of defining itself (offering a narrative story). Since the philosophical question about the distinction between art and reality has been raised by Duchamp and Warhol, with this question art history ended: the definition of art is now a philosophical, no more an artistic, task.

Consequently, contemporary art is post-historical and today there is room only for NPT.

4. Art Progresses (despite Danto and beyond Gombrich): G. Vilar's Pluralistic Anti-Postmodernist Model

According to Danto the idea of artistic progress entails that the narration is unique and exclusive, because it determines the meaning of history by means of presupposing a true aim (or an essence) of history, authentic art must comply with. In other words, the idea of progress implies a meta-historical essence of something (art, in this case), that manifests itself through history. According to Danto the problem with MPT and MoM is the identification of this essence with a specific and determined task: in virtue of this identification "artistic" phenomena which do not comply with this essence are out of history.

Danto's idea is that, once the end of art happens, the philosophical nature of art emerges to consciousness. Once art achieves philosophical self-consciousness, the history of art cannot take new directions. No criteria are possible anymore for distinguishing possible ways of artistic progress. Everything is equally possible.

In his book *Desartización. Paradojas del arte sin fin* (2011), Gerard Vilar discusses critically Danto's view of the end of art (= the end of artistic progress). Danto's argument, Vilar observes, is undermined by an *essentialist fallacy*, that is, the unjustified supposition that, once a concept is defined, one can grasp its essence. This view entails the dependence of art on philosophical theory. In other words, Danto believes that the essence of art is a necessary condition for explaining pluralism and is convinced that historicism and essentialism are mutually compatible. But the price to pay for gaining this compatibility is the idea that until the age of contemporary art there was history, but now, i.e. in the age of contemporary art, there

is no history anymore. There is no history, because no progress is now possible, and there is no progress, because, since art has found a definition (Danto's own theory of art) it has become philosophy; so it ended as art and, as art, cannot go beyond itself anymore.

Vilar criticizes exactly this point. Maintaining that there is no progress in today's art implies to deprive art of the possibility to be innovative, original, surprising and, at the same time, intelligible and valuable. Yet, this seems to be at odds with our idea of art. In other words, Vilar maintains that art is, as such, closely related to progress, even though every given goal of art can be valid only relatively to a specific normative aesthetic order and even though the modernist idea that the goal of progress is nothing but progress (i.e. a kind of never-ending progress for its own sake, as it were) is untenable. But Danto's "*postmodern*"⁵ move throws out the baby with the bath water. Rejecting the linear direction of progress towards perfection or towards infinity (the never-ending search of new progress) does not imply to reject artistic progress as such. Successful artworks work precisely like new statements that have not been expressed and heard before, but still open up new possibilities of signification: they set new goals and standards. Art progresses not only as "*Welterschliessung*", but rather as "*Ererschliessung von Welterschliessungen*". In other words, art does not contribute to improve directly our knowledge of the world, but to improve the self-awareness of the mankind as symbolic animal, i.e. as able to produce new meaning.

According to my view, in order to accept Vilar's theoretical suggestion, one should accept two related premises (that I gladly accept):

a) A *redefinition of the idea of progress*, that should not be understood in terms of *one* (circular or straight) line (like in Gombrich's and Danto's analysis), but in terms of pluralistic expansion, in different directions, like con-

⁵ This move is closely akin to postmodern views like Gianni Vattimo's criticism of artistic progress. In *La fine della modernità* (Vattimo 1985) Vattimo understands art in the postmodern age as marked by the end of the "paradigm of the new" as an unquestionable value that should be pursued *per se*, which has been the typical modernistic view of artistic progress and has now become a mere routine. Vattimo defends a different paradigm of artistic experience, the structure of artistic revolutions, modeled on Thomas Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions (see Kuhn 1962): in the arts there is no unquestionable values in respect to which changes and transformations can be considered as kinds of progress or, conversely, of regress.

centric circles of water. Danto rejects PT for contemporary art, because he reductively identifies progress with LP toward a specific goal (mimesis, self-reflection of the medium, or self-definition), which is incompatible with pluralism. But LP toward a specific goal is not the unique available concept of progress. Contemporary art lets us understand that in the arts progress does not consist only in finding better means for pre-set goals, but in the continuous re-elaboration of the connections between means (techniques, materials, procedures, styles, etc.) and goals (meanings, contents, expressions, etc.), which cannot be entirely set independently from the single artwork, i.e. before art works, but are qualitatively set by each successful artwork in its working: and this working is, as it were, *always in progress*, because it engenders (potentially) transformations of the connection between means and goals (standards) through the evaluative interpretations of (present and future) beholders and listeners, critics and artists. So, as Gombrich has seen with his musical metaphor, which, however, remains unexplained, on the one hand progress in art is possible, because each artwork requires a certain normative order (otherwise it is not and cannot be intelligible); but at the same time, on the other hand, each artwork takes stance toward the normative order in force when it comes to life and contributes to make and to transform it (so each successful artwork adds something unexpected to the context, something that could not be expected before). As different artworks can respond differently to the same normative order (aesthetic style, tradition, movement, etc.), every normative order has different possibilities for further developments. This can be put in the language of problem (dis)solving. Different artworks can (dis-)solve the same problem in different ways; probably, because they see (and search for) different problems, that call for different solutions, that, again, engender new artistic problems and possibilities (= new meanings).

b) Hence, the second premise one needs to accept for endorsing Vilar's view of artistic progress as "*Erschliessung von Welterschliessungen*" is an *evaluative* understanding of artistic phenomena, according to which artworks are not only valuable items, but elicit a reflection (which is often unconscious) on value production, transformation and experience. This implies that every artwork takes place in a normative order, but takes stance toward it, and transforms it, because successful artworks are (to a certain degree) original: they set autonomously their specific standards of success.

Hence (pluralistic) progress, in this sense, seems to be not only possible, but even necessary to art. In other terms, our concept of art is indeed tied to an idea of progress and unbinding the concept of art from the notion of progress would be like making the concept of art unintelligible.

5. Art and Progress / Art as Progress

Hence, the questions asked at the beginning of my paper may be answered as follows. The notion of progress in art makes sense in different ways. Single art movements or styles may identify different exclusive aims of art and judge how art progresses toward these aims accordingly. This is IPT. Still, in this way 1. the aim of art remains extrinsic to art, which is understood as a kind of means to an unchangeable goal (even when the goal is simply to progress more and more, for the sake of progress); 2. each particular aim of art is incompatible with other aims, so that artworks with other qualities are not part of history or just marks of decadence; 3. moreover, IPT cannot explain why we can say that two aesthetically different artworks (a and b) can be both evaluated as successful, with the consequence that there is no *linear* progress from a to b (NPT).

In order to understand in which sense PT and NPT can be compatible, a different notion of progress is needed, that allows for IPT (and CPT) for single historical artistic movements, context and trends (= normative orders), but is at the same time qualitatively broader because it does not find progress only within *one* normative order. Hence, we need a *pluralistic notion of art*, that (contrary to Danto) *allows for progress as non-linear multiple open-edness of possibilities* (Vilar's view). This, in turn, makes clear that progress does not rule out what a linear notion of progress would understand only as regress; it rather entails the reflexive and transformative restatement of the connection between means and goals (also because it lets us see not only the future, but also the past, differently). Each artwork is not only an answer to a problem, but a restatement of the problem, that modifies it, and in this way, of course, modifies the standards according to which the artistic achievement has to be judged.

However, an objection may be raised as to the validity of the notion of progress I am using here. It may be thought that the pluralism I am

defending following Vilar is at odds with the very idea of progress, which is *per se* teleological and monological. A different notion, such as the one of “development”, may be more apt to express what I have in mind. If an artwork may be anything, provided that it opens a space of possible meaning(s) and value(s), then it is true that art may *develop* in more and different directions. For the ways human artefacts and performances may result to be a source of new possible meanings and values are multiple and various. However, so the objection may go, those developments do not necessarily entail a progress.

I am not sure. I suspect that this is a mere verbal dispute. The objection holds only if the notion of progress and its applications to art are limited to the idea (and the historic ideology) of monolinear progress toward an ideal of perfection. If I had to accept these semantic constraints, I would also accept to replace the word “progress” with the allegedly more neutral “development”. However, this would not change the core of the issue. Against Danto, and along with Vilar, I do not think that in contemporary art simply everything is possible and an artwork can be anything. I think that an artwork can be anything that is evaluated as a source of new possible meaning(s) in so far as it elicits reflections on value production, transformation and experience, (trans-)forming, in different degrees, our normative orders. This (trans-)formation is to be conceived of as development of past normative orders or, in my terminology, in terms of pluralistic progress, because it makes possible different (possibly diverging and even incompatible) narrative discourses concerning art. This is clearly manifest, for instance, in the practice of art criticism.

So, here are my short and modest conclusions. Art *can* progress (or, if you prefer, develop) even if progress (or the new) is not accepted as the main (or even exclusive) value and goal of art (as it was for the Avant-Garde). Art *must* (pluralistically) progress (or, again, develop, if you prefer), in order to be meaningful and successful as “open-ness of open-ness”, i.e. as source of new possibilities of meaning(s) and value(s)⁶.

⁶ Previous versions of this paper have been presented at the Evian Colloquium 2014 (*Progress? Progrès? Fortschritt?*, July, 13.-19. 2014), at the Conference *Fortschritt als Signatur der Neuzeit* (Berlin, Technische Universität, February, 20.-22. 2015) and in Dublin at the ESA Conference 2015. I am grateful to the participants (and in particular to Georg Bertram, Robin Celikates, Simon Gabriel Neuffer, Astrid Wagner, Paolo D’Angelo, Eva

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