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The Sociological Location of Art

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An outstanding expert on comparative civilizations, Vytautas Kavolis was born in 1930 in Kaunas, Lithuania. He left Lithuania in the wake of the Soviet occupation in 1944 and lived first in West Germany and then in the United States. He attended the University of Wisconsin–Madison and the University of Chicago, receiving his master's degree and doctorate from Harvard University.

He then taught at Tufts University and Dickinson College. He was named Charles A. Dana Professor of Comparative Civilizations and Professor of Sociology at Dickinson from 1964 until his death in 1996. During this time he also served as a visiting professor at The New School for Social Research in New York City and at Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas.

Prof. Kavolis was a leading early member of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, when the organization crossed the ocean from its source of inspiration in Europe to find its permanent home in the United States. He was named to its executive board from 1974 to 1977 and elected as its president for a term running from 1977 to 1983. Following his second term as president, Prof. Kavolis served until his death as co-editor of the Comparative Civilizations Review.

He was the recipient of Lithuania's National Prize for Culture and Art in 1993 and was the author of well over 100 articles and sixteen books, including “Artistic Expression: A Sociological Analysis” (1968) and “History on Art's Side: Social Dynamics in Artistic Efflorescences” (1972), both published by Cornell University Press. It has been observed that Prof. Kavolis was comfortable with multiple perspectives, not just three or four, but eighteen or even twenty-two, and he often revised them, seeming to have new schema every year.

The following paper has been selected from amongst several unpublished papers which were recently and fortuitously discovered at home by Dr. Kavolis’s wife, Rita Kavolis, and made available to the journal.

We are delighted to receive and publish it but note that the references lack bibliographic citation. Nonetheless, the piece is trenchant and, in my judgment as a professor of American Studies and Communications, illustrative of the complex contemporary relations involving the arts, public perception of the arts, and the use of the arts by society.

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There are ultimately only two possible ways to conceive of art sociologically.

In the non-historical (or "labeling") view, art must be conceived as that which is defined by a society, or an artistically relevant part thereof, as art. The work itself may or may not claim to be art; it is "recognized" as such by those with an authority to do so (in modern societies, by artists and art critics).

This definition implies that art did not exist in preliterate societies until it was recognized by modern critics, since what now appears to be art has been treated mostly as religious or utilitarian artifacts. In the absence of the label "art," imposed by us, these objects are indeed only utilitarian or religious artifacts. Art arises merely in our perception of them, but does not inhere in the objects themselves (M. Peckham).

This view implies that art has no nature of its own that is to any extent common across time and space, but represents merely an arbitrary category of perception. Certain objects acquire a quality, a-having-been-defined-as-art, and that is what is important about them.

The only relevant questions are:

- To what kinds of objects has this quality been attributed at particular times?
- Why did societies attribute the quality of "artness" to different kinds of objects at different times?

Since the labeling perspective implies that anything could have been labeled as art, if we find that certain ways of such labeling either did not arise at all or have not persisted, we have a basis for a less relativistic notion of art.

The second, historical view of art is based on the assumption that art is that which survives a series of tests given to objects that function as art (whether the notion of art is, or is not, recognized in the societies in which it has been produced). When such an object is initially presented to the view of people other than the artist who made it, it could be viewed as representing a "claim to art." When it is accepted by large numbers of people in a society, or by its established elites, or by other artists and art critics, it could be said to have become a popularly or authoritatively or professionally validated work of art.

But the ultimate test of its artistic quality is whether it can transcend the boundaries of time and space and be historically and cross-culturally validated. The performing arts, unless performances are recorded in some manner, cannot, to be sure, be historically validated in the way in which the "creative" (or rather objectifying) arts can. But this is no reason for conceiving of all art in terms that are peculiar only to the performing arts.

The historical conception of art implies that art represents a universe with some shared characteristics that are everywhere recognizable as artistic (whether the concept of art is consciously identified or not).
Experimental psychological studies provide some support for this view. They reveal, for example, that traditional Japanese potters agree to a high degree with American art students on the relative merits of a series of works of art shown to them. The agreement is greater than that between American art and non-art students (I. L. Child). Thus, exposure to the practice of art appears to produce a transcultural consensus on the quality of artistic attainments.

Practice breaks the bonds of ethnocentric local traditions, which are therefore apt to be more influential over the behavior of art publics than over the artists themselves—a relatively unrecognized source of the "alienation" of the artist.

This practice-generated consensus on where art can be seen to exist has several characteristics:

First, it is partial. Each society and period has its own particularistic criteria as well, by which it judges works of art. The patrons and publics of art (and even art critics) probably insist on particularistic criteria more than do the artists themselves. Hence local criteria should have greater weight in judging works of art to the extent that the artistic enterprise is dominated by non-artists. This is one reason for the great fluctuations in the economic evaluations of works of art (Reitlinger).

Second, the artistic consensus is hierarchical. When artists are left alone, they can, in the long run, roughly agree on the ranking of individual works of art. This happens even in egalitarian societies, such as the Eskimo or the Australian aboriginal, where nearly all men participate in artistic activities, but differences in the quality of achievements, and in individual capacities, are recognized (J. Helm). The notion of a hierarchy of artistic qualities is therefore not a superimposition of a social hierarchy on artistic experiences.

Third, the consensus on art has expandable boundaries. Works that the artists of a society have been unfamiliar with can be incorporated, with a discriminating sensitivity to their merits, into their notion of the "field" of art.

The entrance of new claims-to-art generate evaluative efforts, clashes of particularistic values, the rise of artistic schools and movements. But such claims are ultimately tested in terms of the total structure of the field of art.

In turn, this structure evolves by testing itself through the evaluations it gives to works claiming the right to enter it. The system of art evolves over time and it has blurred boundaries; but, contrary to some recent theorists (M. Peckham, J. Cage), it does have a nature specific to itself.

The nature of the system of art seems to derive from sustained experience with the practical problems of making objects or acts that perform the functions of art and from a sense, which craftsmanship seems to generate, of what transcends mere craftsmanship. Getzels and
Csikszentmihalyi have shown, in a contemporary American sample, that craftsmanship by itself is more highly regarded, in judging works of art, by non-experts than by artists and art scholars.

The Aesthetic Function

Since craftsmanship is a purposive activity, it appears that the art public is more apt to judge art in terms of some presumed purpose, while artists judge it in terms of what transcends any presumed purpose. If it is ultimately the consensus of artists that determines what is included in the field of art, artistic value must lie in something that is not recognized, even by the artists themselves, as "the purpose of art."

It follows that works of art cannot be understood in terms of manifest functions they have been specifically intended to perform. Where they function most purely as works of art, they perform latent functions -- unintended and unrecognized. See R. Merton for the distinction between manifest and latent functions.

If this observation is valid, art could be regarded as the generalized system of the society for the performance of unintended and unrecognized (but nevertheless needed) psychocultural functions.

If these functions are effectively performed by other systems of the society, art can remain implicit in them. To the extent that other systems become explicit about their functioning and rationalize it, art has to emerge as an autonomous system. Art's relationships with religion and psychotherapy, as well as diverse ambiguities in perceiving it, can be explained by this conception of the aesthetic function. A variety of consequences follow from it.

First, if its very essence arises from performing unrecognized functions, art must be a less self-conscious, less "rationalized" and indeed less professionalized activity than any other in the cultural sphere.

Second, since it must be ready to perform unrecognized functions as they unpredictably arise, the system of the arts cannot be a specialized system, adapted to a particular set of circumstances. Rather it must remain generalized, to some extent maladapted to the existing state of society and functioning in a wide range of areas of ambiguity. But it is precisely such systems that are capable of social evolution (Sahlins and Service), implanting structured capacities to perform unintended and unrecognized functions into it.

Third, the survival over time, and perhaps the aesthetic quality, of works of art depends on how wide a range of unintended and unrecognized functions it can perform. It is because they have a wide aesthetic range, in the sense that great works of art function for us even when we do not know what exactly they have meant for their producers (e.g., preliterate art). Latent functioning is not dependent on the grasp of intended meanings.
Fourth, it could be argued that an effective organization of any latent psychosocial function constitutes the aesthetic aspect of the social or psychological system in which it is embedded. Successful works of art could then be viewed as embodiments of insight into, and objectifications of, "effectively constructed" but hidden psychocultural processes; and also as rehearsals, structural models, and foci of crystallization for an effective organization of otherwise raw and chaotic psychosocial processes. The linkage between "art" and "life" becomes particularly intimate at this point.

But if aesthetic value depends on consciously unrecognized functions, does an explication of these functions, by a critic, not erase the aesthetic experience (or prevent it from arising for those who will, in the future, be conscious of the functions the work of art presumably performs)?

Not necessarily -- if the work of art, after one of its functions has been explicated, can still function effectively in other unrecognized and unintended ways.

Artistic, especially literary, criticism could be viewed as a struggle against the (hoped-for) inexhaustibility of great works of art. One could leave a work of art in peace, and perhaps forget it, once all of its possible functions have been explicated. Once one has all the explications systematically set out, why should one need the work of art itself anymore?

But by struggling as hard as he can to reach the limits of interpretation of a work of art, the critic may be hoping to demonstrate that no such limits exist. The art critic fights against art in the hope of being defeated by it.

Social Uses of Art

While, to be artistically effective, art must function as art -- fulfilling a great variety of unrecognized and unintended functions -- it does not generally operate as "pure" art.

First, it may overlap with other cultural systems -- religion, philosophy, science, a secular ideology -- and perform, in part, the more clearly identifiable functions of these systems. It is then shaped, to some degree, by the superimposed functions it performs as a part of those systems.

In general, art tends to become increasingly differentiated from other cultural systems in the course of social evolution. Yet in some periods a closer integration of art and some other cultural system, or all of them, may be sought. Thus science has, in most cases indirectly, affected much of modern visual art (Waddington). It is not to be taken for granted, as several French theorists of the novel have recently argued, that the most complete differentiation of art from other cultural systems is most conducive to its authenticity (and, presumably, to specifically artistic creativity).
Nor does a self-conscious integration of art with another cultural system enhance art, as the fiasco of Socialist Realism has shown. It could be inferred from the notion of the aesthetic function that an indirect, unintended mutual interaction between art and some other cultural system would be most stimulating to the arts.

Second, art may be used by various social agencies or groups to perform functions these agencies are interested in. Such use of art by social agencies structures the content and style of art, influences its level of creative attainment and its total repertoire of functions (social additions to the aesthetic function that is peculiar to art everywhere). Again, it is not to be taken for granted that it is necessarily bad for art to be used for extra-artistic purposes.

On the one hand, by using art to fulfill their purposes, social agencies may restrict art's capacity to function as art. This seems likely to happen to the extent to which social agencies successfully limit art to performing any set of consciously recognized and intended purposes. The use of art by more rationalized, "scientific" ideologies should, in this respect, be more pernicious to it than its use by more ambiguous, "mystical" ideologies -- though art is used for extra-artistic purposes in either case.

On the other hand, by using art for their own purposes social agencies may also stretch art's limits in directions which artists might not otherwise have been inclined to explore, enhance certain of its expressive potentialities at the cost of others, and increase its capacity to communicate with contemporaries while perhaps reducing its ability to communicate trans-historically and cross-culturally.

By being forced to struggle against purposes imposed from the outside, artists may become more aware of what is both peculiar and essential (most worth defending) to art. A complete elimination of the pressure of being useful in extra-artistic ways may result in both liberation and trivialization of art.

Like other symbolic systems, art can be used, or function, as a means for attaining the purposes of any recognizable system of society. In the economy, art can be used as a means for attaining or symbolizing the possession of wealth, but also as a critique of particular ways of using it. In the political system, it can function as a means of celebrating, or emotionally undermining, a particular distribution of power; in the community, it might be a means of reinforcing or protesting against the existing order of sensibilities, expectations, social rankings, and social distances. In an ideological system, it can operate to strengthen the hold of established values by filling the imagination with forms or content suggestive of these values -- or to question them by presenting forms and content that are irreconcilable with existing values (Kavolis, 1968).

But even if art objectively functions to promote particular social ends, it is not necessarily consciously employed to promote these ends.
Art can be used by any system of society which has any kind of hold over it -- which commands resources needed for, or relevant to, artistic production, such as wealth, power, time, cultural symbolism, and cathetic interests built into or spontaneously arising in people in some way connected with the arts. Art can be used, whether effectively or not, as a means for either reinforcing or for changing the existing state of affairs in these systems.

Neither of these extra-artistic uses of art seems by necessity aesthetically superior to any other -- i.e., is likely under all circumstances to bring forth more significant art. What seems important is whether artists accept the legitimacy of the extra-artistic expectations directed to their work and incorporate them, unselfconsciously, into their own notion of the artistic task. If they do so, they should be able to produce good art regardless of the type of extra-artistic expectations imposed on it.

Some of the shifts in history from one type of art to another (e.g., from literature to music), and from one style to another, may be explained by variations in their relative adequacy for performing the social functions that have been ascribed to, or expected of, art in particular times and places. At any time, the various arts of a society may all be dominated by one type of function, or they may specialize, in a pluralistic manner, in performing different functions. Certainly the "high" and the "folk" arts of a society usually have different social uses.

An art with a wide appeal in a complex society may perform different functions for different social strata and other groups (the sexes, the age groups, etc.), as Shakespeare probably did in his own lifetime and later on.

The style of a work of art may perform one social function, and its content another. And, of course, the social functions of a work of art which survives in history may well change over time, as changes in the critical interpretations of these works suggest.

The Cognitive Character of Art

To what extent do the particular social uses of art shape its content and style? To what extent do the latter, therefore, correctly reflect or distort the objective realities of the society in which they have been produced? Does use of art by a social agency or group necessarily imply a distortion, in its interests, of the reality which art may be presumed to reflect? Or can some groups (e.g., the "progressive" ones, which identify themselves with the direction of history, in the Marxist view) use art in their own interests without thereby forcing it to distort reality?

The most general response to these queries is probably that art reflects either subjective affirmations or subjective denials, symbolic invalidations, of the existing reality. It can therefore be read only as a record of the history of subjective attitudes toward objectively existing reality--as "the song of history," but not its “newsreel” (A. Malraux).
The ways in which art has been used can be assumed to influence, to some degree, the subjective responses it will express. The subjective responses which exist in the environment in which art is produced, but which are not "useful" to the groups or individuals (including the artists themselves) which provide resources for art creation, are less likely to be reflected in art.

However, insofar as art by its very nature necessarily performs unintended and unrecognized functions as well, it may reflect even the subjective responses which it is not useful to anyone involved in the artistic process to reflect. These responses may indeed contradict the conscious intentions of the artist (Goldmann). Art is never an objective record, and it is never fully controlled by those who use it -- or it ceases to be art.

The most significant art may well express both the most striking characteristics of objective social reality and the sense of what is most missed in it -- reflections of reality as well as its utopian denials. The significance of such art may arise from its discovery of ways to articulate these mutually contradictory subjective responses to social reality, without suppressing one in favor of the other.

Cognitive distortions in art arise not from an introduction of subjective attitudes but from a denial of the ineradicable contradiction, which has a real foothold in the human experience, between affirmation and denial of aspects of existing "objective" (i.e., mechanically recordable) realities. Art distorts the totality of human experience in any social setting when it is biased in favor of either "objective" recording or "subjective" expression.

Art reflects or compensates for the deficiencies of objective reality not only in its content, but also in style (J. Fischer, M. Robbins). Even completely non-representational arts therefore have a cognitive character, and subjective orientations to social reality can be inferred from them (Kavolis, 1968).

Some arts lend themselves more easily to deliberate manipulation in the interest of consciously distorting the ways in which they reflect reality, whether in style or in content. Literature, the theatre, and the visual arts (sculpture and painting more than graphics) are more vulnerable to such manipulation than music.

Representational styles lend themselves more easily to manipulation than highly symbolic or completely non-representational ones. One reason for moving toward the latter styles is indeed the desire of artists to escape manipulation. It is deliberate manipulation (censorship, specification of recipes for works of art by social agencies) rather than merely the use of art by social agencies and groups that would appear to give rise to distortions of the reflection of socio-emotional reality in works of art.
Social Dynamics of Artistic Creativity

If we accept the view that generically artistic functions are both unintended and unrecognized, it follows that societies (and individuals) can do comparatively little, in a conscious and purposive manner, to stimulate the production of artistic values: works of art which fulfill generically artistic functions in a high degree.

That is, while production of art works, or the amount of it, can be determined by conscious social decisions, creativity, or the relatively enduring quality of the works produced, cannot. Indeed, Chambers (1928) has suggested that there is historically an inverse relationship between the level of conscious interest in art in a society and its capacity to produce high artistic values.

If art performs unintended and unrecognized functions, the creation of artistic values should be affected by the degree to which art is needed, in particular social settings or by particular individuals, to perform these functions.

That is, for artistic creativity to become possible, there must be a lot of psychic (or socio-psychological) needs which are neither met by existing social arrangements nor can be consciously identified and purposefully dealt with by means of social policy. The needs must be widespread, intense, and not clearly definable (or if they are definable, not subject to amelioration by concerted social action).

The socio-psychological conditions which increase the need for artistic creativity arise when rapid changes in either the organization of society or in the emotions of its members produce a sharply sensed disjunction between personal emotion and objective social structure. Such disjunctions appear in periods of radical economic, political, ideological, or communal change.

But while the need for art increases during such periods, the possibility of creating it also depends on the availability of resources for creating art. The supply of such resources tends to be diminished in the phase of most intense action during periods of radical change -- e.g., during the decades of most rapid economic growth, during struggles for imperial consolidation, liberation, or change of political system, at the high points of religious (or secular ideological) reformation.

Artistic creativity is enhanced when an increased social need for art coincides with an ample supply of resources for artistic production -- thus before and after, but not during, the most intense phase of any cycle of technological, political, ideological, or communal change in the society (Kavolis, n.d.).

While social movements cannot create art, they increase the need for it -- which becomes most effective after they have succeeded, or failed, in changing the system they have challenged.
Conscious social policy can affect artistic creativity by supplying, or failing to supply, social resources for artistic production commensurate with the existing social need for art. Not all such resources, however, can be controlled at will; the supply of cultural symbolism depends on its existence in a social system, in a form appealing to the imagination of artists, and not on the immediate policies of governments, churches, or parties. The latter can, however, to a high degree, determine the distribution of economic resources.

But while a deficiency of such resources may prevent the creation of works of art for which the potential exists, economic resources cannot generate artistic values if:

1. the social need for art is not sufficiently intense, as during periods of general cultural quiescence and social complacency, when existing conditions are taken for granted by most members of a society (eighteenth-century Italy), or

2. if the society lacks a tradition of, and the skills for, producing works of art.

The type of art in which particular societies become creative when the social need for art is high is more or less dependent on the kind of tradition and the types of skills already available in it.

Artistic creativity seems to become inhibited in a cultural tradition which is dominated by the overwhelming presence of one basic attitude, and stimulated when a tension exists between two contradictory attitudes roughly equal in strength: between achievement motivation and interest in self-expressiveness; between an empirical and a metaphoric conception of the nature of ultimate reality (Sorokin); between restrictive sexual norms and unsuppressed eroticism (Kavolis, 1971).

Artists seem to be most creative when it becomes possible for individual sensibilities to challenge socially established dogmas but before such dogmas lose their own capacity to challenge, or disturb, individual sensibilities.

Artistic attainments also appear to depend on the way in which the artistic enterprise itself is organized and on informal relationships among artists participating in it.

If artistic movements or informal circles of artists are committed to a ruthless search for artistic quality and capable of reacting to it with enthusiasm and to failure with criticism, they are likely to be stimulating, especially for relatively youthful artists incubating radical innovations.

But artistic circles tend to have an adverse influence on creativity when they prove provincially insular in their orientations; rigidly committed to one artistic doctrine or uncommitted to anything other than changing fashion; closely controlled by their publics, dealers, or critics; or bound together chiefly by non-artistic considerations, such as good
fellowship, political ideology, ethnicity, kinship and intermarriage, or sexual inclinations (Kavolis, 1969).

In modern societies, perhaps especially in the large nations, two threats to artistic creativity have emerged in the possible bureaucratic over-organization of the artistic enterprise, leaving little room for the cultivation of the unintended and unrecognized aspects of art, and the early popularization by the mass media of new artistic movements before they have had time to mature their contributions.

Once artistic movements become widely popular they tend to drop what they have been doing, even though their possibilities have not been fully realized, since the modern cult of originality discourages a continued exploration of what others have become familiar with. Hence what a style is potentially capable of may never be developed.

The arts vary in the degree to which their efflorescences can be generated by conscious social policy of resource allocation: lyric poetry and watercolor painting virtually not at all, literature in general not very much. At the other extreme are architecture, the monumental or technologically complex visual arts, and the performing arts requiring large ensembles of actors, musicians, or dancers.

The "spectacular" arts which are most directly dependent on the allocation of large-scale social resources are, of course, also potentially most susceptible to deliberate manipulation by the social agencies or individuals controlling such resources. In this specific sense, the small-scale and intimate arts could be described as inherently the most "liberal" ones.

Far from disappearing, they may therefore become particularly important in the more “manipulative” societies.