

Reflections on Art and the Tasks of Aesthetics in the Age of Technology

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I. The distinctive character of our times

It is frequently said that we are existing in 'the age of crisis'. However, it is equally just to say that there have been no ages without some crises. And therefore, the word crisis used as an epithet of our times implies a certain critically important character of our age which is different from that of any other age of the past.

As Herakleitos once said, we cannot step twice in the same river. Though the river is same, the water that flows in it is continually new. Similarly, the 'present' in our times is same as the 'present' of the past only in name, but actually it is a section of a historical development quite different from any 'present' of the past. In other words, the crisis or the critically important nature of our times is quite different from that of any other age in the past. It has been brought about by the development of natural science and machinery, the invention of which proves that man is not only 'homo sapiens' but also 'homo faber'.

At the early primitive stage, man was threatened by nature. But nowadays, through science, so many of natural phenomena have been or can be brought under man's control that man is threatened by his own use of nature and man-made structures. In connection with these trends, there arose many views and discussions that admit the specific character of our own day as 'technology'.

What is the distinctive character of such a crisis, then? I think that it is the tendencies towards 'the bereavement of humanity' and 'the destruction of nature'. The Industrial Revolution in modern times once seemed to have brought the welfare of mankind, but the rapid progress of natural science and engineering industries has given man the haughty self-confidence that he can convert the natural world, and even can turn almost any impossibility to a possibility. Now he attaches so great an importance to the capability of machinery and technics as to obscure the value of man himself who uses them; he is becoming slave to his tools very rapidly. This is what I mean by the bereavement of humanity. And also, injudicious experiments in the field of natural science and the rapid progress of engineering industries have quickened the pace of the destruction and and the pollution of the beautiful world of nature in which we live.

Nowadays, we can hardly find the ideal man of benevolence that Confucius praised or the man of beauty-and-goodness that the ancient Greeks strove to be. If we ever find one, it is only in the world of classics or fairy tales. And the beautiful and peaceful world of nature does no longer exist except in the remotest spots on the earth or in the landscape paintings. I do not mean to say that we should go back to the primitive condition, ignoring realities. However stern and sterile

it may seem, we have to accept the fatal reality that has developed in the course of historical necessities.

II. Advantages and disadvantages of the age of technology

No one can deny that our technology is a tremendous development, that it is useful in every field of our material culture, giving countless advantages in every phase of our daily life. Its greatest advantages and contributions are 'the economy of labour' and 'the reduction of working hours'.

However, in contrast to the advantages in the physical and external aspects of our daily life, it is undeniable that the development of technology inflicts injurious effects upon the spiritual and internal aspects of our life.

Economy of labour entailed 'laziness', and reduction of working hours urged the tendency towards 'craftiness'. This implies deviation from 'dilligence and sincerity', which are excellent virtue of our life.

Here, I would like to look into the original meaning of the term 'labour', as used for the first time in the following passage from 'Life of Hua-tuo' a famous physician in 'San-kuo-chi'.

"Hua-tuo said to Pu, 'The human body needs *labour*, but it should not go too far."⁽¹⁾

In this context, the term 'labour' did not imply the bodily toil to earn livelihood or hard work or travail as in these days; it meant 'a moderate exercise' for health in the medical and hygienic sense.

(1) *San Kuo Chi*. Bk. 29, 'History of Wei'.

Like the Western proverb, "Mens sana in corpore sano", it is in a healthy body maintained by a moderate exercise that a sound mind dwells.

Both in the East and West, the ideal and perfect model of human life needs an equilibrium of physical and mental health. Labour, even in its present-day sense of toils, is indispensable to our life. It may even be said to be sacred, but the trouble is that nowadays labour is done not by man but mostly by mechanical powers. This makes man lazy and crafty, makes him deviate from the habit of diligence and sincerity. Here, we are to recollect Chuang-chou's famous epigram;

"Machinery (mechanical devices) makes contrived situation and contrived situation makes a contriving mind."⁽²⁾

This epigram teaches us that once a man begins to rely upon a handy means, he ends by turning even himself into a means, leaving no basis of value, which is indispensable to all works of art.

III. Art and labour

Either in bodily toil or in mental work, if a man wants to bear a good fruit, he has to exert himself profusely. This process is hard and painful. However, once the work is done, he comes to experience joy and pleasure. This conversion of pain into pleasure is achieved by labour. As in an old saying, "Labor est etiam ipsa voluptas", we find profound pleasure in laborious achievement. In this case the pleasure of achievement is proportionate to the labour in the process. We have

(2) *Chuang Chou*. Ch. 12, 'Heaven and Earth'.

evidence of this, in the facts of experience. And also, "Laborare est orare". If we regard labour as an expression of redemption and gratefulness to God through our physical toils, labour will be a means to bring the peace of mind and happiness or 'beatitudo'. We might even say that it is 'a sacred ritual'. In the creative work, joy comes as a crystalization of the sweat of brow in the process of making it. Therefore, the time of labour, the process is the most valuable time in our life.

The process of artistic creation is not an exception. As Etienne Souriau says, "art is labour".⁽³⁾ The man who has never really felt, understood and experienced labour is not fully qualified to evaluate artistic works, the creation of which often requires extreme labour of mind and soul of the artist. The creation of a work of art justly said to be its birth. Just as the mother of a new-born baby forgets her labour and gazes at her baby with pure ecstasy, so the artist is rewarded by a joy after his long labour. The significance and worth of an artist's life lies in the arduous labour of creation. It is in the creative activities that the artist attain to the spiritual height of his being. In this sense, it may be said that the process of artistic creation is sublime and sacred labour.

However, as I have mentioned briefly above, in our age of technology, so much of our labour has been replaced by the mechanical power that we reach the end too soon without experiencing the joy of making things, and being used to this, we tend more and more to seek ease and laziness. This habit is always vicious for our earnest life. We all know from our experience that it always breeds falsehood,

(3) Etienne Souriau, *Clefs pour l'esthétique*. Seghers, 1970. p.135.

immorality and misery in our life. If this habit comes into the realm of art, the result will be to be interested in the product and regard the process of artistic creation as a necessary evil to be avoided.⁽⁴⁾ Art will approach plagiarism, corruption and collapse. Here, the centre of my attention is not the mechanical means that the artist uses, but his attitude and moral in the creative process. I believe that aesthetics of our own day should consider this prospect most sincerely.

IV. Reconsideration of 'the self' and reappraisal of 'humanism'

As I have briefly mentioned above, the critical condition of our own day lies in the tendencies towards the bereavement of humanity and the destruction of nature. These problems have been discussed frequently by many scientists and philosophers. In the field of aesthetics, we must consider how we can help overcome this critical situation.

I think that the reconsideration of 'the self' and reappraisal of 'humanism' will serve the purpose. In the Western world, Aurelius Augustinus expounded that "Si dubitat, cogitat⁽⁵⁾". And 1,200 years later, René Descartes, saying "Cogito ergo sum",⁽⁶⁾ confirmed his own existence.

The former very nearly anticipated the modern principle that one's thought involves one's existence, pronouncing that one's doubt implies one's existence. And the latter, in the process of trying to doubt

(4) Tomonobu Imamichi, *La technique et les problèmes d'esthétique*, in 'Vers une esthétique sans entrave, Melanges Mikel Dufrenne'. Union générale d'édition, 1975. p.207-222.

(5) Augustinus, *De Trinitate*. X. 14.

(6) René Descartes, *Discours de la methode*. VI.

everything, found one basic, indubitable truth that our self who doubts exists. Thus, both men discovered the self in the certainty implied by his intellectual doubting, in the finite internal world of the self as the subject of doubting or thinking.

On the other hand, Confucius found the existence of the self in relation of man to man in the human society. His central concerns were, firstly the 'superior man' who develops his mind to the utmost and nurtures his nature, and secondly a 'well-ordered society'. He wanted a society governed by men of virtue who, through personal examples and moral persuasion rather than by means of law or punishment, would bring about people's welfare and social order. Confucius' humanism justly lies here. His humanism emphasized morality as the way to attain true manhood. And this moral character is developed in one's self and in one's relations with others.⁽⁷⁾ In this sense, his humanism is quite different from the humanism based on an anthropomorphic view of the world as in the ancient Greece. It is also different from the humanism based on the realization of the value of man and the discovery of the individual in his actual present and awakened from the tide of thought in medieval view of the world focussed upon a future life. The humanism of Confucius is characterized by the 'benevolence' which forms the basis of the fundamental spirit of practical morality attained by the full mature of character in the superior man, wise, humane, courageous, and motivated by righteousness instead of profit, and who studies the way and loves men. Confucius in his 'Annals' teaches us that benevolence is no other

(7) Chang Chi Yun, *The Essence of Chinese Culture*. China Academy, 1973. p. 5 ff. *A Life of Confucius*. China Academy, 1975. p. 34 ff.

than to love all men,⁽⁸⁾ and it is not in the external world but it dwells in one's heart.⁽⁹⁾

Accordingly, it is not to be sought afar but at hand, it can be attained whenever a man endeavours to practice it. And he admits that, without benevolence, all proprieties and arts are in vain.⁽¹⁰⁾ He attaches a great importance to the life which is based on benevolence as the entire virtue of the heart and to the moral character of the artist instead of the superficial dexterity of his art. I believe that such teachings of Confucius point to an eternal truth that runs through all ages and countries of the world.

However, its forms of practice can be different in different times and countries according to their customs. They may be adjusted to meet the demands of the technological society in our own day. In this sense, the concept of 'eco-ethica'⁽¹¹⁾ advocated by Tomonobu Imamichi has a profound significance. I think that such a consideration has a prime significance in discussing the problems of art or the tasks of aesthetics at the present time characterized by the bereavement of humanity.

(8) *Confucian Annalects*. Yen Yuan, 22.

"Fan Chih asked about benevolence. The Master said, 'It is to love all men.'"

(9) *Ibid.* Shu R, 29.

"The Master said, 'Is benevolence a thing remote? I wish to be benevolent, and lo ! benevolence is at hand.'"

(10) *Ibid.* Pa Yih, 3.

"The Master said, 'If a man be without the benevolence proper to humanity, what has he to do with the rites of propriety? If a man be without the benevolence proper to humanity, what has he to do with music?'"

(11) Tomonobu Imamichi, *Studia comparata de aethetica*. Acta Instituti Ca-lonologiae. Facultas Litterae, Universitas Tokio, 1976. p. 29 ff.

V. The tasks of aesthetics

Now, I would like to introduce here three tasks of aesthetics which seems to be appropriate to the situation of our own day.

Those are (1) Aesthetics of Man, (2) Aesthetics of Environment, (3) Aesthetics of Life.

Firstly, these tasks are necessary in view of the greatness of the danger which threatens 'the existence of human being' and 'the conservation of his environment'.

In the Chapter of 'The Great Declaration' of 'Shu Ching', there is the following passage;

"Heaven and Earth is the parent of all creatures. And of all creatures man is the most highly endowed."⁽¹²⁾

Obviously, man is most intelligent of all creatures. This is why man is justly called the lord of all creatures. Man alone has the faculties to create culture.

However, man seems to be indifferent to this fact. We should remember the simple truth that all that man does is done by himself. In science, in art and in every-thing else, man is the doer. Aesthetics is no exception. Aesthetic inquiries are to be done not by aesthetics for itself, but by man for his happy and worthwhile life. The ultimate subject and aim of all the human activities is man himself. Otherwise, all our endeavour will be an empty and meaningless theory. And as Ernst Cassirer said,⁽¹³⁾ knowledge of the self has been the highest

(12) *Shu Ching*. The Book of Chou, The Great Declaration, Pt. I.

(13) Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*. Yale University Press, 1944. p.I.

aim of philosophical inquiry, and in all conflicts between different philosophical schools this aim has remained invariable and unshaken. But it seems that we are apt to be indifferent to these facts.

We must also keep in mind that man as the subject of existence has his body and spirit and lives in his environment and that man as a social being forms a social group and lives in his society. As a creature living in his environment, man is inevitably influenced both by his natural environment and by his social and cultural environment. The importance of his environment justly lies here.

And secondly, in each of the three tasks, 'an ideal model' of the beautiful man, his environment and his life needs to be formed. An ideal is something imagined in a state of perfection, a model. It exists only in idea. Accordingly, it will never be realized perfectly.

Nevertheless, an ideal is something without which there can be no happy and worthwhile life. If a man possesses a lofty ideal and endeavours to attain it, his life will be full of hope and worth living. If we entertain such an ideal of beauty in our mind and constantly do our best to pursue it in our daily life, we will find our lives worth living.

The first task, 'Aesthetics of Man', is then to form an ideal model of what a beautiful man ought to be. This task involves the tasks of bringing up an ideal beautiful man through aesthetic education or artistic activities.

'Superior Man' praised by Confucius, 'Kalokagathia' in ancient Greece, Schiller's 'die schöne Seele', or Herbert Read's 'Education through Art', etc. may serve as a good model.

However, our ideal, beautiful man has to be a man living in the

age of technology with his own ethical view proper to the nation or the society to which he belongs. Each nation or society has its own good and beautiful morals and manners proper to it, and we must not overlook its importance in discussing the educational problems of a beautiful man.

The second task, 'Aesthetics of Environment' involves the natural and social environments. It also involves the moral temperament of the society. The former is related with the art of landscaping or the so-called environmental arts. The latter is more important. Confucius said in his 'Annalects';

"The Master said, 'To live in the way of benevolence in one's neighbourhood is beauty. If one does not choose to live in the way of benevolence, how can he be wise?'"⁽¹⁴⁾

Confucius thought much of the beautiful moral temperament of the society to be formed by the beautiful and good-hearted man, and he said that the man of good sense must select a good place to live. He attached great importance to the social environment. The importance of the environment was also emphasized by Mencius.⁽¹⁵⁾ He said that man's nature was originally good, and evil was due not to one's nature

(14) *Confucian Annalects*. Le Jin, 1.

(15) *Mencius*. Kao Tsze. Pt. I. 2.

"Mencius replied, 'Water indeed will flow indifferently to the east or west, but will it flow indifferently up or down? The tendency of man's nature to good is like the tendency of water to flow downwards. There are none but have this tendency to good, just as all water flows downwards. Now by striking water and causing it to leap up, you may make it go over your forehead, and, by damming and leading it, you may force it up a hill;— but are such movements according to nature of water? It is the force applied which causes them. Then men are made to do what is not good, their nature is dealt with in this way.'"

but to bad environment, lack of education, and casting oneself away.

This task should be discussed also in relation to the specific natural condition, the ethical view and the consciousness proper to each country.

The third task, 'Aesthetics of Life' is to inquire into the ideal model of a beautiful life which beautiful man lives in a beautiful environment. This involves the consideration of the ethical view and the view of life proper to the nation to which the man belongs.

The following passage in the 'Annalects' suggests an ideal beautiful life based on the ethical view of a specific society.

"The Master said, 'Take the way of man. Be based on virtue. Stay in benevolence. Enjoy in art.'"⁽¹⁶⁾

This epigram speaks of an ideal life based on the rules for the full mature of personality.

However, we are existing in the age of technology which is different from Confucius' day. Our ideal beautiful life should be adjusted to meet the demands of our own day.

These three tasks are related and form circle. The establishment of an ideal model of a beautiful man leads to the formation of an ideal beautiful environment in which a social group of beautiful men lives, and reaches the realization of beautiful life. And then, this task turns back to that of an ideal beautiful man as the subject of his beautiful life in a beautiful environment.

And these three tasks are complementary to one another. The beautiful man is influenced by his environment and lives in his envi-

(16) *Confucian Annalects*. Shu R, 6.

ronment. Therefore, the task of establishing an ideal beautiful man should be discussed in relation to the other two tasks. And each of other two tasks are to be discussed in the same manner.

In the above, I have only given a few suggestions about approaching some of the problems which aesthetics confronted in our age of technology.