

Article

The Art of Reason

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“Imagination envisions the reconciliation of the individual with the whole, of desire with realization, of happiness with reason. While this harmony has been removed into utopia by the established reality principles, phantasy insists that it must and can become real, that behind the illusion lies knowledge. ... The analysis of the cognition function of phantasy thus leads to aesthetics as the “science of beauty”... . The very commitment of art to form vitiates the negation of unfreedom in art.”

—Herbert Marcuse (1966)

Aesthetico-symbolic representation of art in all its forms constitutes repressed reality which is otherwise painful. This cathartic function of art unveils truth based on reason. Marcuse sums up the dualism of Aristotelian reason: “Art survives only where it can cancel itself, where it saves its substance by denying its traditional form and thereby denying reconciliation: where it becomes surrealistic and tonal. Otherwise, art shares the fate of all genuine human communication: it dries off.” (Marcuse 1866, p. 145).

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The role of phantasy against the reality principle lends stream of consciousness in pleasure-seeking, erotic, and sublimated sex. Unsublimated eroticism cannot lead to liberation. Art is close to revolution. Artwork on human skin and the one that is found in ancient caves is qualitatively different. However, art’s progression is reflective of civilization’s evolution along with reality principles. The main purpose of this article is to examine the evolution of human imagination and reason along with civilizational epochs. The images and postures expressed through chiseled stones in the caves of Khajuraho and Sun Temple near Kalinga embody consciousness to be free from repression while challenging instinctual trappings toward transcendental objectives. Search for a higher truth beyond the banality of pleasure seems to have been the cornerstone of art that weds reason.

Science, especially what is applied to social and psychological phenomena, is not fully developed to formulate universal theories of artistic imagination.

The innovative mind is the womb of the invention which can be both a means and an end. There is a difference between “innovation” and “imagination”. At the root of creativity, there is a quest for discovery and truth. Truth can be subjective; it can also be objective. The “foundation of truth” is freedom (Sartre 1989, p. 13). There may not be Sartreans after Sartre, the ideas of freedom and truth remain Sartrean. Without going into phenomenological and ontological philosophical discourse, this paper uses three constructs, basic to the formulation as the main burden of this article.

Firstly, art is never a value-neutral act. All ‘human’ activity can be construed as artistic in the universal sense of creativity. The construction of the tallest statues of Buddha in Afghanistan is an example of the finest art. Talibans’ mindless bombardment to destroy these Buddhas is an act of insane faith but not art. Likewise, respect for the Capitol Hill in Washington as a temple of democracy is artful and creative. However, an organized violent attack on January 6, 2021 with murderous intent instigated by the 45th President of the United States was neither art nor creative as this event attempted to lynch the truth. Mylène Besançon makes a point: “Humans have had a relationship with art, in one form or another, since time immemorial. From prehistoric cave drawings to ancient instruments, it is obvious that art has always been and will continue to be an interwoven part of our existence, regardless of race, political leanings, or cultural background.”

Besançon offers 7 reasons to signify art in life: “(1) We are naturally artistic; (2) Art crosses all divides; (3) Art is good for you; (4) It allows self-expression and self-awareness; (5) The possibility for personal benefits; (6) Art allows for complex ideas to be broken down; and (7) Assists with a recording of history”. The symbiosis of art and reason is aesthetically organic. Philosophers since antiquity have debated the meaning and purpose of art. Enlightenment and Romanticism however transformed art as a creative process. Picasso’s *Guernica* is an example.

Ancient Greeks thought of art as a subjective and elusive expression of ‘mimesis’. “The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance” (‘things’ emphasized by me). Plato did not think much of art as ‘imitation’, thirdly removed from reality since life itself was less than ideal. As I see thingness of art implies ‘being’ which leads to ‘becoming’. In his posthumously published book, Jean Paul Sartre wrote: “The In-itself collapses if it does not become For-itself... . The In-itself-For-itself is a pure type of being... . Thus truth is an absolute event whose appearance coincides with the upsurge of human reality and History (Sartre 1989, pp. 3–5). Isn’t all art a subjective quest for truth?”

Secondly, reason which opens doors of consciousness and freedom. There is a reason for art. And the reason may never be ‘un-artistic.’ There are other views about the reason. Since ‘reason’ is not always ‘truth’, successful argumentative people often determine the outcome. The role of social media and confirmation bias further reinforce the argumentative theory of reason. Conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns breed a new kind of truth that is based on “reasoning.” The confluence of these contrapuntal forces signifies art in the construction of reality.

Truth is compromised in a tug of war situation where the sheer force, both physical and cognitive, determines its character. The courtroom drama is a reality determined by the weight of arguments and evidence. An absolute theory of reason does not exist. Search for one depends on varied intertwined and conflicting factors.

Thirdly, The Three I’s: Imagination, Innovation, and Ingenuity.

It would be anthropocentric to theorize that only humans are endowed with imagination and innovation. The instinctual basis of behavior does validate the mysteries of pleasure, performance, and reality principles.

A story reported by Katherine Smyth unveiled a woman’s quest for sexual satisfaction about her desire, hysteria, feminism, and capitalism in her essay on ‘The tyranny of the female-orgasm industrial complex’ (April 26, 2021). Commoditization of everything that emanates from ‘the pleasure principle’ is the greatest innovation of this civilization. I am not talking about alcohol, cigarettes, and the sex trade. This therapeutic culture (Mohan 2018) has weaponized ‘orgasms camp’, as The Atlantic News reported, to feed this F-OIC in the name of liberation. I have seen this movie in the hallowed albeit hollow halls of an otherwise noble profession that I served for more than half a century.

“How Memes Become Money?” The New Yorker Live examines: how Internet culture is influencing the economy, and what that might mean for financial inequality, art, and the environment. Malcolm Gladwell’s new audiobook, *The Bomber Mafia*, “is a riveting tale of persistence, innovation, and the incalculable wages of war. You will hear the voices of generals, the sound of aircrafts and bombs crashing”. The metaphors become transformative ‘reason.’

Theorizing ‘reason’ has been an old philosophical discourse. Aristotle thought of it as innate to human nature since people are ‘rational’. English authors, Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke used the words “logos”, “ratio”, “raison” and “reason” as interchangeable. Thomas Hobbes also used the word “ratiocination”. In Philosophy, especially in Western philosophy, reason as a way of life signifies human nature.

Truth is the opposite of lies. Yet lies and prejudices distort the truth with immunity. Barring a few Republicans, most of them believe that the presidential election was stolen by Democrats. The godfather of this fake-news movement was no less than the defeated 45th President who was blindly supported by seventy-three million Americans. Likewise, vaccine resistance is mostly manifested by young, illiberal, and poorer Americans inclusive of certain marginalized communities regardless of the party affiliation.

David A. Graham puts it: “Some Americans seem to believe that scientific concern is being weaponized for partisan ends, and see their own resistance as a defense of freedom.” Examples of “unreason” abound in this age of Fake-News. But there is ‘reason’, notwithstanding its perverted logic, the soufflé of ignorance and arrogance.

There is a dialectic ‘correlation’ between freedom and unfreedom. Art has flourished where freedom of expression is allowed. Conversely, authoritarianism and its variants have yielded literature and other forms of art. Both fascists and totalitarian regimes unleashed artistic rebellion in Germany and China. “China’s leaders seem sure that innovation can co-exist with authoritarian rule,” writes Chaguan in *The Economist*: “Hong Kong’s noisy patriots denounce a world-class collection of Chinese art” on April 24, 2021 (Fujimura 2021, p. 38).

Human ingenuity is a key to promote innovation. But ingenuity without imagination is dangerous. Much of humanity’s misfortune may be attributed to ingenuity gone wild. History is more than a catalogue of epochal disasters.

Boundaries of ingenuity are ill-defined at best. Bernard Madoff, having crossed all civil lines, invented the most infamous Ponzi scheme on record.” In other words, he could not bear to tell his clients that he was not a magician. So he ruined them instead.”

American Association of Retired People (AARP) investigated a Fraud Factory, an international phone scammer group defrauding people. What they found inside is both terrifying and helpful. Knowing the crooks’ preferences makes it easier to spot their schemes: credit/debit cards and checks; retailer gift cards; bitcoin; cash; peer-to-peer apps; and wire transfers.” Sari Harrar has identified today’s 9 hot frauds: zoom phishing; Covid-19 vaccine card cons; fake online shopping sites; celebrity imposter jackpots;

online romance ambush; medicare card come-ons; cash-transfer app swindlers; new social security scams; and ‘account problem’ (Harrar 2021). Being cheated in this age of plague, anxiety, and angst makes life miserable. Howsoever brilliant you may be, the ways of thieves are deadlier and perhaps invincible. The horrors of fraud factories in Delhi and Beijing haplessly haunt the affluent world.

Thomas Piketty’s Facebook post on Angrynomics raises a pertinent question about the rise of inequality: “Why do statistics show that most people are getting steadily richer while most of us experience increasing uncertainty & unfairness?”

Reckoning and redemption usually follow after a regretfully mindless act. Faith comes in handy: “Today’s artists are doubtless sifting through the shards of this pandemic era, looking for a healing, golden join.” (Fujimura 2021). Art and Reason as we know today are products of the Enlightenment. Science was invented by Newton, not that reasoning did not exist before. Renaissance stimulated thinking in a more rational and imaginative manner that helped the development of both art and reason. Advancement of sciences - medical, social, political, physical, and other cognates - and its philosophy and method did not get much stimulus before The Age of Reason. It was only after the world wars that scientists began to think about the human, social and psychological aspects of behavior that explained the vagaries of behavior.

The symbiotic confluence of art and reason is an outcome of post-Enlightenment consciousness. The medieval darkness did not disappear overnight. It can be argued that its forces are still at work. Murderous regimes, sub-Saharan poverty, global racism, and pandemic continue to bedevil humanity. The world news often is a daily catalogue of misery and suffering. Indicators of progress are often eclipsed by perpetual helplessness, inanity, and corruption. New Delhi has become the epicenter of the world's deadly catastrophe. The government’s incompetence and lack of imagination has made a bad situation worse. Victims of Covid 19 died for lack of oxygen while profiteers made fortunes.

While funeral pyres smoldered everywhere from New Delhi to Bangalore, oxygen cylinders were seen in short supply. Four hundred thousand people succumbed to this ‘long plague’ until mid-May before the ominous specter of the 3rd surge in a failed democracy. It’s a sad conclusion that covid 19 inflicted only the poor and disadvantaged as compared to the rich and ‘well-connected’ elites of Indian society. The so-called ‘Indian variant’ is now declared a Global Catastrophe (ABC World News with David Muir, May 10, 2021). Hate crimes against Asian Indians raised their ugly heads after Donald Trump called coronavirus a Chinese virus. I shudder at the thought of what might happen to me or my brown-skinned grandkids - all Americans - in the toxicity of this poisonous plague. The clouds of unreason have not only eclipsed my hope, but they have also shattered the fabled American Dream. This is the new American tragedy attributable to the demise of imagination and “poverty of culture” (Mohan 2011). Covid-19 may be prevented. But the global toxicity inflamed by hatred and new social atavism seems invincible. This is the ultimate paradox of the Enlightenment, in the age of reason and democracy. Understandable cynicism prompts a feeling that democracy is perhaps its worst nemesis. I hope I am wrong.

It feels Kafkaesque when irrational, unAmerican forces endanger the roots in a promised land. I have felt this in my bones. I have had the audacity of writing volumes in different shapes and formats. The deafening ‘no-response’ has been clear in its hidden message: Go home, a home that does not exist. America’s latent virtue is the basis of its own origin. When I was a child in school, my father would often ask me to write to the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi: How could I ever attend Harvard University for my education? I would get bundles of booklets and magazines about the America that my father had in his mind. It is unfortunate that the reactionary forces of my own motherland forced me to emigrate with nothing but hope. There are good reasons why my ambivalence is so beautifully structured. The only worthwhile takeaway that I can share at this point in life may be summed up in a few words: the art of reason always leads to a path of fulfillment, if not ‘success.’ Every step taken ahead on the thorny road of progress constitutes a pillar of advancement. I believe, strongly, our cultural-institutional dissolution calls for Enlighten Two (Moahn 2011).

“Men make their history upon the basis of prior conditions” (Sartre 1963, p. xviii).

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