ART AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT PROJECT

Art for an audience, rather than art for art's sake, is one characteristic **Jonathan Le Cocq** finds in the Enlightenment view of the arts.

The term 'Enlightenment project' is code for a set of ideas holding that science and reason, as opposed to authority and superstition, are the proper means to understand the world and to improve human life, and that understanding and life flourish best in a culture of tolerance and individual liberty. Though the Enlightenment project is linked most closely with philosophers and scientists, it also influenced artists.

In the arts, the Enlightenment is usually associated with classicising tendencies towards balance and order, and perhaps, too, a reflection in art of broad social values as opposed to, say, courtly ones. In different ways, one finds this in the late-eighteenth century comic operas of Mozart and neoclassical paintings of Jacques-Louis David. It is also marked by considerable confidence that the governing principles of the arts could be discovered and applied, as reflected in Jean-Philippe Rameau's discovery of the 'laws' of harmony (sometimes compared to Newton's discoveries in physics) or Johann Mattheson's rules of good composition.

Although we identify the Enlightenment project particularly with the late-eighteenth-century thinkers who stated and exemplified its values most explicitly, the term has a significance well beyond the self-proclaimed Age of Reason. In fact, by some it has been identified at least in part with a 'Project of Modernity,' an age of urbanisation, technology, and spread of wealth, with a lifespan from the Renaissance to the twentieth century.[1]

But not, perhaps, to the twenty-first century. We have become familiar with the postmodern accusation that reason and science are no more or less subject to bias, tradition, and dependence on authority than any other way of understanding the world. Green politics questions the equation of scientific, technological or economic progress with human wellbeing. And some deem all beliefs relative, the search for truth merely an attempt by special pleading to prioritise one set of values over another.

In the arts, reference to the Enlightenment project, and the threat to it, has occurred in a very particular way. Some contemporary theory has it that the fate of the Enlightenment project is intimately bound up with that of modernism.[2] The argument goes that the radical modernist experiments in the arts that were a hallmark of the twentieth century—such as cubism and abstraction in the plastic arts, or atonality and serialism in music—were a last-gasp attempt to preserve the Enlightenment project. For it was with these developments that artists sought to

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maintain progress in the arts through originality, and to preserve high art's special status and objective value by a kind of separatism in the face of the overbearing influence of popular culture. With the failure of modernism also came, or perhaps will come, the failure of the Enlightenment project.

I think this view is mistaken, and that there is as a better way than this to understand the relevance of Enlightenment values to the arts today.

Progress in the arts

One problem with the above view is that it identifies the Enlightenment idea of progress through scientific discovery with originality and technical innovation in the arts. But without a criterion like truth, or a yardstick-like refutability, this identification is hard to assert in any straightforward way. Nor is it particularly historical. In the eighteenth century there was little tendency to identify progress with innovation. If anything, there was a certain complacency about contemporary achievements in the arts. Far from emphasising the purely rational, in music, at least, aesthetic theory was largely preoccupied with explaining it in terms of emotional expression.[3]

Radical innovation in the name of art, and the underlying philosophy of art for art's sake, while having its origins in Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, is in fact a Romantic ideal that took hold in the nineteenth century, not the eighteenth. And although the current trend is to identify modernism with a turn towards the objectivity and anti-Romanticism of the 1920s and 1930s, in the musical arts, at least, the first wave of modernism was pre–World War I in the radical expressionism that is rightly seen as a development of late Romanticism. To put it simply, although modernism ultimately rebelled against the emotionalism of the Romantics, in its values of radicalism, revolution and originality it was a Romantic movement, not an Enlightenment one.

If it is not to be identified with modernism, how should we understand the Enlightenment project in the present day in connection with the arts? And how well can it withstand the postmodern scepticism of recent times? I suggest looking at this from the perspective of the three main ingredients of the Enlightenment project as I described it above: belief in science and reason, belief in human progress and wellbeing, and an underlying tendency toward liberalism.

Rationalism in the arts

Rationalism in the arts may be characterised, in part, by that aspect of them that involves problem-solving. While imagination and inspiration are important ingredients of artworks, there is also a great deal that involves intelligent working out of artistic problems. This is often the aspect of artworks that is most impressive, that which generates a sense of wonder when we are confronted with, say, a magnificently worked-out fugue in a substantial choral or instrumental work. It also relates to our capacity to apply objective values to the arts. This is a longstanding philosophical problem about the relationship between facts and values, but it acquires particular force in the present day when what have long been acknowledged as artistic masterpieces, the 'canon' of great works, are in some recent discussions said to rest on merely ideological biases.

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Those of us who teach 101-type introductory courses in the arts are familiar with the experience of teaching, to take one art form as an example, such things as classical music to students whose prior experience of it may be minimal. A common response from such students is to be impressed with the music they have studied. They do not necessarily say they like it any better (though one hopes that they do), but that they respect it more. This is because there are objective qualities in great works of art that exhibit these problem-solving characteristics, which we can describe and explain more or less neutrally: things like the intricate counterpoint of a fugue, the subtle motivic working of a Beethoven sonata movement, the delayed

harmonic resolutions and mammoth climaxes in a Wagner opera, or the detailed matching of musical and literary idea in a Schubert song. These things are, incidentally, often beyond the scope of most contemporary popular art forms. They are part of what gives us high points of human cultural achievement, and are well able to withstand the scepticism of cultural relativism.

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Saying that great art has objective qualities like these means that there are features of it that we can point to and describe as marvellous achievements. Part of our sense of wonder at artistic masterpieces is their capacity to go beyond what most of us feel that we could achieve ourselves. But it is implicit in using this kind of thing as a standard of quality that great art will embody a high degree of skill. The value of skill in art has been downplayed in recent times. There are many forms of contemporary art in which skill has been virtually discounted, where all the value lies in the power of the idea. Bisected animals in an art gallery, or four and a half minutes of ambient sound in a concert hall, are examples. These may be interesting, thought-provoking works worth experiencing in their own right. But by their nature they make it impossible to have that integration of idea and skilful execution that most of us associate with great art and which is also a characteristic of the Enlightenment project.

Art's audience

So far, these views might have been stated by many a modernist critic of postmodern relativism. But the second aspect of Enlightenment thought that is relevant to us, such a critic might not share: that is, its humane and liberal values which are not at all the revolutionary ideals of the Romantics or modernists. The Enlightenment project implies a belief that art should not ignore the values of its natural audience. A great deal of contemporary art, usually that which we call modern rather than postmodern, seems to be so intellectual that is unpalatable and indigestible to most art-lovers, who have consequently avoided it. In music, one thinks of Schoenberg in the first half of the twentieth century, and of Boulez in the second.

On the received view, this separation of artist and audience is a consequence of the Enlightenment project's search for progress, during which the audience has regrettably but necessarily been left behind. But on the view of the project advanced here, it makes little sense to measure progress in the arts in terms of technical innovation alone, divorced from the capacity of that innovation to seem meaningful and worthwhile to its audience. Artists are problem-solvers, as most modernists would agree, but it is not an Enlightenment attitude to be indifferent to the goals that define those problems. If contemporary art has failed to reach those who have learned to love and appreciate the great art of earlier generations, it has either failed to solve some of its problems, or else its values are not humane, Enlightenment values. They are the revolutionary values of the Romantics—of revolution for the sake of revolution, or in art, a quest for originality above all else.

A modernist outlook tends to see attempts by artists to relate their art to the values of their audience as something like a sellout. But this, too, reflects an essentially Romantic attitude of art for art's sake. It is not helped by being an oversimplification. One does not have to view a responsive artist as a kind of shopkeeper who stocks whatever he thinks his audience will buy. A better metaphor is that of an entrepreneur—a risk-taker who develops an idea, such as an original musical work, that might or might not resonate with his audience. Hopefully, that work will matter to the listener. But there must also be the possibility of failure. For a Romantic or modernist this will probably only mean failing to meet whatever standards the artist has set himself, or else those of a small, select expert peer group. Enlightenment values are more likely to be aligned with those of the natural audience for the kind of art the artist makes.

Tolerance and liberty

The question of the relationship between the arts and their audience touches on the role of tolerance and liberty that is the third part of the

way I initially characterised the Enlightenment project. A culture that allows artists the freedom to experiment and to develop their ideas is one that we would expect the pro-Enlightenment thinker to favour. In practice, this is likely to mean an absolute minimum of censorship. We might not always like what artists produce. We might regard it as unhealthy, or offensive, or even demeaning, either to the arts or to some social group. But we should almost invariably put up with it, even if for no other reason than because we know that to reap the benefit of entrepreneurial success, we have to experience a certain amount of entrepreneurial failure. For the same reason, the more active equivalent of censorship—state direction in the arts as existed in Germany under the Nazis, or the Soviet Union under Stalin—seems equally opposed to Enlightenment ideals.

But we might also invoke the distinction between 'freedom from' and 'freedom to' in this. Freedom from censorship or control is not the same as being granted the opportunity to produce whatever one likes through, say, enforced subsidy. Or again, using the entrepreneurial model, there is nothing liberal in removing the risk of failure through failing to find an audience. The ideal of the artist free from any kind of practical consideration, or protected from the marketplace, is much more consistent with a Romantic philosophy than an Enlightenment one.

Art has always depended to a greater or lesser extent on patrons and supporters, and it is usually maintained that the present-day reliance of many arts institutions on state funding is the modern-day continuation of this. But in fact, the present-day situation is unprecedented. This is the first time that so much art is paid for by those who do not directly consume it, partly on the grounds that this maximises artistic freedom. Those involved in the arts are rightly concerned with fostering and developing them in any way possible. But we should all have a concern for the institutions that we create and maintain, and the extent to which they foster the relationship between artist and audience or crowd it out. The late eighteenth century was in fact a period in which the arts flourished in a commercial environment—such as the subscription concert—and through the support of wealthy patrons and benefactors who formed connections with artists they personally admired. That is not a bad model for an Enlightenment project of the present day.

Endnotes

1. See for example Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity—An Incomplete Project,' *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 1000–1008.
2. As above.
3. Among the many eighteenth-century writers who emphasised the emotionally expressive qualities of music, we might single out the celebrated philosopher and composer Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, in his '*Essai sur l'origin des langues*' (c. 1760, published 1781), argued for a common origin of music and language in expressive vocal declamation.