

**NOTES ON JOSE ORTEGA Y GASSET'S ESSAY
"THE DEHUMANIZATION OF ART"**

**NOTAS SOBRE EL ENSAYO DE JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET
"LA DESHUMANIZACIÓN DEL ARTE"**

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ABSTRACT

The seminal work *The Dehumanization of Art* that Ortega y Gasset wrote in 1925 confronting the new art with the observing eye of the philosopher, also contains a plethora of facets and subthemes in form and content that are characteristic of the author. The aim of these brief notes is to bring some perspective, to highlight *circumstances* (using Ortega's vocabulary) around the essay: the historical period, the language use, the style, and some prevailing concepts in Ortega's prose and thinking.

Key words: Art, dehumanization, masses, metaphor, Ortega y Gasset.

Abstracto

La obra seminal "La deshumanización del arte" que Ortega y Gasset escribió en 1925, y en la que se enfrenta al nuevo arte con la observadora mirada del filósofo, incluye además una plétora de aspectos y temas en forma y contenido que son característicos en el autor. El propósito de estas breves anotaciones es aportar algo de perspectiva, señalar (utilizando el vocablo orteguiano) circunstancias del ensayo: el periodo histórico, el uso del lenguaje, el estilo y algunos conceptos notables en la prosa y el pensamiento de Ortega.

Palabras clave: Arte, deshumanización, masas, metáfora, Ortega y Gasset

Introduction

While contemplating some baroque paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of Art with a colleague and a couple of young students, came into the conversation Ortega's description of Velazquez's work. Asked by the students whether there was something they could read from this author, new to them, I thought of "The Dehumanization of Art".

This incisive essay, published in Spain in 1925 and in English by Princeton University Press in 1969 (1,2) and recently again, in 2019 (3) is, as the reader knows, an intent to describe the

new art that appeared in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. Citing works of art from music, painting, poetry, and theater, from artists of the time such as Debussy, the cubists, Mallarme, and Pirandello, Ortega tries to extricate from the artwork the common characteristics of this revolutionary movement, this *new art* – as he calls it – that, within a few years, has totally severed ties from a tradition evolving since the 1500’s.

About the essay’s historical period

The period between the two world wars produced a range of prophetic works from keen thinkers such as Ortega (The Revolt of the Masses), Aldous Huxley (Brave New World), George Orwell (1984, Animal Farm), and others still today considered forward-thinking relevant authors. They, probing into the social realities of their time, tried to describe what was then starting to form the new social landscape. Their subjects deal with social relations and trends, the role of power in society and its different consequences upon the individual, on art, music, and on the evolution of language in future or utopic societies. Their predictions have turned into our reality in many instances.

Allow me to illustrate this with some current examples. Orwell described newspeak in his novel *1984*, the ability of turning a word into meaning its opposite. Today, newspeak is widely used. An example: “a smoke free space” means a space where it is “forbidden to smoke”.

Another observation from Orwell pointed at the pseudo-correction of a problem by changing the problem-related term instead. This is currently widely used: less than a month ago, the governor of the State of New York, determined that the word “inmate” – in his view derogatory— was to be substituted by the term “incarcerated individual” in all NY State documents, but did not indicate any other changes would follow in the penitentiaries. The governor, presumably not a linguist, justifies once again Orwell’s predictions.

Other examples on accurate forecasts are Aldous Huxley use of synthetic music machines, or his description of disco lyrics.

The subject of the essay

Back to the topic. As a brief description of the article’s main theme, let me say that Ortega points at the elimination of the human figure in the new art (hence the *dehumanization*) and that this disgust and rejection of the human and the living in the new art causes its unpopularity among many people, who cannot grasp it. This fascinating and revolutionary study on modern art has been analyzed by innumerable and much better prepared minds than mine, which the

reader may easily peruse. The intent of these notes is to bring in a personal view on other aspects that may interest the uninitiated.

In the article we follow him looking into the changes taking place in the new arts, i.e., the disappearance in them of the human figure and human feelings that were so popular in the romantic music and drama, and hence so understandable for the larger public (*the undifferentiated mass (4) or the drab mass (6)*). He pays notice to the new, incoming elements from the developing artistic fields, other than its dehumanization: its playfulness, its irony, and its lack of intent to become transcendental. These truly new characteristics separate the old from the new; Ortega declines giving his personal opinion on his appreciation of the art, as his task in his view is to define it.

Further, he attempts to formulate concepts to describe the changing field of art, which now in his words becomes an art for artists and not for the masses (7), who are frustrated by this new phenomenon due to their lack of understanding. In his view, the new art is an art of introspection, of stylization, of examining the ideas as objects of the arts. Above all, the new art runs away from examining reality, an Ortega hopes it is trying to build something *substantive* without being an attempted *copy of nature (8)*.

Keen observations

One reason to elect this short and dense article from Ortega was because of his keen observations about modern art in *real time*, this is, at the time the phenomenon was taking place.

This by itself, his ability to observe and relate, would have already been a good example to present my students, at this time when everyone talks of multidisciplinary knowledge while insisting on teaching skills, thus denying them of a solid base of linguistic and philosophical principles. How do we think, but in a language? How can we have sophisticated thoughts without an equally sophisticated knowledge of language to think with? Several public educational systems suffer from this gross curricular flaw.

Accurate descriptions: The metaphor and other facets in Ortega's writings

There are additional qualities inherent to Ortega's writings that always attract the reader. One is his style of writing, profoundly erudite but laboriously hidden. Let us not forget that he wrote

much of his work to be published in the newspapers of Spain, for the vast public opinion. He obviously tried, with indefatigable spirit, to educate his contemporaries.

About his style, let me mention a couple of issues that disappear in the translations. One is his constant work renovating Spanish vocabulary with words he introduces from German, Latin, Arabic... as well as his abundance of *cultisms*(9), neologisms, technicisms. Another important facet in his style—one you would appreciate if you chose to read him in Spanish—is a musicality (maybe inherited from Valle Inclán), which he elaborates with support of powerful syntax and a sense of rhythm.

One final point worth of emphasis is his fluid, superb production of metaphors. He considers the metaphor as “probably the most fertile potency that man possesses (4) (10)”, the only potency that creates imaginary reefs among real things and lends us to “supplant one thing with something else”, which may help hide “an instinct that induces man to avoid realities (4)”.

In this essay, he uncovers to us that an origin of the metaphor is rooted in the spirit of the taboo. In primitive tribes, he tells, the impossibility to mention the object-taboo created the need to refer it by another word. From here on, he sees the substitution uses become unlimited, whether to ornate the loved items as done in classical poetry, or tooled by the new poets, to denigrate the undesirable old reality.

An important underlying thought: the individual and the masses

While Ortega always clearly focuses on describing the current subject of his attention, his other ideas permeate the writing in different ways. If he has already written about a subject he needs to quote, he just gives the reference. There are other subjects which he may treat at a later point in life; he may start by asking a set of questions about them and invite others to elucidate the issues. Also, his ideology – i.e., the set of ideas he has about society and people in a general sense – keeps surfacing in his writings. This is an important aspect to understand his works.

In *The Dehumanization*, we immediately get confronted with an aspect of his writings that will be fundamental a few years later, in one of his great works. This later work, “*The Revolt of the Masses*” from 1932, became an international bestseller at the time of its publication. In *The Revolt*, he developed several ideas already sketched in his previous writings – including this essay – about democracy, the masses, and their direct-action regimen. A tour de force in thinking with one single statistical datum.

The masses and their behavior, a subject mentioned in this article, is as highly controversial today as it was then. Ortega points that the people who do not try to better themselves, i.e., the masses, have pretended to be the whole of society for 150 years (in 1925); however, the music of Stravinsky or Pirandello's drama, forces the masses to recognize themselves as "only people", or just an ingredient of the social structure.

Ortega defends that people that make constant efforts in cultivating spirit and mind are different from the vulgar people, so all individuals are not *equal* in that sense (see the Revolt of the Masses). Further, he states that this difference reveals itself when confronting the new art. In his view (and putting aside the *snoobs*), two reactions separate people as they contemplate the new art. In the minority group, some may like it, and some less, or not at all. The majority group is downright hostile to the work. The issue for the majority, he contends, is that they do not understand it, and they feel angry at the work they cannot understand in the manner they could with the romantic works, which were created for the masses.

Conclusion

This is a succinct incomplete view of a rich, powerful essay; not much is given away here. It is time to leave it at that. Enough with the claims presented, and maybe too often misrepresented. Better for the work to speak, and to let you, the individual reader, uncover the meanings of these arguments and make your own interpretation.

Let us hope that these personal notes bring in you the desire to know one of the genuine minds of the 20th century, who has a body of work still instrumental to understand our present.

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6. “drab mass of society” (see reference No. 2, page 7)
7. “art for artists and not for the masses, for "quality" and not for hoi polloi” (see Reference No. 2, page 12)
8. Ibid. p. 23
9. This use of *cultisms* here (taken from Spanish *cultismos*), refers to words from a scholarly or cultivated origin, such as derivations of Latin or German words
10. “The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic, and it seems a tool for creation which God forgot inside one of His creatures when He made him.” (See Reference No. 2, page 33)

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