

## SHOULD WE WANT ART TO BE TRANSGRESSING MORAL NORMS?

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### Introduction

During my childhood, my family and I often passed a rusty metal pole with various bright-colored rings attached to it, riding along some highway north of Amsterdam. I recall myself asking what that was, upon which my mother answered, “Well darling, that’s art”. “Art?”, I wondered, “But isn’t art supposed to be beautiful?” My mother assured me that art *was* supposed to be beautiful, and – guessing my thoughts – to my relief added that she also couldn’t imagine that anyone would find that thing we had just passed beautiful. A part from the artist himself, of course, but we swiftly agreed that he had proven to be unmistakably crazy as a coconut. Not only was his conception of beauty unique, it was also wrong. And so my childish utopia world remained untouched by his vulgar expression.

It was only later that I came to realise that this art was not meant to be beautiful at all. Art, so I learned, can also be aimed at being something other than beautiful. A way of handling this disturbing fact is remaining in utopia nevertheless, pretending that every piece of art that is not at least aimed at being beautiful is bad and should be condemned. In a recent article in *City Journal*<sup>1</sup>, Roger Scruton – one of the best selling contemporary conservatives - gives a good example of this way of going about handling the existence of ugly metal poles with rings attached to them. Taking a brief look at his argumentation will introduce us to the challenge that is faced in this essay.

In the mentioned article, Scruton observes that modern art<sup>2</sup> has left the ideal of beauty behind. He takes this to be a recent development, pointing out that

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1 R. Scruton, ‘Beauty and Desecration’, *City Journal* 25-06-2009, see: [http://www.city-journal.org/2009/19\\_2\\_beauty.html](http://www.city-journal.org/2009/19_2_beauty.html) (accessed on 10 December 2009).

2 The notion ‘modern art’ needs some explanation here, as the adjective ‘modern’ can refer to two things: an epoch and a qualification. The epoch is well known. As with every historical epoch though, there is some debate about when it began. Scruton proposes 1750, but 1789 is also often mentioned. Philosophers are debating even more passionately about whether the period has ended or not, as we will see later on in this essay. The qualification denoted by the adjective modern is somewhat more difficult to characterize than the epoch. It separates itself from contemporary in that you wouldn’t call a contemporary factory that makes rubbish with out-dated machinery very modern. Modern has – in the past two centuries of progression – grown to mean ‘the most advanced’, probably because that is what the ‘newest’ has often been.

The notion ‘modern art’ moves complexly across the two aforementioned meanings of modern. It is related to the decline of the modernist epoch, and is contributing to that decline by being very modern – more modern than the modern epoch can bear. First thoughts on hearing the phrase ‘modern art’ might very well go to the

from 1750 to 1930, any artistic endeavor strived for beauty. Beauty was, as Scruton states, a value “as important in its way as truth and goodness, and indeed hardly distinguishable from them”. Beauty was the way lasting moral and spiritual values take sensuous shape. And then all went wrong:

“At some time during the aftermath of modernism, beauty ceased to receive those tributes [being celebrated in every artwork RvB]. Art increasingly aimed to disturb, subvert, or transgress moral certainties, and it was not beauty but originality - however achieved and at whatever moral cost - that won the prizes.”

In trying to identify the cause of this troubling situation, Scruton points to a difference between the described disturbing attitude of artists and the Romantic strive for expression that historically precedes it: the artist no longer seems to think of himself as inside bourgeois society. This causes artistic self-expression to be a “transgression of ordinary moral norms”. The intention behind the apparently existing need for transgression, according to Scruton, is to evade the moral judgment that is immanent in the experience of beauty.

Scruton doesn't have an answer to the question why people suddenly wanted to evade moral judgments since the 1930's. The only thing he says about it is that: “(...) a dark shadow of mockery and alienation has crept across the once-shining surface of our world (...)”.

The reason Scruton doesn't have anything more to say about this is that he presumes that truth, goodness and beauty are static, intertwined values.<sup>3</sup> Every deliberate transgression of them can only amount to bad things. This

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surrealists of the 1930', and that is what Scruton is referring to here. He is, however, (later on in the article) also referring to contemporary art with 'modern', although Scruton at the same time calls this postmodern art.

This example shows that referring to art periods remains a tricky business, so I'd like to make my own references clear from the outset. The art from the 1960' on is often revered to as 'postmodern art'. This implies that there is something like a postmodern epoch though, and that is something that is being discussed very much. The meaning of that phrase – to make matters worse – interferes with the term 'contemporary art'. To not force myself into taking a stance in the difficult debate of whether there is postmodern epoch or not, I will call the subject of this essay 'modern art'. Mostly this will refer to the art of the 1960' and 1970', although it is - unless explicitly stated otherwise - a (broader) reference to that kind of art that was trying to push the boundaries of its social circumstances. A term I will use more frequently is 'transgressive art'. I will use this to call attention to the transgressive features of modern art.

3 I say 'presumes' because he doesn't deliver an argument for this. The fact that these values have been steady throughout modernity of course isn't a compelling reason for this to linger on.

brings some circularity to his utterances, since the cause and the result of a lack of beauty are identical – an unidentified dark shadow. Their circularity doesn't make them necessarily wrong though. It could very well be true that the world has just gone dark inside man as well as around him, without much consideration for our questioning where misery started exactly.

But has the world gone dark? Is the art that Scruton finds so subversive really always a bad thing? This is the question I try to answer in this essay. The answer to this question depends on the way we see historical change. If we believe that truth, goodness and beauty are static values, every transgression of them can be taken as a bad thing. The discussion about Postmodernism demonstrates that there are other stances towards these values. These will play an important role in the second part of this paper.

We have seen in Scruton's argumentation that the transgressive art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by the fact that it represents a standpoint outside of bourgeois society and from there somehow transgresses the moral order. The opinion that moral norms are in fact at stake here, is shared both by people who think this transgression has led us to – or at least coincides with – the beginning of a new epoch: the epoch of Postmodernity, and by people that think that this transgression represents a mere crisis in Modernity. Because of this, I can safely start out answering the question whether and how art can transgress moral norms (paragraph 1). I will do this with help from Jencks, Habermas and Hutcheon. After having come up with an account of transgressiveness, the focus will shift towards providing an answer to the question whether this is to be taken as a good or a bad thing. I will attend to this question in the second section of this essay (paragraph 2), using Habermas' and Koslowski's reflections on Postmodernism and historical epochs in general.

As a whole, this essay represents a very modest attempt to explore the possibility to come up with philosophical categories to evaluate the transgressive character of modern art. Many questions will remain untouched or will be only partially answered. Nevertheless, I hope that this essay will provide an insightful way of approaching the important question at stake here.

## **I. How does Modern Art transgress Moral Norms?**

In order to arrive at a sensible answer to the question *how* modern art transgresses moral norms, it is useful to first look at the intentions of the movement that produced this art.

### **I.1 Why Transgress?**

One of the authors that try to explain these intentions is Charles Jencks. He is one of the people that made the term postmodern known<sup>4</sup> by using it in his influential writings on architecture. He distinguishes six phases in the history of postmodern architecture in his article *The Post-Modern Narrative*. Focusing on transgression as we do, the first one is the most important. He says the following about it:

“It [Postmodernism RvB] starts, predictably, as an internal critique within modernism, a tradition that had become much too imperial, commercial and a sign of the corporate Pax Americana.”<sup>5</sup>

Jencks observes that Postmodernism started off as a critical movement inside Modernism, reacting on the inhuman way cities were expanding: everywhere the same buildings were being built and became part of the same kind of city-plan. This started to represent to young architects an imperial power-structure that was controlled by something that had nothing to do with the people living in these cities. Jencks adds:

“In this first period of Post-Modernism [1960-1972, RvB], driven by the counterculture and its myriad battalions – advocacy planners, feminists, black power enthusiasts, minorities of all types – Modernism was seen as representing the power structure, a bland, commercialized middle class and bureaucracy.”<sup>6</sup>

The young architects were trying to break down the walls of these social structures and did this by building in a certain way. So why were they doing this? What made this particular power structure so unbearable? And what effect was to be expected from their buildings? In order to gain a more structural understanding of this, we need to dig deeper into this matter. For that Jürgen Habermas will provide a good outlook.

## **I.2 Reflecting the Historical Outset of the Reasons for Transgressive Art**

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4 In the article ‘Postmodernity as a Philosophical Concept’, in *Postmodernism: the Key Figures*, edited by Hans Bertens and Joseph Natoli, Malden, Blackwell Publishers 2002, pp. 75-86, Wolfgang Welsch and Mike Sandbothe provide a short history of the concept of Postmodernism, showing that although it started appearing in debates as early as 1870, it has only started to take up its positive meaning since the late 1960’, featuring in literary debates. The term was then made popular by Robert Stern and Charles Jencks, Welsch and Sandbothe claim, since 1975. Lyotard finally introduced the term to philosophy in 1979 with his infamous book *La Condition postmoderne*.

<sup>5</sup> C. Jencks, ‘Die Meta-Erzählung der Postmoderne/ The Post-Modern Narrative’, *Die Revision der Postmoderne/ Post-Modernism Revisited*, edited by Ingeborg Flagge and Romana Schneider, Deutsches Architektur Museum Frankfurt am Main, Junius Verlag Hamburg 2004, pp. 12-31, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, p. 15.

In his article *Modernity versus Postmodernity*, Habermas tries to trace the need for transgression back to a development in the Enlightenment. He analyses the history of the 18<sup>th</sup> century using Max Weber's idea of a shattering of the old substantive reason of religion and metaphysics in the three autonomous spheres of science, morality and art. This shattering prepared the way for an institutionalization of three separate discourses, each endorsed with their own immanent logic. Habermas says:

“There appear the structures of cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and of aesthetic-expressive rationality, each of these under the control of specialists who seem more adept at being logical in these particular ways than other people are. As a result, the distance has grown between the culture of the experts and that of the larger public.”<sup>7</sup>

Where did this separation of different kinds of rationality come from? Habermas thinks the answer is the Enlightenment, although the here mentioned increase of distance between expert culture and public culture was not the intention of the enlightenment thinkers. They – Habermas mentions only Condorcet explicitly – hoped that the accumulation of knowledge with experts would be beneficial to everybody. The fact that this didn't happen has, according to Habermas, resulted in the movement that saw light somewhere in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the *l'art pour l'art* movement.

The complete autonomy of art that was reached in the *l'art pour l'art* movement was the end of the development towards ever farther-reaching specialisation. In the subsequent surrealist movement, the right of art to exist was doubted. It was no longer believed that it could enhance the happiness of all people. And this is what caused the disillusion of the surrealists, and later that of the young postmodernists. To them, art had lost its legitimacy, because it had shown itself to be uncritical of the movement towards ever further institutionalization and specialisation. It had separated itself from every connection to the life-world of the public, not being able to serve any significant purpose in the lives of normal people. *L'art pour l'art* was art that never left its safe cocoon of artistic self-reference and formed a world of its own that was to the surrealists completely useless and meaningless.

This all remains very abstract. We can look at architecture once more as an example. Peter Koslowki points to the thought that the first surfacing of postmodern critique in architecture was closely related to boundless functionalism. Referring to Jacob Burkhardt, Koslowski says:

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<sup>7</sup> J. Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', *A Postmodern Reader*, edited by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press 1993, pp 91-105, p. 98.

“Whereas functionalism was first necessitated by the streamlining of production in order to reduce manufacturing costs and thus to allow more consumers to partake in design, now functionalism has assumed an independent character and, in relation to the productive forces, it has become an end in itself.”<sup>8</sup>

This example makes clear the origins of the need for transgression. Even if the Enlightenment ideas of specialisation and the propelling of expert-culture were explicitly aimed towards promoting the happiness of people – as functionalist architecture was in the outset - this specialisation turned out to be a mechanism in which experts receive power over the life-sphere while being separated from it. Just like an art-movement started to determine beauty although it had grown to be completely foreign to normal people, architects started to make buildings so functional that nobody would want to live in them anymore.

### **I.3 How does transgression take place?**

Now that we have an idea of what propelled the anger of the people in the aftermath of modernity it is time to take a closer look at the transgression that was their reaction to it. The movements following *l'art pour l'art* were trying to force a *reconciliation of art and life*. Artists no longer wanted to work for some institutionalized idea of what beauty was. That doesn't mean that the perception of beauty changed, however. What changed was the function of art. Linda Hutcheon points out an important aspect of this:

“(...) the familiar humanist separation of art and life (or human imagination and order versus chaos and disorder) no longer holds. Postmodernist contradictory art still installs that order, but it then uses it to demystify our everyday processes of structuring chaos, of imparting or assigning meaning.”<sup>9</sup>

What Hutcheon explains here is that the artwork somehow must evoke the order it is trying to transgress. In postmodern literature this is often called irony. The irony is that so-called postmodern art uses previous forms and references to power structures to be able to say something about them. Jencks states it very clearly:

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<sup>8</sup> P. Koslowski, 'The (De-)Construction Sites of the Postmodern', *Zeitgeist in Babel. The Postmodernist Controversy*, I. Hoesterey (red.), Bloomington, Indianapolis Indiana University Press 1991, pp. 142-154, p. 148.

<sup>9</sup> L. Hutcheon, 'Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism', *A Postmodern Reader*, edited by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press 1993, pp. 243-259, p. 248.

“(...) irony itself was also essential to Post-Modernism. It allowed Post-Modernists to assert the inevitability of historical usage and, at the same time, distinguish their work from unreflective revivalism. Irony sent the double message – “yes-but” (...).”<sup>10</sup>

The difference between an artwork that is renewing a power structure and one that is transgressing it is – as we read here – some sort of reflection. Hutcheon elaborates on this a little bit more than Jencks does. She shows that the ‘historical uses’ in postmodern art that Jencks talks about here address themselves directly to their public, reacting on a presumed conscious reaction of this public to these familiar signs. The reflection taking place in this art is a reflection on the interaction between artwork and perceiving subject. The artwork is not just aimed at beauty but at a presumed reaction of the perceiver. Because “[t]he perceiving subject is no longer assumed to be a coherent, meaning-generating entity”<sup>11</sup>, a turn towards this subject can break down the centered, static homogenizing world it used to live in. Hutcheon shows that there were many monoliths to be shattered into a de-centered plurality.<sup>12</sup> According to her, art tries to break into the incoherence of the subject by making it conscious of the way it is reacting on art in a predictable way – thereby enabling fixed, unreflected norms. In playing with this reaction, the artwork can involve the subject in its individuality. As a result of this, the perceiving subject can no longer resort to his standard reaction and is confronted with its authentic reflection on this schema of action-reaction.

We see then, that according to Hutcheon, Postmodernism denies the existence of static values and takes as a new authority: the human consciousness that is to be triggered by ironic art. But how does that consciousness function as a new authority? Are new norms created this way?

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<sup>10</sup> C. Jencks, ‘Die Meta-Erzählung der Postmoderne/ The Post-Modern Narrative’, *Die Revision der Postmoderne/ Post-Modernism Revisited*, edited by Ingeborg Flagge and Romana Schneider, Deutsches Architektur Museum Frankfurt am Main, Junius Verlag Hamburg 2004, pp. 12-31, p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> L. Hutcheon, ‘Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism’, *A Postmodern Reader*, edited by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press 1993, pp. 243-259, p. 252.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida has shown that the postmodern project has much to do with taking away the center of homogenized structures. He most famously did this in *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, in *A Postmodern Reader*, edited by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press 1993, pp. 223-241, p. 224. He there says that: “The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure – but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the freeplay of the structure. No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the freeplay of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any center represents the unthinkable itself.” We see here that Derrida perceives this loss of a center as an ‘unthinkable’. Hutcheon takes this thought up, as we will see shortly, in a context that suites this essay better. It should be emphasized though, that the argument is Derrida’s.

Hutcheon is aware of the contradiction everyone who is opposing norms is in danger of falling into. She is therefore not saying: “there are no fixed norms and that is absolutely true”. Hutcheon handles this theoretic challenge by presuming that there is an inherent need in humanity for creating new norms and values. Shifting the status of norms to a mere satisfaction of needs leaves the possibility open to challenge all of them, without denying that there are going to be new norms nevertheless. Hutcheon says:

“The contradictions of both postmodernist theory and practice are positioned within the system and yet work to allow its premises to be seen as fictions or as ideological structures. This does not necessarily destroy their “truth” value, but it does define the conditions of that “truth”.”<sup>13</sup>

According to Hutcheon, the conditions of this ‘truth’ are, as we saw earlier, brought out by the process of making people aware of the way in which their own fixed reactions to certain impulses create the status of norms. This creation is not to be seen as an unveiling. There are no norms to be found nowhere; norms are created.

#### **I.4 Is it Possible to Transgress any Form of Normativity?**

Is it really possible that this process as Hutcheon describes, makes for a transgression of moral norms as she would have it? If human existence really asks for norms, is it then possible to transgress these by bringing to consciousness this need, and the way it works itself into our lives through a to-date unconscious process? To answer these questions we need to take this discussion to another level. Until now I have analyzed the intentions of artists or thoughts from scholars reflecting on them. Answering the question whether this can lead to times in which norms are altogether changed, can only be done speculating. This is why the discussion between modernists and postmodernists is still not decided. The first group thinks that the complex of postmodern thoughts and art are another phase in the modern epoch, whereas the second thinks we are seeing the beginning of a new epoch where people will orient themselves in new ways and on new norms.

To answer the main question of this paper concerning how we can decide whether transgressions are a good thing, we need to look further than the apparent contradiction of irony. If we are to take the possibility seriously that these transgressions are really transgressing a system of norms, and not just breaking some contingent habits, we find ourselves in a very foggy outlook point. If this transgression really leads to a new set of norms, how will we know whether this is a good or a bad thing?

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<sup>13</sup> L. Hutcheon, ‘Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism’, *A Postmodern Reader*, edited by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press 1993, pp. 243-259, p. 254.

## II. What About the Future?

To judge transgression in art, so we learned in the previous paragraph, we must somehow figure out whether moral norms can change over time. There are several approaches to this problem, of which two more popular ones will be elaborated, starting with that of Jürgen Habermas.

### II.1 Transgressions within the Project of Enlightenment

According to Habermas, modern art is often too radical in its attempts at transgression. He thinks these attempts are bound to backfire. Although, he states, artists have tried to remove all boundaries – those between art and life and those between appearance and reality - they unwillingly called to the fore again all the features of art that they tried to evade, like the special cognitive status of judgments of taste and the transcendence of the art work over society (among others).

What went wrong? According to Habermas there are two things to be mentioned. First of all, the reformers were too rash in their attempts to break the boundaries of elitism. Consequence of this was the evaporation of all content of art. Habermas points to the second mistake as following:

“A rationalized everyday life (...) could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere – art – and so providing access to just one of the specialized knowledge complexes.”<sup>14</sup>

Now, this in itself is not an argument for artists to always respect the boundaries between art and life. However, later on in the cited essay, Habermas does present argument for this, expanding on this matter further:

“A reified everyday praxis can be cured only by creating unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements.”<sup>15</sup>

Why would interaction between these different elements lead us to a better situation? To understand what Habermas means, we need to look at his broader thinking. Habermas' main thesis is that once the circumstances are right, reason will provide an infinite improvement of our world. That is why he emphasizes here the need for ‘unconstrained interaction’ of different spheres of rationality. If that is established, only the gap between the elitist culture and everyday life needs closing. Habermas thinks this can be done

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<sup>14</sup> J. Habermas, ‘Modernity versus Postmodernity’, *A Postmodern Reader*, edited by Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon, Albany, N.Y., State University of New York Press 1993, pp 91-105, p. 100.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, p. 101.

along the same path. He derives from Albrecht Wellmer the view that it is possible for an artist to enter into a different language game than that of the experts' critical judgments by directing aesthetic experiences at illuminating "a life-historical situation"<sup>16</sup>. Habermas expects a lot from this.

"It [the aesthetic experience directed at a life historical situation RvB] permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another."<sup>17</sup>

This is only one of the three aspects that need integration. It makes clear though, that for Habermas, our cognitive significations and our normative expectations can somehow be brought in to a perfect condition. To do that, is the project of Enlightenment. In a final quotation from this article, Habermas makes clear how the project of Enlightenment is to be fulfilled without a radical transgression of norms.

"The project aims at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages, but would be impoverished through mere traditionalism. This new connection, however, can only be established under the condition that societal modernization will also be steered in a different direction. The life-world has to become able to develop institutions out of itself which sets limits to the internal dynamics and to the imperatives of an almost autonomous economic system and its administrative complements."<sup>18</sup>

Habermas pays attention to the institutions and economic situation because he his proposal to fulfill the project of modernity opposes a conservative stance. The conservative attitude is, according to Habermas, failing to see how invasive modernity is to all spheres of life. Wanting to cut out avant-garde art, as conservatives want, can only be caused by a misinterpretation of the renewing forces that inhabit society and need to be guided by a process of integration and relinking.

This conflict between Habermas and a conservative stance brings out what is positive about transgressions according to Habermas. We have seen however, that to him, they will still backfire when they are too rash – e.g. when they disturb communication between different rational spheres. Although Habermas does think avant-garde has its purpose and uses, he embeds this in a project – the project of enlightenment – that remains the same before and after transgressions.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Idem*, p. 102.

<sup>18</sup> *Idem*, p. 103.

### III. Towards radical openness

Paul Koslowski is among the people that question whether it is possible, as Habermas thinks, to understand transgressive art as an endeavor that is part of a road to a fulfillment of the project of modernity. That is to say: whether transgressive art can save the broader constellation in which the transgressed norms function. To him, Habermas is taking the name of an historical epoch (Modernity) and turning it into a project – deceptively.

“The ‘project of modernity’ profits from the phrase’s implicit suggestion of the most advanced state of consciousness, which would be precisely modern consciousness or consciousness of modernity. But its suggestion rests on the mistaken view that there exist such a thing as one most advanced consciousness in an epoch and that its realization could become a project that someone could make his own and carry on as its director.”<sup>19</sup>

What is the problem with the idea that a ‘most advanced state of mind’ exists? Koslowski takes up Fichtean thought in order to develop an argument against the left-Hegelian views of Habermas that include the conviction that reason unfolds historically and can in the end become absolute. The argument, an interpretation of Fichte, is an argument against the possibility of this absolute reason. In the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1812, Fichte argues that reason isn’t absolute because it isn’t capable of excluding totality from itself. Koslowski reconstructs:

“Reason is not the absolute because, rather than producing reality, reason must always refer to some Other that is not itself. One step removed, reason can only allow reality, which is the appearance of the absolute, to appear.”<sup>20</sup>

What the occurring of Postmodernism has shown in Koslowski’s eyes, is liberation from the iron frame of history. Hereby he refers to Hegel and the way he is perceived by left-Hegelians like Habermas. This perception is dangerous according to Koslowski, because as soon as one starts claiming the absoluteness of reason, every criterion to judge that reason disappears. Koslowski rightly points out that reason can never legitimize itself, because it is never absolute.

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<sup>19</sup> P. Koslowski, ‘The (De-)Construction Sites of the Postmodern’, *Zeitgeist in Babel. The Postmodernist Controversy*, I. Hoesterey (red.), Bloomington, Indianapolis Indiana University Press 1991, pp. 142-154, p. 144-5

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Because of this, Koslowski takes a positive stance to the new possibilities of Postmodernism. Seeing the dangers of going too far with arbitrariness and eclecticism, he notes:

“Out of anarchistic postmodernism grows the chance for an essential and fundamental [substantielle] postmodernism that would be in the position to offer new and substantial forms as alternatives to the jargon and aesthetic of inauthenticity.”<sup>21</sup>

How could this essential and fundamental Postmodernism take shape? And how can it be essential without being just another approach to the modern?

“Philosophical essentialism is postmodern because it goes beyond the distinctions and differentiations of modernism. That is, it does not take all the inferior products that have resulted from a state in which art, science, and religion are isolated from each other as the final word; rather, it sees them as failed developments that need to be overcome by means of a new integration of these three spiritual spheres of life.”<sup>22</sup>

This might sound like Habermas, but don't be mistaken. Habermas wants to reintegrate the three spheres of life through a reasonable discourse. For Koslowski this integration is only possible with openness towards the absolute. In his opinion, this should lead to openness towards the possibility that every epoch has its own project. He points towards death as the limit for the reconciliation any rational discourse has to offer. To Koslowski, this is no doubt connected to the idea that the absolute is something beyond our ability to grasp, which we are reminded of every time someone dies.

Koslowski thus wants us to pursue the project of Postmodernism. What that project will be, is still a question. For Koslowski the rusty pole is nothing more than an opening of a rational discourse. It functions as a mere crowbar towards a new epoch in the history of mankind.

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<sup>21</sup> *Idem*, p. 149.

<sup>22</sup> P. Koslowski, 'The (De-)Construction Sites of the Postmodern', *Zeitgeist in Babel. The Postmodernist Controversy*, I. Hoesterey (red.), Bloomington, Indianapolis Indiana University Press 1991, pp. 142-154, p. 148.

#### **IV. Habermas vs. Koslowski**

We are trying to answer the question of whether transgressions of norms are a good or a bad thing. Are they a sign of a dark shadow that has crept across our world or not? For me, the opposition between Habermas and Koslowski makes clear that to judge transgressions, we cannot resort to the norms that are or aren't transgressed. If we do that, of course we will find that their transgression is wrong. Scruton, who presumes that the values of truth, beauty and goodness are intertwined and fixed, can only disapprove of transgressions.

Habermas is a popular and influential thinker, and this relates to the fact that, although he does hold that the project of modernity should still be pursued, he tries to find a meta-discourse to talk about the way postmodernism is possibly forcing a new epoch into existence. He tries to found his belief in the project of modernity in the strength of reason. This is why there is a discussion possible between Habermas and thinkers that expect more from Postmodernism than he does, like Koslowski.

I agree with Koslowski that a reference to rationality isn't enough foundation for having faith in the project of enlightenment. The works of Fichte have shown this. To know for sure which norms are the right ones to live by, we need to look at the absolute. Because of this, we cannot dismiss transgressions as wrong. We must leave the possibility open that they are making space for a new epoch with a new project. However, this is only a partial answer to the question we are attempting to answer. We wanted to find categories to evaluate transgressiveness. Only then can we judge how far transgressions should go.

#### **V. How Open Should We Get?**

We are – then – confronted with a problem. If man is deprived of knowledge concerning the absolute, we can indeed only remain open towards that absolute. Sadly, with all the openness in the world, we will never know exactly when we go too far. We do not seem to be able to prevent making mistakes. There is some hope though, which I would like to touch upon in two remarks.

Short of categories to judge transgressive art, we can first of all resort to the consoling thought that if Hutcheon is right in that we are always in need of norms, then transgressive art will never completely leave us without them, for a transgression can only be a transgression as long as there is something to be transgressed. If we lose norms it will not be because of transgressive art, but because we somehow lose the energy or will to create them anew. For now though, there is no reason to believe that the transgression of the norms of enlightenment reason will not lead to a new epoch. Although

nobody can be absolutely sure about this, we will have to trust that the absolute, in the end, can never be overruled by the relative.

A second hopeful observation – that regrettably cannot be developed within the restricted boundaries of this paper, but will be explored elsewhere – is that we, although we admittedly are not able to access the absolute in a rational way, can still expect a lot from philosophy in this regard. It is namely still possible to investigate our reason more thoroughly. Although reason will never access the absolute, we as rational beings will always have to gain that insight in a rational manner. Some might claim that we feel the absolute - or speak with God, even - but that statement is itself already made in a rational discourse. It must be rational, for even the most direct of feelings is still only perceivable to be a representation that obeys the laws of reason. Perhaps it will turn out to be possible to establish through an investigation of our reason the reason why we necessarily cannot be able to gain insight in the absolute. If we find such a reason, we might be able to establish a more reflected account of our dealings with the absolute, and therewith reach a level of reflection that is more fundamental than that of the discussion of Habermas and Koslowski.

Until that moment, we can indeed do no more than Koslowski proposes: to stay open for the workings of the absolute, which – as I would like to add – can never be other than rational. The investigation of this rationality will be the biggest philosophical challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Conclusion

The question whether transgressions are to be taken as a good or as bad thing has not been answered the way we would like it to be answered. We have seen that the transgressions that are being discussed today are transgressions of moral norms. The question whether transgressions are good, is for an important part a question about the changeability of these norms.

This paper introduced two ways of interpreting the changeability of these norms: that of Habermas and that of Koslowski. Their debate is – very typically – about the changeability of reason altogether. The deciding argument was derived from Fichte by Koslowski, and states that reason can never have the final word in our perception of history, because it cannot exclude totality from itself. Because of this, we must conclude that transgressions can be taken as a good thing, because they are able to prevent an upcoming epoch from being taken hostage in the norms and values of epochs that are no longer an appearance of the absolute.

The frustrating conclusion that must be drawn from the staged debate is that it is not possible to come up with more detailed criteria for the measure of transgressiveness that is still good. We never know whether they are breaking

down an epoch or creating open space for new ones. I have nevertheless concluded with two hopeful observations: first of which is that if Hutcheon is right to state that humans are in need of norms, transgressions can never leave us without any in their own right, for transgressions can only appear if there is something left to transgress. Secondly I explained that although Fichte is right that man can never access the absolute directly, the only way to approach it is through reason. Investigating this reason is therefore our best shot at trying to find more precise criteria for judge art.

