Committed Art and Propaganda

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by

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ABSTRACT

This study provides an overview of the relationship between art and politics. After having defined both art and politics, in the sense in which they are used in this study, this paper examines what makes them overlap and interact.

By investigating the role of committed art in this paper, the authors have distinguished three versions of it: Committed art “inspired by politics”, Committed art “in the service of politics” and Committed art “by mistake”. All three versions are connected to the ‘commitment’ discourse, but each of them differs in the origins of this connection. The cases are illustrated with examples of art works from various historical moments.

In addition, the paper discusses the key arguments and debates involved in the study of committed art and propaganda. It assesses the need for propaganda from antiquity till nowadays as well as the response of the people to it. Expanding chronologically, the authors take into consideration all the sociocultural and political factors of each era.

This study ends up answering how much of art is after all uncommitted.
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Committed Art and Propaganda

“The arts matter because they embrace, express and define the soul of a civilization. A nation without arts would be a nation that had stopped talking to itself, stopped dreaming, and had lost interest in the past and lacked curiosity about the future.”

John Tusa, Art Matters (2000)

Art has played a major role in political history from antiquity till nowadays. Art and politics present some major affinities. They are both based on ideologies, they are both filtered by the sociohistorical moments during which they happen, they both address to people. What this paper investigates is what makes them overlap and interact. Apart from their common points, there is a relation, one could say out of necessity. Politics and specifically political systems find in art an effective medium to communicate messages to the people. They also use art to cultivate new values and ideas. On the other hand, art is inspired or influenced by politics. Viewing history, from revolutionary movements and totalitarian regimes to democracies, artists have always found an interesting ground of inspiration.

By exploring the complicated relation between art and politics, a series of questions arise concerning the profits and the losses for each party in this relation, the motives behind it and the actual power of art.

This study attempts to discuss the “political” in art. It tries to assess the impact of different sociohistorical moments on the relation between art and politics.

In order to test our hypothesis, we present examples of artistic work from various historical moments. Expanding chronologically, we take into consideration all the sociocultural and political factors of each era in order to explain why and how art has been used for political reasons.

1. DEFINING ART

To define art is probably as complicated as to define human feelings. Everybody knows about them but not everybody understands them. Everybody experiences them but not everybody can explain them. Having emotions is common to all humans, but their interpretation and externalisation remains unique for every individual.

So, just like human feelings, art is a unique condition. And just like human feelings are outlined, described and analyzed by psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and psychologists so is art outlined, described and analyzed by art critics, art
historians and artists. This is not to say that nobody else can have a personal
view about them, on the contrary, everybody has an opinion for both human
feelings and art, but only few are charged with the responsibility to provide the
most comprehensive and acceptable definitions of them.

Art is a conscious synthesis and creation of forms, sounds, movements,
colours, materials and words to express a human condition. These creations,
that we call art or art works can take all possible forms and express all
possible conditions.

Talking about the arts in this paper will be restricted to specific art forms such
as music, theatre, architecture, dance, literature, cinema and the visual
arts. This choice has been made as a result of the infinite and abstract forms
art can take. Moreover, narrowing down the scope of this paper, aims to
sharpen its focus.

Art is characterized by its quality to carry messages; messages that are either
clearly stated or deeply hidden. These messages might be conveyed
consciously by the artists or they might be completely unintentional. Also,
these messages might be imposed on or projected to the art works by the
audience.

As a human expression, art can be shared among people of all economic and
social backgrounds. It is an expression that can easily reach both the most
educated audiences as well as the least educated. This value of art does not
mean that all people understand and appreciate all art forms or all art works.
On the contrary, there is a lot of discussion about the effect of different
artworks in people of different class or education. In this paper however, we
will not refer to issues related to ‘low’ and ‘high’ art. We will mainly focus on
the messages finally reaching the audiences through art.

2. DEFINING POLITICS

In this paper, we talk about the “political” element in art and we also talk about
politics. As political, we characterise anything that can give us a hint of the
sociohistorical situation in which the artwork took place. It is not strictly limited
within the austere political boundaries such as the affiliation to a political party
or an action in favour of government. Our participation in the community we
live might encompass a political meaning, without having us taking part in
administrative decisions or acts. Even our consciously apolitical behaviour,
can be translated as a purely political position in the sense that connotes our
decision and freedom not to participate.

Furthermore, by talking about politics, we refer, here, to various political
systems as found throughout history. Political system is perceived here
according to the definition in the Collins’s Dictionary of Sociology, that is “the
apparatus of government and the general arrangements for political decision
making within a society.”

Each political system is based on an ideology which constitutes its guide.
According to their ideological basis, all political systems need to build their
own structures in society, in order for the system to function and to be maintained. When we talk about structures, we refer to all kinds of social and political arrangements within a society. Whether democratic or totalitarian, all political systems have to induce their ideologies to collective consciousness. Therefore, new values and new ideas should be incorporated in the structures of society. Ideas and values need to be shared by the bulk of the community. Anything new, in order to be accepted, it needs to respect the social and cultural traditions of a society. An illustrative example would be the emergence of communism in China. Mao Tse Toung used the educational system and emphasized on certain traditions of the Chinese culture, such the Beijing Opera, in order to cultivate to the Chinese the communist principles. In his attempt to reshape the old Chinese way of thinking and behaving, Mao begun from China’s traditional culture. Beijing’s Opera was the ideal target. More than a thousand years old, the Opera was the symbol of the Chinese tradition; if one could change the Opera, could change everything. Eight new plays were written. The new stories of generals and the army replaced the old ones of the emperors and their mistresses.

The culture of a society is always on the agenda of politics. Either to maintain sovereignty or to interfere in an existent political situation, it seems almost inevitable not to intervene in society’s culture. An exemplifying and modern example is that of American politics in the extract of Henri Kissinger’s speech in 1974 in Washington, “…The Greek people are anarchic and difficult to tame. For this reason, we must strike deep into their cultural roots; perhaps then, we can force them to conform. I mean, of course, to strike on their language, their religion, their cultural and historical reserves, so that we can neutralise their ability to develop, to distinguish themselves, or to prevail; Thereby, removing them as an obstacle to our strategically vital plans in the Balkans, the Mediterranean and the Middle East…”1. Kissinger’s view constitutes a common policy of a super power that tries to find an effective way in order to complete its imperialist plans; in any case by intruding and interfering in a society’s culture equates with great economic and political consequences.

3. THE INTERRELATION BETWEEN ART AND POLITICS

At first glance, given the specific definitions of the nature of art and politics, there seems to be no obvious interrelation between them. Is there any interplay at all? And if so, of what kind?

Upon closer inspection we understand that in order to establish a political situation, it is important to incorporate its values into the structures of the society and this can be facilitated via a thorough grounding in the culture of the society2. Lenin believed that rural peasants were not ready to generate revolutionary consciousness by themselves. The Party was to provide leadership and formulate the theoretical basis of policy as well as to educate the masses. Both Lenin’s and Stalin’s political vision presupposed the existence of a cultivated and confident working class. Propaganda and education were not very distinct in the Soviet Union. Lenin battled illiteracy and tried to raise Soviets’ cultural tastes; he viewed art as a function lying within the broader framework of education. In his terms, that meant that
literature and other forms of art had to reflect the evolutionary trends of the new society. Soviet art was mainly state funded, while the Communist Party interfered in all sorts of art. As early as 1918, Lenin decided to pull down the Tsarist statues and to replace them with new monuments, an action that symbolized his desire to distanciate people from the old memories. Similarly to Lenin, Hitler, once in power, ordered to burn all the books that could poison people’s conscience and which opposed the nazi ideology\(^3\). Over 20,000 books of well-known authors like Albert Einstein, Zigmud Freud, Emile Zola, Hellen Keller a.o were burnt in Berlin.

As we can see, there are similarities concerning the interference of the Communist and the Nazist Regimes in the culture of their societies. The culture of each society needs to support and embrace the new political situation, if this is to last. It is of no coincidence that all major historical political regimes have severely interfered in the culture of their society. It starts with literature, poetry, music and cinema because though they do not seem to represent direct threats to the establishment, artistic culture has an extreme power to mould the consciousness of the people. Taking into consideration the peculiarities of a society, art helps to reinforce the existing structures. Ideally, art has a dual role in the establishment of a political system. On the one hand, it has the power to enforce its ideology, by communicating its values to the masses. On the other hand, art as a part of our culture has a direct effect on our thinking and behaviour, something that can either empower or weaken the structures of the society.

4. COMMITTED ART

So what is committed art? What is its nature or its basic characteristics? At the heart of this paper lies the perception of what we mean by ‘committed’. This definition is again a matter of conflict. For some, ‘committed art’\(^4\) implies the artists’ direct intervention in the world of politics while for some others represents the artists’ views and position towards the social condition of their time. The meaning of what we call ‘committed art’ has changed over time and place, leaving us with a not very clear view about it.

After an extended study of examples selected throughout various historical periods, we ended up distinguishing three versions of committed art. All three versions are connected to the ‘commitment’ discourse, but each of them differs in the origins of this connection. In other words, these versions are to be found not in the works of art but in the purposes of their creators. Thus, these three versions clarify the circumstances under which the artwork becomes ‘committed’:

‘Committed Art inspired by politics’

When Pablo Picasso created the well-known “Guernica” in 1937, a depiction of the Spanish civil war, nobody could imagine that this painting would remain the absolute modern art statement against war. The work has been a direct expression of the artist’s position against Franco and his political regime. It is noteworthy that Picasso did not allow “Guernica” to be exhibited in Spain until after dictator Franco was dead.
“Guernica” is of course, first of all, a condemnation of war, an expression of the pain and the disaster that followed and all the above are universal truths. However, it is very much an artwork inspired by the political conditions of the time. It is ‘committed’ in the sense that it has a clear political signification. It has been created within the broader context of Picasso’s actions against Franco and at exactly the same historical moment of the conflict. The work acquired such a political aura that about thirty years after its creation, the Art Workers Coalition (AWC), a body of anti-war artists, invited Picasso to remove “Guernica” from New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) as a protest against the museum’s considered complicity with, the Vietnam War.

‘Committed art inspired by politics’ represents that kind of artwork that comes straight out of the artist’s ideology. It is not dictated, nor random, but it expresses feelings and concepts of the artist for a political condition.

This kind of political inspiration can be found in thousands outstanding artworks of various historical periods.

More than one century before Picasso’s “Guernica”, the famous Eugene Delacroix created a work of major political significance for the Greek Revolution. Three years after the beginning of the 1821 revolution the well-known “The massacre of Chios” became a vehicle of a political idea with major publicity. The stirring depiction of the Greek fight raised awareness and deeply touched all Europeans. As a result, people from all European countries increased their support for the Greek fight.

In Soviet Union of the 60’s, apart from the majority of artists who followed the governments instructions there were others who ‘committed’ to opposite views. Grisha Bruskin, painter and sculptor, had severely critisized Sosialist Realism. His “Fundamental Lexicon” depicts the symbols used by the ideological sign system of the communist state. During the 1960s and 1970s, non conformist art groups were increasingly active in the Soviet Union.

A final example can be found in the world of cinema. In the United States great movie stars like Donald Sutherland and Jane Fonda used their fame to protest against the Vietnam war. Fonda made her views clear in the movie “FTA” – F*** The Army”, 1973, while both Robert Oldman with his movie “M*A*S*H”, 1970, and Dalton Trambo with “Johnny Got His Gun”, 1971, severely criticized the war.

‘Committed Art in the service of politics’

Within several political regimes the artist is part of a mechanism that should protect and enforce a specific political condition or aim. He or she is therefore under order to create artworks able to reach the people with their messages and to guide them towards a specific behaviour.

Is the artist who creates an artwork in the service of politics, a free artist? Unfortunately, there is not a single answer to this question. The artist might be more than willing to provide an artwork for the needs of a political ideology that he/she shares. However he/she might also be just like any other citizen
who must execute orders. When it comes to ‘committed art in the service of politics’ it is indeed very hard to distinguish the blurred boundaries between an artist willing to contribute to politics (which actually represents the concept of a committed artist par excellence) and an artist under the state of fear.

In some cases, the artist does not clearly belong to either of these sides. The Parthenon, an architectural symbol of Athens, created in the 5th century B.C was influenced by Pericles’ political vision to exceed the competition between Athenians and Spartans—and in terms of architecture this was achieved through a mixed Ionic and Doric technique-. This vision of course cannot entitle the two creators (Fidias and Calicrates) as committed artists. It is however because of Pericles vision and financial support that a great work of art was created at that specific historical moment and with this specific architectural form.

Post- Revolutionary France

Napoleon was among the firsts modern propagandists. With the help of his royal court artist and confidant, Jacques Louis David (1748-1825), he created and staged his public image as an indisputable leader and a romantic hero. David’s paintings such as “Napoleon Crossing the Great St. Bernard Pass”, 1800 and “The Coronation of Emperor Napoleon and Empress Josephine”, 1804, are well known propagandistic devices of the era, along with other artistic paintings and etchings. These paintings were ordered to David in order to promote the political achievements of Napoleon.

Nazist Germany

Numerous examples of artworks created by threatened artists can be found in this historical period. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s minister for popular enlightenment and propaganda was primarily responsible for creating the Nazi political reality. According to Goebbels, in order to achieve a policy based on German nazist education, it was necessary to gather all artists and intellectuals and coordinate their work. Therefore, Nazis created the National Chamber of Culture that controlled all kind of artistic work, from music and literature to theatre and cinema. Its purpose was to “merge together the creative elements from all fields for carrying out, under the leadership of the state, a single will”. All artists had either to abide by their rules or work without being able to exhibit or be deprived of their right to work. It is not by coincidence that at that period most of the German artists immigrated. Those that were left behind were obliged to obey. All literary or theatrical manuscripts had first to be controlled by the Ministry of Propaganda in order to be authorized for publication or performance.

A typical example of the Chamber’s tactics can be found in the music of Nazist Germany. It is of course broadly known that the regime showed a special preference for certain types of music while it forbidden others. What is of particular interest is that Goebbels, in order to avoid the interference of ‘black’ or ‘Jewish’ sounds, was issuing special circulars with guidance for the composition of music that prohibited the use of certain instruments, terminology or even musical techniques that might refer to jazz sounds.
We cannot whatsoever consider all the artists of that period committed, under
the state of fear. It is noteworthy that more than 100,000 art practitioners
joined a Chamber that accepted only ‘racially and ideologically acceptable
artists’.

Let’s take for example the work of Leni Riefenstall. When Nazis came into
power in Germany, they knew well that films could help to boost national
confidence. Goebbels believed that strategically produced entertainment had
the real power. Well-known films are “Olympia” in 1936 (ordered by the
dictator himself) and “Triumph of the Will” in 1934. Both were made by Leni
Riefenstall, personal friend of Hitler’s. Riefenstall’s work was clearly
influenced by the Nazi aesthetics. The nazist regime furnished her with all
technical support to accomplish the wisful result. Her friendship with the
German dictator cost her her career, after the collapse of nazism.

Soviet Union

The fall of the winter palace, main home of the tsarist family, was the main
theme of the highly visionary and epic film ‘The Storming of the Winter Palace’
(1920), by the so-called revolution’s filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (1898 -
1948). Though according to historical references, there was not much
resistance and the casualties were no more than five; the film version was
pictureing a massive invasion. This exaggeration contributed to the
empowerment of the Revolution’s central myth, by creating a history of
heroism as regards how the workers undertook power.

Furthermore, in the area of the visual arts, the artistic movement of Socialist
Realism meant that artists ought to interpret, reflect and change reality. What
we mean here is that art does not depict ordinary reality, but the socialist
reality. This is more than apparent in Tatyana Yablonskaya’s painting in 1917,
“Corn”. Yablonskaya depicts a scene of agricultural work, but with no sign of
hardship and toil, instead people look happy and proud. So, in this sense, the
ideal of working within the realm of a communist community is an action of
self-accomplishment and socialist fervour.

In architecture, the Russian Constructivist movement, of which Vladimir Tatlin
was a founding father, played an important role. Constructivist Architecture
created the vast housing blocks that served the Party’s ideology of communal
living, where private habits and personal life had no place. In other words,
committed art shaped the urban landscape and transformed living conditions.

‘Committed Art by mistake’

As we have already mentioned in our definition of art, an artist cannot
necessarily be aware of all the messages carried by his/her artwork. When it
comes to art, messages and aesthetic signification can be transformed,
projected or even invented by opinion leaders and the audience itself.

In this third version we are finding art works that are either used by specific
political regimes long after their creation, (that is, the artist was not aware of
that significance at the time of creation) or artworks that are connected with politics years or centuries after the artists’ death.

This third category also implies the case of those artists who although they never considered themselves or their work as ‘committed’, ended up becoming part of political references.

Once again Nazi Germany provides us with examples. The music of Anton Bruckner (1824-1896) became synonymous with the German parades and with the fascist ‘serious’ spirit. Of course Bruckner lived almost a century before Fascist Germany and his work was mainly inspired by religious music. In the same way, Richard Wagner’s music (1813-1883) incarnated the ideals of the ‘heroic German soul’ half a century after his death. Wagner’s music was thought appropriate to educate the young Germans. For Goebbels’ propaganda notions, Wagner had one more reason to become their ‘chosen’ musician. In 1850 Wagner had published in a German music journal an anti-Jewish article that argued about the ‘poisoning of European art by the Jewish’.

In contemporary Greece, the Socialist Party PASOK and his first leader Andreas Papandreou have been strongly connected to the music of Carmina Burana by Carl Orloff (1895-1982). The work although composed in 1937 has been used in all major political gatherings of 1990’s and characterised a whole political era until the death of Papandreou.

Limitations on the artistic work

It is important to mention that there are cases of artists or artworks where the boundaries between the above categories are blurred. Especially when even in the most despotic regimes like the Nazi Germany, art propaganda was produced by artists on a voluntary basis. Taking for example Francisco de Goya, the noted Spanish artist. Goya had been appointed First Painter to the King of Spain. He made the paintings of the royalty and of the people that was surrounding them, including the military. On the other hand, he was a liberal intellectual with his own political convictions. He produced both etchings and paintings depicting man’s inhumanity to man. In his series of etchings called “Disasters of War”, he presented the descent of a nation into absolute bulgarity. Moreover, Goya’s “Execution of the Rebels”, in 1814, remains a powerful testimony to the barbarity of organized power over political and social protest.

5. PROPAGANDA: THEN AND NOW

The word “propaganda” has negative connotations, as it implies manipulation and deception strategies. On the other hand, art implies the passion of the artist, the beauty of the artwork, the freedom and imagination of artistic creations. Taking this into consideration, it is absolutely normal to think that “art propaganda” is a contradiction in terms. Yet, propaganda is much more than that and art is not as innocent.

Propaganda from antiquity till nowadays constitutes the absolute weapon in the hands of any politician. In the Roman Arena, the masses were pacified
and manipulated through spectacles staged for obvious reasons of political exploitation. Nowadays, cinema films and TV are the mediums for our brain-washing. However, propaganda is more than manipulation and thought control, it is also about action, just like Lasswell reminds us, propaganda is “the technique of influencing human action”\(^{12}\). Thus propagandists not only manipulate symbols but seek to manipulate the public’s attitudes and behaviours as well. Most specifically, they employ publicist strategies dexterously to influence and shape public opinion. As we can see from our examples, propagandists like Mao Tse Tung and Stalin wanted to activate people. In China, Mao \(^{13}\), with the projection of propagandist films, persuaded the Chinese to embark on a cleaning campaign in order to eliminate diseases, while Stalin used propagandist posters in order to make people participate to the building of an electric network.

In addition, art is really powerful. This, has in cases been used, by the artists in order either to protest against something or in order to defend something else. In other cases, artists just wanted to express their feelings. What we mean here, by saying that art is not innocent, is accepting that its power of communicating messages, has well been used, with or without the permission of the artist, for reasons other than the aesthetic. Moreover, we attribute to art here, with certain caution, the actions of the artist. Artists, being people of high intellectual standards are useful for propaganda. State propaganda, when supported by the educated classes can be very efficacious. It was a lesson learned by Hitler and many others, and it has been pursued to this day. The media, the schools, and popular culture can effectively promote certain trends. They are the mediums to introduce the dominant ideological attitudes to the society. In particular, mass media, education and popular culture are nowadays the best ways to intrude in people’s minds and they are also the best “weapons” of mass submission.

In particular, the role of media is really crucial, taking for example television, which is the medium with the most profound influence over public opinion. The control over the media has proved vital for the American government and has definitely contributed to the re-election of President Bush. By comparing European and American news broadcasts or watching Michael Moore’s documentaries, it becomes obvious what the American citizens do not inform, about their own political reality. Media, including TV, radio and the Press is an incredibly powerful propagandist tool for the American government. It is not a joke that in the U.S, the “country of freedom” – Moore’s documentaries can only be found in peripheral, fringed cinemas and art has frequently been censored. During the recent American “war against terror”, as they like to call it, many well known singers decided to declare officially their opposition to the war. These artists had afterwards problems with the major American radio stations which did not play their songs.

Though propaganda techniques are getting more and more sophisticated, people’s scepticism arise concerning what they see and hear. People just cannot understand why Americans and allies should go around torturing and killing people. As Chomsky argues\(^{14}\), these are all signs of the civilizing effect, despite all the propaganda, despite all the efforts to brain-wash, people are learning to resist and to criticise. People are acquiring an ability and a
willingness to think things through. It's a kind of slow, gradual, but fundamental process.

6. CONCLUSION

After numerous examples and various explanations we end up wondering, how much of art is after all uncommitted?

There is no doubt that there was always free art and free artists. There is no question that millions of outstanding artworks have been created without the slightest relation to any kind of commitment. However, the artistic work in all historical eras and in all geographical locations is unavoidably associated with the historical conditions in which it had been created. It is unavoidably connected to the unique time and place of its creation. This is —even unconsciously— a political statement and this statement is incorporated in all artworks. Within this framework every single artistic expression is political.

So, has all art a political background? It has indeed, even when some deny it and elude to the so-called ‘personal statements’. As Hans Haacke stated: “Clement Greenberg’s authority had made people believe that a work of art leaps ten meters above the earth and that it had nothing to do with the historical conditions in which it had been created. A work of art was supposedly self-referencing and self-sufficient; its only relationship with history being stylistic”\(^{15}\).

What Greenberg overlooks is that although a masterpiece can surpass its era and apply in various historical times, it cannot be detached by its era. The political dimension of art is the expected outcome of a conscious artist living in a human society. After all nothing is created in vacuum. From Sophocle’s “Antigone” (442 B.C) to Burgess “A Clockwork Orange” (1962) and from Picasso’s “Les Demoiselles d’ Avignon” (1907) to the Joseph Kosuth’s conceptual art work “One and Three Chairs” (1965), all are expressing a political truth of their own.

Reaching the end of our paper we wouldn’t exaggerate to argue that in many cases political scientists could share together with art critics and art historians a part of the responsibility to provide the most comprehensive de-coding of an artwork.
1 Published in “Economicos Tahidromos”, 14/08/1997, in Eleutherotypia, Monday 7th March 2005, p.79
4 Also found as ‘totalitarian art’ and ‘propaganda art’. For more information, see: A.Min, D.Duo, S.Landsberger (2003), Chinese Propaganda Posters, Italy :Taschen
14 See: Chomsky, N, The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda, in Open Media, Pamphlet no.10, Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, February 1992
15 See: Stefanidis, M “Notes for the ‘60s”, in ‘Inside-Outside: notes for the ‘60s’ Exhibition catalogue, Published by the Hellenic American Union, January 2005,p.17
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