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# Introduction

## *The second Labor of Hercules*

Ludwig Wittgenstein's foreword to his *Philosophical Investigations* begins with a motto borrowed from the nineteenth-century Austrian playwright and satirist Nestroy: 'One characteristic of progress is that it appears to be much bigger than it really is.' This is an unusual choice of motto, because nowhere in his *Philosophical Investigations* does he mention historical development or processes, let alone progress. Moreover, nowhere does he say anything of significance at all about such a concept.<sup>1</sup>

No less intriguing is the way the concept of progress continues to resurface during the twentieth century. Progress, it was repeated, was a dated concept based on a metaphysical idea of history long since dismissed. The prevailing opinion was that it was a nineteenth-century idea that had been subject to criticism even in its own day, before being given the definitive death sentence with the outbreak of the First World War, when the optimistic West was forced once and for all to take off its blinkers.<sup>2</sup> Progress, it was reiterated, especially during the last two decades of the twentieth century, was the fossil fuel that for centuries had fed the grand narratives of history and the what-proved-to-be disastrous ideologies. But that fuel supply had now finally been exhausted, or, as Dutch writer Gerard Reve once put it: 'Progress doesn't exist, and it's a good thing, too, because things are already bad enough as they are.'<sup>3</sup>

It is striking that the philosophers of the previous century were continually preoccupied with repudiating a belief or idea that, according to the *communis opinio* of their discipline, had been outdated for many years. In this way, much twentieth-century philosophy resembles the struggle that Hercules faced when he had to chop off the heads of the much-feared Hydra, even though it was already known that the monster would grow new heads again instantly. The name of the many-headed monster in the present context is Progress, and the mythological impact of the concept of progress is no less far-reaching than that of the monster that Hercules took to task. But Hercules had more success in achieving his goal than philosophy has had in its struggle with Progress, for the question still remains of whether this philosophical undertaking has been completed. Might it not be more appropriate to turn Nestroy's motto around to read: 'Isn't it characteristic of progress that it appears to be much smaller than it really is?'

Much (especially European) twentieth-century thinking has thus focused on what has been called our technology-dominated culture. In the influential philosophy of the later Heidegger, but equally in such diverse authors as Lewis Mumford, Hans Jonas, Hannah Arendt, and Arnold Gehlen, the theme continues to be a fundamental criticism of the Western notion of progress – as an ever-advancing technology that, based on a fatal and shortsighted vision, increasingly ignores and threatens existence, culture, and life.

Criticism of the destructive power of progress – *le prix du progrès* – has seldom been absent, even in the Frankfurt School, particularly since the publication of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).<sup>4</sup> Prominent postwar thinkers such as Marcuse and Habermas have paid much attention to what has been characterized as an instrumental or technical rationality. In their analysis of this phenomenon, developments are examined and questioned that, on closer scrutiny, all too often can be identified as the framework of an implicit ideology of progress.

This tendency has become even more pronounced in philosophers like Foucault, whose work can be seen as an ongoing struggle with the monster of Progress. On the one hand, his historical studies bring to light from countless perspectives, the structures through which our culture's development, understood as progress, is unmasked – as no less than an increasing disciplining and dominating of human existence. On the other hand, as a historian, he repeatedly emphasizes the breaks in the past, taking the discontinuities between the different periods as the starting point for the unmaskings.

The same hydra of Progress has haunted other areas of philosophy, including the remarkable debates launched in the philosophy of science following the publication of Thomas Kuhn's groundbreaking *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). These discussions focused most explicitly on the supposed rationality according to which science develops, but, under the surface, the question continually lurks of to what extent this development can be viewed as a form of progress, as a continual advancement of knowledge. It was precisely this uncertainty that led to the belief in progress being challenged. Seen in this light, the history of postmodernism can also be viewed with some amazement. Just as Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition*, announced the end of the grand narratives (which, after all, had been the legitimization of the ideologies that turned out to be so disastrous), so philosophers insisted endlessly on the death of the idea of progress during the last decades of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

But perhaps the most striking area in which ideas of progress have manifested themselves as powerfully as they have invisibly – or rather, almost unconsciously – has been the arts. During the twentieth century, the question of the significance and applicability of ideas of progress to art was seldom the subject of serious study, but, at the same time, the idea of progress was one of

the crucial tenets of the avant-garde and, in fact, of all trends and movements (not insignificant words in themselves) in modern art. Works of art that were not 'modern' or that defied description in terms of an implicit jargon of progress went more or less unnoticed for years on end. It is only today, with the much-discussed end of the avant-garde, the 'crisis' in contemporary art that has been proclaimed with increasing frequency during the past few decades, and the widespread dissemination of postmodern thought that we see any reflective interest in that very influential historical category called 'progress.' However, the reflex to reduce this category to an absolute concept stands in the way of a proper analysis of any farewell to progress: Hercules continues to struggle in the dark, while the philosophers turn their heads in the other direction.

### *After history*

Something is changing in the arts. It is difficult to say whether this has been so over the past fifteen or the past twenty years. It involves a complex phenomenon in very diverse art forms and as many different countries and cultural traditions. While art is being given increasing attention in Western societies, at the same time a feeling of disorientation prevails, a sense of vanity and futility which undermines that attention and gives it a fleeting character. A predictable future and a comprehensibly ordered past are slowly disappearing from view and with them, an orientation in the present. Art appears to be losing both its identity and its power through the pluriformity of its own success.

Such ideas and opinions are prevalent among artists, critics, and consumers in every branch of art. New compositions of contemporary music are in danger of being marginalized, either temporarily or permanently, while, because of their enormous diversity, there is almost no agreement as to which developments are truly significant, not to speak of the problematic relationship that exists between classical and popular music. In literature, the era of the experimental novel has ended, together with that of a diverse succession of innovations in poetry. Old forms are being revived again or emulated. During the past thirty years, architecture has freed itself from the long-standing domination of functionalism. It is now quoting from the riches of the past with varying degrees of exuberance. Artists and journals devoted to the visual arts have been discussing the end of painting for some years now, and all are worried about the rise of the so-called 'new media.' A growing number of genres overlap: it is often difficult to make a distinction between autonomous art, applied art, design, advertising, and the many other forms of mass culture.

This entire development – or, perhaps, this absence of development – is

accompanied by a sense of unease. Has everything already been said and done? Is innovation no longer possible? Was the *fin-de-siècle* a century ago only a brief glimpse of the all-destructive *finis millennii* we have just experienced? Have we really landed in a posthistoric period of art, where anything goes and consequently nothing matters? Whatever the answer, one thing is certain: art is in trouble. Some even say that the arts as we have known them for the past three centuries have had their day.

One of the foremost contemporary exponents of this idea is philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto. He has built his much-debated hypothesis regarding the end of art on a philosophical foundation, by attacking the very concept of progress in art. In doing so, he goes one step further than the many writers, critics, and artists before him who proclaimed the end of the avant-garde and modernism. He sees the present juncture as the culmination of a much lengthier development.<sup>6</sup>

Danto's fascinating account limits itself to the visual arts, but it also has much wider applications. In keeping with a current philosophical classification, he proposes three perspectives through which to view the history of art. The first perspective sees art as a gradually improving *visual description* of reality. Renaissance painter and writer Giorgio Vasari applied this perspective to a specific period, from Cimabue to Michelangelo, while during the twentieth century, Gombrich did the same for a much longer timespan. In this view, further perfection ultimately becomes impossible. Painting and sculpture, for example, have been outstripped by film, which, after all, captures movement and thus comes closer to approaching reality. The road to abstract art in fact leads nowhere because it diverges from the ideal of perfect mimesis.<sup>7</sup>

The second perspective sees art as *expression*. This approach is described as having been an escape route for visual artists during the first part of the twentieth century, as they became aware of the bankruptcy of representative, mimetic art. In this view, the notion of progress is regarded as nonsensical, much as it was in the previous view, because no 'mediating technology of expression' can be identified. Whereas the means of depicting reality can be described as a series of continually advancing techniques and skills (such as the discovery of perspective), the same cannot be said for expression. Seen in this light, the history of art is no more than a succession of distinct, more or less artistically successful, expressions, a kind of biographical series in which there is no progression.<sup>8</sup>

The third perspective views art, through Hegelian eyes, as a form of growing *self-awareness* in which the theoretical component steadily increases until the conceptual content becomes so great that art becomes philosophy. Here Danto convincingly allows for the autonomous nature of contemporary art and the now-dominant features of commentary, reference, and self-referentiality. Art becomes increasingly self-aware, its own object. In this case, too,

rather than inexorable progress, there is talk of an endpoint as in Hegel. And, according to Danto, this endpoint has already been reached in the visual arts. Andy Warhol's *Brillo Box* can thus only be understood through a conceptual approach to art. This is why art has definitely become history. Good art can, of course, still be created in this postmodern, posthistoric era, but it is devoid of almost all relevance. Or, to put it differently, art has been transformed through its conceptual weight into a form of philosophy.<sup>9</sup> This, according to Danto, is what makes it so fascinating.

### *Whence, how, whither?*

With such questions in mind, this book seeks to shed light on the often implicit, yet influential, way that progress in art is understood. How do we relate to art's impressive past, whose structure postmodern criticism has changed forever? Is art truly nearing its end? Do the multiplicity of art forms and the complex state of affairs in nearly every branch of contemporary art indeed attest to a general crisis, or is the word 'crisis' just a modern-day commonplace? One problem that arises here is the ambiguity of philosophical criticism, which has long been preoccupied with ideas of progress in the implicit and indirect manner outlined here.

More attention must be paid to philosophical criticism of the ideas of progress. Is it, for example, possible to say anything meaningful at all about progress, as the later Wittgenstein might lead us to doubt? To answer this question, it must, if nothing else, be formulated slightly differently as: *how* have ideas of progress been used in the past, and *how* are they still being used? In which historic context can they be placed, and what function do they have in that context?

As these questions suggest, my book has adopted both a historical and a systematic approach. It attempts to combine an empirical with a more theoretical perspective and, in keeping with the lack of modesty common to philosophers, does not shy away from discussing *all* art forms. This approach inevitably takes me to the currently much-propagated interdisciplinarity of the cultural sciences, which was not so much a starting point as an endpoint of this book. Consequently, the philosophy of culture, the history of ideas, the history of art and literature, aesthetics, and theoretical history will continually overlap in the following chapters. Three questions are treated in succession: where and how did thought on progress in the arts arise? How have concepts of progress been applied in the arts? And what role do such concepts play in the discussion of contemporary art?

The first part of this book examines the intellectual history of the notion of progress in the arts. One of the unexpected heads of the hydra of Progress

already looms large in chapter one, which reveals how difficult it is to separate the idea of progress from the ideas derived from it. I have argued that there is little point in trying to trace the history of ideas of progress from antiquity to the present. A plea for the middle road, somewhere between an overly global realism and a nominalism excessively preoccupied with context, is followed by a description of the development of a new historical consciousness during the eighteenth century. This description paves the way for chapter two, in which a history of ideas of progress in the arts is presented. This history begins with the famous Querelle between the Ancients and the Moderns at the end of the seventeenth century, and describes how notions of progress gradually emerged during the Enlightenment, pushing finalist thought into the background. Chapter three completes this short history of ideas, reviewing in succession the ideas of revolution, development, evolution, and progress in the arts, from Romanticism to the modern avant-garde.

The second part of this book looks more systematically at the question of how such ideas have been applied over time. Chapter four examines Thomas Kuhn's model for scientific revolutions, in order to increase insight into artistic change, which often occurs in the form of radical breaks and is presented in terms of revolutionary rhetoric. This, in turn, facilitates a search for reasons underlying the major role that ideas of progress have played – and perhaps continue to play – in the arts. Chapter five includes a case study intended to clarify how ideas of progress are used, and how they function in the everyday reality of one, artistically innovative movement. The object of study is a specific magazine, that classical avant-garde vehicle for ideas of progress. More concretely, chapter five discusses the renewal in architecture and painting sparked by the movement known as De Stijl (Mondrian, Rietveld, Oud, van Doesburg, and others). Texts from the magazine of the same name (*De Stijl*, 1917-1931) are used to identify how artists presented themselves and how they understood their own work in terms of progress. The question is then asked of whether others, in later years, also interpreted those changes as progress. In this context, I examine the extent to which those changes might still be viewed as a form of artistic progress.

The same question recurs explicitly in the third part of this book. Chapters six and seven expound on issues already raised in chapters three and four: the posthistoric confusion following the end of the avant-garde, art as a permanent ever-accelerating revolution, and the consequences of the radical disavowal of progress in the arts today as signaled by Danto and others. By way of conclusion, it is suggested that progress in this context is not an altogether useless concept, and that there are several reasons for considering developments in the arts as a form of progress. Moreover, a re-evaluation of the concept of progress is seen as an important way of counteracting postmodernism's apparent attitude of lighthearted permissiveness in the arts.