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The Magical Power of Art: Subject, Public Sphere, Emancipation

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For the subject of his Nobel lecture, Joseph Brodsky chose an issue of key importance to an artist, namely, the meaning of art for people, individuals and society. He opened with a strong statement on the completely private character of the work of art.

If art teaches anything (to the artist, in the first place), it is the privateness of the human condition. Being the most ancient as well as the most literal form of private enterprise, it fosters in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness – thus turning him from a social animal into an autonomous “I.” Lots of things can be shared: a bed, a piece of bread, convictions, a mistress, but not a poem by, say, Rainer Maria Rilke. A work of art, of literature especially, and a poem in particular, addresses a man *tête-à-tête*, entering with him into direct – free of any go-betweens – relations.¹

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1 This and further quotations from Brodsky are based on the script of his lecture available on the webpage of the Committee: http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1987/brodsky-lecture.html

Departing from this axiological statement, the great Russian poet arrives at a paradoxical conclusion. Art, private by its very nature, a refuge for privacy even, fulfills an extraordinary social role, not despite but precisely because of this characteristic. Art has an advantage over politics, over the sphere of power, since:

Language and, presumably, literature are things that are more ancient and inevitable, more durable than any form of social organization. The revulsion, irony, or indifference often expressed by literature towards the state is essentially a reaction of the permanent – better yet, the infinite – against the temporary, against the finite. To say the least, as long as the state permits itself to interfere with the affairs of literature, literature has the right to interfere with the affairs of the state. A political system, a form of social organization, as any system in general, is by definition a form of the past tense that aspires to impose itself upon the present (and often on the future as well); and a man whose profession is language is the last one who can afford to forget this. The real danger for a writer is not so much the possibility (and often the certainty) of persecution on the part of the state, as it is the possibility of finding oneself mesmerized by the state's features, which, whether monstrous or undergoing changes for the better, are always temporary.

Brodsky believes that in this relation of infinite art and temporary politics, a highly important role is played by the private aesthetic experience which at the same time is an ethical experience.

On the whole, every new aesthetic reality makes man's ethical reality more precise. For aesthetics is the mother of ethics. The categories of "good" and "bad" are, first and foremost, aesthetic ones, at least etymologically preceding the categories of "good" and "evil." If in ethics not "all is permitted," it is precisely because not "all is permitted" in aesthetics, because the number of colors in the spectrum is limited. The tender babe who cries and rejects the stranger or who, on the contrary, reaches out to him, does so instinctively, making an aesthetic choice, not a moral one.

The connection between art and politics, aesthetics and ethics, is not only obvious but also special and intimate precisely because art allows for the preservation and cultivation of privacy. In fact, Brodsky adds that "The more substantial an individual's aesthetic experience is, the sounder his taste, the sharper his moral focus, the freer – though not necessarily the happier – he is" and continues: "It is precisely in this applied, rather than Platonic, sense that

we should understand Dostoevsky's remark that beauty will save the world, or Matthew Arnold's belief that we shall be saved by poetry."

As a consequence, art in a society is a condition *sine qua non* of its human dimension and ethical well-being. Brodsky outlines a kind of political utopia:

In any event, the condition of society in which art in general, and literature in particular, are the property or prerogative of a minority appears to me unhealthy and dangerous. I am not appealing for the replacement of the state with a library, although this thought has visited me frequently; but there is no doubt in my mind that, had we been choosing our leaders on the basis of their reading experience and not their political programs, there would be much less grief on earth. It seems to me that a potential master of our fates should be asked, first of all, not about how he imagines the course of his foreign policy, but about his attitude toward Stendhal, Dickens, Dostoevsky. If only because the lock and stock of literature is indeed human diversity and perversity, it turns out to be a reliable antidote for any attempt – whether familiar or yet to be invented – toward a total mass solution to the problems of human existence. As a form of moral insurance, at least, literature is much more dependable than a system of beliefs or a philosophical doctrine.

Brodsky's lecture was undoubtedly intentionally provocative: an apotheosis of art which, while remaining free of limitation, is capable of countering all kinds of pressures, and more to the point, depriving them of their political power. When the dictator's words are revealed as empty rhetoric, its power of enslavement dissipates despite all of its more or less refined tools of violence. Art is also an apotheosis of freedom, although the poet prefers to speak of privacy, probably in order not to overuse big words. The autonomous "I" opposes the social animal, a product of "mass solutions to the problems of human existence." Such positioning of the private versus the public entails the positioning of good versus evil, beauty versus ugliness, in which the victory of beauty and good results not only from the work of an artist but also from the reader's. For Brodsky, a "novel or a poem is not a monologue, but the conversation of a writer with a reader, a conversation, I repeat, that is very private, excluding all others – if you will, mutually misanthropic." Consequently, the power of art lies for Brodsky in its influence upon the audience – the reader. Nothing from what had been lived or read disappears, all persists and continues to impact the very center of the "autonomous I." And so, the Russian poet adds "I believe – not empirically, alas, but only theoretically – that, for someone who has read a lot of Dickens, to shoot his like in the name of some idea is more problematic than for someone who has read no Dickens."

It would be easy to critique the views presented in the cited lecture. Even if they reflect the extraordinary, almost mythical, moral of Joseph Brodsky's life, they also present him evoking the pathos of the Romantic idea of art and artist as a creative force transforming and shaping the society. Modernity seems to have undermined this interpretation of the mission of art, assigning to it a far humbler role and weakening the faith in its power. The relationship of aesthetics and ethics appears, sadly, to be broken. It has been pointed out in the context of Brodsky's lecture that one could imagine a pretty decent volume of poetry written by Stalin, Mao-Tse-Tung and Ho-Chi-Minh, illustrated with Hitler's watercolors. Brodsky is obviously aware of this and differentiates between those who are well read and true readers, but such differentiation can really be conducted only *a posteriori*, which of course means that the validity of the very distinction can be easily undermined. Finally, one could level what I consider the most significant charge against Brodsky, namely that he presents an elitist, aristocratic model of art while trying to democratize it. Brodsky believed that Russian totalitarianism could have come to existence only because art was limited to the circles of the chosen, to the Russian intelligentsia, leaving entire human masses outside its domain.

If one were to systematize and summarize Brodsky's poetic intuitions, a rather clear distinction would emerge between the corrupt public sphere and the private one, where the autonomy of the individual and its ability to reject mass slogans can – or must – be preserved if humanity is to survive. True art, and the poet clearly uses a very limited definition here, should thus avoid engagement, as it is bound to be a false one. Art cannot be entangled in social or political arguments or it will inevitably become entangled in “bad” language which in turn will subordinate art to tyranny. The only meaning of art, to restate once more, is its intimate impact on the “autonomous I” through a misanthropic conversation. The originality of Brodsky's idea, however, lies in its introduction of the private sphere directly into politics. The concept of culture as an improvement of *Bildung*, found in numerous definitions of culture in the 19th century but distant from all political connotations, becomes for the poet a political tool. This way, he performs an extraordinary politicization of the private sphere, prefiguring or predicting that which has become, as I will attempt to show, the central issue of the first decade of the 21st Century.

One can fully appreciate Brodsky's intuitions only by looking back at the beginnings of the 19th century when the modern public sphere began to take shape. In order to define it, we must refer to the seminal work of Jürgen Habermas who writes:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public

sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.²

Commenting on this definition, Habermas stresses the dialectic of the public sphere's emergence from the already existing private sphere which itself inevitably undergoes a transformation as a result of the emergence of the modern, complex commodity exchange and the related division of labor. The private is not destroyed as a result of the public sphere constituting itself – on the contrary, it is given an additional dimension which had previously been nonexistent or barely present.

The line between state and society, fundamental in our context, divided the public sphere from the private realm. The public sphere was coextensive with public authority [...]. Included in the private realm was the authentic “public sphere,” for it was a public sphere constituted by private people. Within the realm that was the preserve of private people we therefore distinguish again between private and public spheres. The private sphere comprised civil society in the narrower sense, that is to say, the realm of commodity exchange and of social labor; imbedded in it was the family with its interior domain (*Intimsphäre*). The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society.³

Habermas's definition of the public sphere was, as we know, broadly discussed and contested. There is no need here to repeat those often very dramatic arguments but it may be worthwhile to outline at least the main dividing lines of the debate. Firstly, it concerns the degree to which the public sphere is autonomous from the state, or in general, from the political sphere. Apart from liberal tradition represented by the German philosopher, there emerges a parallel one, tying together the public sphere, society and the state. The connection of the public sphere and the state almost automatically introduces the second line of division, namely, the question of separating the public sphere from the private one, in other words, of separating private values and the good life from civic and political values. Following the clearest divisional

2 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, transl. Thomas Burger with assistance of Fredrick Lawrence, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), 27.

3 *Ibid.*, 30-31.

lines, we are presented with two almost symmetrical visions of society. On the one hand, there is a definite separation of its internal spheres with their completely different values, on the other, a fusion of those spheres through uniform value systems that constitute the social life. Obviously, intermediate variants are possible as well – from dissident thinkers of the 70s and 80s, there emerges a vision of a civic society as a space of ethical values, differentiating between the later and the corrupt political sphere of the totalitarian state. In such a version of the public sphere, values organize the society against the state which in its ideological dimensions becomes an empty shell continuing to exist only thanks to its apparatus of violence. Importantly, each of these concepts is true in a way – inasmuch as they reflect a certain idea of the functioning of modern society. In other words, the concepts of the public sphere and of the public space emerging within the public sphere are largely instruments of symbolic power.⁴ Thus, an analysis of the public sphere and its transformations has two aspects. On the one hand, there is the emergence of the public sphere itself as a self-standing and separate space in social life; on the other hand, the appropriation of this sphere by politics and ideology.⁵

Art obviously had to accompany the transformations of the public sphere, and to find its place in an era where it was no longer viewed as an emanation and transmission of absolute values; it began to be recognized as a phenomenon historically and culturally limited by the horizon of temporality. In this new situation, art had to find again a niche allowing it to reconstruct the sense of its existence. And considering various interpretations of art's role in modernity, one may say without the risk of exaggeration that it fulfilled its role very well, maybe even "too well." It took the effort to fill the gap that emerged when the modern "disenchantment of the world" brought about the breaking of culture's continuity both within a certain moment of the present, and between the past and the present of a given culture. And if art proved capable of playing this role, it was possible due to its magical power allowing it to conquer the seemingly unconquerable horizon of temporality.

A testimony to this power can be found in the famous remark by Karl Marx who, although moved by the phenomenon, seems to remain helpless in the face of it. In the remaining manuscript and fragmentary passages of the *Grundrisse* he looks at the relations between forms of consciousness and the

4 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

5 Ideologies attempting to appropriate the public sphere can be classified, following Zeev Sternhell, into two major currents: the Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment - viewed not as a simple reaction to the former but as an autonomous intellectual movement. See: Zeev Sternhell, *Les anti-Lumières. Une tradition du XVIIIe siècle à la guerre froide* (Paris: Fayard, 2006). I discussed this in „Oświecenie i nowoczesność (część I),” *Przegląd Polityczny* 81 (2007): 61-66.

processes of production, and in this context struggles with an odd property of art that manages to overcome its temporary limitation. Marx notes that: “certain periods of the highest development of art stand in no direct connection to the general development of society, or to the material basis and skeleton structure of its organization.”⁶ He then adds: “is Achilles possible side by side with powder and lead? Or is the *Iliad* at all compatible with the printing press and even printing machines? Do not singing and reciting and the muses necessarily go out of existence with the appearance of the printer’s bar, and do not, therefore, prerequisites of epic poetry disappear?”⁷ But what the author of *Das Kapital* finds truly difficult to comprehend is how it is possible for us to remain amazed by Greek art when our society differs so much from the one that produced it, “but the difficulty is not in grasping the idea that Greek art and epos are bound up with certain forms of social development. It lies rather in understanding why they still constitute for us a source of aesthetic enjoyment and in certain respects prevail as the standard model beyond attainment.”⁸ Marx’s answer to this question was very enigmatic and has remained so despite numerous commentaries in the following years. He says:

A man cannot become a child again unless he becomes childish. But does he not take pleasure in the naiveté of the child, and must he not strive to reproduce its truth on a higher plane? Is it not the character of every epoch revived in its original truth in the child’s nature? Why should not the childhood of mankind exert an eternal charm in the unique historic age where it obtained its most beautiful development? [...] The Greeks were normal children. The charm of their art has for us does not conflict with the immature stage of the society in which it had its roots. That charm is rather the product of the latter. It is inseparable from the fact that the immature social conditions under which that art arose can never return.⁹

Marx’s remarks have been interpreted with the goal of finding those features of art that decide about its universal character. But when we look at them today, this does not seem to be of key importance. What is important is the fact that because of its dualist, protean nature, art may fulfill in the public sphere, and in culture, the role of being a keystone of values.

6 Karl Marx, “Introduction to the *Grundrisse*” in *Karl Marx: A Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 19.

7 *Ibid.*, 20.

8 *Ibid.*, 20.

9 *Ibid.*, 20.

Writing about Walter Benjamin's famous propositions from *On the Concept of History*, Giorgio Agamben emphasizes that two important tropes in the works of the German philosopher, "quotation" and "collector," are an answer to a cultural situation where the chain of connections allowing for a continuous transmission of the past has been broken: "In a traditional society neither the quotation nor the collection is conceivable, since it is not possible to break at any point the links of the chain by which the transmission of the past takes place."¹⁰ According to Agamben, Benjamin did not fully consider the consequences of his ideas, especially the concept of "aura" which is central concept in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Agamben believes, contrary to Benjamin, that the disappearance of aura does not result in liberation of the work of art from its cultural sheath but quite the opposite – endows it with new artistic value:

This is to say: the work of art loses the authority and guarantees it derived from belonging to a tradition for which it built the places and objects that incessantly weld past and present together. However, far from giving up its authenticity in order to become reproducible (thus fulfilling Hölderlin's wish that poetry might again become something that one could calculate and teach), the work of art instead becomes the locus of the most ineffable of mysteries, the epiphany of aesthetic beauty.¹¹

According to the Italian philosopher, beauty must appear to fill the empty space remaining after the fall of the traditional, mimetic culture where the processes of movement from the past to the present and the object of transmission were identical. Art performs exactly the same tasks as those once fulfilled by tradition: it resolves the conflict between the old and new, whose resolution is necessary for man to function. Aesthetics is capable of reclaiming this space between the past and the future, space where human actions and human knowledge are situated. However, Agamben notes that:

This space is the aesthetic space, but what is transmitted in it is precisely the impossibility of transmission, and its truth is the negation of the truth of its contents. A culture that in losing its transmissibility has lost the sole guarantee of its truth and become threatened by the incessant accumulation of its nonsense now relies on art for its guarantee; art is thus forced

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, transl. Georgia Albert, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 105.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

to guarantee something that can only be guaranteed if art itself loses its guarantees in turn.¹²

Here, art plays a particularly important role, perhaps the key role, not even in constituting society but in saving the human condition faced with what has become known as modernity. But the role assigned to art is too demanding because its atemporal horizon is no longer defended by tradition. Such universalist vision can be found in numerous analyses of art's function in modernity, analyses which interestingly have been formulated recently. As this is not the place for a thorough discussion of these approaches, I will only briefly mention some of them.

For instance, Alain Badiou's concept of art assumes it to be one of the spheres where truth-generating procedures emerge.

We shall thus posit that there are four conditions of philosophy, and the lack of a single one gives rise to its dissipation, just as the emergence of all four conditioned its apparition. These conditions are: the *matheme*, the *poeme*, political invention and love. We shall call the set of these conditions generic procedures [...] The four types of generic procedures specify and class all the procedures determined thus far which may produce truths (there are but scientific, artistic, political and amorous truths).¹³

Badiou's ethics centers upon the category of "event." The event is also an element of a "normal" situation. From the ontological perspective, the event is a naming of the emptiness that existed at the very center of the previous situation. As an example, Badiou mentions the appearance of the classical style associated with Haydn's name in music: "at the heart of the baroque style at its virtuoso saturation lay the absence (as decisive as it was unnoticed) of a genuine conception of musical architectonics. The Haydn-event occurs as a kind of musical 'naming' of this absence."¹⁴ The event is a carrier of truth and Badiou strongly opposes the tendency in contemporary philosophy that relativizes truth. There is always one truth, although it has to be referred to one of the four spheres of human activity: science, art, politics and love. The event determines the truth for each of these spheres. In art, an event may

¹² Ibid., 110.

¹³ Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, translated, edited and with an introduction by Norman Madarasz, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 35.

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, *Ethics. An Essay on Understanding Evil*, transl. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), 68.

be constituted by the creation of a new style, in science by the emergence of a new theory, in politics - a revolution, and in love by the meeting of lovers. In each case, however, the truth revealed in the event surpasses the already existing knowledge and becomes a source of new knowledge.

Badiou sees in modernity a domination of art that towered above other truth-generating spheres and moved to the foreground, replacing philosophy. He refers to this period as the "age of poets" to emphasize the remarkably significant role of art for constituting truth which nonetheless also resulted in a confusion of roles of art and philosophy:

The moderns, even more so, the postmoderns, have willingly exposed the wound which would be inflicted upon philosophy by the unique mode in which poetry, literature, art in general, bears witness to our modernity. There will always have been a challenge laid down by art to the concept, and it is on the basis of this challenge, this wound, that it is necessary to interpret the Platonic gesture which can only establish the royalty of the philosopher by banishing the poets.¹⁵

Of course for Badiou this is an illegitimate replacement of philosophy by art, doubly illegitimate in fact, as art not only ventured outside its territory, but also changed the very essence of philosophy which is the formal condition of the emergence of truth, although it itself generates no truths. The "age of poets" emerged as a reaction to the weakness of contemporary philosophical thought but was also a testimony to the significant role of art, one that almost exceeded its power.

Jacques Rancière's idea of aesthetic meta-politics resonates with the two above-mentioned concepts. In Rancière, art meets politics not in the area of "engagement" or "resistance," but rather through a shared striving to reconfigure the space of perception, to transform the common social space. Rancière discusses the political character of art in an interview with Gabriel Rockhill:

It means that aesthetics has its own meta-politics. [...] There are politics of aesthetics, forms of community laid out by the very regime of identification in which we perceive art (hence pure art as well as committed art).¹⁶

The autonomy of art and its participation in the project of aesthetic meta-politics do not exclude but complement each other. Rancière defines

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, "Philosophy and Art," in *Infinite Thought* (London: Continuum, 2005), 76.

¹⁶ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of the Aesthetics* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 50.

meta-politics as “thinking which aims to overcome political dissensus by switching scene.”¹⁷ The aesthetic project is inscribed in this meta-politics inasmuch as they both share a common desire to transform the political field which is also the field of perception. This is why both concepts of art, shaped in modernity and continued in postmodernity, encounter what Rancière calls an original contradiction. Whether it is a concept of art that transforms into life, or a concept of art that resists life and through this becomes a source of emancipatory thought, in the end

these two ‘politics’ are in effect implicated in the same forms by which we identify art as the object of specific experience. [...] There is no art without a specific distribution of the sensible tying it to a certain form of politics. Aesthetics is such a distribution. The tension between these two politics threatens the aesthetic regime of art. But it is also what makes it function.¹⁸

I have briefly presented these three important concepts of art in order to highlight a certain feature that they share or, perhaps, a certain brand - one that I would not dare to call a similarity. The brand that they share is a conviction that art’s entrance into the public sphere does not imply it becoming an expression of external, historically determined social and cultural conditions. Art transcends these, which does not mean that we must return to the concept of art as an expression of eternal and absolute values. And if this last concept of art opposes the modernist ones, especially those associated with the name of Walter Benjamin, the resistance also assumes a continuation. This emerging concept is not only critical of modernism but turns against postmodernism as well. Following Terry Eagleton, one may see how postmodernism resolved the contradictions inherent in the modernist formulations of arts. All artistic disciplines

find themselves accorded to a momentous social significance which they are really too fragile and delicate to sustain, crumbling from the inside as they are forced to stand in for God or happiness or political justice. [...] It is postmodernism which seeks to relieve the arts of this oppressive burden of anxiety, urging them to forget all such portentous dreams of depth, and thus liberating them into a fairly trifling sort of freedom.¹⁹

17 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 33.

18 *Ibid.*, 44.

19 Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 16.

I would prefer to refrain from passing judgment on the actual validity of this evaluation. Postmodernity is, as modernity was, difficult to conceptualize in clear terms. Jean-François Lyotard, a thinker as important for postmodernism as Walter Benjamin was for modernism, relates the concept of the end of grand narratives to the idea of art's freedom and its boundless potential for experimentation, but at the same time, applying his interpretation of the Kantian sublime to modernist art, he emphasizes the special role of artistic creation. The notion that art realizes social values obviously is not a modernist idea; it nonetheless assigns to art specific challenges and tasks.

Regardless of the details of the debate concerning the status of art within postmodernism, the end of this particular formation is now becoming increasingly clear. And it is this sense of postmodernity's end rather than its internal problems that lead to questions concerning the role of art, although – as it is common in such cases – those questions must be formulated within the broader context of the organization of the public sphere. It seems we are now only able to define features of this breakthrough from a negative perspective. I believe that among the axial symptoms of the end of postmodernity there are the return of grand narratives, the reclaiming of human subjectivity and the fading of the public sphere. Those processes result in the reemergence of the idea of universality as an answer to the besetting questions of post-postmodernity.

Each of these reactions to postmodernity would require a thorough analysis, but for the purpose of this essay, I would like to describe only what these tendencies mean to me. When Lyotard wrote about the end of the meta-narrative, the statement itself carried an aftertaste of a story with a didactically optimistic character. It turned out that after many dramatic, horrifying experiences of history, humanity finally managed to rid itself of the desire to be a universal subject, to speak with a single voice and strive toward a single goal. The failures of emancipatory metanarratives are at the same time a proof of a maturity that leaves behind the temptations of totalitarianism, even the one masked as representative democracy. Sadly, the fiasco of the concept becomes noticeable on several analytical levels. To mention only the most spectacular examples, there are narratives of such shocking simplicity as the victory of the forces of good over the "axis of evil," as well as reanimated eschatological stories of different religions and their varieties, from radical Islam to Christian fundamentalism. On the other hand, optimism radiates from several varieties of globalization, from the dreams of realizing cosmopolitical projects by the stoics or Kant, to the post-communist concept of the rise and fall of empire. Emancipatory illusions seem to regain their force and the voice of the skeptical philosopher can only warn that they are always of limited and faulty character. Maybe, however, Giorgio Agamben is right constructing a suggestive

counter-narrative of post-post-modernity, stressing that extreme political and technological domination focuses on “bio-power,” resulting in the reduction of human existence to “bare life.”²⁰

At the same time, the return of the grand narratives entails the destruction of the public sphere which is not to be equated with the shrinking of public space. Quite to the contrary - as the means of communication (among them, the Internet) develop, the public space becomes monstrously big, but its growth remains in an inversely proportional relation to the size of the public sphere. The very possibility of separating the public sphere and space is in itself a sign of the times. The public sphere described by Habermas is constitutively conditioned upon going out, finding oneself in a space demarcated by the meeting places of clubs and organizations, but also by the circulation of press and political pamphlets. A shrinking or even disappearing public sphere takes place through the shrinking of public space. Prohibition of free assembly, closing down clubs, censorship or suppression of the press and banning the meetings of independent organizations - actions typical of totalitarian regimes - take place precisely in the public space although they are aimed at suppressing the public sphere. However, it turns out that the connection of the public sphere and public space is not indispensable.

The public sphere may be colonized from two directions. On the one hand, it is being increasingly subordinated to grand and lesser narratives of governments. The mechanisms of this domination are revealed by several contemporary philosophers, from Michel Foucault and his micro-physics of power, through Pierre Bourdieu and symbolic power, to perhaps the most radical among them, Giorgio Agamben, who in the concentration camp sees the modern *nomos* leaving little hope for the exchange of thoughts that could reach a consensus on politics. It becomes clear, however, that this colonization of notions and means of discourse does not have to entail a dismantling of the public space which may retain a living quality, filled with voices and passion, but devoid of the power to create its own response to this process of colonization.

The public sphere is also increasingly penetrated by the private area of subjectivity. In a book recalled earlier in this essay, Habermas stresses the impossibility of clearing this sphere of subjectivity which cannot be shed completely when we go outside. Nonetheless, the very decision to enter the space of discussion and the act of searching for a consensus mean that subjectivity is somewhat suspended and the rational discourse of the social subjects comes to the foreground. Many features of modernity and postmodernity could be

20 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, transl. Daniel Hellen-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

explained through the peculiarities of the process separating subjectivity from the public sphere and space. This concerns, of course, also the role of art that first becomes divided into art for art's sake and art that enters the public sphere, often as a medium of communication or even expression of social values. Although this division has been repeatedly questioned and contested, it continues to remain a point of departure for such revisionary deliberations.

Subjectivity's conquest of the public sphere is on the one hand a process complementary to its colonization by the meta-narrative but, on the other hand, also contradictory to it. It is complementary in the sense that the majority of those narratives include an ideal subjectivity that corresponds to all the grand political narratives. It seems, however, that from the very beginning the process is destined to fail when confronted with resistance from real human subjectivity. This is where I trace the rebirth of the concept of subjectivity in contemporary humanist reflection. Naturally, one cannot go back to the illusory notion of the subject as an integrated whole capable, as construed by classical German philosophy, of grasping the entire available reality through intellectual effort. The subject that is reborn in the post-postmodern thought is a broken one, lost in internal contradictions. It is nonetheless the only force that can oppose the growing domination of dehumanizing meta-narratives making their return.

Using the idiom of psychoanalysis, Julia Kristeva perhaps presents the most distinctive concept of rebellion in the contemporary humanities, a revolt understood as an intimate transformation instead of a movement or social rebellion. This is how she formulates the concept in one of the interviews:

In contemporary society the world revolt means very schematically political revolution. People tend to think of extreme left movements linked to the Communist revolution or to its leftist developments. I would like to strip the word revolt of its purely political sense. In all Western traditions, revolt is a very deep movement of discontent, anxiety and anguish. In this sense, to say that revolt is only politics is a betrayal of this vast movement.²¹

Revolt, in opposition to revolution, confirms what is most crucial in psychic life, or – in the psychoanalytical language of the author – the return to the Self, to the “I.” This return, however, is always unstable and temporary, as it is in the conflict that we find pleasure and *jouissance*. Let me quote one more passage from the above mentioned interview, in order to further clarify Kristeva's thought:

21 Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2002), 99.

I think that in the automated modern world the depth of psychic life, the liberation of psychic life, the search for truth in the interrogation and the questioning are all aspects that are overlooked. We are expected to be performing entities. At best, we are asked to work well and to buy as much as possible. This whole problematic of interrogation, of the return to the self, the questioning and the conflicts that are sources of human freedom have become obliterated, rejected or even destroyed parameters. The culture that arises from this situation is a culture of entertainment rather than one of interrogation and revolt. I would say it is an essential kind of resistance in a technocratic society to rehabilitate memory along with the questioning and to allow the conflicts of the individual to take place.²²

The sphere of imagination or the imaginary sphere (to use Jacques Lacan's category) is of key importance for the development of freedom as postulated by Kristeva. This is because imagination allows for stopping the attacks on our internal psychic life, and it is capable of transforming them, sublimating them and, as such, allows us to live and be free. Art is, naturally, crucial for the development of the imaginary sphere, because it allows to "translate" our mental states to ourselves.²³ Admittedly, Kristeva writes mainly about writers, since her analyses concern mostly literature, but one can easily apply her notions to other types of art that, using their own means, perform the same work. Joseph Brodsky would be definitely critical about the entire psychoanalytical assemblage of the concept of rebellion as presented by the French philosopher, but certain similarities between these two voices are difficult to deny. Both see the mission of art in revealing and strengthening the internal world of the viewer or reader. Art is first and foremost a way to encourage introspection, a search and questioning of that which the mind may see as obvious. It is equally clear for the poet born in totalitarian Russia and the psychoanalytical philosopher born in totalitarian Bulgaria that the political meaning of art lies in its distance from politics. Neither a connection to politics or any other ideology, nor its support for a political alternative decide the terms of engagement for art, which after all is determined by its ability for a "misanthropic conversation" or for questioning the seeming coherence of the psyche. The core of art's influence lies in pleasure, *jouissance* of negation, a discovery of internal conflicts. Imagination is inevitably inscribed in it, and indispensable to all internal, intimate revolts.

22 *Ibid.*, 100 – 101.

23 Julia Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt. The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis*, transl. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 254.

Such political reading of art assumes, of course, a transformation of the very notion of the political. The political is different from politics (in the French tradition, respectively, *le politique* and *la politique*), it is a way of life or of viewing social reality, and it meets art at its deepest level. Art as a project of meta-political aesthetics or as a space between the past and the present must eventually refer to the internal conflicts and tensions emerging in the internal lives of individuals. It seems, however, that such an autonomization of individuals leads in turn to the restitution of public space identical with the public sphere. Entering the public space but at the same time going beyond it, art remains in the condition of allowing this space to exist and be transformed. I would emphasize especially the latter as it is impossible to find an unchangeable public sphere or public space distinguishable from the private sphere. This is because the distinction itself always results from a certain political, or – to be precise – meta-political political project (as in Rancière) and its contents largely determine what is imaginable and what cannot take place in current politics. Art situated within this distinction is at the same time one of the conditions for its existence and is the reason why it is so difficult to see its manifestations in the public sphere which are not merely symptomatic or fleeting. Universalism in the aesthetic political project reveals itself only through subjectivity, in the defense of the individual and the unique world of the individual's internal conflicts.

Translation: Anna Warso