

Aims and Perspectives of a Life-related Phenomenological Criticism of Culture and Art

by Marco A. Sorace

On the last page of "La barbarie", his phenomenological criticism of culture published in 1987, Michel Henry wonders whether we might not be able to put a stop to man's growing alienation from the basis of his life caused by the ever-increasing impact of technology and the media.¹ Twenty years on, however, things have taken a dramatic turn for the worse, in a manner one could not foresee. The so-called "virtual worlds" have developed in such a way that the deeper anthropological dimensions of traditional art and culture seem to be less and less relevant. "Surface aesthetics", and with it a certain separation of sense perception from life, has now found wide acceptance without any questioning.

In view of this, one could conclude that Henry's analysis, which expressly refers to the critical state of culture toward the end of the eighties of the 20th century, has been overtaken by events and no longer applies. But the opposite is true. The alienation from life just mentioned, which now often seems to have been pushed to its limits, is by no means without problems but can take on forms one can call pathogenic. So school teachers, for example, come across students they can hardly reach in a meaningful way since they are dealing with people spending all their time and communicative energy on a virtual "Second Life". Again, in schools, there is already evidence of an insidiously spreading violence as a result of current media developments, as well as a crude and superficial attitude young people take up towards sex. If culture and art react only in a very inappropriate way to such phenomena, or even reinforce them by mirroring them, it is partly due to the fact that they do not allow people to come to grips with the problems they are facing in their lives in that they would refer them back to their roots. This is, however, where life-related phenomenological criticism of art and culture comes in. Without sounding euphemistic, one can sincerely say that in this respect the "phenomenology of life" can provide a way out of "*the troubles, defeats and desperations of our time*"².

In the attempt to sketch out what can be "achieved" by the life-related phenomenological criticism of art and culture, one does best in pointing out its position in the history of the western European mind. Whereas *Friedrich Nietzsche* was at pains to show how the so-called underlying "*real world*", assumed by all metaphysical thought up to modern times, had "*become a mere fable*", i.e. had become less and less convincing³, the pendulum of this criticism swung the other way during the 20th century. Interestingly enough, Nietzsche anticipates this already by saying: "We have done away with the real world, Which world is left over now? Is it the virtual one?"⁴ In fact - despite Nietzsche's incipient pointing towards a third way - we have so far not managed to fill this metaphysical sense vacuum with a fundamental anthropology. So it is from the mere worldly appearances (those things "*left over*"

¹ Cp. *La barbarie*. Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 247.

² *Hugo Ball* uses this expression in a talk he gave 90 years ago, interestingly enough in describing the paintings of Wassily Kandinsky (in Id., *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1984, 41-53, 45). This same artist takes up a key role in Henry in his attempt to give a positive view of the cultural potential of the life-related phenomenological criticism. Only cp. *Michel Henry, Voir l'invisible*. Sur Kandinsky. Paris: Bourin 1988.

³ *Götzendämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophirt*. In: Id., *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 6, ed. Giorgio Colli / Mazzino Montinari. Munich e.g.: dtv / de Gruyter 1988, 2., revised edition, 80f.

⁴ *Ibid.* 81.

according to the criticism of metaphysics) that modern man tries to filter out a sense, a basis of life. Henry, however, has demonstrated convincingly how contradictory such an undertaking is within the realm of philosophy, since such worldly appearances can only be perceived if the one to whom they appear makes himself an appearance as a living being.⁵ But not only this, similarly he can show how the traditional wealth of our culture (in art, but also in politics or theological thought) begins to emerge when culture is understood in its original context of the radical revelation of life, which is, by the way, a crucial point in understanding the relevance of Henry's criticism of culture.

It is now up to the life-related phenomenological criticism of culture to take up Henry's approach and apply it in individual fields of investigation.⁶ This way, among other things, the rich store of knowledge (*Verfügungswissen*) at our disposal (for example in the theory of art it is the numerous findings in technical research allowing precise evaluation as to dating or authorship) can be made fruitful in providing a challenging new orientation for the people of our time (*Orientierungswissen*).

Thus the aim of this undertaking becomes apparent: finding out in how far culture, and especially art, through a radical critical approach, can again be turned into a significant tool for the understanding of the phenomena of life and enhance it.⁷

I propose to illustrate this briefly with two examples.



Caravaggio, David with the Head of Goliath, c. 1606/07, Wood , 90,5 x 116 cm,
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Inv.-N° 125

⁵ In his late work "Incarnation" (*Une philosophie de la chair*. Paris: Seuil 2000) *Michel Henry* sums up his concept of non-intentional foundation of reasoning, which he had been developing since his early masterwork "L'essence de la manifestation". It takes up the problem of tracing back the concrete experiences gained through sense perception to a "primordial knowledge", which *Aristotle* poses at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* (1026). In doing so Henry does not follow the later metaphysical tradition which sees knowledge based in itself through reasoning. Cp., as to this problem, *Jean-Luc Marion*, *L'autre philosophie première et la question de la donation*. *Philosophie* 49 (1996).

⁶ Cp. as overview of the range of Henry's research *Rolf Kühn*, *Michel Henry 10.01.1922-03.07.2002* (obit). *Phänomenologische Forschungen* 7 (2002), 7-10.

⁷ Cp. *Henry, Barbarie*, loc. cit., 14f.

Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio, impressed his public with his singularly sensuous, at times highly dramatic paintings done on dark backgrounds. Since Caravaggio's works were frequently copied by his successors, sometimes with amazing accuracy, the theory of art, in the last few decades, focused on trying to prove his uniqueness by analysing the technique he employed. Through radiography and other scientific methods one managed more and more successfully to identify his paintings which, as a rule, were done "alla prima", i.e. without any preliminary sketching. So soon quite reliable identifications were possible. As Caravaggio's works, however, had nearly exclusively become a topic of scientific investigation, one less and less cared about inquiring why Caravaggio had developed such an extraordinary technique, which allowed for spontaneity and liveliness. In the wake of this, artistic theory fell victim to quite serious misinterpretations, e.g. in taking his works as documents of Tridentine dogmatism only because his sponsors moved in such circles, without being aware how in his paintings by the subliminal focus on the affections, especially as to pleasure and pain, particularly the latter is being undermined.⁸

A further example is the Berlin "Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe" designed by the American architect Peter Eisenmann, which was inaugurated in 2005. On a site measuring about 19,000 sq m (204,440 sq foot), one erected 2711 concrete slabs of various heights, with slight vertical slants between 0.4 and 2 degrees, so that the overall impression gained from a distance is that of minimalist waves.



Peter Eisenmann, Memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe, 2005, Berlin

Before work was begun in 2003, an acrimonious public debate took place. It was riggered mainly by the fact that Eisenmann not only denied that the abstract monument had a concrete meaning but also that it had any meaning at all, implying it was even futile to look for any life-related meaning. Rolf Kühn quite aptly describes the ensuing problem, when he says, "the Berlin concrete slabs do not pose a problem by their minimalist aesthetic abstraction but by their semantic and semiological neutrality, since a body always has 'a meaning', i.e. by referring back to itself, to its vulnerability or its joy."⁹ Despite the quite justified aim of erecting a memorial remembering the atrocities of the Third Reich that would serve its purpose, those in authority should have realised that by denying any life-related meaning to culture and art in a "postmodern" gesture, as it were, the latter becomes hollow so that, in the end, it is just a facade

⁸ Cp. the catalogue to the exhibition *Caravaggio. Originale und Kopien im Spiegel der Forschung*. Ed. Jürgen Harten / Jean-Hubert Martin, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz 2006. With the example of the restoration of the mosaics at the monastery of Daphni *Michel Henry* demonstrates at length the loss of life-related knowledge about a work of art as opposed to scientific knowledge, which he does in his paper "La métamorphose de Daphné" (In: *Les Etudes Philosophiques* 3 (1977), 319-332; now also in: *Phénoménologie de la vie*, vol. III: De l'art et du politique. Paris PUF 2004), the content of which is also incorporated in the line of argumentation of his "La barbarie" (loc. cit. 54 ff.).

⁹ *Rolf Kühn, Ästhetische Existenz heute. Zum Verhältnis von Leben und Kunst*. Freiburg / Munich: Alber 2007, 213.

and has only a phantom-like existence. For art, in the course of its history from archaic beginnings up to our modern times, has always been closely related to the fundamental quest for the meaning of human existence. "The danger to culture lurking behind the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin and other places is therefore not only that the memory of the past becomes arbitrary but that we will be basically unable to understand ourselves as mere phenomenological entities."¹⁰

These examples are intended to show that a life-related phenomenological criticism enables us to understand and evaluate those things that come our way in the guise of "culture" or "art" in that we try to establish whether there is an "inner necessity" (one of the ways in which life reveals itself) which helps to produce the forms of the works we are dealing with.¹¹ The more one practises and such a phenomenology of life approach, the more persuasive it becomes. There are numerous phenomena (beyond the ones Henry quoted) that want to be examined to show that traditional as well as contemporary art can only escape from its incognito state with the help of a life-related phenomenological criticism.¹²

Translated by Peter Opiolka
© Dr. Marco A. Sorace

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cp. also *Wassily Kandinsky, Über die Formfrage*. In: Id./ Franz Marc (ed.), *Der Blaue Reiter*. Munich: Piper 2004 (jubilee edition), 132-188, esp. 142.

¹² Cp. also *Marco A. Sorace, Wider die Barbarei. Zur Kritik des Wissenschaftswissens in der künstlerischen Avantgarde und bei Michel Henry*. In: Hartwig Bischof (ed.), *Leibschau des Lebens. Bilddenken in phänomenologischer Hinsicht* (Seele - Leben - Existenz, vol. 11). Freiburg / Munich: Alber 2008 (still not published).