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### **“What is ‘post-modern’ – a quarter of a century after”**

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Roughly 25 years ago, “post-modern”, together with its siblings post-structuralism and deconstruction, appeared on the stage of the Western world accompanied by battle drums and trumpets. The cultural elite – in countries where they still existed – had to take sides, for or against. Some of their partisans hailed them as the most up-to-date trend, some of their enemies abused them as conservative. Some sophisticated minds praised them as liberators who finally put an end to the iron-handed dictatorship of high modernism, whereas others bemoaned the unmistakable signs of cultural and artistic decay and the commercialization of taste. Yet, although those belonging to either camp took a firm stand, when the simple philosophical question “what is it?” – notably “what is post-modern?” – has been raised, almost everyone gave a different answer. Yet the dispute, the waves of which calmed down a long time ago, went on stormily for a few years. As I see now, it exhibited an interesting *mélange* of the language of high modernism and of the post-modern way of speaking in its several varieties. Post-modern theorists spoke the language of universalism mobilizing its usual contrasts of the new fighting the old, of the innovative challenging the fossilized, the progressive pushing out the conservative. Yet, the post-modernism exhibited simultaneously a colorful heterogeneity, where everyone added a new color to the palette, and everyone spoke about something else than the other .

Let me advance already here one of my conclusions: the post-modern perspective can claim at least momentary victory simply on the grounds that such similar universalistic debates have since disappeared from the horizon of the secular cultural world. Sharp polemics may evolve around a singular event or work, as a happening, a building – or an architect – an exhibition or a museum, a novel, a composer, a performance. In such similar debates several perspectives can clash, be the clashes purely artistic or include political or ethical elements too. Yet today, one can hardly hear the battle cry of the controversies of the scene 25 years ago, such as “this cannot be done anymore, this is out of date, this is not art at all”. Instead of the old battle cry we practice a more subdued one such as “this is not good, unskillful, a failure, dangerous, boring, ridiculous.”

Once upon a time, in 1982, in his, at that time, famous lecture, Lyotard made a good point when he attempted to formulate the difference between pre-modern and modern thinking about art in the following way: the pre-modern asked what beauty is, the moderns ask what art is. Today one can raise both questions, although one does not need to raise either of them

Yet in the just mentioned talk, Lyotard was first and foremost to describe the specificity of the post-modern way of creating and judging. Several things that he believed to be a central issue in post-modern creations turned out to be marginal. Yet he put his finger on something important, when he insisted that the post-modern language, regard or perspective is a de-totalizing language, regard and perspective. True, Lyotard hailed the tendency of de-totalizing with extreme pathos and an ultimate universality claim. He said that we must declare war on the Whole, we should bear witness to non-representability , we ought to stand for difference, we ought to rescue the difference, rescue the “honor of the Name.” Humph! Perhaps it is not the invisible Jewish God whose honor will be rescued in post-modern art. To this otherwise fine remark I would only add, that although the rejection of holism is, indeed, one of the outstanding features of the post-modern perspective, still, as it turned out, the

presentation of the Whole remains one option among many options in post-modern arts. Post-modern art is like a household where one can make use of very different ingredients. Or to speak philosophically, one might repeat with Leibniz that the best perspective is characterized by the greatest amount of heterogeneity in the smallest space.

Taking up one point stressed by Lyotard, and neglecting all the others whether I agree or disagree with them – I will speak only about the tendency towards de-totalizing from a post-modern perspective, yet without pathos or enthusiastic commitments. I will take up the issue in the following steps. 1. The de-totalizing of the concept of history; 2. the de-totalizing of the concept of truth; 3. of forms of life; 4. of the arts; and finally – 5 – I will speak briefly about the post-modern arrangement of museums. Why I discuss de-totalizing exactly in this sequence, will be clear, I hope, at the end of my paper,

There is one single thought I need to advance: re-totalizing, among others, also in today's fashionable fundamentalism, is but an answer to de-totalizing, the result and seeming reversal of the former. But the reversal is in one important sense only a seeming one, for this newly bred holism – more often than not – is re-totalizing a fragment.

1. It is obvious to begin the discussion with the de-totalizing of the modern understanding of history, since the decline of the grand narrative and the deconstruction of metaphysics became by now a philosophical commonplace. It could be, perhaps, still added that the decline of grand narrative concluded directly from the destruction of metaphysics, since the grand narrative was the most significant attempt so far to modernize metaphysics while temporizing it in the form of world history. In the grand debate 25 years ago, this was not yet evident. The first “post moderns” spoke with gusto about the end of history and the dawn of “post *histoire*”. This was often so interpreted as a declaration of a new age: we left behind the modern age and we stepped into another, post-modern age. This idea, similar to the statement by Lyotard mentioned above, was deeply rooted in the tradition of modernistic thinking which it meant to overcome, because it is exactly in the spirit of the grand narrative that we have to step from an old epoch into a new one and that we need also to be able to give a fairly precise account about the periods we left behind, and somehow also to describe the specificity of the new one. This is no de-totalizing. It is only then that we can speak of de-totalizing when the conception of change in perspective is substituted for the conception of the change of periods. The grand narrative does not disappear because we stepped into a new period while overcoming modernity, but because we look at modernity from a different perspective. To paraphrase Hegel, it is not the case that we – post-moderns – finally succeed in looking at history rationally and thus it will look back at us also rationally, but because we look at history or rather histories differently, it looks back at us differently. I could formulate the situation with a little simplification in the following way:

The post-modern interpretation of modernity has replaced the modernist interpretation of modernity, that is, we see ourselves differently than before. And since we look at modernity differently than before we see it differently, not only as far as its content but also as its structure is concerned. We no longer see it as a Whole where everything is quasi organically related to everything else, neither as an epic poem, where the story ends with marriage or with death. Rather we see history as a mosaic that consists of heterogeneous pieces of colored glass, most of which do not even fit together. Seen from this perspective, modernity cannot be regarded as a progressive or a regressive period of History, even if from one aspect one can see progress, whereas in another aspect one notices regress, or both. There is room for action, decision, evaluation, precisely because of the heterogeneity of the modern world. Seen from the de-totalizing perspective of the post-modern, the modern world is fragile, and we know very little about its future. This is another reason to believe that action,

decision, evaluation might make a difference. In my – somewhat old fashioned – formulation: the post-modern perspective is the self-consciousness of modernity.

Yet when speaking of the post-modern perspective, as about the self-consciousness of modernity I have not offered a definition of the “post-modern”. Just as little as if my confession that, from this moment onwards, I understand my own life differently, would serve as a definition of my life. The simile is not very forced, since generations do not change their perspectives about their own life at any entirely contingent moment. The reversal or change of the gaze looking at modernity is not independent of historical events and especially of historical traumas, and the analytical work which has been performed on these traumas. The experience with Nazism, with Stalinism, the work performed on those traumatic experiences, and even the movements of 1968, prompted the reversal of the regard. The gestation of a de-totalizing position was already noticeable in certain tendencies of the 1968 events. Further on, the decomposition of the grand narrative was reinforced by the experience of increasing globalization, in addition to two aspects. First, because spatiality begins to play as important a role as temporality in historical narratives, moreover time experience appears as space experience. Second, because almost every people, group, ethnicity, religion, form of life, culture, seeks to establish its own identity or difference within a shared modern culture. I have already mentioned that this identity-forming trend can also end up in totalizing and thus fundamentalism, in its local and not universalizing shape. Finally, I must add, that from a post-modern perspective the post-modern perspective itself is regarded with irony and a grain of skepticism. One cannot declare confidently from a post-modern perspective that having overcome all errors we finally know well what modernity is.

2. Twenty-five years ago, and in the following decade, the charge of having “relativized” truth, or rather the concept of truth, was brought against the so-called post-modern thinkers, Foucault and Derrida included. The charge is a sheer nonsense, since one can speak of “relative” only if one has already subscribed to an Absolute, for example to a Hegelian system. Yet the de-totalizing of the concept of truth questions the relative together with the absolute.

Needless to say, the tendency to de-totalize truth is not a recent development. It starts in the age of the Enlightenment, when the authority of Reason was queried, or at least kept within a boundary. After all Absolute Truth or the certainty of Reason presupposes an Ultimate Authority which warrants it. God could no longer remain the absolute warranty, at least not in mainstream philosophical thinking. The grand narrative replaced God insofar as it presented the Absolute, Truth as the Certainty, in contrast to subjective, primitive certainties, as the result of historical development. Simultaneously, the holistic concept of Truth was replaced in the 19th century by the regional concept of truth, that of “true knowledge” in something, of something. This new concept leaves behind the metaphysical claims, for it accepts as true only statements or theories which remain open to falsification. At the same time it preserves the legitimacy claim of the traditional concept of truth, given that: science legitimates, authenticates the sole truth for the time being. Whatever is scientific, or claims to be scientific, is believed to be, by definition, true.

The post-modern perspective pluralizes also the scientific concept of true knowledge insofar as it de-totalizes it and treats it genealogically, Let me mention three, in my mind, essential, steps in this direction. The first is the theory of paradigms as elaborated by Kuhn, which already introduced perspective change into the understanding of scientific theories and their truths. As a second, I mention Foucault’s gambit, the substitution of the genealogical question “how is truth produced?” by the traditional question, “what is truth?” As a third I mention deconstruction as practiced by Derrida, who lets texts elaborate a truth and then erase

it. In Derrida's mind, all truth claims are deconstructed, but the concept of truth and justice is not, because it cannot, since it is deconstruction itself..

3. Once upon a time there was a slogan: anything goes. This slogan tried to make the process of de-totalizing understandable and misunderstandable. Every story is a good one if we accept it; every theory or description is true if it is plausible and if we can do something with it; every painting, writing, piece of music qualifies as "art" if we deem it to be so. Everyone lives in the way they please. Interpreted in this way, post-modern equals negative liberty, this time not for single persons alone. Not just that I can do whatever pleases me, but, in addition, I do not break or hurt any norm or rule, and I will not be censored by anyone for living as I like. From this interpretation, the enemies of the post-modern "condition" drew the too simplified conclusion, that the so-called post modern world will result in the dissolution of all social, moral and artistic norms and rules, leading to absolute nihilism, while its friends were celebrating the end of terror, the long awaited freedom, fantasy, wish fulfillment and the satisfaction of desires.

A quarter of a century after one must admit that, at least as forms of life are concerned, many things go without being generally censored. This is true especially about the increasing plurality of sexual relations and preferences. Ways of life which have been abhorred as unnatural, sheer madness, sinful on the one hand, or lionized as revolutionary, on the other, are now taken for granted, a matter of routine. Homosexual marriage is a claim for adjustment.

Still, there is a tendency to the opposite where fewer and fewer things "are going". One of the most telling examples is the narrowing down of the carrier avenue. You can live as a lesbian, you take seriously the beliefs of Christian Science, yet if you want to develop any of your abilities and get the position you desire, you cannot do what you please or wish, since you must spend long years in school, you need to earn several degrees. We can treat regulations and rules with irony, but it is rational to abide by them. The constraints are mobile, yet not always elastic.

"Anything goes" therefore sounds like an empty slogan and perhaps the formula of a utopia, for some a negative, for some others a positive one. In fact, many of the things one wished to do 25 years ago are routine nowadays, yet many things one was then free to practice and which promised some rewards have become a blind alley. Some things go, some others do not.

And yet, one can also say that the slogan is not as empty as it sounds. "Anything goes" does not necessarily mean the everyone can do what they desire and get away with it, but that everyone can choose a form of life and get away with it. There are constraints in every form of life, yet different constraints. I accept such and such constraints, for example getting three degrees, the other accepts other constraints, living in the countryside and doing occasional work. As in a well known film, one man chooses to submit to the constraints necessary to become a famous concert pianist, while the other prefers to play in a country pub and live in peace. Both, finally, enjoy what they are doing. The post-modern perspective allows the person who conducts one way of life to understand the person who chooses an entirely different one, without attributing moral or social superiority to any of them. This is, indeed, possible, although not widely practiced.

But is it "obligatory" to withhold judgment, is it right to do so? The answer is easy in the case of talented pianists, but the alternatives are usually harder. After all, some prefer a life of drugs, whereas others can choose a life at the psychological and financial expense of another human being, whom they keep on a short leash of emotional or sexual dependency. The moral question cannot be answered in its generality. If you ask me to judge, there will be cases when I will tell you "live as you please, only do not pass judgment upon us, and above

all, do not force us to do what we do not want to do” and there will be cases when I would cry out, with Voltaire, “crush the infamous!”

The grand narratives – in both their “progressive” and “decadent” versions – identified Enlightenment and modernity. Philosophies of “progress” promised that, in modernity, the project of the Enlightenment will carry – through conflicts – the final victory, although, for the time being, it is still an unfinished project. Philosophers of decadence warned us that the destructive powers of the Enlightenment, after having been set free in modernity, will increase their destructive power until the collapse of Western civilization. From a post-modern perspective, modernity shows an altogether different picture. There are also among the confessed “post-moderns” a few thinkers – for example Zygmunt Bauman – who equate Enlightenment and modernity in its culture-critical version. On my part – joining many others – I do not share this vision. In my understanding, Enlightenment and modernity are by far not identical, neither are “humanism” and Enlightenment. Totalitarian systems like Nazi Germany or the Stalinist Soviet Union were absolutely modern. Bauman would agree and add to this that Auschwitz and the Gulag have been the descendants of the Enlightenment. This conception could be accepted only if one held the belief that Romanticism is the only legitimate branch on the tree of Enlightenment. Yet, even if it is one of the branches, there are other branches of the same tree which mediate an entirely different message, as has been presented in Foucault’s beautiful essay “What is Enlightenment?” Nowadays one could also point at new historical phenomena such as religious fundamentalism which turns openly against Enlightenment although it is modern beyond any doubt. To cut a long story short: post-modern perspective is pluralistic, and there are as many theories as thinkers presenting them. Yet one can safely say that it inherited something from Romanticism and something else from Enlightenment proper: the sense of irony on the one hand, and the tendency towards skepticism on the other hand.

4. Roughly a quarter of a century ago the post-modern perspective occupied the stage as “post-modernism”, as a new tendency in arts, in opposition to classical or “high” modernism. They started to speak about post-modern style in contrast to “modernist style” in architecture and not without reason, given that Bauhaus on the one hand, and minimalism on the other hand, were regarded as the *dernier cri* in modernist architecture. There were buildings constructed in a “post-modern”, that is post-Bauhaus and post -minimalist style. Museums, hotels and other public buildings wear on their very body the defunct styles they quote, among other the various forms of secession or sometimes even the styles of Italian fascist architecture and sculpture begin to merge, unusual materials are used, fantasy is set free. Modernists cried wolf, and mobilized the faithful against commercial eclecticism and allegedly bad, barbaric taste, with very little success. Obviously so, for if we only imagined a whole city populated by minimalist buildings alone we would die of horror and boredom, even if we judged each and every building separately as “sublime”. One should not forget that, both according to Adorno and Lyotard, modernism embodies the sublime.

The post-modern style in architecture also immediately gathered a decent army of following among sophisticated aesthetes, and thus the old story seemed to be reiterated: once again the new fighting the old. The buildings were not fighting but the ideas concerning building were. This kind of battle now belongs to the past, because one can build in all “styles”, moreover the style of each and every building has also become personal. The sole aesthetic criteria is that the building should impress us as uniquely beautiful and attractive, and – in Libeskind’s formulation – tell its own story. As the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao or the new MOMA building in New York really do.

At the beginning, the true post-modern believers contrasted the freedom of post-modernist works and ideas with the terror of high modernism. It would be impossible to deny

that there was such a terror, practiced first and foremost by art critics, exhibition organizers, gallery owners, concert managers, aesthetes, and especially by the numerous declarations and manifestos issued regularly by the ideologues of modernist schools. Adorno banned the common chord from music, which allegedly represented reconciliation with an alienated world. In painting, figurative works – like those by Lucien Freud – were looked at with a disapproving eye. In literature, there was zero tolerance for a linear story or for identifiable characters. If we have all these ideological restrictions in mind, post-modernism appears in fact as liberating. Since it has not replaced ancient restrictions with new ones, but lifted all restrictions of a general kind. One can still believe with Nietzsche that it is easier or even more refined to dance in chains, but one can hardly say that the same chains are good for everyone.

One can ask, of course, where modernism ends and post-modernism begins, but it does not make much sense. Since neither modernism ended nor post-modernism began at one point. Whatever specific difference one may attribute to post-modernism, none of them will be helpful. Let us say, that post-modern art is playful and prove it with the works of the recently deceased Niki de Saint-Phalle. Yet what about surrealism? Was it not playful enough? Or have they already been “post-modern” without knowing it? Let us say that installation is a post-modern genre. What about Duchamp or Yves Klein? Have they been post-modern? And where does post-modern begin for example in music? Where the common chord is slipping back? In Messiaen, or perhaps in Part, or only in the post-minimalist Glass? Yet from a post-modern perspective one does not usually ask such questions. One does, in fact, not attach importance either to the questions or to the answers, precisely because one does not think in terms of the grand narrative. Let me briefly enumerate three different, yet related, aspects of this kind of thinking.

At first I mention the problem of historicism in art.

Nowadays, one’s appreciation of a work of art – be it a novel, a painting, a piece of music or a building – and whether one likes it or not, does not usually depend on the historical moment or the geographic place of its creation. Cries of enthusiasm, such as, “Fantastic! Already in the 15th century! He was so far ahead of his time!” or deprecating remarks, such as, “During his time in Paris, they were already painting in the impressionistic style, whereas he still...” are no longer in vogue. When a modernist who was guided round a wonderfully built, elegant and sophisticated medieval castle in Stockholm was informed that the castle was built in the 19th century, he immediately lost interest and stopped even looking at it. For an eye that looks at a building or any work from a post-modern perspective, the sense of beauty has nothing to do with dating and attribution. Surely, monetary value has a lot to do with them, especially in the case of paintings. The denizens of Budapest can nowadays freely enjoy the Neo-Gothic and eclectic parliament building, whereas 50 years ago sophisticated citizens would have been ashamed to admit their love and appreciation. We all learned in the thirties that the beginning as well as the summit of modernist literature is Proust’s *Remembrance of Times Past* and Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Yet this historical pairing tells us very little today. For a contemporary reader *Ulysses* has far more to do with Don Quixote than with *Remembrance of Times Past*, whereas Proust’s novel seems to have far more to do with Balzac or Stendhal than with Joyce’s novel. And there are many among us who would say they admired one, but not the other, without shocking sophisticated readers. We are no more duty bound to consider Aristophanes as the greatest comedy writer among them all, because he was the first and he happened to be a Greek. From the post-modern perspective there are no sacred cows, neither are there untouchables. This is why the practice of iconoclasm is groundless. We turn towards certain artists or works of arts, as we can also turn away from them, but without drama. Some cultural critics warn us, this is as much a loss as a gain. For if there is no more “agon” in the world of arts, artworks will lose their social significance. This may be true, but will not

necessarily become true. The new generation can read, look, listen, decide, appreciate, evaluate in a far more personal way than has happened before. The question remains whether this practice turns judgments into subjective or contingent ones, or whether it rather serves as a counter poison against the tyranny of advertisement and culture industry. It needs to be added that Harold Bloom was right: the post-modern way of reading and thinking has not destroyed the so-called Western Canon, only opened it up.

De-totalizing the concept “Art” is, in my mind, the second most important feature of the post-modern way of thinking. The concept “Art” is in fact not very old, yet essentially modern. It counts as a commonplace in cultural history that it has not occurred to anyone – for instance in the Middle Ages to encompass, in one and the same concept, such different things as sacred, church, music, marketplace, comedy, lyric poetry or a castle. “Art” encompassing all of them and more, is a universalistic concept and, as such, the product of the Enlightenment. It made itself at home especially on the European Continent. The English language still distinguishes between art and literature even if English art theorists do not.

The traditional universalistic concept “Art” occupied a central role in the high modernist vision of the art world. Not because the concept was taken for granted, as it used to be in the 19th century, but precisely because it was no longer taken for granted, because it became problematic. This was the reason of Lyotard’s already-mentioned dictum, that “what is art?” became the decisive question of the modernist vision. It followed from this claim and vision that all the main tendencies and schools of the modernist art world, such as impressionism, expressionism, symbolism, secession, surrealism, dadaism, constructivism, minimalism, and so on, had to make their presence felt in all kinds of “Art”, at least in painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and in all literary genres. Yet arts are different, genres within a kind of art are also different, and they resist vehemently to be subjected to the same tendency or school. If the pressure of famous art critics is too overwhelming, artists cannot resist or at least they try to write or paint or compose as far as possible according to the last ideologically underpinned mode. But try as hard as we do, there is no surrealistic music or surrealistic architecture, and though minimalism was forced upon literature, not without any success, it could boast minor results compared with the essential ones in architecture or music. The hidden or outspoken demand that the same tendencies should be presented in all kinds of arts and at the same time, this ideological terror has completely withered with the appearance of the post-modern. A video artist is not interested in what kind of styles are preferred in literature, if they prefer any, The moderns hailed the autonomy of art, the post-moderns the autonomy of every single work of art.

Let me turn to the third specificity of post-modern practice in arts and art theory.

It has been said and repeated for several years, sometimes with dismay, at other times with fervor, that there is no more avant-garde. As, naturally, there is no arrièrè-guard either. This development resembles very much the shift in the understanding of history. One can do everything that has been done in the past: figurative painting is back, so is realism and naturalism, yet one can also paint abstract, and minimalism has its fans. Palimpsest becomes widespread. One can compose opera for stage, symphony for an orchestra, electronic music, one can compose on a computer and so on. In literature one can compose text, also minimalist texts, but the old kind of novel is also back with its stories and characters. The idea that the past is constantly in the present appears in the post-modern staging of traditional works, whether operas, comedies or tragedies. Everything is possible on the stage, fantasy flies free, here anything goes if it works.

Although there is no avant-garde in the sense that the new does not appear as the promise, as the redeeming “yes”, there are still new art-forms. Some among them revive old, long-extinct genres. Once upon a time there was an art called “living picture”, and now it appears again. Silhouette or shadow play as an art form – mentioned also by Kant – is back.

Video artists revive the wonderful and defunct style of silent movies, other video artists conjure up the spirit of Renaissance painting, for example Bill Viola. The first photo artists of the 19th century presented their models frequently in period costumes. This kind of photography has been out of fashion for a long time, yet now we enjoy it again in the works of Cindy Sherman and others. Blurring of the limits of various art forms and genres, the tendency which was already there in high modernism, continues. In this manner, the arts have not changed “periods”, but rather the perspectives from which we look at them, and the ideas, ideologies which surround them. This means – in this case – simply that a work of art will be no better or no worse because it remained confined within the limits of one genre alone or because it merged two or three genres in one.

I would like to return briefly to one of my former, perhaps enigmatic, sentences: Anything goes if it works. What does it mean, that a work of art “works”? That it impresses us as being “art”? That the listener or the viewer perceives it as such? There is no unanimous answer to this question as there was none to the question: “Why is something seen or heard as beautiful?” This is, however, the slightest of all problems. One is not worried because no unanimous answer can be given to the questions, “What makes something beautiful?” or, “What makes this and this a work of art?” but because those questions are raised at all. Why do we consider those questions meaningful at all?

I will answer one of the questions tentatively. Why cannot we help asking whether this or that work is a work of art. The question includes the hidden agenda, the other question: “What makes a work of art a work of art?” Since this question is – contrary to the one concerning beauty – a modern one, the answer, if there is answer, not to the question itself but to the importance of the question, needs to be sought somewhere in the modern human condition.

The modern world is a functional one. Instead of asking the questions concerning “essences” we ask questions concerning functions. The question concerning art is raised, because we attribute a specific function to works of art, and we want to know whether this or that painted thing, piece of music or literature performs this function or not. To put it bluntly, in my view the function of works of art in modernity is to offer us sense, to render meaning to life’s experiences, to illuminate those experiences, very painful experiences included, to make us think them over, and do all this in a sensually enjoyable way, giving us pleasure. Most experiences in life give us both pleasure and pain, and those – first and foremost love – are the most significant ones. But they mostly do not provide us with the meaning of those experiences, especially not of the painful ones. Many things, events, give us only pleasure without pain, such as a nice dress, a good dinner, an entertaining book, but we never expect them to live up to the function of sense-rendering, especially not in rendering sense to pain, trauma, grief. One can also turn to wisdom books or to philosophy, which may fulfill this function, yet they do it without offering sensual pleasure and joy.

The chief difference between art and entertainment is not that art is good and entertainment is bad. There is also bad art and good entertainment. The difference lies in their respective functions. From this, it does not follow that good art cannot be entertaining, for it often is, and it does not follow either, that works created for entertainment will never render meaning or sense to one’s experiences. We deal in both cases with illocutionary acts. Advertisements can also be well done, witty, even beautiful, yet they are perlocutionary acts. This is also true about political posters.

Bad art is the kind of art which does not perform its function, because of poor quality, well meant diletantism, lack of talent, being miscarried. It is a misunderstanding that since we do not expect art critics to promote one tendency in art over another, there is no task left for them. They are expected to give their expert opinion which includes practiced taste whether a work is well done or a failure, further, to put into the center, to promote the artists

and the works of art which, to their mind, perform the function of meaning rendered on the highest level and provide simultaneously great satisfaction for our senses.

5. One of the most popular slogans of modernist art theory sounded: “Demolish, raze the museums to the ground!” Those museums suggest that the old masters were better than us. Some modernist music theorists declared the death of opera. It is a bourgeois genre, it must leave the stage! Modernist writers declared that the old ones were conservative fools. For example, Aragon organized a demonstration of avant-garde writers against Anatole France at his funeral. It is well known that political radicalism – both left and right radicalism – claimed a leading role in modernist movements.

The de-totalizing of the grand narrative resulted, among things, in the disappearance of this kind of radicalism. One can abuse post-moderns as conservatives solely from the position of modernist radicalism. Post-moderns do not organize demonstrations at the funeral of somebody because they do not like his style, they do not boo authors just because they represent another trend. Theater lovers visit the kind of theaters which they can expect to stage plays in their taste. One can regret that there are no scandals. Yet where there is no scandal, there is no terror either.

In between, several things happened to the museums.

One cannot expect anyone to speak about museums in general. There are museums for everything almost everywhere. Museums are the greatest tourist attractions. One can think randomly of Bilbao, Barcelona or the so-called “Museumviertel” in Vienna.

Among all those museums, the kind called museum or gallery of “fine art”, the one which exhibits works of art, of applied arts, or archeological finds, and incidentally products of other cultures which can be also looked at as works of art, still occupy pride of place. Traditional museums collected works which have supposedly already proved their timeless value. This was true also in times of modernism. Those were the museums modernists tried to demolish at least in a spiritual sense.

Instead of crushing the museums, the conception of the museum has changed in the last decades. The change took place roughly in three stages. First the emergence of museums of contemporary art; second, the rearrangement of the tradition; third the organization of concentration at single artworks with the means of anarchy. Since the traditional museums of fine art allow for little rearrangement – which is by no means a shortcoming – I can mention only a few new museums or some new wings of the old ones.

The most important innovation is the appearance of museums of contemporary art. The concept of the museum and the concept of being contemporary seem to contradict one another. Yet only if we think of museums in the spirit of the grand narrative. Then only the dead masters can have a place in a museum. The task of the museum is to keep the dead alive, to show that there are dead who live forever, because they will never be forgotten. The traditional museum is the temple of memory. Whoever enters the gate of this temple will “repeat”, just as one repeats in the temple the same liturgy, the same ceremony, about the same creed and the same story. On the contrary, the contemporary art museums collect the spirit of living artists. The conception does not include repetition. It can be presupposed that someone who enters this museum looks at a work for a first time, even if they are 80 years old and a frequent visitor of galleries. It can be presupposed that no one could have seen this work before, because it has not yet existed. In a museum of contemporary art the present undresses, shows itself, introduces itself. It raises claim to the sense-rendering function of art even by presenting itself as senseless. But this remains the sole claim. The works presented in contemporary art museums do not raise necessarily and simultaneously the claim to “eternal validity”, not even to longevity, for example an installation could hardly do it. Yet still, and in all cases, the gaze the viewer casts on the object will be a “yes vote” or a “no vote”.

I know that these few, vague sentences should have been followed up by detailed elaboration, but to continue this chain of thought would take us far away from the subject matter of this paper.

I only want to stress one additional thing. An important new conception is developing in the artistic arrangement of museums in general, and, especially, in the newly established museums. Attention is concentrated on single art objects. That is, the context loses significance, for it is presupposed that the single work is its own context. It is indifferent or it seems to be indifferent which other objects are placed closest to it, before, beside or above it. Once upon a time, modernist art theorists abused museums on the grounds that they present works out of context. We were advised that a medieval altar belongs in a medieval church, in the museum it is out of context and thus not really meaningful. Museums inspired by the ideas of high modernism tried to correct this blemish. A typical example is the Cloisters museum in New York, where whole churches were built inside the museum, to let the spectator see the sacred images in their quasi-original context. All this is sheer romanticism. There are several conceptions to arrange museums in our age, given that the post-modern position does not exclude any approach if it “goes”. Yet, as mentioned, one of the significant conceptions of arrangement is exactly context or indifference. This is how one can exhibit in the same room four paintings, some pieces of furniture, a hanging scroll and a sculpture, not created in the same time or the same place. This is indeed, anarchy, but anarchy with a purpose: the spectator should concentrate on one object, independently of the other ones.

However, all this looks odd only for an eye used to the museum arrangement of classical or high modernism. If, for instance, we cast a glance at the aesthetic works of Hutcheson, we will see how he recommended, in the 18th century, exactly this principle to the wealthy nobility who aspired to populate their castles and gardens with works of art and other things of beauty and good taste.

Yet there is still an institution which has mostly, albeit not everywhere and always, preserved the spirit of the grand narrative even after its demise. And this is a central institution of art: the traditional gallery or museum of fine art. Museums or galleries of fine art generally embody the grand narrative at its classical best. This is the case if they tell the whole story like the Metropolitan Museum or the Louvre; it is also the case if they present the spectator with one or the other chapter or one single thread of the story like the British Museum or the Kunsthistorisches Museum.

All the museums and galleries of fine art are, in the last instance, illustrations of Hegel’s Aesthetics. We start the story somewhere in Egypt, in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates, then continue with the Greeks, the Romans, the Middle Ages. At some point and somewhere one has to insert also the works from the Far East. Then we turn to early modern art where we divide nations, in the case of Italian Renaissance the cities, and follow the narrative within nations. There are galleries of English, German, French, Dutch art, yet within these and similar groupings the arrangement still need to follow the historical sequence. It is not easy to satisfy both criteria – time and nation – yet they try hard. In the 19th century the styles also enter the stage by arranging European and American art, again in a quasi-historicist setting. There will be for example a cluster of French pre-impressionism, impressionism, post-impressionism, etc. Sometimes the outcome is funny. I have seen Kandinsky put in the cluster of “German expressionism”. Surely, the “ancient” can also be presented in a post-modernist manner, and there are already attempts at it, which are still very much resisted. Even such an innocent case as hanging one of the Monet water lily pictures in the vicinity of two contemporary works in the newly opened MOMA, met with an outcry from some art critics, although essentially the historicist arrangement has been preserved obediently almost everywhere.

One can of course ask the question as to whether only conservative habits resist innovations and the de-totalizing of traditional art galleries? Or, is there, perhaps, an inherent value in looking at paintings, statues, and even at furniture and things of use as “embodied” history? Whether the attraction of this arrangement is an important and even warning sign? Or, do we still need the crutch of the grand narrative? Or, let me reformulate the last question: Do we need a place in the world of art where the grand narrative can still feel at home?

At an earlier point I came up with the idea that de-totalizing has its limits both in daily practices, and in case of concepts such as truth, but that those limits are elastic, they are different in each case and change in time. I would now go further by asking the question, do the collections of the galleries and museums of fine art, the collections of the dead kept alive, indicate the limit to the de-totalizing of the grand narrative? Is it just the habit, or also the sense-rendering function of art itself, which puts up fierce resistance against the total dismantling of the grand narrative in those museums?

I would tentatively answer the question in the affirmative, although I do not know why.