

EDITORIAL

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Philosophy and Literature "In Situation"

The second issue of *Labyrinth* 2020 is dedicated to the socio-political role of art and aesthetics, as well as the specific relationship between philosophy and literature. Some of the issues discussed here relate to the ideological use and/or abuse of art, and the question of whether art should be engaged or disengaged. These questions, in turn, lead to the need for a more precise philosophical or aesthetic definition of art, and thus to a renewed clarification of the relationship between art and religion, on the one hand, and between literature and philosophy, on the other.

The question of whether art has a social and even socio-political function has always been controversial. As we know, Sartre is considered the "father" of the concept of so-called "engaged" or "committed" literature art, which was already vehemently criticized in the 1940s and 1950s (see Cohen-Solal 1985, 410). In the editorial of the first issue of *Labyrinth* 2020, I pointed out the important distinction that Sartre makes between philosophy and literature or between philosophy and art, but without going into the motives and arguments of socio-political commitment. Here I would like to recall his conception of *littérature engagée* briefly, because of its peculiarity, which consists in the fact that Sartre justifies the axiological aspects of commitment philosophically, i.e., derives them from the ontological conception of freedom and his syncretical anthropology. Thus, for Sartre philosophy provides the basis for the understanding of art and literature.

Already in *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* (1939), Sartre defines the specificity of existence, of being human, as responsibility for one's own being: "to exist is always to *assume* its being; that is, to be responsible for it instead of receiving it from outside as a pebble does. And since the human reality is essentially its own possibility, this existent can itself 'choose' what it will be, achieve itself – or lose itself." (Sartre 1962, 204) This view, which he says to have adopted from Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, becomes decisive for the main thesis of existentialism, namely that existence precedes essence, i.e., that there is no predetermined human nature in the essentialist sense, but that human being, as freedom and choice, must decide for itself what will become of it and of humanity. But it's in *Présentation des Les Temps Modernes* that Sartre presents an elaborated conception of *littérature engagée*. He begins with a critique of bourgeois writers who have been

inoculated against the temptation of irresponsibility that has become a tradition of the literary career. Like stipendiaries, they receive, according to him, money to sigh and, relying on the theories of "l'art pour l'art" they vegetate in society as pure consumers. Insecure in their social position, too afraid to rebel against the bourgeoisie that pays them, they choose to judge their century "from the outside", just as the experimenter remains outside the experimental system. This ancient legacy of irresponsibility explains the impure literary conscience. On the one hand, these writers flaunt themselves in front of the bourgeoisie who reads them, presenting themselves as the guardians of ideal values, but on the other hand, they are ashamed and feel oppressed and complex in front of the workers who do not read them because they were writing while others were fighting. Disgusted with literature as a craft, some writers began to claim that the hidden purpose of literature was to destroy language, the spoken word, so that nothing could be said. But is this possible? Every work and every line has a certain *social meaning*, even those that claim to be the most detached from society. Sartre's thesis of the artist's socio-political commitment, his inability to avoid taking a stand, counters the widespread notion of "pure" art. He therefore explicitly insists that man is not free not to choose, that even abstention is a choice, so that even if man does not do what he wants, he is still responsible for what he is. The responsibility rests on everyone's shoulders, and it would be an absolute self-deception to think that we can maintain any kind of "neutrality. This is particularly important for the writer, who must transmit the "spirit of his time", be its witness, its conscience and active creator. For Sartre, being in situation and being responsible is not something we can avoid, we can only take our destiny and responsibility upon ourselves.

For us, the writer is neither a Vestal nor an Ariel. He is 'in it,' whatever he does marked, compromised, even in the farthest refuge. [...] Since the writer has no means to escape, we want him tightly to embrace his time; it is his unique chance: it made itself for him and he is made for it. One regrets Balzac's indifference to the 1848 Revolution, Flaubert's frightened incomprehension of the Commune. One regrets it for them. There is something there that they missed forever [...] The writer is situated in his time. Every word has consequences. Every silence, too. I hold Flaubert and Goncourt responsible for the repression which followed the Commune because they did not write one line to prevent it. One might say that it was not their business. But was the Calas trial Voltaire's business? Dreyfus' condemnation Zola's? the administration of the Congo, Gide's? Each of these authors, in a special circumstance of his life, measured his responsibility as a writer. The Occupation taught us ours. Since we act on our time by our very existence, we decide that this action will be deliberate. (Sartre 1975, 433) (251-252)

In other words, being human means that we are absolutely free and at the same time "not free not to choose", i.e., we are always involved/engaged in a situation. We can avoid or lie to ourselves that this or that is none of our business, which is nothing but bad faith, or we can be honest to ourselves and the others and take personal responsibility, i.e., make a conscious commitment. But Sartre's conception of *littérature engagée* is not based simply on his conception of freedom, elaborated already in *L'être et le néant*; it aims to be a sketch of his conception of the integral human being (*l'homme total*), who is "totally committed and totally free", a "free man who must be delivered, by widening his possibilities of choice" (ibid., 441). This means that it is necessary to participate to bring forth some changes in society.

Although Sartre insisted, that committed literature will not aim at social change by doing that *politically*, i.e., by serving a party, but by relying on a (philosophical) conception of human being, which recognizes it as the sole absolute and helps literature to "become again what it should never have ceased to be: a social function" (ibid., 435-436), the main critical objections against his conception has been that the politicization of literature leads to the loss of its aesthetic qualities and its self-destruction as art. He was accused of also wanting to engage the visual arts and music, but how is this supposed to work? To avoid such criticisms, in *Qu'est que la littérature?* (1948) Sartre makes a clear distinction between poetry, painting, sculpture, and music on the one hand, and prose (literature) on the other. Unlike prose, which is situated on the level of discourse and therefore works with signs that engage it, poetry and the other arts do not deal with signs but with intrinsic objects and therefore escape engagement. (Sartre 1988, 25-38)

Sartre's conception of commitment literature was not only rejected by right-wing intellectuals. Even revolutionary writers such as Marcuse would later note that the aesthetic transformation is more sensual than conceptual. For Marcuse

Art can express its radical potential only as art, in its own language and image, which invalidate the ordinary language, the "prose du monde." The liberating "message" of art also transcends the actually attainable goals of liberation, just as it transcends the actual critique of society. [...] Art cannot represent the revolution, it can only invoke it in another medium, in an aesthetic form in which the political content becomes *metapolitical*, governed by the internal necessity of art. And the goal of all revolution – a world of tranquility and freedom – appears in a totally unpolitical medium, under the laws of beauty, of harmony. (Marcuse 1972, 103-104)

Adorno was no less categorical, emphasizing that however seriously "committed" a work may be, the aesthetic object and the provision of aesthetic pleasure take precedence over the socio-political engagement: as something invented, created, works of art and literature are indications of the practice from which they distance themselves. Of his detailed

and very differentiated critique of Sartre, which I cannot reproduce here, I find the tension between philosophy and art, which he addresses, particularly important, which does not mean that you necessarily have to share it.

Sartre's plays are vehicles for the author's ideas, which have been left behind in the race of aesthetic forms. They operate with traditional intrigues, exalted by an unshaken faith in meanings which can be transferred from art to reality. But the theses they illustrate, or where possible state, misuse the emotions which Sartre's own drama aims to express, by making them examples. They thereby disavow themselves. When one of his most famous plays ends with the dictum "Hell is other people," it sounds like a quotation from Being and Nothingness, and it might just as well have been "Hell is ourselves." The combination of solid plot and equally solid, extractable idea won Sartre great success and made him, without doubt against his honest will, acceptable to the culture industry. The high level of abstraction of such thesis-art led him into the mistake of letting some of his best works, the film *Les Jeux sont Faits* or the play *Les Mains Sales*, be performed as political events, and not just to an audience of victims in the dark. In much the same way, the current ideology – which Sartre detests – confuses the actions and sufferings of paper leaders with the objective movement of history. [...] Many of his phrases could be parroted by his mortal enemies. The idea that decision as such is what counts would even cover the Nazi slogan that "only sacrifice makes us free." In fascist Italy, Gentile's absolute dynamism made similar pronouncements in philosophy. The flaw in his conception of commitment strikes at the very cause to which Sartre wishes to commit himself. (Adorno 1978, 8)

The problem that Adorno addresses here is a hermeneutical one and, in my opinion, it does not only apply to Sartre. As hermeneuticians, we know that every text is open, even the Bible, and can be interpreted in different ways (Ricoeur 1995, 72). This also applies to plays, films and why not to the other arts. Whether one hears the cry of the slaves in the so-called black music and concludes from this that music can also be committed (see Lere 1970) remains open to the recipient. Weren't some of Charlie Chaplin's films, such as *The Great Dictator* or *A King in New York*, labeled as communist or war-mongering or too political and not artistic enough? It is therefore not surprising that there has recently been a debate about whether Sartre's play *Les Mouches* (*The Flies*) was actually a satire on Vichy in the spirit of the Resistance, or only presented as such in retrospect, if Sartre was indifferent to the Jewish or not during the Occupation of France etc. (see Galster 2001 and 2015; Judaken 2006; *The Jewish Chronicle* 2014).

These discussions should not be forgotten, even in this second issue of *Labyrinth* the emphasis of the social function of art and literature lies elsewhere, e.g., on the aesthetic ideology and its violent inhumanity (Jeremy Spencer), the dilemma be-

tween autonomy of art and its institutionalization (Bruno Trentini), the barbarian practices of art (Gene Fendt), and the art of the everyday vs. aesthetic/philosophical "eventism" (Hugues Choplin). Either way, it's ultimately about the general topic. Either way, it is ultimately about the general theme of how philosophical ideas have influenced art and artists and of how philosophers can in turn learn from art itself.

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