

# **Music and the Crisis of Modernity**

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## **Declaration**

I the undersigned, Víctor García Priego, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

London, 25 March 2015

## Abstract

In this dissertation I want to show how the crisis of the project of modernity – apparent in some challenges we face today such as climate change and rising inequality in developed countries – may provide a chance to redefine the ways we think about musical practice. For this purpose I develop a theoretical framework that allows us to link what is at stake with music – the often conflicting needs, hopes and even fears that articulate musical experience today at both the individual and collective level – with what is at stake with modernity. This framework is based mainly on Hannah Arendt’s phenomenology of human activities in *The Human Condition* and the implicit story of modernity it relies on. Arendt’s account, itself an attempt to provide an explanation to and a way out of the existential threat to the project of modernity posed by totalitarianisms, establishes crucial distinctions between labour and work, on the one side, and between work and action and speech, on the other side. By re-situating music in the broader context of human activities and the evolution of their paradigms in modernity I want to articulate a perspective from which I will discuss issues related to the distinction between the productive and non-productive aspects of musical practice; the different kinds of musical experience; the limits of the subject-object model implicit in most versions of modern aesthetics and the necessity to expand the model to include the intersubjective dimension; and the extent to which what Lydia Goehr calls the ‘work-concept’ may be a principle regulating musical practice in post-industrial society.

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## Introduction

*Music* and *modernity*. In everyday life we use concepts, most of the time without noticing it, to make sense of reality, to articulate our relationship to other human beings and to the world. When used in everyday life, these two concepts – ‘music’ and ‘modernity’ – resonate in different ways.

On the one side, at least at first instance ‘music’ appears as a relatively stable, reliable concept. To be sure, music is not a value-free concept, and for this reason even outside academia it has always proven difficult to agree to a definition of what music is; indeed, if we can agree to anything it is to the fact that music has something inherently enigmatic that ultimately resists any attempt to define it. However, pretty much everyone has an intuitive idea of music that allows them to discriminate between what is music and what is not and to make judgments about music. In other words, everyone has, at least in principle, a *practical* understanding of music that allows them to deal with it – to choose a piece to listen to in the car while driving to work, to engage in a performance, to start a conversation about music – as an element of their being-in-the-world.

On the other side, the concept of ‘modernity’ emerges in everyday life as a more problematic and unstable one. In the first place, to many people it may appear highly questionable that this concept has any practical meaning at all. The devastating effects of three decades of neo-liberalism on the minds of millions of people may provide a simple, if incomplete, explanation for this. After all, a central concern of modernity is how to build a society that allows the unfolding of truly *human* life; therefore, if it turns out that ‘there is no such thing as society’, then ‘modernity’ is an empty concept.

However, the concept of modernity is a problematic one even for those citizens who resist the idea that human beings are ultimately consumers relating to each other on the basis of crude competition. First, insofar as we associate

modernity with the ideals of the Enlightenment – such as Kant’s idea that each human being must be regarded as an end in itself, not as a means towards another end – these ideals appear themselves very much as *questions*; if we want to take them seriously – that is, if we want to let them shape the way we organise our common life – these ideals present themselves as *tasks* rather than as closed, immutable concepts. Second, insofar as some modern societies have managed, especially in the three decades following the end of World War II, to articulate themselves around some of the ideals of the Enlightenment, recent developments – the overwhelming evidence about the consequences of climate change and the rise in inequality, to name only two major issues – pose serious questions about their real impact in today’s world. Third, the pace of change in modern societies, facilitated by technological progress, has made it even more difficult to believe at all in the existence of concepts that are robust enough to make sense of and shape these changes. Rather than providing solid foundations, the idea of modernity itself has become ‘liquid’, to borrow Bauman’s term.<sup>1</sup> It is in this sense that, when discussing issues related to modernity, we may often find ourselves talking about the *crisis* of the project of modernity in one way or another.<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective it seems only logical that the term ‘crisis’ affects the term ‘modernity’ rather than the term ‘music’ in the title of this dissertation. In fact, it would seem strange to talk about a ‘crisis of music’ today, given the omnipresence of music in our lives and the amount of resources we devote today to playing, creating, analysing and listening to music. And yet it can hardly be ignored that both concepts – music and modernity – are much more intimately related than the perspective of everyday life suggests. As Bowie (2007) has extensively shown, the very idea of modernity is deeply informed by the experience of music, or, more abstractly, by experiences that are best made sense of through the medium of music

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<sup>1</sup> Bauman 2000.

<sup>2</sup> This crisis implies that we are confronted with the choice between acknowledging that modernity remains ‘an unfinished project’ (Habermas 1997) which requires us to redefine those concepts and ideals we still believe to be useful, and the conclusion that we would rather dispense with them and move on to something radically different.



rather than (everyday or philosophical) language. Moreover however we want to define music today, our *practical* understanding of music is necessarily a *modern* understanding of music in the sense that it both presupposes and articulates typically modern paradigms.

Moreover, especially in the domain of the so-called classical music our theoretical framework largely relies, as Goehr (1992) has shown, on categories that emerged in a specific period – roughly, between 1800 and 1850 – which corresponds to the emergence of Romantic aesthetics in a broad sense. At the centre of these categories lies the very idea of the musical work – what Goehr refers to as the work-concept, an open concept (i.e. one that acts as a regulative idea informing practice and that is not fixed once and forever) that has then been taken for granted in musical life since 1800. Thinking about music in terms of works is therefore a typically modern phenomenon.

This already suggests that, if there is a crisis of the ideals of modernity, our experience of music cannot remain unaffected. Moreover, we might be trying to make sense in theoretical terms of this musical experience through a conceptual framework that, far from being self-evident and ‘timeless’, actually emerged during a specific period and as a result of paradigms that have lost much of their influence in today’s world. If, as Goehr argues, the work-concept emerged under specific socio-economic circumstances – which correspond to the rise of the bourgeoisie as a dominant social class and its idea of creating an ‘imaginary museum’ where musical works could be experienced and admired *as works* of autonomous art – to what extent would it make sense to think about music (including music created during the period between 1800 and 1950 but experienced today) in terms of works in the post-industrial, post-bourgeois, era?

This is not just a technical issue about the accuracy in the use of a concept. What is at stake here is whether there is place for the ideals of what we usually refer to as classical music in a society that to a large extent is looking in a different direction. This issue has been discussed in depth by Johnson (2002). In this regard I

think it is crucial to make sense of the way the internet has radically transformed the way music is produced, reproduced, distributed and consumed.

In this dissertation I want to contribute to these three debates, (1) about the relationship between music and modernity, (2) about the adequacy or inadequacy of the conceptual framework rooted in Romantic aesthetics to make sense of today's musical experience, and (3) about the role of musical life in today's society, especially in the domain of classical music. In order to do so I want to put forward a theoretical framework that allows us to regard music as we experience it today *from the point of view of the crisis of modernity*. This framework will be based mainly on Hannah Arendt's account of human activities in *The Human Condition* and the implicit story about modernity it relies on. Admittedly, Adorno would be a more obvious starting point for the present discussions; however, as I want to show, Arendt's thought provides an invaluable alternative route that may allow us to deal from a different perspective with many of the issues addressed by Adorno.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the implications of Arendt's ideas for the way we make sense of musical experience have largely remained unexplored. To my knowledge, only Boissière (2010) has attempted to directly link some aspects of Arendt's thought to questions related to music, if in the context of a broader discussion that also deals with ideas from Benjamin and Adorno.

My strategy therefore implies that the path I will take to address musical questions will be an *indirect* one: instead of starting with issues related to music, I will first 'switch the sound off', as it were, in order to elucidate what is at stake when we engage in any kind of musical activity. In fact, during large parts of the dissertation, especially in Chapters 2 and 3, I will barely speak about music. This might seem strange given the fact that, as the title of this dissertation suggests, music is at the centre of my interests. However, a central aim of this dissertation is to demonstrate that, as paradoxical as it might sound, we have much to win if we try to make sense of music in non-musical terms, that is, if we regard music from the

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<sup>3</sup> As I will explain in Chapter 2, Arendt also represents an invaluable access route to Heidegger's philosophy.

perspective of issues that matter in the broader context of our lives: how we relate to other human beings, how we deal with inner and outer nature – in short, the kinds of issues modernity tries to address in an attempt to make the world more human. Some communication experts believe that the best way to appreciate what politicians really communicate when they deliver a speech is to watch the whole speech with the sound off; this way many things are revealed that are not apparent when we focus on ‘what’ they are saying. It is not that the content does not matter; rather, the content acquires a different meaning when it is understood in the broader context of non-verbal communication. My approach in this dissertation follows a similar logic. Moreover, I want to show that the present crisis, in which the whole project of modernity is at stake, may represent an opportunity rather than an impediment insofar as it may allow us to redefine the relationship between what we regard as musical and what we regard as non-musical.

In terms of methodology I will try to follow a similar approach as Arendt’s in *The Human Condition*, which, I would say, combines phenomenological with hermeneutic elements. The idea I just described of ‘switching off the sound’ of music in order to elucidate what is at stake when we engage in music corresponds to what the phenomenology describes as a shift from the ‘natural attitude’ to the ‘phenomenological attitude’. Simply put, in the natural attitude I see a yellow ball and just deal with it in an unreflective way according to a set of possibilities determined by a context (e.g. a tennis game), while in the phenomenological attitude I focus on ‘the being yellow of the ball’, which may allow me to become aware of the implications of the ball being yellow instead of, say, green. As we will see in Chapter 2, this approach allows Arendt, for example, to establish a distinction between labour and work, on the one side, and between work and action, on the other, and to study the implications of these largely ignored distinctions for the interaction among human beings in the public sphere. The hermeneutic element of this approach implies that any insight gained through the shift to the phenomenological attitude must allow me to *understand* the original situation in a

new way, that is, it must open up new possibilities of engaging with my environment I was not aware of while acting in an unreflective way within the natural attitude.

In Chapter 1 I will deal with issues related to the crisis of the project of modernity and will discuss how the experience of a crisis changes our way of looking at things in general and music in particular, especially regarding the idea that musical works may have a content we may be able to decipher through active listening or analysis. In order to re-situate questions related to music (and musical works) in the context of human activities I will develop in Chapter 2 a theoretical framework based on Hannah Arendt's phenomenology of human activities put forward in *The Human Condition*. Crucially, Arendt's account is not a static model, but relies on a story of modernity I will try to reconstruct. I will then deal with the implications of Arendt's account of human activities for our understanding of art (Chapter 3) and music (Chapter 4) in modernity.

## **Chapter 1      The Crisis of Modernity and Music**

The aim of this chapter is to elucidate the implications of the crisis of the project of modernity for our way of thinking about music. In §1.1 I briefly discuss some signs that point to a profound crisis in the project of modernity. In §1.2 I deal more generally with the experience of crisis that is inherent to the experience of modernity itself. In §1.3 I discuss how an experience of crisis shakes the foundations underlying our way to understand musical works. Finally, in §1.4 I will explore a way to overcome the limitations of a positivist/representationalist idea of musical works; this will lead to some question regarding the very idea of thinking about music in terms of works.

### 1.1 The crisis of modernity (I)

Whatever we think about the Enlightenment or modernity (and whether or not we think about them at all) one thing is certain: we live in challenging times. The reality we face – this world of today which we have not chosen, to which we have rather been thrown against our will – will therefore be the starting point for all discussions in this dissertation.

In this section I want to briefly discuss some of the main problems and questions this world confronts us with today. My intention is not to paint a gloomy picture of world reality (those challenges are after all the result of unprecedented achievements), but to put them into a historical perspective which may allow us to make sense of them in terms of a possible crisis of the values and views we commonly associate with modernity. In fact, we have many reasons to think that we are immersed in a radical process of change – all the more radical as an important share of the establishment is trying by all means to deny the forces driving this process – in which the whole project of modernity may be put into question. We do not know what kind of world will emerge from this, how similar or how different it will be from the present one, and whether we will still call it a modern world, or a

post-modern one, or something else; what seems clear is that many fundamental challenges we face today are not the kind of problems we can solve with the sole use of tools we successfully used in the past.

Today's challenges are multiple and complex, and they can therefore not be reduced to simple problems demanding simple solutions. Obviously, I am not intending to discuss here all these challenges in all their complexity, so I will rather focus on two key areas which demand a radical rethinking of some fundamental values of Western civilisation: climate change, and what we could call a crisis of the social contract.

Let us briefly look at how we arrived at this situation. The horrors of the Second World War – unquestionably the darkest pages of human history – marked a turning point in modern history. While views about the concrete aims of modernity as well as their viability and even their desirability obviously differed already at that time, such a collective madness of organised mass destruction and inhumanity was widely regarded as a failure of the humanistic ideals of Enlightenment to free men and women on earth from their *selbstverschuldete Unmündigkeit* ('self-incurred immaturity'), to use Kant's words.<sup>1</sup> At least, there was consensus on one main thing: this should never happen again. The world that emerged after 1945 was built to a great extent on this widely held conviction.

The energies that had during centuries been devoted to war now needed to be committed to something else. What ultimately unified peoples in Europe and convinced them that in the long run it was better to co-operate than to try to destroy each other was a newly defined ideal of prosperity. The idea was that if society as a whole could benefit from economic well-being the probability of war would be dramatically reduced (the fear of the catastrophic consequences the use of nuclear weapons could lead to did the rest). In some sense this was the definitive triumph of utilitarianism.

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<sup>1</sup> (Kant 1999a: 20)

The big problem we face today is that the main pillars on which this prosperity has been built are now melting down, and in some cases in more than a figurative sense. Those main pillars are basically two: our relationship with the environment, and the social contract (explicit or implicit) on which were based the relations between citizens within each country and between nations at an international level. Let us consider the first. Today, there is consensus among scientists that climate change 1) is actually taking place; 2) is caused by human action, mainly via huge amounts of carbon emissions as a result of a massive burning of fossil fuels during the last half century; and 3) can be reversed (albeit only to a certain extent) only if we take radical measures to dramatically reduce carbon emissions – measures that would in fact reshape the whole global economic landscape.

We can say that, if the prosperity of Ancient Rome was built at the expense of millions of slaves (as Marx claimed<sup>2</sup>), the economic success of today's Western civilisation has been built at the expense of the earth we live in, which happens to be the only home where we can enjoy this prosperity. We need no more evidence that we should take action right now if we want to avoid making the earth uninhabitable in a couple of decades. And yet we are actually doing the opposite. Big oil companies are still heavily investing in increasing their oil reserves. As such, these actions are in many cases causing major damages to the environment; what is even more striking is the fact that burning the already existing reserves would mean that global temperatures would increase by at least six degrees celsius, which would have severe, and possible irreversible, consequences for life on earth. Nothing is done to stop this; instead, all major pension funds worldwide have significant amounts of assets invested in those companies. As a leading climate scientist and activist has put it, it does not make much sense to invest one's pension 'in companies that make sure we won't have a planet to retire on.'<sup>3</sup> But this is exactly what we are doing, and this seems totally normal. What is shocking here is the

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<sup>2</sup> He extensively discusses this issue in the first volume of *Capital* (1990).

<sup>3</sup> Bill McKibben, *It is time to stop investing in the fossil fuel industry*, The Guardian, 30 May 2013.

disconnect between what we regard as normal from the point of view of everyday life and the real consequences of this behaviour: we save our ‘hard earned’ money and expect the highest possible returns, but we do not want to be aware that this money is not a number in a bank account, but it transforms the world we live in the most literal sense.

On the other side, the social contract on which was built the prosperity achieved since the Second World War in the Western countries is literally falling apart. As a result of the hegemony of neo-liberal ideology, during the last three decades the developed countries have witnessed an unprecedented rise in inequality<sup>4</sup> that in some cases is threatening the equilibrium that is needed for a pacific co-existence in society, as is becoming apparent especially, but not only, in the countries more severely affected by the crisis in the euro zone. Many highly qualified graduates are without jobs, people working full-time do not earn enough to cover the basic expenses – but we are told that ‘there is no alternative’. And those who are suffering most the devastating consequences of the perverse ideology of the elites are paralysed, as if preventing things from getting even worse were the most they can aspire for. Unfortunately, after three decades hearing in multiple ways that ‘there is no such thing as society’, we have to a great extent lost the sense of commitment for what is common, for the things we share, so that it is not surprising that for many people engaging in common action is not even considered as a possibility. Moreover, globalisation has also changed the traditional equilibria between developed and developing countries. If, as mentioned before, the prosperity of developed countries has been achieved to a great extent at the expense of the environment, their dominance over developing countries has been an equally important factor. In fact, they have largely benefited not only from low wages and low commodities prices, but also from their bargaining power e.g. in matters related to trade.<sup>5</sup> Insofar as the gap between developed and developing countries is

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<sup>4</sup> For an extensive and informed study of the causes and the consequences of this inequality see Stiglitz 2012 and especially Piketty 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Three excellent accounts of globalisation: Stiglitz 2002, Chang 2007 and Rodrik 2011.



diminishing, developed countries face a dilemma: either they must adapt to a new global environment characterised (among other things) by fierce wage competition by allowing the exploitation of the weakest social classes in their own countries,<sup>6</sup> or they must change their economic and social model. So far, only the first option is on the table.

As a result of these changes, we now live in a world in which following the rules of what we used to regard as a 'normal life' (studying, getting a job, raising a family, retiring) does not guarantee a decent future anymore, either at the individual or the collective level. With regard to this new situation Ulrich Beck coined the term 'Risk Society' back in 1986 (shortly before the disaster at Chernobyl). 'Society has become a laboratory where there is absolutely nobody in charge' (Beck 1998: 9). It is not just uncertainty – which can be dealt with, as insurance companies do – but a kind of risk that we have 'manufactured' ourselves but that we cannot control or even understand. In the face of this, we let public affairs be dominated by 'forms of organised irresponsibility' (ibid.: 15).

## 1.2 The crisis of modernity (II)

It seems clear that our world today delivers many signs that point to what we could call a 'crisis of modernity', either because some fundamental ideals of the Enlightenment are being put into question or need a new twist, or because some conditions that would make them possible, or even attractive and desirable, are not sustainable anymore. How much we need to change, and how deep changes need to be might still not be clear, but it would be impossible to anyone who believes in the project of modernity in some way to remain indifferent to the events that are currently challenging the very roots of this project. On the other side, this experience or crisis is not new in modernity. The devastating period of Western history initiated with the First World War and culminating with the Holocaust offers the most obvious example of such an experience. But, putting aside the proportions of that

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<sup>6</sup> For a study of the phenomenon of global cities see Sassen 2006.

disaster, one can hardly say that this was the first time that the project of Enlightenment had been seriously threatened. In fact, the experience of crisis as such very much belongs to the nature of modern history, to the point that we may use the term ‘crisis of modernity’ not just to designate a concrete event occurring right now but, more generally, and in the sense of a *genitivus subjectivus*, to refer to modernity’s characteristic way of unfolding itself.<sup>7</sup>

In this section I would like to sketch a simple model consisting in a ‘story in three acts’ of a typical process of crisis as a kind of propaedeutic exercise before we add music into the equation. While I will mention some important developments that have occurred since the Enlightenment, my intention is not to give a historical account or a ‘one-size-fits-all’ philosophical explanation of crises as they have been experienced in modernity, but rather to establish a (modest) model that will allow us to understand how each stage of the process might determine the kinds of questions we will ask ourselves with regard to music.

*Act I.* Everything begins with a leap from what we could call a ‘pre-modern’ to a ‘modern’ or ‘enlightened’ attitude. One of the most powerful driving forces of modernity – and probably the most characteristic aspect of Enlightenment – is, at least in principle, its unprecedented trust in man. From the point of view of the modern man, the pre-modern man appears as paralysed by his resigned attitude towards his own life and by his (implicit or explicit) belief that, as he is sinful in nature, he can only find truth and salvation outside of himself, and mediated by a higher authority. Truth revealed by such an authority – whether it regards the world, human nature or morals – must be accepted. For the pre-modern man, both the human world and nature are a prison; he can aspire to adapt to it in the best possible way and make this ‘valley of tears’ more bearable, but he cannot think of reshaping nature and world and transforming them into something more conforming to human aspirations.

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<sup>7</sup> The idea of modernity as a *Krisenprozess* was established already in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly through Hegel’s philosophy.

Enlightenment radically redefines the position of man in the cosmos.<sup>8</sup> A major articulation of this move is the so-called ‘Copernican turn’ in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Now, our aim is not merely to accommodate our minds to a ‘ready-made’ world and our deeds to a pre-existing, unchangeable moral and social order for which we are ultimately not responsible.<sup>9</sup> The world we perceive via our senses is as much a product of our own minds as it is ‘outside ourselves’, and it actually involves a synthesis of what is given to us and what we ‘produce’ ourselves, i.e. of the passive and active faculties of our understanding. The active side is what Kant calls ‘spontaneity’, in the sense that our understanding operates according to rules that are not causally determined from outside, but ‘self-imposed’. (For example: the fact that we perceive what happens in nature in terms of causes and effects is itself not causally determined by nature). Now, the subject is therefore a condition of possibility of objects as objects, and man has moved from the periphery to the centre of creation.

This redefinition of man’s position within the cosmos leads to two crucial notions in modernity: the (interrelated) ideas of human autonomy and dignity. They find their supreme expression in Kant’s idea of categorical imperative: ‘Handle so, daß die Menschheit, sowohl in deiner Person als in der Person eines jeden anderen, jederzeit zugleich als Zweck, niemals bloß als Mittel brauchest.’<sup>10</sup> Parallel to this newly found ideal of human dignity emerges the idea of ‘enlightened self-interest’, i.e. the idea that it is possible to act out of self-interest in such a way as to promote human happiness also in other human beings, and not necessarily at their expense. The most characteristic expression of this faith in the positive effects of self-interest on a wider community is Adam Smith’s idea of an ‘invisible hand’ which leads anyone acting out of self-interest ‘to promote an end which was no part of his intention.’<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See also Beiser 2000.

<sup>9</sup> See Guyer 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Kant 1999: A429. ‘Act in such a way that you always treat humanity whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end’.

<sup>11</sup> Smith 1999: §4.2.9. Interestingly, Smith uses the term ‘invisible hand’ – one of the main concepts of the neo-liberal dogma – only twice throughout his work: once in *The Wealth of Nations* and once

Importantly, modernity's relocation of man in the creation is not just a theoretical matter. In fact, modernity involves a shift from a focus on theory as the highest among the human occupations (typical for Ancient and Medieval philosophers) to a focus on practical matters. For Kant, what is at stake in metaphysics is actually the very possibility of man as a moral being: the central question of his philosophy is how we can regard ourselves as free, autonomous agents despite the fact that we are a part of nature and are therefore conditioned by its laws. Marx famously went even further: 'Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden interpretiert, es kommt darauf an, sie zu verändern'<sup>12</sup> – an assertion that very much encapsulates the (often problematic) relationship between knowledge and practice in modernity. While the pre-modern man thinks that salvation cannot ultimately be enjoyed during lifetime, the modern man believes that he is entitled to, and that it is even his duty to, create heaven on earth (at least partially). He does not look anymore at a ready-made world in order to attune his mind to 'what there is'; he is also capable of looking at the world in terms of 'what ought to be'. And – crucially – he will not just paint for himself a picture of a better world, but will try to transform the existing one according to this image. Accordingly, the modern man will increasingly regard the world as a result (direct or indirect) of his own actions, i.e. as being created by himself. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge is not enough anymore; science must be transformed into technology so this knowledge allow us to overcome the limitations nature imposes on us.

Of course, modernity's confidence in man is not unlimited or unconditional. Kant himself was well aware of the necessity of recognising the limits of the individual; in fact, he was wary of the idea of a human master as guarantor of mankind's freedom on the grounds that such a ruler, being a human being themselves, would sooner or later have the temptation to abuse its authority, since 'aus so krummem Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht ist, kann nichts ganz

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in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. For a discussion of Smith's idea of the visible hand see Sedlacek 2011: 197ff.

<sup>12</sup> Marx 1990b: 7. 'Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it'. This is the Eleventh of the Theses on Feuerbach.

Gerades gezimmert werden.’<sup>13</sup> And Rousseau, in his idea that we all have an ‘authentic self’ that is good in nature but that is only corrupted by society, was acknowledging that human beings are the source of both good and evil. The point is that the state of resignation typical of the pre-modern man is not an inevitable attitude, but rather a choice. The motto of Enlightenment is ‘Sapere aude!’, or in Kant’s translation: ‘have the courage to make use of your own understanding’ (Kant 2006: 19), means that we have the possibility to look at the world with our own eyes (i.e. not with the eyes of an authority we may be afraid of), discover our dimension as moral beings und thus promote the good within us.<sup>14</sup>

This is not just an historical account about the origins of modernity. I think it is important to see that this story actually happens every time we abandon a resigned, and at the same time comfortable, attitude towards something we identify as ‘reality’ and assume instead the risk of imagining a better reality and taking some kind of action to make this world a better place to live in. (Of course, views on what this concretely means may be and are indeed very different, but this is not the point here). Seen this way, the Enlightenment was not just a movement located in a certain period of human history, but rather was and remains a possibility; maybe even a promise, but in any case ‘a promise we need to try to redeem ourselves, here and now’, to borrow a phrase from Wellmer.<sup>15</sup>

*Act II.* But, alas, history has shown often enough how disappointed Enlightenment’s confidence in man can be. The most extremes examples of such a disappointment were provided by the totalitarian regimes that emerged in the period between the two world wars. What was really frightening about them was not just the unprecedented extent of brutality and inhumanity that pervaded those movements, but the fact that

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<sup>13</sup> Kant 2006: 10. ‘From such crooked timbers as man has been made of, nothing straight can be built’.

<sup>14</sup> For the impact on society of the ideas of the Enlightenment articulated by Kant et. al. see Pinkard 2002.

<sup>15</sup> 2007: 177. He uses it with regard to the interpretation of the meaning of a text, but I think it is equally accurate to describe what we do when we try to understand the meaning of Enlightenment as a whole, at least insofar as we believe that its forces have not been buried by recent history but are still alive in one way or another.

they relied on the belief that it is possible for men 1) to overcome a resigned attitude towards current life conditions; 2) to find out what their ‘true nature’ is, i.e. what an ideal human life or ideal human beings look like; and 3) to ‘help’ nature do its job and accelerate the arrival of this ‘new man’ (and from the moment when this is regarded as an inevitable natural process, systematic violence becomes perfectly justifiable; in fact, it is not seen as violence anymore). In Hannah Arendt’s view, totalitarianism is not just a form of tyranny: in it, ‘human nature’ is at stake, together with the belief that ‘everything is possible’ (quoted in Canovan 1992: 23).

Act II is therefore characterised by a dramatic feeling of disenchantment that affects the whole project of Enlightenment. If in Act I the modern man reacts against beliefs, views and forces he no longer regards as his own, in Act II he is confronted with the evidence that, despite all good intentions, modernity too often ends up substituting a form of inhumanity for another. Now, the problem is not outside Enlightenment, as in Act I, but lies at its core. In this regard, Adorno points to what he sees as the ‘suspicious’ side of the idea of human dignity in Kantian ethics. In the name of autonomy, he argues, Kant ascribes to man a kind of privilege that rapidly turns into a right for domination over the rest of nature. Kantian ethics, he says, ‘tends to exclude man from creation, and therewith his humanity constantly threatens to turn into inhumanity’ (2004: §202).

The point is that we do not need such extreme experiences as those provided by Nazism and Stalinism to feel disappointed about the project of modernity. Such discontent has been quite common since the beginning. F.H. Jacobi, one of the first critics of Kant, warned already at the end of the 18th century against the dangers of Enlightenment’s overreliance on a self-justifying reason, which, in his view, could only lead to nihilism.<sup>16</sup> Marx famously pointed to the state of alienation that inevitably arises as a result of the division of labour originally introduced with the aim of making production more efficient (something that should, at least in principle, improve people’s lives). And Max Weber would later talk about the

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<sup>16</sup> See Bowie 1997.

*Entzauberung der Welt* (the ‘disenchantment of the world’) as a typical phenomenon resulting from a systematic use of instrumental reason in virtually all domains of private and public life.<sup>17</sup>

A typical existential experience at this stage is that of *Entzweiung* (‘self-division’). In Act I everything we hoped for or believed in (reason as a remedy against superstition, democracy as a remedy against tyranny, culture as a remedy against superstition) appeared to us in a clear and unambiguous way, so that we thought it was possible to imagine the ‘emergence from our self-incurred immaturity’ as a kind of straight path. Instead, in Act II we typically feel torn apart between apparently irreconcilable opposites: reason and emotions, sensuality and understanding, faith and knowledge, man and nature, self-interest and general interest, conscious and unconscious will, private and public realm, ‘useless’ art and economic profit. If in Act I we tended to ‘absolutise’ things we believe in and to regard them as possessing intrinsic values, in Act II we are often forced to see that we actually mistook a part for the whole (a whole we cannot apprehend as such, since we are within its borders – in fact, also a part of it – and cannot look at it from outside), and that the value of this part cannot be defined in absolute terms, but only in relationship to other things.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, this state of *Entzweiung* makes understanding with other people even more difficult: in most cases there is not just disagreement about the kinds of solutions to the crisis that must be implemented, but, on a deeper level, there is often a ‘clash of narratives’, i.e. a disagreement in the ways of interpreting the world which makes true dialogue barely possible. For example, the present eurozone crisis presents an example of conflicting narratives that make consensus – and therefore a fair and integrating solution to the crisis – very difficult, if at all. On the one side, many economists insist that the origin of the current imbalances resides mainly in

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<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Weber 2002: 488. For a discussion of Weber’s idea of modernity as a process of rationalisation see Chapter 2 in Habermas 1995, I.

<sup>18</sup> We could also say that sometimes things we create to improve our lives in some way become ‘independent’ from us, so that we lose sight of the reasons we originally created them and eventually become their slaves. A typical example for this is money, and, more recently, finance.

some fatal flaws in the design of the common currency. On the other side, the core countries insist on an explanation to the crisis in the form of a moral tale of the kind of the old fable of the Ant and the Grasshopper. Thus, the former advocate changes in policy that might mitigate the negative effects of the original design of the euro, while the latter insist on the necessity of converting all grasshoppers into ants.

Act II therefore represents the outbreak of the crisis as such and the feeling of hopelessness it entails, which arises from the evidence that it is not just the ‘implementation’ of the blueprint for a better world we imagined in Act I which went wrong, but the very beliefs and views on which our hopes relied.

*Act III.* The third act in our story is about the response we give to the disenchantment experienced in the second act, i.e. about the response to the crisis itself. It is important to note from the start that at this stage there is no single response or outcome that can be regarded as ‘natural’ or ‘necessary’ in view of the events that described in the two previous stages. (Yes, at this point one will often hear people saying that ‘there is no alternative’, but, as we will see in a moment, this ‘there is no alternative’ approach is just one alternative among others.) In fact, this category – the idea that we can interpret human nature or history in such a way as to be able to justify what we believe is the ‘right thing to do’, in one word: metaphysics – actually belonged to Act I and was buried by the crisis in Act II. What we face in Act III, whether we like it or not, is an experience of freedom, but one of a very different nature from the freedom we strived for in Act I. Here, as Sartre put it, we are confronted with the fact that for man ‘existence precedes essence’, which means that man is ‘a being who exists before he can be defined by a concept of it’ (Sartre 2007: 22) and that therefore ‘we can never explain our actions by reference to a given and immutable human nature.’ ‘In other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom’ (ibid.: 29).

One possible response, and in the short term probably the easiest one, is just denial – denial of the kinds of the experience of *Entzweiung* I just mentioned. This amounts to ignoring the feedback of reality on previous beliefs and values (and



actions based on those values) and continuing to look at the world and man as if they were simple, unambiguous and predictable, if just suffering from easily identifiable problems requiring equally simple solutions. A certain amount of ‘muddling-through’ is often unavoidable, at least for a while, since it is always difficult to put into question ways of articulating the world and ideals we deemed useful or valuable and which we found it easy to commit to. Besides, a crisis typically compels us to ask different kinds of questions from those we were familiar with, and not just to find better solutions to old questions. However, denial becomes extremely dangerous when it establishes itself as an articulated and consistent movement aimed at annihilating the possibility of a more creative and productive response to the crisis, ensuring that the necessary changes are made so that nothing changes.<sup>19</sup>

This leads us to the ‘there is no alternative’ alternative, which is in fact a reaction to the kind of alternatives it tries to deny. I think that this movement capitalises on one aspect that was crucial at the very beginning of this story. In Act I, as we saw, the modern man makes a decisive step when he overcomes the fears of the pre-modern man, especially those based on the idea that he is just a slave of nature and therefore somewhat sinful in nature, and with them the views imposed by higher authorities on his rights to dream a better world and to commit to those dreams. The reality with which he is confronted in Act II – that such emancipatory hopes too often lead either to alienation and nihilism or just to a different form of slavery – may be interpreted by anyone suffering such a disillusionment as conclusive evidence that the negative forces (internal or external) unleashed in such a move will always be more powerful than all good intentions and hopes for a ‘more human’ world; in other words, that he should have never attempted such a move. This reading of the crisis is very powerful: in view of the despair caused by the experience of *Entzweiung*, the temptation to return to the safety and the sense of unity provided by the ‘valley of tears’, where everything was at least presented in an unambiguous way, may look more than appealing – in fact: as ‘the only possible

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<sup>19</sup> The Republican Party in the United States offers a supreme example of denial of this kind.

alternative'. To be sure, there will be some who will try to impose their own narrative of the crisis and their (reactionary) ideal of social order by capitalising on the guilty feelings of those who once dared to hope for a better, more 'human' society, only to eventually see how much social division, material and human losses and chaos those hopes had led to.<sup>20</sup> Ironically enough, those opportunists will almost infallibly be the ones who already most benefited from the chaos; in some cases, they will even have promoted it.

This is a crucial moment. For those who still want to believe in some way in the ideals of the Enlightenment, this will clearly appear as just another case demanding collective emancipation from an established authority which wants to use its power to repress people, impose their desired social order, and thus maintain their privileges. We were already there in Act I, however, and one might ask whether this idea of emancipation is not actually a kind of Sisyphean task in which one gets free from a tyrant, only to create the next one shortly after, or, even worse, to become one in one way or another. Now, a new approach to emancipation seems necessary. And here, too, Enlightenment provides the most efficient tool: criticism. 'Sapere aude!', the motto of Enlightenment, can be regarded as a path leading from dogmatism – the 'infancy' of reason, as Kant says in the First Critique (1998: A761) – over scepticism – which is a indication 'that our experience has rendered our judgment wiser and more circumspect' (ibid.) – to criticism. In Act III (and contrary to Act I), criticism means first and foremost self-criticism. Being modern will mean facing unpleasant questions: to what extent were our previous dreams of emancipation driven by resentment? Was our ideal of democracy really inclusive and universal or did it rely on views and values that could not be shared by other people? To what extent was the humanism we defended a freeing or a repressive

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<sup>20</sup> The most characteristic examples of such movements in Western history were the Counter-Reformation initiated by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), three decades after Luther's Ninety-Five Theses; and the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815, one-quarter of a century after the French Revolution. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Franco regime in Spain (1939-1975) represents an especially sad case of brutal repression and demonisation of the ideals of Enlightenment by the same people who brought a brief period of democracy to an end and provoked a cruel Civil War (1936-1939).

force? Was it not merely an instrument to enforce the interests of a new dominant class?

Using the guillotine against nobles and kings is sometimes much easier than going through such a process of self-critique. Many will even see this as a sign of weakness. But those questions may lead us to a different kind of insights. For instance, we may start to regard the oppressive dominant class not as an enemy in itself but as a symptom of some of our values and, more broadly, as a true reflection of our culture: is our highest aspiration to maximise profits and consume as much as possible, to accumulate power over other fellow human beings and show this as an achievement? Are our social relations not determined to a high degree by a spirit of competition in which ‘winner takes all’? Does our culture not create this dominant class through such kinds of values? If we think we might have reasons to answer to some of those questions with ‘yes’, emancipation should this time start within ourselves, and the first step should probably be to relearn to look at things in a different way (after all, as Merleau-Ponty said, ‘true philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world’, 1945: 21) before we change things – this time not in a top-down approach, as we did the first time, but with a more inclusive bottom-up attitude. Sometimes this might understandably disappoint people expecting changes right now (‘but what do you propose?’). And this approach undoubtedly requires us to accept a certain measure of unpredictability. But all this is necessary if we want to avoid making the ‘new system’ a new form of tyranny.

Such a process of self-critique may basically take us in three different directions. First, we can try to re-establish the lost sense of unity by embracing a powerful idea that helps us understand reality and articulate our actions (this idea can take very different forms: class struggle, will to power, or free market fundamentalism). Second, we may arrive at the conclusion that we should shelve the whole project of modernity, along with its destructive focus on subjectivity and its repressive humanism, and move on to something essentially different (which we will call, for lack of a better name, post-modernity). Finally, we may use this process to redefine ourselves and our relationships to each other and to the world by critically

assessing, and in some cases re-interpreting some key views, beliefs, values and even doctrines we used to hold. Sometimes it is not just about rejecting them, but about looking at them from a different perspective (the value of a theory as such very much depends on the question it is trying to answer), or just about acknowledging that what we saw as an absolute truth was actually part of a wider whole and therefore dependent on answers to other questions.

Hannah Arendt offers us a good example of a constructive re-reading of a previous theory, in this case the work of Kant. Traditionally, the study of Kant had focused on the kinds of questions dealt with in the First Critique, i.e. on questions related to epistemology or on his account of subjectivity as a basis for his idea of autonomy of man as a moral being. As Arendt had to experience at first hand, those theories were pretty much useless in the face of totalitarianism. Instead, in her Lectures on Kant's political philosophy she tried to find politically relevant insights in Kant's works. She found them in the Third Critique, in which, she argued, Kant tries to find answers to some questions that had been 'left over' from the previous two Critiques.<sup>21</sup> In her view, what was crucial was Kant's shift from a focus on 'man' in the first two Critiques to a focus on 'men' in the Third Critique (especially in the first part, 'Critique of Aesthetic Judgment'); that is, from an idea of man as 'a reasonable being, subject to the laws of practical reason which gives to himself, autonomous, an end in himself, belonging to a *Geisterreich*, realm of intelligible beings', to questions concerning 'men', in plural, as 'earthbound creatures, living in communities, endowed with common sense, *sensus communis*, a community sense; not autonomous, needing each other's company even for thinking' (Arendt 1982: 27). Or maybe, as she would have put it elsewhere, from an idea of man as a 'what' to an idea of man as a 'who' (Arendt: 1998: 10). (More on this in Chapter 3.) I would say that Arendt's re-reading of Kant shows that at this stage – after some

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<sup>21</sup> It was not the idea of accessing Kant through the Critique of Judgment rather than through the Critique of Pure Reason that was new – the Early Romantics had been heavily influenced and inspired by the Third Critique – but her attempt to infer from Kant's last Critique (rather than from other writings in which he explicitly deals with political matters) the political philosophy Kant actually never wrote. More generally, the importance of the Critique of Judgment in Kant's work has been increasingly acknowledged during the past two decades. See e.g. Bowie 2003: 16ff.)

fundamental views and values have been put into question by a devastating crisis – it is often not just about substituting a new, ‘better’ theory for an older one, but about changing the very status of theory as such, thereby redefining the kind of questions it tries to answer (and the question of who is asking them) as well as the way and the medium in which they are dealt with. This case illustrates a shift away from an idea of philosophy as self-reflection to a focus on intersubjective communication (a move that will be extensively elaborated later in the work of Jürgen Habermas<sup>22</sup>).

It is important to emphasise that none of the multiple possible responses to the crisis – whether we opt for denial and ‘muddling-through’ as long as it is possible, the return to a resigned pre-modern attitude, the overcoming of modernity and the inauguration of post-modernity, or the reinvention of modernity – can be regarded a priori as more ‘right’, or as a more ‘natural’ outcome, since in a crisis it is precisely what we regard as ‘natural’ and ‘right’ that is being questioned. We are not ultimately free to avoid facing the consequences of our previous actions, but we are free to choose the response we give to those consequences. Seen this way, a crisis may hide valuable chances, as long as we stop believing those who say that ‘there is no alternative’. On the contrary: the end of the story always remains open.

### 1.3 Music and crisis (I)

I have been talking for a while about crisis: about the crisis we have to deal with now, and more generally about modernity’s experience of crisis. One very simple question we could ask is: what does music have to tell us about all this? To answer this question, I will first try to re-tell the story of the previous section, this time with the ‘help’ of music, or, more precisely, with the ‘help’ of Beethoven. In this section I will try to show an idea of music as emerging as a response to the kinds of expectations, challenges, aporias and hopes of a process of crisis (as opposed to a ‘static’ idea of music and music works as ‘aesthetic objects’), before we move in the next section on to questions related to how we actually experience music today.

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<sup>22</sup> See Habermas 1995.

Since in our time we naturally tend to focus (implicitly or explicitly) on works as ready-made objects with an intrinsic meaning (we will explore this phenomenon in Chapter 2 and 3), I think it would be useful at this point to mention the classical distinction between *energeia* – the creative impulse – and *ergon* – the objective result, the work or *Gebilde*.<sup>23</sup> The former always implies a concrete situation, a human life in its individual and collective dimension, a ‘friction point’ with the world that to a great extent disappears in the *ergon*, but without which the work loses a decisive aspect of its meaning. Of course, it is not just about tracing back the ‘intentions’ of the composer when writing the piece; the point of this idea of *energeia* is that works of art are created as a response to something happening in real lives for which we can find no (conventional) words, but about which we do not want to remain silent. Therefore, and to put it in a simple way, my aim in this section will be to look at Beethoven’s works, but from the perspective of the ‘questions’ they were (presumably) trying to answer, in the hope that those questions have something in common with ours.<sup>24</sup>

If we wanted to make a film using the story in the previous section and needed to choose a symphonic composer to put music to this film we would undoubtedly pick Beethoven. Yes, Mahler would also make a good candidate, but only if we were to put music just to Act II. On the one side, his music lacks the kind of forward-looking, idealistic naiveté of Act I: Mahler’s naiveté, if at all, was rather nostalgic and therefore looked to a past that would never come back again. And, on the other side, his music does not want us to believe that we are ultimately free to write the end of the story; rather, Mahler’s music wants to awake us to a threatening reality which cannot be made sense of anymore (which is the reason people at his time did not want to realise this reality).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See e.g. Dahlhaus 1987: 32.

<sup>24</sup> This is what Gadamer called ‘fusion of horizons’.

<sup>25</sup> I admit that it would be more difficult to argue against Wagner on similar grounds, but I think that ultimately we would find in his works – and even more in his life – many more reasons to criticise (or even hate) modernity than to believe in it, while I think that in Beethoven the ‘inner struggle’ between both poles typical of the modern man is much more apparent. Actually, the second best option, in my opinion, and much closer to Beethoven than one might think at first glance, would be Mozart. Although he died in 1791 (only two years after the French Revolution) his music – I am

Contrary to Mahler, Beethoven overarches all three parts of the film. If we look at his works we would be tempted to pick some from the heroic period for Act I (the *Eroica* or the Fifth would be an obvious choice) and some from the later period for Act II and Act III (we could e.g. use the first two movements of the Ninth Symphony for Act II and the last two for Act III). But if we look at his work – not just his works, but his ‘Schaffen’, in the singular, and in the intransitive sense – we see that things are much more subtle than this. In fact, the kind of disappointment and the resulting struggles we saw in Act II are very much present already in the heroic period. In order to show this I will use a rather atypical work: the Fifth Piano Concerto.

Why Beethoven? As Burnham says, a common thread throughout the history of the reception of Beethoven’s works during the past 200 hundred years is ‘the feeling that Beethoven’s music somehow encodes real-life experiences’ (Burnham 1995: xiii). He mentions some recurrent *topoi* in Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht’s monograph on Beethoven’s reception, *Zur Geschichte der Beethoven-Rezeption*, such as ‘*Erlebnismusik* (music-as-experience), *Leidensnotwendigkeit* (the necessity of suffering), and *Überwindung* (overcoming)’ (ibid.), and even goes on to say that ‘Beethoven has arguably been to music what Socrates was to ancient philosophy: humankind becomes his fundamental subject; his music is heard as a direct expression of human values’ (ibid.). In the history of Western culture Beethoven’s music therefore represents a new beginning – the beginning of *autonomous* music. This entails not just a new style of composition, but a new place of music in human affairs, and in this sense also a new kind of *presence*, ‘the sense of an earnest and fundamental presence burdened with some great weight yet coursing forth ineluctably, moving the listener along as does the earth itself. Broadly speaking, Beethoven’s music is thus heard to reach us primarily at an ethical level...’ (ibid.: 65).

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thinking especially at the Da Ponte operas, *The Magic Flute*, the last piano concertos and the Requiem – already reflects and deals with some crucial ‘modern’ contradictions and hopes. His ‘problem’ was that, unlike Beethoven, he quite successfully managed to ‘delete’ the traces of the *energeia* in the sense we have just seen.)

This presence is therefore a *compelling* presence; it is as if Beethoven's autonomous music wanted everyone to regard *themselves* as autonomous in the modern sense, that is, to live their own lives (and not just their 'interests' in a narrow sense), and this means: to acknowledge the ethical dimension of their existence and commit to making this world a bit more human. As Adorno says, 'Humanität bei [Beethoven] heißt: so sollst du dich verhalten wie diese Musik sich verhält.'<sup>26</sup> Beethoven's music thus conveys not just *Empfindungen*, emotions, but 'Anweisungen zu einem aktiven, tätigen, sich entäußernden, dabei nicht engen, und solidarischen Leben.'<sup>27</sup> It seems obvious that the reaction to Beethoven's music has changed during the past two centuries. Burnham establishes four different paradigms informing the reception of Beethoven since the composer's death: 'the Romantic hero' (from 1827 onwards), 'the Redeemer' (from 1870 onwards), 'the lawgiver and bearer of Classical values' (from 1927, the centenary of Beethoven's death), and finally the status as a 'cultural force and cultural product' (since 1970).<sup>28</sup> This evolution can be made sense of as the history of the attempts made by successive generations to come to terms with the demands posed by Beethoven's music; in some way, insofar as we can say that his music still remains challenging for us today, it is because many of these attempts were largely *unsuccessful*.

In summary, it seems clear that what is at stake with Beethoven's music is more than music; it is something that lies at the heart of the project of modernity:

It is hardly a secret that Beethoven's music has consistently been judged to be expressive of the primary features of the modern Western concept of the self, such as the self as a spiritual or moral entity, the constitutive autonomy of the self, the possibility of self-transcendence, and the fundamental condition of struggle.

(Burnham 1995: 113)

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<sup>26</sup> Adorno 2004: §18. 'Humanity means for Beethoven: you should behave in the same way as this music behaves.'

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. '...instructions on how to lead a life which is active, selfless but without being narrow, and solidary.'

<sup>28</sup> See the essay 'The Four Ages of Beethoven: Critical Reception and the Canonic Composer' in Burnham 2010.



As I want to argue, Beethoven's music does not just display these values (and the demands attached to them); it also deals with questions and contradictions arising from them and even with the need to respond to a reality that has not been transformed as expected.

First let us have a look on the life circumstances of Beethoven during the time when he composed his Fifth Piano Concerto. Between May and September 1809 Vienna was beleaguered by Napoleon's armies. Those who could, specially the nobility (including many close friends of Beethoven), fled the city. As his contemporary Ferdinand Ries reports, during the months of the occupation Beethoven 'spent the greater part of the time in a cellar in the house of his brother Kaspar Karl, where he covered his head with pillows so as not to hear the cannons'. In July of the same year he said to his publisher Breitkopf & Härtel: 'In the meantime we have been suffering misery in a most concentrated form... The whole course of events has in my case affected both body and soul... What a destructive, disorderly life I see and hear around me: nothing but drums, cannons, and human misery in every form'. The armistice some weeks later did not substantially change his mood: 'What do you say to this dead peace? I no longer expect to see any stability in this age. The only certainty we can rely on is blind chance'.

For a man who had fervently believed in many of the promises the era initiated by the French Revolution had brought about (he had even planned to dedicate one of his most representative works to Napoleon), this was certainly more than a bitter disillusion. And his chances to find consolation elsewhere were rather scarce: his hopes of achieving a minimal financial stability, possible at that time only in the form of a regular salary paid by some kind of benefactor, were fading; and his health, specially regarding his problems with deafness, was deteriorating. His relationships to women did not contribute much to his happiness either. 25 years after Kant had tried to give an answer to the question 'What is Enlightenment?', Beethoven could have easily been forgiven for not caring anymore at all about what Enlightenment really was. The more puzzling it is that in those circumstances he

was able to write such a work as the Fifth Piano Concerto, in which the ideals of the Enlightenment, at least at first glance, seem to be still alive.<sup>29</sup>

First let us have a brief look on the score, as we would find it today. We will not find it difficult to read the piece in terms of an interplay between collective and individual ‘discourses’. On the one side, the orchestra – the collective – is as powerful as it had never been before in a concerto. It does not just provide a ‘setting’ for the soloist, nor does it confine to the role of a mere counterpart; it expresses and asserts itself in its full power, as self-sufficient, one could even say. On the other side, the soloist – the individual – is allowed to explore regions of its individual self whose nature often seem at odds with the kind of presence the orchestra imposes: concrete, goal-oriented, here and now. And yet the destinies of both do not seem to be in opposition, but intertwined. Finally, after an interlude – in the second movement the orchestra is not really an orchestra but rather a reflection of the self of the soloist – the third movement seems to confirm that both, individual and collective, have a common destiny, as if they had ultimately been created to ‘dance’ together as two inseparable and interdependent parts of the same whole.

We may go on discussing all these kinds of things and finding more aspects of the ‘message’ of Enlightenment in Beethoven’s Fifth Piano Concerto, but the real problem arises when we remind ourselves of the circumstances in which Beethoven composed precisely this piece. In fact, what is striking is that, when writing this work in the Vienna brutally ruled by Napoleon’s army, Beethoven is being confronted precisely with some appalling consequences of the revolution that had promised a new era for humanity. In our story of before Beethoven is therefore not in Act I anymore, but is living through the disenchantment of Act II, and things

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<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to determine with precision with which of these ideas and ideals Beethoven identified himself. It seems clear that he despised tyranny (*Egmont*), and that questions about virtue, freedom, progress and universal brotherhood remained recurrent sources of inspiration throughout his life (see Solomon 1978: 33ff). On the other side, his misanthropic and reactionary tendencies are well documented in most existing biographies. Dahlhaus suggests that Beethoven tended to show his ‘French’, revolutionary side in times of peace, and his patriotic, reactionary side in situations of conflict (Dahlhaus 1987: 48). All these contradictions are present in his fantasies of the arrival of an aristocratic hero who would liberate humanity from its yoke. In any case, however sophisticated and consistent his views were, it is not difficult to sense the energy of the emancipatory élan of Enlightenment in Beethoven’s works, specially in those of the so-called heroic period.)

change substantially if we read the piece as a response to this disenchantment. And then we find that, ironically enough, the first movement of the Fifth Piano Concerto very much displays the character of military music (Alfred Einstein even called this concerto the ‘apotheosis of the military concept’<sup>30</sup>). It is really difficult to believe that Beethoven was just ignoring what was happening around him when composing this piece, and even more difficult to think that he was affirming precisely that which was the cause of the misery he and many other people were suffering at that time. Was that rather an act of masochistic stubbornness? Subjugation to *Realpolitik* through an astute idealisation of power? Utopian dreams of reconciliation?

Maybe, just maybe, we can see in this piece a re-definition of what Einstein called the ‘military concept’, or, put in other words, the eagerness for domination over the rest of creation Adorno identified behind the idea of dignity in Kantian ethics (Adorno 2004: §202). However, despite its undeniably affirmative character, the war-like rhythms and motives of this movement are presented in a different light: as we mentioned before, especially the interventions of the soloist show an extremely subtle and personal affective universe that contrasts with the uniform, herd-like character we usually associate with military choreography. It is as if through this re-interpretation of military music Beethoven wanted to convince us (or rather himself?) that collective, transformative action does not need to be inherently ‘military’, that is, destructive. It does not need to exclude the unfolding of each individual as a unique being; on the contrary: men can unite their forces not just to destroy each other, but to actively build solid institutions that protect people and promote virtue and happiness. At the risk of going a bit too far with this interpretative line, we could even see a partial re-interpretation of the heroic style itself (it is probably not a coincidence that this piece and the *Eroica* are in the same key), something like a shift from a ‘top-down’ to a ‘bottom-up’ approach, as we would say today. The focus would then be less on the aristocratic hero who knows better than the other men and uses his force to implement his agenda, and more on

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Solomon 1998: 268.

the idea of giving voice to individuals (i.e. ‘normal citizens’) and create the conditions for them to express themselves without fear. If Rousseau famously said that ‘Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains,’<sup>31</sup> this piece might be trying to tell us that we could find a way of reconciling individual self and society – and this despite an overwhelming reality that is trying to tell us that ‘there is no alternative’.

This would mean that we could identify here elements of the second and third acts of our story. On the one side, we can see the recognition of an *Entzweiung*: the awareness of the opposition between collective and individual (and the need to find an harmonious relationship between both) is much more palpable here than in the *Eroica*, where the ‘subject’ (the hero) was in some way both individual and collective at the same time. On the other side, this re-interpretation of military thematic might point to a certain degree of self-criticism vis-à-vis the most assertive aspects of the music of the heroic period (what Adorno called ‘the dark traits of Beethoven’), of whose most destructive side reality in Europe at that time might be a reflection. In any case, the very fact that Beethoven was able to compose such an astonishing piece at that time (or even because of what he was experience at that time) might be seen as an affirmation of the kind of freedom we encounter in Act III: freedom to relearn to look at the world and ourselves, against the idea that the current events provide the ultimate judgment about what human life can be like.

Those elements obviously become much more apparent in the music of the late period. In the Ninth Symphony, for example, this experience of *Entzweiung* is probably more dramatic than anywhere else in Beethoven’s works so that, in my view, it is questionable whether the proposed resolution implies that we may, after all, hope to be able one day to build a piece of heaven on earth (whatever this means, this is probably the whole point of modernity), or that, on the contrary, our highest aspiration would be to live ‘as if’ this were possible.

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<sup>31</sup> Rousseau 2012: 10.

All these interpretations are, of course, disputable. For the moment I just want to draw some (partial) conclusions and questions arising from them I will deal with more in detail in the next section:

1. If we tell the ‘story in three acts’ in the previous section two times, once without music, and a second time with Beethoven’s music, it seems clear (at least to some of us) that music does have something to say; in other words, that music is not just a separate realm with its own ‘sphere of validity’ (even if it is that too, in some sense), but that it becomes more meaningful, livelier, if we understand it as emerging precisely as an articulation of and a response to the kinds of concerns, contradictions and hopes we experience in ‘real’ life.

2. However, even if we share with audience members of all epochs ‘the feeling that Beethoven’s music somewhat encodes real-life experiences’ (Burnham 1995: xiii), it is much less clear *what* exactly Beethoven’s music has to say specifically *to us* today, that is, to what extent we can make sense of today’s crisis through Beethoven’s works such as the Fifth Piano Concerto. This means that it is perfectly possible to ‘understand’ a work, to make sense of it as a self-sufficient, self-containing construct, even to be able to see in it some kind of ‘values’ – and at the same to fail to find connections with the life we actually live. We could go even further and think, as Adorno does, that ‘[t]here is no construct [*Gebilde*] in the world, not the highest constructs of philosophy, not the highest of art, which could not, by holding onto them in an isolated manner, be misused to keep people away from other things, to deceive people about other matters’ (cited in Bowie 2013: 27). If this assertion sounds frightening it is not just because of the fact that someone might be trying to manipulate us in some way through the use (or misuse) of art works, but because we ourselves might (unconsciously) be trying to keep them away from our lives, that is, we might be *adapting* the way we relate to them precisely in order to *avoid* the uncomfortable truths about our world they may help us to unveil.

3. It therefore seems clear that there is a *gap* between anything we can ascribe to specific works – values, meaning, any kind of ‘message’ – and what we commonly refer to as ‘real life’, and that the question of how to bridge this gap

cannot be answered through musical analysis only. To be sure, this does not necessarily mean that there is something wrong with musical analysis: in fact, this gap is always there; it is, we could say, constitutive of art. It allows us to use music in order to escape reality, but also to find always new ways to look at reality through music. However, in a time of crisis this gap becomes an *issue* on its own, as we are challenged not just to review the way we understand specific works, but to redefine their place – and, more broadly, the place of music as a discipline – in the context of our lives. Seen this way, a crisis may confront us with new kinds of questions, with problems of a different nature from that of the problems we were used to deal with, but at the same time it represents an opportunity.

We therefore need to understand what is at stake with this gap, and how we can deal with it today. This will be the task of the next section.

#### 1.4 Music and crisis (II)

In the previous section I tried to illustrate a fundamental problem we face when we deal with musical works from the past and try to discern their ‘meaning’. On the one side, especially in Beethoven’s case, we are confronted with works that seem to display some high values, values that in turn impose some demands on us in the sense that they do not allow us to remain indifferent. On the other side, it is perfectly possible (and even normal) that, despite this compelling presence of Beethoven’s music and despite our more or less successful efforts to come to terms with it, our lives remain unaffected by the values the music seems to display. As I pointed out before, this gap between what we see ‘represented’ in musical works and our ‘real life’ becomes an issue on its own especially in a time of crisis; it is therefore best understood from the perspective of what I described in §1.2 as ‘Act II’ of the process of crisis, in which the very foundations of our way to deal with essential elements of our culture (in this case with music and musical works) have been shaken.

Let us look a bit more closely at the problem inherent in the idea that musical works may represent values. In his essay ‘The Age of the World Picture’ (‘Die Zeit des Weltbildes’) Heidegger says that the representation of value (‘die Vorstellung des Wertes’) is essential to what he calls ‘die neuzeitliche Auslegung des Seienden’, i.e. the way we make sense of things in modernity.<sup>32</sup> First, he argues, we attribute values to objects, then we objectify values themselves, and finally we end up ‘fabricating’ values.<sup>33</sup> Paradoxically enough, during this process values do not become more ‘objective’, more ‘real’; rather, they are ‘subjectivised’, that is, they become a mere reflection of subjective needs. It is for this reason that Heidegger, in a rather provocative way, invites us ‘to think against values’ in his ‘Letter on Humanism’:

Das Denken gegen ‘die Werte’ behauptet nicht, daß alles, was man als ‘Werte’ erklärt – die ‘Kultur’, die ‘Kunst’, die ‘Wissenschaft’, die ‘Menschenwürde’, ‘Welt’ und ‘Gott’ – wertlos sei. Vielmehr gilt es endlich einzusehen, daß eben durch die Kennzeichnung von etwas als ‘Wert’ das so Gewertete seiner Würde geraubt wird. Das besagt: durch die Einschätzung von etwas als Wert wird das Gewertete nur als Gegenstand für die Schätzung des Menschen zugelassen.<sup>34</sup>

(Heidegger 2000: 41)

Rather unsurprisingly, he associates this feature of the modern way of thinking with a ‘loss of Being’, that is, a loss of the sense of what these values were originally supposed to mean before they were subjectivised (‘meaning’ is here understood in a broad sense, in the context of our ‘being-in-the-world’, not just in the restricted sense of ‘semantic meaning’). Adorno explains this subjectification of values mainly

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<sup>32</sup> Heidegger 1977: 94; apart from the representation of value he also mentions the *system* as the other essential feature of the modern way of interpreting the world.

<sup>33</sup> See Young 2001: 25.

<sup>34</sup> ‘To think against “values” is not to maintain that everything interpreted as “a value” – “culture,” “art,” “science,” “human dignity,” “world,” and “God” – is valueless. Rather, it is important finally to realize that precisely through the characterization of something as “a value” what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man’s estimation.’ (Heidegger 2011: 171).

in terms of a process of ‘commodification’; in art, it ultimately leads to what he calls ‘Entkunstung der Kunst’ (see Adorno 2003a: 32), which can be translated as ‘de-artification of art’ (see Paddison 1993: 206).

In fact, any marketing specialist working for a commercial business will stress the key importance of building ‘brand values’ among potential clients. These ‘values’ do not need to correspond to something real, as long as they appeal to needs of customers; to a considerable extent they are *fabricated* by means of highly effective (and costly) marketing campaigns, especially in sectors such as financial services, where firms largely succeed in conveying to their customers a picture about their activities that bears little or no resemblance with what they *really* do.<sup>35</sup>

Our ability to fabricate values also involves an ability to remove *negative* values from things we desire. As Žižek notes,

[I]n today's market we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant property: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol... Virtual reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of the Real...

(Žižek and Daly 2004: 105)

Therefore, put in a quite extreme way, it is not unreasonable to assume that we *might* be studying, playing and listening to something that ‘smells and tastes’ like Beethoven’s music but that is deprived of its ‘malignant property’, namely the new view of reality it invites (or even compels) us to take and the transformative power within ourselves it might allow us to discover.

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<sup>35</sup> An example of this, interesting in a double way in our present discussion, is Deutsche Bank’s slogan ‘Passion to perform’. In fact, Deutsche Bank operates according to a quite ruthless ideal of ‘performance’, even for the standards of today’s financial industry (see for example *Wie halten es Deutsch-Banker mit der Wahrheit?*, Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, 17 August 2014). It is the job of their marketing department to make this look as a virtue, as a positive ‘value’. For this purpose, the bank sponsors some leading cultural institutions, including the Berliner Philharmoniker. With them, according to a note in a booklet written by a senior official of the company, Deutsche Bank ‘shares a passion to perform.’



Adorno's theory of the dialectic of the musical material arguably represents the most sophisticated effort to overcome the limitations of this explicit or implicit positivist attitude with regard to values as displayed in musical works. In fact, it can be regarded as an attempt to bridge the gap I mentioned at the end of the previous section between the meaning we attribute to musical works (as a result, among other things, of musical analysis), and aspects of real life to which these works must relate in some way. In the rest of this section I will try to assess to what extent we can make use of Adorno's dialectical method today.

As is well known, Adorno's theory of the dialectic of the musical material is presented in a rather fragmentary form throughout his work, not least because his characteristic aversion against articulating his ideas in a systematic way. Here I will mainly rely on the critical reconstruction of Adorno's dialectical model put forward by Paddison (1993).

For Adorno, art in general and music in particular are, at least potentially, a mode of cognition, a way of making sense of the world we live in. In this sense, the idea of a *Wahrheitsgehalt* (truth content) with regard to art works – a central concept in Adorno's theory<sup>36</sup> – can easily be misunderstood, since 'truth' is not something that is 'contained' within the work itself, something we would just need to 'unwrap' through analysis, as it were. Rather, this truth is revealed through a series of *relationships* – dialectical relationships – involving interactions at different levels with elements that are not explicitly present in the work. Put in a simple way, what is explicit in a musical work – what 'sounds', or the score insofar as it can potentially serve as a basis for a performance – becomes meaningful only insofar as it responds to something 'outside' the work.

This interaction is what Adorno tried to articulate in his theory of the musical material. The musical material is everything the composer finds in a pre-formed way, and which he or she 'forms' in order to produce something new. Contrary to what Hindemith and other theorists and composers thought at that time, the notion of

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<sup>36</sup> See Paddison 1993: 111ff for a discussion of the Hegelian origin of Adorno's idea of truth; see also Bowie 2007: 332ff and Bowie 2013: 34ff.

the material handed-down to a composer does not just include natural phenomena (such as the overtone series and the ‘natural laws’ derived from it), but rather a set of ‘socially and historically mediated aesthetic norms and conventions’<sup>37</sup> – from harmonic relationships and motivic developments to the construction of forms such as the sonata – that determine how the ‘physical’ material – the sounds – are to be used.<sup>38</sup> On the one side, the composer has to submit to the demands of the material; in fact, the artist is *not* free to do what he or she wants.<sup>39</sup> In order to do this, the composer needs to *master* the material, as only this will allow him or her to achieve the degree of consistency (*Stimmigkeit*) the work will need to stand on its own feet, i.e. to be experienced *as a work*. On the other side, this technical mastery of the material is not an end in itself, as the composer is expected to take a critical stance towards the material; that is, he or she is expected to use it in a new way, thus allowing the music to become *expressive*. Through this dialectic between *convention/construction* (as demands imposed by the handed down material) and *expression* (as something new that arises in the process) music’s world-disclosive potential starts to be realised.<sup>40</sup>

Importantly, the dialectic does not end at the level of the work (the ‘immanent level’ in Adorno’s terminology). The laws of the material are not like natural laws, given that the material is historically and socially mediated: if conventions appear as natural it is because they have become ‘second nature’ (a term Adorno borrowed from Lukács; see Paddison 1993: 91). In other words, conventions reflected in the material are not just ‘musical’ in nature: they are ‘sedimented history and society’ (Paddison 1993: 208). Therefore, when making decisions about the handed-down material, the composer is actually taking a stance in relationship to society: ‘[D]ie Auseinandersetzung des Komponisten mit dem Material [ist] die mit

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<sup>37</sup> Paddison 1993: 150.

<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the genesis of Adorno’s theory and its stance towards other opposing theories such as Hindemith’s see Chapter 2 in Paddison 1993.

<sup>39</sup> This was one of the points of dispute in Adorno’s debate with Krenek during the 1930s; see Paddison 1993: 81ff.

<sup>40</sup> For a detailed explanation of the different levels at which the dialectic of the musical material takes place see Chapter 5 in Paddison 1993. See also Bowie 2007: 356ff.

der Gesellschaft' (Adorno 2003b: 40).<sup>41</sup> Importantly, this *Auseinandersetzung* ('confrontation' or 'interaction') with society must take place at the technical level, i.e. through the mediation of the musical material (see Paddison 1993: 189). This allows the composer (or the artist in general) to 'reveal what has been forgotten or repressed by established modes of thought' (Bowie 2013: 36), and, in this sense, the most authentic music and art becomes a form of critical theory.<sup>42</sup>

Adorno's dialectical model therefore offers a solution to the seemingly unsolvable problems associated with the positivist/representationalist approach discussed above. Values are not 'represented' or 'contained' in the work, they may become apparent only insofar as we are able to grasp the interaction of the work with something that lies outside itself as a *Gestalt*, i.e. something that is present in the work only in an implicit way. The problem is, of course, how to understand and articulate this *mediation*, i.e. the interaction of the work with the (musical and social) world outside itself.

But rather than dealing with the problems inherent to the idea of the mediation of the material I would like here to discuss some issues related to the kind of society the theory of the musical material presupposes. In the first place, Adorno's theory presupposes that we think about music *in terms of works*. As Goehr shows in her enlightening book *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992), this way of thinking about music and everything it implies for musical practice – that works are created to be performed an indefinite number of times, that there is a clear separation between composition and performance, that works must be rehearsed before they are performed, that works must be unique and original, that the composers have certain rights on their works, that music is performed in venues specifically designed for this purpose – actually became a matter of course only with the emergence of modern (Romantic) aesthetics. Before, music was regarded as a

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<sup>41</sup> 'The confrontation of the composer with the material is the confrontation with society.' See also Bowie 2007: 346.

<sup>42</sup> See Paddison 1993: 100.

*performative* art, not as a *productive* art like painting or sculpture.<sup>43</sup> This move can be regarded as a result of the need to accord music the status of autonomous art. Crucially, a new space had to be created for that purpose, since in the church and in the court music would always play a subordinated, non-autonomous role.

Since music was a temporal and performance art, its works could not be preserved in physical form or placed in a museum like other works of fine art. Music had a problem. It had to replicate the conditions of the plastic arts and, at the same time, render them appropriate to its temporal and ephemeral character. Music resolved the problem by creating for itself a ‘metaphorical’ museum, an equivalent of the museum for plastic arts—what has come to be known as an imaginary museum of musical works.

(Goehr 1992: 174)

Adorno’s theory of the musical material implicitly presupposes this space in which works can be regarded *as works*, as this space provides a relatively stable background that ensures a certain continuity between the works of different composers. Moreover, this space, as something relatively separate from other spheres of society, enables art – especially radical art – to become critical theory.

But what is actually this ‘imaginary museum of musical works’ in the broader context of society? Weber’s account of modern society offers crucial insights here. Weber regards modernity as a process of rationalisation affecting all domains of life. This process finds its expression in the capitalist economy, the bureaucratic state – and also in modern (autonomous) art. This gives rise to three clearly differentiated ‘spheres of validity’ (*Wertsphären*): science and technology, universalist right and moral, and art. In fact, modern art could be autonomous only as long as it had its own ‘sphere of validity’; for this reason, modern societies had to create a separate space in which autonomous art could flourish. This is what Weber

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<sup>43</sup> See Chapter 5 in Goehr 1992. For this reason, what Goehr calls the work-concept is generally inadequate for music composed before 1800 (including Bach music), and obviously also for jazz and popular music

calls in general terms *Kunstbetrieb* ('art business'), which was largely driven by the interests of the bourgeoisie.<sup>44</sup> In the fine arts, for example, it found its expression in the creation of museums. In the domain of music, this led to the creation of institutions in which music could be listened to and appreciated *on its own terms*, i.e. not as something attached to an extra-musical event (as had been common until 1800). This space, which finds its expression in but is ultimately not reducible to the kinds of musical institutions (such as philharmonic societies) and venues (such as concert halls) created by the emerging bourgeoisie, is what Goehr calls 'the imaginary museum of musical works'.

To summarise the journey we have made in this section: we started with the gap between what we intuitively regard as the 'contents' of musical works and real life. As I argued in the previous section, this gap, which remains largely unseen as long as our worldview remains unchallenged, becomes an issue itself during a period of crisis. In other words, a crisis puts into question any positivistic/representationalist view of art. Adorno's theory of musical material provides a way out of the limitations imposed by such a view. In fact, musical meaning is not 'contained' or 'represented' in the work, but emerges through the interaction of the work with something outside itself, and ultimately with 'history and society' that are sedimented in other works in the form of a set of conventions. However, this means that musical works must share a space of their own, a space separate from other spheres of society in which they can interact with each other, as it were, and which allows art to become critical theory. This space – Goehr's 'imaginary museum of musical works' – is *inseparable* from the very idea of musical works and emerged only after 1800 (until then music was largely regarded as a performative, not as a productive art). Moreover, the emergence of this space is

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<sup>44</sup> Modern art – autonomous art – is essentially *bourgeois* art, in the sense that it serves the ideals of the bourgeoisie. As Paddison notes, '[t]he "dialectic of musical material" can be understood as the historical "objectification" of the bourgeois Subject in musical structures – what Adorno calls the process of "subject-objectification", an objectification of the Subject which has forgotten its subjective origins.' (Paddison 1993: 119)

inextricably linked to the emergence of the bourgeoisie as a dominant social class, and is therefore rooted in the form of society of industrial capitalism.

Two main questions arise here:

1. What is really at stake when we deal with the issue of whether we can or should think about musical experience in terms of works? In other words, what might be lost if we dispense with the work-concept as a regulative principle guiding musical practice?

2. To what extent is it actually possible to deal with musical works in a strict sense – i.e. not just with pieces of music or with musical objects – in post-industrial, post-bourgeois society?

It seems clear that it is ultimately not possible to answer these questions from a purely musical perspective, since what is at stake here lies beyond the realm of music. (Moreover, as I tried to demonstrate in this chapter, the very foundations of this ‘real of music’ – its significance and its relationship to other domains of life – are put into question by the current crisis.) For this reason, in order to gain a better understanding of these questions I will follow a rather unusual strategy that will involve putting aside specifically musical questions for a while. The first step (Chapter 2) will be to look at all human activities – productive and non-productive – and the evolution of their different paradigms in modernity. Arendt’s approach to this issue in *The Human Condition* will, I hope, provide us a fresh perspective from which I will discuss questions related to art (Chapter 3) and music (Chapter 4). Finally, I will revisit the two questions mentioned above in the conclusion.

## Chapter 2      **Modernity and *The Human Condition***

In this chapter I will develop a theoretical framework that will allow us to re-situate questions related to music in the context of all human activities and the evolution of their paradigms in modernity. In §2.1 I discuss the questions and historical developments Arendt tries to give a response to in *The Human Condition* and the possible similarities with today's situation. In §2.2 and §2.3 I will deal with Arendt's account of human activities and the often conflicting paradigms related to them (*animal laborans*, *homo faber*, and action and speech). In §2.4 I will attempt to reconstruct the story of modernity Arendt's phenomenology of human activities relies on.

### 2.1 Hannah Arendt and the crisis of modernity

Before we examine Arendt's insightful and original account of human activities in her most important work, *The Human Condition*, I would like to discuss some key aspects of Arendt's attitude towards philosophy and theory in general that are crucial in the context of the issues discussed in the present dissertation. In fact, most of Arendt's work (not just *HC*) represents an attempt to give some responses to questions posed by dreadful events that ultimately constituted an unprecedented crisis of modernity. As I want to show, we can learn as much from her theories as such as from the specific *kind* of questions she chose to deal with, especially in face of a situation that unequivocally attested the failure of a (typically modern) way of pursuing knowledge and building a better world.

For a German Jew who had to emigrate first to France and then to the United States, it would have been relatively easy to adhere to the conventional wisdom that Nazism had primarily been the result of a perverse ideology that originated in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Germany and whose destructive consequences were fatally amplified by some unfortunate events (Treaty of Versailles, economic

crisis of the late 1920s). According to this reading, the devastating consequences of Nazism could basically be avoided in the future by eradicating the perverse ideology from which they emerged. For Arendt, however, things were much more complex. Certainly, ideological elements (including anti-semitism) did play a key role but they alone could not be held accountable for the amount of mass destruction achieved by Nazism. In her view, Nazism was actually a product of some of the most obscure aspects of modernity, and the critique of Nazism therefore *had* to entail a critique of modernity. This was also the thesis of the members of the Frankfurt School. However, there is a crucial difference between Arendt and Adorno regarding the way they dealt with the critique of the project of modernity and the kinds of answers they strived for. Despite his numerous invaluable insights, Adorno too often tended towards a *totalising* critique of the project of modernity that left little space for both an acknowledgement of its achievements and a new start based on a re-writing or re-invention of its positive aspects.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, we could hardly characterise Arendt as an unambiguously optimistic human being, and, while some of her critics missed the point when they dismissed some key ideas in *The Human Condition* as a mere idealisation of ancient Greece, this element of nostalgia<sup>2</sup> for a pre-modern world is undoubtedly present in her work (after all, she had been a pupil of Martin Heidegger...). However, in face of the devastation caused by totalitarianism and the questions about the project of modernity it aroused, she took in my view a more positive and constructive stance than that adopted by Adorno and Horkheimer.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to summarise those aspects of Arendt's diagnosis of and response to the crisis of modernity she had to deal with that are especially relevant to our discussions in the following four points:

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<sup>1</sup> This is apparent especially in the work he wrote in exile with Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

<sup>2</sup> This has been called 'Hellenic nostalgia' (Canovan 1992: 115).

<sup>3</sup> Some ideas of the most prominent pupil of Adorno, Jürgen Habermas, were influenced by Arendt rather than Adorno himself. As we will see, Habermas's distinction between communicative action and instrumental-rational action was influenced by the account of human activities in *The Human Condition*. For a critical assessment of Habermas's intellectual debt to Hannah Arendt – which he himself openly acknowledged in 1980 – see Canovan 1983.



(1) One central concern in Arendt's thought is how to acknowledge and deal with 'the human condition of plurality', i.e. 'the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world' (Arendt 1998: 7). Totalitarianisms constituted an extreme attempt to deprive humans of their spontaneity and reduce them to predictable beings, just 'bundles of reactions', mere 'specimen of the animal-species man' (quoted in Canovan 1992: 60). They were not just another form of tyranny: 'human nature as such [was] at stake' (ibid.: 23); that is, the idea that it is possible and necessary to *decide* about what human beings are or ought to become, and to 'help' nature and history – in the totalitarian worldview they are just two sides of the same coin – to do their job. *This* made totalitarianisms a characteristically modern phenomenon, certainly an unprecedented one with regard to the scale and the cruelty of their deeds, but by no means unique in their idea of a unitary and homogeneous humankind *enforced* by a powerful elite that capitalised on the discontent, the fears and the conformism of the masses. As such, totalitarianisms were direct descendants of 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism, from which they had inherited the element of 'expansion for expansion's sake' characteristic of the kind of capitalism that emerged in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as the homogenising forces inherent to it (the connection between capitalism and Nazism was also made by Adorno and the Frankfurt School). In this sense, totalitarianisms, far from giving definitive evidence of the evil *nature* of modern men, may have the positive effect of showing humans what happens when they are not able to counteract forces that deny their multiplicity and present themselves as 'irresistible' and 'inevitable' (free-market fundamentalism, the dismantling of the welfare state, the promotion of an ideal of social Darwinism, etc); that is, when the 'expansive' use of instrumental reason in its multiple forms is not paralleled with the construction and preservation of a *space for freedom* where human plurality can be unfolded and *lived*. Ultimately, this was the central question dealt with by Arendt in her political philosophy.

(2) The recognition of human plurality entails a reassessment of the idea of human history. Too often in modernity – and in this regard totalitarianisms offer again an

extreme example – history has been explained as the story of a ‘single’ subject (‘mankind’), who precisely ‘makes’ history according to a more or less articulated underlying plan which is justified on the basis of its ‘necessity’.<sup>4</sup> Arendt insists that there is no such single subject, let alone that its actions may be predicted and regarded as ‘inevitable’. Instead, human action is inherently *unpredictable*, and developments in history (which are shaped by *men* with very different – and *limited* – points of view and pursuing very diverse goals) are therefore ultimately *contingent*. There is no ‘making’ of history: totalitarianisms give evidence both of the impossibility of this task and of the devastating consequences of such an endeavour; and there is no ‘inevitability’ in historical processes. Ironically enough, totalitarianisms, in their condition as *unprecedented* phenomena, provided a proof of what they wanted to deny: the unpredictability of human deeds, and the ability of human beings to start new processes that would have been unimaginable before. Instead of trying to eradicate this quality (what she calls *natality*, the capacity of man to be himself a ‘beginning’), Arendt proposes not only to recognise it but to treat it as our most precious gift (in the sense that this is what differentiates us most from animals), that is, as something for which we have to create the necessary frame so as to be able to realise this potential in a positive and constructive way and mitigate its negative consequences when those inevitably appear.

(3) The experience of a catastrophe of that kind calls human beings, as it were, for a ‘return to earth’. In Arendt’s view, it was on the basis of the assumption that ‘everything is possible’ (Canovan 1992: 13) that totalitarian regimes were able to commit their most atrocious deeds. Once one begins to believe that nothing can set a limit on human powers, the sense of responsibility that should accompany human action fades and, as in the case of Nazism and Stalinism, eventually disappears altogether. Leaders live in a completely imaginary world without any kind of contact with reality: whatever happens, whether events confirm or contradict their plans and

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<sup>4</sup> This was one of the central critiques Arendt made of Marxism.

their predictions, nothing can change their minds or their course of action anymore. And, what is worse, they ‘shut the masses off from the real world’ (ibid.: 55) through a massive use of propaganda, a task that is made easier by the fact that the masses, amidst confusion and self-division, are more prone to embrace a strong and simple narrative that provides them with an (albeit illusory) sense of reassurance. This leads to the tragic irony that leaders fervently (and violently) defend the implementation of an ideology in which they do not believe anymore, not least because this same ideology makes also *them* dispensable.<sup>5</sup> At this point the boundaries between truth and falsity, between what is acceptable and what is not, become blurred and eventually vanish. This literally makes us *speechless*.<sup>6</sup>

A new beginning is only possible if we are able to re-establish a sense of an interplay with the world in which the multiple consequences of our thoughts, words and actions affect and shape our future thoughts, words and actions. Only this way can a sense of responsibility be restored. On a more abstract level, this amounts to acknowledging the limits implied in our existence – or, in Arendt’s words, the ‘conditions under which life on earth has been given to man’ (Arendt 1998: 7). Once we accept the fact that we are constrained by those ‘conditions’, i.e. once we accept that *not everything* is possible, we will be able to resume our discussions about what is important and what is not, what we can allow ourselves and what we cannot, and ultimately about how we can make life on earth more human.

(4) Last but not least, as might be inferred from the previous points, Arendt’s philosophy implicitly entails a reassessment of the status and the nature of *theory*.

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this kind of cynicism is not unique to Nazi and Stalinist leaders. It is astonishing to see again and again how neoliberal elites appeal to alleged immutable principles such as the idea of the ‘creative destruction’ (introduced in the form they know it by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter, who in turn had borrowed it from... Karl Marx), as if they were exempted from being affected by those principles. As Beck has put it, ‘if [neo-liberals] really carried out their ideas, they would become self-executioners’ (Beck and Willms 2004: 175).

<sup>6</sup> Again, this reading of the nature of totalitarianisms gives us a key to understanding some problems we face today. Why do we constantly fail to implement effective policies to reduce carbon emissions in spite of the fact that more than 99% of the scientific community warns that (anthropogenic) global warming is actually taking place and that action must be taken to avoid irreversible damage? Our inability to force politicians to do the necessary might be an indication that we ourselves do not really believe (at least not sufficiently) that *not everything* is possible, i.e. that even our level of technological progress does not make us powerful enough to escape the consequences of our deeds.

As we have seen in Chapter 1, in the face of an experience of crisis in which we lose any sense of orientation because of the fact that things do not appear anymore in an unambiguous way as they used to, we are tempted to look for grand narratives or new principles (Class Struggle, Will to Power, *Lebensphilosophie*) that help us restore the lost sense of unity. Those theories, however, far from overcoming the limitations of the old metaphysics, often only reinforce them, eventually leading to the kind of nihilism that can so often be sensed in some post-modernist philosophers. Arendt follows exactly the opposite strategy. Instead of looking for unity, she looks for *distinctions*, for ‘neglected corners of experience’ (see Canovan’s ‘Introduction’ in Arendt 1998: vii). Where we previously used a concept that appeared as unambiguous, she re-establishes lost distinctions, shows us different layers of meaning and deconstructs old, widely held assumptions; as we will see in this and the following chapter, *The Human Condition* is full of distinctions of this sort: between labour and work and between work and action, between eternity and immortality, power and strength, the social and the political, property and wealth, private and public affairs, etc.<sup>7</sup> Where we previously engaged in inquiries of a ‘monological’ nature, she shows us that certain issues (especially those regarding our common interests, that is, the most important ones) can only be dealt with in a dialogical way<sup>8</sup> and therefore demand an appropriate *space* or framework rather than prescriptions given from the privileged position of a philosopher. And, finally, where we tried to build *systems* in order to replace old ones, she criticises and re-interprets well-known theories and puts them under the light of the new questions, so that they help us make sense of reality in a more appropriate way in a process that must essentially remain open-ended. For Arendt, recent experiences, as dramatic as they may be, can potentially be a source of new insights.<sup>9</sup> This attitude contrasts in

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<sup>7</sup> In explicit reference to Marx and Nietzsche, she says that ‘it lies in the very nature of the famous “turning upside down” of philosophic systems or currently accepted values ... that the conceptual framework is left more or less intact.’ (ibid.: 17)

<sup>8</sup> ‘Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves’, (ibid.: 4)

<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of *HC* she says: ‘What I propose in the following is a reconsideration of the human condition from the vantage point of our newest experiences and our most recent fears.’ (ibid.: 5)

her view with the search for an ‘Archimedean point’ of many philosophers in the Western tradition, for whom contingent experience (and the ‘realm of human affairs’ in general) is an impediment rather than a ‘vantage point’ in the pursuit of truth.<sup>10</sup> If often in a rather implicit way, in *HC* she offers new readings mainly of Aristotle, Kant and Heidegger,<sup>11</sup> and (explicitly) criticises Plato, Adam Smith, Marx and Nietzsche. The result is not a new system, as it might seem at first sight if we look at the structure of the book, but in some sense a reassessment of and dialogue with old theories – a dialogue that enables their contradictions as well as their *enlightening* potential to be realised.<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2 The Human Condition: human activities

### *2.2.1 The ‘conditions under which life has been given to man’*

In the previous section I tried to situate the questions dealt with in *The Human Condition* in a broader historical and philosophical context. On the one side, as I mentioned before, I think that understanding the nature – and the scale! – of the problems Arendt dealt with (as well as their similarity to some of the issues we are faced with today) was necessary in order to grasp the originality of this work. On the other side, this contextualisation helps us understand the reasons for Arendt’s interest in *politics*.<sup>13</sup> This is not a minor question, since, having traditionally been classified as a work of political philosophy, *HC* has attracted many readers with the wrong expectations. Although Arendt’s interest in politics is genuine and real, the work does not really take a prescriptive approach to political philosophy<sup>14</sup> (e.g.

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<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere she says that ‘[for Plato] the true philosopher does not accept the conditions under which life has been given to man.’ (Arendt 1982: 22)

<sup>11</sup> As Wellmer says, ‘in a way, [Arendt] writes the political philosophy which, in her view, Heidegger, as a post-Kantian thinker, *should* have written (rather than flirting with the Nazis, as he did).’ (Wellmer 2000: 222)

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that Arendt did not produce original ideas. She obviously was much more than a mere eclectic thinker; however, I think that her originality lies most and foremost in the way she establishes a ‘dialogue’ between the worlds of theory/thought and practice/experience. In this regard, it is interesting to remember that she did not consider herself a philosopher – she insisted that her thought was not original enough for this designation – but rather as a ‘publicist’.

<sup>13</sup> See Kateb 2000 for an account of Arendt’s idea of politics and the reception of her political philosophy. (For a more detailed discussion see Kateb 1984).

<sup>14</sup> ‘It is important to realise that Arendt did *not* present *The Human Condition* as a systematic statement of her political philosophy, a kind of Arendtian equivalent of Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*

regarding forms of political organisation<sup>15</sup> or legislation). I would say that Arendt's concerns with politics as articulated in *HC* are better understood not as a starting point but rather as the *result* of dealing with dramatic experiences and fundamental questions that were not eminently political, and for which the ideas of the most prominent modern philosophers only gave partial answers that required further development and a new perspective. If Kant's mind had been filled 'with ever new and increasing admiration and awe' by 'the starry heaven above me and the moral law within me', and Heidegger's with the 'question of Being', Arendt devoted her main work to the question of how men can live on earth and relate to each other in such a way as to be able to reveal themselves as unique beings – as a 'who', and not as a 'what'. It is in relationship to this main question that Arendt's interest in 'politics' and 'action' should be understood. Seen that way, it becomes apparent how misleading Arendt's classification as a primarily political philosopher might be (as justified as it is on many grounds) – and how relevant her insights might become to other fields (such as art) that are not usually considered as belonging to the sphere of the political.

For Arendt, it belongs to the human predicament that the disclosure of each human being as a 'who', while being a latent possibility during our life on earth, is not guaranteed by the mere fact of being born into this world. The only thing that is sure is that we will need to deal with many things – our bodies, nature, things we make ourselves, other people – that 'condition' our existence in different ways. Arendt makes clear from the start that the idea of the human condition stands in opposition to the idea of human nature that had been a main concern in Western philosophy (and that had experienced a new twist in modernity with the advent of modern sciences). The question of human nature is the question of *what* we are, and 'if we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it, and

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(Canovan 1992: 99) As Canovan explains in her 'Introduction' to Arendt 1998 (ix), 'Arendt herself described *The Human Condition* as "a kind of prolegomena" to a more systematic work of political theory which she planned (but never completed)'. The title of this book would have been *Introduction into Politics* (Canovan 1992: 100)

<sup>15</sup> In *On Revolution* (1973), however, she offers some views regarding the organisation of the state and the articulation of politics. See also 'A new republicanism' in Canovan 1992 (201ff).

the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a “who” as though it were a “what” (Arendt 1998: 10).<sup>16</sup> Rather, it would be better to try to understand precisely those conditions that may on the one side hinder or limit and on the other side provide man the possibility to reveal himself as a ‘who’.<sup>17</sup> In the world of modern science this question might appear trivial or even meaningless, but for Arendt this question is more pertinent than ever in a time in which scientific progress has made men believe that it could be possible for them to ‘escape from [their] imprisonment to the earth’ (ibid.: 1; Arendt refers here to the reaction of an American reporter to the launch of the first man-made object into the space in 1957.)

Arendt distinguishes three main conditions that affect in one way or another the activities pursued by men during their lives.

- (1) First and foremost, men need to meet the necessities of their bodies – simply put, they need to regularly eat and have rest in order to stay alive. This is what Arendt calls ‘the human condition of life itself’, whereby ‘life’ is understood here as the kinds of biological processes we share with animals and plants.
- (2) Second, in order to live as humans, men need an “artificial” world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings’ (ibid.: 7). This relatively stable world stands in opposition to the ‘ever-recurring life cycle’ of nature. ‘Within its borders each individual life is housed’ (ibid.), which means that this artificial world allows each human being to live as a *human* being, and not just as a member of a species, that is, as an animal. This need men have for a distinctively human, ‘unnatural’ world is ‘the human condition of wordliness’.
- (3) Third, a truly human life cannot be imagined outside the society of men. This is so not just because men need each other in order to satisfy necessities of

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<sup>16</sup> As we have seen in the previous section, the question of human nature – and the perverse idea that man himself would have the power to change it – was at the very centre of the concerns of totalitarian regimes.

<sup>17</sup> ‘The conditions of human existence’ Arendt says, ‘can never “explain” what we are or answer to the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely.’ (ibid.: 11)

life in an efficient way, but because they need the presence of other fellow human beings to relate to each other and disclose themselves as unique beings. This is ‘the human condition of plurality, the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world’ (ibid.).

These three conditions – life, wordliness and plurality – do not *explain* the human activities arising from them, but they certainly *condition* not only our activities (‘what’ we do as observed from a third-person perspective) but also our *understanding* of things and other people – our ‘being-in-the-world’.<sup>18</sup>

Before we go into more detail it is important to understand the meaning of ‘nature’ in Arendt’s thought, and why she regards man as ‘something highly unnatural’.<sup>19</sup> While Arendt tends to add some existential overtones when she speaks about nature, the idea of a human world in which men can regard themselves as free and that stands in opposition to the determinist realm of nature, in which they are subject to implacable laws, has its origins in Kant. For Kant, men can see themselves as *phenomena* – that is, as governed by the same laws that condition all other natural beings (and that means: all things that appear to our senses); in fact, they do so almost all the time, and as a result they fail to be aware and make use of their freedom. Or they can understand themselves as *noumena* (as ‘things-in-themselves’), which means that they can regard themselves and act as free agents – of course, not in the sense that they can pursue the satisfaction of their desires without any restrictions (that would be the opposite of freedom for Kant, as well as for Arendt), but in the sense that they can act according to the moral law they ‘impose’ on themselves as rational beings. For Kant, at least the Kant of the first two Critiques, this ‘shift’ between our perception of ourselves as *phenomena* and our self-awareness as *noumena* – or, put in other words, between necessity and freedom – is grounded on something *within* man in his quality as a transcendental subject.

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<sup>18</sup> It would be misleading to see them as the ‘cause’ of our activities, but this kind of reductive approach is unfortunately too often taken as a matter of course in the social sciences.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Man’s “nature” is only “human” in so far as it opens up to man the possibility of becoming something highly unnatural, that is, a man.’ (quoted in Canovan 1992: 25)



Since it is actually *man* who gives the law to nature (its laws are actually the laws of our understanding that are the condition of possibility of objects), it is also man – not God – who gives the moral law to himself. As rational beings we all share this law, and we cannot choose not to follow it as long as we assume this status as rational beings and acknowledge the dignity of all men as ‘ends in themselves’ it entails. For Arendt,<sup>20</sup> in contrast, the shift between the perception of ourselves as being merely a part of nature (as members of a species) and our awareness as free beings can only be enacted *between* men, since it is grounded on the fact of human plurality.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.2.2 *Labour, Work, Action*

To the three main conditions correspond what Arendt calls the ‘three fundamental human activities’: Labour, Work and Action.

*Labour* corresponds to the human condition of life, and is ‘the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body’ (ibid.: 7). It is what we do in order to feed our body and look after its well-being in a broad sense. Labour is therefore dictated by the exigencies of the life process; for this reason it was defined by Marx as ‘man’s metabolism with nature’ (ibid.: 98). Contrary to what we may think from the point of view of everyday language, the cycle of labour is not exhausted with labour itself: consumption is also an inherent part of it: ‘labor and consumption are but two stages of the ever-recurring cycle of biological life’ (ibid.: 99). If it has a ‘goal’, it is the preservation of the species (not just self-preservation) and, as such, it is a task that is never completed. Labour is therefore the kind of activity we share most with animals.<sup>22</sup>

*Work* corresponds to the human condition of worldliness. It introduces a new element that is alien to labour. In its inherently cyclical and ‘ever-recurring’ nature,

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<sup>20</sup> In this regard, Arendt relies more on her (quite original) reading of the Critique of Judgement – which she considered as Kant’s most politically relevant work – than on the first two critiques.

<sup>21</sup> For an account of Arendt’s concept of freedom see Kohn 2000.

<sup>22</sup> Canovan establishes the following main characteristics of Arendt’s idea of labour as an activity: labour is (1) natural, (2) cyclic, (3) arduous, (4) necessary, (5) fertile, and (6) private (Canovan 1992: 112-124).

labour leaves no ‘result’ or anything that survives the process itself. Instead, ‘work provides an artificial world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings’ (ibid.: 7). Unlike labour, work is a linear, goal-oriented process, with a beginning and an end. We can assume that the primary goal of men when they build things is to fulfil the task of labour in a more efficient way (the oldest man-made things are hunting tools), and at a later stage maybe to free themselves, at least partially, from the burden of labour. This would mean that work is actually an extension of labour. However, these artificial things provide men with something far beyond the mere ‘function’ for which they were created. At some point, they are not just tools that are controlled by men, but they *condition* men in a way men themselves cannot determine anymore. ‘The things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers’ (ibid.: 9). This is an essential aspect of the relationship of human beings with the world they live in. Against what humans often want to believe, it is always a two-way relationship, we could say a ‘dialogical’ experience, not a ‘monological’ one. Merleau-Ponty described in a vivid way the effect of the presence of man-made objects on humans beyond the purposes for which they were created (which, of course, do not disappear but are also ‘present’ in things and even become visible in a new way when the objects are not used):

Je n’ai pas seulement un monde physique, je ne vis pas seulement au milieu de la terre, de l’air et de l’eau, j’ai autour de moi des routes, des plantations, des villages, des rues, des églises, des ustensiles, une sonnette, une cuiller, une pipe. Chacun de ces objets porte en creux la marque et l’action humaine à laquelle il sert. Chacun émet une atmosphère d’humanité.<sup>23</sup>

(Merleau-Ponty 1945: 404-405)

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Not only have I a physical world, not only do I live in the midst of earth, air and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, churches, implements, a bell, a spoon, a pipe. Each of these objects is moulded to the human action which it serves. Each one spreads round it an atmosphere of humanity.’ (transl. C. Smith)

Most importantly, this artificial world of things as a whole provides a sense of relative stability in relationship to the perpetual change of nature. Within this human world, a totally different kind of life becomes possible: a human life.<sup>24</sup> This world of human artifice both separates and relates human beings in such a way that each of them can regard themselves not just as a ‘member of a species’, but as a distinct being with a unique identity. It is through the relative stability of those man-made objects that man has a ‘mirror’ in which he can see his life as meaningful, beyond the blind determinism of nature.<sup>25</sup>

The human world created by work makes possible the third kind of activity: *Action*, which is ‘the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter’ (ibid.: 7). Action, and speech (both are ultimately inseparable for Arendt), are the most human of all activities pursued by men on earth, since through action they effectively become free from the constraints imposed by nature and reveal themselves as unique beings. Contrary to work, action is not ultimately oriented towards a result *outside* itself, but acquires its true meaning in the ‘disclosure of the agent’ (ibid.: 175): ‘only [man] can communicate himself and not merely something – thirst or hunger, affection or hostility or fear’ (ibid.: 176).

Of course, this does not mean that human beings *always* disclose themselves when they do things and speak to each other. Importantly, this disclosure ultimately does not depend on each human being, it does not depend on each person doing certain things in a right way, but on human beings relating to each other in a certain way. ‘This revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are *with* others and neither for nor against them – that is, in sheer human togetherness’ (ibid.: 180, italics in original). It is important to understand this idea of ‘togetherness’. Many animal species rely on small ‘societies’ that help them meet in a more effective way the necessities of life (which is the task of labour). Wolves, for

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<sup>24</sup> ‘No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings.’ (Arendt 1998: 22)

<sup>25</sup> The realm of man-made things also includes less ‘tangible’ objects such as laws and institutions.

example, are able to hunt prey much larger than themselves thanks to such ‘societies’ (which in some cases might be vital to their survival). This means that the ‘common life’ among members of those species is primarily dictated by their instincts and is therefore based on both a ‘for-one-another’ attitude (*Füreinander*) and an ‘against-one-another’ attitude (*Gegeneinander*, for example when they need to assert their status towards the other members, or when they need to defend their territory against rivals).<sup>26</sup> In this kind of common life a kind of hierarchy (typically based on the rule of the strongest) is always *necessary* for the preservation of the group. In contrast, men sharing a common world (a *Mitwelt*) can *also* encounter other fellow human beings and relate *with* each other (*im Miteinander*) in a way that is not ultimately determined by their instincts.<sup>27</sup> This means that action in Arendt’s sense is possible only when men regard themselves as both *equals* and *distinct* from each other. This ‘twofold character of equality and distinction’ (ibid.: 175) is apparent in language:

If men were not equals, they could neither understand each other... nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough.

(Arendt 1998: 175-176).

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<sup>26</sup> Whether animals are also ‘capable’ or not of relating to each other and disclosing themselves as unique beings is ultimately beyond the point, since this question as we understand it is only possible from the experience of an artificial world distinct from nature; that is, the question as such makes sense only from a human perspective. This does not mean that we could not and should not treat animals in a humane way.

<sup>27</sup> In this idea of togetherness there is therefore no place for both self-sacrifice and selfishness. Quite contentiously, Arendt says that ‘Both [the doer of good works and the criminal] are lonely figures, the one being for, the other against, all men; they, therefore, remain outside the pale of human intercourse and are, politically, marginal figures’ (ibid.: 180). Of course, we should not understand her as implying that both are equally undesirable. Rather, this idea reminds us of the perils of self-proclaimed ‘saviours’ and more generally of the limits of any paternalistic attitude, especially when it does not see any situation in which men help other men as transitory but as a status quo that must be maintained. In this sense, the recent boom of philanthropy among so-called ‘ultra-high net worth individuals’ might be seen in some cases – any generalisation is always unfair – as an attempt to maintain the division between ‘givers’ and ‘takers’, and therefore to reaffirm and perpetuate the existing *inequality*, rather than promote an encounter among people that regard each other as equals.

It is therefore important to understand both – equality and distinction – as belonging together. On the one side, we often tend to confuse equality with ‘uniformity’ or ‘sameness’. Some approaches in the social sciences reflect this view, especially when they use statistical methods to study (and in most cases this means: make predictions about) human behaviour.<sup>28</sup> On the other side, we often tend to identify the idea of disclosing our distinct identity with narcissistic impulses. In this regard, Arendt seems to make things worse when she speaks in relationship to action about ‘the shining brightness we once called glory’ (ibid.: 180), or when she laments the fact that Christianity eradicated the pursue of eternity – that means, *worldly* eternity, as opposed to immortality – that had characterised some periods of ancient Greece. However, nothing could be further from Arendt’s idea than action arising from this narcissistic motivation. The narcissist sees himself as a ‘what’, not as a ‘who’, and does not regard other people as equals (he is therefore not interested in togetherness in Arendt’s sense).

As we can see, Arendt’s broad classification of human activities relies on distinctions that for different reasons have been neglected by the philosophical tradition (we will see how important it is to try to elucidate *why* this has been the case). One crucial distinction is obviously that between ‘labour’ and ‘work’. In English we use the (intransitive) verb ‘to work’ to refer also to labour, so that the distinction between both is blurred in everyday language.<sup>29</sup> This comes at a cost, since the distinction between one activity which is in essence ‘man’s metabolism with nature’ and leaves no durable traces and another activity that instead entails a certain ‘violence’ on nature and creates an human, ‘unnatural’ world is crucial to understand the conditions that make action possible. (In this regard, Arendt also distinguishes between the ‘fertility’ of labour and the ‘productivity’ of work.)

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<sup>28</sup> For Arendt’s critique of the modern social sciences – especially economics – see ibid.: 42-43.

<sup>29</sup> In the German version of *HC* she uses the nouns *Arbeit* and *Herstellen* to refer to ‘labour’ and ‘work’; *arbeiten* as a verb is intransitive, while *herstellen* – which explicitly means ‘fabricating’ – is transitive. In German, it is *Arbeit* that is used for both activities in common language. As Arendt points out, this blurred distinction between ‘labour’ and ‘work’ is a common phenomenon among modern Western languages (ibid.: 80).

A further crucial distinction, that one even more difficult to grasp from the point of view of the established use of language, is between ‘work’ and ‘action’. This distinction is a revival of the Aristotelian opposition between *poiesis* (fabrication) and *praxis* (action). In the former the emphasis is on the result, i.e. on the product of the activity (be it a physical object or not), which is usually expected to meet some pre-established criteria; in the latter the emphasis is rather on the ‘disclosure of the agent’, and, as a disclosure, its results remain essentially unpredictable. *Poesis* as such is possible in isolation and requires *techné* (‘craftsmanship’), while *praxis* is only possible in interaction with other acting beings and is oriented towards *arete* (‘virtue’, sometimes translated as ‘excellence’) and *phronesis* (‘practical wisdom’).<sup>30</sup>

### 2.3 The *animal laborans*, *homo faber*, and action and speech

At this point it goes without saying that the central aim of Arendt is not merely to establish a typology of the ‘*vita activa*’, assigning the right labels to all kinds of human activities from the point of view of an uninvolved spectator. This seems pretty obvious in view of the questions and motivations discussed above out of which *HC* was written; however, I think it is not totally superfluous to stress that her aims are much more far reaching than those of most among the usual approaches in the social sciences. In fact, for Arendt it is not just about describing and classifying activities, but about understanding the underlying categories, the paradigms and the aporias of each kind of activity, as well as the ‘conflicts’, the dialectics and the intertwining between them. This makes the whole picture a bit more complicated, since in most cases it is not possible to put a ‘label’ on a specific activity, given that to some extent it will likely be affected by the paradigms and values of the other kinds of activities.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> This distinction between work/*poiesis* and action/*praxis* had a decisive influence on Habermas’s idea of ‘communicative action’. See Joas and Knöbl 2009.

<sup>31</sup> An example of this might be a worker in an assembly line in a car factory. Taking Arendt’s classification in a strict sense, her activity should be classified under ‘work’, since this person contributes to ‘fabricating’ relatively durable objects. However, for this worker this job might be just a way of making a living, and the results of her work beyond the weekly salary might have no

In order to explain how different it is to look at the world from the perspective of labour, work or action, Arendt refers throughout *HC* to what we could regard as three ‘archetypes’ – *animal laborans*, *homo faber*, and action<sup>32</sup> – that correspond to the three main kinds of activities. Needless to say, they do not indicate three types of people or social classes, even if some people might obviously identify themselves more with one of them than with the others. They are rather different ways of understanding things, of ‘coping’ with the world, and, the same way as all three human conditions discussed above apply to every human being (even if we respond to them in different ways), we could say that all this three *personae* – indeed, these three ‘generators of meaning’ – coexist within all of us, sometimes in harmony, sometimes in conflict. This model based on these three archetypes will allow Arendt to elucidate some of the aporias faced by modern man, and, as I hope, will also allow us to understand some of the impasses in which we often find ourselves when we study musical experience.

### 2.3.1 *The animal laborans*

From what we have said before about the distinctions between labour, work and action we can infer that the *animal laborans*, *homo faber*, and the man engaging in action and speech have quite different and in part opposite values and ideals. For the *animal laborans* the highest values are related to the satisfaction of the body and the

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significance whatsoever in her life (in fact, this is a quite common phenomenon today). In this case, we should speak about labour, not work. In the same way, if this worker is involved in a trade union and participates in meetings and presentations where issues regarding the common life with other fellow workers are discussed, her activity might be said to have some aspects of action in Arendt’s sense.

<sup>32</sup> Unlike in the case of labour and work, Arendt does not use a fixed term to refer to the archetype of action, in part probably because of the aspect of ‘plurality’ inherent to it that makes it difficult to speak about an archetype with established features. Her idea of a ‘man of action’ is clearly inspired in Aristotle’s *zoon politikon*, misleadingly translated into Latin and then into vernacular languages as ‘social animal’ (we will see in a moment Arendt’s distinction between ‘the social’ and ‘the political’). However, the literal translation – ‘political animal’ – would be an oxymoron in the present context, since for Arendt the realm of the political and the realm of the determinism of nature (the animal realm) are mutually exclusive. For the sake of simplicity I will simply use here the terms ‘action’ or ‘action and speech’ to refer to an archetype more or less symmetric to the other two (*animal laborans* and *homo faber*), even if it should be clear that an hypothetical ‘man of action’ would refer to something qualitatively different – in fact, a ‘who’, not a ‘what’.

reproduction of ‘life’ (in Arendt’s restrictive sense).<sup>33</sup> Since labour and consumption are two inseparable aspects of the same process, it tends to regard events as an ever-recurring flow of cyclical processes (e.g. between labour and leisure) where energy is merely transformed without leaving any durable results. Objects are perceived in terms of their possible consumability, i.e. as potential commodities. The *animal laborans* regards itself and other fellow men as members of a species, and this obviously determines its relationships with others: for the *animal laborans*, the society of others must aim primarily at making the burden of labour more bearable and the joy of consuming even more exciting. *Abundance* is probably the highest ideal of the *animal laborans*; on the ‘philosophical’ level, the highest ideal would be ‘just to live’, that is, the possibility to live without worries and in an unreflective – and that means: ‘unphilosophical’ – way.

### 2.3.2 *Homo faber*

*Homo faber* articulates his activities in a totally different way. For him, every activity has a start and an end; a cause and a goal. It is he who introduces the category of means and ends or, as we would say, the instrumental use of reason.<sup>34</sup> If the success or failure of the *animal laborans* is mainly determined by the *quantity* of satisfaction of its needs, the success or failure of *homo faber* is measured based on a previous ‘idea’ (or *eidos*) of what the produced thing ought to be (e.g. what a tool needs to look like in order to efficiently fulfil the task it has been made for). We could say that *homo faber* introduces a *qualitative* aspect: it is not just about ‘more’ or ‘less’, but about ‘better’ or ‘worse’, measured against an ideal *outside* itself. By

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<sup>33</sup> It is important to distinguish this idea of ‘life itself’ from the idea of life as studied by biology. Phenomenologically, they are totally different: one is essentially self-affirming and unreflective and can be understood only from a first-person perspective; the other one implies a descriptive, third-person perspective and to a certain extent also a mechanistic view of life that is totally alien to the experience of life of the *animal laborans*.

<sup>34</sup> One could argue that the *animal laborans* also pursues its activities according to the means and ends category. This is obviously true in some way; however, this explanation is possible *only* from the point of view of *homo faber*. The *animal laborans* acts out of instincts and cannot, strictly speaking, weigh in advance the consequences of taking different options; it does not decide, nor does it provide justifications, it just reacts. This is easy to see in the irrational logic of consumerism: it is better to consume *today*, even if I have to incur debts and this means that I will be able to consume less tomorrow.



extension, *homo faber* sees the world – not just the things he fabricates – in teleological terms: every thing has been caused by something external to itself and has a purpose beyond itself. In other words, he sees everything as being *created*, or as raw material he can use himself to fabricate something. And he likes to see himself as a *creator*: even cognition – a more contemplative, ‘passive’ attitude than ‘active’ fabrication – means for him to understand the causes and purposes of things, that is, to set himself in the position of the creator. The ideals of *homo faber* are obviously more sophisticated than those of the *animal laborans* and include utility, stability, durability and predictability.

### 2.3.3 Action and speech vs the animal laborans

The paradigm of action as conceived by Arendt are better understood in opposition to those of the *animal laborans* and *homo faber*, not least because in modern society the categories of action and politics in Arendt’s sense have been absorbed to a great extent by the paradigms of the *animal laborans* and *homo faber*.<sup>35</sup>

On the one hand, insofar as we regard ourselves as capable of action and speech, this means that we are free from the impulses of the *animal laborans* in us to endlessly satisfy the ‘needs’ dictated by our instincts and to see abundance as the highest ideal. As we said before, for the man of action common life with other people is not determined by necessity (as it is for the *animal laborans*), but by the need to interact with other people on the basis of *togetherness*, which is the kind of relationship among human beings who mutually regard themselves both as equals and distinct from each other, i.e. not just as members of a species. In Arendt’s view, the kinds of association with other fellow human beings strived for at the level of the

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<sup>35</sup> As we will see later, the paradigms of the *animal laborans* and *homo faber* have ended up ‘merging’ in some sense, so that in many regards we can see both as two sides of the same coin. For example, as early as 1967 Habermas established a more simple distinction between ‘labour’, as the kind of instrumental-rational activity aiming at satisfying needs and wants (and which would include elements of ‘work’ in Arendt’s sense), and ‘interaction’, as the kind of non-teleological action which would roughly correspond to ‘action’ in Arendt’s account. However, I think that in the present context it makes sense to differentiate the ideals of action/speech from those of labour and work in a separate way.

*animal laborans* and the man of action correspond, respectively, to paradigms of the household and the public realm. The household – *oikos*, the *oikonomos* being a kind of household-manager – is hierarchically organised according to roles that are more or less determined by nature, and this hierarchy is supported by the fact that it is necessary to fulfil the task of the household, which is to satisfy the material needs of its members. Monarchy (and this also means: tyranny), ‘the rule of the one’, with the pater familias on top of the hierarchical order, is the typical form of government of the household. The public realm, in contrast, relies precisely on the fact that men have already satisfied their needs in the realm of the household and are therefore free to share a common world and relate to each other as citizens, i.e. as equals. Participative (rather than representative) democracy would be, at least in principle, the ideal basis for the co-existence in the public realm.

In this regard, Arendt establishes another important distinction: that of the idea of *polis* and the idea of *societas*. While *polis* corresponds to the idea of the public realm just mentioned, *societas* is actually built according to the paradigm of the household, as a kind of gigantic family whose primary aim is to satisfy the material needs of its members. As it seems obvious, modern society<sup>36</sup> is much closer to the idea of *societas* than to that of *polis*, not least because politics is strongly if not mainly determined by economic matters (which were originally a concern of the private realm, and which take the ideals of the *animal laborans* for granted).<sup>37</sup> The consequences of this are manifold. First, the blurring of the boundaries between the private and the public realm makes it more difficult to differentiate between the aims and priorities of the *animal laborans* and the kinds of categories related to action; and therefore to acknowledge the necessity of a separate realm in which relationships between men are not determined by necessity. Second, economic forces dominate relationships between men and therefore determine the expectations

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<sup>36</sup> For Arendt’s use of the term society see Canovan (1992: 115ff).

<sup>37</sup> The economist John Maynard Keynes used the term ‘animal spirits’ to designate a positive force driving economic growth, something that politicians should promote in times of recession, when each individual tends to consume less – which reduces aggregate demand and therefore total income in the economy – out of fear of the future.

they are allowed to have; the ideal of abundance about anything else, self-interest and competition are then absolutised, leaving little space for the sense of togetherness necessary for true action.

Third, this ‘victory of the *animal laborans*’ (this is the title of the last section of *HC*) makes true equality (and therefore action) really difficult to achieve. The same way as the structure of the family/household, ‘society expects from its members a certain kind of behavior, imposing innumerable and various rules, all of which tend to “normalize” its members, ... to exclude spontaneous action or outstanding achievement’<sup>38</sup> (ibid.: 40). And even worse: the ‘one man rule’ typical of the household ‘is transformed in society ... into a kind of no-man rule’, which reaches its higher expression in bureaucracy as the typically modern form of organisation of the public affairs.<sup>39</sup> The result of this projection into the public realm of the expectations (and the fears!) of the private sphere – basically, those related to the satisfaction of the primary material and emotional needs – as well as of its power relations is the phenomenon of conformism and the sense of powerlessness characteristic of modern societies.

#### 2.3.4 Action and speech vs *homo faber*

On the other hand, the point of view of action and speech entails the overcoming the utilitarian view of *homo faber*. As we said before, *homo faber* regards activities in teleological terms, i.e. in terms of their more or less measurable results and the purposes they fulfil. In some sense, while one can enjoy the process of fabrication as such, what ultimately matters lies *outside* this process. In contrast, action and speech are not ultimately oriented towards any ‘results’ outside themselves. To be sure, deeds and speech are not just self-representation, and they may be articulated around

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<sup>38</sup> Arendt says that in modern society ‘behavior has replaced action as the foremost mode of human relationship’ (ibid.: 41; and that ‘it is the same conformism, the assumption that men behave and do not act with respect to each other, that lies at the root of the modern science of economics’ (ibid.: 41-42).

<sup>39</sup> This could be seen as an interesting re-reading of Heidegger’s idea of ‘das Man’ – translated in different ways as ‘the Anyone’ or ‘the They’ – as a kind of anonym principle that dictates the views and the behaviour of people without being critically assessed. See Heidegger 2006: 126ff.

common concerns requiring a ‘solution’ (and therefore a kind of goal-oriented action). Things, even important things, can be accomplished; however, the meaning of action is, as we would say, ‘immanent’, and ultimately depends on the actors discovering themselves as unique beings. From the point of view of *homo faber*, action of this kind appears irremediably futile and pointless, and maybe also morally questionable if taken as an ideal.<sup>40</sup> Of course, *homo faber* completely misunderstands action, which at most he mistakes for a kind of leisure. (It must be said that the idea of leisure is actually connected with the categories of the *animal laborans* and has therefore essentially nothing to do with action).

As such, work can be carried out in solitude, without the society of other men, while action and speech can only take place in interaction with other people on the basis of equality and reciprocity (which means that the ideal of the ‘disclosure of the agent’ applies as much for myself as for my counterpart, both ‘disclosures’ being for me but two aspects of the same thing).

For *homo faber*, the most characteristic way of interacting with other people occurs in the marketplace. It is there that the objects he produces are displayed, compared with each other and exchanged.<sup>41</sup> If we said before that the meaning of work resides outside itself, the value of the objects it produces eventually depends on their exchangeability, that is, it also lies outside themselves. In fact, the very idea of ‘value’ relies on the assumption that things can be exchanged. ‘For it is only in the exchange market, where everything can be exchanged for something else, that all things ... become values’ (ibid.: 163-164).

Central to Arendt’s idea of action is what she calls ‘the human condition of *natality*’ (ibid.: 9). She connects the idea of action with the idea of birth/natality in different ways. Essentially, to act is to *begin* something. ‘To act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin ... , to set something into motion’ (ibid.: 177). This ‘something’ obviously does not merely mean anything that is new and

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<sup>40</sup> Arendt sees Adam Smith as ‘the classic author’ on matters related to ‘[denouncing] the idle uselessness of action and speech in particular and of politics in general’ (Arendt 1998: 220)

<sup>41</sup> According to Adam Smith, it is the ‘propensity to truck, barter and exchange’ that distinguishes man from animal (ibid.: 160).

therefore ‘numerically different’ from anything that has been done before; it implies something unique that reveals also the fact that each human being is *unrepeatable*. We possess this quality for the fact of being born: ‘the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting’ (ibid.: 9). Moreover, action and speech in Arendt’s sense (i.e. beyond any utilitarian purposes) imply a *second birth*. ‘With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance’ (ibid.: 176-177).

At first sight, we might also associate *homo faber* with some those qualities (taking initiative, the ability to start new things); however, in contrast to the means-and-ends paradigm of *homo faber*, action is essentially *irreversible*, and the consequences of deeds in the ‘web of human affairs’ are *unpredictable*, which is a reflection of the plurality<sup>42</sup> of men: ‘the fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him’ (ibid.: 178).<sup>43</sup> On the one side, this means that through action men are capable of performing *miracles*, of course, not in the sense that they are endowed with super natural powers (or that they might gain them through technology), but in the sense that, ‘seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, [action] looks like a miracle’ (ibid.: 246).<sup>44</sup>

Action therefore represents the possibility of going beyond the ‘there is no alternative’ thinking I mentioned in Chapter 1. It is precisely because of this unpredictability – of whose possible negative consequences history has delivered enough examples – that philosophers, on the one side, and men in power, on the

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<sup>42</sup> As Canovan notes, this plurality is ‘dynamic’; ‘it is of the essence of the human condition that the persons who inhabit the world are continually changing’ (Canovan 1992: 130).

<sup>43</sup> It is in order to limit the consequences of the uncertainty and irreversibility inherent to action that men needed to learn to forgive each other – i.e. to release each other from the consequences of previous actions – and to make and hold promises; without both – the ‘power to forgive’ and the ‘power to promise’ – action would not be possible.

<sup>44</sup> She associates this insight with Jesus of Nazareth, whose actual teachings would have been of a totally different nature than the Christian tradition they allegedly inspired: ‘The only activity Jesus of Nazareth recommends in his preachings is action, and the only human capacity he stresses is the capacity “to perform miracles”.’ (Arendt 1998: 318)

other side, have traditionally been more than suspicious about action.<sup>45</sup> According to Arendt, this suspicion is deeply rooted in the Western philosophical tradition, its origins dating back to Plato. It was probably the shocking experience of the death of Socrates that gave rise to the idea that it was better to ‘escape from the frailty of human affairs into the solidity of quiet and order’ (ibid.: 222). The solution was the idea of the philosopher-king, ‘whose “wisdom” solves the perplexities of action as though they were solvable problems of cognition’ (ibid.: 221). The problem of tyrannies is not just that they might be cruel, but that they will inexorably try to push citizens into their private businesses and away from the participation in public affairs.<sup>46</sup> The result of this dividing line between those who rule and those who execute their orders was a divorce between thought and action (‘knowing what to do and doing it became two altogether different performances’<sup>47</sup> ibid.: 223). This in turn led to a change in the paradigm of action, which now became a form of ‘making’, therefore within the realm of *homo faber*, not action as such.<sup>48</sup> This conception of action as a form of making found its expression in modernity in the idea that it is possible for men to ‘make’ or ‘produce’ their own history,<sup>49</sup> an idea that had devastating effects when it was appropriated by totalitarianisms.

In summary, action and speech as ‘the most human activities’ are also the most difficult to understand and to come to terms with. As the expression of freedom, they are not easily ‘grasped’ by conventional concepts, since they precisely

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<sup>45</sup> The first lines of the *Communist Manifesto* capture the nature of the fear of the elites that what was previously *unimaginable* may eventually happen: ‘A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of Communism. All the powers of Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter; Pope and Czar, Metternich and Guizot, French radicals and German police spies’ (Marx and Engels 1908: 7)

<sup>46</sup> A modern version of this is the so-called ‘technocratic governments’, an effective instrument of the elites to carry through their interests while keeping away citizens from the discussions that matter to them because they have a direct impact on their lives. See Habermas, *Im Sog der Technokratie* (2013)

<sup>47</sup> Arendt speaks of the ‘Platonic identification of knowledge with command and rulership and of action with obedience and execution’ (ibid.: 225), and says that ‘The Platonic separation of knowing and doing has remained at the root of all theories of domination which are not mere justifications of an irreducible and irresponsible will to power’ ibid.

<sup>48</sup> ‘In the *Republic*, the philosopher-king applies the ideas as the craftsman applies his rules and standards’ (ibid.: 227).

<sup>49</sup> Arendt denounces the fact that Marx legitimates and even glorifies violence – ‘violence is the midwife of History’ – in the same way as *homo faber* sees as justifiable the violence he exerts on nature in order to produce his objects (ibid.: 228-229). ‘Marxism could be developed into a totalitarian ideology because of its perversion, or misunderstanding of political action as the making of history’ (1992: 71).

represent the possibility to re-define and therefore overcome the limitations of conventional concepts. They do not respond to more or less quantifiable and predictable needs. From the point of view of the *animal laborans* and *homo faber*, they often appear as futile, useless, even meaningless, and ultimately also dangerous, since they potentially represent a threat to the kind of order and stability they strive for.

## 2.4 *Homo faber* and the fate of modernity

### *2.4.1. The transformation of homo faber in modernity*

Understanding the role of *homo faber*, his relationships to the other two archetypes, his aporias and his contradictions provides a valuable clue to some central problems in modernity, and, with that, to questions related to the significance and the ambiguous nature of art in modernity. In this section I will try to reconstruct Arendt's story about the 'victory' and eventual 'defeat' of *homo faber* in the Modern Age, before we proceed to questions specifically related to art in the next section.

As we said before, *homo faber* represents the ability of man to exert a certain domination over nature, in the sense that man is capable to transform the material he finds in nature and with that to withstand its ever-changing cycle. The most tangible effects of his activities are defined in terms of utility; however, his most important achievement consists in creating a relatively stable world that makes possible a human life, i.e. a life that is at least partially free from the constraints imposed by nature. In other words, it is *homo faber* who originally makes culture possible. And it is precisely here that his contradictions arise. I would see the most important contribution of *homo faber* as a 'surplus', i.e. as something that was not originally 'planned' and that cannot be understood in terms of utility. Once he has produced his objects, those artificial objects are not just 'used', they also '[testify] to the presence of other human beings' (ibid.: 22), and that means: those man-made things have a 'life' of their own, something that points towards an dimension of man that is unknown to *homo faber qua homo faber* and that he cannot understand through his

categories and values (means-and-ends, usefulness, predictability). As Arendt puts it,

utilitarianism, the philosophy of *homo faber* par excellence, can be diagnosed theoretically as an innate incapacity to understand the distinction between utility and meaningfulness, which we express linguistically by distinguishing between “in order to” and “for the sake of”.

(Arendt 1998: 154)

The problem is that, since everything is done ‘in order to’ achieve something else, every end is susceptible of becoming a means for a different end. In face of this endless chain of means and ends, *homo faber* is presented with a dilemma: either he suspends / overcomes – the German word ‘aufheben’ would be the most appropriate here – the category of means and ends, i.e. utilitarianism *as such*, or he must find an ‘end in itself’, that is, an end that cannot be taken as a means for a different end, as paradoxical as this idea might be. As we know, the elevation of Man to the status of an ‘end in himself’ was one of the central ideals of the Enlightenment. The consequence of this is not really a resolution of the dilemma, but a turn to subjectivity.

The only way out of the dilemma of meaninglessness in all strictly utilitarian philosophy is to turn away from the objective world of use things and fall back upon the subjectivity of use itself.

(Arendt 1998: 155)

To put it in very simple terms: at some point, *homo faber* must choose between the *animal laborans* – insofar as it represents the satisfaction of subjective needs that are taken, as it were, as an ‘end in itself’ – and the kind of activities that are the prerogative of man: action and speech, that as such precisely require the overcoming the limitations imposed by those needs. The problem is that acting and speaking men *need homo faber*, they need the human world only he is able to ‘make’, since action and speech would never be possible in the deterministic realm nature. *Homo faber*,



however, cannot understand *why* as long as he remains trapped in the categories of utilitarianism – as long as he is not able to differentiate between ‘in order to’ and ‘for the sake of’. In this situation, the easiest solution for him is to ‘fall back’ upon his own subjectivity and make man – and this ultimately means: his needs – ‘the measure of all things’.

This turn to subjectivity – the idea that the task of *homo faber* consists in satisfying the needs of man, rather than providing him with a ‘home’ – also had implications with regard to the paradigm of *homo faber* itself, which was now ‘absorbed’ in some way into the paradigm of the *animal laborans*. This entailed a shift of focus

- from the idea that men need to overcome the constraints imposed by nature to live a truly human life to the glorification of labour and the turn towards a simple and unreflective ‘principle of happiness’ consisting merely in a ‘pain and pleasure calculus’ (ibid.: 309);
- from the ideal of the relative stability of the finished product to the *process* itself, that is, from the ‘what’ to the ‘how’ (ibid.: 307);
- from the idea of use value to the levelling effects of unlimited exchangeability and eventually to the ‘devaluation of all values’ (ibid.);
- from the idea of ‘solid’ property that enables each human being to have ‘a privately owned share in the world’ (ibid.: 267) to the idea of ‘liquid’ wealth;
- from the commitment to an external, objective and permanent world everyone shares with other fellow human beings – the very world that makes possible action and speech – to the loneliness and the instability of the subjective realm.

The paradox is that *homo faber* now uses his abilities to produce more things and faster than ever, but those things are not meant to ‘stay’ in the world, but to disappear quite immediately. If the task of *homo faber* was originally to build a human world and thus to provide a sense of stability vis-à-vis the ever-recurring

cycle of nature, now he puts his powers at the service of the *animal laborans*, i.e. he uses them precisely in the opposite direction.<sup>50</sup> The result is on the one side a typically modern experience of world alienation ('worldlessness'), of not feeling at home anywhere in this world; and, on the other side, an *animal laborans* endowed with powers it cannot master or even understand. If these powers sometimes seem to confirm its 'philosophy of life' – the idea that the satisfaction of wants and needs is 'the highest good' – the reality is that they only hide its lack of freedom. Such an *animal laborans* – who was originally confined to the private realm and now has conquered the public realm – leads to what Arendt calls an 'unnatural growth of the natural' (ibid.: 47). The great paradox of modernity is that an anthropocentric world might become the least human of all possible worlds.

#### 2.4.2 *Homo faber and the quest for truth in modernity*

In the previous pages I have tried to reconstruct the story told by Arendt about the rise of *homo faber*, the elevation of man to the status of an 'end in himself' and the 'victory of *animal laborans*', the 'unnatural growth of the natural' and the world alienation as the paradoxical result of the anthropocentric world ideated by *homo faber*. In this sub-section I will look at the same process from a different angle, which I hope will help us better understand the origins and the nature of the aporias of *homo faber*.

So far we have discussed *homo faber* mainly in terms of what he *does*, more concretely in terms of what he fabricates and the kind of teleological thinking he uses during the process. More broadly, *homo faber* also constitutes a way of looking at the world that reaches far beyond the process of fabrication; and this means also: a way of searching for truth. Whether we are aware or not, when we look at things in the modus of the modern *homo faber*, we are discriminating between true and false, we are looking for a particular kind of certainty. In fact, our everyday, non-reflective

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<sup>50</sup> As Arendt points out, the classical economists – 'whom Marx in his economic theories followed closely despite all of his criticisms' (Arendt 2002b: 311) – and Marx shared the view that that 'labor is the source of all wealth' (ibid.).

idea of truth, which relies on the idea that there must be a correspondence between things and mind, is very much the paradigm of truth of modern *homo faber* (and therefore of modern science). As Heidegger<sup>51</sup> shows in *On the Essence of Truth*, this idea of truth<sup>52</sup> – what he calls ‘the usual concept of truth’, the idea of truth as correspondence between what we think or say and things – relies on the pre-modern assumption that things have being *created* and that, as such, they *must* be in conformity with the mind of God.

Die veritas als adaequatio rei ad intellectum meint nicht schon den späteren, erst auf dem Grunde der Subjektivität des Menschenwesens möglichen transzendentalen Gedanken Kants, daß “sich die Gegenstände nach unserer Erkenntnis richten”, sondern den christlich theologischen Glauben, daß die Sachen in dem, was sie sind und ob sie sind, nur sind, sofern sie als je erschaffene (*ens creatum*) der im *intellectus divinus*, d.h. in dem Geiste Gottes, vorgedachten Idea entsprechen und somit idee-gerecht (richtig) und in diesem Sinne “wahr” sind.<sup>53</sup>

(Heidegger 1997: 8).

To put it in simple terms, in the transition to modernity man in some sense takes God’s place as the creator of things, and the idea of the transcendental subject – Kant’s ‘Copernican turn’ – would only be the culmination of this process. But what motivated this process?

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<sup>51</sup> For a comprehensive account of Heidegger’s philosophy see Inwood 1997. For a detailed description of the key concepts in Heidegger see Inwood 1999. Steiner 1989 offers an interesting and original interpretation of Heidegger’s thought. See also Rorty 1991.

<sup>52</sup> For a concise account of Heidegger’s concept of truth see Wrathall 2006. For a more detailed account on the same subject see Dahlstrom 2001.

<sup>53</sup> *Veritas as adaequatio rei ad intellectum* does not imply the later transcendental conception of Kant – possible only on the basis of the subjectivity of man’s essence – that “objects conform to our knowledge”. Rather, it implies the Christian theological belief that, with respect to what it is and whether it is, a matter, as created (*ens creatum*), is only insofar as it corresponds to the idea preconceived in the *intellectus divinus*, i.e., in the mind of God, and thus measures up to the idea (is correct) and in this sense is “true”. (Heidegger 2011: 67)

Arendt mentions one significant event<sup>54</sup> that triggered the transformation of the pre-modern into the modern world: the invention of the telescope.<sup>55</sup> To be sure, there had been significant discoveries before, and none of them had constituted an event of this nature.

What Galileo did and what nobody had done before was to use the telescope in such a way that the secrets of the universe were delivered to human cognition “with the certainty of sense-perception”; that is, he put within the grasp of an earth-bound creature and its body-bound senses what had seemed forever beyond his reach, at best open to the uncertainties of speculation and imagination.

(Arendt 1998: 259-260)

This was the first significant step towards the ‘world alienation’ mentioned before. On the one side, men began to believe that it was possible to find the Archimedean point out of which it would be possible to move the earth. To a great extent this has implicitly been the big ideal of modern science, which is apparent in its most outstanding successes, from the discovery of atomic power to the first flight to the moon, from the creation of synthetic materials that cannot be found in nature to the production of genetically modified food. ‘Whatever we do today in physics ... we always handle nature from a point in the universe outside the earth’ (ibid.: 262).

On the other side, on the philosophical front this discovery was met with despair: if such a small instrument had demonstrated that what we were able so far to perceive with our senses was totally wrong – not the sun, but the earth moves – how would it be possible to trust ‘reality’ at all?

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<sup>54</sup> As she says, ‘not ideas but events change the world’ (ibid.:273), since ‘ideas, ... as distinguished from events, are never unprecedented’ (Arendt 1998: 259).

<sup>55</sup> In this regard she also mentions two other important events: the discovery of America and the Reformation (ibid.:248). They are certainly significant events: the discovery of America initiated a process of exploration of the earth that gradually made distances shorter and the earth ‘smaller’ in the eyes of men, who at some point started to lose the sense of their condition as earth-bound creatures; and the Reformation initiated a process of expropriation of the possessions of the Church that instigated the idea of ‘social wealth’ and with that the shift from the idea of property to the idea of wealth mentioned before.

Je supposerai donc, non pas que Dieu, qui est très bon, et qui est la souveraine source de vérité, mais qu'un certain mauvais génie, non moins rusé et trompeur que puissant, a employé toute son industrie à me tromper; je penserai que le ciel, l'air, la terre, les couleurs, les figures, les sons, et toutes les autres choses extérieures, ne sont rien que des illusions et rêveries dont il s'est servi pour tendre des pièges à ma crédulité<sup>56</sup>.

(Descartes, *Méditations Métaphysiques*, First Meditation)

As Arendt puts it, 'Being and Appearance had parted company' (Arendt 1998: 275). The Cartesian doubt thus changed the focus of philosophy: from now on, the priority was to find the locus and the source of *absolute certainty*. And Descartes famously found it in the *cogito ergo sum*, that is, *within* man. The very possibility of a 'Dieu trompeur' had left no choice other than – de facto – taking God's place as the 'souveraine source de vérité'.

The next step in the search for absolute certainty was the 'mathematisation of science' – or even the *reduction scientiae ad mathematicam* – and consequently what Husserl called the 'mathematisation of nature' (Husserl 1996: §9). In the process nature and world – everything we can perceive through our senses – were reduced to the condition of *res extensa*. What could not be explained in mathematical terms did not have any significance, or just did not exist at all.

Interestingly, Arendt sees in this regard the utilitarian element of modern technology – the fact that it aims at satisfying human needs – rather as an aspect of secondary importance. If observation and contemplation had traditionally been the appropriate means to attain certainty, now in face of the universal Cartesian doubt they have become obsolete: 'In order to be certain one had to *make sure*, and in order to know one had to do' (Arendt 1998: 290). The main driver for the practical

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<sup>56</sup> I will suppose, then, not that Deity, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the earth, the colours, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity (Descartes 1908: 27).

focus of modern technology would then not be sheer utilitarianism ('the greatest happiness of the greatest number', in the formulation of Jeremy Bentham, *ibid.*: 308), but the need for *confirmation* of the modern man's self-made 'truth'. Arendt's argument is that hedonism as a philosophy of life – which she argues is much more about avoiding pain than increasing pleasure – would have never been enough to motivate the huge technological progress of the modern era. Instead, it was rather the need to overcome the Cartesian doubt – in other words, a deep mistrust of himself – that drove the modern man towards almost 'compulsive' practical experimentation.

The conviction that objective truth is not given to man but that he can know only what he makes himself is not the result of scepticism but of a demonstrable discovery, and therefore does not lead to resignation but either to redoubled activity or to despair.

(Arendt 1998: 293)

This, of course, had consequences for the paradigm of 'action', that had already been the object of suspicion for both philosophers and men in power because of the inherent unpredictability of human deeds. On these premises, 'action' can be only understood in terms of its *success*, that is, its success in finding this kind of 'confirmation' to modern science's world view (hence the blurring boundary between success and truth in the modern societies, and consequently the assumption that we do not need such thing as 'truth'). Under this point of view action in Arendt's sense is completely pointless.

Ultimately, the ideal of absolute certainty – and in this sense also the paradigm of truth as correspondence if taken as the absolute ideal of truth – *must* rely on man 'creating' his own world, since otherwise there will inevitably be distortions to this certainty / correspondence. And modern man does not just create objects, it also 'creates' nature (atom power, genetically modified food, cloned

animals) and even quasi-natural systems (bureaucracy, finance,<sup>57</sup> economics in general).

Ironically enough, the mistrust of reality of modern man – ‘he can know only what he makes himself’ – and his search for certainty against the universal doubt push him towards the inner world of the *cogito*, where he ultimately finds only the even more unstable and unreliable world of his emotions and instincts – which he then needs to both satisfy and repress in some way in order to maintain alive the illusion of his self-made world.<sup>58</sup>

In *The Question Concerning Technology* Heidegger offers further important insights about what makes modern technology (i.e. modern *homo faber*) different. At the start he makes an important remark: ‘So ist denn auch das Wesen der Technik ganz und gar nichts Technisches’<sup>59</sup> (Heidegger 1954: 13); later he adds: ‘Solange wir die Technik als Instrument vorstellen, bleiben wir im Willen hängen, sie zu meistern.’ (1954: 40)<sup>60</sup> This is very important, since we often fail to be aware to what extent we use technology’s own categories when we try to assess how it affects our lives. We therefore need a broader context to be able to see what is really at stake in modern technology. According to Heidegger,<sup>61</sup> in its origin technology is not just about means and ends; rather, it is a mode of ‘revealing’ (*Entbergen*).

Das Entscheidende der *techne* liegt somit keineswegs im Machen und Hantieren, nicht im Verwenden von Mittlen, sondern ... [im] Entbergen.<sup>62</sup>

(Heidegger 1954: 21)

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<sup>57</sup> I think that the fact that some terms widely used in finance and economics – ‘overheated’ economy, financial ‘meltdown’, ‘chain reactions’ – are the same as those used in science is indicative of how interchangeably the modern man regards both realms, i.e. the ‘nature’ he has created and the ‘true’ nature. What is disturbing is that those systems are to a great extent unintelligible from the perspective of everyday life – as they are to most ‘experts’ – to the point that we see our lives determined in many ways by mechanisms that we have created and that we do not understand (and therefore cannot control anymore). Habermas referred to this phenomenon as the ‘colonisation of the life-world’ by the systems (Habermas 1995: II, 522).

<sup>58</sup> This explosive mix of world alienation, hubris, the power of technology and the repression of the inner nature is what eventually gave rise to the totalitarianisms

<sup>59</sup> ‘The essence of technology is by no means anything technological.’ (Heidegger 2011: 217)

<sup>60</sup> ‘So long as we represent technology as an instrument, we remain transfixed in the will to master it.’ (Heidegger 2011: 235-236)

<sup>61</sup> See Dreyfus 2006 for an account of the origin of Heidegger’s ideas about technology.

<sup>62</sup> ‘What is decisive in *techne* does not at all lie in making and manipulating, nor in the using of means, but rather in ... revealing.’ (Heidegger 2011: 223)

He reaches this conclusion by linking the idea of technology / *techne* to the idea of *poiesis*, which he says is a kind of ‘bringing-forth’ (*Her-vor-bringen*) in the sense of ‘bringing into appearance’ (*zum-Scheinen-Bringen*). ‘Das Her-vor-bringen bringt aus der Verborgenheit her in die Unverborgenheit vor.’ (ibid.:19)<sup>63</sup> We can interpret this in the following way: transforming the world – this is what we do when we fabricate things – does not *primarily* mean exerting domination on the world, but understanding, we could even say: *interpreting* it in some way, and bringing something new into appearance. Of course, this does not mean that what has been ‘revealed’ or ‘brought into appearance’ necessarily corresponds to the ‘intention’ of the fabricator, or that she is even aware *that* she is ‘revealing’ something. Crucially, we can have some control over the process of fabrication, but we have no control over the ‘revealing’ itself:

Allein die Unverborgenheit selbst ... ist niemals ein menschliches Gemächte, so wenig wie der Bereich, den der Mensch jederzeit schon durchgeht, wenn er als Subjekt sich auf ein Objekt bezieht.<sup>64</sup>

(Heidegger 1954: 26)

In other words, the unconcealment that takes place here does not depend solely on and can therefore not be explained in terms of the ‘activity’ of the fabricator, but must rather rely on the fact that the fabricated object is a part of a world where humans *live* in the truest sense of the word:

Wo immer der Mensch sein Auge und Ohr öffnet, sein Herz aufschließt, sich in das Sinnen und Trachten, Bilden und Werken, Bitten und Danken freigibt, findet er sich überall ins Unverborgene gebracht.<sup>65</sup>

(Heidegger 1954: 26)

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<sup>63</sup> ‘Bringing-forth brings out of concealment into unconcealment.’ (Heidegger 2011: 222)

<sup>64</sup> ‘But the unconcealment itself ... is never a human handiwork, any more than is the realm man traverses every time he as a subject relates to an object.’ (Heidegger 2011: 226)

<sup>65</sup> ‘Wherever man opens his eyes and ears, unlocks his heart, and gives himself over to meditating and striving, shaping and working, entreating and thanking, he finds himself everywhere already brought into the unconcealed.’ (Heidegger 2011: 226)



This means that what comes as a result of a process of fabrication cannot really be understood in teleological terms. Rather, as I suggested before, this helps to explain why the most decisive contribution of *homo faber* comes in the form of a ‘surplus’, in the sense that he creates a world whose significance for human life goes far beyond the ‘purposes’ for which those objects were created (even if those purposes are obviously real or even essential to fabrication as such).

From the perspective of modern technology it is quite difficult to understand the meaning of the kind of ‘unconcealment’ that takes place in fabrication. But this is not because modern technology does not have anything to do with unconcealment. Revealing as *Entbergen* also takes place in modern technology. What is different according to Heidegger is that it *challenges* (*herausfordert*) nature in a certain way:

Das in der modernen Technik waltende Entbergen ist ein Herausfordern, das an die Natur das Ansinnen stellt, Energie zu liefern, die als solche herausgefördert und gespeichert werden kann.<sup>66</sup>

(Heidegger 1954: 22)

It is not just that modern technology uses or extracts energy from nature – any kind of technology does in some way. The point is that now this energy can be stored, transformed and distributed in unlimited ways. This challenging takes place in the form of an ‘enframing’ (*Ge-stell*), through which man, in an ‘ordering attitude’ (*bestellendes Verhalten*) regards – ‘reveals’ – nature as a huge ‘standing-reserve’ (*Bestand*) of energy he can use at his discretion. This is the approach of modern science.

Dementsprechend zeigt sich das bestellende Verhalten des Menschen zuerst im Aufkommen der neuzeitlichen exakten Naturwissenschaft. Ihre Art des

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<sup>66</sup> ‘The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging, which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such.’ (Heidegger 2011: 223)

Vorstellens stellt der Natur als einem berechenbaren Kräftezusammenhang nach.<sup>67</sup>

(Heidegger 1954: 29)

The result of this *Ge-stell* (enframing) that reduces objects to mere *Bestand* (standing-reserve) is that objects ‘disappear’ *as objects*, i.e. they are dispossessed of their most characteristic quality, namely their ‘independence’ from us as subjects and the fact that they can reveal to us things that are outside our control: ‘Was im Sinne des Bestandes steht, steht uns nicht mehr als Gegenstand gegenüber.’<sup>68</sup> (1954: 24) This amounts to saying that the modern *homo faber* is a self-denying *homo faber*; he creates objects he himself does not allow to appear *as objects*. With the *Ge-stell*, the circle is closed and modern technology has ‘imposed’ its own ‘truth’; the other truth – the one that arises from a ‘dialogue’ with the world, the one man cannot ‘produce’ himself – is not allowed to emerge: ‘Das *Ge-stell* verstellt das Scheinen und Walten der Wahrheit.’<sup>69</sup> (1954: 35)

Heidegger seems to imply that this ‘challenging’ is actually a two-way one, i.e. that man himself is also challenged in the process.<sup>70</sup> This obviously applies also to the kind ‘systems’ created by man we mentioned before.

Der Mensch steht so entschieden im Gefolge der Herausforderung des *Ge-stells*, daß er dieses nicht als einen Anspruch vernimmt, daß er sich selber *als den Angesprochenen* übersieht.<sup>71</sup>

(Heidegger 1954: 35, my emphasis)

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<sup>67</sup> ‘Accordingly, man’s ordering attitude and behavior display themselves first in the rise of modern physics as an exact science. Modern science’s way of representing pursues and entraps nature as a calculable coherence of forces.’ (Heidegger 2011: 228)

<sup>68</sup> ‘Whatever stands by in the sense of standing-reserve no longer stands over against us as object.’ (2011: 225)

<sup>69</sup> ‘Enframing blocks the shining-forth and holding sway of truth.’ (Heidegger 2011: 232)

<sup>70</sup> ‘Actually, that this is the case only comes to a surprise if we look at things from the perspective of modern technology: ‘the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers.’ (Arendt 1998: 9)

<sup>71</sup> ‘Man stands so decisively in subservience to on the challenging-forth of enframing that he does not grasp enframing as a claim, that he fails to see himself *as the one spoken to*’. (Heidegger 2011: 232, my emphasis)

However, the way of looking at things of modern technology aims at *avoiding* this dialogue; in other words, modern technology is blind and deaf. As a result, man does not see him self ‘as the one spoken to’ (*der Angesprochene*).<sup>72</sup> One might think that, in absence of this dialogue, man would encounter only himself ... ‘*Indessen begegnet der Mensch heute in Wahrheit gerade nirgends mehr sich selber, d.h. seinem Wesen.*’<sup>73</sup> (Heidegger 1954: 35, emphasis in original)

Here we find a variation of the irony we mentioned before: the demand for absolute certainty (which is sold by modern science as a kind of absolute objectivity) makes objects disappear *as objects*; and the claim that ‘man is the measure of all things’ – on the basis of which man feels entitled to regard nature as ‘Bestand’ – ends up with man encountering himself *nowhere*.

#### 2.4.3 Modernity as the creature of (modern) *homo faber*?

The story about modernity I have tried to reconstruct here based on Heidegger and Arendt is ultimately not very different from the story of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In fact, even if they obviously tell things in a quite different way,<sup>74</sup> their conclusion seems essentially very similar to that of Heidegger and Arendt, namely that reason ultimately destroys the humanity it itself has made possible: ‘Aufklärung schlägt in Mythologie zurück.’<sup>75</sup> If Enlightenment can revert to Mythology it is not least so because both are intertwined, however much they want to understand themselves in opposition to each other. This kind of critique of modernity is a powerful one – and a necessary one, if we want to understand not

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<sup>72</sup> ‘Je me sens regardé par les choses, mon activité est identiquement passivité ... on ne sait plus qui voit et qui est vu’. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 181)

‘I feel I am looked at by things, my activity is also passivity ... one does not know any longer who sees and who is seen.’

<sup>73</sup> ‘*In truth, however, precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e. his essence.*’ (2011: 212, emphasis in original)

<sup>74</sup> What they call ‘myth’ is obviously a very comprehensive and complex concept that does not correspond to any of the concepts used by Heidegger or Arendt, who among other things showed no interest for Freudian psychoanalysis. We can to some extent recognise in it the kinds of fears of the *animal laborans* and its attempt to come to terms with necessity and the determinism of nature in an ‘irrational’ way; still, both concepts are clearly totally different, even if we might think that they somewhat illuminate each other. Their idea of Enlightenment, though, very much corresponds to the modern version of *homo faber*.

<sup>75</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno 2012: 6. ‘Enlightenment reverts back to mythology.’

only the nature of totalitarianisms (which have decisively influenced the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and not only the first half, and whose shadow has arguably not totally disappeared), but also the kinds of challenges we are confronted with today that we have discussed in Chapter 1. Presenting modernity today essentially as a success story would certainly require a highly naive and uncritical – and therefore ‘unmodern’ – attitude.

But this is also a quite *one-sided* story. Probably the most credible evidence we may have for this is the very fact that we are *criticising* modernity.<sup>76</sup> We may (and should) argue about the practical effects of this critical attitude on things that matter to us today, but on the other side we should not underestimate the fact that we *can* do that, and that this *must* be the result of important achievements in modernity.

If it should turn out to be true that knowledge (in the modern sense of know-how) and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is.

(Arendt 1998: 3)

We can still believe that we are not there yet, at least not totally.

If I am relying on Arendt – much more than on Heidegger or Adorno – for the story I want to tell here it is because, as I want to show, the theoretical framework she provided in *The Human Condition*, especially with regard to her account of the human activities, offers us the possibility to overcome the one-sidedness of this critique of modernity and in particular the seeming inevitability of the conclusion derived from it. In fact, if we look at her model, it becomes apparent that this critique equates modernity with the idea of modernity of the modern *homo faber* (the same way as Horkheimer and Adorno tend to equate reason with

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<sup>76</sup> A small aside reflection: for many of us, engaging in this kind of critique would not have been possible at all, say, fifty or eighty years ago, for the simple reason of having being born in the wrong country or into the wrong social class.

instrumental reason). Only on this basis is the conclusion possible that 'Enlightenment is totalitarian' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2012: 12). Accepting such a conclusion would actually amount to *accepting* in some way (if not necessarily agreeing to) the world-view of the modern *homo faber*. And, as we have seen, this world-view is a quite solipsistic one. As Arendt insists, though, everything men come in touch with – and this includes the objects and systems they themselves produce – constantly *conditions* them in ways they cannot totally control. While this obviously poses some significant dangers, this also means that men are constantly motivated or even compelled by reality (even if it is the reality they create themselves) to change their views and expectations; in this sense, men are *not* free enough to perpetuate a totalitarian view of modernity even if they decided to.

In the last part of this section I am going to discuss some issues arising from the story we just went through. The idea is to find *questions* that may allow us to see things in a less unambiguous way – i.e. to find a way of escape out of the aporias of modern *homo faber*.

(1) *Thaumazein vs Cartesian doubt*. As we have seen, the idea that everything we believe to be real might actually be a dream or even the joke of a 'malignant demon' or a 'Dieu trompeur' and that if this is the case one day we will experience the pain of having proved wrong our belief is the origin of the Cartesian doubt. As such, it was not just the nightmare of one single man; it reflected the sentiment of a generation of men – basically their reaction to the questions posed by a man-made instrument, the telescope – and inaugurated a new way of looking for truth that would be one of the main characteristics of modernity. When Karl Popper said that the progress of science consists not in finding new truths but in refuting old ones and that scientific theories can therefore never be finally proved he was probably doing justice to the original driver of modern science that was universal doubt.

According to Arendt, the progress of modern science came at the expense of the idea of ancient philosophers that it is actually *thaumazein*, 'the shocked wonder

at the miracle of Being' (Arendt 1998: 302), and not doubt, that lies at the beginning of philosophy.

In modern philosophy and thought, doubt occupies much the same central position as that occupied for all the centuries before by the Greek *thaumazein*, the wonder at everything that is as it is. Descartes was the first to conceptualize this modern doubting, which after him became the self-evident, inaudible motor that has moved all thought.

(Arendt 1998: 273)

This loss did not affect just professional philosophers; as the paradigm of reason of modern science gradually expanded to all domains of life, it translated into the kind of 'Entzauberung der Welt' ('disenchantment of the world') conceptualised by Max Weber and later used by Horkheimer and Adorno.

On the other side, it can also be argued that if we had completely lost the sense of *thaumazein*, we would not miss it or talk about it now. This means that, if it is possible to tell the story of modernity as a process of *Entzauberung der Welt*, it is also possible to tell the story of the *responses* of men to this *Entzauberung* and of their search for other areas that would open up to them the possibility of this experience of *thaumazein*.

(2) *Thought vs cognition*. If, as Arendt claims, Plato separated thought from action, resulting in a new paradigm of action as a form of 'making' (i.e. where the focus was in the *result* and not in the 'disclosure of the agent'), modern science separated thought from the search of truth, or, rather, substituted a much more restricted idea of thought – based on the paradigm of mathematics – for the kind of thought that had been at the centre of philosophical inquiry and that emerged from the experience of 'speechless wonder' or *thaumazein*. In this regard, Arendt distinguishes between *thought* and *cognition*, the latter becoming the new paradigm. 'Cognition always pursues a definite aim ... ; but once this aim is reached, the cognitive process has

come to an end' (ibid.: 170). This, as we can see, is the result of the appropriation of *homo faber* of questions related to truth in modernity.

Thought, on the contrary, has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results; not only the utilitarian philosophy of *homo faber* but also the men of action<sup>77</sup> and lovers of results in the sciences have never tired of pointing out how entirely "useless" thought is.

(Arendt 1998: 170)

Arendt also distinguishes both ('useless') thought and (goal-oriented) cognition from the 'power of logical reasoning' (ibid.: 171). Interestingly, she regards this kind of logico-mathematical intelligence rather as a function of the brain, and therefore as ultimately belonging to the realm of the *animal laborans*.<sup>78</sup> The same as labour can be performed by machines, at least in part, this kind of reasoning can also be carried out by computers. *Thought*, instead, is the prerogative of man.

Here again arises the question of how modernity responded to the challenge of modern science and how it found ways to channel men's capacity (and need) for thought.

(3) *Problem solving vs questioning*. A consequence of the *reductio scientiae ad mathematicam* was also the reduction of the activity of 'questioning' to mere 'problem solving'. The typical modern man, practically minded as he is, is impatient with 'questions' that do not lead to a pre-determined kind of answer (a considerable part of analytical philosophy represents a true reflection of this attitude); strictly speaking, he does not look for *answers* (which would represent a 'new beginning' in the sense that they open up new ways of looking at the problem itself and therefore a

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<sup>77</sup> The term 'men of action' does not refer here to 'action' in Arendt's sense – which is closely related to the capacity for thought – but is rather an expression of the contempt of modern men towards contemplation.

<sup>78</sup> From this point of view, a senior trader at an investment bank who is able to perform very complicated mathematical operations in a short period of time would actually behave – at least with regard to his job – more like an extremely sophisticated ape than like a thinking *man*. A thinking man would no doubt consider the impact of his actions on the lives of many other people beyond the mere accuracy of his calculations.

new start for the process of questioning), but rather for *solutions* (which represent an *end* to the process). This is obviously another consequence of the fact that the search for truth was tailored to the ideals of *homo faber*.

(4) *A monological vs a dialogical paradigm of truth.* The paradigm of mathematics had a further consequence that affected not just the nature and the results of the process but also the relationship of men searching for truth with each other and with the world. The result was what we could call a *monological* paradigm of truth – in fact, the only outcome possible from the Cartesian doubt and the *cogito* – that is, an ideal of truth that does not need men committing anymore to each other and the world they share. As we have seen before, this is precisely the aim of Heidegger's *Ge-stell* / enframing: to 'suffocate', as it were, this dialogue of men with things and impose instead man's own 'conditions' on things (which now must be available to man, i.e. they become a *Bestand* / standing-reserve).

The problem is that, as became apparent with totalitarianisms – the most brutal and consequent attempt to implement this monological ideal of truth –, the idea of annihilating the possibility of any dissent in order to 'preserve' truth makes *men* themselves superfluous and dispensable (and this ultimately includes also the dominant elites). As paradoxical as this might sound, such an approach can only lead to cynical relativism, where it is not possible to differentiate between truth and untruth.

We can therefore say that modernity itself created the need for a new dialogical and inclusive paradigm of truth that integrates the value provided by different perspectives and at the same time constitutes a response to the temptations of relativism. In this paradigm, the element of 'dispute' is not a disturbance to the process – something we need to limit or even eliminate – but is rather *constitutive* to truth. It is therefore an intersubjective (or transsubjective) and *co-operative* ideal of truth.

Die Wahrheit, als perspektivenübergreifend, ist zugleich wesentlich *umstritten*. Daß die Wahrheit transsubjektiv ist, bedeutet zugleich, daß die



Wahrheit strittig ist. Der Streit um die Wahrheit ist das Element, in dem die Wahrheit ihr Sein hat, ein Sein, das uns immer wieder nötigt, die Wahrheit neu zu entdecken, eine Stellung im Wahrheitsraum zu beziehen, Gründe zu geben und zu akzeptieren. Nur auf dem Hintergrund eines kooperativen Streits um die Wahrheit sind gemeinsam als begründet anerkannte Überzeugungen möglich.<sup>79</sup>

(Wellmer 2007: 197, emphasis in original)

We could say that his paradigm of truth is ‘dialogical’ (or ‘communicative’) in a double way. On the one side, it implies that we let things ‘tell’ us something, i.e. that we do not try to reduce them to the result of the kind of mathematical operations we can ‘control’. On the other side, it requires a dialogue *between* men, since the plurality of perspectives – and the ‘dispute over the truth’ it entails – is a *necessary condition*, and not an obstacle, to this kind of disclosure of things.

It must be mentioned that this ‘dialogical’ idea of truth that integrates the element of dispute and the variety of perspectives does not just represent an alternative view to the ‘monological’ paradigm of mathematics and the modern sciences at a theoretical level. As we saw before, one consequence of the rise of the modern *homo faber* (of modern technology) had been a widespread experience of world alienation and the ‘victory of the *animal laborans*’, who now to a great extent determines the relationships between men in the public realm (Arendt often refers to modern society as a ‘society of laborers’, Arendt 1998: 4-5). Since its highest ideal lies in the satisfaction of wants and needs, for the *animal laborans* there is simply no place for the question of truth. In these circumstances ‘claims based on power’ (*Machtansprüche*) take the place of ‘validity claims’ (*Geltungsansprüche*). This leads in different ways to what Habermas called ‘distorted communication’ and

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<sup>79</sup> ‘Truth, as something that happens *across* perspectives, is at the same time essentially *contentious*. That truth is transsubjective means at the same time that truth is disputable. The dispute over the truth is the element in which truth has its being, a being that prompts us again and again to re-discover the truth, to take a stance in the space of truth, to give and accept arguments. Only on the basis of a co-operative dispute over truth can views that are mutually accepted as justified be possible’.

therefore constitutes a potential impediment to the unfolding of this dialogical paradigm of truth.

(5) *Mastery vs servitude*. The passage on ‘mastery and servitude’ in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 1998: 127-36) has been widely commented on in the context of the most varied discussions with regard to the relationships among human beings and was famously re-written in Marx’s theory of the class struggle. I think this passage is highly inspiring and illuminating also in the present context, in which we are looking for ways out of the monolithic world view of modern technology, in relationship to which we often – explicitly or implicitly – behave as *servants*.

This passage makes it apparent that it is not possible to reduce the meaning of work (that is, the activity of *homo faber*) to its *results*. This is initially the belief of the master: he thinks that the ‘result’ of the action is *everything* one can expect from it, and on the basis of this belief he forces the servant to work for him. However, by transforming nature / the world, the servant gains something the master fails to achieve: first autonomy and then self-consciousness. At some point, this allows him to look at the world with his own eyes and thus see the true nature of his relationship to the master, whose recognition he then no longer needs. Importantly, this self-consciousness is attained not just through labour (as implied by Marx) but through *work* in Arendt’s sense, that is, as a ‘shaping activity’ (‘formendes Tun’) that leaves a permanent object (‘ein bleibender Gegenstand’, *ibid.*: 135):

Die Arbeit [des Knechtes] hingegen ist gehemmte Begierde, aufgehaltenes Verschwinden, oder sie *bildet*.<sup>80</sup>

(Hegel 1998: 135, my emphasis)

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<sup>80</sup> ‘Work, on the other hand, is desired held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work *forms* and *shapes* the thing’ (my emphasis; transl. A.V. Miller). Even if Hegel explains this in a quite different way, we can connect this idea of self-consciousness achieved through a shaping activity with Heidegger’s idea that fabricating as *poiesis* is originally a way of ‘revealing’.

From this we can infer that, insofar as we see our activities primarily in terms of *labour* (i.e., as a means to be able to consume) and disregard the fact that our activities also leave results and therefore ‘shape’ the world in one way or another (which amounts to seeing them in terms of *work*), we miss to a great extent the possibility of this kind of self-consciousness.

With that I do not necessarily want to imply that we should or even could behave towards modern technology in the same way as towards a huge master from which we would then try to emancipate ourselves; such an idea might be self-defeating, since modern technology is *us*.<sup>81</sup> The point of this story in the present context is that we cannot reduce the meaning of modern technology to its effects (many of which are on the other side undoubtedly positive) or even to the solipsistic world-view it tries to enforce. All this commitment to (or even obsession for) modern technology – and by extension, everything related to a practical use of instrumental reason – might have equipped us with something we cannot understand in ‘technological’ terms, something in the form of a kind of new self-consciousness. The problem, of course, is that we need an element of *reflection*: in order to appreciate this we need to be able to take some distance from the apparently compelling logic of modern technology (which, as we have seen in the previous subsection, ‘denies’ the permanent and therefore ‘objective’ character of its results, thus making reflection more difficult).

(6) *The emergence of modern subjectivity*. As we saw in the previous section, the Cartesian doubt and the search for absolute certainty that led to the solipsistic world of the *cogito* had an undesired and paradoxical effect: instead of finding a reliable source of stability, man found the highly unstable and unreliable world of his instincts, emotions and desires. We already spoke about the negative consequences

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<sup>81</sup> However, it is important to note that, as Pinkard explains, Hegel is addressing here the problem inherent in the dominant ideal in the medieval period in European history, ‘interpreted by Hegel as a reign of universal servitude expressing itself as devotion to something “higher”’ which ‘turned out to have as its “truth” ... a view of a completely “objective” (God’s eye) point of view’ (Pinkard 2002: 231).

of this, which are summarised in what Arendt termed as ‘the victory of the *animal laborans*’ and the ‘unnatural growth of the natural’.

However, this process of introspection also created the need to come to terms with this ‘inner life’. This also made possible a new kind of self-consciousness, and gave rise to the idea of a private sphere of intimacy in which those emotions could be unfolded and articulated as something whose meaning reaches far beyond the mere satisfaction of needs.<sup>82</sup> Obviously enough, this new sphere in turn created new ‘problems’ – e.g. those arising from the conflict between individual and society – that needed to be articulated,<sup>83</sup> and for which a new ‘language’ had to be created. And with all the problems of modern individualism – not least its disrespect for collective, *political* affairs – this development has to a great extent freed men from the constraints of the kinds of ‘role-playing’ imposed by society, enabling them to choose more consciously the ways they want to give meaning to their lives.

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All these issues arise from the question of the dominance of *homo faber* (of his modern version) in modernity, and all of them more or less point in the same direction: the question of art in modernity, to which we will turn in the next chapter, and which is much more inseparable from questions related to technology and other uses of instrumental-reason than is generally acknowledged in many accounts of modern aesthetics (let alone by artists themselves).<sup>84</sup> Seen this way, the theoretical framework provided by Arendt has allowed us to find a rather unconventional route to the question about art in modernity, at least if regarded from the criteria that are dominant in modern aesthetics, which in some sense (generally) presupposes that

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<sup>82</sup> It must be noted that Arendt does not directly link the rise of this idea of intimacy to the introspection of the Cartesian doubt. However, she clearly differentiates it from the ‘private realm’ whose priority is the satisfaction of needs and that is therefore the natural realm of the *animal laborans*. (see Arendt 1998: 38)

<sup>83</sup> ‘The first articulate explorer and to an extent even theorist of intimacy was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, characteristically enough, is the only great author still frequently cited by his first name alone.’ (ibid.: 38-39)

<sup>84</sup> In fact, for Heidegger ‘technology and art belong together in our life, and art has to become the art of the age of technology’ (Pöggeler 1994: 122).

there is already a realm of art, more or less separated and ‘protected’ from the inference of other realms such as those of the natural or social sciences.

Instead, as I wanted to show, we might conclude that, if, as Heidegger says, ‘the essence of technology is nothing technological’, the essence of art is nothing aesthetic; or, translated into a more simple language, *what matters in art is nothing aesthetic*. Crucially, we must note that ‘essence’ here means quite the opposite of what is implied by the typical essentialist / Platonist approach of a large part of modern aesthetics (especially, but not only, in its version derived from the analytical philosophy). Seen from this point of view, there is no such thing as an ‘essence’ of art, but rather what emerges from a constant *questioning* about matters in art, which in turn must necessarily be related to other questions – such as those posed by technology – we are confronted with as human beings living on earth and sharing a common world.

Weil das Wesen der Technik nichts Technisches ist, darum muß die wesentliche Besinnung auf die Technik und die entscheidende Auseinandersetzung mit ihr in einem Bereich geschehen, der einerseits mit dem Wesen der Technik verwandt und andererseits von ihm doch grundverschieden ist.

Ein solcher Bereich ist die Kunst. Freilich nur dann, wenn die künstlerische Besinnung ihrerseits sich der Konstellation der Wahrheit nicht verschließt, nach der wir *fragen*.<sup>85</sup>

(Heidegger 1954: 43, emphasis in original).

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<sup>85</sup> ‘Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art. But certainly if reflection upon art, for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth, concerning which we are *questioning*’. (Heidegger 2011: 238, emphasis in original)

## Chapter 3      *The Human Condition and Art*

In this chapter I will address issues related to art based on Arendt's account of human activities in *The Human Condition*. The obvious starting point is the explicit treatment of art in *HC* (§3.1), which suggests that art belongs to the realm of *homo faber*. In §3.2 I explain why this might be a too narrow view. In §3.3 I discuss the implications of confining art to the realm of *homo faber* and to the subject-object dialectic that is characteristic of the paradigm of *homo faber*. In §3.4 I explore different ways to overcome the limitations of the subject-object dialectic typical of modern aesthetics through Arendt's concept of action, and sketch a model in which the *telos* of the subject-object relationship resides in an enlarged subject-subject relationship.

### 3.1 Explicit treatment of Art in *The Human Condition*

At first glance one could think that Arendt treats art in *The Human Condition* somewhat *en passant*, as if it was just another human activity among many others and had no proper realm of its own. She devotes only one section to works of art (at the end of the chapter on Work), and the explicit references to art elsewhere in the book are sporadic; furthermore, they often seem to have a rather complementary function, as if they were incidental and did not really affect the substance of her arguments. On the other side, it also seems clear that she had a fine understanding of art, and that she was anything but indifferent to it. This attitude contrasts with the usual treatment of aesthetics in modernity, which grants art its own 'sphere of validity'; it is therefore not surprising that Arendt's views about art play virtually no role in the history of modern aesthetics. In fact, I think that it is precisely for this reason that Arendt's treatment of art, which is much more sophisticated than one could think after a first reading, is extremely valuable.

If we were to discuss Arendt's 'aesthetics', we could easily conclude that her idea of art, deeply informed by Kant and Heidegger, is not especially original and that it adds nothing substantial to the debates about art in modernity. However, if we did so, we would be missing the broader implications of her ideas for our understanding of art (many of which she did not spell out herself). Paradoxically enough, by avoiding the usual 'special treatment' of art and situating it in a broader context (the whole of other activities, needs and interests that both inform art and are informed by it in different ways but most of which cannot be defined in purely aesthetic terms), Arendt's ideas will allow us to understand the limitations and aporias of the typical *questions* we commonly ask about art.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows I will try to sketch the implications of Arendt's more 'neutral' view about art in general, in the hope that many things will become even more clear in the next section when we will discuss them in relationship to music.

It seems quite obvious to think that Arendt situates art unequivocally within the realm of *homo faber*. We remember that the task of *homo faber* is not just to build tools that help *animal laborans* to satisfy its needs in a better way and to make the burden of labour more bearable. Most importantly, the objects produced by *homo faber* constitute a durable, stable world distinct from the realm of nature, which is characterised by perpetual change and determinism. This 'unnatural', human world allows men to feel at home and relate to each other not just in order to satisfy their needs and desires, but in a way that allows them to disclose themselves as unique beings. In this sense, works of art represent the highest achievement of *homo faber*, precisely because of their superior durability – 'almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes' (Arendt 1998: 167) – compared to that of objects that are produced in order to serve for some purpose. A car or a computer may indeed irradiate a certain *atmosphère d'humanité* ('atmosphere of humanity'),

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<sup>1</sup> This 'conventional' way of looking for ideas about art in *The Human Condition* – as the typical argument would go, she relativises its role and her ideas about art are anyway not really original, *therefore* she has nothing relevant to say about art – is symptomatic of how narrow modern discussions about art often are. We want to treat 'art as art' and thus preserve its 'autonomy' and protect it from both the levelling logic of utilitarianism and the relativism of post-modernism (where *anything* can mean *anything*), and we end up missing the important questions about art.

as Merleau-Ponty said, but they have been primarily fabricated in order to satisfy certain needs. So long as they are being used – while we are driving to work or reading the news online – they tend to ‘disappear’, at least partially, *as objects*,<sup>2</sup> since in those moments we focus on other things: traffic lights, the most convenient itinerary, a recent vote in Parliament about the next rise in taxes. Moreover, the life-cycles of such objects are typically quite short (shorter than a human life anyway), and after some time they will in all probability be disposed of and replaced by similar objects that fulfil the same tasks (as well as new ones) in a more effective way; this means in turn that the replacements will be expected to ‘conceal’ even more effectively their condition as *objects*. Works of art are the kind of products of *homo faber* that explicitly resist the implacable logic of utility. They even *demand* to be treated in a different way from other objects: ‘the proper intercourse with a work of art is certainly not “using” it; on the contrary, it must be removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use objects to attain its proper place in the world’ (ibid.). This ‘demand’ arises, in Arendt’s view, by means of their *shape*, more concretely by virtue of their ‘adequacy or inadequacy to what [they] should *look* like ... to [their] *eidos* or *idea*, the mental image, or rather the image seen by the inner eye, that preceded its coming into the world and survives its potential destruction’ (ibid.: 173, italics in original). On the one side, this is presumably based on Kant’s idea that the shape of a work of art stimulates the mind’s disposition (‘Gemüt’) and arouses pleasure (‘Wohlgefallen’) via the – paradoxical – combination of a ‘free play of the imagination’ (‘freies Spiel der Einbildungskraft’) and the submission of the imagination to the laws of the understanding (‘conformity of the imagination to the understanding’ or ‘Übereinstimmung der Einbildungskraft zum Verstande’), which makes works of art appear in a special way that transcends the possible use value of them as objects (Kant 2006: §22, ‘Allgemeine Anmerkung’; needless to say, this applies in the same way to non-visual arts.)

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<sup>2</sup> As we have seen in the previous section, the ‘enframing’ of modern technology exacerbates this ‘disappearing’ of the objects *as objects*.



On the other side, we can recognise here again Heidegger's idea of *techne* as a mode of 'revealing'. According to this, what makes possible the durability of works of art – and man-made objects in general – is not their utility (as already discussed), and not ultimately their shape, but the fact that this shape corresponds to and reveals a way of *disclosing* the world that wants to 'endure', in the sense that it represents a 'truth claim' (*Wahrheitsanspruch*) for the one who encounters those objects.

This leads us to Arendt's idea of 'reification'. For her, the production of a work of art consists in a process of 'reification of thought'.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, apart from the origin of works of art in thought, she seems to imply that their durability – their ability to become 'autonomous' and resist any 'use' of them – also depends on the degree of 'condensation'<sup>4</sup> (ibid.: 169) in relationship to the everyday use of their material (language, images, etc). Consequently, '[works of art] are not exchangeable and therefore defy equalization through a common denominator such as money; if they enter the market place, they can only be arbitrarily priced' (Arendt 1998: 167).

### 3.2 Questions arising from the location of works of art in the realm of *homo faber*

So far so good, we could conclude if we just wanted to locate Arendt's views about art in the context of the modern philosophical tradition. However, it is precisely this location of works of art in the realm of *homo faber* that gives rise to the most interesting questions. If art belongs to the domain of the *homo faber* (in fact, for Arendt it represents his most precious achievement), it will share in some way the

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<sup>3</sup> Arendt uses the word 'reification' – in the German version of *HC* appeared some years later she uses the terms 'vergegenständliche Verdinglichung' (Arendt 2002: 203) and 'herstellendes Vergegenständlichen' (ibid.: 204) – in a different way from Adorno. For Arendt, 'reification' is related to the emergence/creation of works of art, for which Adorno prefers the opposed idea of the 'spiritualisation of material' ('Vergeistigung des Materials'); in contrast, Adorno uses the word reification ('Verdinglichung') to refer to 'the rigidification of dynamic processes into static givens' (Paddison 1993: 198) during the process of distribution, that is, once works of art are a part of our world.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of 'condensation' has of course its origin in Heidegger. When Heidegger says 'Das Wesen der Kunst ist die Dichtung' (Heidegger 1960: 77; 'The essence of art is poetry' Heidegger 2011: 129), he plays with the association of the German word 'Dichtung' (poetry) with 'Verdichtung' (condensation)

kinds of delusions, limitations and aporias inherent to the categories of the modern *homo faber* discussed before – and at the same time it might offer a different perspective on them, as I suggested at the end of the previous section.

The first question that arises if we want to understand technology and art – the two sides of *homo faber* – as related to each other is precisely the one regarding the *nature* of this relationship. This is of course a complex question, which I can only briefly discuss here; however I think it is important to be aware of its implications if we want to avoid the kind of disconnect between art and world (and between theory of art and art) we are widely experiencing today. I would classify the possible responses we might give about the relationship to art and technology (and by extension to the use of instrumental reason) into four main groups. Needless to say, these groups are not mutually exclusive, and they may contain very different and even opposing views; what is relevant here is not ‘what’ these views state, but the underlying nature of the relationship between art and technology they explicitly or implicitly assume.

(1) *Identification*. It is possible to see the paradigms of technology and art as aligned, i.e. as just two manifestations of the same thing. This may occur at very different levels. For example, the kind of expectations we may have when we encounter works of art may be similar in nature to the kind of expectations technology arouses in us. From this point of view we would explain the work of the artist in the same terms as the work of an engineer: both use their creativity and their know-how in order to enable a certain kind of ‘experience’ in other people – whether this experience is made via a painting or a film, or via a car or a mobile phone. From a certain perspective, this can be seen as a *de facto* assimilation of the paradigm of technology into the paradigm of modern art, i.e. as an indication of the ‘superiority’ of technology. However, we could see this rather as a ‘win-win situation’. On the one side, art can be ‘enjoyed’ in the same way as other products (which obviously entails regarding art through the lens of Heidegger’s ‘Ge-stell’ that reduces everything to mere ‘Bestand’), and at the same time it benefits from the

‘aura’ of technological progress. Furthermore, we can study works of art in the same way we would try to understand a piece of machinery, or a natural being as seen by the natural sciences<sup>5</sup> (in fact both ways of explaining things are interconnected and rely on the same mechanistic view of the world).

But, on the other side, technology also may benefit from art, in the sense that by assimilating some of the aspects of the paradigm of art technology is able to bestow upon itself, as it were, the kind of ‘aura’ we associate with objects which owe their existence not just to the fact that they can satisfy some wants and needs.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to this assimilation, some engineers and visionaries such as Steve Jobs are granted the status of ‘geniuses’, something that once was the prerogative of a few ‘chosen’ artists. A further aspect of art that reflects a basic attitude of modern technology is that it may also *create* its own ‘reality’, thus making the ‘real reality’ appear obsolete or even unnecessary. If, as Arendt says, the modern man only knows what he makes himself, art also may be seen as an attempt to ‘produce’ an inner and an outer world that we can then ‘know’ without really dealing with both ourselves and the world.

However we want to evaluate this phenomenon of this gradual ‘merging’ of the realms of art and technology, what is sure is that we need to *acknowledge* that the line between technology and art in our real lives has been blurred during the past two decades with the boom of the internet and the digital technologies.<sup>7</sup>

(2) *Opposition*. It is also possible – and in fact quite common, at least when it comes to our conscious reflections about art – to see art and technology as opposed to each other. If one represents the realm of utility, the other is the realm of ‘non-utility’, i.e.

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<sup>5</sup> This is arguably what many philosophers in the analytical tradition do in one way or another. I personally tend to think that in many this comes out of a sincere interest for art that makes them believe that treating art with a totally different paradigm from that of science and technology would mean ‘downgrading’ art to a kind of second class realm.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, the fascination of many people towards technological devices such as iPhones cannot be explained in terms of their ‘functionality’.

<sup>7</sup> This is also apparent in the fact that, when some people advocate the promotion the ‘creative industries’ in order to stimulate overall economic growth, they as a matter of course include in this category – along with what we used to term as ‘culture industry’ – things like apps, smart websites and computer games. See for example the *Manifesto for the Creative Economy*, published by Nesta (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) in April 2013 ([www.nesta.org.uk](http://www.nesta.org.uk))

of those objects that irradiate a special dignity because they cannot be used; if one is associated with the satisfaction of our needs and wants and therefore with the limitations of body, the other is associated with our 'spiritual' dimension; if one relies on the idea of progress, the other provides access to a realm of timeless truths; if one may be deemed responsible for the dehumanisation of the modern world, the other would at least to some extent enable men to discover (and this ultimately means: re-discover) their own humanity and provide them with reasons to hope for a better world. However, we can also see things from the other side of the divide, and sanctify modern science and technology as those human endeavours that have enabled humanity to achieve an unprecedented progress that has e.g. lifted millions of people out of poverty, increased our life expectancy, and opened up new ways of communicating with each other; and dismiss the 'unproductive' work of artists and the like, who devote their lives to their 'idle' activities while benefiting from the achievements of the sciences (for which they do not even feel the necessity to be thankful at all). As we can immediately see, the idea that art and technology are essentially opposed to each other implies that we sooner or later need to take a stance for one or the other, with the limitations this entails for our understanding of both.

(3) *Independence*. In many instances we tend to see technology and art as two separate and essentially different realms, each with its own 'logic' and its own 'sphere of validity'. At first sight, this looks like a quite comfortable (indeed maybe too comfortable) attitude. Technology is good; and art is good too. Both are part of our lives, and each has its own domain. As long as we deal with art, we do not need to care about technology (and, for that matter, to any other realms of our life), since art has its own 'language' that cannot be translated into other languages, and any attempt to do so will be doomed to failure. And yet we cannot totally avoid this attitude, since dealing with art implies 'suspending', at least to a certain extent, the 'conventional' use of language and the kinds of views and assumptions that characterise our everyday life, otherwise we simply do not understand art as art.

Furthermore, this attitude also acknowledges the problem of ‘mediation’ between works of art and what lies ‘outside’ them.

(4) *Complementarity*. Finally, we can also regard technology and art as two *different* things that constantly influence and in some sense complement each other. Under this point of view, even if it is not possible to assimilate one into the other, it is ultimately not possible to define one without reference to the other. Seen from the perspective of art, this view acknowledges the fact that technology both influences our expectations with regard to art and opens up new possibilities for artistic creation, and that art therefore cannot be seen as a kind of timeless language alien to the progress of technology. Technology not only conditions how we experience art, it also conditions its *language*.<sup>8</sup> This view also acknowledges, as Heidegger did, that art and technology have their origins in the same kind of activity (what the Greeks called *poiesis*, which is related to *aletheia* and as such constitutes a mode of ‘revealing’), and that only the solipsistic view of modern technology has drawn a line (or even created a divide) between both. According to this, it would be more productive to abandon the ‘safe’ way of dealing with both – either as essentially identical or opposed to each other (or totally independent from each other) – and instead treat the status and the nature of the ‘realm’ of both as *questions* that need to be constantly articulated in new ways.

This last option was the one we assumed at the beginning of this section. However, I think it is important to see that this attitude by no means justifies itself, and that each of the other attitudes I just described is compelling and even inevitable in some way. It is also important to acknowledge that it is not possible to give an answer to this question ‘a priori’, i.e. it is not possible to grant art a fixed status in relationship to technology, if only because it is ultimately not possible to decide how art ‘reveals’ itself. Rather, I would suggest that art in modernity (understood as a

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<sup>8</sup> The influence of technology – and instrumental rationality in a broader sense – on art in general and music in particular was extensively articulated by Weber in *The Rational and Sociological Foundations of Music*.

*practice*, i.e. as a way of getting involved with the world, not just as something seen from the perspective of a theory constructed *post facto*) is very much about articulating this question *across* all the four main possibilities I have just sketched, and therefore in some way about dealing with the limitations and the questions posed by each way of relating art and technology.<sup>9</sup> In other words, there is no theory that can ‘guarantee’ that what we call art really appears in the context of our lives in one way or another.

### 3.3 Art seen as a relationship between subject and object

#### *3.3.1 The polarity between subject and object*

We have just examined the possible ways of relating art and technology – or, in other words, of understanding the relationship between the ‘two souls’ of *homo faber* in modernity. All different ways of linking both that I tried to sketch in the previous section have one common denominator: they explicitly or implicitly assume that our understanding of art primarily entails an understanding of a relationship (or a ‘dialectic’) between a subject and an object. This is not surprising, since this kind of subject-object model corresponds to the categories of *homo faber* (much more so than to those of the other archetypes of the *vita activa* we examined above, the *animal laborans* and action/speech). In this sub-section we are going to examine some of the possibilities and the implications of this view of art primarily from the point of view of a relationship between a subject and an object.

Here it is easier to recognise that there are in principle two main broad approaches we can adopt. In the following it is not my intention to give a precise and detailed account or even a critique of them, but just to roughly sketch some of

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<sup>9</sup> Some of the aporias inherent in each option are quite easy to identify. The first option makes art ultimately meaningless, since it becomes just another means to satisfy our needs in the same way as technology does; the second runs the risk which is typical of this kind of oppositions, namely that one reinforces and affirms precisely what one pretends to oppose (in this case the domination of technology and our powerlessness in the face of its logic); the third just isolates art from the rest of the world, thus creating a ‘parallel world’ increasingly disconnected from the world we share; and the fourth obviously runs the risk of perpetuating a vicious circle of self-serving questions that leads nowhere, and therefore of failing to understand both technology and art.

their main underlying assumptions in order to show the nature of the polarity between both approaches. It goes without saying that both offer space for a number of different theories.<sup>10</sup>

We can understand this relationship primarily from the point of view of the *subject*, and study for instance the ‘effect’ of the works of art on the subject (the ‘reception’ of the works of art), how it perceives them and reacts to them, how it actually ‘creates’ them by imposing its own expectations on them, the kinds of ‘experiences’ works of art enable, the choices different groups of people make etc. Or, more generally, we can also study the benefits of arts in general on the lives of people – whether they ‘make’ us more creative, more or less intelligent, how they affect the identity of different social groups, whether they can be seen as a part of our general education as human beings (according to the idea of ‘Bildung’) or just as a source of entertainment. Subject-based approaches often tend emphasise to the ‘immediacy’ of experiences enabled by works of art. When dealing with the artist (rather than the spectator), they tend to focus on the aspect of the ‘expression’ of his own subjectivity, rather than in the creation of self-contained works. These kinds of views ultimately see the subject as the ‘condition of possibility’ of the works of art *qua* works of art, or at least they see the subject as their ultimate end. In most cases, these kinds of approaches are rather wary of dealing with questions related to ‘truth’, since it is the choices made by the subject (its ‘taste’) and therefore the ‘effect’ of works on people that ultimately matters.<sup>11</sup>

Alternatively, we can explain things from the point of view of the *object*. Studying art means primarily studying and analysing works of art, i.e. trying to elucidate what they ‘are’, their language, how they are constructed, what techniques were employed by the artist, what the works mean beyond what the subject happens

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<sup>10</sup> Here I am not primarily interested in discussing or classifying different theories that are available, but rather to gain an overview of the different approaches we may adopt when we deal with art in one way or another. These views are often implicit and for this reason largely unconscious and do not always correspond to the ‘theories’ we consciously adhere to.

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer sees in Kant the origin of the ‘subjectification of aesthetics’ (Gadamer 1990: 48ff.). As we will see later in this chapter, Arendt offers a different reading of Kant’s Third Critique differently. See also Bowie 2003.

to expect from them; and, in the case of the performing arts, how they should be executed. This involves dealing more or less explicitly with questions about the truth of art as something transtemporal and independent from the will of the subject. In most cases, the *artist* as ‘creator’ enjoys a kind of absolute authority, and his ‘intentions’ have the status of absolute law. It is the subject who has to submit to the authority of the artist, not the other way round.<sup>12</sup>

We could say that the subject-based approach represents the most outspokenly utilitarian side of *homo faber*, and therefore his most ‘modern’ side, in the sense that it is not the object as such but the ‘satisfaction’ of the subject (whatever this may mean in each case) what is really at stake. In contrast, the object-based approach can be seen as corresponding to a kind of ‘old fashioned’ *homo faber* for whom it is the objects themselves and their durability – that is, their ability to ‘survive’ the often arbitrary and ever-changing preferences of people – that give meaning to the activity of the artist. However, it can be also a ‘modern’ approach in the sense that in many cases it actually deals not with objects, but with *constructs* of objects that have little resemblance with what appears to us. In this case it is not just about ‘knowing’ works of art that have been delivered by tradition, but about ‘knowing’ the constructs we have made out of them (the modern man ‘can know only what he makes himself’), which in exchange ensures a ‘safe’ access to their ‘truth’. (It is true that this approach is very popular among analytical philosophers; however, we must bear in mind that always when we deal with works of art as such – when we analyse them and try to elucidate their meaning in one way or another – we are implicitly accepting the risk of ending up dealing with such constructs, not with works *as they appear to us*). For example, what is seen as the intention of the artist is often idealised and absolutised in such a way that in many cases it could hardly be imagined that the concerned artist would recognise himself in those ‘intentions’.

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<sup>12</sup> See Goehr 1992 for a discussion of the severe limitations of the conceptual framework of the analytical approach and of the aporias of the idea of *Werktreue* in music.



As we can see, both kinds of approaches lead sooner or later to annoying aporias. The subject-based approaches eventually make works of art (and maybe art itself) superfluous, since at the end everything is reduced to perpetual ‘flows of energy’ (‘the victory of the *animal laborans*’...). And the object-based approaches, with their reluctance to treat works of art as living beings, eventually deal only with ‘dead’ and therefore empty objects (which, in such a case, lose their condition as *objects* altogether).

### 3.3.2 *Hermeneutics*

There is arguably a ‘third way’, an approach that tries to bridge the divide between the perspective of the subject and that of the object, or at least to shape the polarity between both in a productive way by trying to overcome the limitations and the one-sidedness of each point of view. This school originated in the German Romanticism and is generally known by the name of ‘hermeneutics’. In its more ‘mature’ version, this approach is present in the works of Heidegger<sup>13</sup> and Gadamer<sup>14</sup>; although Adorno incorporated other distinctive elements – most notably from Marxism and psychoanalysis – that were in principle alien to this tradition, his approach is also largely hermeneutical in nature.<sup>15</sup>

On the one side, hermeneutics tries to overcome the ‘the subjectification of modern aesthetics’. Gadamer sees Kant, and especially his theory of taste in the *Critique of Judgment*, as the initiator of this emphasis on subjectivity when it comes to questions related to art.<sup>16</sup> However, this arguably does not do justice to Kant’s Third Critique,<sup>17</sup> which allows a quite different reading (such as Arendt’s, as we will

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<sup>13</sup> For an account of Heidegger’s philosophy of art see Young 2001.

<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive account of Gadamer’s thought see Grondin 2003. For an interesting interpretation of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* as a ‘redescription of man which tries to place the classic picture into a larger one, and thus to “distance” the philosophical problem rather than offer a set of solutions to it’ (Rorty 2009: 358) see ‘Philosophy without mirrors’ in Rorty 2009 (357ff).

<sup>15</sup> For a comprehensive and detailed account of Adorno’s (musical) aesthetics see Paddison 1993; for a discussion of the possible links between Adorno’s and Heidegger’s philosophy (also in a musical context) see Bowie 2004.

<sup>16</sup> See ‘The subjectification of Aesthetics through the Kant Critique’, Gadamer 1990: 48ff.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of some of Gadamer’s controversial views about Kantian aesthetics see Bowie 2003.

see later). Instead, we might think that what Gadamer actually tried to overcome was rather what had become the standard reading of the *Critique of Judgment* as the inauguration of modern aesthetics understood as a discipline separated from the other two big areas of philosophy (epistemology and ethics) and with its own sphere of validity (based allegedly only on matters of ‘taste’, i.e. on subjective reactions to works of art on which it is not possible to find consensus through arguments).

Hermeneutics therefore tries to re-establish the importance of works themselves, in some sense it tries to ‘defend’ them from the attacks of the subject; in this sense we might think that hermeneutics takes a stance for the objective side of the divide. However, hermeneutics is aware that treating works of art essentially as *things* just means not doing justice to them. In *The Origin of the Work of Art* Heidegger shows that as long as we insist in understanding works of art as ‘things’ we remain stuck in the categories of utilitarianism, that is, those under which we understand *Zeuge* (pieces of ‘equipment’).

For hermeneutics, the question about works of art is the question about their *truth*. This truth, though, is not the same kind of truth as that strived for by the natural sciences, but something that *happens* (or, rather, something that *may* happen, since there is no ‘right’ and ‘reliable’ method to access it) in the interaction with them. Unlike most self-proclaimed ‘objective’ approaches, hermeneutics regards works of art as something *alive*, i.e. as something that *needs* the re-contextualisation in the real lives of people – and this also means: a reference to something outside the realm of art – to happen at all:

Die Auslegung überlieferter Texte ist die Auslegung ihres Wahrheitsanspruchs aus dem Horizont der eigenen Gegenwart und damit zugleich ihr Neu-einlegen in den Horizont der Gegenwart.<sup>18</sup>

(Wellmer 2007: 136).

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<sup>18</sup> ‘The interpretation of texts from tradition is the interpretation of their truth claim from the point of view of the horizon of the own present und therefore at the same time their insertion in the horizon of the present’. This corresponds to Gadamer’s idea of the ‘fusion of horizons’ (‘Verschmelzung der Horizonte’, see Gadamer 1990: 311, 383)

Crucially, this does not mean that we are allowed to do what we want with works of art:<sup>19</sup> we need to accept their *demands*, we must accept the ‘game’ they offer to us, in which they, not us, set the rules. There is no such thing as ‘immediacy’ when dealing with works of art; rather, works happen – they take place, in the sense of ‘sich vollziehen’ – and thus emerge in front of us as an ‘event’ (‘Ereignis’) precisely when we engage in the kinds of questions they pose to us;<sup>20</sup> that is, in the interpretation, which is a kind of re-creation (*Nachschaffen*, and not just *Nachahmung* or ‘imitation’<sup>21</sup>).

Hermeneutics also tries to liberate us from the tyranny of the artist and his ‘intentions’ as the supreme authority regarding the truth of the works of art. Instead, artist and the one who encounters his work are at the same level, and if it is possible to talk about the genius of the artist, it must also be possible to talk about the genius of the engaged spectator: ‘Der Genialität des Schaffens entspricht eine Genialität des Verstehens.’<sup>22</sup> (Gadamer 1990: 62)

In fact, works of art do not owe their existence only to artists: while they certainly deserve our recognition and our admiration for having been able to convert a unique experience or something they had been able to ‘see’ in the world that escaped our eyes into a *Gebilde* (to ‘reify thoughts’, to use Arendt’s expression, or to ‘spiritualise the material’, to use Adorno’s), they necessarily have to rely on an existing language (if only in order to transform it), and also on a community with which they could *potentially* share those thoughts and which ultimately granted works their ‘work’ status (i.e. as something relatively permanent and durable).

In this context, a certain kind of phenomenological approach might be valuable as well in combination with a hermeneutical approach. Phenomenology

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Valéry’s words ‘Mes vers ont le sens qu’on leur prête’ (quoted in Gadamer 1990: 100n, ‘my verses have the meaning anyone accords to them’) encapsulate the kind of views about art Gadamer wants to overcome.

<sup>20</sup> Works need analysis for their “truth content” [*Wahrheitsgehalt*] to be revealed’ (Adorno and Paddison 1982: 176), whereby “‘To analyse” means much the same as to become aware of a work as a force-field [*Kraftfeld*] organised around a problem’ (ibid.: 181). For Adorno, works of art need analysis also because they themselves *are* analysis, in the sense that they enact a re-interpretation of the material of previous works.

<sup>21</sup> Gadamer 1990: 125; *Nachschaffen* can also be translated as ‘creative reproduction’.

<sup>22</sup> ‘To the geniality of creating corresponds a geniality of understanding.’

studies the ‘as-structure’ of our experience of things. At the level of the work, this helps us differentiate between a simple account of ‘facts’. For example a figure in a painting, a scene in a film, or a motive in a symphony may mean very different things depending on where they are located, i.e. we may perceive them *as* different things in relationship – e.g. as contrast, re-affirmation or variation – to other elements of the work. This is important since objectivist approaches of the kind we discussed above always tend to level out all these kinds of phenomena, reducing them to their ‘literal’ meaning. And, at a more general level, a phenomenological attitude helps us acknowledge the fact that – especially in the era of digital technology – we do not always encounter works *as works*, i.e. that, even if we are in front of a painting or are listening to a musical work it does not necessarily mean that we are treating them as the kinds of objects a hermeneutical approach presupposes.

In summary, hermeneutics regards interaction with works of art as a ‘dialogical’ process, in which it is crucial that we encounter them in such a way that we let them ‘speak’, i.e. ‘tell’ us something that is related to our actual lives but that we cannot determine ourselves. Insofar as we are able to do that, we may let them *reveal* something about the world or ourselves. Here the circle closes: what is at stake in art is how we can better know ourselves and the world we live in; however, this is not achieved via pure introspection (as with the Cartesian doubt or subjectivist approaches that take the emotional world of the subject as an absolute), but by dealing with an ‘Other’ over which we have no power, and to which we must give the space and the possibility to ‘shock’ us with a truth we might not be able to handle from the perspective of our conventional everyday views. As such, hermeneutics can be seen as an attempt to make possible again the experience of *thaumazein* we mentioned above (§2.4.3), and that, as we have seen, the own dynamics of *homo faber* in modernity had rendered superfluous or even undesirable (since this experience is by definition something he cannot control).

### 3.4 Art from the perspective of Arendt's idea of *action*

#### *3.4.1 Shift of focus: from homo faber to action – reading Arendt against Arendt?*

So far in this chapter we have dealt with art and questions related to art mainly from the perspective of *homo faber* in Arendt's sense. This seemed obvious enough, since it is not possible to conceive the study of art without dealing with *works of art*, which as such belong to the domain of *homo faber*. As we have seen, this classification of works of art as belonging to the domain of *homo faber* was more problematic than it seemed at first sight, not least because of the ambiguities and aporias of the modern *homo faber*. In fact, the modern *homo faber* is quite different from pre-modern one: while *homo faber* originally made products and put them in the world, where they were allowed to stay and in some sense have their own life, the modern *homo faber* makes even more products, but these are not allowed to 'stay' in the world, they are treated as 'Bestand' or 'standing-reserve', and therefore at the same level as any other things, and condemned to be consumed in some way and thus 'disappear' rather sooner than later. In fact, modern technology constitutes a kind of 'self-denying' *homo faber*. To a great extent art in modernity articulates in relationship to this 'problem'. We have examined the complex ways art can articulate itself in the face of modern technology. Furthermore, we have briefly explored some major implications of the underlying assumption implicit in the idea of dealing with art from the point of view of *homo faber* that sees experience of art as a relationship between an object and a subject, and have identified hermeneutics as the approach that tries to face the inherent problems and aporias of this assumption in a more enlightening way.

Now we must question whether dealing with art from the point of view of *homo faber* (which is in one way or another the common denominator of a vast majority of approaches to art), and especially the implicit subject-object dialectic is sufficient or even adequate at all if we want to understand how we want to articulate art in a meaningful way today. One central problem of the subject-object model is that we are dealing here with a highly asymmetric relationship, where sooner or later

one will try to ‘dominate’ the other. And this ‘one’, of course, is the subject. Quite literally, the new technologies – I would say, especially the internet because of the possibility to make millions of works of art available at no cost with just a few mouse clicks – have given no chance to the object. The worse thing is that we might still think that we deal with objects (in the sense of hermeneutics, i.e. as something able to ‘speak’ to us), but very often we actually deal only with *shadows* of objects, or, insofar as we take the effort to study works of art, with constructs of objects, not with something we can share with other people. At most, they can provide – beyond some kind of personal enjoyment – a kind of individual illuminating experience.

These are the (rather unpleasant) questions hermeneutics faces today. As enlightening as a hermeneutical approach may be, it can also lead to a dead-end. I think that one of the main problems of Heidegger and Gadamer is that they look too much to the past (and maybe to an idealised one). Heidegger’s works seem to see the solution in a return to a kind of pre-modern world where we may be able again to get a glance on the Being of things. His disastrous incursion in politics (and his ulterior refusal to apologise in any form for having been a member of the Nazi party), apart from raising serious questions about his ethics and his role as a citizen, may also indicate both a lack of touch with the society he lived in and a deep pessimism about can really be done in this kind of society. And the way Gadamer speaks in *Truth and Method* about the ‘great ages in the History of Art’ (‘die großen Zeiten der Geschichte der Kunst’, Gadamer 1990: 87) as something located in an undefined past also invites us to think that the most we can aspire for is to ‘rescue’ something that has already been lost.

Another problem of virtually any subject-object model is that by nature it will tend to create also a divide between our ability for contemplation and our ability for *action* (in Arendt’s sense, i.e. not just as fabrication), as if they were two totally separate realms.

In the face of this dead end one possibility is to get rid of the subject-object framework altogether.<sup>23</sup> However, in the rest of this section I am going to try to sketch a different framework, namely one that integrates the most illuminating aspects of a hermeneutical approach into a larger whole in which what ultimately matters is not a subject-object relationship,<sup>24</sup> but the possibilities of communication and action between at the level of a subject-subject relationship. In other words, we are going to explore questions related to art not from the point of view of *homo faber*, as we have done so far in this section, but from the point of view of *action and speech* in Arendt's sense.

At first sight, this might sound like reading Arendt against Arendt, since, as we have seen, in *HC* she locates art in the realm of *homo faber*, the fabricator of the artificial objects that constitute the human world (she even considers art works as 'the worldliest of all objects'). However, a closer look at *HC* shows that her views on art – even if they are barely spelt out in most cases – are more sophisticated than that. First, at some point – when discussing the process that led to the emergence of a 'labourers' society', where 'whatever we do, we are supposed to do for the sake of "making a living"' (Arendt 1998: 126) – she acknowledges the fact that in a labouring society

not even the "work" of the artist is left; it is dissolved into play and has lost its worldly meaning. The *playfulness* of the artist is felt to fulfil the same function in the laboring life process of society as the playing of tennis or the pursuit of a hobby fulfils in the life of the individual

(Arendt 1998: 128, my emphasis).

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<sup>23</sup> This is what the post-modernist movement tried to do in the 1980s. Post-modernist represents a 'movement against totalising reason and its subject' (Wellmer 1985: 50-51).

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the problems implicit in this subject-object polarity is actually recognised by hermeneutics. For Heidegger, 'modern aesthetics presupposes the subject/object dichotomy and then problematically tries to describe the subsequent interaction between two allegedly heterogeneous domains, instead of recognizing and seeking to describe the prior role works of art play in the background of our everyday worldly engagement.' (Thomson 2011: 56)

This means that, as long as we understand art as a kind of *playfulness*,<sup>25</sup> we are in the realm of the *animal laborans*, not *homo faber*. Already in the late 1950s, as Arendt wrote *HC*, she put in doubt that modern society, especially when it definitely takes the form of a labouring society, is able or even willing to accept and preserve the character of ‘durability’ and ‘permanence’ inherent to works of art, and without which they are reduced to mere *playfulness* (which would obviously correspond rather to the status as commodities).<sup>26</sup>

Second, in some places she also discusses artistic activities in relationship to action and politics: for example, she accords great importance to storytelling in action and politics (ibid.: §35) and in relationship to Greek drama she says that ‘theater is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art’ (ibid.: 188). This already suggests that for her art is not just a matter of *homo faber*. Moreover, this link between art and the sphere of action and politics becomes much more clear in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* (where she treats both – art and politics – in a quite unconventional way, as we will see later).

However, apart from the (often short) explicit mentions to art in *HC* and elsewhere there is an even more important reason – derived from the own nature of ‘work’ as one of the three main human activities – why it is ultimately not possible to understand art exclusively from the point of view of *homo faber*. We remember that the main task of *homo faber* is to build an artificial world in which the life of men is ‘housed’, i.e. in which a human life is possible in the sense that men are able

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<sup>25</sup> (Interestingly, Arendt and Gadamer understand play/playfulness in quite opposite ways. For Arendt, this ‘playfulness’ means more or less the dissolution of the contents, i.e. the element of thought present in the work of art. For Gadamer, *Spiel* (‘play’) refers precisely to how the work of art unfolds itself. ‘Wenn wir im Zusammenhang der Erfahrung der Kunst von Spiel sprechen, so meint Spiel nicht das Verhältnis oder gar die Gemütsverfassung des Schaffenden oder Genießenden und überhaupt nicht die Freiheit einer Subjektivität, die sich im Spiel betätigt, sondern die Seinsweise des Kunstwerkes selbst.’ (Gadamer 1990: 107) ‘When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, but the mode of being of art itself.’ This ideal of *Spiel* is based on the paradigm of the *Kulthandlung* (‘ritual act’, ibid.: 121), not on sport, and therefore has an inherent *Ernst* (‘seriousness/gravity’, ibid.: 107).

<sup>26</sup> She is somewhat ambiguous on this matter. In some places, it might seem that she wants to be optimistic: shortly before the quotation just discussed she says that in a labouring society, where all professions are levelled down to the status of labour, ‘the only exception society is willing to grant is the artist, who, strictly speaking, is the only “worker” left.’ (Arendt 1998: 127)



to live ‘with’ each other and not just either ‘for’ or ‘against’ each other; this idea of ‘togetherness’ is the basis for action and speech in Arendt’s sense, in which the crucial thing is the ‘disclosure of the agents’ as distinct and unique beings. I described the main contribution of *homo faber* in terms of a ‘surplus’: he makes objects of many different kinds, which in some way serve to fulfil manifold purposes; however, those objects – especially if regarded not individually but as a whole – also provide something that was not initially *planned* before they were made. In some sense, these objects become ‘alive’ themselves, they irradiate an ‘atmosphère d’humanité’ that allows men to understand themselves not just from the point of view of the determinism of nature, but from the point of view of their condition as unique and free beings sharing a common world – in fact, we could even say that this ‘atmosphère d’humanité’ *instigates* this shift. Men are then able to relate to each other in a new way: they do not need to think all the time about satisfying the needs of their bodies (this is the task of the *animal laborans*), and they do not need to justify their activities in terms of a *purpose* outside those activities (as *homo faber* does); they can just *act* and *speak* with each other. And here is where the problem arises: men relating to each other in this way *need* the world erected by ‘work’, they need *homo faber*, but *homo faber* is not able to understand why, according to his categories, action and speech – the most human of all activities – are at most futile and at worst dangerous.

To be sure, if the realm of *homo faber* also includes the realm of art, he will know something about how to deal with ‘uselessness’. However, as we have seen, especially in modernity this outspoken ‘uselessness’ of art – its ‘autonomy’ from other realms of life, which is much more ambiguous than it seems at first sight – very much articulates itself (in different ways) in relationship to the forms of dominance of modern technology, i.e. to the paradigms of modern science and utilitarianism, which ‘enframe’ every thing they encounter, reducing it to mere ‘Bestand’ or ‘standing-reserve’ (in fact, as we have tried to illustrate, it is difficult to understand the development of art in modernity if we choose to ignore its multiple connections with the development of technology). Put in a very simple way, this

‘uselessness’ of art can only be understood in relationship to the very special kind of ‘usefulness’ that has become paradigmatic in modernity.

The point here is that, if it is not possible to understand the importance for a human life of the world erected by ‘work’ from the categories of the same *homo faber* who has build it, the same will apply to art, that is, it will be ultimately not possible to understand the importance of art from the point of view of *homo faber* – even if it is a very ‘artistic’ *homo faber* –, i.e. in terms of objects (as special as they may be), made by artists and perceived by and exerting an impact on subjects.

Speaking about art from the perspective of action and speech in Arendt’s sense (that means, not primarily in terms of ‘works’) therefore seems more than adequate, even if we are not really used to do so since this means actually ‘suspending’ the kinds of categories we typically rely on when we focus our reflections on art works. At this point one may wonder whether this kind of relativisation of works of art does not represent another path to subjectivism, especially if we say that in action and speech what matters is the ‘disclosure of the agents as unique beings’. But, as I hope I will be able to make clear in what follows, works do *not* disappear. What we want to do is just to understand them from a subject-subject perspective, that is, from the point of view of the kind of communication among unique beings that allows them to disclose themselves as a ‘who’, an interaction that would not be possible without the presence of a man-made world (which includes works of art), but which we cannot grasp from the ‘what’-related concepts we use to speak about works.

I will divide the task into three main areas. First, I am going to consider works of art as a part of the artificial human world erected by *homo faber* and how they affect action, as it were, in a passive way. Second, we are going to get a bit closer to the works and see how they constitute themselves a space in this human world where men gather and actively and consciously interact with the works; crucially, since we are looking at things from the point of view of action, what interests us here is not how each man deals with works *individually*, but how men do so *collectively*, so that ultimately it is not just an interaction between individuals and

works, but *among men*. Finally, we are going to see how art itself can be understood not just as a form of ‘making’ but as a form of action in Arendt’s sense.

### 3.4.2 Works of art as a part of the ‘life-world’

In the previous sections I have extensively discussed the archetype of *homo faber* and his task of building an artificial, relatively permanent work where a human life is ‘housed’. (Certainly, the modern *homo faber* in some sense denies his products this quality: as already discussed, modern technology has to a great extent blurred this sense of stability of the external world, for instance by producing more products and faster than ever, and thus ‘shortening’ the lives of all things we can see. However, we can assume that it has not done so completely, otherwise it would be difficult to conceptualise this phenomenon of world alienation at all. We will therefore put this problem aside for a moment.) Basically, this world allows men to live *together*:

To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.

(Arendt 1998: 52).

Regarding Arendt’s concept of the human world, Canovan says that ‘it is clear that art rather than technology provides her model’ (Canovan 1992: 109). In fact, it is not difficult to see the origin of this idea in Heidegger, concretely in *The Origin of the Work of Art* when he talks about the Greek temple. ‘Werksein heißt: eine Welt aufstellen. Aber was ist das, eine Welt?’<sup>27</sup> (Heidegger 1960: 40) It is clear that this ‘world’ set up by man-made objects (such as the Greek temple) cannot be explained in terms of the dead materiality or even the shape of those objects.<sup>28</sup> As such, the

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<sup>27</sup> ‘To be a work means to set up a world. But what is it to be a world?’ (Heidegger 2011: 108)

<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that this aspect of the work of art (as something that sets up a world) precedes to and therefore is more essential than the fact that may actually be treated ‘as a work’ or as

world cannot be ‘seen’; to put it like that, it has more to do with the ‘air’ around it<sup>29</sup>, which allows men be at home – to ‘dwell’, ‘sich aufhalten’ – in this world. In fact, it creates a ‘space’ (*Geräumigkeit*) for *meaning*.

Welt ist nicht die bloße Ansammlung der vorhandenen abzählbaren oder unabzählbaren, bekannten und unbekannten Dinge. Welt ist aber auch nicht ein nur eingebildeter, zur Summe der Vorhandenen hinzu vorgestellter Rahmen. *Welt weltet* ... Welt ist nie ein Gegenstand, der vor uns steht und angeschaut werden kann ... Indem eine Welt sich öffnet, bekommen alle Dinge ihre Weile und Eile, ihre Ferne und Nähe, ihre Weite und Enge ... Indem ein Werk Werk ist, räumt es jene Geräumigkeit ein.<sup>30</sup>

(Heidegger 1960: 40-41, emphasis in original)

As Arendt insists, in such a permanent world each man is able to appreciate his human life in its finitude (and therefore in its uniqueness), that means, with a beginning and an end, and not just as a part of a species integrated in the ever-recurring life-cycle of nature. This point is also mentioned by Heidegger:

Das Tempelwerk fügt erst und sammelt zugleich die Einheit jener Bahnen und Bezüge um sich, in denen Geburt und Tod, Unheil und Segen, Sieg und Schmach, Ausharren und Verfall – dem Menschenwesen die Gestalt seines Geschickes gewinnen.<sup>31</sup>

(Heidegger 1960: 37)

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‘art’: ‘The artwork, in Heidegger’s view, far from depending upon the artworld (its public, its theories of interpretation, its pursuit of the history of art), is what makes a world possible.’ (Dahlstrom 1994: 131)

<sup>29</sup> ‘Das sichere Ragen [des Tempels] macht den unsichtbaren Raum der Luft sichtbar’ (Heidegger 1960: 38) ‘The temple’s firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air.’ (Heidegger 2011: 107).

<sup>30</sup> ‘World is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are at present-at-hand. But neither is it a merely imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things. The *world worlds* ... World is never an object that stands before us and can be seen ... By the opening up of a world, all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and limits ... A work, by being a work, makes space for that spaciousness.’ (Heidegger 2011: 108-109, translation slightly changed)

<sup>31</sup> ‘It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human beings.’ (2011: 106).

Crucially, for Arendt this world and the space it creates is the basis for ‘the existence of a public realm into which things can appear out of the darkness of sheltered experience’, and even says that ‘even the twilight which illuminates our private and intimate lives is ultimately derived from the much harsher light of the public realm.’ (Arendt 1998: 51)

Therefore, before we talk about works of art in terms of ‘what’ they are themselves, i.e. in terms of their contents, it is important to appreciate a more fundamental thing they provide, which is this ‘space’ in which men can *appear* as unique beings. As it seems clear, if we usually fail to appreciate this is because in the moment art works (and anything else) appear to us as something meaningful, we *are* already in this space, at least to some extent. To be sure, this is a feature that works of art share with all other things, and the usual line we normally set between the realm of art from the rest of things is of no much use here, since, with regard to the ‘setting up’ of a world, the difference between art objects and ‘common’ objects would be rather one of degree. However, we can see the importance of art for this common space if we carry out a small thought experiment. We can try to imagine a city in which there are no works of art at all. No paintings, no sculptures, no museums anyway, no books on the shelves in the living rooms, no libraries, no films and no cinemas, no music sounding. All buildings have exactly the same shape and the same colour, and they, as well as all everyday objects – clothes, tables, cars – are designed exclusively to fulfil their function. Obviously enough, what people living in this city would be missing cannot be explained in terms of what they are not able to ‘consume’. What they would be missing would be this *space* in which they can come out of the darkness of their isolated lives (which would be the lives of members of a species, not ‘individual’ lives), and relate to other fellow human beings on the basis of togetherness.<sup>32</sup> In a more ‘normal’ city, this space is already

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<sup>32</sup> The closest versions of such a city in the real world can maybe be found in the former communist countries; it is therefore not a surprise that, as has become apparent since the fall of communism, many people in those countries just grew up with a lack of a sense of ‘togetherness’.

there, even while we do not pay attention to works of art, and even for those who do not care at all about any kind of art works.

To be sure, this space – what we often call ‘culture’, and for which Husserl coined the term ‘life-world’<sup>33</sup> – is not ‘neutral’; as a space, it has *limits*, i.e. limits to the modes of appearance that are possible in this space and to the ways men can relate to each other within this space. This means that this space also can have an ideological and repressive element. It is not my aim to undertake here a critique of modern mass culture, but it is important to note this contradiction (in fact, this dialectic) that is so typical of modernity: in principle, man-made things set up a world, that is, a space where human beings can appear and relate to each other as distinct beings; however, at some point, this very human world promotes among men and even forces them to use this space to live rather as member of a species (as we could say, a sub-human form of life), if only in an ‘enhanced’ way.

We must not forget that, as tempted as we might be to study the effects of this or that kind of art (architecture, music, etc) on the views of people about their own lives, it is ultimately not possible to elucidate this relationship in causal terms with conclusions of the type ‘pop culture makes people live a consumerist lifestyle’, not least because ‘non-pop’ culture could not guarantee the opposite (which is what could be expected if the relationship were causal).

Another important thing, however, is that men can also become conscious of the limits posed by their own life-world and *change* them. Since, as those limits are the result of both the ‘work’ of men in the past and the conflict of those limits with the views and hopes of men in the present – otherwise they would not appear as limits – they are, at least in principle, both disputable and changeable. This, however, requires men to deal with them actively and *collectively* – which brings us to the next level.

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<sup>33</sup> See Mohanty (1995: 73f) Smith (2007: 343ff), and Sokolowsky (2000: 146ff).

### 3.4.3 Works of art as a special 'meeting place' for men within the human world

In the previous paragraph we have discussed the presence of works of art, as it were, in the 'air' we breathe, regardless of whether men pay attention or not to their specific 'shape' or 'contents'. Seen that way, works of art are on the same level as any other man-made objects. Initially, dealing with this aspect of works of arts therefore seemed trivial; however, the example of the phantom city has made apparent how important is the 'surplus' works of art provide beyond the mere functionality of objects. Moreover, the life-world of all cultural objects is not neutral: it also poses limits – in some cases in a repressive way – to the kinds of lives men lead in the very space those cultural objects create. This sounds 'deterministic'; however, men are not just *passively* affected by them; they can also actively and critically engage with those cultural objects, and, especially, with works of art.

I think that one way of understanding the concept of 'autonomous art' in modernity in a positive way is not if we try to explain it in terms of special 'features' of the works themselves, and not even in terms of the social function for which works have been created – in a word, not in terms of *homo faber* but in terms of the 'space' they open *within* the existing human world. I would describe this space as a 'meeting place' in which men gather and interact with each other, share their experiences, and maybe also discuss matters that affect their common life. It is a kind of special space in which they can *criticise* the limitations posed by the outer space, that is, a space from which they see that they are not just determined by them, but that they can *re-shape* them. In some sense, works of art may act as *institutions* in civil society (regardless of whether art works are 'officially' autonomous or not). In fact, when two people meet in front of a painting, for example, Picasso's *Guernica*, and discuss something that appeals to both of them, they are creating a mini-community around a common concern; they may leave it like that five minutes later, or this mini-community may grow and at some point reach beyond its own limits towards the world 'outside', for example, if these two people (and others that

may have joined in the meantime) are able to relate these discussions to questions that affect their lives and the lives of others, in this case, for example our attitude towards war in general, or towards the legacy of the catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup> Crucially, at this point these discussions are not just about matters of purely subjective feelings or opinions ('the personal views' of each individual), but happen in a horizon of 'truth' and 'untruth' (it would be for example highly disputable to say that Picasso's *Guernica* represents an idealisation of war), even if in most cases reaching a definitive agreement will be impossible, and actually also pointless. In any case, those two people are entering a relationship that was not possible *before* they met in front of the painting.

But I think that it is also possible to see things the other way round: institutions in civil society are also similar to works of art in the sense that they also represent ideals that are formulated in statutes, around which men gather, and whose effect and implementation on the world they actively discuss when they interact with each other. I would not like to not push things too far – works of art do not demand from people that they adhere to their ideals or their 'statutes', not least because they are not explicitly stated and are themselves open to discussion. Nevertheless, I think that it might be very enlightening to understand both – works of art, when they are really able to 'summon' people in this way, and institutions in civil society – in relationship to each other.

In the previous paragraph we said that works of art, through their mere presence, determine in some ways the lives of people; here we say that they also may create a special space where people can meet and discuss things and shape themselves the world they live in. But this kind of ambiguity is typical, I would even say *constitutive*, of art (and culture in general), and something that cannot be grasped from the point of view of the works themselves, precisely because it is *us* who need to choose whether we are happy with a passive, uncritical attitude towards them, or

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<sup>34</sup> Of course, this reference to the world outside the work itself is possible also when the work does not explicitly offer this way, as might for example be the case of Kandinsky's abstract paintings. In such cases, how to relate the work to the world outside may have the issue to be discussed.



rather want to take a more active and critical stance, which must eventually be directed towards the common world we share, that is *beyond* the explicit and limited realm of the works themselves. We may say that they offer us this space for this critical thinking – something that must ultimately happen *between men*, not just between each individual and the works.

(We can only absolutise the deterministic side of culture and art if we regard them from the point of view of ‘work’ and *homo faber*, not action and speech, which are by nature ‘unpredictable’, which means that a new perception of things, a new beginning, is always possible, at least in a latent way. It might be argued that the kinds of frontal critique of art and culture conducted in Western philosophy, from Plato’s *Republic* to Adorno’s critique of mass culture, may indicate a high degree of mistrust precisely towards the possibility of creating a new beginning by engaging critically – and collectively – with the products of culture.)

We are going to examine some aspects of this ‘special place’ that works of art offer to men who want to adopt this critical (and at the same time constructive) attitude towards the world they live in.

a) *Two forms of experience: Erlebnis vs Erfahrung.* As we have seen, men can gather around a work of art, but this still does not mean that they are discovering things together, that they are learning to look to the world or even adopting a critical attitude towards it. Even if they talk about the impressions the work provokes in them, they may remain just that, impressions, that is, experiences that are primarily private and not shareable with other people. At this point it is useful to differentiate between two kinds of ‘experiences’. On the one side, we have these raw impressions, changing and rather disconnected between themselves. This corresponds to the idea of *Erlebnis* as ‘fragmented “lived experience”’.<sup>35</sup> But, as I tried to illustrate above, the work can enable another kind of experience, in which

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<sup>35</sup> Paddison 1993: 187. For the English translation of the terms and for the whole idea of the differentiation between ‘*Erlebnis*’ and ‘*Erfahrung*’ as understood by Adorno and Benjamin I am relying here on Paddison 1993: 187 and 213ff

men are able to understand themselves and the world they share in a different way. This would correspond to the idea of *Erfahrung* as ‘integrated “interpretive experience”’ (Paddison 1993: 187).

For Gadamer, ‘Erleben heißt zunächst “noch am Leben sein, wenn etwas geschieht”.’<sup>36</sup> The *Erlebnis* is therefore primarily a kind of ‘confirmation’ that we are alive, which obviously comes as a form of pleasure; in them, life as such affirms itself. *Erlebnisse* are ephemeral and evanescent in character; however, an ‘enhanced’ kind of *Erlebnis* might in some sense transcend its own moment and become something ‘unforgettable’ and ‘unrepeatable’ (Gadamer 1990: 73). In virtue of this, the *Erlebnis* became in the Romantic aesthetics ‘ein Moment des unendlichen Lebens.’<sup>37</sup> Consequently, ‘die Grundlegung der Ästhetik im Erlebnis führt zur absoluten Punktualität, die die Einheit des Kunstwerkes ... aufhebt.’ (ibid.: 101)<sup>38</sup> That means, strictly speaking in the *Erlebnis* we do not have the work of art in front of us, but only disconnected small parts or ‘atoms’ of it.

*Erfahrung*, in contrast, confronts us with our own limitedness: with what we do not know, with what we cannot control.

In der Tat ist, wie wir sahen, Erfahrung zunächst immer Erfahrung der Nichtigkeit. Es ist nicht so, wie wir annahmen (Gadamer 1990: 360). Die eigentliche Erfahrung ist diejenige, in der sich der Mensch seiner Endlichkeit bewußt wird. An ihr findet das Machenkönnen und das Selbstbewußtsein seiner planenden Vernunft seine Grenze (ibid.: 363).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Gadamer 1990: 66, ‘Experience [Erleben] means first and foremost, “to be alive when something happens”.’

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.: 75, ‘a moment of eternal life’. Gadamer is quoting Schleiermacher here, but the model he is criticising is rather that of Nietzsche. What interests us here is not whether or not he was doing justice to Schleiermacher – his view of Romantic aesthetics might be too one-sided – but the fact that his critique does apply to many implicitly or explicitly ‘Romantic’ views about art that are based on this kind of *Erlebnis* that makes us transcend everyday life and puts us in a different, ‘eternal’ realm. For a discussion on some aspects of Gadamer’s view about Schleiermacher and Romantic aesthetics see Bowie 1997.

<sup>38</sup> ‘The grounding of aesthetics on experience [Erlebnis] leads to the absolute punctuality, which suspends/revokes the unity of the work of art.’

<sup>39</sup> ‘Experience is initially always experience of nothingness: something is not what we supposed it to be’. ‘Real experience is that whereby man becomes aware of his finiteness. In it are discovered the limits of the power and the self-knowledge of his planning reason.’ (transl. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall)

This distinction between experience as *Erlebnis* and experience as *Erfahrung* parallels in some way that between the agreeable (*das Angenehme*) and the beautiful (*das Schöne*) in Kant's Third Critique. Needless to say, the consumerism typical of modern society tends to reduce *Erfahrung* and *das Schöne* to the idea of *Erlebnis* and *das Angenehme*, since it is this latter that can be created, measured and exchanged in a more 'effective' way.<sup>40</sup> In our context, they represent the difference between the realm of the *animal laborans* and that of action and speech. Crucially, the works created by *homo faber* can 'mediate' in both senses, that is, they can be regarded as sources of *Erlebnisse* – and as such, they are at some point treated as *Bestand* or 'standing reserve' – or alternatively we can put aside for a moment this logic of *animal laborans* and allow them to appear as objects with a unique identity that congregate men for an *Erfahrung*. In the first case, works are something totally unstable and 'unreliable', ultimately dependent on our needs and desires. In the other case, they are a source of (relative) stability that allows our changing inner nature to receive a sense of direction and, crucially, to come out its own 'darkness' and be shared with other people, resulting in a renewed view about the world we also share with them. (Gadamer expressed this stability of the work of art relative to our changing subjectivity in a quite radical way: 'Das "Subjekt" der Erfahrung der Kunst, das was bleibt und beharrt, ist nicht die Subjektivität dessen, der sie erfährt, sondern das Kunstwerk selbst.'<sup>41</sup> (Obviously enough, this was a conscious reversal of Kant's idea of the transcendental subject as 'the condition of possibility of objects'.)

I would like to insist – since I think this has been recognised but not sufficiently highlighted by philosophers in the hermeneutic tradition – that the difference between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* is ultimately a matter of my relationship not to the work, but to other people (and this is why I think it is useful to regard such

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<sup>40</sup> When we hear that art has nothing to do with 'truth' because it is only supposed to be 'beautiful', what is implied here is actually 'agreeable', that kind of experience that is essentially subjective and that cannot be shared with others.

<sup>41</sup> Gadamer 1990: 108. 'The "Subject" of the experience of art, what remains and perseveres, is not the subjectivity of the one who experiences it, but the work of art itself.'

issues from the point of view of Arendt's idea of action). Whether I want to stay within my own subjective world of changing sensations or I want to see how I can share them with other people – which means that 1) I need to *articulate* them and put them into a discursive language; 2) the experiences of others become equally important to me, and I therefore need to *listen* to others beyond my own private experiences; and 3) I need to stop the intrinsic tendency of *Erlebnisse* to reproduce themselves and demand for more – is something I cannot arrange with the work alone. The works just gives me the possibility to shift from one to the other, and to carry out the discussions with other people once the new space set up by the work has been recognised and accepted. What matters is, at the end, the kind of views we can share, what we all can *see* (only those views can be the basis for common action).

As strange as this might initially sound, the difference between *Erlebnis* and 'Erfahrung' therefore depends on *participation*, and that means: participation in a common 'endeavour' with other people that may – or may not – result in a different, better (more adequate, more humane) conception of things. This is, by the way, the 'antidote' to both purely subjective *Erlebnisse* and the (solipsistic) paradigm of objective knowledge in the sciences.

The ideal of objective knowledge which dominates our concepts of knowledge, science, and truth, needs to be supplemented by the ideal of sharing in something, of participation ... This possible participation is the true criterion for the wealth or the poverty of what we produce in our humanities and social sciences.

(Gadamer 2001: 40)

b) *Dialogue*. We could conclude that, if *Erlebnis* is a kind of personal, non-shareable and punctual experience that focuses more on the intensity than on the contents, *Erfahrung* is a participative, discursive and therefore a transsubjective one. *Erlebnis* is self-sufficient, while *Erfahrung* points beyond itself – which does not imply that it is just a means towards an end, since its 'effect' is the result of a kind of *questioning*

(not just the solution to a problem) and is therefore essentially unpredictable – and potentially has implications for the life we share with other people: for our relationships with them, for our views about the world, for what we take as the normative horizon for our actions. For this reason, the *Erfahrung* explicitly or implicitly involves questions related to truth (unlike the *Erlebnis*, which is much more about intensity, i.e. about quantity).

Here we encounter again, if in a different form, the dichotomy between the ‘monological’ and the ‘dialogical’ paradigms of truth we mentioned in the previous chapter. We have just said that the *Erlebnis* is not interested in truth, but this is precisely the point. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the paradigm of truth of the natural sciences and modern technology is a ‘one-way’ one: it tries to eliminate every kind of ‘doubt’ that may arise from outside by imposing its own infallible, mathematical view on things, so that, at the end, it does not know what is given, i.e. disclosed to us in reality, but what it ‘creates’ itself. Since this form of knowledge denies reality – which is something ‘alive’, in the sense that by definition it emerges as the result of a multiplicity of perspectives that can never be exhausted, and for which human plurality is therefore a necessary condition – its results are something ‘dead’. On the one side, this means that the subject is left at the mercy of its own ‘inner world’ and its nightmares (every emotion that cannot be communicated can potentially turn into a nightmare); on the other side, in order to avoid its own ‘deadness’, this ‘objective’ knowledge ‘recycles’ itself in the form of technology – that is, as a means towards an *Erlebnis*,<sup>42</sup> which provides both a sense of an ‘enhanced life experience’ and with that a ‘confirmation’ for its own paradigm. Once we have the *Erlebnis* the question about truth becomes totally superfluous, but this is only the consequent result of the idea of truth as something we can appropriate and therefore create ourselves. For someone who only talks in the form of monologues, the very concept of *conversation* will become superfluous at some

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<sup>42</sup> The *Ge-stell* or ‘enframing’, by means of which we see everything as *Bestand* or ‘standing-reserve’ is actually a means to see everything potentially as a source of *Erlebnis*.

point, at least as long as he or she finds some kind of incentive to continue with his or her monologues.

Here I have just essentially retold the same story I told before when discussing the evolution of *homo faber* in modernity in relationship to the paradigm of modern technology, but this time as regarded from the point of view of art. I think it is important to see that essentially *the same* may happen – basically, the same process from a solipsistic, monological idea of truth (e.g. regarding what art works *are*) that finally finds its justification in an ephemeral sense of *Erlebnis* – when we deal with art and aesthetics, which often claim to be just the *opposite* of modern technology.<sup>43</sup>

In order to understand the nature of an *Erfahrung* as something of a dialogical nature and therefore essentially different from an *Erlebnis* we therefore need to understand what ‘dialogue’ can mean in art, since this idea also has its pitfalls. Gadamer links his idea of *Erfahrung* to the ‘Erfahrung des Du’ or ‘experience of the Thou’ (Gadamer 1990: 364). This means that we do not treat the work of art as an object, but as a conversation partner. We do not want to ‘dominate’ it, but interact with the work on the basis of a ‘dialectic of reciprocity’ (‘Dialektik der Gegenseitigkeit’, *ibid.*: 365), where we treat it as a person who has something to say to us, and whom we cannot completely know. The question is: *who* is this person? Gadamer identifies this Thou in the work of art with what is usually called ‘the historical consciousness’ (‘das historische Bewußtsein’, *ibid.*: 366), or, more simply, the ‘tradition’ (‘Überlieferung’).

Ich muß die Überlieferung in ihrem Anspruch gelten lassen, nicht im Sinne einer bloßen Annerkennung der Andersheit der Vergangenheit, sondern in der Weise, daß sie mir etwas zu sagen hat.<sup>44</sup>

(Gadamer 1990: 367)

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<sup>43</sup> This is an example of a kind of ‘alignment’ between art and technology, as discussed in the previous chapter. Even there where we hope to be protected from the dictatorship of modern technology we can actually live according to the same paradigm.

<sup>44</sup> ‘I must allow tradition’s claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness, but in such a way that it has something to say to me.’

For Gadamer, this way of dealing with the tradition gives us the possibility to re-interpret it, i.e. to understand it *differently*, and at the same time to better understand ourselves. I would say that this kind of experience allows us to *criticise* tradition, i.e. to see as changeable and contingent what we once (usually in an unconscious way) accepted as ‘given’ and ‘natural’.

This idea of dialogue with the work, however, as enlightening as it is, has one problem, namely that it relies on an essentially asymmetrical relationship. Even if I manage to suspend my belief that the work is an object and treat it like a person and try to listen to what it wants to tell me, the work wholly depends on *me* to keep this status as a quasi-person, and, unlike a person, it remains ultimately defenceless if I want to impose my needs and my views in order to hear what I want to hear. Then the question arises of how fast this can revert into another form of solipsistic experience (maybe seasoned with some *Erlebnis*). Moreover, the relationship with tradition is by nature also an asymmetric one, since, consciously or not, we know that its views exert a certain power over our life.<sup>45</sup>

For this reason I think that this dialogical nature of my interaction with the work must be understood *together* with the kind of dialogue I can enter with other people in the space set up by the work. In other words, this dialogue with the work (a subject-object dialogue after all) can enable a true *Erfahrung* and can have a meaning at all if it is articulated on the basis of a subject-subject dialogue. This might sound like an individual person alone would not be able to understand a work by studying it and doing research etc. But this is the point: I *need* other people, since only in the plurality of views and perspectives the work can emerge *as a work* in the sense that it is something (in some way ‘someone’) we cannot ‘dominate’ anymore and that therefore can ‘tell’ us something<sup>46</sup> (that is, something that is not reducible to

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<sup>45</sup> It might be argued that Gadamer gives too much authority to tradition; in fact, this was one of the points of dispute in his debate with Habermas. See How 1995.

<sup>46</sup> Pöggeler relates Heidegger’s notion in *The Origin of the Work of Art* regarding the ‘ability’ of works of art – in this case Van Gogh’s painting of the peasant’s shoes – to ‘speak’ to the idea of ‘myth’: ‘Heidegger does not speak about “myth”, but he uses equivalents when he says that van Gogh’s painting “spoke”. The painting spoke; in other words, it brought the experience of shoes and of the use of shoes in different periods of history back into the specific language of the arts’ (Pöggeler 1994: 119). I would say that the kind of intersubjective, participative experience I am

our own projections). To be sure, for this to happen it is not enough that many people gather around the work, since a group of people can also impose its needs on a work and thus ‘kill’ the possibility of any kind of dialogue (actually this phenomenon is not rare at all). The condition is that they understand themselves as *acting* beings, that is, that they relate to each other as equals and recognise (and appreciate as something valuable) the plurality of their views, and that they approach the work in a *questioning* attitude.

We can connect this to Heidegger’s idea of the ‘preservation’ (*Bewahrung*) of the work. Obviously enough, this idea of preservation has nothing to do with protecting a material object against decay. ‘Das Werk ein Werk sein lassen, nennen wir die Bewahrung des Werkes’<sup>47</sup> (Heidegger 1960: 67). The spontaneous question that arises here is: and *what* do we have to do to ‘let the work be a work’? Obviously, there is no right and secure ‘method’ to do that, not least because the idea of experience in the sense of *Erfahrung* is essentially connected to the happening of something unexpected. Heidegger does not positively say ‘what’ we have to do, but he provides a hint in a relatively obscure passage that becomes much more intelligible if understood from the point of view of Arendt’s idea of action:

Die Bewahrung des Werkes vereinzelt die Menschen nicht auf ihre Erlebnisse, sondern rückt sie ein in die Zugehörigkeit zu der im Werk geschehenden Wahrheit und gründet so das Für- und Miteinandersein als das geschichtliche Ausstehen des Da-seins aus dem Bezug zur Unverborgenheit.<sup>48</sup>

(Heidegger 1960: 69)

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trying to describe here precisely overcomes the ‘mythological’ overtones implicit in the idea that works of art might ‘speak’, since it is rather the fact that they represent common concerns, as well as the fact that human plurality is essential to their unfolding *as works* that they are able to ‘speak’, i.e. to *reveal* us something. As I mentioned before, the broader framework provided by Arendt’s idea of action represents a way of escape out of such ‘mysterious’ or ‘ghostly’ aspects of Heidegger’s (and sometimes also of Gadamer’s) hermeneutics.

<sup>47</sup> ‘This letting the work be a work we call preserving the work.’ (Heidegger 2011: 123)

<sup>48</sup> ‘Preserving the work does not reduce people to their private experiences, but brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work. Thus it grounds being for and with one another as the historical standing-out of human existence in relation to unconcealment (Heidegger 2011: 124-125)



This means that the ‘beneficiaries’ of this preservation are ultimately the ‘preservers’ themselves, in the sense that they are able to come out of the loneliness of their private, subjective *Erlebnisse* and live their plurality (Heidegger always refers to ‘the preservers’, *die Bewahrenden*, in the plural<sup>49</sup>); even if Heidegger does not say it with these words, this ‘being for and with each other’ (*Für- und Miteinandersein*) must necessarily entail a co-operative *dialogue* among people, since a *Miteinandersein* where people do not talk to each other (or where they communicate primarily in order to express and satisfy their needs) would just be a contradiction in terms. We can therefore say that this dialogue among ‘preservers’ – which never reaches a definitive form and must constantly be re-generated and re-shaped – is both the condition for (at least in the sense that the preservers are open to it) and the result of the dialogue with the work. In other words, the dialogue with the work has a meaning if it translates into a new layer in the dialogue with people; if it is taken for its own sake it will most likely revert into the kind of subjectivism it seeks to overcome.

c) *From subjectivism to ‘enlarged mentality’ and ‘sensus communis’*. One could argue that we are following here a kind of circular argument: we said that the work of art sets up a space in which people can relate to each other on the basis of Arendt’s paradigm of action, and then we said that the work, in order to appear in such a way, needs people around who are willing to understand themselves as acting beings. The point is that this understanding of people as acting and speaking beings – as opposed to people pursuing the satisfaction of personal needs, or trying to achieve pre-determined goals – is not something we can achieve once and for all; moving into this area is not just like going from A to B, it is rather like getting into a continuous process, maybe a circular one in which the focus constantly moves from

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<sup>49</sup> According to Dahlstrom, this more intersubjective conception of truth in *The Origin of the Work of Art* represents an evolution in relationship to *Being and Time*: ‘According to *The Origin of the Work of Art*, an artwork institutes an existential truth, but, in contrast to the existential truth elaborated in *Being and Time*, it is the truth of a “historical people”, grounding their “being-for-and-with-one-another”.’ (Dahlstrom 1994: 132)

the work to the acting beings themselves. From the point of view of *homo faber* – who thinks in terms of means and ends, and when the end is achieved, the process is finished – this appears as ‘aimless’. However, this kind of interaction at two levels – among acting beings themselves and between themselves and the work – has a certain *telos*, even if one of a different nature than those of *homo faber*, in the sense that it is at the same time a path and a goal.

As Heidegger says,

Die Bewahrung geschieht in verschiedenen Stufen des Wissens mit je verschiedener Reichweite, Beständigkeit und Helligkeit.<sup>50</sup>

(Heidegger 1960: 69)

Again, if we were to understand this primarily on the basis of a subject-object relationship, we would easily mistake this for a kind of process in which we hope to discover little by little the hidden ‘essence’ of the work. Instead, we should understand this on the basis of a subject-subject relationship. We may find a key for this – via Arendt – in Kant’s idea of *sensus communis*. As I have mentioned before, in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* Arendt discusses the *Critique of Judgement* in a quite unusual way, primarily not as a work in aesthetics, but as Kant’s most relevant work of political philosophy.<sup>51</sup> Already the fact that this reading is unusual says something about our understanding of both politics and art as two essentially incompatible realms, one focusing on norms, and on consensus-based, goal-oriented collective action<sup>52</sup> and the other on subjective, essentially private experiences (which in most cases means *Erlebnisse*), or at most on the idea of an individual development in the sense of *Bildung*. The idea of the *sensus communis*, however, brings both under the one roof and makes it apparent that,

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<sup>50</sup> Preserving occurs at different levels of knowledge, with always differing degrees of scope, constancy, and lucidity (Heidegger 2011: 125)

<sup>51</sup> Tellingly, the nine essays contained in the volume *Kant’s political philosophy: interpretations and applications* (Ellis ed.: 2012) treat many different issues in Kant’s political philosophy but contain virtually no substantial mention to the *Critique of Judgement*. The only time this happens is precisely in relationship to Arendt’s unconventional reading of the Third Critique (Ferguson 2012: 127).

<sup>52</sup> As long as it remains an essentially teleological action aimed at satisfying the needs of citizens it is not action in Arendt’s sense.

while politics and art are obviously not the same thing, it is actually not possible to understand the one without the other.

One interesting point Arendt makes is that in the Third Critique Kant deals with crucial ‘leftover questions’ from previous works, against the more widespread view that understands Kant from the point of view of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and sees the *Critique of Judgment* as a rather complementary, if not incidental, work. For Arendt, if Kant had not carried out his shift in focus from the quite solipsistic idea of ‘Man’ as a ‘reasonable being’ in the first two Critiques to the idea of ‘men’ as ‘earthbound creatures, living in communities’ (Arendt 1982: 27) his work would have remained somewhat incomplete. It seems that in some sense she sees the idea of the ‘sensus communis’ as the culmination of his work,<sup>53</sup> and not only because of its intrinsic value, but because of the long way that preceded the formulation of this idea in the Third Critique. For Arendt, ‘it is the very humanity of man that is manifest in this sense’ (ibid.: 70). The *sensus communis* in Kant’s and Arendt’s sense has therefore little to do with what we usually understand as ‘common sense’, which we rather associate with what ‘everyone’ thinks, the ‘average’ opinion, something that might be necessary in practical terms, but that needs to be overcome if one wants ‘to be oneself’.

Unter dem *sensus communis* aber muß man die Idee eines gemeinschaftlichen Sinnes, d.i. eines Beurteilungsvermögens verstehen, welches in seiner Reflexion auf die Vorstellungsart jedes anderen in Gedanken (a priori) Rücksicht nimmt, um gleichsam an die gesamte Menschenvernunft sein Urteil zu halten und dadurch der Illusion zu

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<sup>53</sup> This relatively high rank she accords to the idea of *sensus communis* – arguably not his most glamorous idea – within the Kantian philosophy is probably the most provocative element of Arendt’s interpretation of the *Critique of Judgment* and Kant in general. The contrast with more traditional interpretations becomes apparent if we look at Guyer’s major account of the Third Critique (*Kant and the Claims of Taste*), where he discusses the idea of ‘sensus communis’ rather in relationship to technical and epistemological questions such as communicability of knowledge (Guyer 1997: 251) or the question of whether ‘sensus communis’ is to be understood as regulative or constitutive (ibid.: 264-265).

entgehen, die aus subjektiven Privatbedingungen, welche leicht für objektiv gehalten werden könnten, auf das Urteil nachteiligen Einfluß haben würde.<sup>54</sup>

(Kant 2006: B157)

The *sensus communis* or ‘sense of community’<sup>55</sup> does not represent a ‘deficit’ in relationship to my subjective experiences – only from the point of view of a blind individualism that takes such private, subjective experiences as something absolute is it possible to see it this way. On the contrary, the ‘sensus communis’ represents a ‘surplus’, as is apparent in Kant’s idea of the ‘enlarged mentality’ (*erweiterte Denkungsart*): I am able not just to view things from my perspective, but also to put myself in the place of everyone else,<sup>56</sup> and through this multi-perspective things appear under a different light. Importantly, this does not mean that I renounce my own subjectivity and passively submit to the opinion of everyone else; on the contrary, the other people need my *active* participation, that I am able to think for myself and in accordance with myself (that means, even if my view differs from that of others). This is summarised in the three ‘maxims of the *sensus communis*’:

1. Selbstdenken; 2. an der Stelle jedes anderen denken; 3. jederzeit mit sich selbst einstimmig denken. Die erste ist die Maxime der vorurteilsfreien, die zweite der erweiterten, die dritte der konsequenten Denkungsart.<sup>57</sup>

(Kant 2006: B158).

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<sup>54</sup> ‘By *sensus communis*, however, must be understood the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment.’ (transl. P. Guyer and E. Matthews)

<sup>55</sup> Although Pinkard – unlike Arendt – understands the idea of a *sensus communis* primarily from the point of view of aesthetic experience, he links this idea to that of the ‘kingdom of ends’: ‘Something like the “kingdom of ends” thus seems to be at play in aesthetic judgment, except that the “kingdom of ends” involves the use of concepts (there are indeed moral rules and reasoned moral arguments), whereas aesthetic experience does not involve concepts.’ (Pinkard 2002: 75)

<sup>56</sup> ‘Culture is not what the work means to me; it is about the meaning the work has beyond my immediate response and how I position my response in relation to that larger meaning.’ (J. Johnson 2002: 80)

<sup>57</sup> ‘1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everyone else; 3. Always to think in accord with oneself. The first is the maxim of the unprejudiced way of thinking, the second of the broad-minded way, the third that of the consistent way’ (transl. P. Guyer and E. Matthews).

(3) *Art itself as 'action'*. So far we have discussed works of art as a 'condition of possibility' for action, in the sense that they may bring together men that, through the collective interaction with the works, are able to interact with each other in a different way, since in this 'space' created by the works they can become (partially) free from the kinds of interests and constraints that characterise human relationships in everyday life. This allows them to adopt a critical attitude towards the world they share, and to change their views about it (which is the condition for action based on freedom, as opposed to what we do out of necessity, just by uncritically adhering to established views). Now we are going to see how art itself – as we would say, the 'creative act' of art – can be seen as a form of *action*, and not just a form of 'making', of 'producing' something (which it also undeniably is).

Since we are talking about action (in Arendt's sense), and action, strictly speaking, can only occur in the openness of the public realm, we are ultimately dealing with the political sphere. We are entering a murky territory here. The idea of a connection between art and politics awakes in the collective memory the remembrance of negative experiences, some of them linked to the most horrible catastrophes of the past century. Here I want to put into question the underlying assumption of this aversion to linking art and politics (which arguably became the common view after the Second World War)<sup>58</sup> and offer a different perspective on the matter.

In fact, what makes us wary of this connection – and for good reason – is the idea that art can be used for the implementation of a political agenda, or, more generally, to bring together the masses e.g. against a common external enemy (real or unreal) and make them blind with regard to the true intentions of their leaders. This is what happened with the totalitarianisms (and still happens today, if in a more subtle form). But this corresponds to an idea of politics and action as a form of 'making' – quite common in the Western civilisation – of the sort Arendt criticised,

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<sup>58</sup> We note here that the relegation of art from the political sphere has not prevented the use of art in mass manipulation.

as we have seen above. In this case, art is only a means towards an end just as any other such as sport or education.

Crucially, the instrumentalisation of art cannot be overcome if we relegate it from politics into the strictly private sphere, or if we put it in a different realm (and if this realm is not in the world we share, where will it be?) by saying that art is ‘an end in itself’. Instead, I would argue that *any* action of *any* artist, insofar as he or she does something that affects the views of his fellow citizens and that may change their perception about the common world we all share – and for which the artist may be criticised – takes place in what Arendt called the ‘web of human affairs’ and therefore *constitutes* a form of action. For this reason, it is not about deciding where to ‘put’ art, whether in this realm or in the other, as if it was a piece of furniture that can be transported from a room to another, but about *acknowledging* that it happens in the world we share, and that we therefore have to take responsibility for what we do when we deal with art (as with all things), since it might actually affect the our ‘web of human affairs’ in one way or another (this is also valid for artists themselves, who often do not like to admit that rules that govern the co-existence with other fellow human beings also apply to them).

When Picasso painted *Guernica* for the World’s Fair in Paris in 1937, he was responding to the bombarding of a small city in Northern Spain by German fighters during the Spanish Civil War some months earlier.<sup>59</sup> This painting confronted people with the horrendous reality of a war in which only the side employing the highest amount of brutality would eventually be able to win. Importantly, the ‘action’ here cannot be equated with the ‘work’: the ‘work’ is the ‘object’, which can still be seen in the Museum of Contemporary Art Reina Sofía in Madrid, and which still can confront us with questions related to the Spanish Civil War and other wars. The ‘action’ was rather a relationship between Picasso and some of his fellow citizens (from whom he would also receive the most varied responses), which in turn

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<sup>59</sup> The intervention of Nazi Germany (and the Italy of Mussolini) – in support of Franco’s troops and against the legality of the democratic regime of the Second Republic was no less brutal than the actions of the Communists they pretended to defend the Spanish people from and eventually proved a kind of game-changer in the war.

motivated further actions among them (the fact that we cannot register and analyse them in causal terms does not mean that they did not take place, as if everything had been exactly the same if Picasso had chosen to paint an ancient Spanish King on his horse instead of the *Guernica* for the World's Fair in Paris). 'Action' here does not mean merely 'expression', which is by nature a 'one-way' phenomenon, but a kind of contact with fellow human beings on the basis of a 'two-way' exchange. And, of course, the 'action' cannot be reduced to (or even be explained in terms of) the 'intention' of the artist: it might have happened that the painting had awoken views on people that Picasso himself did not have. Once the work is in the world, what men do with it is pretty much outside the reach of the artist (think for example about the 'reception' of Goethe's *Werther*...).

a) *Works of art as records of actions.* We have just touched one of the reasons why Arendt recognised that art is important also for politics.

These stories [i.e. the stories of acting men] may then be recorded in documents and monuments, they may be visible in use objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked into all kinds of materials.

(Arendt 1998: 184)

(Interestingly, we find here again the distinction between objects 'officially' considered as works of art and the rest of objects as one of degree, not nature.)

This does not just mean that works of art contain 'information' about deeds of human beings in the past. Even more important is the fact that they *disclose* those actions *as actions*, that is, as stories enacted by men disclosing themselves as a 'who', not just as a 'what'.<sup>60</sup> This is probably the most important aspect, even more than the fact that works of art explicitly refer to actions that actually took place, as in the case of the *Guernica*. When Cervantes wrote his novel *Don Quixote* he was

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<sup>60</sup> Arendt says that works of art regarded under this perspective 'are not products, properly speaking' (ibid.)

certainly not recording the stories of a real man of his time, but he was indeed disclosing what ‘action’ meant for many people in Spain at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which in turn offers us the possibility to think about how we understand ourselves in relationship to its contradictions and aporias, but also the appeal made on men by this paradigm of action. In other cases, the work of art does not disclose action as such but its absence, or the repression – and the suffering associated to it<sup>61</sup> – that prevents people from being free enough to act as unique beings (Picasso’s *Guernica* also reflects this).

In the same way, other non-representative forms of art (including music) offer this disclosure of actions as actions. Of course, imaginative interpretation is needed here, but a kind of interpretation – that is, an integration of the *questions* of the work in the horizon of our own life – is necessary *anyway*.

*b) The work of art as a beginning.* One of the central concepts of Arendt’s idea of action – and of *HC* as a whole – is her idea of *natality*, the ability<sup>62</sup> men have to take initiative, to begin things, to achieve the unexpected. Arendt does not explicitly connect this idea of natality to works of art, but I think that there is a quite enigmatic idea in Heidegger’s *The Origin of the Work of Art* – that of *Stiftung* or ‘founding’ – that very much illuminates her idea of ‘beginning’ and that makes it apparent that what is implied with natality might be better understood from the point of view of art. (Conversely, I think that Heidegger’s idea – as many of his ideas in general – is also better understood in the context of the explicitly political meaning of Arendt’s idea of action, even if he himself would probably not have approved of this reading.)

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<sup>61</sup> This would correspond to Adorno’s idea that art may ‘give voice to suffering’.

<sup>62</sup> Rather than an ability it is actually a way of looking at men, quite opposed to the deterministic world view of the natural sciences – and in part that of the social sciences too –, which leaves little or no room for ‘beginnings’, i.e. for unexpected actions.



Das Wesen der Kunst ist die Dichtung. Das Wesen der Dichtung ist aber die Stiftung der Wahrheit. Das Stiften verstehen wir hier in einem dreifachen Sinne: Stiften als Schenken, Stiften als Gründen und Stiften als Anfangen.<sup>63</sup>

(Heidegger 1960: 77)

First, this experience of art represents a ‘surplus’, an ‘overflow’, in relationship to what we would have expected from it before: ‘Die Stiftung ist ein Überfluß, eine Schenkung.’<sup>64</sup> (Heidegger 1960: 77) This means that the most valuable thing in it is something we cannot provoke; even the most intense *Erlebnis* has nothing to do with this overflow if we are able to find the way to reproduce it again and again. Second, it creates a new ‘ground’, that is, it sets a new standard for future experiences. This means that the experience does not disappear into oblivion; on the contrary: our views on some things will never be the same as they were before. And third (consequently), all this implies a new beginning. ‘Immer wenn Kunst geschieht, d.h. wenn ein Anfang ist, kommt in die Geschichte ein Stoß, fängt Geschichte erst oder wieder an.’<sup>65</sup> (ibid.: 79)

Importantly, this possibility of enacting a new beginning through art is not exclusive to artists as creators (actually the fact of ‘making’ a work of art does not guarantee any kind of ‘beginning’); rather, this is a prerogative of ‘preservers’: ‘Stiftung ist aber nur in der Bewahrung wirklich.’<sup>66</sup> (Heidegger 1960: 77)

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<sup>63</sup> ‘The essence of art is poetry. The essence of poetry, in turn, is the founding of truth. We understand founding here in a triple sense: founding as bestowing, founding as grounding, and founding as beginning. (Heidegger 2011: 129)

<sup>64</sup> ‘Founding is an overflow, a bestowal.’ (Heidegger 2011: 130)

<sup>65</sup> ‘Whenever art happens – that is, whenever there is a beginning – a thrust enters history; history either begins or starts over again.’ (Heidegger 2011: 131)

<sup>66</sup> ‘Founding, however, is actual only in preserving.’ (Heidegger 2011: 129)

## Chapter 4      Music and the Human Condition

### 4.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters we have made quite a long journey. To a great extent this was made possible by Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, a work that in many senses emerged as a response to totalitarianisms; or rather, to the fact that they were possible *precisely* in modernity. While the confluence of factors that led to the most dreadful episodes in human history was certainly a unique event, those factors – imperialist capitalism driven by the idea of 'expansion for expansion's sake', the repression of inner nature and the contempt for what makes each human being unique, the unprecedented technological progress that seemed to make possible humanity's dreams, the belief that men can 'make' history and even change human nature as they please, the corruption of the elites – taken as a whole and individually, constituted typically modern problems that demanded not just new responses, but new *kinds* of responses. We started with Arendt's attitude towards those questions. Instead of embracing a new 'grand narrative' that would re-establish the legitimacy of modernity, or getting rid of the project of Enlightenment altogether, she tried to define what is precisely at stake with modernity: the possibility that men may be able to live in a space where they can disclose themselves as distinct and unique beings (i.e. the very possibility totalitarianisms had tried to eradicate). As paradoxical as this may sound, this is possible only insofar as men are willing to accept their condition as 'earthbound creatures', i.e. in which they are 'conditioned' (if not totally determined) by things they cannot control.

This led us to Arendt's account of human activities, which she divides into three broad groups (that basically correspond to the three basic 'conditions'): labour, work and action. As we have seen, what matters here is not merely 'what' we do in

each case or ‘why’ we do it, but also how the different categories of these main activities inform our understanding of the world we live in and the kinds of relationships we build to other fellow human beings. For this reason Arendt often speaks not just in terms of activities as they would be empirically recorded and analysed, but in terms of paradigms – the *animal laborans*, *homo faber*, and action and speech – that can virtually determine the meaning of *any* kind of activity. (Thus, a specific activity such as writing a novel can be seen in terms of labour, work or action.) Most importantly, these paradigms are not immutable ‘essences’ – Arendt insists that there is no such thing as a ‘human nature’. Indeed, they have been transformed in modernity. We went through the story of the rise of *homo faber* in modernity and his search for absolute certainty that led him to ‘mathematise’ and eventually to ‘create’ reality himself. This resulted in the typical modern phenomenon of world alienation, and in the ‘victory of the *animal laborans*’: if labour had traditionally been confined to the sphere of the private realm, now labour was seen as ‘the source of all wealth’, and for this reason as the ultimate force driving human relationships in the public realm. Ironically enough, modern technology did not lead men to free themselves from the burden of labour, but to see everything in terms of labour and consumption and thus to ‘commodify’ everything.

However, questions posed by modern technology – the new face of *homo faber* in modernity – also led us to ‘the other side’ of *homo faber* as the fabricator of artificial objects. We examined the multiple relationships between technology and art (relationships that cannot ultimately be explained either in ‘artistic’ or ‘technological terms’) and their possible implications; then we examined the problems arising from discussing questions related to art primarily from the point of view of *homo faber*, especially the aporias inherent in the subject-object model as the basis for the experience of art. This moved us towards a shift of focus, from the categories of *homo faber* to those of action in Arendt’s sense, which allowed us to understand this subject-object relationship – action, unlike the *animal laborans*, *needs* an objective world that both relates and separates men as unique beings – from the point of view of subject-subject relationships whose nature cannot be

explained in terms of *homo faber*, i.e. by means of the usual categories we commonly rely on when we refer to works of art. Moreover, we saw that works of art actually *need* themselves this plurality of men interacting with each other in order to be ‘objective’ at all, i.e. to appear as ‘works’, that is, as objects beyond our control that are able to ‘tell’ us something about ourselves and our world that goes beyond the mere projection of subjectivity. From this perspective, art can be seen not just as something *made* by men but as something that happens *between* men, i.e. as a ‘space’ where they can relate to each other in ways that may help them overcome the constraints posed by everyday life and its obsession with labour and consumption, and that may allow them to disclose themselves as ‘beginnings’.

In this chapter we are going to follow a similar path, but we will relate those questions to questions about how we experience and understand music today – more concretely, symphonic music. My main aim is to show how we can use Arendt’s account of the human activities and her model based on the subdivision in three main areas (labour, work, and action) and their corresponding paradigms (*animal laborans*, *homo faber*, and acting men), as well as the fate of each of them in modernity, to understand how we can articulate our musical practice today in ways that allow us to make sense of the world we live in. Many of the ideas and different approaches to music I will discuss in this chapter will be familiar to anyone who is used to thinking about music; since this is not a dissertation directly concerned with musical aesthetics, my aim is not to discuss them in detail, but to identify some of their characteristic implicit assumptions and integrate them into a larger whole (based on Arendt’s model) that allows us to see the dialectics between the different approaches, to understand their inherent aporias, and – insofar as possible – to find ways out of them.

For this purpose I will use as a starting point a ‘case study’, albeit a particular one, since it will be about an *imaginary* musical event: Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony played by a well-known orchestra in a prestigious concert hall, maybe one in a major cultural centre in a Western country. My aim, of course, is not primarily to discuss Beethoven’s piece, e.g. how it might be performed, its reception

among the public, etc; as such, the fact that this event may involve something we call a ‘work’ (an idea that can in turn mean many different things) is only one possible aspect of this event. Rather, what I want to elucidate – with the help of the insights we gained in the previous two chapters – is what happens among all participants in this event, how their expectations may ‘contribute’ to its meaning, how they are in turn affected by it, what kind of relationships may take place between them, the ‘choices’ they make (especially those that cannot be expressed in musical terms) and, of course, how Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony may *appear* in each case. In this regard, I am less interested in a typology of listeners such as the one offered by Adorno in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*,<sup>1</sup> than in the different ‘layers’ of meaning, i.e. what *conditions* the way we experience music. To put it this way, if I am taking a specific work and not just ‘any’ symphonic work it is not in order to study it, but in some sense to ‘deconstruct’ its absolute status as an ‘aesthetic object’ with pre-determined qualities that exists regardless of what people around it may do, a status that in many cases may obscure rather than enlighten the significance of such an event in the broader context of our lives. On the other side, I do not want to reduce the work (and the whole event) to the mere result of the motivations of participants, since the event may attain a meaning in their lives that cannot be explained in terms of their initial motivations.

At this point a quick remark on methodological matters might be opportune and useful, if not strictly necessary in view of the approach I have been following so far. When we talk about ‘case studies’ today we usually do so from the point of view of the social sciences. A quite obvious option today in the social sciences would be to use e.g. Arendt’s account of human activities as a basis for any kind of *empirical* research. An empirical approach would involve e.g. categorising groups or people (by age, occupation, income, ethnic background etc.) as well as the different priorities and expectations they may have when listening to music, and trying to elucidate by means of the appropriate tools (carefully designed questionnaires,

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno 1975: 14-34.

statistical methods, etc.) how they experience different kinds of music, or what they associate Beethoven's Seventh with, etc. If properly conducted, such an empirical study could for instance provide information about whether the *real* values (as opposed to the *stated* values) with which they associate their ideal musical experience are those of *animal laborans*, *homo faber* or *action* in Arendt's sense. It would therefore be primarily descriptive, although it could potentially be used by the music industry e.g. in order to better understand and address the 'needs' of the public.

At the methodological level, an empirical study treats all its initial 'ingredients' – different values, categories of people, ultimately also 'music' – as a *given*, that is, it takes them and their meaning for granted. If there is some ambiguity in those elements, the final result might correspondingly be ambiguous or just wrong. Therefore, it just tries to make associations between them so as to highlight certain aspects of some of those 'ingredients' that were not apparent at the beginning. Its process is linear and cumulative, and it has a beginning and an end. Needless to say, this approach has been imported from modern natural sciences; if I think it is worth mentioning it now that I am going to try to find a bridge between the *theory* we have been dealing with and the *practice* of our musical life, it is because this way of looking for knowledge (in fact, this limited idea of knowledge) as well as its paradigm of success is so embedded in our mentality that too often we fail to see that a 'leap' out of this apparently safe framework is necessary.

As I tried to explain in Chapter 1, the questions we are dealing with in this dissertation are located in a different 'space', one in which we just *cannot* take all those things for granted anymore; that is, they take into account the fact that we are in a period of *crisis* where the very foundations of what would constitute such an empirical approach (including its goal-oriented linearity and its paradigm of success) are *themselves* put into question. For this reason, I am going to take an approach – which I would say is basically the same as Arendt's – that contains both *phenomenological* and *hermeneutic* aspects.

A phenomenological approach involves some form of ‘categorical intuition’, in Husserl’s words. Put in common language, this means that the elements we find at the beginning of our research – physical or ideal objects, states of affairs, facts – are not there as *given*, but rather as a *question*, as a *problem*. We do not just perceive a tree that happens to be blue, but perceive ‘the being blue of the tree’, as well as ourselves being affected by that, e.g. by the fact that this may represent a unique event for most of us. We accept the tree, its blueness and ourselves *as questions*. In the present study: music, musicians, musical works, society, listeners – every idea we may have of each of these at the beginning will remain provisional and will be tested, reviewed, and maybe (hopefully) *understood* in new ways and therefore transformed during the process. In some sense we must ‘suspend’ or ‘put into brackets’ the meaning we accord to those words when we use them in everyday life – not in order to ‘deny’ it, but in order to elucidate how this meaning is *constituted*, often rather as the result of complex interactions between different layers of meaning that remained concealed to common, everyday experience (i.e. to what phenomenology calls ‘the natural attitude’, which is the basis for any empirical approach). For example, here we are not interested just in a ‘work’ such as the Seventh, but in its *being a work*, i.e. in the multiple ways it constitutes (or fails to do so) itself as a work.

The ‘hermeneutical’ aspect of this approach means that this ‘categorical intuition’ is not just carried out for the sake of a ‘pure’, unengaged contemplation of the outside world; the aim is to *understand our understanding* of the world, our ‘coping’ with this world, so that we may be able to articulate our relationship to it in new ways. This hermeneutical aspect therefore covers a wider space than our account of hermeneutics in the previous chapter, that is, it deals not just with our understanding of works of art, but with our understanding of everything we encounter in our life that makes it *meaningful*.

Just to be clear, with that I do not want to imply that empirical research *as such* is useless or that a phenomenological and hermeneutical approach is *per se* more valuable than empirical research. I think that empirical studies can provide

valuable insights, and that they can be very useful in counteracting the most important downside of an approach that ‘puts into brackets’ what the ‘natural attitude’ seems to take for granted, which is the danger of falling into the trap of solipsism. In fact, I think that both kinds of approaches can perfectly be complementary; the important thing is to acknowledge the inherent limitations of both. Furthermore, I will not strive for definitive conclusions here; rather, I would like to open new ways to think and debate about musical practice, to re-focus some questions, and to see how we could articulate this practice in different ways. Any kind of answers to the questions dealt with here will therefore be open-ended and open to discussion.

#### 4.2 Music and ‘life itself’

What is that makes Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony so popular? If we have a look on the concert programme of our imaginary event it is highly unlikely that we will not find there Wagner’s famous dictum that this work is the ‘apotheosis of dance’; this, in some sense, has become the ‘official’ characterisation of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony. According to that, this symphony is therefore not about any heroic ventures, struggles against destiny or mystification of nature; this time it is about something much simpler: just dance – and, in especially in the case of the last movement, we expect this dance to take an outspoken Dionysian, even orgiastic character. However accurate Wagner’s dictum may be, one thing seems clear: any intellectualist approach to this symphony will look helpless against the fact that this piece directly addresses the body’s impulses to live itself. This already sets an horizon to our expectations, which will have pretty much to do with a certain kind of bodily excitement. Indeed, even after an average performance of Beethoven’s Seventh it is difficult not to feel revitalised in some sense. Of course, we may also expect many other things, perhaps more ‘spiritual’ and according to what we associate with the concept of ‘high culture’. But I think it is difficult to deny the fact



that, for many of us, as long as we are not sensually ‘fed’ to a certain extent, all other ‘values’ will remain quite irrelevant.

We may find that the kind of ‘interpretation’ offered by orchestra and conductor explicitly addresses those ‘needs’. Thus, tempo indications such as *Vivace*, *Presto* or *Allegro con brio* are *directly* related to this character of the piece as an affirmation of life, and this will commonly mean that the orchestra, encouraged by a conductor full of energy and temperament, will play the symphony simply as fast and loud and it is physically possible, and this can be a fair amount, since the piece is not especially difficult from a technical point of view (nothing to compare with Strauss or Mahler). In other words, the idea of liveliness (implicit, for example, in the tempo indication – *Vivace* – of the main part of the first movement) will be interpreted in *quantitative* terms. Of course, there is also a second movement (*Allegretto*), where this ideal of ‘as much as possible’ cannot apply; but, if we think about that, we will see that this makes sense, since a bit of rest is necessary in order to be able to unfold the vital forces in full in the last movement.

Regeneration of vital forces, priority of abundance over quality, of *immediacy* over reflection: we are in the world of the *animal laborans*, as odd as it may seem if we think that we are dealing with one of the greatest exponents of European culture. However, the ideal of ‘life itself’ does not understand the difference between ‘high culture’ and the rest; at most, it will be a label, like those of ‘premium’ products – more elegant than the rest – we find in the supermarket. And the fact is that, seen this way, this event is just a part of a cycle of production and consumption. The meaning of this event might then be better *understood* in terms of our ‘labour life’. If we happen to be in the orchestra the performance will be, at most, like doing sport and, at worst, like doing some kind of unpleasant manual work in a factory. If we are among the public, this relationship to our labour life may happen in different ways; we may take this event e.g. as a reward (if we want to ‘treat’ ourselves after a stressful day), as a compensation (if we need to recover the feeling of vitality our job as taken away from us), or as a preparation for the next day (e.g. if we just need to relax, in which case we may enjoy more the

second movement, especially the central part in A major, or we may just regret that it is the Seventh and not the Sixth that is on the programme tonight). It might appear odd to talk about this event in terms of labour as ‘the metabolism of man with nature’, as Marx said; however, this kind of experiences are just as necessary for the cycle of labour as eating and sleeping: ‘*Panis et circenses* truly belong together; both are necessary for life, for its preservation and recuperation’ (Arendt 1960: 282).

In this sense, this event implicitly ‘competes’ with many other kinds of events we would not associate with music. Maybe, when we decided to go to the concert, we discarded other options like going to the pub with colleagues after work, or going to the gym, or taking a short holiday break for a spa treatment. In some sense, this event fulfils a similar function as these other options. Furthermore, it also competes with other ways of experiencing music. Even most of those among the public who still do not know that it is possible to download hundreds of versions of Beethoven’s Seventh *for free* will probably have one or two CDs at home with different recordings of this piece. This means that the live concert needs to offer some kind of ‘value added’ in relationship to the experience of listening to this symphony in our living room or on the tube. And this value added will most likely define itself in terms of *quantity*: the experience of sound in the concert hall, and the kind of ‘enhanced’ experience provided by the fact that there will be other 2,000 audience members listening to the same piece and reacting to it after its end by giving an enthusiastic applause. The *animal laborans* in us needs this kind of identification with its peers – ultimately with the species – to feel alive itself.

This event therefore fulfils its function primarily within a chain of mass production and consumption – in fact, it would not be *conceivable* outside this chain. This certainly does not sound very glamorous, but the culture industry to a great extent relies precisely on this need life feels in itself to be regenerated and reaffirmed again and again. And this is no surprise, since it is in this dimension – the dimension of ‘life itself’ – where results can be most easily be predicted and, in some way, quantified. In fact, if musicians and conductor play the symphony (especially the last movement) fast and loud enough, it is difficult to imagine that

they will not be rewarded with loud applause. And if this was an opera performance, there would surely be someone in the public measuring the length of the applause each singer receives and then comparing it with their ‘scores’ from previous performances.

How important this sense of predictability is – the fact that ‘suppliers’ of this kind of ‘experience’ need to be sure that they are delivering what the public ‘needs’ – is apparent in the fact that some concert halls – such as the Southbank Centre – offer in their websites, in the page containing all information about the event (date, venue, programme, tickets), a ‘sample’ with a recording of the works that are going to be played. Being confronted with something different from what one expected – no, this kind of ‘mistake’ must be avoided, that would be a ‘waste’, like the meal we have paid for but do not want to eat.

On the other side, this kind of experience cannot rely on predictability only; it also must rely on a sense of *novelty*. Even if we are listening to the same symphony again and again, we need to experience new things every time – be it a different venue, a conductor doing different movements or with a different thought, something ‘original’ in the interpretation, the work played with authentic instruments – otherwise the ‘vitality’ we associate to the piece will fade, and we will not find it appealing anymore. (Luckily, we have the possibility to renew our repertoire from time to time.) However, the curiosity this search for novelty entails has a limited scope, and, as paradoxical as this may sound, in most cases we will strive for the *same* kind of novelty again and again – something that can also be anticipated in some way by the culture industry.

And what happens with Beethoven’s Seventh? Does it have nothing to say about all this? As any other thing that is consumed, it *disappears* immediately, or rather, it is not allowed to appear too much, since we impose some needs on it that we consider more important than the work itself. In any case, the day after the event, this symphony will most likely be in the same place as the ice cream we had in the concert hall during the break. In the case that something has remained from the experience of the concert, it will probably be the same as if we had heard, say,

Mahler's Fifth, Tchaikovsky's Fifth, or Shostakovich's Tenth, all of which also finish with the orchestra playing fast and loud and can therefore be regarded as an 'affirmation of life' in a similar way to Beethoven's Seventh.

From a certain point of view it is easy to caricature this kind of musical experience, not least because the kind of performances resulting from an approach that takes too seriously this ideal of the 'affirmation of life itself' are too often just this, caricatures. However, it is completely pointless to be against the idea of entertainment as such, or to criticise the fact that the one of the purposes of the culture industry is to provide this kind of 'goods'. This would amount to denying our dimension as *animal laborans*, and would lead nowhere.

In so far as we are all subject to life's great cycle, we all stand in need of entertainment and amusement in some form or other, and it is sheer hypocrisy or social snobbery to deny that we can be amused and entertained by exactly the same things which amuse and entertain the masses of our fellow men.

(Arendt 1960: 282)

Moreover, a positive affirmation of life, even a 'Dionysian' moment, be it a small one, is always necessary if we even want to start to talk about music as something meaningful at all. We immediately acknowledge the importance of this essential affirmation of life if we recall how furious we can become when it is missing, for example, when we hear an orchestra playing mechanically the same piece they have played in the same way hundreds of times, or when we listen to a good orchestra playing in a concert hall with bad acoustics. The problem is, of course, when the ideal of the affirmation of 'life itself' is taken as an absolute; or when we use the label of 'high culture' or appeal to the 'spirituality' of art to differentiate ourselves from the 'masses', even if what we are doing is just another form of entertainment.

For this reason, even if we acknowledge and accept the role of our imaginary event in today's society as a form of entertainment and therefore as an element in a

chain of labour and consumption, as well as the constraints this implies, we also acknowledge the necessity, even the urgency, to think beyond this ‘logic’.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.3 Works

At some point we might notice that an experience based primarily on quantity does not fulfil our expectations anymore. We might then get interested in the works themselves, not just in their ‘effects’ or in the ‘experience’ they may enable us, and after some time studying Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony we might have gained some self-consciousness beyond our role as mere consumers, and this means that our expectations might have changed.

In that case we may ask questions such as: why do we need to play this piece so *extremely* fast? Beethoven uses in the fast movements three different indications: *Vivace*, *Presto* and *Allegro con brio*. If he had just expected that we play them all just as fast as it is physically possible, why did he not give the *same* indication for all of them, *Presto*, or even *Prestissimo*? In fact, given the orgiastic character we usually associate with the fourth movement, it can be quite annoying to realise that Beethoven actually wrote ‘only’ ‘*Allegro con brio*’. In order to understand this we might find it useful to *compare* this movement with the final movements of other symphonies. Where do we find a *finale* with the indication *Presto*? In Beethoven’s symphonies, *nowhere*. We must go back in time. We find examples in Mozart 35, 36 and 38, or Haydn 92. At first glance, what is different from Beethoven’s piece is that (1) the textures are much simpler and lighter, and (2) there is less contrast between the different thematic elements. If we have a little know-how as musicians this seems quite logical, since we know that the tempo is determined by the degree of (vertical and horizontal) contrast; roughly, the richer the texture (i.e. the more contrast between the different elements sounding simultaneously), the more time we

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson links the paradigm of commercial music – which also applies to the use of classical music primarily as entertainment – to the adolescent illusion that it is possible to give free reign to emotions and desires without any sense of responsibility. ‘Youth culture yearns for a prerational immediacy, that of the body, of libidinal energy, and for the luxury of blind, adolescent emotions without consequences or responsibilities. Ironic, too, is that popular culture presents a prerational consciousness as the absolute modern.’ (Johnson 2002: 60).

will need to hear and integrate all those elements into a consistent whole, otherwise we only hear a monolithic and undifferentiated mass of sound, as is often the case in Beethoven's Seventh Symphony. (This explains why the 4<sup>th</sup> movement of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony, a masterpiece in counterpoint, is *Molto allegro*, but not *Presto*, and why *Presto* movements often begin with a unison.) Also on the horizontal level there is a relationship between the amount of time we need as listeners and the degree of harmonic contrast. If we hear an harmonic succession a second time twice as fast as the first time, we do not experience the same contrast just faster, but just *less* contrast. Again, we observe in *Presto* movements that the harmony tends to be much simpler than in this case.

Indeed, in the present case (fourth movement of Beethoven's Seventh), we cannot speak of a simple texture consisting in a unison or a melody and a conventional accompaniment. From bar 5, apart from the (1) main voice in the first violins we have (2) a motor-character figure in thirds in second violins and violas which is nevertheless more than noise and which should not be covered by the rest of the orchestra, (3) a syncopated bass reinforced by horns, trumpets and timpani, in rhythmical opposition to the main voice, and (4) in the woodwinds, an upbeat-figure rhythmically opposed to that of the bass (which is in turn rhythmically opposed to the main theme). We might think that that the 'brio' of this movement arises precisely from this multiplicity of elements opposing to each other, rather than from the sum of all voices playing *con brio* individually. If we play it too fast, however, everything becomes an undifferentiated mass.

Besides, if we look at the harmony, the tension of the dominant (increased by the rests in bars 2 and 4) is held and enhanced during 7 bars through a pedal point that is resolved only in the eighth measure of the theme. Again, if we play it too fast, we might dissolve, not increase this tension.

The case of the first movement is even more subtle. If we look closely at the score, we see that Beethoven distinguished between three ways the main rhythmic cell is articulated: (1) without dots or rests, as at the beginning of the *Vivace* in the woodwinds (bars 63-66), or at the beginning of the development in the violins (bars

180-184); (2) with staccato dots in the shorter notes, as the first time the theme appears in the flute (67ff), or when the violins play the theme in the *tutti* (89ff); and (3) with a semi-quaver rest after the long note, as in the climax in the development (254ff). If we play it too fast we hear always the *same* through the whole movement (and). However, as we see, the composer seems to have given this rhythmic cell different meanings in each case. In some cases two of the mentioned ways of articulating this cell are superposed, as in the passage leading to the climax in the development, where woodwinds play (1) and strings play (3). Since (1), (2) and (3) represent three levels of articulation we might think that (in some cases) they indicate a difference between what happens in the background and what happens in the foreground. If we think a bit further we might reach the conclusion that, insofar as this movement is about ‘dance’ as an affirmation of life, this life is not something totally immediate and unambiguous that admits only variations in quantity, but something that shows different modes of presence, or, with other words, something that emerges and progresses out of an inner dialectic with itself. In this case, even the rests (just before the *Vivace* officially begins) have a meaning, there is a kind of ‘life’ in them. Those are dimensions the usual ‘all you can eat’ version of this symphony completely misses, where rests are just like holes in the cheese. Moreover, it is perfectly possible to translate these different ways of articulating the main rhythmic cell into different bowings in the strings, instead of playing *everything* in the same way (down-down-up, which very often creates undesired accents on every beat, so that we hear the movement not in 6/8 but in 3/8).

We have introduced a new element that was not present before, which is what is usually called ‘interpretation’. But of course, this very idea of interpretation entails its own problems. We might become a bit more ‘radical’ and think that, since we are dealing with works, i.e. with something that should not be conditioned by our needs and desires, there is actually no such thing as interpretation. Instead, we will think that what we need to do as performers is just to correspond to an ideal of what the work should look like, which is usually associated either with the first performance (in which we will need to do some research about how this piece was

played two hundred years ago), or with the score. In the latter case, the question about the right tempo is quite easy to answer – actually it is a superfluous question, since Beethoven's metronome marks admit no 'interpretation'. So for the *Vivace* in the first movement it is dotted crotchet = 104, and in the Finale it is minim = 72. If we are tempted to argue that these tempi are too fast, that we will not hear all the elements and differentiations that are in the score and are also a part of the work, we should remember that Beethoven was a genius and therefore knew better than us what was the best tempo for his works.

Here we are obviously speaking through the voice of *homo faber* all the time – or, rather, through different *voices* of *homo faber*, since in art, unlike in modern sciences, there are basically different ways of dealing with 'objects'. In any case, we were analysing, measuring, comparing, finding patterns, searching for quality criteria, and this is the realm of *homo faber*. In the previous section our imaginary event there were virtually only 'subjects', since, as we said, the work 'disappeared' immediately after the performance. Actually, if we want to exaggerate our description a bit, there were no distinct and unique 'subjects', but just one 'gigantic subject', in the sense that we were all basically going through the *same* experience; this subject was therefore closer to the idea of a 'species' than to the idea of individual and unique beings making *different* experiences and interacting with each other. Now, in contrast, we are dealing with works, that means, with relatively 'durable' objects that, at least in principle, transcend our own experience. We treat each of these objects as something that has been *created*, and for this reason we ask questions about the 'intention' of its creator (the composer). At the same time, these objects are just not 'there', they arouse questions in us and challenge us in different ways, so that the question of our *relationship* with them becomes unavoidable at some point.



#### 4.4 Two main kinds of musical homo faber

The move from the understanding of our event from the point of view of the *animal laborans* to the event as understood by *homo faber* was only possible through a kind of ‘mistrust’ towards this unambiguous affirmation of life itself. This mistrust was confirmed just after we looked at the work (i.e. at the score) more closely. In fact, things were not as we supposed them to be when we assumed the uncritical attitude of the *animal laborans*. In other words, our common view of things has been challenged in different ways. Sometimes *more* means *less*. For example, regarding the tempi. If the piece is played too fast, we might be missing the effect of the *contrast* between the different elements; we may try to compensate this loss ‘from outside’, i.e. by playing even faster and out of a state of overexcitement, but this will be like adding an extra portion of salt to an otherwise boring dish. We might also appreciate that this idea of ‘dance’ or ‘life’ is much less unambiguous than it seemed, that it might contain a kind of ‘dialogue’ within itself. And the rests: they also have a *meaning*, even if nothing sounds.

I would argue that this move was possible thanks to something comparable to the Cartesian doubt we discussed in Chapter 2. In some sense, we do not ‘trust’ our senses anymore, the work and therefore the whole event now appears as something *different* from the more ‘immediate’ view the *animal laborans* in us wanted to impose. We realise that the kind of sensual enjoyment may deceive us, i.e. it might be an obstacle rather than a helpful ally if want to discover the ‘truth’ of the work. Reactions to this experience might be very varied, all of them facing different questions and aporias. I would like to divide them into three broad groups. First, the most obvious possibility is to go back to the categories of the *animal laborans* and ‘enjoy’ the work again. In fact, it is not clear what the more reflective way of the *homo faber* may offer to us, and it seems obvious that one does not need to be an expert to be able to enjoy things; quite often expertise is even an impediment. Moreover, such an endeavour takes time that could be used for other things. (We should not rush to criticise this attitude, however; rather, we should ask ourselves

why many people – including many intelligent people – hold such an opinion of so-called *experts*.)

The other two broad attitudes we can adopt imply ‘accepting’ the objective character of the music works and correspond to two different paradigms in the way we can deal with them, or, in other words, to two different paradigms of *homo faber* in relationship to musical works. Of course, they can overlap and be combined in different ways, but I think it is useful to present them here as two different attitudes to appreciate the polarity between them.

On the one side, we can complete this move in a radical way, and take musical works as something *absolutely* objective, i.e. as something that is *totally* independent from us and our needs as subjects. We already encountered this attitude in the previous section in the voice of the one who saw no reason to change by one millimetre Beethoven’s metronome marks. (More on the issue regarding metronome marks later in this chapter.) This attitude parallels that of the modern natural sciences and their search for ‘absolute certainty’ and therefore represents a very modern phenomenon. Of course, this kind of attitude does not always lead to the same kind of ‘fundamentalism’ with regard to performance matters and the idea of the ‘Werktreue’; it can deal with other questions, for example that of the ontology of the musical work (is it the score? The sum of all performances? The intention of the composer? The sum of the sounds of the first performance?), or even that of the emotions in music (are they ‘contained’ in the work? Does the work ‘arouse’ these emotions in us?). However, the kind of ‘certainties’ it strives for can be compared to those of the natural sciences. Importantly, these kinds of questions would be unthinkable two hundred years ago, where the ‘works’ we are concerned with now were still ‘alive’; only on the basis that we are dealing with essentially *dead* objects is such an radical objectivistic approach possible. The most evident expression of this attitude in musical aesthetics can be found in an explicit way in many analytical approaches,<sup>3</sup> but it can also be found elsewhere in an implicit way.

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<sup>3</sup> For a critique of different kinds of analytical approaches to music see Part I in Goehr 1992.

On the other side, we can take a more ‘flexible’ and creative stance, one that does justice to both the object and the subject. Unlike the option we have just mentioned, this attitude does not take the work as an absolute, but rather as something that *emerges* from or even *takes place* in our interaction with it. We have also encountered this type in the previous section, when we briefly discussed questions such as those related to the different ways in which the main rhythmic cell appears in the first movement and the multiplicity of elements at the beginning of the fourth movement in Beethoven’s Seventh. This attitude combines both phenomenological and hermeneutical aspects applied to the understanding of the piece. Basically, a ‘phenomenological’ attitude recognises a ‘gap’ between our vision of music from the point of view of the ‘natural attitude’, which in our time very much corresponds to the world view of technology, and how we actually *experience* music. A simple example may illustrate this point. From the point of view of technology, we may think that the pitch of each note is mathematically determined, and that any deviation from it will be *wrong*. This means that, if the central ‘a’ is 440 Hz, the ‘a’ one octave higher will be 880 Hz, and the ‘a’ one octave lower will be 220 Hz. However, if we listen to music with our own ear and not with the ear of a tuning device, we will see that it does not dissociate pitch from timbre; for this reason, the same ‘a’ (440 Hz) will sound *higher* if played by a horn (since this tone is located in its most brilliant register) than if played by a violin on the d-string, or by a clarinet (where this tone falls in its darkest register).<sup>4</sup> The same principle may be applied to other parameters such as tempo and dynamics, as I have suggested above. For example, if we have a relatively long ‘accelerando’, it will probably sound rather artificial if we choose to do it strictly in a gradual way, from 0 to 100; instead, we could use some ‘strategic’ points in this passage (typically, where the harmony expands) to increase the tempo in a natural way, ‘from inside’, as something demanded by music, not imposed from outside as the result of an

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<sup>4</sup> The same way, a good piano tuner knows that the upper octaves must be tuned a bit ‘too low’ – otherwise they will sound too shrill – and the lower octaves a bit ‘too high’ – otherwise they will sound too dark.

‘order’. In the first case, the indication given by the composer is just this, an ‘order’; in the second case, it *reveals* something about the piece, which also means that this indication *needs* us – our interpretation, our own *understanding* of the piece – in order to sound as something ‘inevitable’ in some way. Also in music every phenomenon appears *as* something within a context.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the repetition of a motif means an increase in tension; sometimes the device of repetition is used to *resolve* tension. If we eliminate this aspect – the fact that music must rely on our understanding of it, i.e. in our ability to differentiate between repetition *as* a way to build tension and repetition *as* a means to resolve it – music becomes literally *meaningless*.

The point I want to make here is that this approach – which I characterised as ‘phenomenological’ since it focuses on works as they *appear* to us, as opposed to how they ‘are’ – recognises the fact that music works must correspond to our way of perceiving things as living beings (not machines) at least in the same measure as we must correspond to them as objective entities that cannot be reduced to what we happen to project on them. The *hermeneutical* attitude goes even a bit further. It does not just recognise that the rhythmic cell that is omnipresent in the first movement – a relatively long movement to rely mainly on a single immutable pattern – appears in different forms that need to be audible to the listener; it also asks what the opposition/contrast between these different forms of articulation means (as we have seen before, this cell appears in three different ways: without and with staccato dots, and with rests after the first note). The level of articulation, and the level of ‘activity’ and ‘presence’ and therefore the ‘vital impulse’ of this rhythmic cell is not always the same. Sometimes it affirms itself, sometimes it even expands, but sometimes it remains in the background, as a possibility, not as a fact. In fact, the contrast in the first movement very much relies on the opposition of this

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<sup>5</sup> It is this aspect of phenomenology that I am most interested in here, i.e. the fact that there is an essential difference between the ‘notes’ as we see them in the text and as ‘physical entities’ and our experience of music, which relies on this as-structure that often cannot be realised from the ‘letter’ of the text. The idea of phenomenology I am presenting here is much simpler than that presented by Dahlhaus (1982: 74ff) and of course than that of Ansermet (1989). In this regard I am not concerned with issues related to ‘a priori’ laws of our understanding that govern our perception of music.

main cell *to itself*, rather than on the contrast between clearly differentiated themes or even motives. As I pointed out before, this might suggest that, insofar as we are dealing here with something we can associate with an ‘affirmation of life’ (as is implied in Wagner’s description of the work as an ‘apotheosis of dance’), this ‘life’ is not an ‘immediate’ and one-dimensional thing, but rather unfolds through the opposition to itself (if we want to put it in Hegelian terms, through a kind of dialectic between ‘Sein und Nichtsein’). Crucially, each cell is not a self-contained entity anymore, something that is repeated to the point of exhaustion. A *discursive* element appears, there is an evolution, a *path*; relevant is not just what is ‘given’, what is already there, but what is ‘becoming’, what is *not yet* there.

In a similar way, at the beginning of the fourth movement we find that the meaning of each one of the four elements we mentioned before – the four ‘voices’ opposing each other – becomes apparent *only* if regarded in relationship to the other three voices. If we play the bass alone, for example, it will not sound like syncopated figures on the dominant, but like the tonic played on the first beat of the measure (of course, only in the eighth measure – when ‘e’ resolves into ‘a’ we will realise that it was actually a dominant, not a tonic.) If the voice the bass is opposing (the main theme in the first violins) is missing, its *meaning* becomes a totally different one. Generally, this means that each voice finds its meaning only in the whole, and that the whole cannot be explained as the sum of its parts. Paradoxically enough, if we want to hear each voice as distinct from the others, we must hear it *in relationship* to the other voices. If this relationship does not take place we will not hear four distinct voices, but just a main voice and *noise*.

The important point here is not whether these reflections are more or less accurate, but the fact that, at some point, if we want to remain consequent with this way of *questioning*, we need to dare a ‘leap’ outside the works. Through this kind of questioning we are letting appear Beethoven’s Seventh in such a way that it confronts us with questions that are not merely *musical* questions. For example, in the first movement our everyday idea of ‘life’ as something unambiguous that emerges through accumulation and self-affirmation might be challenged, and we

might start to believe that there is another kind of ‘life’. The same might happen with our experience of time. And the start of the fourth movement might start challenging our individualistic view that society is the sum of its individual members (or even that ‘there is no such thing as society’), where what everyone does has a meaning in itself, independent from what other people do. Here we notice that the more we deal with music, the less we are actually dealing with purely musical questions.

#### 4.5 The aporia of *homo faber*

In the previous section we have examined two opposed ways of dealing with music works. One of them – the radically objectivist approach – strives for a kind of ‘absolute certainty’ in the way we deal with them and therefore needs to take their objective character as absolute.<sup>6</sup> By doing so it creates a kind of ‘divide’ between subject and object; in some sense, the object is safeguarded from the effects of the interaction with the subject, but on the other side this ‘gap’ must be bridged in some way. One possibility is then to objectivise the relationship between the subject and the object *as such*, that is, to explain musical experience in similar terms as the natural sciences<sup>7</sup> explain physical and biological processes. In most cases, these explanations will take as a matter of course a mechanistic view imported from the sciences according to which musical experience must be explained in terms of the effects of a series of sounds ordered in a certain way on the subject that is perceiving these sounds. This, of course, does not make things better, and at some point it will be impossible to believe that works understood in this way really have something to

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<sup>6</sup> For a classical account of this kind of approach see Kivy 2002. He discusses the music work in terms of the type/token problem. Already the fact that the relationship of a work with its possible interpretations can be regarded as a ‘problem’ that can be solved in a certain way is indicative of the priorities of this approach. Not surprisingly, Kivy discusses musical performance – which he regards primarily as a ‘sonic-structure’ (ibid.: 216) primarily in terms of the correspondence with the score (ibid.: 224ff). For an even more detailed account of the kinds of problems related to the ontology of the musical work and their possible solutions see Dodd 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Kivy even compares the composition of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony with Newton’s discoveries of the laws of motion as expressed in the *Principia Mathematica* (Kivy 2002: 219).

do with us, or to recognise ourselves as living human beings in this kind of musical experience.

As we have seen, the hermeneutic approach tries to avoid this problem and to ‘bridge’ the gap between subject and object. According to its underlying model, both – subject and object – emerge *as such* in the ‘interaction’ with each other. Through a certain way of *questioning*, the work appears in a new way, both as something we cannot control, and as something that is trying to tell us something important about *ourselves* and the world we live in. However, precisely because of this, at some point this approach also faces a problem: the more we let music works ‘speak’ themselves, the more they will bring our attention towards something that lies *outside* of our relationship with them, that is, outside musical experience itself. The problem is that this ‘new’ relationship that is offered to us – i.e. that with the world outside music that involves a different way of looking at this world – cannot be understood and articulated in musical terms; to put it like that, at some point we need to give up music in order to ‘understand’ music. I think that many of us have made at some point a similar experience: after an exceptional concert, (one of those that arrive only from time to time), in which we participated as a part of the public or as performers – the difference does not ultimately matter – we notice, on the way home, or the day after, that the world just does not look as it did before. We know that this experience triggered something, but *what* has really changed is difficult to grasp, and the more we try to ‘recall’ what we experienced through this concert, the less we *understand* what has really changed in us.

These two attitudes are quite different; however, they obviously have one important point in common in relationship to the first paradigm we examined before (that of the *animal laborans*). In fact, through the move from the *animal laborans* to *homo faber* we have shifted our focus from the point of view of the one who enjoys music to the *expert*; from the ideal of ‘experience’ (taken as an absolute) to the work as something ‘autonomous’, from the needs of the subject to the multiple demands and challenges posed by object. In other words, we have also moved from the point of view of the passive listener to that of the *creator*, which is how *homo faber*

regards himself. Interestingly, in some cases the first type of *homo faber* we have just discussed – the objectivist one – takes the point of view of the *creator*, but *not* that of the composer, insofar as he regards music works (and musical experience in general) with the eyes of the natural sciences. The other approach – the hermeneutic one – seeks more explicitly the point of view of the composer, in the sense that it tries to understand his *language*, his reasons for using this motif in one way or another, the relationships between the different parts of the piece, etc.

The crucial aspect I want to highlight here is that *homo faber*, in any of his varieties, by nature tries to achieve some kind of *mastery* of the work. In one way or another, dealing with a work implies the aspiration to *know* more about it, to ‘appropriate’ it – and this also means, especially for the modern *homo faber*: to ‘dominate’ it. Even if the hermeneutic approach recognises the need to give up this ‘Herrschaftswissen’ (‘knowledge for domination’, in the words of Gadamer<sup>8</sup>) and find a way to treat the work as a ‘Thou’, that is, on equal terms, this ideal of ‘domination’ is implicitly present, at least as a temptation, every time we deal with a musical work and try to ‘understand’ it.<sup>9</sup> A further problem is that, as I discussed in the previous chapters, technology has made it extremely easy for us to exert this kind of domination over musical works, to the extent that we do not notice anymore that the common ‘relationship’ with them we have come to accept as a matter of course is not precisely a ‘symmetrical’ one. Indeed, one could say that the first thing we should do is to acknowledge the *scale* of this domination, and the fact that we barely treat musical works as objects in the sense implied by hermeneutics.

What happens then with our ‘mastery’ of and our ‘knowledge’ about the works and with the ‘meaning’ we find in them? In the story I tried to reconstruct in the previous chapters we saw that the modern *homo faber*, in his search for ‘certainty’, ended up dealing not with reality, but with his own ‘constructs’. This

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Herrschaftswissen ist das Wissen der neuzeitlichen Naturwissenschaften insgesamt’ (Gadamer 1990: 445) ‘The knowledge of all the natural sciences is “knowledge for domination”.’

<sup>9</sup> I would say that the idea of ‘absolute music’ also presents this danger. When we regard something as an absolute – i.e. as separated from everything else that matters – it becomes difficult to have a relationship to it on equal terms. For an account of the idea of absolute music see Dahlhaus 1991.



was the first cornerstone of modern subjectivity: ironically enough, instead of the source of the kind of reliability one would associate with the idea of objective knowledge, the modern man found in the *cogito* rather the unstable world of his own emotions and desires. Furthermore, for this new paradigm of knowledge, ‘contemplation’ alone was not enough anymore: it needed some kind of external ‘confirmation’. This constant striving for ‘success’ characteristic of modern technology eventually led to what Arendt called ‘the victory of the *animal laborans*’: in order to prove itself right, modern technology aligned itself with utilitarianism, and this ultimately meant that it put all its knowledge at the service of the needs of the *animal laborans*, which then ‘colonised’ the public realm.

What we can take from this story for our present discussion here is that it is in the *nature* of the modern *homo faber* (1) that he tends to deal with ‘constructs’, not reality; (2) that by doing so he is only in contact with himself (and this means that he eventually ‘finds himself nowhere’, as Heidegger said); and (3) that he constantly searches for a ‘confirmation’ for his constructs, which pushes him towards the realm of the *animal laborans*.

Regarding the objectivist approach mentioned before, for anyone dealing with these questions at a strictly theoretical level – e.g. someone in academia – it might be possible to consequently maintain such a position and deal with ‘dead’ objects or ‘constructs’ all the time, as long as the theory itself is more or less consistent. However, consistently applying such an ideal of musical works to the *actual* performance of works *and* find a ‘market’ for the resulting ‘products’ is much more difficult: as we have seen, the music industry to a great extent fulfils a function of entertainment, and such ‘aseptic’ performances just do not fit into this ideal, and today’s marketing can sell almost anything, but typically during a short period of time. Of course there are still around some specimen of the kind of ‘Ressentiment-Hörer’ Adorno described in his typology of listeners in his *Introduction to the*

*Sociology of Music* (Adorno 1975: 24-25). But in practice such an ‘objective’ way of making music will sooner or later look for some kind of *Erlebnisse*.<sup>10</sup>

The case of the hermeneutical approach is a bit more complicated. The fact is that the world we live in today is not very interested in the kind of experience of music and art such an approach advocates, not least because technology pushes us exactly in the opposite direction. For any musician who really wants to engage in a sincere way in this kind of approach, the reality of the world constantly represents a threat. A soloist (e.g. a pianist) might find it easier to cope with this and play from the refuge of her own solitude, to put it this way. For a conductor it is much more difficult: in many respects, the music business poses such constraints to this approach – the reduced number of rehearsals is only one among many – that today it is very difficult to offer something remotely similar, especially for young conductors (some older maestros, such as Daniel Barenboim, may still be able to afford a more ‘musical’ way of making music).

It might be a bit hard to accept, especially if we are taking a hermeneutical approach, that what we know about music works might just be, at least to a certain extent, a ‘construct’, i.e. a kind of ‘meaning’ or an ‘order’ we find ourselves in the works through an experience that remains primarily a *private* one. I might be able to say many things about Beethoven’s Seventh that are in principle accurate from a theoretical point of view and ‘authentic’ in the sense that they are grounded on a personal experience; the question is how far beyond my own private sphere this kind of insight will reach, or, to put it more bluntly, to what extent such insight may really be the basis of a collective experience that transforms the way we look at the world we share. But this is the problem we face – the problem of solipsism – when we are able to exert such control on music works that they barely appear as ‘works’ anymore in front of our eyes, i.e. as independent entities outside our control. It is important to see that the point here is not that we are doing something ‘wrong’, but

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<sup>10</sup> I think this is more or less apparent in Kivy’s idea that a music work can be just ‘a beautiful noise, signifying nothing’ (Kivy 1993: 19): what remains is nothing more than a sensation, a more or less sophisticated one, but a sensation after all.

that this just corresponds to the usual way of dealing with music works and things in general at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The best evidence for the fact that our musical experience today is more *solipsistic* than we are willing to admit is that, despite the huge amount of resources the study of music in all its forms still attracts today, to a great extent we are unable to shape our musical practice in such a way that it *really* allows us to look at the world with different eyes and *understand* the crisis we are facing.

#### 4.6 Music from the point of view of Arendt's idea of action

So far I have discussed the *conventional* way of dealing with music today, in some of its different varieties. However, the paradigms I have described so far, understood as a whole, can be explained as different versions of a dialectic between subject and object. In one case (*animal laborans* / music qua entertainment as an essential part of the cycle of labour) the object is *consumed* without asking further questions and therefore disappears as an object. In another case (objectivist approach) the object is taken as an absolute, and ends up becoming a construct, i.e. something that is *not* an object at all; sooner or later, this approach will lead to some form of subjectivity (that is, something quite close to the ideal of the *animal laborans* it vehemently tries to oppose), or it will have to accept its 'deadness'. Finally, the hermeneutical approach, the most sophisticated of all three, manages to find the way towards a productive relationship between subject and object based on mutual respect; however, by its own nature, this relationship tends to 'transcend' itself and reach the world 'outside' itself, and this is where the problems arrive: today's world – dominated by the paradigms of both the *animal laborans* and technology – operates according to a different logic: there are no *objects* in it, no *works* strictly speaking, and pretending to treat music works *as works* today in the sense implied by technology involves going against the implacable logic of technology that pervades our everyday life (and against the no less implacable logic of the music industry). Either this requires a huge effort from the individual to 'deconstruct' all this

everyday logic and let works appear as works again, i.e. at the same level as the subject so that a ‘dialogue’ in Gadamer’s sense is possible, or, sadly, such an experience remains an illusory one, if maybe rewarded with some punctual *Erlebnisse* or even some *Erfahrungen* from time to time. Put in a different way, it is as if one tried to speak a totally different language from that used in everyday life.

We encounter here the musical version of the same dead-end I described in the previous chapter as I discussed the possibilities and the problems of treating art from the perspective of *homo faber*, i.e. focusing on the study of works as ‘created’ objects, and therefore implicitly or explicitly within a theoretical framework that takes a relationship between subject and object – whatever the nature of this relationship may be – as a matter of course. As I did in the previous chapter, I would like to explore here in relationship to musical practice a way out of this aporia by means of a model that understands the relationship subject-object from the point of view of a relationship subject-subject, based on ideas implicit in Arendt’s conception of action.

The idea is therefore to see how we can understand music as something that *happens* between men in many different ways, and where works can play many different roles. We can make a small thought experiment and ‘switch off’ the sound in our imaginary event where Beethoven’s Seventh is played. In the first paradigm we discussed – that of the *animal laborans* – there is a certain relationship between all participants; however, this relationship relies on the categories of labour. We can say that there is a relationship between those who are on the stage (orchestra and conductor) and the public, but this relationship is one between ‘labourers’ and ‘consumers’. And, as Arendt says, labour and consumption are two stages of the same process; therefore, all participants have ultimately the *same* status, which corresponds to the category of members of a species. Insofar as this event relies on the categories of labour and the *animal laborans*, the participants may interact with each other in some way, but they do so not as distinct and unique beings, but as member of a species, where the priorities lie in the satisfaction of individual needs and the preservation of the species. The identification with the whole species (with

the mass) may give a sense of ‘enhanced experience’, and this is one of the reasons we still attend concerts some times, but this does not change the fact that, insofar as everyone is trying to satisfy their needs, everyone is *alone* with themselves. I am certainly exaggerating things a bit; of course, events such as the one we are dealing with here cannot be reduced to this dimension (at least we are still willing to believe that), not least because if this was the case it would be completely impossible to talk about them afterwards. However, it is important to see that today’s music industry, as a part of modern society – which strongly articulates itself on the basis of the assumption that everything can be seen in terms of labour (as the supreme ‘source of wealth’) – very much relies on this paradigm. This is therefore something we cannot ignore; we certainly need a critical attitude towards this paradigm, but one that accepts it as a *condition* in Arendt’s sense, i.e. as something that strongly ‘conditions’ our views and expectations, but that does not *completely* determine them.

So the relationships between individuals in the paradigm of the *animal laborans* were like those among the members of a species. The case of *homo faber* was quite different. Insofar as we focused on the work that was being played in our event and on our possible relationships with it our fellow human beings virtually *disappeared*. The objectivist approach to music works we discussed willingly accepted this isolation, not least because such approach often arises from a mistrust (or even contempt) towards the paradigm of the ‘masses’ (i.e. those of the *animal laborans*). The hermeneutical approach instead tried to treat Beethoven’s Seventh as a *person* in some way, as a Thou, as someone who has something to say about us that might be worth listening to. The problem is that, in order to really do justice to this kind of relationship, it *had* to find some relevance *outside* itself, e.g. in the relationship with other ‘real’ persons, and we have discussed why it is so difficult.

In academia, given its structure and its own dynamics, it is quite a matter of course and even a necessity to have some exchange with peers. However, I think it is telling that the dialogue between musicians on matters regarding musical works is often practically non-existent. One would expect that conductors – insofar as they

are really interested in the works they conduct – would be able to speak among themselves (or at least with the players in the orchestra) and discuss their views about the works, and how we can relate these works to problems we face today etc... but we all know how naïve this sounds in view of how the music industry really operates. On the other side this is not surprising, since musical performance is seen to a great extent as a process of *production*, and not one that produces ‘durable’ objects, but one that produces commodities, i.e. objects that are meant to disappear immediately – as we have seen, *homo faber* working for the *animal laborans*. This makes musical performance a one-way process, in which one person – the conductor – is expected to have a clear idea about what needs to be done and how it needs to be done. ‘Dialogue’, as well as the kind of ‘doubts’ that may arise if I see that my views are not as justified as I believed them to be, have no place in this mechanism.

In summary, in the paradigm of the *homo faber* human relationships are rather of secondary importance, if at all. Dialogue is therefore either highly problematic (when it takes place with works, as in the hermeneutical approach) or is taboo, as in the case of music making understood as a process of production.

Now we are going to see how we can understand music and musical works from the point of view of men relating to each other as equals on the basis of ‘togetherness’, as implied in Arendt’s idea of action. For this purpose we are going to follow a similar path to that in the previous chapter.

#### *4.6.1 Music works as a part of the life-world*

All paradigms of musical experience I have analysed so far, as different versions of a relationship between a subject and an object, rely on the assumption that there is something sounding and that there are subjects who are more or less aware of these sounds, however they will relate to them. However, music, as we know, is omnipresent in our lives, and it conditions our lives in ways that cannot be explained in terms of what we usually understand as ‘musical experience’. In fact, it is a part of the world we live in, the world we share and that to a great extent conditions the

kind of relationships we can have in it. If we walk into any store in London's Oxford Street on a Saturday afternoon just before Christmas we will probably not be completely aware of the music that is sounding, and not because it is not loud enough, but because we are busy with other things. Once we have walked out we might not be able to say what was the piece that was sounding, but we can be absolutely certain that it was not an Adagio from a Bruckner symphony. Very likely it was a kind of music that wants to awake in people the dynamics of 'life itself' and 'help' them understand themselves according to the unreflective form of life of the *animal laborans* and its ideal of *abundance*. Music is therefore a substantial element of the micro-world of Oxford Street in London, one that to a great extent determines, or at least limits, the kinds of relationships men may have among themselves.

Fortunately, the world is larger than this micro-world we just mentioned, but the principle is the same. Music is present everywhere, either people are listening to it individually (by means of a wide range of devices) while they are doing other things, or it is sounding for everybody. And as important as this kind of explicit 'presence' of music is also the other kind of *implicit* presence, that is, when music is *not* sounding. In some sense, Beethoven's symphonies (in a greater extent than, say, the works of Stockhausen) are a part of our world, even when they are not being played. They condition our understanding of human relationships in different ways. The fact that it cannot ultimately be demonstrated through empirical means *how* they condition us does not mean that they do not do so (again, such an assumption would correspond to the limited view of modern natural sciences: what cannot be mathematised just does not exist). If we try to imagine again a kind of phantom city, as we did in the previous chapter, but this time as a city where there is everything we usually have *except* the symphonies of Beethoven, it would be difficult to imagine that our ideals of human relationships, of dignity, of human rights etc. would be exactly the same. We would still be able to read and understand the first article of the German constitution ('Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar', 'The dignity of man is inviolable'), but it would not 'sound' in the same way.

Moreover, the air we breathe does not contain just ‘works’, but also different paradigms regarding how we can *treat* them. When we hear Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* while we are waiting on the phone until we can finally talk with our mobile provider, we are hearing not just *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, but also its *trivialisation*.

Therefore, when we listen to Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony in our event, we are not just hearing one piece among others, something that corresponds to the text of the score; we are bringing to the foreground something that is a part of the world we live in, something that *was* already there, conditioning in some sense the ways we understand our lives. For this reason, Beethoven’s symphony is not just a work, but may potentially become a common *concern*, something that, as a part of the world we share, we could and should deal with *collectively*. This brings us to the next stage.

#### 4.6.2 Musical works as a special ‘meeting place’ for men within the human world

As we have seen in the previous chapter, works of art do not just form part of the world we live in, but – unlike many other man-made objects – they can also set up a ‘special place’ within this human world in which men may be able to relate to each other on the basis of togetherness, that is, free, at least partially, from the usual constraints of everyday life linked to the paradigm of labour and the *animal laborans* (whose paradigm of relationships, as we have seen, is not based on the ‘with each other’, but on the ‘for’ or ‘against’ each other). This way of relating to each other, in turn, allows them to adopt a more critical attitude towards the world as it is experience in everyday life, and also towards the work itself.

Moreover, this interaction of men allows them to move from a focus on *Erlebnis* as the ultimate *telos* of musical experience to a much more comprehensive ideal of *Erfahrung*. As we saw, *Erlebnis* is primarily punctual, non-discursive, it relies on intensity, and, in its most extreme variety (derived from Romantic aesthetics, or from a perversion of it) on something that totally transcends the



‘reality’ of everyday life and puts us in a different, ‘eternal’ world, as it were. *Erfahrung*, in contrast, is essentially discursive and dialogical; unlike *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung* is ultimately not self-contained, it points beyond itself, precisely towards the ‘reality’ we often try to escape, but at the same time it invites us to look at it (and at ourselves) with different eyes – to *understand* the world and ourselves in a new way. While *Erfahrung* is not impossible in the context of an ‘individual’ interaction with the work, at some point, as we have discussed, it needs to be *realised* in the society of other people, not least because we need other people in order to perceive things as *meaningful*. An important conclusion we reached in this regard in the previous chapter was that *Erfahrung* essentially relies on the *participation* of the subject; and *Erlebnis* is perfectly possible for a totally passive subject (as someone who is receiving a massage), but *Erfahrung* needs the commitment of the subject. This idea of participation means that *Erfahrung* is ultimately not possible without interaction among people who regard themselves as *acting* beings.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, true ‘Erfahrung’ is not possible without *dialogue* among people who understand themselves as acting beings, not least because this dialogue allows the work to emerge as something really *objective*, i.e. as something I cannot ‘dominate’ since I can never exhaust its possibilities from my the limited point of view of my own perspective. It is therefore this multiplicity of perspectives based on the plurality of men as distinct and unique beings that let the work appear as a work, and not just as a commodity. For example I might understand the first movement of Beethoven’s Seventh as a dialectic of the main rhythmic cell with itself where we can see how life unfolds and affirms itself first out of nothing (rests just before the ‘Vivace’) and then as an interplay between background and foreground, between non-articulated and articulated modes of existence (as Heidegger and Arendt would say, between ‘earth’ and ‘world’). But you may see the same movement from a more classical perspective, as a discourse, and in this sense regard the rests before the start

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<sup>11</sup> Importantly, this idea of participation also changes our idea of ‘understanding’. From the perspective of *homo faber*, we understand ‘the work’, here we just *understand*. ‘Understanding what? Simply understanding, as an intransitive activity. We come into empathy with an other. We share the journey in which artworks invite us to participate, and we understand’ (Johnson 2002: 83).

of the ‘Vivace’ as one rhetorical device among many others throughout the movement.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore precisely in the possible *friction* between the different views – i.e. through the fact that it can be viewed from different angles – that the work acquires a new, more solid existence. Importantly, this is the case only insofar as this different views of participants ‘meet’ in a common place, that is, that they are related to something that *matters* to all participants; if these different ways of looking at the work are reduced to mere questions of ‘taste’ (as something primarily private and non-communicable, that is, in the non-Kantian sense) the work does not transcend the subjective sphere and therefore remains a ‘private’ matter, even if several people happen to talk about their impressions about it. In other words, for the work to appear as a work in this sense – as a ‘special place’ within the human world where men can engage in a dialogue enabling a kind of *Erfahrung* that invites them to look at the world they share in a new way – the dialogue around the work must take place in the context of a dialectic between *truth* and *untruth*: my own view *might* be misguided, it might be the result of my own projections, and – crucially – it could lead us to the wrong conclusions regarding how we can disclose the world we share. Even if several people reach some kind of consensus about their views, this does not rule out the possibility of this *failure*, which is inherent to the idea of *Erfahrung*.

Participation therefore involves what we Kant called *sensus communis*, that is, the willingness of all participants to overcome the ‘temptation’ to regard their own views (as intense as the experiences they rely on may be) as an absolute, and to be able to think from the perspective of other players. This is what *homo faber* will never understand, and what we will not be able to grasp as long as we see musical works and performance through his categories: what makes a work a work in the sense discussed here depends less on craftsmanship, theoretical knowledge, know-how, etc than on the willingness of participants to commit to this ‘enlarged mentality’.

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<sup>12</sup> Adorno suggests that this symphony might represent a synthesis of the ‘symphonic principle’ (whose paradigm is the *Eroica* and the Fifth Symphony and the ‘epic principle’ (Adorno 2004: §216).

Needless to say, this is not the usual way in which we articulate our musical practice. We have examined how the music industry – and, more generally, modern society – ‘conditions’ the way we actively engage in music: absolute priority to entertainment and therefore to often intensive but evanescent, essentially private experiences (‘Erlebnisse’), and, regarding performance, to the ideal of *homo faber* of music making as a process of production that sees the idea of ‘dialogue’ as a disturbance rather than as one of its essential components.

Are those constraints definitive? Fortunately, the orchestra – this old institution we have inherited from the first days of modernity – offers ways to articulate musical performance and musical experience from the idea of ‘togetherness’.

In the following I am going to briefly discuss three issues which make apparent how a change of paradigm in relationship to music making could be possible.

#### *4.6.3 Metronome marks and tempo*

The question regarding the ‘authenticity’ of metronome marks in Beethoven’s symphonies (and in general) and their role or absence thereof in performance has been widely discussed. I do not want to address it in detail here but just to consider some of the underlying assumptions that make this question *a question* at all. In many accounts it is more or less taken for granted that if the composer gave such metronome marks, we *must* follow them, since tempo is a vital parameter in a music work and metronome marks are just one means composers can use to determine the ideal tempo. Even in many places where this and other issues are discussed in a critical and sophisticated way (see e.g. Brown 1991 and 1999, or Swarowsky 1979, to name two different approaches) what remains out of the discussion is the fact that 1) the authority of the composer is unquestionable in this as in any other regards; and 2) music works have an ‘ideal’ tempo that can be measured in physical terms, i.e. in terms of number of beats per minute, and that applies to every kind of

circumstance, whether we play with a large or a small orchestra, in a large or a small hall with good or bad acoustics. At this stage it is not necessary to stress that these arguments correspond to the paradigm of *homo faber*. They imply a division (actually a divide) between the one who has the ‘idea’ (the composer, or the conductor, who chooses the tempo – actually his own metronome mark – when the composer gave no ‘precise’ indication) and the ones who ‘execute’ this idea. We remember that the *modus operandi* of *homo faber* is a one-way process: when the materialisation of this idea has been accomplished, the process is finished.

Sadly, this rules out the possibility that musicians (and the conductor!) understand themselves as *acting* beings. Acting is essentially a two-way process: meaning appears as a result of a *relationship*. First, I obviously need an idea about what the ideal tempo of a piece might be, but I also *react* to what actually happens; apart from the effects of different external circumstances (e.g. acoustics), in the performance the piece might reveal something I was not aware before, something that *demand*s a different tempo.<sup>13</sup> Excluding this vital factor from discussions about tempo clearly points to an implicit will to ‘dominate’ the piece (even if it is legitimated on the basis of the ‘intention’ of the composer). And second, the search for the tempo can never be accomplished alone: it is not just my relationship with ‘the work’, but my relationship with other people who are also *participating* in the event, either as performers or as listeners. The ‘truth’ or ‘untruth’ of the tempo emerges *because* tempo is ‘disputable’. Moreover, anyone who has engaged in this kind of search of the ‘right’ tempo has made the experience that the tempo (understood as metronome mark) that yesterday appeared as ‘right’ appears today as ‘wrong’. Why? Because *we* have changed: we are aware of more things, we *ask* the work new questions. In other words: we have made an experience in the sense of *Erfahrung*.

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<sup>13</sup> As Johnson points out, ‘a single act of listening is similar to a single meeting with another person... Was the totality of that person exhausted by my meeting with him?’ (Johnson 2002: 55-56). The same obviously applies to performance, and what I am able to ‘see’ about the piece each time clearly influences the tempo. According to the kind of approaches I have just mentioned, not even a single meeting with the piece is necessary to know what is the most adequate tempo.

#### *4.6.4 The position of the different instrumental groups on the stage*

This issue might look relatively trivial, especially from the perspective of the ‘spectator’, but it reveals in my opinion some important aspects about how we understand music making. It regards the positioning on the stage of the different instrument groups of an orchestra. What I find most interesting here is not primarily which is the best ‘solution’, but the *kinds* of arguments given by concerned parties – usually the ones who make those decisions, that means, the musicians themselves and the conductor – for the choice of one or the ordering of their choice. We remember that, with regard to strings, there are basically three common solutions for a conventional symphony orchestra:

(in a semi-circle around the conductor, clockwise as seen from the perspective of the listener)

- 1) first violins – second violins – violas – violoncellos (the classical positioning in most countries in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century)
- 2) first violins – violoncellos – violas – second violins (the return to this old positioning has become a trend during the last 10-15 years)
- 3) first violins – second violins – violoncellos – violas (Berlin Philharmonic)

The group of double-basses is almost always right behind that of violoncellos (except with the Vienna Philharmonic, where they are in a single row close to the background wall). Timpani are usually in the middle, unless there is not enough space for them. The position of woodwinds is always the same, in the middle behind the strings. However, the horns can be either on the right side of the woodwinds (in two rows when there are four), or right behind the woodwinds (in one single row), or even on the left side (rather rarely). Accordingly, trumpets go either behind the woodwinds close to the timpani (if horns are on the right), or they may go to the right if horns are behind the woodwinds or on the left.

We can classify the kinds of justifications for one or the other solution (when some are given, of course) into three groups:

- 1) *The point of view of the listener.* In many cases, grounds are given on the basis of ‘how it sounds’ from the perspective of the listener, i.e. because of the ‘effect’ of the sound on the listener: we put first and second violins opposite to each other because this has a better effect e.g. in the passages when the second violins respond to the first violins.
- 2) *Tradition.* In other cases, musicians and conductors appeal to the ‘tradition’ in some form or another: we put the violas outside and the violoncellos inside because the Berlin Philharmonic do the same; or we put the double-basses miles away from the violoncellos because the Vienna Philharmonic do the same, or because we found some document that says that during the first performance of the work 200 years ago the players were placed this way.
- 3) *Well-being of musicians.* Sometimes the orchestra makes a decision based on the needs of musicians that want to avoid being disturbed by the ‘noise’ of brass instruments, which can be really annoying during the rehearsals, especially if the conductor happens to be keen to repeat the same loud passage in a Mahler symphony again and again.

Of course, sometimes a combination of more than one of these justifications is given, but this is not the issue here. As we can see, 1) more or less implies that music is something musicians ‘produce’ in order to achieve the proper effect among listeners; 2) sees the orchestra as an institution in a quasi-metaphysical way, not as something that is shaped by actual men; and 3) regards music making in terms of labour, where the aim is to maximise pleasure and minimise pain. To be sure, *all* these arguments have a point; however, they all implicitly assume that a music work is the sum of its parts, not that the work emerges as a result of the *relationships* between those parts, especially in terms of voices within the orchestra. Seen from the point of view of *acting* space and distance matter, as well as the role of each participant in the ‘game’ of the orchestra. The same way as all first violins form a single group (rather than being scattered across the stage), their voice – their sound – needs to be related to their ‘siblings’, the second violins; instead, they lose the sense of this relationship if they are ‘matched’ with the double-basses, with whom they

can actually ‘mix’ only through the mediation of the middle voices. Again, these arguments ignore the fact that an orchestra consists of *relationships* among people who understand themselves as acting beings. In the orchestra, as in a plural society, the sound (or we should say the voice) of a violin is not just the sound of a violin, but can only be understood (i.e. as a voice, not just as sheer sound) in relationship to the sounds/voices of the other players.

#### 4.6.5 *The conductor and the musicians*

Finally, both issues we have just discussed point in different ways towards the role of the conductor. Adorno explained in a lucid way the problems inherent to his or her role (see ‘Dirigent und Orchester’ in Adorno 1975). Apart from the kinds of relationships between conductor and orchestra that can be better studied in psychoanalytical terms, the fact is that the very complexity of the works from the late classical period to Schoenberg and beyond demands someone ‘in charge’ who is able to *understand* them i.e. to integrate their manifold elements into a whole and, as it were, ‘enforce’ their inner consistency (‘Stimmigkeit’), without which they do not appear as work at all. As we would say, these works demand someone with strong *homo faber*-like qualities. The problem is that, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, dialogue is not among the characteristic features of *homo faber*. This often results in rehearsals where *no-one speaks* (in Arendt’s sense of speech linked to the ‘disclosure of the agent’); there are only ‘instructions’ that must immediately be executed.<sup>14</sup> Even where – especially today – this lack of speech is compensated with other things (charisma, agreeable manners, a contract with a record label), the awareness of musicians as acting (and therefore unique) beings is missing.

With regard to what I mentioned before that the search of the right tempo is actually a collective search, many conductors (and musicians!) would argue that

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Der redende Kapellmeister wird verdächtig als einer, der, was er meint, nicht drastisch zu konkretisieren vermag; auch als einer, der durch Geschwätz die zutiefst verhaßten Proben in die Länge zieht’ (Adorno 1975: 135). ‘The talking conductor becomes suspect as one who cannot drastically concretize what he means; also as one whose chatter prolongs the detested rehearsals’ (trans. E. B. Ashton).

such an idea would lead to everyone doing what they want, or that the resulting tempo would be just an aleatory one. But this is the point: *acting* does not mean that one says and does what they want, but precisely that they are able to overcome the limitations of their own subjectivity and move towards Kant's and Arendt's 'sensus communis'.

The question is whether we still want to regard the orchestra as a place where such kind of dictatorship is 'good for the people', or we are willing to move towards a different kind of leadership that understands commitment to the work and know-how in the *telos* of an 'enlarged mentality' in which participants see themselves as *acting* beings. If, as Adorno says, 'auch als brüchige Totalität ist das Orchester Mikrokosmos der Gesellschaft'<sup>15</sup> (ibid.: 143), this is a question whose implications reach far beyond the realm of music.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Even as brittle a totality the orchestra is a microcosm of society' (trans. E. B. Ashton).



## Conclusion

*Erlebnis and Erfahrung, and musical works in post-industrial society*

In Chapter 3 (see §3.4.3) I discussed the importance of distinguishing between experience as *Erlebnis* and experience as *Erfahrung* when dealing with works of art. In the previous chapter I re-introduced the issue in relationship to musical works through what I called ‘the aporia of *homo faber*’. In order to overcome the limitations of the perspective of the *animal laborans*, we need to acknowledge the work *as a work*, that is, as an objective *Gestalt* that transcends and survives our own experience of it. Regarding the work as something that has been created, as something with an internal consistency or *Stimmigkeit* (to use Adorno’s term) amounts to adopting, at least partially, the perspective of the composer (and therefore the perspective of *homo faber*). Understanding the work, however, is not enough: as an objective *Gestalt*, the work is something ‘dead’, and the very idea of its inner rationality as *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* (‘purposiveness without purpose’, as opposed to other kinds of instrumental rationality we deal with in everyday life) confronts us with a vacuum, and in some way leaves us with the necessity of ‘looking for life’ beyond the work itself. When adopting the perspective of *homo faber* we are thus confronted with a dilemma: either we go back to the categories of *animal laborans* and give the rationality of the work a ‘purpose’ in the form of an (enhanced) *Erlebnis*, and this ultimately means that the work largely disappears as a work, or we move on from the categories of *homo faber* to those of action in Arendt’s sense, which *homo faber* cannot understand since they lie beyond the realm of instrumental rationality. This, I argued, entails a move from a model based on a (highly asymmetrical) dialectic between subject and object to a model in which the ultimate *telos* of the object lies in an enriched subject-subject relationship: the work as an objective *Gestalt* creates an ‘in-between’ (*inter-esse*) that both separates and relates men and women and that therefore creates a space for Kant’s

‘enlarged mentality’. I think this corresponds to what Johnson has described in terms of a transition between a transitive form of understanding (which in the present context would correspond to the categories of *homo faber*) to an intransitive one (which would correspond to Arendt’s categories of action and speech):

Understanding what? Simply understanding, as an intransitive activity. We come into empathy with an other. We share the journey in which artworks invite us to participate, and we understand.

(Johnson 2002: 83)

Put in another way, this would entail the transition from a ‘what’-based to a ‘who’-based form of understanding: understanding the work (as a ‘what’) is only a pre-condition to understanding myself as a ‘who’, which is possible only insofar as I am able to regard other fellow human beings as a ‘who’ as well, that is, insofar as I can *participate* in a form of ‘enlarged mentality’. Importantly, the work as objective *Gestalt* does not disappear; now it is regarded not just as something self-contained with an intrinsic meaning, but in terms of the *space* it creates and the shared experiences (*Erfahrungen*) this space enables to human beings who mutually recognise each other as equals, i.e. as a ‘who’. This transition to a ‘who’-based form of understanding is both the pre-condition and the *telos* of *Erfahrung* and, I would argue, what ultimately makes the world-disclosive aspect of music (and art) possible.

This, I think, provides an answer to the first question I mentioned at the end of Chapter 1. In view of the fact that what Goehr calls the work-concept is not something inherent to music but actually emerged only around 1800 I asked what really is at stake with this idea and what we might lose if we stop articulating our musical experience around musical works. In fact, as I have tried to show, the work-concept, insofar as it acts as a regulative idea guiding musical experience, allows us to distinguish between experience as *Erlebnis* (which is a punctual experience that does not need an object that ‘survives’ it) and experience as *Erfahrung* (which entails a ‘journey’ from a limited, self-centered to an enlarged mentality), as long as

we overcome the limitations of the categories of *homo faber*. What ultimately matters when we deal with an objective *Gestalt* is therefore not the work itself or its relationship with the subject that contemplates it, but the space it creates, which may allow human beings to free themselves from the constraints and fears imposed by the necessities of everyday life and relate to each other as unique human beings. Unlike *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung* therefore both presupposes an understanding of the work as an ‘in itself’ and at the same time points beyond the work towards a new understanding of ourselves and the world we live in.

The second question I mentioned at the end of Chapter 1 – to what extent it is even possible to talk about musical works in a strict sense in the post-industrial era – is obviously much more difficult to answer;<sup>1</sup> here I will only outline a way of approaching the question.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, musical works need a space – Goehr’s ‘imaginary museum of musical works’, which corresponds to Weber’s idea of a *Kunstbetrieb* or ‘art business’ with its own ‘sphere of validity’ – in which they can actually appear as an expression of autonomous art, that is, *as works*. On the one side it is true that we still have something of that sort: despite several rounds of public spending cuts during the last years we still have a significant number of concert halls, opera houses and symphony orchestras, some of which have been in place since the late eighteenth century or nineteenth century. However, it is easy to underestimate to what extent the role in society of these institutions has changed especially during the past sixty years. There is much one can say about that; in the present discussion it suffices to note that these institutions as a whole have totally lost their status of *exclusivity* with regard to the experience of a certain kind of music. Two hundred years ago (and to a large extent even sixty years ago) one *had*

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<sup>1</sup> This is not least so because we can still not say that we have accomplished the transition to post-industrial capitalism. As Bauman says, we live in a time of *interregnum*, which he defines as ‘the condition in which the old ways and means of getting things done have stopped already working properly yet the new, more effective ways and means are still at the designing stage or at best in the stage of experimentation.’ (See ‘The Changing Nature of Work and Agency in Times of Interregnum’, in *Social Europe Journal*, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2014, <http://www.social-europe.eu/2014/01/interregnum/>)

to go to a concert hall to experience a Beethoven symphony. This is what made the ‘imaginary museum of musical works’ really a *museum*, i.e. a privileged space where musical works could unfold themselves as works. Today, the symphony orchestra playing at the concert hall represents just one possibility of experiencing music; in the internet era, music is potentially – and sometimes actually – *everywhere*. This means that, even when we go to the concert hall, our expectations are formed by many other ways of experiencing music – in the car, as film music, as a mobile phone ringtone, in advertising – but also by other activities we engage in in our leisure time – sports, restaurants, spa resorts...

This suggests that what we have is at best only a shadow of what once was the ‘imaginary museum of musical works’ – today’s museum would be, as it were, the museum of a museum. Does this mean that we will not be able to experience musical works *as works* anymore, and that we therefore need to dispense with the idea of experience as *Erfahrung* in music?

Fortunately, it is possible to look at things from a different angle. The process I just mentioned in which the institutions that constituted the ‘imaginary museum of musical works’ lost the status of exclusivity and with that a large part of their original role in society has been paralleled at the level of the individual by what sociologists such as Giddens and Beck have called a process of *individualisation*. The concept of individualisation has little to do with the neo-liberal ideal of free market individualism (which in turn relies on the delusional idea of self-sufficient individuals); rather, individualisation is the process in which individuals free themselves from the constraints imposed on them by traditions (regarding, for example, roles assigned to individuals at work, in civil society, or in the family).

In developed modernity – to be quite blunt about it – human mutuality and community rest no longer on solidly established traditions, but, rather, on a paradoxical collectivity of reciprocal individualization.

(Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: xxi)

In fact, it is possible to make sense of the history of modern musical life since 1800 as a process of ‘democratisation’ involving a progressive shift of power from composers – as creators once the supreme masters of the ‘imaginary museum of musical works’ – to performers – whose relevance grew as concert programmes started to include more and more works from the past – and finally to individuals, who now, as mentioned above, have a much wider range of possibilities to experience music and to shape their leisure time in general. How this power is used and whether the majority of individuals see themselves primarily as passive consumers or take an active role in shaping the institutions are of course different questions. The fact is that the kind of society that would correspond to the top-down structure of musical life – with the artist at the top – that is implicitly presupposed in modern aesthetics is long gone,<sup>2</sup> and that this does not need to be something negative. We might not have a big museum for musical works, but we are freer than two-hundred years ago to shape our lives and thus to create ourselves smaller, more ‘personalised’ spaces in which we might be able to redefine the kind of objective *Gestalt* we need to enable a new kind of *Erfahrung*; this *Erfahrung* would then be rooted in our real lives and might help us discover the power that lies within us and that will allow us to shape what Beck has called the Second Modernity.<sup>3</sup> To be sure, this kind of bottom-up musical life<sup>4</sup> would need a certain kind of leadership, but one of a different kind from that exerted by the artist *qua* creator.

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<sup>2</sup> Adorno’s theory, for example, relies on a broad conception of musical life (*Musikleben*) that is articulated around four main functions fulfilled by different kinds of players: production (composers), re-production (interpreters), distribution (musical institutions) and consumption (audience members). (See Paddison 1993: 187). This (Marxian) model clearly corresponds to the categories of industrial society. It is organised, as we would say, according to a top-down hierarchy, where composers play the main role. In fact, Adorno’s theory of the musical material tries to give explanations almost exclusively to the creative activity of the composer, with interpreters and listeners playing a subordinated role: the most one can expect from them is that they conform to the demands of the work *qua* work of art *despite* other kinds of demands (most notably those resulting from the nature of the work *qua* commodity). This is a quite static model, and it might be argued that Adorno largely failed to give an account of what happens when interpreters and listeners increasingly become *like composers* – as this is what is expected from them – without effectively becoming such (that is, while remaining subordinated to composers *qua* producers).

<sup>3</sup> See Beck and Willms 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Beck’s idea of ‘sub-politics’ may be useful in this context; see Beck 1997.

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