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Aesthetics in the pandemic time

It is apparently difficult to unveil a connection between a pandemic virus and aesthetics. Usually aesthetics refer to art meaning to what is beautiful and generate an aesthetic satisfaction. On the other hand, if we consider aesthetics as dealing especially with the sensitive side of human manner of connection to the outside world we could think about the impact our sensitive organs have on our health. Especially our eyes, nose, mouth and skin are those implicated in contacting the virus and putting us in big danger. The same organs usually enable us to discover the world, to get certain knowledge of it through direct contact. We could think thus about our paradoxical condition of being helped by these organs to get more and more involved in our relation with the outside world and, on the other hand, of being put in big danger just trough this contact.

If we refer to the other meaning of aesthetics, as a philosophical thought on the artistic phenomenon, I would point out one of my personal experiences during this lock down period which in Romania, started on March 16 and will last at least up to May 15, according to official decisions.

As all my colleagues, university members, I moved my courses on-line. One of these courses is about artistic styles and cultural movements in Europe. In the beginning, I pointed out the basic features of the Ancient Greek art mentioning the Platonic and Aristotelian definitions of beauty considered from a Pythagorean perspective. Concepts as proportion, symmetry, and harmony were put to work for artistic production. These features were then rediscovered during the Renaissance period. Then I also pointed out the main features of the fundamental artistic movements of Medieval Ages: the Romanic and Gothic styles. I discussed with my students a curious feature of the Romanic style – the obsession to cover up the entire space of the capitals of columns inside Romanic churches. One belief was that the Romanic sculptor was really afraid of the possibility that the evil could insert itself in a free space. Thus, these sculptors covered with figures any free space of the capital. As a consequence, the figures were very strange, abnormal and suggested fantastic figures, many of them looking monster-like.



Here are some drawings of the strange figures covering any free space of a Romanic capital as presented in W. Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, Bucharest, Meridane, 1979, vol. II.

This course was scheduled for the beginning of March. Romania declared the first infected person on February 26.

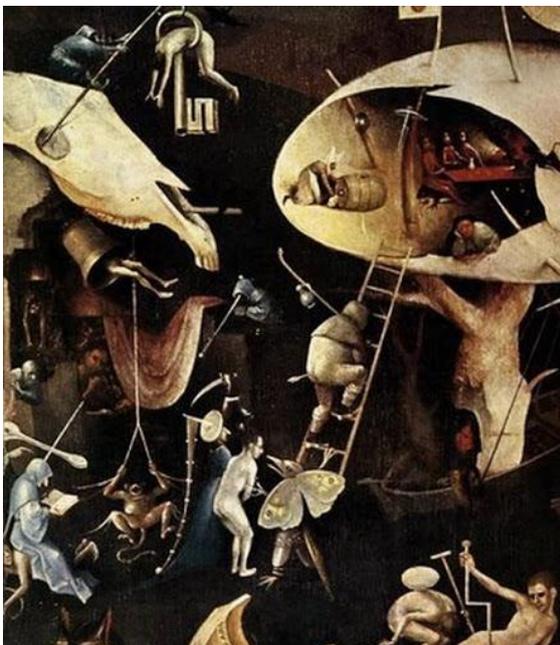
Then, passing to Renaissance artistic thought, after having mentioned the basic features which revived the Ancient thought characterized by balance, rational thinking and Pythagorean beauty, we discussed also an example of Renaissance literature: those wonderful and optimistic adventures of *Gargantua and Pantragrue* written by Francois Rabelais. We discovered that Rabelais manifested a real sympathy for what was ab-normal, meaning what was not or against the traditional (medieval) normality. Those Rabelaisian human giants cultivated their bodies which were huge, eating and drinking amazing quantities of food and beverage. The human body seemed thus to overpass any measure and get control upon the entire life.

During that week, we started to watch the news from Italy, news which was more numerous and sadder. Meanwhile in Romania the number of infected people started to rise. It was obvious that the virus, like the unseen evil which was the terror of the Romanic medieval sculptor, was conquering more and more regions of Europe, becoming more and more excessive in its spreading out.

And images as those represented by Bosch or Grunewald started to be not only artistic representations of artistic imagination but also representations of of our own phantasmas when seeing how deeply suffered those infected carried into emergencies rooms of hospitals or when seeing large amounts of coffins waiting in wide spaces to be cremated (as in Italy or Spain).



Grunewald, *St. Anthony's Temptation*



H. Bosch – The Hell - details

It was something almost comparable to the descriptions of the Black Death of the 14th century of to the Spanish Flu of 1918 (La Pesadilla). These images became a nightmare

and Bosch or Grunewald did not exaggerate on the contrary, they succeeded in suggesting how profound the feelings of fright and powerlessness or helplessness were. However, during this second week of April, Italy and Spain seem to have trespass the climax of the pandemic and try to think about when they will restart activity. Even though Italy counts today 18000 deaths, there is a hope for better days.

The course on artistic styles analyzed meanwhile the Baroque art pointing out the desire for splendor of what was apparent and which tried to mask, or to cover a deep fear of death. The baroque artist was captivated by the brightness of movement (gestures, dances) or the sparkling spirituality of a discourse, meaning finally the gleam of the present against the silence and shadow of what is motionless, what stands still.

In the TV images showing people singing on their balconies and laughing, applauding anybody could see exactly this momentaneous happiness of being alive.

Another topic we analyzed was *madness* in Shakespeare's plays (especially *King Lear*) and Cervantes' *Don Quijote*.

And there were cases in my country in which people could not bear any more the loneliness, some got suicide, other left their residence facing sanctions from police officers...In times of abnormality, abnormal behaviors become more numerous. How many families of those who died could not see or speak to them and the sick people died in loneliness and scared to death. This can draw anybody mad of sadness. In my country, experts say that the peak of death will be reached sometimes between April 20 and 30.

It will be exactly when we will analyze Goethe's *Faust*. We will discuss about two interesting aspects: the pact with the devil and the new type of European man – the Faustian man.

Faust makes his agreement with the devil however his soul is finally redeemed. His temptation was to know in an absolute way, to reach the absolute knowledge through rational judgments. This makes him powerful and capable to change the living conditions for an entire community. This is the Faustian man which we hope to be also the model for this horrific challenge we are facing now. We know that it will be an end of this ordeal, the sooner, the better, of course. Goethe's *Faust* could be considered as an artistic profile of the modern man of the last centuries, a man strongly believing in the progress of knowledge and technologies. Today, we all are waiting for medical solutions which will help us to continue our lives and to mourn our loved ones who, unfortunately, did not succeed in their fight with the evil.

Let us hope for our salvation.