



**4<sup>th</sup> WORLD SUMMIT ON ARTS & CULTURE  
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Contribution to the Panel discussion,  
23<sup>rd</sup> September: Instrumentalization of the arts in  
the “national interests”: is intercultural dialogue  
worth conscripting the arts?

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When Mike van Graan, Program Director of this 4<sup>th</sup> World Summit on Arts and Culture, invited me to speak at the conference I was, I confess, flattered ... but also puzzled. Puzzled because I lacked the personal knowledge that could help me decide whether to accept or not. So I turned to two of my colleagues and asked for their opinion. One immediately said that I should accept the invitation for, having participated herself at the Singapore Summit, she considered it a most valuable experience. The other also agreed, even though he wasn't sure about the session in which I was being asked to take part in. His laconic comment was: "I find they have put you in a session with quite a complicated theme". That's that for an opinion; to which I replied that I agreed fully! We then both considered that, even though it could be one of those sessions during which, say what one might, one never fully satisfies the audience, it was nevertheless worth the experience.

I have read and re-read the title of the session a number of times in an attempt to try and grasp its full implications but, and this is probably due to my education and training, I find that I keep giving myself the same answer: "And so, what else is new?". Which leads me to the conclusion that the title, interesting and provocative in itself, is, in fact, dealing with problems that have been in discussion for many years now: national interests have always instrumentalized the arts which in turn have been conscripted not only for intercultural dialogue but also for many other purposes.

I will therefore try to explain, with all due respect, my personal reaction to the main topic of the session. But in order to do this, I have to first put myself "in context". By family background and cultural experience, I am a product of the Western World – half Italian, half Spanish, with cultural roots in the U.S. and Mexico – and raised in Europe during the years of economic buoyancy. I am an archaeologist by training, specialized in ancient Roman topography which means that I have also been trained at skilled draftsmanship at the service of research.

So now, to the subject of the session.

To facilitate my task today, I have broken down the enunciation of the title into various fragments, proceeding in this way, from their de-construction to a possible conclusion.

In the first place, let's look at "the arts" and "artists". Actually, in the Western world, the notion of "arts" and "artists" doesn't really take shape until quite late in its history. The Greek sculptor Phidias is possibly one of the first best-known "individual" artists. Indeed, in the Encyclopedia Britannica he is "the artistic director of the construction of the Parthenon, who ... probably designed its overall sculptural decoration"<sup>1</sup>. The "probably designed" simply means that historians are not sure whether he did everything himself or not. In fact, up to the fifth century b.C., but also until much later, most of the artistic production we know of, if not all, is anonymous. Think only about the black and red-paint Attic vases; with the exception of a very small number of "signatures", we are totally at a loss as to who were its creators. But surely we cannot deny that some of them are full-fledged "masterpieces". And, in those cases when spurious signatures are found, they are of the most humble type containing the name of the artists with the verb *epoiesen*: it's the art work that speaks telling us that "so-and-so made me". These signatures send scholars in fibrillation because they enable them to identify schools of styles together with their systems and sub-systems.

In fact, for most of mankind's history, neither the artist nor his works have been important: they are simply the means through which the values of a given society have been transmitted. There is no sense of the eternal or the unique. Think of how little of this art has survived: entire cities buried and forgotten; thousands of vessels carrying valuable cargos sunk during their travels; artworks destroyed by fire, etc... Just think of what a shock it was, when it was finally understood and accepted that the aesthetical taste of most of the Western Ancient World had absolutely nothing to do with what our first art historians had imagined and projected through constructions based on their own aesthetical values, as the recent case of the frescoes in the Knossos palace in Crete reveal. The Greek and Roman temples were painted in bright and shocking colors, as were the marble statues. The "greenish" color of bronze statues is in fact the color that bronze takes on with time: originally they were bright and shiny. And to boot, most of these statues were, in most cases, "industrial" copies of an original.

In second place, let's look at "instrumentalization of the arts". To an archaeologist this is totally obvious because art has been, since all time, instrumentalized as a matter of course. The truth is that throughout history art has been, is and will be instrumentalized always in the service of power. Without exceptions, the governing power canalizes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.britannica.com>.

through art the messages it needs to build and to maintain its power. At the service of power, art serves the purpose of creating, or maintaining, a set of symbolic references to which the people can relate. At times, it serves either purposes of celebration or helps in “telling stories”, or both. Let’s take just one example: the Roman arches of triumph. These were built to celebrate the “triumph”, that is, the return of the victorious army after a campaign. The army marched under the arch which in turn remained in its place to remind everybody of that particular moment of glory. But arches, columns and other monuments are also there to tell stories: the sculpted bas-reliefs tell the people, in a simple visual language that everybody can understand, what and where something happened and who were the protagonists.

To my mind here is a first and most important element: we are conscious that there is an instrumentalization of art but art is also an instrument *per se*. An instrument that, when there is no printed paper or other more sophisticated means of communication, tells people stories, usually related to their past, in order to create a bonding and a sense of belonging. So, although we agree that art is instrumentalized, we can also ascertain that it is an essential instrument whereby we vehicle history.

It will be the able emperor Augustus who will use art, and in particular, the poetic genius of Virgil and the economic aid of Maecenas, the first known philanthropist, to write an epic poem, “The Aenid”, by which Romans were told that the emperor was a direct descendant of Aeneas and therefore of the gods. Indeed, Augustus instrumentalized art for a very specific political aim, leaving as a result not only one of the finest epic poems ever written but also the marvelous Pantheon in Rome and many other works of art.

The same could be said for the art of the Middle Ages, both Romanesque and Gothic: the artists, architects and painters may be unknown but their art served as a means to propagate and strengthen a particular cosmological vision of the world.

We can see therefore that the double-faced coin has always existed: art has been an instrument by which to educate and disseminate information; and art has been an instrument used in politics and in policy-making. In my view, the interesting discussion lies therefore in defining the very thin line between “instrument” and “instrumentalization”. It remains a discussion, interesting *per se*, but I’m not sure whether it would take us to a concrete, universal position.

The real breakthrough does not really come with the Renaissance, for although the use of the artist's name begins to gain importance, the same artists are still working in "botteghe" along with other fellow artists. The portrait given by Irving Stone of the tortured Michelangelo in "The Agony and the Ecstasy" is, although compelling and exciting to read, an interpretation made by the author using the cultural, aesthetic and philosophical references of our contemporary world.

It is in the nineteenth century and with the rise of Romanticism that the notion of the artist with a capital A, will come into existence. The artist as a unique, and tremendously gifted, human being who, through a complex and tortured personal process, creates art, again with a capital A. The so-called *artiste maudit*. What Isaiah Berlin calls the revolt of the nineteenth century has a deep meaning indeed in history. For, if it is true that the system that existed throughout the Ancient World, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was the same, it is also true that such a system had solid philosophical and religious roots, platonic in its origin, whereby as Berlin puts it: "to a genuine question, there was one true answer"<sup>2</sup>. Throughout history and until well into the nineteenth century, art and artists were at the service of a collectively accepted "truth", be it the mythological origin of Augustus or, in later times, the Christian religion, and to the perpetuation of this truth through a process of *nemesis*, that is of imitation or reproduction of that truth. It is only in the nineteenth century when, amongst others, the German philosopher Herder will reach a position by which he is able to state that art is the means of self-expression of the individual spirit<sup>3</sup>.

And this brings me to the second part of the enunciation: are the arts instrumentalized for the "national interests" or not?

At the same time that nineteenth century philosophers were deconstructing the existing system of values and striving for individuality, there was another fundamental phenomenon taking place: the building of nationalisms. As we know, the need to belong is consistent to human beings and it has taken different forms throughout history: one belongs to a clan or tribe, a social order or class, a professional or religious organization, and societies have constituted themselves around elements such as ancestry, language, common traditions or the continued occupation of a territory.

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<sup>2</sup> I. Berlin, "The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World" in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, London, 1998, p. 555.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 571.

What happens in modern history is that “nation states” become the entity within which state and nation coincide. But what defines a nation? To cite again Berlin, it is two main concepts: the sense of belonging to a defined human group because of territory, law, beliefs, language, tradition, artistic and religious expressions, social institutions and, in certain cases, ancestry or racial characteristics; and, what he defines as the “biological” evolution of the State which entails “the elevation of the interests of unity and self-determination of the nation to the status of the supreme value before which all other considerations must, if will be, yield at all times”<sup>4</sup> or, in other words, the absolute sovereignty of the state. Here, the pyramidal political system of loyalties through categories (prince, aristocracy, fraternities) is replaced by a political system in which power has to take into account both the “individual” and the fluctuation of interests and opinions of citizens, or civil society, to whom it has recognized fundamental rights of political participation.

What is actually quite funny is that – as Hobsbawm puts it clearly in his “Invention of Tradition” – most European states, but also, for example, some Latin American states, are sheer creations of the nineteenth century, and that, in this process of creation, culture and the arts have played a fundamental role.

In fact, in order to guarantee loyalty to a new political system, the ancient ties now have to be substituted by new modern symbols which will take various forms<sup>5</sup>:

- the setting up of secular education with a clear mandate to educate (and indoctrinate) citizens - such as in the French case where alphabetization in an only language not only fostered the sense of belonging to the French State but also enabled the rise of a new ruling *élite* (or bureaucracy), identifiable through the education received and not through kin or blood;
- the invention of public secular ceremonies in which historical events, whether real or not, were celebrated to create a sense of belonging where religion no longer had a place (independence day, labor day, etc.);
- the massive production of historical monuments, including public buildings, to commemorate important events;
- the invention of public sports events in which citizens participated collectively and identified with, such as football, baseball, or the re-invention of the Olympic Games;

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<sup>4</sup> I. Berlin, “Nationalism: Past Neglect and Present Power” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, London, 1998, p. 587.

<sup>5</sup> E. Hobsbawm y T. Ranger (ed.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 263-308.

- the invention of national flags to which citizens owed allegiance, especially men once the army draft became compulsory.

And just to state obvious cases from my home countries: Italian, as it is used today and taught in school, is an invention insofar that, in 1870, the Tuscan language of Dante was chosen to be used by all citizens of the recently created national state; and, modern Catalan, on the other hand, is the result of the painstaking labor undertaken by the engineer Pompeu Fabra to “normalize” the existing diverse verbal expressions into a one single language.

And now for the third part: “intercultural dialogue”. As to this, I really don’t know what to say, if not that I’m skeptical about it as a concept.

I’ve tried to show that not only art and artists have always been at the service of “something” or “someone”. In recent history this something has been the creation of the nation-state. I think that no one can deny that both art and culture in general have been an essential element in this latter process and, in its most recent evolution in the building of what a famous Italian historian, Federico Chabod, calls the “idea” of Europe. What is probably happening today is that a tension, similar to the one revealed in the nineteenth century, is now taking place in a different form. If before, the individual, although free to be himself, belonged nevertheless to a superior entity, in this case the state, now we have intermediate levels or different forms of individual groupings: all identifiable by their culture, their belief or their ways of life.

On the one hand, I agree with as a professor whom I admire, Mr Alfons Martinell, who once said that it is not cultures that dialogue with each other, it is people. That is, it is not absolutely necessary to create “systems”, cultural in this case, for people to interact. And, on the other hand, I have the feeling that to some extent, intercultural dialogue has unfortunately become a sort of political buzzword. In a complex world where the nation-state, as we western Europeans know it, suffers continuous attacks, interculturality is, indeed, a way in which the state moves away from the one-culture / one-state postulate into much deeper waters... and hopes that it will survive.

So much then for intercultural dialogue! From my point of view if we acknowledge that, say, the Platonic system is no longer valid, and it is not!, and that therefore there is neither a single system nor a single truth to which we can refer to, our societies should nevertheless be able to provide the points of reference which are necessary to human

beings and without which there can be no valid system to which we can relate. And I'm afraid that we are still far from that. The Roman Empire from the third century on brought about its own decline and fall by accepting, through a very generous offer on its part, that all and every sub-systems, cultural or not, could co-exist within its boundaries. It made an ultimate and outstanding effort through the granting of Roman citizenship to all in 212 a.C., but it was definitely already too late because the previous references had already been lost new ones had not yet been created. Is this our case today?

I most certainly do not have the answer but I do think that culture, at least in Europe, is "back on stage" with a new thrust and that it can be of great help in trying to solve the existing dichotomy between supra-national and sub-national systems; between nation-states and multicultural or multiethnic societies. But how? A new idea of Europe, founded on its diversity and excellence, as George Steiner puts it? A new European citizenship in which, as politicians would like, we Europeans could collectively identify, regardless of our personal diversities? And, with regard to the arts and artists, I really would not give it much further thought: art can be an instrument for the public good but will be continued to be instrumentalized as well. It is therefore up to the artist to decide on which side he wants to stand.

I would now like to finish by relating a recent episode that I found interesting. Not long ago I attended a conference by the Dean of the Harvard Business School, and even though his view of the future was somewhat apocalyptic, it had a certain appeal to it. He considered that in some 50 years time, the new "rulers" of the world will be the *élite* of the corporate system. So much for that. What struck me was that he said that this *élite* will of course have been trained in an excellent business school and will be learned in international relations and development strategies but that, last but not least, it will also have been taught that they will not be able to "rule" unless they have clear references to cultural, religious and aesthetic values. He was probably referring to a new universal Renaissance man, but this is yet to come!

My heartfelt thanks to all of you for your attention and to the organizers for having invited me to this Summit.

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