

CRISES IN ART*

In order to discuss our problem I propose to adopt a definition of art as an ensemble of man-made objects of specific character, of materials, tools and institutions, of people—those who produce and those who commission or look at works of art—and of techniques and skills mastered by the artists. Art—so broadly understood—has no sharp limits, it is an area connected by hundreds of links with the whole of social, economic, intellectual and spiritual life. It is exposed to various disturbances since any one occurring in those other areas with which art is connected must of necessity affect art and its development to a greater or smaller degree. Lack of demand for some kind of artistic products must lead to the extinction of the corresponding kind of production. For instance, images of saints disappeared in those parts of Germany

* This article was written and presented on the occasion of a symposium devoted to the concept of “crisis” at Castelgandolfo in August 1985. In its present form the article includes observations suggested by the discussion during the Castelgandolfo symposium. The symposium was organized by the Vienna Institute of the Knowledge of Man (Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen). I am indebted to the director of the Institute for permission to publish the article in *Diogenes* before the publication of the proceedings.

which adopted the Reformation. One can say in general, that, since various factors of social and economic character influence the life of art, it must reflect the results of those crises which affect social, political or economic life, although the way art reacts on various disturbances may be varied. It may seem natural that in a period of unemployment and of high prices society cannot afford to devote as much money to invest in the goods of culture as it does in times of prosperity, and often it is so indeed.

In the concept of crisis it is implied that we have to do with a decisive moment in which normal processes are disturbed and it is decided whether some development will take a negative or a positive turn. Such a meaning connects with the Greek roots of the concept—from Hippocrates on.¹ Let us then first of all propose to differentiate between crises which have a negative outcome—in the current use “crisis” has a negative sound—and those which result in new positive developments. We shall then look at crises taking into account both their consequences and their causes.

To begin, I want to deal with what I call negative crises in art, their various reasons and sources. Then I shall pass on to the crises whose results have a positive character. Finally I shall discuss special problems concerning the interrelations between art and the other areas of life in critical situations.

I. CRISES AS NEGATIVE PHENOMENA

We may consider the following features as characteristic of some of the types of crises affecting art; some of them concern the material side of artistic life—stagnation in artistic production, lack of initiatives and commissions extended to the artists, decline of the demand for the works of art on the market. Other crises concern intellectual or spiritual phenomena, like a break-down of the faith in the principles followed and in the accepted aims and norms of artistic production—in the times of socialistic realism in some countries many an artist who adhered to its principles had to go

¹ About the history of the concept “crisis”, see G. Masur, “Crisis in History”, in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, I, New York 1973, p. 589-596; R. Starn, “Métamorphoses d’une notion, “*Communications*”, Nr. 25 (La notion de crise), 1976, p. 4-18.

through the crisis of conflicting attitudes and ideas. In those artistic periods which value highly innovations in art the crisis may be manifested in the lack of new ideas, in a limitation to the well-accepted types of solution of the basic problems of artistic production, and in a dislike for risking new ways.

It is difficult to systematize phenomena in that broad area we have described as art, but we shall try to differentiate at least some groups of them.

1. The first type of crises we shall discuss is crises brought about by factors extraneous to specific problems of art. And indeed among the crisis phenomena in art a considerable group is constituted by those which are caused by historical factors completely foreign to the sphere of culture and especially to art. One can discern crises affecting the material aspects and those which affect the ideological or spiritual sphere.

In his considerations concerning historical crisis, included in the lectures given in 1868 and published posthumously as *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (1905) Jakob Burckhardt gave as examples of crisis the invasion of the Roman Empire by the Germanic peoples and the conquest of Byzantium by Ottoman Turks. Such historical events exercised, of course, an immense influence on the cultural and artistic processes. In the awareness of the people of those times, they were real catastrophes indeed. They were defeats caused by exterior factors, almost like misfortunes brought about by hurricanes or by an eruption of a volcano.

An equally evident and striking example of a crisis brought about by events taking place outside the field of art is the conquest of the American peoples by Europeans representing a much more advanced systematic age. For the peoples of America the confrontation with conquerors representing an incomparably higher level of civilization was, no doubt, something more than a crisis. It was a cataclysm and a complete catastrophe. The reasons however of the crisis and of the death of Aztec art were extraneous and resulted from a purely physical violence.

In a somewhat similar way the great Florentine sculptor of the 15th century, Lorenzo Ghiberti, saw the great crisis which was the end of Classical art: "Now at the time of the Emperor Constantine—he wrote in his *Commentari*—and Pope Sylvester the Christian faith arose. Idolatry was subject to great attack, such

that all the statues and paintings were destroyed and broken which had been so noble, and of such ancient and perfect dignity, and so too, along with the statues and paintings, there were also destroyed the commentaries and books and outlines and rules that gave instructions in so worthy and noble an art. And then, to wipe out all ancient idolatrous customs, they decided that all the temples should be bare. At this time they ordered heavy punishment for any one who would make any statues or paintings, and so the art of sculpture and of painting stopped, and all learning that had been produced in it. When the art was undone, the temples remained bare six hundred years or so".²

Not every physical aggression from the outside produces an equally essential crisis in art. This is proved by the plunder of Rome by the troops of the emperor in 1527. To be sure, in the awareness of the contemporaries the *Sacco di Roma* was seen as a kind of end of the world, as the destruction of the corrupt Rome prophesied for a long time by the millenarians, as a crisis leading to a disaster and a catastrophe, but it affected the artistic life in a passing way only.³ No doubt, dozens of artists left Rome looking for shelter and work either in the Northern Italian centres in Mantua, Bologna or Venice, or abroad like the group of artists brought to France by Francis I. Yet this physically and psychologically nightmarish experience which the *Sacco* must have been for the people of the High Renaissance did not, it seems, leave lasting results in the world of art. Neither did it interrupt the essential artistic initiatives of the Popes, which continued without break at least until Bernini, nor did it influence in an unambiguous way the transformation of the means of artistic expression, the choice of subjects represented, or the style of the works. Although sometimes the appearance of some features of Mannerism was attributed to the influence of those dramatic events it is difficult to prove that it was actually caused by the *Sacco di Roma*.

2. The second kind of crisis originates not because of physical violence but because of ideological influence and it concerns moral or spiritual aspects of art. A classic example of a crisis in art caused

² See C. Gilbert, *Italian Art. 1400-1500, Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1980, p. 76.

³ A. Chastel, *The Sack of Rome, 1527*, Princeton 1983.

by phenomena occurring in the ideological sphere is iconoclasm, Byzantine or Protestant, although it is true that in both cases violence was also applied to the works of art.

It is well known what consequences resulted for art from the introduction of extreme iconoclastic opinions.⁴ What resulted was the destruction—to a great extent—of the pre-iconoclast art in Byzantium and the decimation of the works of medieval art in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands. Outside of that physical side of the process, moreover, the opinions of the iconoclasts caused a deep crisis as concerns the attitude toward the actual artistic activity.

Under the impact of the iconoclasm of the Reformation, German art broke down. Dürer died in the last moment, as it were, and therefore he was spared the experience of the greatest crisis, as Luther noted after the death of the German painter.⁵ Holbein left for England, and there, to awake no criticism, concentrated on portraiture of his prominent contemporaries. If the crisis of the *Sacco di Roma* was a cataclysm coming from outside that soon passed away, the crisis of the Reformation deeply affected German art, principally the religious one changing to a considerable degree its character and essentially limiting its scope. In the areas mastered by the Protestants, ecclesiastic commissions either disappeared or became reduced to a limited iconographic repertoire. The main function which was now mostly served by the artists was religious commemoration: the painted or carved epitaph remained the principal, almost the only kind of commission artists received in Germany.

In 1526 the guild of painters in Basle directed a petition to the local Town Council which expresses the distressful situation of the artists: "Finally, they [the painters] ask [the council] to consider graciously that they, too, have wives and children, and to see to it that they can stay in Basle, because even so the painters' profession is in a bad way. Several painters have already abandoned their jobs, and if the situation is not improving in this and other re-

⁴ An abundant bibliography on Protestant iconoclasm can be found in S. Michalski, "Aspekte der protestantischen Bilderfrage", *Idea Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunsthalle*, III, 1984, p. 65-86.

⁵ M. Luther, *Werke, Briefwechsel*, IV, Weimar 1933, p. 459, Nr. 1266.

spects, one will have to reckon with more of them giving up".⁶

A long time was needed for the art of Mannerism and of the Early Baroque to develop in Germanic countries at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries at the time of Rudolph II, taking advantage of the imperial and princely collecting of works of art and of things unusual. In truth it was only in the 18th century that artistic production reached again the period of growth and even then it was first of all in the Catholic countries of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

Various intellectual movements in history took a negative position towards artistic decoration of churches, like the Cistercian reform movement. We know the polemics between St. Bernhard of Clairvaux and the Benedictines in which the position of the Cistercian aesthetics was formulated.⁷ The luxurious, rich decoration applied to the monastic buildings by the Benedictines was reduced to the most limited and sober non-figurative ornamentation in Cistercian architecture, described recently by Peter Fergusson as "architecture of solitude".⁸

The condemnation of art by Savonarola in the very highest moment of the development of Renaissance culture in Florence is well known. But neither St. Bernhard nor Savonarola were artists. Their criticism was coming from outside. It is however possible to name cases which show how intellectual and/or moral criticism had been accepted by the artists and produced various forms of crisis in their art and artistic consciousness. Fra Bartolommeo had abandoned painting under the impact of the *frate's* preaching and returned to art only years after Savonarola's death at the stake.⁹

Counter-Reformation caused again a wave of self-criticism and repentance in some artists formerly delighting in the sensual representation of nude bodies typical for certain trends of Mannerism.

⁶ A. Woltmann, *Holbein and His Time*, London 1872, p. 288, quoted in W. Stechow, *Northern Renaissance Art 1400-1600. Sources and Documents*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1966, p. 131.

⁷ S. Bernhardi *Apologia ad Guillelmum sancti Theodorici abbatem*, in *Patrologia Latina*, CLXXXII, reprinted in J. Schlosser, *Quellenbuch zur Kunstgeschichte des abendländischen Mittelalters*, Vienna 1896.

⁸ P. Fergusson, *Architecture of Solitude. Cistercian Abbeys in Twelfth-Century England*, Princeton 1984.

⁹ G. Vasari, *Vita di Fra Bartolommeo di S. Marco*, in his *Le Vite...* ed. C.L. Raghianti, II, Milan-Rome 1942, p. 78-79.

We are informed about the sculptor Ammannati's crisis of conscience, which found expression in his famous letter to the *Accademici del disegno* of August 22, 1582:

"Beware, for God's sake, as you value your salvation, lest you incur and fall into that error that I have incurred in my works when I made many of my figures entirely nude and undraped following rather the usage—nay, the abuse—than the reason of the artists my predecessors, who did likewise and failed to consider that it is far more creditable to appear modest and decent than to appear vain and lascivious, no matter how fine and excellent our works may be.

Being unable otherwise to mend and correct this not trivial error and fault of mine—for it is impossible to withdraw my statues or to appraise all who see them how much I regret having made them—I have resolved to confess publicly, write down, and make known to all, so far as it is in my power, how gravely I have sinned and how sorely I grieve and repent—also for the purpose of warning my fellow-artists not to incur such baleful vice"...¹⁰

Certainly Ammannati differentiates moral and artistic reasons as he says it is important to be modest "no matter how fine and excellent our works may be". But thematic invention constituted such an important field of artistic activity that it is not easy to separate the problems of subject matter from those of artistic imagination and form. We come here closer and closer to specific values and questions dealt with by the artists and resulting from the structure of relations between creators and beholders.

3. The following type of crises is specific for the world of art. And again, some of them concern the material, the others the ideal or spiritual aspects of the art world. The type of conditioning of an artistic crisis I want to discuss next is inherent in the very system of art as communication. It appears in certain periods of artistic development and concerns the relations between the artist and his customer.

In general before the 19th century the connection of art with social life was based on traditional foundations that changed very slowly. It was the bourgeois revolution at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and the new situation resulting from it in the 19th

¹⁰ B. Ammannati, "Lettera agli Accademici del disegno", in P. Barocchi, ed., *Trattati d'arte del Cinquecento*, III, Bari 1962, p. 119.

century that formed a new framework for the life of art, in harmony with the striving of the artist after full freedom—from the guild, the prince, the church. But the new framework was no more able to secure the harmonious coexistence of the artist and his customer. The incommensurability of the artist's striving with the expectations of the large bourgeois masses burdened artistic relations of the 19th century with an imprint of a permanent crisis. The artist finally liberated himself from all the constraints and limitations, but, by disrupting his harmonious coexistence with the customers, he took a great risk. The result of such a situation was the 19th century division into the officially acknowledged and mediocre academic art, accepted by the public, on one hand, and the creative and innovative art of the bohemians, ignored by the public, on the other. From a craft well regulated by the principles of the guild, the artistic profession was transformed into an activity resulting from a faith in genius. Art was no longer—as it was before—a skilled craft, it was now a mission.

Lack of understanding and of acceptance, by the public and by some of the critics, of the outstanding works of Romanticism, Realism and Impressionism, which received due praise only after one or two generations, gave a moral flavour to the attitudes of the artists. Honesty demanded to abstain from orders, prizes and recognition of any type, since to receive them might be interpreted as a result of concessions made to the public. An honest artist had to share the destinies of the others. The ostentatious *Salon des refusés* challenged the official juries. The history of many artists, today acknowledged as the leading ones of the 19th century, is frequently a history of artists refused. The conflict between artists and philistines, between bohemians and bourgeois, became a typical 19th century problem. This severance of links of harmony between the artist and his customer is *the* crisis of that century, as far as art is concerned.

That conflict died out slowly as—along with the development of commercial galleries and of art dealing as well as of museums of modern art—new adequate forms organizing the relations between the artists and society originated. In the second half of the 20th century the outstanding representatives of the avant-garde trends have become again people rich and esteemed. They have found new patrons: wealthy industrialists, stars of sport, film, television, or

entertainment, intellectuals, directors of museums of modern art. The crisis disappeared. It is rare that somebody dares publicly to criticise even the most astonishing or non-conventional ideas of the artists. In this one could see the source of another crisis. But to that we shall return later.

4. Other reasons for a crisis in the art world are inherent not so much in the social system of art but rather in the very problems of creative activity. Some reasons may belong to the technical, the others to the theoretical field. All the technical inventions and improvements causing essential changes in technology may lead to critical situations in art. The application of print to the multiplication of texts and images contributed to the gradual fading away and the death of miniature painting. The invention of lithography and of wood-engraving in the 19th century had an analogous consequence for metal-engraving. The deepest transformation in all the visual arts was brought about by the invention and the development of photography. To a high degree, it took away from the visual arts the function of representing the actual reality and of reporting about the images of places, people and events.

How deep its consequences were for the art of the 20th century is generally known, and it seems justified to say that the situation resulting from this invasion of the world of the visual arts by photography was a critical one.

In each historical period, artists followed the more or less articulated sets of opinions and norms. The guild established regulations concerning honesty in the use of materials and in execution. Academies and intellectual groups close to the world of art established, in later times, theoretical views or at least the general leading ideas concerning the aims of art and the forms of its activity and production. A loss of faith in those norms and views could lead to the phenomena of crisis, although usually new creative attitudes and principles were constituted to substitute them for the old ones. Rejecting all the norms, principles and rigors brings the danger of being flooded by the element of freedom and of being lost among possibilities. It seems that some of the critical phenomena in contemporary art may result from such an overdose of freedom.

It is usual to describe as a crisis the present situation in contemporary art. During the Castelgandolfo conference in August 1985 Paul Ricoeur drew attention to the three features of contemporary

art which he considered as symptomatic of the crisis. He spoke namely of: 1. the collapse of the idea of beautiful, 2. the collapse of the idea of the work, and 3. the collapse of the idea of frame.

Contemporary art does not indeed strive after beauty; it pays little attention to producing accomplished works; it does not stress the boundaries separating its products from the outside world. To the contrary, it delights in producing things far from beautiful; the products of contemporary artists are sometimes ephemeral, they are bordering on happenings, on concepts, on performance, and to a great extent they merge with non-artistic reality.

All three of these features indicate that contemporary art is based on attitudes different from those adopted by artists of preceding periods. Measured by the standards adopted earlier its products do not fit the category of the work of art. They deny it. Should we see a crisis in this situation? It is clear that the basic ideas concerning the nature of what for centuries was called a work of art have changed. Is what we are witnessing in the world of art of our time a negative crisis or perhaps a fulguration of a new epoch? One thing is certain, that most basic assumptions about art, its character and function, which had been taken for granted for centuries, are no more valid. It is not possible to decide whether what is going on in the world of art should be seen as a crisis or as a beginning of a new epoch before reaching a point in time allowing for an historical perspective. In our present day we tend to experience the situation as a crisis, since we look on it with the mind charged with traditional ideas, norms and values. Perhaps we have to change them so as to get a new perspective in which contemporary art will simply appear as congruent with the contemporary world and its unresolved problems. Maybe the crisis is not that of art. Maybe we are faced with the situation not infrequently to be met with, namely that art is only a transmitter indicating crises occurring in the other spheres of life. And, as we know, crises in various spheres of life do not necessarily produce crises in art.

5. Last but not least, there is still one kind of cause of crises which could be called the state of the awareness of the artist. Every artist independently from his professional position is a man whose psyche passes through various states, and if those states have a critical character, they can, of course, leave a corresponding imprint on his artistic production, as we know from the art of Vincent

van Gogh. In certain cases, specific psychical states—also the critical ones—result precisely from the problems of artistic work and are strictly connected with them. The problem of *non finito*, of not bringing a work of art to a conclusion, shows it very well, especially in the artistic output of some artists. Reasons for the non-completion of those works were various and in general in each specific case justified by the circumstances, but one may be permitted to call critical a state of mind frequently undertaking tasks impossible of completion.

Another case—out of many—of a crisis in the mind of the artist connected with his theoretical thinking may be given. In the evolution of Albrecht Dürer's theoretical ideas we can trace, about 1512, a crisis which is expressed in his utterances concerning beauty formulated in his drafts and notes: "But what beauty is I know not. Nobody knows it except God"—he wrote in one of the manuscript sketches to his treatise on painting. Then he approaches the subject from various angles: "I should like to understand beauty in the following way: that which in/ various/ periods was considered beautiful by the majority of people—that we should attempt to do./.../ Too much and too little spoil everything./.../ To study beautiful things good council is useful. One should however ask for their opinion those who know well how to work with their own hands. To the others, who did not learn that/ the correct judgement/ is hidden like a foreign language to you./... There are numerous differences and reasons of beauty /.../ This work is beautiful which does not lack anything.

It is not possible that we be able to paint a beautiful figure taking as our model one man only. There is no man on earth so beautiful that a more beautiful one could not exist. There does not exist anybody on earth who could tell or indicate which should be the most beautiful form of man. Nobody is able to judge beauty except God.

In some things we consider something as beautiful which would not be beautiful elsewhere. From the two varied things which are both beautiful it is not easy to tell which is more beautiful.

One can make something good putting together many parts picked up from several beautiful people".¹¹

¹¹ Quotations from Dürer's theoretical manuscripts are given according to the edition of K. Lange and F. Fuhse, *Dürers schriftlicher Nachlass*, Halle a.S. 1893, p. 288-291.

These selected quotations reveal the incertitude, and the resistance opposed by Dürer to his increasing scepticism. Even measure, even the Geometry which he adored until now as a divine guidance is not reliable. In the words we have quoted Dürer changes his mind constantly: once he expresses agnosticism, then he accepts the importance of the opinion of the majority, then he adopts the mean values as criterion of beauty, then he proclaims the significance of the judgement of the professional artists, then he connects beauty with *integritas* (that is beautiful which does not lack anything), then he accepts the theory of selection of the most beautiful parts, then he attributes to divinity only the ability to formulate aesthetic judgements, finally he declares that beauty is varied and relative.¹²

It is moving to read through Dürer's drafts which had been written in that period of crisis. Again and again new formulations appear concerning the key problems of beauty. Finally from hopeless pessimism Dürer goes over to the more optimistic attitude as he limits his expectations and as he hopes to find out at least a partial truth. It is true that confronted with reality the Italian ideal criteria fail, but Dürer does not want to believe beauty to be inaccessible for the human mind. He is humble and pious—only God is able to recognize what true beauty is. But at least it must be possible for some aspect of beauty to be grasped by men.

Having originally put his whole faith in the compass and the ruler Dürer could not remain indifferent as he experienced the variety and multiplicity of things beautiful and as he became aware of the fact that there is no unambiguous definition to describe what is *das rechte Hübsche*.

In 1514 *Melencolia I*, his famous engraving, was executed in which—as Panofsky has shown—two great iconographic traditions were combined—the representation of Melancholy as one of the four temperaments and the representation of Geometry as one of the arts, the one which encompasses several arts based on mathematical principles.¹³

¹² This part of the article is based on my introduction to the Polish translation of Dürer's theoretical and other writings: *Albrecht Dürer jako pisarz i teoretyk sztuki*, Wrocław 1956, pp. LXXXVI-XC.

¹³ E. Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer*, Princeton 1943, p. 162, also E. Panofsky and F. Saxl, *Dürers Melencolia I. Eine Quellen- und Typengeschichtliche Untersuchung*, Leipzig-Berlin 1923.

As Panofsky formulated it, Dürer represented “Geometry gone melancholy”, in other words, he represented “*melancholia artificialis* or the melancholy of the artist”. The Melancholia “typifies a theoretical insight which thinks but cannot act. The ignorant infant, making meaningless scrawls on his slate and almost conveying the impression of blindness, typifies Practical Skill which acts but cannot think [...]. Theory and practice are thus not “together”, as Dürer demands, but thoroughly disunited: and the result is impotence and gloom”.¹⁴

The engraving may be the expression of Dürer’s mind fighting against scepticism and doubts: “The lie is in our understanding—he wrote—, and darkness is so firmly entrenched in our mind that even our groping will fail”.¹⁵

Dürer knew how to overcome the crisis and to limit his attempts to finding the relative, “conditioned” beauty. After the moment of crisis a new approach to the basic artistic problem was formed, which allowed further development of Dürer’s thinking. A crisis was in a sense a necessary stage in the development, leading to subsequent formation of new, positive phenomena.

II. CRISIS AS A POSITIVE PHENOMENON

In several modern considerations of crisis its positive role is stressed. René Thom formulates it as follows: “*Ainsi la crise apparait comme le facteur essentiel du progrès biologique, et, peut-être, en fait de tout progrès*”.¹⁶ Crisis can signify that decisive moment in which, as Burckhardt said, an “acceleration of the historical process”¹⁷ occurs, a rash formulation of the new points of view, an establishing of new paradigms, of new values, new concepts which in a short time take the place of the old points of view, paradigms, values and concepts. It is a process observed—in relation to science—by Thomas S. Kuhn, who considers the crisis as a

¹⁴ E. Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer, op. cit.*, p. 164.

¹⁵ Lange and Fuhse, *op. cit.* in footnote 11, p. 222; *Albrecht Dürer jako pisarz, op. cit.* in footnote 12, p. LXXXIX.

¹⁶ R. Thom, “Crise et catastrophe”, *Communications*, Nr. 25 (La notion de crise), 1976, p. 34-38, here p. 38.

¹⁷ J. Burckhardt, *Die geschichtlichen Krisen*, in his *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*, Leipzig 1929, p. 157-191.

necessary condition for the emergence of new theories.¹⁸

In his wise essay on the crises, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker noted the problem and considered it so important that he proposed introducing a specific term to describe those moments of the positive disturbance of historical process, those moments in which the whole organism of culture is renewed.¹⁹ Weizsäcker speaks of long periods in which always the same implications are valid, and he calls them “plateau” (*Ebenen*), while for those lightning-like, illuminating moments in which one perceives new ways and suddenly quits all of one’s previous habits he proposed to resurrect the old term *fulguratio*, introduced by Leibniz and applied also by Konrad Lorenz. In the moments of such *fulgurations* a man or a civilization seem to be struck by lightning. Seen against the background of the development of life on earth, the whole period of human civilization seems to Weizsäcker to be such a *fulguration*.

If then by crises in a negative sense we understand interruptions in the normal historical process resulting from the difficulties of a development slowed down or even stopped, crises in a positive sense—the *fulgurations*—would mean the accelerated processes of fast happening; in such moments, various evolutionary sequences are completed which under normal conditions would take some centuries. We do not know if Leibniz’s unusual sounding term will enter our terminology for good and if its introduction is needed, but the basic duality of crisis phenomena seems to be beyond any doubt. Crisis is an interruption, a disruption of the historical process either bringing negative results or, on the contrary, giving a strong impulse to looking for new solutions, new ideas, new perspectives after the rejection of the old methods unable to solve correctly the emerging problems.

With reference to the visual arts and to architecture, it seems reasonable to enrich our terminology with the conceptual tools developed by George Kubler.²⁰ Kubler divides the products of culture into prototypical models of problem solutions which he calls

¹⁸ T.S. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1962. See also R. Scott Root-Bernstein, “On Paradigms and Revolutions in Science and Art: The Challenge of Interpretation”, *Art Journal*, XLIV, 1984, Nr. 2, p. 109-118.

¹⁹ C.F. von Weizsäcker, *Über die Krisen*, typescript xeroxed by the Vienna Institute for the Science of Man, 1984.

²⁰ G. Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, New Haven-London, 1962.

“prime objects”, and into “replications”. The great mass of replications would constitute Weizsäcker’s “plateaus”, the “prime objects” would appear in the gleam of *fulgurations*. One should test whether the crisis periods really favour the appearance of especially numerous “prime objects”, or whether, conditioned as they are by many circumstances, they arise predominantly from accidental causes. If, however, we take into consideration great ensembles of “prime objects” which take shape when this specific phenomenon we call style is being formed, it is evident they appear in relatively short periods. The *fulguration* of the Gothic occurred in the middle and the second half of the 12th century; the *fulguration* of the Baroque took place at the turn of the 16th and the 17th centuries. The *fulguration* of modern art occurred in the first two decades of the 20th century.

III. COORDINATION OR A CHAOS OF CRISES

We arrive here at the next question which demands an answer and which we have already touched upon. Does a coordination exist among the various fields of the historical process? And, especially, can a negative crisis in one field appear together with a positive crisis in another? Does an economic crisis go together with a negative crisis in culture? The well known ideas of Lopez that hard times do not make it impossible to invest in culture, would be a counter-argument.²¹ Culture and especially the visual arts flourished in the 15th century in the north of Europe. “Outside the world of art everywhere there reigns darkness”—Johan Huizinga wrote in the *Waning of the Middle Ages*.²² The economic depression, the never ending wars, the Turkish danger, a hundred years old conflict between the English and the French and one between Burgundy and France secondary to it, everything, especially after the fall of Byzantium, seemed to be the least suitable possible to any cultural development. And yet it was the period of great painting in the Netherlands, France and Germany, the period of Sluter,

²¹ R.S. Lopez, “Hard Times and the Investment in Culture”, in *The Renaissance. Six Essays* (1953), New York-Evanston 1962, p. 29-54.

²² J. Huizinga, *Herfstij der middeleeuwen*, 1918.

²³ R. Romano, *Tra le due crisi, Italia del rinascimento*, Turin 1971.

Van Eyck, Van der Weyden, Memling, Master Francke, Fouquet, Quarton, of the amazing miniaturists, of the masters of *ars nova* in Netherlandish music, of Guillaume Dufay and Gilles Binchois. Against the background of political and economic crisis, a spectacular artistic *fulguration* occurred. As a second example the origins of the Baroque in Italy may be given. The Italian historian Ruggiero Romano in his book *Tra le due crisi: Italia del Rinascimento* (Turin 1971) provides information about the economic background of the period of the Baroque.²³ It appears that the time of activity of the Carracci brothers, of Caravaggio, Guido Reni, Maderna, Domenichino is that of the great economic crisis at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries. Also later in the same century the situation is bad in Italy: the commercial and industrial crash is later. It can be situated in the years 1619-1622 in the sense that after the sudden crisis of those years the commerce and industry enter the period of a long-term crisis. So we see, then, that the first phase of the crisis covers the activity of the Carracci and of Caravaggio, the second, the youthful, dynamic phase of Bernini, the flourishing of the early Baroque.

When Spain entered the golden age of culture, the years of well-being and wealth gained from colonial expansion had already passed. The period of the greatest flourishing of French literature and art under Louis XIV was at the same time one of a deep economic crisis (Le Roy Ladurie). The Napoleonic wars ravaging Europe did not prevent the spectacular development of the visual works of Goya, Fuseli, Canova, Thordvaldsen, Turner, Runge, Friedrich.

An excellent case is the period of the First World War, when Europe, the Near East and the oceans were engulfed by fire and destruction, misery and hunger. Those same years have produced a powerful *fulguration* that created the foundations of modern art. How many outstanding works of that art are dated between 1914 and 1918! The large series of the new "prime objects" came into being precisely during that time. They originated at the very time when the great war crisis melted down and reduced to ashes old structures. In the course of five years, the *accélération de l'histoire*

²³ R. Romano, *Tra le due crisi, Italia del rinascimento*, Turin 1971.

brought the 19th century to its conclusion and opened new perspectives. Old “prime objects” were already widely replicated. Everywhere neoclassical theatres, neogothic cathedrals and neobaroque railway stations could be seen. The war crisis put into doubt all the norms, principles and models. On the grounds laid waste the works of the Futurists, the Cubists and the Expressionists appeared in which the newly discovered world of speed, subconscious and of relativity began to find an expression producing new paradigms for the 20th century. The most appalling signals of that crisis were the appeals of the Futurist manifestos to destroy the monuments of the culture of the past. They were experienced by the young artists and writers as inadequate to the needs and feelings of the 20th-century people.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The rhythms of historical change vary. History is made by a multiplicity of factors and they may cause various rhythms of change. The “plateaus” and the crisis-like *fulgurations* are only the extreme limiting cases in the rhythmicity of the historical and especially art-historical processes. Gothic architecture was formed in the time span of some decades, modern art in some ten to twenty years and nothing prevents us from accepting a variation of the velocity of sequences in the strictly contemporary processes as well. Analyzing historical happenings and the relative speed of change it is sometimes convenient to apply the concept of crisis to art and its history. But if we do that we should be aware that we apply it in a different sense than that which it has in economy. The differences are certainly considerable.

In the life of culture a crisis is mostly expressed in forms to which the quantitative measurement cannot be applied. The crisis here may take the form of a lack of harmony between principles and realizations, between expectations and fulfilment, between means and aims. Those are things felt mostly by people and which affect their awareness, but which cannot be measured. To the contrary, the positive crises seem to consist in a sudden constitution of a new harmony of principles and achievements, means and aims. Phenomena which—with Weizsäcker—we have called

fulgurations bring such new, complete paradigms of style, corresponding to needs and expectations.

One has to remember that art, although it results, like economy, from the acting of several people, expresses ideas, feelings, and problems of individual artists and therefore evades the statistical methods which measure economic data. Art creates and transmits values that cannot be measured or easily compared like the figures describing economic growth. Works of art—at least some of them are unique—are individual creations, difficult to compare even among each other.

One can ask at the end: is the concept of crisis fruitful and suitable for application in the history of art?

Edgar Morin in his study *Pour une crisologie*, published in 1976, pointed out that “*Quand la crise était limitée au secteur économique, on pouvait au moins la reconnaître à certains traits quantifiés... Mais dès qu'elle s'élargit à la culture, la civilisation, l'humanité, la notion perd tout contour*”.²⁴ And he speaks about the necessity of discussing disturbances in the functioning of systems. The same is pointed out by René Thom. A crisis is—he says—a disturbance occurring inside the self-regulating system.²⁵ As I said at the beginning, I understand art as an ensemble of objects, of people who are able to produce objects enjoyed by other people, of skills and techniques. It is an ensemble then of things of various character, and which, as a whole, does not form a self-regulating system. But elements of this ensemble—people, techniques, production, communication, art dealing—form specific systems which function and are vulnerable, can be disturbed. They may be affected by crises. And the examples we have analysed were of this kind. Indeed only some parts or aspects of the whole area of art are mostly affected. People as psychic individuals can go through crises, techniques and production can be affected by them. We spoke about Dürer's aesthetic awareness, about the influence of technical inventions. Art as a system of communication may become incomprehensible to most people and therefore go through a crisis. Its role as a system of social communication is thus disturbed. This

²⁴ E. Morin, “Pour une crisologie”, *Communications*, Nr. 25 (La notion de crise), 1976, p. 149-163, here p. 149.

²⁵ R. Thom, *op. cit.* in footnote 16.

happened in the 14th century, it happens in the 20th. It is rarely possible to meet with a crisis which would affect the whole ensemble which is art.

But since a thousand links connect art with the whole of the society and its life, it reacts on crises appearing in various sectors of historical reality and the works of art are often good indicators of critical situations in life. We shall probably always speak about crises in art but we should be aware of the metaphoric character of the application of the concept.

It is in most cases possible to point out causes or possible reasons for crises of a negative character affecting certain aspects of art. But it is mostly impossible to indicate the causes of the positive and sudden *fulgurations*, of spectacular formulations of new styles and new expressions. The nature, rhythm and origins of both general and individual *fulgurations* in art remain for us always one of the great mysteries of creativity.

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