Durkheim and the problem of art: some observations

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Introduction

Recent contributions to this journal by Werner Gephart, Pierre-Michel Menger and W. S. F. Pickering have each, in their different ways, contributed to the clarification of the complex but neglected issues surrounding Emile Durkheim’s treatment of art, imagination and aesthetics. In contrasting his fitful, impatient and unsympathetic examination of the realm of the Beautiful with his dense and painstaking investigations in the spheres of the True and the Good, these authors also underline the more general (though frequently underestimated) fragility of the classic sociological contribution to the study of art. In this respect, crucial insights of Marx and Weber remain curiously undeveloped while Simmel’s work is genuinely exceptional in the significance it ascribes to aesthetic phenomena. Thus, while Durkheim’s inability or unwillingness to accord higher priority to the analysis of art is undoubtedly rooted in biographical circumstance and philosophical predilection, its apparent typification of the intellectual attitude of the sociological founding fathers provokes broader questions in the history of ideas and the sociology of knowledge (Zolberg 1990:35-39, Gräna 1971:125 and 1989:28).

The discussion which follows consists of brief reflections on a few of the many intriguing themes emerging from the different approaches of Gephart, Pickering and Menger. Variations on such themes, of course, inevitably involve rough inventory of the merits and flaws of Durkheim’s overall treatment of art as viewed from the privileged vantage-point of hindsight. In such accounting, deep-seated prejudices, misplaced polarities, serious misunderstandings and missed opportunities must be weighed against genuine insights, perceptive assessments, accurate predictions and multivalent theoretical formulations.

Durkheim on art

In the eyes of Gephart and Menger, the creative elaboration of Durkheim’s profound insight into the primordial ties among art, ritual, religion and the

Durkheimian Studies Vol. 8, n.s., 2002: 51-69

51
sacred is a forceful reminder of the lamentable indifference of most contemporary sociologists to the links between religion and aesthetics. It is also a fortiori an occasion for regret that the discussion of art in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (Durkheim [1912a] 1961:425-428) and other works fails to generate a more sophisticated, systematic and comprehensive account of art in Durkheim’s later writings. Thus, Pickering notes that ‘in no place do we find Durkheim examining art with the same thoroughness that he used in considering religion or education’ while Gephart bluntly asserts that the formulation of ‘Règles de l’art’ had to await the talents of Pierre Bourdieu. Durkheim is not merely indifferent to art, however, for (as Pickering documents) he exhibits hostility to any art that is liberated from the constraints of religious authority. Starkly contrasting art with morality, he is clearly troubled by the deviant, disruptive and socially dysfunctional potential of the former’s boundless imagination, unbridled emotionalism and (what Gephart calls) its ‘unbound and excessive energy’.

By its very nature, art is a source of social pathology because it insidiously threatens the sacred, undermines social solidarity and contributes to le malaise social. At best amoral and at worst immoral, it stands apart from and opposed to what Durkheim perceives as la vie sérieuse or the serious business of life. In apparent agreement with Oscar Wilde’s maxim that ‘all art is completely useless’ he associates the pursuit of art and the cultivation of artistic sensibility with superfluousness, superficiality, playfulness, luxury, laxity, indulgence, indiscipline, irresponsibility, impracticality, illusionism, escapism, disorganization and sickness. Such a general conception evidently derives, at least in part, from a specific belle époque image of bohemian decadence identified with the unconventional and mercurial lifestyle of Parisian artistic and literary circles. In any case, extension of Pickering’s narcotic Marxist metaphor suggests that Raymond Aron’s phrase l’opium des intellectuels may be appropriated to summarize succinctly Durkheim’s personal view of art (Aron 1957).

Despite familiarity with the fact that both intellectual and political life produce strange bedfellows, those cognizant of Durkheim’s commitment to freedom, fraternity, democracy and individual liberty under the Third Republic must inevitably find difficulty in coming to terms with his apparent enchantment by the spell of Plato and consequent alignment with the enemies of an open society (Murdoch 1977, Popper 1962). It seems ironic that the sphere of art, which he described in The Division of Labour as ‘the domain of liberty’ should be for that very reason an object of suspicion and distaste for this ardent heir of the Enlightenment. Moreover, it appears equally strange that Durkheim can convincingly be deemed a proponent of the ‘Death of Art’ thesis primarily associated with G. W. F. Hegel who is also dubbed an enemy of the open society by Karl Popper (Durkheim [1893b] 1949:51-52; Gray 1970:33-34).

Durkheim and Weber on art

Perhaps the best way to achieve a balanced perspective on Durkheim’s conception of art is to compare his insights on this topic with those of his great German contemporary, Max Weber. Though infrequently cited, Weber’s account of the role of art notably and uncannily parallels Durkheim’s discussion while diverging significantly from it (O’Toole 1996). Stressing (like Durkheim) the intimacy of the historical connection between art and religion, Weber nonetheless discerns in ‘the development of intellectualism and the rationalization of life’ an increasing separation between these spheres of activity to the extent that art becomes the competitor rather than the collaborator of a religious ethic. Emerging as ‘a cosmos of more and more consciously grasped independent values’, art offers nothing less than a salvation from the routines of everyday life and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism. As a rival to religion it is, in the modern era, the direct beneficiary of humanity’s reluctance ‘to assume responsibility for moral judgements’. In such circumstances, Weber discerns an inevitable and ominous transition ‘from the moral to the aesthetic evaluation of conduct’ so that what was once morally reprehensible becomes merely a matter of bad taste. From a religious perspective, adoption of an aesthetic worldview involves abrogation of the necessity to take a stand on ethical issues and a consequent collapse of communities founded on an acknowledged validity of common ethical norms. But, what the religious believer regards as selfish dereliction of duty and abandonment of social ties is viewed in a very different manner by the artist or even ‘the aesthetically excited and receptive mind’. To these, the mere existence of ethical norms may seem oppressive and tyrannical, an unwelcome and intolerable coercion ‘of their genuine creativeness and innermost selves’ and an affront to their personally contrived codes of values (Weber 1948:342 and 1963:242-244).

Durkheim, it would seem, could find little to contradict in this account. Art is clearly contrasted with morality and depicted in conflict with
conventional ethics. Its highly individualistic ethos offers an escape route from routine obligations and a means by which duties or responsibilities can be evaded in the interests of creativity, self-realization and personal fulfilment. In consequence, art not only ceases to contribute to social cohesion but actually assists in unravelling the social bond in modern society.

Even with respect to art’s supposed lack of ‘seriousness’, Weber appears to endorse Durkheim’s diagnosis by his attitude to matters of taste. It is intriguing to contemplate this convergence of Jewish Puritanism and German Pietism united in earnest rectitude against what Pickering terms la vie légère. However, a discernible difference in the seriousness with which each is committed to the notion of art’s lack of seriousness reveals a significant disparity between the perspectives of Durkheim and Weber. Appreciation of this might begin with meditation on Kenneth Clark’s observation that while the ‘concept of good taste is the virtuous profession of luxury art’ he is ‘inclined to doubt if a completely healthy relationship between art and society is possible while the concept of good taste exists’ (Clark 1964:66-67). Implied is the existence of degrees of artistic seriousness. Clark insists that great art bears no relation to good taste. It seems probable that, despite his peremptory treatment of taste, Weber would have appreciated this point of view. Convinced that all art is anathema to the serious life, Durkheim would likely have been unmoved by it.

Although he explicitly distances art from morality, Weber undoubtedly regards it (actually or potentially) as part of la vie sérieuse. This is clear from his description of art as a means of ‘salvation’ whose ‘redemptive function’ makes plausible a destiny as an alternative and successor to religion in the modern world (O’Toole 1996:128-134). While this insight has a diverse ancestry (and progeny) in European thought, there is an unmistakably Nietzschean quality to Weber’s view of art as a redemptive refuge from rationalism, routine, the burden of moral guilt and the apparent meaninglessness of the modern age. Whether or not Durkheim was familiar with Weber’s opinions on aesthetics (and it seems certain he was not), he steadfastly refused to entertain the notion of art as an alternative to religion at a time when many intellectuals publicly invested ‘their largest emotions not in religion itself but in art’ in circumstances where ‘art was raised nearly to the level of religion and endowed with a quasi-religious function’ (Trilling 1964:53). J.-M. Guayau, whose work is noted by both Menger and Pickering, was far from unique in his conviction that art would eventually appropriate the social functions of dying traditional religions. Convinced, like Comte that rational morality based on science must supplant dogmatic illusions, Durkheim may have viewed such prospective ‘religions of art’ (with some distaste) as fin de siècle fantasies: mere echoes of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century cult of the sublime which popularized the ‘worship’ of nature and portrayed artists and poets in terms of prophecy, priesthood and even divinity (Schenk 1979). Such indulgent visions would hardly have seemed worthy alternatives to the sober dignity of his own humanistic ‘Cult of Man’ (Pickering 1990:95-105; Westley 1978).

Comparisons between Weber and Durkheim are always invidious but, while both devote inadequate attention to art and aesthetics, the former undoubtedly demonstrates greater appreciation of their social significance and lays firmer foundations for those seeking to build upon his insights. In the latter case, it can be argued that a Durkheimian sociology of art is possible in spite of rather than because of the master’s specific contribution to this topic. As Gephart illustrates pointedly, it is ‘a strange task’ but not an impossible one ‘to try to find in the Durkheim paradigm a sociology of art’. Thus, his intellectual archaeology skilfully succeeds in unearthing the underpinnings of a serviceable sociology of art amongst Durkheim’s insights into religion’s elementary forms. Nonetheless, the bittersweet smell of success is detectable here. Gephart must surely have pondered the loss to scholarship resulting from Durkheim’s own failure to extend and elaborate his seminal exploration of the religious origins of art into a mature examination of the aesthetic sphere.

The seriousness of art

It is not difficult to cite missed opportunities deriving from Durkheim’s insistence on art’s lack of seriousness and his own consequent reluctance to favour it with serious study. There is no doubt, for example, that Durkheim egregiously underestimated the (actual and potential) religious and spiritual content of modern art, however superficially secular its outer appearance. Almost simultaneously with the appearance of The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky published his highly influential treatise Concerning the Spiritual in Art, a work which has provoked generations of painters and sculptors to associate the creation of non-figurative or abstract art with the dawning of a new age of spiritual enlightenment in a world where religion, science and morality are in a state of upheaval (Kandinsky 1947; Tekiner 2000:41-45).
Although by no means all twentieth century and contemporary artists have described their calling in religious or spiritual terms, the number of prominent figures proclaiming an explicitly religious mission is notable nonetheless. In addition, the work of countless others expresses implicit, unintended or unacknowledged religiosity and spirituality, not only in the opinion of art critics and professional aesthetes but in the judgement of eminent theologians. A line of development can easily be traced from the turn of the twentieth century recording the persisting presence of the sacred, the spiritual and the religious in a significant segment of major artworks on public display. Indeed, those who seek to experience the great religious art of the last hundred years may, with rare exceptions, forsake official liturgical art housed under ecclesiastical supervision in traditional houses of worship. It can hardly be said that such figures as Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Marc Chagall, Georges Rouault, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock whose names have all frequently been associated with the idea of art as a means of religious or spiritual expression were less than serious individuals. They undoubtedly took themselves and their work extremely seriously and would have firmly rejected any insinuation that their energies and (often herculean) efforts were not expended on 'the serious business of life'. For them, art was the serious business of life.

A strong sense of serious purpose has by no means been restricted to those artists explicitly laying claim to religious or spiritual inspiration. Indeed, the major art movements of the twentieth century were typically characterized by the capitalized 'High Seriousness' detected by Tom Wolfe (1975:48). This was so even in the case of Dada, Surrealism and Pop Art whose humour and seeming frivolity did not disguise the deeper moral, political, social and psychological concerns of their exponents. Furthermore, in a process which calls into question Durkheim's image of the unrestrained nature of the aesthetic realm, the serious character of modern art has been greatly enhanced by the expanding influence of professional art criticism and fine arts scholarship. Proliferation of authoritative theories which presume to convey the meaning of artworks (as Geiphart notes) implicitly authenticates art as a worthy and serious vocation (Wolfe 1975:43-69; Danto 1984:31).

The seriousness of modern art is also obvious from its profound impact on the wider society, a fact which undermines Durkheim's charge of escapism. While some artists have undeniably engaged in flights from reality, the political history of the past century is impossible to comprehend without due consideration of its aesthetic aspect (Ecksteins 1989). Art movements such as Futurism, Constructivism and Socialist Realism notoriously aided the rise of totalitarianism while individual artists were (willingly or unwillingly) involved in shaping its imagery, iconography, architecture, pageantry and choreography. The 'personality cults' which raised Lenin, Stalin, Hitler and Mao to the rank of demigods all relied heavily on an aesthetic component which proved to be an essential instrument of propaganda. Walter Benjamin has written perceptively of the violent and catastrophie 'aestheticization of politics' in the twentieth century and it is unfortunate that such a compelling theme has lacked Durkheimian interpreters (Benjamin 1969; Bell 1977).

The seriousness of art in the modern era may, however, be viewed in a more positive light. It is thus noteworthy that Picasso's Guernica remains one of the best known and most admired paintings of the twentieth century while the masterworks of proletarian or Aryan studios have been consigned to the aesthetic dustbin of history. Artists of all kinds have shown singular seriousness in their dogged defence of individual human rights in the face of arbitrary authority. Leading figures in the art world have achieved heroic status as symbols of resistance to political repression while countless lesser known denizens of that world have, time and again, defied authoritarianism through an explicit moral commitment to use their creative talents in the cause of human enlightenment and liberation. Sharply contesting Durkheim's understimation of art's social significance, such facts also cast doubt on the wisdom of excluding the aesthetic from the 'Cult of Man' which celebrated 'notions of conscience, personal judgement and reason'. Durkheim surely had far more in common with many artists than he realized (Pickering 1990:100).

While the Durkheimian concept of the sacred presents many difficulties, Geiphart has admirably indicated how it can be applied in order to reveal art's 'genetico-structural affinities to religion'. Noting that the 'force of the sacred is the intellectual source both of religious ideas as well as aesthetic forms', he discerns a process of differentiation by which 'aesthetic imagination and its communal practice in rituals and cults' comes to transcend everyday life in a manner 'similar to religious practice'. A latter-day Durkheimian conception of aesthetics as a sacred alternative to religion raises a number of intellectual issues, some of which have been fruitfully explored by Geiphart. As an addendum to his analysis, however, it may be suggested that the comparative perspective intrinsic to the notion of functional alternatives permits deeper insight into both religion and art as each is reciprocally reinterpreted in terms of the other. Furthermore, introduction of
the possibility of a migration of the sacred from one sphere to another should intensify interest in both the religious content of art and the aesthetic content of religion. The idea of art and religion as broadly overlapping alternative realms of human activity would seem especially relevant in attempts to clarify current definitional dilemmas and in efforts to classify the conventionally unfamiliar religious and aesthetic forms emergent in post-industrial societies.

Art, religion and everyday life

Gephart provides a clue to perhaps the most striking parallel between contemporary art and religion when he observes that ‘aesthetic content needs much more specialized explanation and interpretation as the difference between the object world of everyday life and the work of art decreases’ (see also Danto 1984:31). Underscoring, as it does, the increasingly itinerant nature of the sacred and the blurring of boundaries which segregate it from the profane, this statement possesses an even broader significance than is explicitly suggested by its author. It could, in fact, easily be transposed into a religious key with convincing sociological justification and widespread support from specialists in the sociology of religion. Thus, current affirmations of the ‘fading out’ of art find such striking parallels in assertions of religion’s increasing ‘invisibility’ that brief investigation of this matter appears worthwhile (Maquet 1973; Luckmann 1967).

The question ‘what is art?’ though always challenging has probably never been more difficult to answer. It is clear, however, that an automatic association of art with certain sorts of objects (e.g. paintings or sculptures) created in accordance with specific technical traditions has long been displaced as a definitional device. Thus, while the casual visitor to an art gallery may find some modern artworks (especially those of a minimalist or abstract nature) mystifying or perhaps distasteful, they are likely to be familiar enough to be seen as ‘art’. Puzzlement is liable to be accompanied by sheer bewilderment, however, when exhibits on display include items such as a household mirror, a stack of bricks, an unmade bed or an exact walk-in replica of a neighbourhood pharmacy complete with contents.8 The fact that the sheer ordinariness of such exhibits seems to belie their claim to be art draws attention to the crucial connection, proposed by Durkheim, between art and the sacred (Dissanayake 1988:92-98). Historically, the creation of art has involved a process of what a contemporary sociobiologist calls ‘making special’: a classification and designation of ‘things set apart’ which strongly evokes Durkheim’s account of the emergence of the sacred. Intermittently throughout the past century, however, the idea of the ‘specialness’, ‘sacredness’ or ‘aura’ of art has been denounced from various quarters with an interest in the minimization or eradication of the gap between art and the mundane world. Thus, in one formulation, art will eventually disappear ‘when everyone becomes an artist and the world is finally transformed into a work of art’ (Taylor 1999:189). Another approach hinges on the recognition of the artistry implicit in the everyday world and seeks nothing less than what Danto calls ‘the transfiguration of the commonplace’ (Danto 1981). In Durkheiman terms, such conceptions posit a fusion of the sacred and profane in which the distinction disappears as human life becomes simultaneously both sacred and profane.

Interestingly, the significance of this perspective is best appreciated in the theological terms usefully applied by Mark Taylor in describing the fundamental tension characterizing the history of art in the last hundred years. In his view, the constant dialectical interplay between transcendence and immanence characteristic of the Western religious tradition also defines competing artistic alternatives. Thus, a continuing oscillation between these two ‘contrasting tendencies’ means that an abstract, autonomous, otherworldly art that is ‘no longer about anything other than itself’ is challenged, in the modern context, by an art which ‘becomes so worldly that everything seems to be art’ (Taylor 1999:185). Needless to say, in such circumstances, a satisfactory definition of art is extremely elusive.

How is such a view of art mirrored in the sociological understanding of contemporary religion? This question goes to the heart of current definitional debates among specialists and is consequently of crucial relevance to the continuing controversy concerning the concept of secularization. Durkheim, of course, famously depicted the difficulty of defining religion while constructing what is probably the best known sociological definition of the term. By contrast, Weber infamously avoided explicit definition of this central concept in his monumental comparative - historical writings (Durkheim [1912a] 1961:62; Weber 1963:1). Although, nearly a century later, the sociological study of religion still displays a lack of clarity regarding its subject matter, Durkheim’s definition continues to inspire support and provoke dissent in a way which also has relevance for the study of art.

While sociologists of religion have historically concentrated their attention on religion’s collective and institutional aspects (to a great extent
under Durkheimian influence), during the past three decades a significantly new situation has unfolded. Especially since the advent of Thomas Luckmann’s ‘invisible religion’ thesis, many sociologists have become far less inclined to engage in the study of traditional ecclesiastical organizations. They seek instead a diffuse religion glimpsed in formerly unhallowed locations but permanently imperceptible to those unwilling to embrace a highly inclusive definitional framework. For such scholars, religious vitality in post-industrial societies (especially in Western Europe) no longer involves identifiable and authoritative bodies to which believers belong. It derives, on the contrary, from a widely dispersed resource upon which believers may draw without any obligation to commit themselves to a collective enterprise (Davie 1994; Beckford 1992:170-171; Bibby 1993). Religion in this sense is individualized, privatized, fragmented and syncretic: a post-modern bricolage drawn from multiple (old and new) sources. Though it can take an incalculable variety of forms, it is currently most discernible in a broad cultural quest for ‘spirituality’. From this point of view, ‘religion’ is more likely to be encountered in a health food store, a gymnasium, a motivational seminar, a twelve-step empowerment programme or a self-help group than in any church, chapel, synagogue, mosque or temple.

Although Durkheim’s celebrated concern with ‘the moral community called a church’ might appear to distance him from this currently prevailing highly inclusive conception of religion (of which Luckmann was the harbinger), this is far from being the case. If a notion of the permanent possibility of the ‘transfiguration of the commonplace’ is implicit in his concept of the sacred, the tension between the transcendent and the immanent is also a vital element in his theory of religion. Thus, it is no surprise that neo-Durkheimians are prominent among the promoters of an inclusive functional definitional strategy as especially appropriate in the contemporary situation. Kenneth Thompson, for example, chides the proponents of the secularization thesis for discerning ‘the apparent disappearance of large sections of (religious) subject-matter’ and condemns them for clinging to a ‘supernaturalist’ and substantive definition of religion which distorts their vision. Prescribing an antidote in the form of Durkheim’s theory of the sacred, he counsels his adversaries that ‘for those who follow the Durkheimian approach, their subject-matter does not decline but is constantly reproduced, even if transformed’ (Thompson 1990:533-534). Just as art seems to disappear when it becomes indistinguishable from mundane objects so religion loses visibility when it deserts its former strongholds and discovers new abodes in unfamiliar social settings. Religion can thus become so ‘worldly’ that, depending on one’s point of view, nothing or everything is religious. The sacred is profaned as the profane is sacrified.

It is unnecessary to belabour the obvious parallels between art and religion in a highly individualized contemporary (post-modern) context. Nor do the potential benefits of more extensive Durkheimian comparative analysis of the religious and aesthetic spheres require further promotion.

**Art in contemporary life**

In circumstances where even those who oppose Durkheimianism ‘are forced to recognize that it is increasingly featuring in the key debates about post-modernity’, the relevance of a revisionist Durkheimian sociology of art should not be underestimated (Thompson 1993:452). In the light of previous discussion, an appropriate topic for such an enterprise might be the phenomenon of art and religion sans frontières: the blurring of borders between these spheres as each becomes increasingly boundless. Such research would be most profitably conducted in tandem with an exploration of art and religion as functionally alternative forms of human activity wherever they are distinguishable. In the course of both these investigations, scholars will probably note the degree to which art and religion increasingly share an individualist goal of self-realization, a fact which might be worth contemplating in terms of Durkheim’s reflections on the ‘Cult of Man’. Another interesting issue is provoked by Durkheim’s observation that ‘there is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself’ (Durkheim [1912a] 1961:474-475). If this is so, might not art also possess an eternal character? Alternatively, is this possibility merely a chimera deriving from a major intellectual error on Durkheim’s part? (Pickering 1990).

So much of the foregoing discussion has dwelt on his misconceptions and misjudgements, that the opportunity to defend Durkheim on certain matters cannot honourably be missed. Taking issue with Durkheim’s view that art fails to bring people face-to-face with physical, moral and social reality because of its primary concern with the imagination, Pickering makes some specific contestable observations. Noting their emergence in specific historical contexts and their debt to their predecessors, he denies that art objects are ‘products of the unbridled imagination’, insisting that they ‘are not
without boundaries’. In addition, he suggests that artworks involve representations in which may be found the ‘likeness of some link with reality’ and that overly innovative or radical representations will find themselves ‘rejected by society’. These eminently sensible comments echo the perennially apt sociological response to the ideology of original, unsocialized and untrammelled creative genius and evoke almost instant assent. But, before Pickering’s critique is endorsed, it is necessary to consider under what circumstances Durkheim might be right.

There is no doubt that (as previous discussion has indicated), Durkheim was badly wrong in his estimation of the nature and significance of art both in historical and contemporary terms. Though he lived at a time (and in the place) in which the world of art was being transformed, the story of art from the renaissance until the time of his own death offers little of use in defending him against Pickering’s charges. As a social institution, art simply was not as anarchic, amoral, undisciplined or trivial as Durkheim maintained, despite its bohemian reputation. Ironically and anachronistically, however, evidence drawn from developments in art since his death renders Durkheim’s opinion rather more plausible. Thus, it is in the artistic turmoil which began in the 1940s, escalated in the 1960s and intensified during the last two decades of the century that something akin to art as Durkheim describes it may be glimpsed.

The content of much late twentieth-century art, for example, might be cited in support of Durkheim’s claim that ‘art fails to bring people face-to-face with reality’ and to refute Pickering’s belief that art consists of representations in which are found ‘the notion of likeness or some link with reality’. The fact that many artists explicitly and unshakably reject representationalism as playing any part in their work is surely a point in Durkheim’s favour. While it is undeniable that much non-figurative or abstract art has sometimes sought to represent such things as theosophical symbols, Jungian archetypes or even the primal motion of the universe, prominent figures have insisted repeatedly that their paintings or sculptures are not of or about anything and that the terms ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ have no meaning in the context of their artworks. Artists who have used the techniques of ‘automaticism’ or ‘action-painting’ have described their works simply as events while those who have revelled in the sheer superficiality and ‘flappiness’ of their works have been resolute in their rejection of the very idea of representation (Tekiner 2000; Taylor 1992). Of course, artists’ intentions can hardly be conclusive in this matter. Those engaged in the creation of art may be unconsciously involved in the representation of things that, while invisible to themselves, are apparent and intelligible to the sociologist, psychologist or theologian. In the case of abstractionism, however, it is the psychiatrist rather than the sociologist who is most likely to succeed in excavating the buried referents of the artwork. While any investigation of the representation of the social in abstract art seems destined to disappointment, a search for the social in much minimalist and environmental art seems likely to prove equally difficult.

Durkheim might also be defended against Pickering’s insistence that art objects possess boundaries and are part of a cumulative historical process. In the light of earlier discussion of the simultaneous breakdown of borders in both art and religion, it is unnecessary to do more than simply reiterate that, at the present time, there appears to be nothing that cannot qualify as art and be received as such if so defined (Danto 1997:27). The issue of boundaries is, of course, intrinsically linked to the presence of tradition and the process of historical development. In casting doubt on Pickering’s statements, therefore, it is appropriate to cite a scholar who has emphasized this fact in his widely debated assertion of ‘the end of art’, a proposition which has instigated one of the most important recent philosophical debates in the field of art criticism.11

The end of art?

Distinguishing between ‘modern’ and ‘contemporary’ art, Arthur Danto expresses ‘a vivid sense that some momentous historical shift’ took place in the transition from the former to the latter during the late 1960s and early 1970s. As this major mutation is, in its essential features, consistent with what is now commonly described as the movement from ‘modernism’ to ‘post-modernism’, it seems in order to identify contemporary art (in Danto’s sense) with what others call post-modernist art (Smart 1993, Danto 1997:3-19). What are its main features? For Danto, contemporary art is the (possibly inevitable) result of the ‘terminal fermentation’ of the previous half-century: an enterprise ‘too pluralistic in intention and realization to allow itself to be captured along a single dimension’. It has emerged from a situation in which ‘artists pressed against boundary after boundary, and found that the boundaries all gave way’. Fragmented, pluralistic and relativistic, the world of art is now like a museum ‘in which all art has a rightful place, where there is no a priori criterion as to what art must look like and where there is no narrative into which the numerous contents must all fit’. In this collage anything visual can
be a visual artwork, no art is more valid than any other and the whole history of artistic creation 'sunders into a sequence of individual acts, one after another'. It is in these circumstances that Danto feels compelled to speak of 'the end of art' in a manner which evokes Hegel's famous epitaph. In his new formulation, this means 'the end of a certain narrative which has unfolded in art history over the centuries' and under the terms of which 'making art was to be carrying forward the history of discovery and making new breakthroughs'. With the breakdown of narrative and boundaries, he argues, 'there is no longer any reason to think of art as having a progressive history: there simply is not the possibility of a developmental sequence' (Danto 1984:7-8, 1992:7-10, 1997:21-39). Danto does not discount the prospect of a future renaissance of art and the writing of a first chapter in an entirely new narrative. Until this occurs, however, he prefers to depict contemporary artists as working in what he calls 'the post-historical period'. In his opinion, such artists (unfortunately) can only 'bring into existence works which lack the historical importance or meaning we have for a long time come to expect' (Danto 1984:31).

If Danto is correct in his analysis, then Pickering is mistaken in assuming the permanence of boundaries and the relevance of historical tradition in the practice of art. Durkheim, however, receives a sort of posthumous exoneration from the resemblance between Danto's portrayal of contemporary art and his own. There is a decidedly post-modern twist in the fact that Durkheim advanced an erroneous view of art at the turn of one century while unknowingly anticipating art's condition at the turn of the next. Even in the matter of art's 'seriousness', Danto seems to echo Durkheim in depicting the deficiencies of post-historical art. It would, of course, be entirely inappropiate to award Durkheim retrospective credit for his apparent powers of prediction. Contemplation of the character of post-modern art, however, might lead us to ponder the possibility that his perception of certain tendencies within the volatile world of art was less misguided than has hitherto been recognised.

Conclusion

The incisive and insightful articles of Geppert, Menger and Pickering make a most beneficial and timely contribution both to Durkheimian studies and the sociology of art. It is to be hoped that they will stimulate further re-examination of Durkheim's writings on art as a basis for a sustained and systematic neo-Durkheimian analysis of aesthetics in the context of post-modernity.

Clearly, no attempt is made in the articles discussed here, nor in the present commentary on them, to disguise or downplay Durkheim's failings in the field of art. Far from diminishing the magnitude of his scholarly achievement, however, his errors are a reminder of C. Wright Mills's observation that the founding fathers of sociology are 'so often wrong' yet remain great in their enduring capacity to inspire the explorations of later generations (Mills 1960:3). Durkheim's view of art, as Pickering remarks, undoubtedly 'raises as many questions as it solves'. It is fortunate that the search for solutions has been inaugurated so auspiciously.

NOTES


2. See also Menger's discussion pp. 63-66.

3. The Enlightenment roots of totalitarianism should not be overlooked. See Talcott (1951).

4. The writings of both Durkheim and Weber are evocative of Victorian Evangelicalism's attitudes of seriousness and earnestness. See Bradley (1976).

5. See O'Toole (1996:129-130). According to Nietzsche, art 'raises its head where creeds relax' to become the major beneficiary of religious decline.

6. Durkheim's account of the religious origins of art had an early and profound impact. See Harrison (1913). See also Menger's account of art, effervescence, memory and revitalisation in Durkheim's analysis of religion pp. 73-77.

7. The literature on the religious or spiritual aspects of art is immense. See, for example, Tekiner 2000; Taylor 1992, 1999; Goethals 1990; Crumlin 1998; Apostolos-Cappadona 1984; and Wolfe 1984. For important theological discussions see Kung 1981; Rahner 1982 and Tillich 1987.

8. The classic piece of 'ready-made' art is Marcel Duchamp's urinal ('Fountain') while the most famous 'appropriated' work explicitly and meticulously constructed to be indistinguishable from its mundane model is Andy Warhol's 'Brillo Box'. All 'found' art becomes art through the decree of an individual artist.
9. Malcolm Hamilton (1998) suggests the appropriateness of the magician's phrase 'Now you see it, now you don't' in the context of secularization. It may be used (in reverse) with regard to sociological sightings of religion. For overviews of contemporary diffuse religion see Roof 1996; Wuthnow 1998; and Demerath 2000. See also Pickering (1990) in search of the sacred in contemporary life.

10. Although Luckmann's main debt is to Weber, his thesis may be read as an extension of Durkheim's analysis. Consider, for example, his observation that we must regard the social processes that lead to the formation of the self as fundamentally religious' (1967:48-49). While he views the transcendence of biological nature as 'a religious phenomenon', Luckmann's conception of contemporary religion is one of shrinking transcendence and expanding imminent (1967:48 and 1990).

11. Pickering's explication of Durkheim parallels that of Menger (pp. 63-66).

12. See Menger's comments on the tension between the individual and collective dimensions of art as a central problem for Durkheim (pp. 61-62).

13. See Danto (1984, 1997). As Danto notes, the idea of the end of art was 'in the air' in the early 1980s. His essay appeared almost simultaneously with a strikingly similar work in (German) by Hans Belting (1987). The debate has been prolonged and the literature is voluminous. See, for example, Morgan (1998).

14. No longer able to supply 'that satisfaction of spiritual wants which earlier epochs and peoples have sought', art has become for Hegel 'one of the sides of its highest destiny a thing of the past' (Gray 1970:33-34).

15. Belting's diagnosis parallels Danto's exactly. He writes of 'the relatively recent loss of faith in a great and compelling narrative' and observes 'that contemporary art manifests an awareness of a history of art but no longer carries it forward' (1987:58 and 3). The loss of narrative is a notion central to the idea of post-modernity. Lyotard writes of 'the great narrative of the end of great narratives' (1986).

16. Danto obviously distinguishes between more and less significant art. Acceptance of such a distinction might lead to an interesting Durkheimian study of the social circumstances which respectively generate 'serious' and 'non-serious art'.

REFERENCES


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