

A Study In The Relationship of Art to The Society

By Dr. Heba Al Hawary

Any researcher studying the history of the art movement would not imagine an integrated image of orientations and art doctrines at a period of time, unless he is mindful of doctrines, beliefs and philosophical concepts that not only appeared along with it but helped in its appearance¹. Since the beginning of civilization, art has been associated with thought and culture of the creative whether this culture was paganism or heavenly belief, an orientation imposed by the ruling authority, a philosophical idea that dominated the artist's view of existence and hence formed his manner of artistic expression, or a philosophical orientation that prevailed till it became like a base. The program we will follow in this study makes use of what was known as the "New Historicism Program" which deals with all kinds of art, whether literary or plastic art or other than them. These works should be considered as events in the social world, historical and local circumstances and the human life in the place of its production, explanation and influence. The role of criticism is to analyze the various relations that connect these works and their authors with culture, politics and society. The definition of Dr. Muhammad Anani is here worth mentioning in this respect; he says: "This term was given to groups of critics and theorists who refused synchronic or immediate programs that are used in the study of culture and literature. These were the programs that associated with structuralism; hence they tried to get to convincing answers of many questions or problems stemming from the conflict between the aesthetic, cultural and historical programs which are used in studying all kinds of texts. The writings of Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams and Stephen Greenblatt had a great influence in this field. Stephen Greenblatt describes the "New Historicism" as a program not a doctrine and studying any work of art must include the intention of the artist, the type of the work and the historical conditions because these are social and ideological sides. They must be taken into consideration when evaluating this work of art".

He went on to say: "Producing and consuming such works are not confined to one element, but they include various interests whatever well-organized status it reached for a basic reason which is art is a social phenomenon and hence it requires the existence of more than one mind. It is incumbent upon us -responding to the art of the past and whether agreed or not- to notice the changes in values and interests as a result of the conflicts taking place in the social and political life. New Historicism -in its mental tendency- is following the theoretical and philosophical examples (Post-structuralism)². Hawthorn comments on this saying: "We imagine the owner of "New Historicism" standing safely on the beach contemplating the sea of history, observing the historical situations that accompanied the creativity and writing of the literary work". This is what the contemporary philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer referred to when he revealed to us the crisis of our strange aesthetic comprehension that became looking at art as a separate aesthetic shape and independent from all forms of our human life. Consequently Gadamer tried to reestablish our aesthetic mind and to reveal to us the truth of the "beautiful in art" that cannot be understood away from the forms of our human life such as the symbol, game, celebration, imitation, myth and the religious experience including its rituals...etc. These are the forms in which art was appearing and stemming from at the time of the ancients with no effort and automatically. Because the aesthetic consciousness was not a barrier between art and beauty phenomena -as human innovations- and the real of man and the world he lives³. So a lot can be gained through the program and bases; and this is believable especially with regard to the heritage; hence history and art. For heritage is not limited to bases and as a result it cannot be reestablished in an artificial way e.g. we cannot remotely deal with it through bases or methodic tools as if it were an independent issue from us. Gadamer sees that the human consciousness is historically limited and he then



Ahmed El Shaer, El Sadat, 8 bit Portraits, 2010, Digital Print, 70x100cm., edition of 5. Courtesy of the artist.

calls it “Effective Historical Consciousness”. Because our existence is affected by the brief of our history, it then exceeds the value we know about ourselves. This means it is important to be conscious of our heritage which is considered as preconscious determinants of consciousness. That means that we recognize ourselves through the recognition of our history; this recognition cannot happen through a methodic study of history as an independent issue from us, for history can be made when it affects us without our knowledge. The objective methodic tendency deals with history in a generalized abstract way, not as a concrete issue connected to our live experience. Hence it is enlarging the gap between the essence and the issue. The objective methodic tendency that tries to completely limit the history

is an impossible one, because the consciousness that tries to understand in this case ignores its connection to the previous limitations or the effective history that affects it, hence it is supposed that its understanding is connected to the historical event and is included in its context⁴. Because the endless hermeneutics processes give life new dimensions and makes it show what was hidden, then the movement of theoretical inaction -whether in the field of literary criticism or other fields- stands against the nature of life by its continuous renewal and development. Gadamer says also: “Life in its eternal existential meaning grows and develops from behind the steady ideologies”. The study will borrow the concept of new history criticism from the world of literary criticism considering that the art -whether

plastic or literary- is a creative product submits to the same standards and elements -so to speak- and said Alen: "If the art was directly expressing the creed, it is as well the first language of the people's, but it is the language that has inspiration and power than any abstract language. It is not strange in our era to make it close between the language and the art being two communication means. Hegel himself was studying the language of architecture within the categories of his book "Philosophy of Beauty". Krochh has also declared the melting linguistic and aesthetic arts in each other⁵. Hence, the study of the effects of society's throughout-history political changes on the plastic art produced by this society, are included in this historical frame in the new sense. Raymond Williams has determined three up-to-date meanings in which the term "culture" is used currently, they are closely related to each other:

1. A general, intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development process.
2. A specific life-style of a specific people, period or a human group.
3. Works and practices of intellectual activity in particular the artistic activity. Some modernizers -who want to study literature in its historical social context-, have resorted to use this term without using terms that inspire Marxism in the program or the analysis framework⁶.

Through critical analysis studies deal with some plastic art works , this will be done by stabilizing the basic elements of design in Photography and they are:

Dot and line, shape, space, view, color, the whole arrangement, composed form, simple form in addition to that the study is convinced by the view of Tewfik Al-Hakim in his book Fannul Adab "Literature Art", issued in 1952 about the balance necessity between the power of expression and interpretation; the power of expression also is a balance between the power of manner and the issue i.e. the form and the content. By which, the literary or artistic effect can be done in itself. As for the interpretation, it is the message carried by the literary or artistic effect afterwards for humanity to say its word about the human position in his universe and society. Also the expression alone may lead to the production of a committed art if it exaggerated expressing a special meaning and content that have

nothing to do with freedom and independency. Art for art is withholding the artist within the framework of shape. The committed art is withholding the artist within the imprison of content. The optimal art is what is created in the frame of neutrality i.e. the balance of expression with interpretation. Dr. Taha Hussein has discussed this question in his book "Disagreement and Criticism" issued in 1955, he said he does not dislike the material literature because it is material and does not like the spiritual literature because it is spiritual. The issue of literature being in the interest of life or the life being in the interest of literature is a difficult issue, because it is difficult to separate between the image of literature and its material for they are inseparable and the most important thing therein is to feel beauty.

Phenomenology:

Phenomenology was founded in the writings of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, whose philosophy depends on the world image in the human conscience as a starting point. Thus, it ignores the possibility of considering the world as an independent from the human conscience, seeking to reach the concretized fact through our experience. Roman Ingarden, the Polish aesthetics scientist, was among the first whom interested in the opinions of Husserl. He thought that the reading of the literary work⁷ concretized it in the reader mind (as the written text concretizes directing the play and its performance).

The Geneva School of Criticism is deeply indebted to Husserl and phenomenological opinions, and the members of this school, who joined Geneva University, often were called the Critics of Conscience. J. Hillis Miller believed in the opinions of this school at one time, and he wrote a useful investigative review of this school which was reprinted in his book "Theory Then and Now." He said in this review, "the critics of Geneva consider the literature as one of the forms of the conscience, whereas the criticism, according to their point of view, is ultimately the "reciprocal transparency" between the mind of the critic and of the author. In addition, the criticism school of the reader-response criticism is deeply indebted to the phenomenology and the Geneva school, especially according to the German critic Wolfgang Iser, who introduced one of

his articles (which was reprinted in his book in 1974) with the following sentence, “The phenomenological art theory does fully stress that the critic has to put in his consideration the kinds of reaction to the text, when reviewing the literally work and the text itself.

Hence, Iser proceeded with his discussion about the Ingarden’s theory about the artistic concretization. And he concluded that any literary work has two pivots: the artistic pivot (the text of the author) and the aesthetic pivot (the reader’s examination). He also focused on what he called the “the virtuality of text” which means the literary work has its own virtual existence that cannot be achieved except through the experience of the frequent reading, i.e. the theatre text which can be directed in countless ways. So, he verged on the Derrida’s approach that the reading is a “transformative activity”. In addition, Iser takes advantage from the argument of Husserl that the conscience is an intentional activity. That is, it was directed toward an ideal and sought toward an aim, which was neither random nor comprehensive. Depending on this, Iser got his opinion about the necessity of taking care of the pre-intentions of the reader, and the intentions which was aroused as a result of reading the literary work. Among the most important arguments of Iser was his thought that there were gaps in the text which the reader should bridge, and this act varies naturally from one reader to another. The concept of gaps of Iser has great similarity with the concept of Roman Ingarden “Spots of Indeterminacy” which was declared when talking about the process of reading as a concretization of the literary work.

Aesthetics of Reception:

One of the social analyses of the aesthetic value issue is concerned with the all-variable aesthetics of reception. The supporters (holders, adopters) of this theory always form their criticism of the traditional Aesthetics on the supposition that there is no specific meaning for the text. However, the reader or the watcher is the one who creates the meaning while receiving the literary work. So, watching or reading is regarded as providing new explanation according to the watcher- reader’s perspective. (Most of the social analysts supporting “Aesthetics of Reception” held this explanation innovative in some situations specified by

the social, sectarian, sexual, etc. circumstances. In this regard, Aesthetics of reception incorporates the theory of Hermeneutics and Semiotics.

Jauss, Hans Robert:

Jauss is of the opinion that the group of literary bases was produced during the date the works were critically received. For the evaluation carried out by the first reader remains and becomes wealthier through the successive studying processes. In return for the “Prejudgments approved by the historical objectivity”, Jauss puts forward aesthetics for studying and effectiveness. Since the successive readers consider the literary works to be different, they are to be evaluated upon every reading; for the literary work is not a stand-alone issue nor does it appear the same for each reader at any period of time. It is not a text that reveals its non-temporality nature through a soliloquy. Jauss indicated that any work pursues its aesthetic effect is a result of “the expectations horizon” of the recipient with regard to the artistic work. New works will take on more nearness or farness aesthetic dimension from the horizon of expectations. In some cases -his example was the narration of Madame Bovary -, the literary work gives an aesthetic dimension that confines the understanding of work to a specific group of readers. But in the long run, these works may in general change the action of reading, as they change their core literary bases. Jauss shows his readiness to define the aesthetic value by the language of reception components in this way “The literary work offers a standard to define its aesthetic value through its effect on the readers whether this standard was in line with their expectations, exceeding them or disappointing their hopes. The ordinary distance and the alternative horizon required by responding to the new works, this distance is that determines the nature of the literary work according to the prerequisites of reception aestheticism. The more less the distance, so that the consciousness of the recipient does not require any change of the unknown experiment horizon, the more he is close to the consumptive field.” (30-24) At present, there are three main schools competing to present an aesthetic theory in a social framework. These are the schools depend on the speech theory, philosophic art anthropology and art psychoanalysis theories. (30-96).

Discourse:

The French philosopher Michel Foucault could divide in his book (words and things) (Paris 1966) the human knowledge field into three sciences or we should say three epistemological areas and every area has sub divisions knowing that they overlap in one way or another. They can be identified generally on the basis of the three human sciences Biology, Economy, and Philology. Hence, we can say that the activity of psychological area is where the being lives and performs its many functions thus it is tightly related to Biology. While, the Sociological area is tightly related to Economy as it is concerned the person when he-she works, produces, and consumes, his or her relationships with the other members of the society, and his or her struggles. The third and the last area, however, is tightly related to Philology, where we can find the study of literature and poems, in a briefer phrase where studies and analyses of all the oral or written expressions that may be of a cultural background found, as it is concerned with the linguistic rules and forms. Foucault does not only hold that these three areas of knowledge, which can be elaborated depending on the historical connection between the human sciences and Biology, Economy, and Philology, cover all human knowledge field, he holds also that each of these knowledge areas has a double rule governing it. The psychological area is governed by the function and criterion rules as it originally deals the functions of the human being and governs the good performance of every being whether described by normality or abnormality. While, the Sociological area has the struggle and ruling as it deals with the material production in the society and the economic affairs. Although struggle is the main governor of this area, there must be rules regulating. On the third hand, the area of philology is governed by the denotation and context rules as all forms of human expressions are analyzed and studied within it for touching their denotations which cannot be absorbed without being put in a context. Hence, when the artistic criticism is seeking the discovery of the denotations of expressions within its specific contexts (with Foucault terms), let us know that it is not targeting the study of struggles a society witnesses. Rather, it tries to form a general image for the context which produced the literary

work and gave the artistic expression its denotation. This concept is regarded, by the researcher, as the main course of the research through making connection between the social volatile issues in Egypt and plastic art during any researched period. The writings of Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams and Steven G-Grenblat had great effect on two schools, Cultural Criticism or Cultural Materialism and New Historicism that eventually emerged in the literary criticism area. The Discourse Theory, especially in Foucault's work, had a growing effect in the cultural studies within the last years. Though Foucault did not make a thorough study of the aesthetic discourse matching his analysis of the medical science (1973), knowledge (1981) and sex (1979) discourses, he by implication pointed out some subjects of the aesthetic theory and the artistic practice providing the succeeding researchers with sensitive directions in this area of work (For example his elaboration of the conception of the (author) (1979) in which he explains the conception of discourse and in his book (Archeology Of Knowledge) (1972) Foucault pointed out the necessary steps for the study of sex .

About the Writer

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End Notes

1. *Nihad Seliha: al-masrah bayn al nadhariyyah al-deramiyyah wal nadhrat al-falsafiyah, Fosoul Magazine, Fifth Volume, 1985, p. 134.*
2. *Muhammad Anani: al-mustalahat al-adabiyya al-hadithah, Adabiyat series, the International Egyptian Company.*
3. *Hans-Georg Gadamer: "Tajalli al-Jameel", the Supreme Council of Culture, Cairo 1997, p. 14, 23.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Abdel-Fattah al-Didi: al-itijabat al-mu'asirah fil-falsafah, General Egyptian Book Organization, Cairo, 1985, p. 84.*
6. *Muhammad Anani: al-Mustahat al-adabiyyah al-Hadithah, p. 14.*
7. *Muhammad Anani: al-Mustahat al-adabiyyah al-Hadithah, Longman . p.70*



"Nanas" by Niki de Saint Phalle in Hanover, Germany.