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**Didier Maleuvre. *The Art of Civilization, a Bourgeois History*.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016**

Reviewed by Pedro Geiger

The Art of Civilization, a Bourgeois History is an excellent, erudite book. After the *Introduction*, its first chapter, *Birth of the Aesthetic*, deals with the concept of “civilization” and with the role of cities in the production of “civilization” — the product of the citizens, of the bourgeoisie. Even when the Church or the Aristocracy was running European societies, the making of the goods of the civilization was in the hands of the bourgeoisie. The author undertakes a deep analysis of classical Greek production. *Birth of the Aesthetic* divides historical times between the oldest periods, when art was produced without the existence of the concept of “art,” and the periods which followed the formation of such a concept. Thus, the role of the classical Greeks in creating the idea of beauty is presented.

Didier Maleuvre prefers to use the word “civilization” as meaning “pertaining to the city.” Comparing it with the more static term “culture,” which includes rural and folk environments, the author sees civilization as expressing an instance where one looks differently, more dynamically, *inward* and *outward*, to the *past* and the *future*. As to the place of art production in the process of civilization, he declares that “art indeed is useful to civilization, and to one civilization in particular”; the many forms and uses of art in western societies “served a *demystifying* function advancing a rationalized (some say “disenchanted,” others, “bourgeois”) frame of mind which, in the specific sense detailed below, we shall call “civilized.”

“The purpose is to show how the civilizing mind (i.e., the view from the city, the town-dweller’s lorgnette) shapes, and is shaped by, artistic expression. More polemically, the aim is to see how art since ancient Greece mostly (though not exclusively, and certainly not uncritically) advances a mentality we should now call by its name, to wit, *bourgeois*.”

“Art looks at things not just for what they are, but for what they are not and what they could be. The city does strange things to the mind. The eighteenth-century *philosophes* said that it civilizes it; more neutrally, we could say that it citifies it; and poetically, we will say that it aestheticizes it.”

The eight following chapters of the book describe a sequence of civilizations during different historical periods, as being directed “toward the rationalizations of mentalities.” These chapters are named *The Time of Images*, *Into the Time of Art*, *The Time of Makers*, *The Time of Work*, *The Time of Knowledge*, *The Time of Taste*, *The Time of Ideologies* and *The Time of Production*. The book concludes with the chapter *Triumph of the Aesthetic*.

Chapter 2, *The Time of Images*, is dedicated to the period of feudalism in Europe, when one saw a decline of the cities, and when Christianity became the source of artistic production. At its inception in Europe, “Christianity spread down the roads and routes of the city-building Pax Romana. As an economic and cultural vector, the city ... was a spent force, surviving mostly in the spiritualized medium of theology, such as Augustine’s *City of God* (fourth century).”

Until the ninth century, the Church was the force driving the civilization, and it promoted the production of images, such as the images of Christ. The diffusion of images expressed the insertion into Christianity of Neo-Platonism, with its principle of the importance of Form.

Chapter 3, *Into the Time of Art*, deals with the Middle Age in Europe, with its Renaissance and with its post-Renaissance. The chapter divides the styles into a Romanesque Middle Age and a Gothic Middle Age. This is a time when cities begin to revive. “Cave-like architecture was out; now was the age of the cliff—and forest—like building. The Romanesque emphasized tight-knit community, the Gothic romanticized transcendent yearnings. ... The new cathedral wasn’t just a big space for big crowds; it was a divining rod for the imagination. It made religion intensely spectacular, bid the gaze to soar. ... The edifice itself proclaimed the city mindset — competitive, experimental, and assertive. Assertive because the city, by its very existence, confirms the power of men-made environment over nature, and the cathedral symbolized newfound confidence in man’s power to create a world made and designed by us for our use and enjoyment.”

“The Middle Ages knew the arts of rhetoric, of drawing, of sculpting. These *arts* generally looked back on precedent or social authority: they were methods. *Ars* became art when creative authority drew inward; when the scholar-teacher betook himself to double and to rebuild. The scholastics rediscovered the art of thinking, thinking not merely as the transmission of knowledge but as production. The shift from transmission to production parallels the transition from agrarian work to city-life artisanship.” The chapter ends with comments about the arts of poetry and singing.

The Time of Makers, the fourth chapter, covers the lives and work of major figures in the arts, philosophy and politics, from the 14th to the 16th centuries, when mercantilism flourished, and the port cities were developing and creating the Hanseatic League. At this time the Renaissance started new cycles of Art and began the production of science, and man’s consciousness of his individuality appeared. Among the figures whose lives and works are analyzed in this chapter are Boccaccio, Dante, Donatello, Durer, Francis Bacon, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Machiavelli, Montaigne, Petrarch, Raphael, Shakespeare, and Thomas More.

The Time of Work, the fifth chapter, covers the Reformation, the appearance of the Protestants, and their influence in art. It was a time when paintings started to be sold to the bourgeoisie, and representation shifted from religious figures to common people, and to still life (*natures mortes*). The rise of the *Dutch Golden Age* (1590-1680), with painters as Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Brueghel, is analyzed as valuing “accuracy over grandiosity.”

The sixth chapter, *The Time of Knowledge*, points to the religious wars in Europe as a result of the Reformation, but, on the positive side, to a knowledge revolution, “a revolution inside the concept of knowledge itself.” Knowledge is not a loyalty to dogma, but a search for *veracity*. “New knowledge observes, tests hypotheses, and never declares itself above error.” Doubt is embodied in the classic Hamlet exclamation “to be or not to be.”

The end of the religious wars in Europe came with the emergence of the Nation-State as the transcendent power during the 17th century, the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 being its legal instrument, along with the abolition of the Hanseatic League. Emphasizing the concept of motion, the chapter points to the changes in thought influenced by Copernicus’ findings about the Earth’s rotation. The chapter deals with Bacon, Caravaggio, Cervantes, Descartes, Galileo, Lope de Vega, Montaigne, Pascal and Shakespeare, among others. It also comments on the Baroque.

Chapter seven, *The Time of Taste*, starts with the “Quarrel between Ancients and Moderns” at the end of the 18th century, and with the appearance of concepts such as “modernity” and “academic.” It was a time when “the bourgeoisie became the major economic player, so its empiricism, its taste for clarity and due process, for material security and peaceful compromise took center stage.” The chapter covers the Enlightenment and notes that it was only in 1750 that the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten coined the term “aesthetics,” derived from ancient Greek. Among those the chapter considers are Diderot, Kant, Hobbes, Hume, Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau, the Marquis de Sade, Smith, and Voltaire.

The Time of Ideologies is the eighth chapter. It deals with revolutions that express the decline of the aristocracy and the emergence of mass movements, including the American (1776) and the French (1789) revolutions. It shows the relations between these revolutions and movements in arts, philosophy and sciences, citing and analyzing Balzac, Beethoven, Bell, Burke, Marie Curie, David, Goethe, Hegel, Hertz, von Humboldt, Keats, Mozart, Pasteur, Schelling, Schiller, and Wagner. It mentions the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 and subsequent world expositions.

The Time of Production is the title of chapter nine. It addresses the advance of *realism*, a movement parallel to the growth of *industrial capitalism* and the formation of the *proletariat* class, a class opposed to the bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie itself generated a significant division between its *high, middle* and *low bourgeois* layers, according to differing levels of income. The two last layers and the proletariat formed the *people*, and an idea of art produced for the people appeared. In a list that runs from Courbet and Goya to the Impressionists and to the Cubists, one finds, among others, the names of Cézanne, Daumier with his caricatures, Degas, Gauguin, Manet, Modigliani, Monet, Picasso, Renoir, Seurat and Van Gogh.

This is also a time of the birth of the political socialist movements, with Proudhon, Marx and Engels. The author explains why, in his view, art cannot be politicized in the way imagined by the left and the right. “The goal of politics is to maintain or change a concrete social situation. Politics operates in the immanent and the feasible. Art is reflection, ... a work of art is a mirror, and a mirror image exists on a different plane of reality. It takes a holiday from the here and now. This holiday creates spectators — which is not what political activists should be.” The chapter also deals with philosophers such as Bergson and Nietzsche, and it gives attention to the introduction of Art Education as a way to bring the masses to Art.

The tenth and final chapter, *Triumph of the Aesthetic*, deals with the twentieth century, one characterized by works on art in impressively high numbers. “The problem with the twentieth century isn’t that art was used to beautify politics ... the core problem was that politics and morality were enclosed by an aesthetic view of life.” The author sees the conflicts between artists and communist regimes as linked to the bourgeois nature of Art, to the liberty of the city, and to the communist opposition to the bourgeoisie while praising the nation state. The book finishes with consideration of present conditions and the possibilities of the future. “What is space? What is time? What is energy? How does history move? What is gender? What is consciousness, society, religion, art? Who or what are we?”

New lines in arts, as of the German Bauhaus, the Russian Concretes, Dada, Futurism, Minimalism, Pop Art, and Surrealism are discussed in this chapter, as are more current developments in philosophy and science. The names of individuals and their works include, among others, Aragon, Apollinaire, Duchamp, Freud, Gorky, Le Corbusier, Keynes, Kierkegaard, Paul Klee, Malevich, Thomas Mann, Stravinsky and Warhol.

A very rich bibliography, containing material from Greek philosophers to contemporary scholars, completes the contents of the book. As a small criticism, one can wonder at the omission of Heidegger in the bibliography and the absence of a discussion regarding cinema and Video Art, although there is a brief mention of Buster Keaton. Regardless, the ideas presented in this book represent a very strong contribution to our debates about the definition of what is civilization.