

Point de Suture

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Science, Technology, Fine Arts and Industry, the current representations of which force us to perceive as clearly separated, not to say partitioned or sometimes even opposed activity fields,, originally were considered as different facets of a single set of practices that the Middle Ages used to call the Arts, and that more or less covered all human activities except agriculture, hunting and gathering.

Etymology as well as texts allow one to check that the different firelds of the Arts were not perceived as individual disciplines before the 17th and 18th centuries, as may be seen from the vast unitarian project led by Diderot and D'Alembert of the Encyclopedia, in other terms, according to the subtitle, a Reasoned Dictionary of Sciences, Arts and Trades.

The separation of Fine Arts and Science which ruined the previously common stream of the Arts was only achieved in the 19th century with the generalisation of Industry. Since this moment distances only increased between Science, Technology, Fine Arts and Industry and, in a tree-like manner the crack further propagated within these disciplines themselves, and even within their subparts.

The most common explanation of this evolution lies in the myth of the Tower of Babel, although its religious origin is rarely reminded : development and specialization would have resulted in a growing mutual misunderstanding, a regrettable but necessary drawback that we should learn to live with.

One may however have some doubts about this point.

Not only because the supposed basis of such a resignation is of religious origin, but deeper, because it is rooted in only one religious tradition that cannot stand for all of them.

And anyway, this reference to the myth of Babel would not suffice to explain the movement of distrust and disrepute that stroke Fine Arts, Sciences, Technology and Industry one after the other in the last two centuries.

As regards Fine Arts, the sort of ignorance and specific kind of contempt that is now attached to them in the popular, commercial, technical and scientific circles , started to spread as soon as the romantic period and reached a kind of standard level with Dada in the beginning of the XXe century. The resulting situation regarding Fine Arts is quite the opposite of the interest and support they enjoyed in Florence in the Quattrocento.



Sablier – Pierre Petiot & Richard. Misiano-Genovese

A similar disease has gradually struck philosophy, to the point that in most circles today, it seems enough to label as philosophical any consideration that looks somewhat unusual or the usefulness of which does not seem immediately obvious, to feel entitled to discard it without any further examination.

A comparable although different movement started to develop after world war II regarding sciences. It was not contempt but a general attitude of fear and distrust, which might have been considered as a result of the recent use of atomic weapons, if it had not quickly come to impact indiscriminately all sciences, and not just nuclear physics.

In the years 1965-1970 disenchantment spread to the products of Industry under the concept of the Consumer Society.

In the following years, the development of Industry and Technology itself were questioned by what has since been called Ecology.

At the end of the process, the only aspect of culture that had eluded so many successive waves of critics happened to be Religion.

Considered on a daily basis, this evolution in the representations seemed natural, just as seemed natural the semantic shift, by which the French word culture has come to simply mean "human". So that finally everything happened to be cultural and vice versa, and it should also be noted that this shift has been accompanied by a considerable extension of the entertainment industry.

Yet, in spite of this evolution, there were several historical periods when culture had a quite different meaning and when it seemed obvious to all that the Arts had no other purpose than human development.

However, during these times, quite on the opposite of the image that now has become widespread, there was nothing such as a general feeling or idea of a systematic and inexorable march towards progress.

Instead, the general attitude was a thoughtful and reasoned movement, mindful of the risks, involving judgment and collective decision and its core engine was not only based on novelty but also on the effectiveness of a permanent critical activity.

When considered as a whole and from some distance, the current disenchantment regarding Art, Sciences, Technology and Industry expresses the fact that, despite their efforts and ceaseless agitation, men are not very satisfied with what they make. All they had undertaken in order to perceive, feel, think and act further and higher now seems all too often to lead to opposite results.

This situation may seem paradoxical, since the eclipse of the gods has graced men with a mandatory quota of 24 hours of freedom per day. It may be seen as a result of this ironical process by which dialectic eventually turns all things into their opposites. Or one may discern in this evolution the movement of alienation by which human activity becomes foreign. Actually, all sorts of fatalities may be invoked. Fatalities are always at hand and easy going.

But it may also be that wisdom is not on the side of resignation. It may be that it would be wiser to simply try to understand. Maybe would it be enough not to accept and to rekindle the embers of a dialogue between Science and Arts¹ to bring the contours, of course never free of errors or of risks, of some sort of perspective.

Such an attempt may well look as being out of place in the present historical period, it may appear as useless. Why care as long as it has a chance to be beautiful.

It may also be that there is no other way out.

1 A dialogue that remained possible at least until the early twentieth century, as may be seen from the relations between Valéry, Mallarmé et Poincaré

