

Steeds mooier : over geschiedenis en zin van vooruitgangsideeën in de kunst

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Summary

More and More Beautiful.

On the Idea of Progress in the Arts

Although generally assumed that the idea of progress is a typical feature of nineteenth-century thought, it is a notion twentieth-century philosophers still wrestle with constantly. To be sure, present-day philosophers are more sophisticated in the use of historical categories, nevertheless it is evident that the idea of progress continues to be of great interest. This is apparent particularly in the arts. While almost no one seemed willing to believe there could be progress in the arts, the idea itself has been the main conceptual category in the historical avant-garde. The significance of the belief in progress reemerged clearly in postmodernist resistance to such an idea, and in the recent discussions about a 'crisis' in the arts, and even an end-of-art.

When and in what context did these speculations of progress arise? In the first chapter it is argued, that by answering this question, we do not need to go as far back as the ancient Greeks, or the Renaissance. For to do so would betray a naive conceptual realism, i.e., the assumption there is such a thing as an essentially invariable idea which manifests itself, or develops, throughout time. On the other hand, nominalistic views or conceptual 'Historismus' are not very helpful for studying the meaning and use of concepts of progress. A more useful line of approach can be found in the work of Reinhart Koselleck. He describes how during the eighteenth century people developed a sense of 'geschichtliche Zeit' – a new awareness of time without a determined future – where historical categories such as 'progress' acquired a pragmatic meaning.

The second and third chapters outline the meaning and use of

ideas of progress as they developed in the last three centuries. The starting point for this brief history of ideas is the 'Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes'. This debate, circa 1700, concerned the question whether then contemporary writers and artists could compete with the Ancients. The 'Querelle' is of interest to us, first of all, because it abandons absolute criteria of Beauty. Some participants in these discussions were beginning to realise that aesthetic values were partially dependent on the contemporary context. Furthermore, they came to understand history as a linear process, but in a finalistic way. The 'Querelle' had everything to do with the growing regard for phantasy and imagination, a development closely connected with the rise of an autonomous aesthetic domain – the rise of the arts as we know them today.

In the age of Romanticism imagination, creativity and originality became very important. In addition, under the impact of the ubiquitous influence of the French Revolution, an historicist consciousness emerged. The idea of progress in the arts could flourish, but only in the restricted sense of a persisting finalism that itself was the consequence of a prevalent Hegelianism. However, in the second half of the nineteenth century – with the success of positivism, evolutionism and many new branches of cultural history – an extensive and general belief in steady progress in all realms of reality began to prevail, the arts included. Beginning with modernism, and even more so since the rise of the historical avant-garde, the arts present themselves more and more in the form of *movements*, inventing the so-called *-isms*, and perceiving every innovation as a revolution.

The second part of the book deals with the questions: *How are concepts of progress used in the arts? And, why have these concepts had a grip on the arts for such a long time?* Chapter four analyses the revolutionary vocabulary and the historicist assumptions implied by this vocabulary. It applies Thomas Kuhn's model of scientific development to the arts in so far as this model – as it focusses on the external circumstances accompanying sudden changes in standards and values – will help us explain the use of concepts of progress as well as the desire for

periodization. Using this model it can be shown how changes are interpreted in terms of progress and conceived of as good, necessary and understandable.

The analysis is supported by the empirical evidence of two case studies. Chapter five describes an important innovation in Dutch poetry, embodied in the 'Beweging van Vijftig' (The Movement of '50). This chapter deals with the way the *Vijftigers* engineered a breakthrough with – and through the medium of – the magazine *Podium*. The first ten volumes are examined focussing on the questions: To what extent is the vocabulary of progress used?; What are the effects?; And, in what manner has it been possible for later historians of literature to speak of a kind of progress in retrospect? The sixth chapter concerning itself with the movement 'De Stijl' is a similar study of a magazine, viz., all volumes of *De Stijl* (1917-1931). This particular case study deals with innovations in architecture and painting. Special attention is paid to the theoretical opinions of the movement's protagonists (among others, Mondriaan and Van Doesburg) about progress, evolution and development.

The last part of the book takes up the problems sketched at the end of chapters three and four, that is, the collapse of the avant-garde, and a feeling of acceleration of history, leading to confusion. This section discusses the *present-day meaning and significance of ideas of progress in the arts*. Chapter seven deals with the contemporary view that art has come to an end. It criticises the position of the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto, who denies the possibility of any further historical advance in the (plastic) arts. Though his analysis of the growing importance of conceptual art has merit, his Hegelian interpretation of present-day art as a conceptual culmination and terminus is much too narrow. But even if one rejects Danto's apocalyptic proclamation there still remain sound arguments against the possibility of progress in the arts. However, in the final chapter it is argued that to conceive of art in terms of progress continues to be an idea that makes sense.

The argument in favour of this idea can be summarized as follows. First, by invention and change there is a growth in the

number of styles, genres, processes, skills, and works of art themselves, which (contrary to achievements in science) will never be completely replaced by new styles, genres, processes, skills and works of art. This quantitative artistic progress also implies a mutual enrichment of works of art by their interaction. Secondly – and this seems more important – the idea of progress in the arts makes sense in terms of cognitive development. In concert with Nelson Goodman's cognitive understanding of the arts, it can be shown that the arts offer us new experiences and points of view, as well as new sensual, emotional and intellectual schemes to interpret reality.

Such a belief in artistic progress, albeit modest and limited, can counter the insipid relativism of a postmodern and posthistorical mentality that until now has proven to be unfruitful in the creation and interpretation of works of art.