

Art: Fantasy or Worldview?

A work of art does not reveal the attitudes of an artist and it cannot tell us anything about the artist. Art is, therefore, neutral. Would you agree with such a statement? My opinion is completely the opposite. I have to note that these thoughts are still being formed in my mind and, although I have been concerned with them for quite some time now, they have not been finalised yet. I believe that my thoughts about this subject might be settled in a few years (or even decades). For if it took years for great thinkers to conceptualise certain ideas, even more time it will take for me – not that I am justifying myself, but I am only trying to be realistic. In my essay I will speak generally and partly hypothetically, ie. about the way things should be (in theory) rather than the way they are (practically), which sums up my previous statement.

Before discussing art, it is necessary to define art. Art is a creative presentation of what made an impression on an individual and what has been received from the environment. It is often the ordinary that impresses the individual in a special way. An artist creatively processes impressions through colour, voice, word, movement or painting. An artist works out of what she or he is, out of herself or himself. Art is a part of life. The understanding of style “contributes to a better understanding of life at a certain stage, not the other way around” (Radovan IVANČIČ). We know that life is not neutral and we cannot be indifferent towards it. If similarly art is not neutral, then we can observe it from a moral perspective as well. Wouldn't it be, however, unexpected and surprising to talk about morality of art in a world where morality is often neglected and ignored?

The Art of Encounter

It is understandable that an artist is not necessarily what she or he writes, paints or simply says (creates). An artist is, however, building her or his work with the material of her or his thoughts enweaved by the strings of her or his personality. Art is not separated from life, it points to life and is part of it; sometimes amazes, sometimes confuses, but there is always a message present in it – no matter whether it prompts us towards admiration or it draws our attention to small neglected things or even to something so ordinary that we would never notice.

An artist is, primarily, a person with attitudes. She or he, like politicians or scientists, wants to say something, but uses a different method. In this essay I am in the first place concerned with Christian artists. Rather than evaluating works or talking about beauty in art, I will try to touch upon the meaning of art and its role in Christianity. I am planning to explore this meaning at least in a partial sense, as the application of art is wide and we cannot talk here about all its complexity.

Therefore, when we will be talking about a Christian artist, we will discuss neither religion as such nor different religions – it would be too broad an area to research. The role of art in religions can be very different (depending on the nature of the religion) and there are so many religious communities that each could present their own way of looking at the topic; they have different perspectives and starting points. Therefore in this study I am interested in art in Christianity. In Christianity all perspectives are included, both the frog's – a person is in that case in a frog's perspective, she or he croaks about the miracle of life, – and bird's – God's perspective – for it is written that “the Spirit of God dwelled upon the waters” (Genesis 1,2). Art in Christianity is a space where the Triune God meets with a person who lets God to find her or him hidden in a garden of life's noise and complicity.

We differentiate between Christian art in a wide sense and Christian art in a narrow sense – sacral or liturgical art. Some would define Christian art in a wide sense as “religious”, which it really is, if it applies to the inner perception of Divine reality. Sometimes religion



is defined as a search for God (upward movement) whereas Christainity is God's advent among people and their response to it (both downward and upward movement). A personal contribution is not the sole one, even though it is crucial. It is necessary for a person to be approached by God, and from that encounter Christian art is created.

Christian art should be a fruit of prayer. Prayer is the explicit encounter with God in silence, composure, where a person is alone with God in conversation. Prayer is a "friendship with God which, if done consistently, changes the person" (St. Theresa of Avila). Rajmund KUPAREO, a Dominican theologian, refers to works that are the fruit of prayer as "works of mystical inspiration". Under the expression of mystic he defines "that practical comprehension of

God in the depth of soul which has its roots in dedicatory grace, imputed virtues, and finally in faith and love, as well as in the gifts of the Holy Spirit. That comprehension is called contemplation, intuition of truth whose motif and purpose is love.”

Hunger for Depth

If we look at the spiritual atmosphere of our time, we notice the hunger of people, hunger for something beyond everyday reality. But this is often just an aimless wandering, partly because those who reached the goal do not point people clearly enough towards it. First of all, it seems to be necessary to listen to people’s questions and only then to give answers so that we would not answer unraised queries with words people do not understand. If we are (and we are indeed) in the era of postmodernism, then we have to speak in the “spirit” of postmodernism, with image and through experience. Art is full of images, whether produced by words or a paintbrush.

Religious experience, the experience of meeting the Lord Jesus Christ, is crucial for a living faith. Just as we cannot tell someone what a hug means but one has to experience it by herself or himself to know its true meaning, the same goes for faith – it cannot be explained nor an exact scheme of it can be drawn. It can only be lively and truthfully transmitted through words, a paintbrush or a sound, so that others can wish to experience it, to experience a handshake or a hug, a hug from God.

A piece of art can testify that Christian artists cannot keep silent about the secret God has given us - the secret of God’s love. I will just mention here a theatre play entitled “Brother Donkey”, directed by Rene MEDVEŠEK and played in ZKM in Zagreb, which tells us of St. Francis who so devotedly loved the Lord that he took everything in life as a gift from God. The play is a testimony of faith through the words and manners of today’s people. It is contemporary and yet speaks of the eternal and touches depth, touches God.

Responsibility of an Artist

It is necessary to accentuate the responsibility of an artist and thus her/his art as well, since there she or he talks in a creative way about the Truth. Creativity is a method, a means, whereas Truth is the goal. “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1, 17). Maybe you ask yourselves what grace has got to do with it. Grace is a completely undeserved gift; and so is talent. We did not make any efforts to obtain talents but they were given to us without any regard to our credits. As parents cannot give their children talents, they are often surprised when they discover their children’s talents. Therefore the only One who could have given us our talents is the Parent of all parents.

The question raised here is whether art is neutral. My answer is a definite no; it is not neutral. Whatever a human being does it is not neutral because we are responsible and moral beings. Moral values are not just a kind of the values but the values themselves (in a sense of what is good and therefore desirable), which is being respected by respecting the objective value scale (as a Magyar Jesuit, WEISSMAHR Béla defines it).

Through her/his art a creator touches certain values coming out of her/his inner self implying thereby the moral aspect of her/his work of art. Those aspects can be hidden and inexpressive. But art can both insult or praise and admire – the creature and the Creator. Therefore it is not neutral. Christian art is not only that which uses biblical or other Christian topics. Not the topic but the spirit of an artistic work is the one that makes someone’s work Christian or not Christian. As I have already mentioned, “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1, 17).

If art brings us to the Truth, we will know the truth, and the truth shall set us free (John 8,32). Only the One Who is truly free can set free, but we are often addicted to what surrounds us and burdened by worries and pressures of all kinds. Often a person longing for relief, rest and a break from the usual rush approaches art. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” (Mathew 11, 28). A great responsibility rests on the shoulders of a Christian artist not to bring constant restlessness but peace and hope, not to tread and curse but to praise and bless.

But it needs to be emphasized that Christian art is not equal to mysticism: “Art cannot replace mysticism. Art falls to the area of signs, and mysticism is God’s life. The time will come, if God wills, when we will say »goodbye« to signs, when we will not have a need to comprehend, love or taste created things.” (MONCHANIN)

Art out of Life

A person acts out of fullness of her or his heart. The same happens in art. If the artist realizes that the Lord God loves her or him, she or he will work and live out of love, to God’s glory. Just as St. Augustine said: “love and do whatever you will”. Artists are not invented characters who have no real life; all sorts of musicians and actors face the questions that ordinary people struggle with. Many celebrities go through identity crises; which means that defining who they are is not always easy for them. The same goes for Christian artists.

An artwork is a pearl that needs to be taken out of the shell. A person is a shell to whom God has given many pearls, creativity that points to the Creator. The First and the Last artist is God. We humans are simply trying to follow God’s example. An artist who seeks truth and has enough humility to admit that she or he was given a gift of creativity, just as life itself, is open to see that we shall always fail in understanding all that we are. Understanding this gift is far beyond our comprehension.

Of course, it is not just Christian artists who have a responsibility when producing art, even though these responsibilities may vary from one artist to another, however we may choose to define the artist. There are many things people would like to call artistic but one could doubt whether those very products of human activity should so easily be given the label of art. What is more, we all have some sort of creativity within us, but only some of us manage to let life flow out of that creativity.

Rainer Maria RILKE in his *Letters to a Young Poet* says: “Be honest with yourself: would you die if you were forbidden to write? This above all: ask yourself in the quietest time of night: »Am I really compelled to write?« Dig deeper for the answer. If the answer is »Yes«, if you can respond to such a question by a strong, simple, »I must«,

then organize your life around this necessity. Your life, even in its emptiest, most indifferent moments, must become a sigh and witness of such a compulsion.”

What would we die for? What would a Christian artist die for? Evidently enough, I cannot provide an answer to this question. I suppose, however, that we can make art out of life by dying in order to experience small moments of impression that draw us closer to the adventure of life, in the same way as a film or a book can do it. When enjoying the richness of life artists might become aware that all that impressions in the end come from the Impresser, the One Who reaches out to show what a smile or hug means.

People being impressed with life and art can turn life into poetry. If you cannot and “if your daily life seems paltry, do not blame it. Blame yourself for not being poet enough to discover its richness” (Rainer Maria RILKE). The richness of art shows that it has much to do with life. Both life and art can reach out to meet the Lord. To some extent – depending on us – they already do.

Suggested Reading

FALZON Christopher, *Philosophy Goes to the Movies. An Introduction to Philosophy*. London – New York, 2002.

GAUNT W., *The Aesthetic Adventure*. London, 1945.

IVANČIČ Radovan, *Stilovi – razdoblja – život. Skripta*. Zagreb, 1993.

KUPAREO Rajmund, *Estetski užitak*. Zagreb, 1990.

KUPAREO Rajmund, *Čovjek i umjetnost*. Zagreb, 1993.

LEWIS C. S., *Essay Collection.. Literature, Philosophy and Short Stories*. Glasgow, 2000.

LITCH Mary M., *Philosophy through Film*. London – New York, 2002.

MARITAIN J., *Art et Scolastique*. Paris, 1920.

MONCHANIN J., *De l'Esthétique à la Mystique*. Tournai, 1955.

NEWMAN John Henry, *The Idea of a University*. New Haven – London, 1996.

NOUWEN Henri J. M., *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. London, 1994.

ROOKMAAKER H. R., *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*. London, 1970.

SENNE René Le, *Introduction à la Philosophie*. Paris, 1947.

WEISSMAHR Béla Sl, *Philosophische Gotteslehre*. Stuttgart, 1994.

Iva BERANEK is a graduate of the Jesuit College in Zagreb in the field of philosophy and religious culture. She is Roman Catholic and has been involved in ecumenical work in Croatia for the last four years. The present article was translated from Croatian by Gabrijela ALTHALLER.