



Literature as a Genealogy of Social Sciences

26

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“What would become of science without metaphors?”

G. H. Hardy

Summary

I believe that literature and art, in a broader sense, exert an undeniable influence on social sciences. That is why I call this relationship ‘genealogical.’ This chapter seeks to analyze that bond from its philosophical foundations in the context of postmodernity. To achieve this objective, I will start by examining the traditional concepts of aesthetics and their development through history, considering the worldviews of philosophers such as Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Lukács, and Heidegger. After that, I will analyze the fundamental principles of Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics related to aesthetics. Gadamer, a disciple of Heidegger, differed from his mentor in his conception of aesthetics and proved the legitimacy of the knowledge held by the sciences of the spirit.

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The Calumny of Apelles.

(Adapted from Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/85/Sandro_Botticelli_021.jpg)

Keywords

Genealogy · Literature · Social sciences · Truth

QR Code



Scanning the QR code directs you to the word cloud of the chapter that is made up of the words we discussed throughout the whole book in relation to the chapter's keyword, which is intentionally not included in the word cloud. Find the keyword and put it in place in the puzzle according to the clues provided in chap. 36. The mystery hidden in the puzzle is the quote of *THINKING: Bioengineering of Science and Art*.

Introduction

The epigraph which starts the present work is a quote from mathematician G. H. Hardy that introduces us to the peculiar relationship between science and literature.

This chapter studies a particular aspect of that relationship: the link between literature and social sciences, where the former acts as a genealogy of the latter. In other words, literature exerts its influence on history, sociology, political sciences, and law; that is why I call this relationship ‘genealogical.’ By using this term, I follow Alain Badiou’s typology [1] for literature and philosophy. According to the French philosopher, this typology does not aim at turning literature into an object of study: it intends to show its influence on other disciplines. To exemplify that influence, I can mention George Orwell’s novel 1984, which depicts the oppression exerted by a totalitarian state in a more vivid way than any legal or political text could do. Moreover, Orwell’s novel could be a source of inspiration for both the jurist and the political philosopher.

When studying the relationship between literature and science, we must take into account that literature, as an artistic expression, is not only a source of aesthetic enjoyment but also a vehicle for truth, just as science is. That connection took a long time to be admitted since the methodological model of natural sciences, which prevailed for decades, condemned the scientist’s self-involvement in the analysis of the object. Such methodological requirement was difficult to fulfil both in the social sciences and in art since, as Martin Heidegger observed, understanding is impossible without anticipation. However, the encounter between a subject and a work of art is an experience of knowledge and understanding, as Gadamer [2] pointed out in his work *Truth and Method*. Here the author stated that art is the expression of truth, and reaching truth is not a matter of method.

In my opinion, there is a close relationship between art and truth. This connection philosophically justifies the influence of literature and, generally speaking, of art on science. It is my objective to clarify the nature of such a relation. With this in mind, I will first analyze the decline of the aesthetic discourse, which, in a way, constitutes the most characteristic feature of postmodernity, and then delve into the guidelines proposed by George Gadamer at the beginning of *Truth and Method*.

The Decline of the Aesthetic Discourse

In the early decades of the twentieth century, artistic Avant-Gardes launched an attack against art and aesthetic institutions. The main consequence of that rebellion was an outburst of aesthetic manifestations outside traditional environments such as art galleries, concert halls, or theatres. An attempt emerged to reintegrate art into everyday life, even when that led to a revolutionary utopia. This artistic explosion accompanied a criticism of aesthetics as a discipline. Avant-gardists did not believe that the aesthetic discourse could give a full account of artistic experiences and expressly rejected the analytical categories of idealistic aesthetics.

After historical avant-gardes, which aimed at separating art from its traditional frameworks, there came the time for neo-avant-grades, which focused on the importance of technique over aesthetics. Walter Benjamin thoroughly analyzed this phenomenon in his essay entitled *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 1936. Under the predominance of technique, the artwork lost what Benjamin called ‘the aura,’ namely, what made it unique and impossible to undergo mass reproduction; in other words, what made the original different from any copy.

During the twentieth century, the primacy of technique over aesthetics was so overwhelming that it not only dissolved the differences between original and copy but also erased the limits which separated the artists from their public. Artists began to apply machine-like techniques, and, as a consequence, the creative process was no more the work of the genius—as the Kantian aesthetics had defined it— but a mere mechanical act.

That dominance of technique over aesthetics encompassed a hegemony of mass media in the cultural field, which was of such magnitude that the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo considered them to “produce consensus, creation and intensification of a common language in the social field” [3, p. 52]. By bringing about consensus, mass media shaped public opinion and defined the aesthetic preferences of the recipient.

The effects of mechanical production and the influence of mass media on our contemporary culture are undeniable. However, it is evident that artistic manifestations still survive in an institutional sense: people attend theatres, concert halls, and art galleries. In light of this, we might ask ourselves whether the crisis lies in art or in the discourse of aesthetics—a philosophical discipline whose object is the artistic manifestation. More precisely, we may wonder if the aesthetic discourse can comprehend opposed realities such as the influence of media and the survival of traditional artistic creations.

Another sign of the crisis in the aesthetic discourse is the question of the work of art as a product of genius. That used to be a fundamental principle of traditional aesthetics, which considered itself entitled to distinguish what was from what was not. It also proved the emphatic nature of the traditional aesthetic discourse, which led in some cases to the apotheosis of an artist.

Vattimo [3] observed that the crisis in aesthetics paralleled a crisis in metaphysics, which no more considered the *being* as something permanent but started seeing it as something finite, that is, something perishable, subject to birth and death. This change of view saw the aesthetic product from a metaphysical perspective, more precisely from Heidegger’s idea of the work of art as “a work of truth.”

This conception of the German philosopher revolved around two aspects:

- i. *aufstellung*, the work of art as “the image of the world,” that is, the artwork belonging to a historical world; and
- ii. *herstellung*, the work of art as “the product of the land.”

The latter category was fundamental to this worldview since it emphasized the temporality of the artwork. That aspect had never been considered by conventional aesthetics, which used to see the work of art as bound to eternity.

Such conceptual shift reveals that the sign of postmodernity was a crisis in the traditional aesthetic categories rather than a crisis in or even the death of art itself. This crisis tells us about a decline of the aesthetic discourse or the inadequacy of its categories to define the aesthetic phenomenon after avant-gardes' arrival.

The Work of Art as An Experience of Truth

Hans-Georg Gadamer was a disciple of Martin Heidegger. Unlike his mentor, however, he did not focus his studies on the hermeneutics of existence. On the contrary, he made an effort to go beyond Heidegger's methodological monism, which supported the use of the same method of study both for natural sciences and sciences of the spirit. Methodological monism preconized the conceptual separation of researcher from the subject matter and argued that the former's involvement with the latter was simply abominable. Gadamer considered it necessary to outline methodological hermeneutics suitable for social sciences to overcome such a rigid approach.

In social sciences, methodological monism is impossible to apply since researchers become inevitably involved with their subjects of study. To researchers, understanding a subject matter implies understanding themselves. German theologian Rudolf Bultmann called that process 'participative understanding'. That assumption was the basis for Gadamer's questioning about the truth in the sciences of the spirit and his search for an appropriate methodology to approach them. To find such methodology, it was necessary to examine all the social sciences: art, politics, religion, to mention some, because "it is the sciences of the spirit as a whole what will allow finding an answer to this question" [2, p. 140].

In his quest to develop a suitable methodological approach, Gadamer began by searching the aesthetic experience. In the first part of his work, *Truth and Method*, he started by clarifying the question of truth in art. To frame that question correctly, he set about a historical inquiry on aesthetic consciousness. In the first place, he examined the controversial concept of "genius" and then moved on to other considerations.

Historically speaking, the first conception of creative genius was a force able to produce a work of art something different from any other object. That idea was functional to the observers since they saw the artwork as a miracle from creative genius, while its creators saw it as a sheer matter of technique and method. Later on, that conception declined, and the power formerly attributed to the author was conferred to the interpreter. This originated an aporia: there was no rigorous criterion to determine whether one interpretation was better than another.

As those two criteria were invalidated, Hungarian philosopher György Lukács introduced a new idea in an attempt to legitimize the work of art as a result of the aesthetic experience. Lukács defined the work of art as “an empty form, a mere crossing point in the multiplicity of possible aesthetic experiences” [2, p. 136].

Then, a dilemma emerged: focusing on the experience, on the instant, implied a fragmentation of reality, which Søren Kierkegaard had already anticipated.

The Danish scholar held that an existence limited to mere immediacy was void. Through that notion, Kierkegaard wanted to prove that the aesthetic experience could not provide a foundation for the continuity of existence, that is, to offer a context for the human being to avoid fragmentation.

That failure attributed to the aesthetic consciousness led the philosopher to assume that the basis for the continuity of being was in self-understanding as the only possibility of overcoming fragmentation and sustaining human existence. When we humans, who are a world in ourselves, contemplate a work of art, which is a world in itself, and we understand it, we understand ourselves. This knowledge, the product of the encounter between both worlds, helps us, observers, to overcome “the discontinuity and isolation of experience” [2, p. 139] by the continuity of our “being there.” In the belief that the aesthetic discourse was unable to account for the artistic experience, in other words, those aesthetics was disconnected from art, Gadamer concluded that art is knowledge. But what is the nature of that knowledge? Undoubtedly, it is radically opposed to that of the natural sciences. However, it is knowledge since it is an intermediary of truth.

This cognitive contradiction was confirmed by the German philosopher Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Arts*. In that work, the author described the history of art as a history of worldviews. Doing so, he validated the truth of the aesthetic experience. However, he said, this validation gets interrupted when the least monopolizes the philosophical experience, or in other words, when art gets lost in philosophy. Then, the truth of the artistic experience becomes unknown again.

The previous historical considerations about “aesthetic consciousness” showed the inadequacy of aesthetics to define the true nature of art. Seeing that, Gadamer decided to elucidate it from a broader framework, which was offered by Martin Heidegger’s metaphysics, more precisely by his idea of ‘being on the horizon of time.’

The author of *Truth and Method* held that the relationship between being and time should not be interpreted radically. On the contrary, ‘being on the horizon of time’ meant that humans had to understand themselves by referring entirely to their own time and future. Heidegger conceived the ‘being’ as grounded on finitude, the necessary basis to question ourselves about the ‘being’ of self-understanding. This questioning would allow us to overcome the fragmentation caused by the artistic experience.

All the previous considerations led the thinker beyond the horizon of understanding and opened the door to a broader experience: the experience of being. With the idea of finitude as a point of departure, Gadamer approached the nature of art from the aesthetic experience, even when it could not offer a definite answer, just as happened to Heidegger in his questioning Metaphysics.

To understand the encounter between a work of art and truth, Gadamer proposed the notion of “game:” in the philosopher’s view, understanding a work of art means getting caught by the game it represents. In this game-like instance, we are not conductors but captives, as we get carried away by the rhythm of music, the beauty of a poem, or the magnificence of a cathedral. The game is not subjective at all: understanding an artwork means getting caught by it. In addition to captivating us, the work of art discovers something essential that refers to itself and ourselves.

A work of art refers to itself because it is a *surplus* of reality, a more revealing reality. To exemplify this, I chose *The Calumny of Apelles* by the Italian artist Sandro Botticelli. In this picture, the observer can see the image of a naked woman looking up to the sky: the allegory of truth. It represents a transcendent ideal of virtue which refers to the religious spirit still present at the beginning of the renaissance when the secularization process began. In turn, the *surplus* of reality conveyed by that image also challenges the observers, making them reflect upon the complex concept of truth.

Summing up, I assert that Gadamer’s principles transcend the nineteenth century methodological monism and examine the artistic experience from the perspective of finitude. Taking it into account, present-day thinkers could implement the same approach to inquiry about the nature of religion, politics, or law, that is, the ‘sciences of the spirit’ in any of its forms. By doing so, they will realize that the question put at the artistic experience proves that art is knowledge, and as such, an indisputable path to truth.

Conclusion

In this text, I have briefly explained the philosophical foundations that legitimize the genealogical relationship between literature and social sciences and, more widely, the relationship between art and science. To achieve this purpose, I resorted to Georg Gadamer’s philosophical guidelines, which validate the truth of the aesthetic experience and other manifestations of the social sciences such as politics, religion, and law. I began my paper with Hardy’s inquiry: “what would become of science without metaphors?” After all the considerations presented here, I would reformulate this question, asking what would become of us without science and without metaphors.

Core Messages

- The assumptions of methodological positivism have long hampered the legitimization of other forms of knowledge, such as art.
- Overlooking the validity of other forms of truth ignores the need for knowledge that every human being holds by nature.

- While specialization has brought about significant progress, excessive atomization of knowledge led to disregarding other realities, such as art or religion.
- The worldview of leading scientists exceeded science fragmentation and admitted other forms of truth besides science.

Acknowledgements The author would like to thank Inés Álvarez for assistance with the process of translating the chapter

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