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Thème 1

THE RELATIONS OF A WORK OF ART TO THE ARTISTIC CULTURE OF THE TIME

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As an art-historian I have devoted my research, in the last few years, less to works of art in themselves than to the reactions which they have evoked at the time of their creation in the contemporary criticism and public. From this arose my book "The Misjudged Artist: On the History of Misunderstanding in Art". (Munich 1948). I only dealt there with the last two centuries, in their reactions to painting, poetry and music; from earlier times our information is insufficient. For us critics it is valuable to know the history of early criticism. Writing after the event, the art-historians behave as though each epoch had been more or less homogeneous. This is an error, the result of seeing things in perspective. When one listens to what earlier periods have said of themselves and of their art, one finds that it is invariably a question of complaints against the great divisions of the time. In actual fact there are three kinds of work in almost every period: the definitely conservative, the definitely avant-garde and those which lie on a middle line. In the same way there are three kinds of critic and three kinds of public. All three are in movement historically, only at different speeds. The works most easily understood are always those which are conservative within their own time, for their form is already traditional. The "middle" works are more difficult, but most difficult of all those of the avant-garde. Most observers are creatures of habit and so regard every more-or-less new form as unnatural or modish, intellectual or snobbish. Thus every new type of art produces a negative reaction in the public, a reaction based chiefly on its forms. This diminishes only in periods where magic or religion offer a bridge to help one over the formal innovations. In art, there are always discrepancies to begin with between the sender and the receiver. We can never get rid of these altogether, for the best artists are always in advance of their time.

But we can diminish them a little if we understand the historical law which underlies them and always take that into consideration. As critics we must impress it on the public that art is always in flux and that the observer should therefore concern himself most intensively with its newest manifestations. We need a dynamic instead of a static way of looking at things. And art critics must write so that the public becomes used as quickly as possible to each new style. For in the life of the art-public there is unfortunately a law of inertia, which keeps it always behind events. Cultural conservatism is usually a greater danger than is the lust after novelty for its

own sake. This true especially when art is moving out of a worse into a better period.

But then begins for us critics the most important part of our work: within the new forms of art themselves, we must be able to distinguish good from bad. And this is only possible when one has learned each time to read each new world of forms as a new language.

Unfortunately there is no simple measuring-rod for human and cultural values. We need here a sort of Theory of Relativity - and on such a theory I am myself working at present. It has nothing to do with the Relativity theory in physics but takes its scale of values from the position reached by the contemporary culture of the time, from the changes in contemporary life out of which the works of art arise. According to this theory there are no "eternal values", because eternity is something which we cannot oversee. There exist only functional values for definite periods. Subsequently, we call the works of individual artists significant when we can say of them that they have a profound influence even when the men who must receive them are already following quite different tendencies. A prototype of this is Johann Sebastian Bach, who was placed in the first class by the Classicists around 1800, then by such Romanticists as Schumann, later by the Rationalists, still later by the men of sentiment such as Albert Schweitzer and finally by the Constructivists - each time from a different point of view.

My lecture will give examples of how grotesquely public opinion has erred in the last hundred years when faced with comparatively new types of art and we shall discuss how such errors may be avoided.