

Vjeran Katunarić

## **The Whispers of the Muses**

Artworks as Time Travelers



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*ibidem*  
Verlag

## **Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover art: *Time* (2019)

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1697-3

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Printed in the EU

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## Acknowledgements

Writing this book has been one of the peaks of my life-long learning. This learning has been a cooperative venture with two beginnings. The first was my natural birth and the second, what René König called the sociocultural birth. For me, the latter, unlike the former, is the product of both linear and non-linear evolution. We take from our predecessors and give to our followers, mostly students in my case, but we also take from authors who are not with us anymore and whom, in any case, we could not have the opportunity to meet in person. Likewise, we give, as we write, to future generations, to those who are not yet born. For the idea of the time-loops, which stands at the conceptual center of this book – to start with the acknowledgements – I am most grateful to Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, respectively. But, is it appropriate to express gratitude to the deceased, as if they were still alive and somehow collaborated on this work? I think it is. With this book, I have tried to prove that immortality is an artwork, a true time traveler, capable of recreating life that otherwise disappears in a linear-time perspective.

In this book, the lion's share of the editorial work has been done by John Jacobs, to whom I am grateful especially because of many useful suggestions that resulted from his thorough understanding of the book's contents and purpose.

Anonymous reviewers of the papers on which two different chapters of this book are based expressed their praise in particular for bringing a new sociological dimension to the analysis of artwork, for which words I am truly surprised and grateful at the same time. I also thank the anonymous reviewers of this book who rated it as "enjoyable."

Lastly, I am most grateful to Blanka, who again patiently commented on many parts of the manuscript, in the course of which she did not express any doubts about the conceptual framework, including some of the fairly provocative ideas about the impact of art on the composition of reality and our perception of it. Yet, as I told

her many times in the course of our conversations about this project, I am not sure that those ideas are mine alone.

# Introduction

How can my Muse want subject to invent  
While thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse  
Thine own sweet argument, too excellent  
For every vulgar paper to rehearse?  
O give thyself the thanks if aught in me  
Worthy perusal stand against thy sight,  
For who's so dumb that cannot write to thee,  
When thou thyself dost give invention light?  
Be thou the tenth Muse, ten times more in worth  
Than those old nine which rhymers invoke;  
And he that calls on thee, let him bring forth  
Eternal numbers to outlive long date.  
If my slight Muse do please these curious days,  
The pain be mine, but thine shall be the praise.

William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 38* (1609)

Behind many of the world's greatest works of art, lies a great muse; they stare back at you, their faces often more recognizable than those of the artists themselves. "I had only to open my bedroom window, and blue air, love, and flowers entered with her," Marc Chagall famously said of his wife and muse Bella Rosenfeld, echoing the sentiments of many a creative mind when it comes to the women (and men) who most capture their imagination.

Lucia Ferigutti, "Revealed: The Muses Behind Some of the World's Greatest Masterpieces" (2016)

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments* (1840)

This book represents an attempt at understanding in a different way the widespread belief that some artists attract the attention of muses who take part in the artist's vision of reality, including the future. Artists themselves, as well as the author of this book, although not an artist himself, understand this relationship as metaphysical or supernatural. On the other hand, this topic is rather undervalued. It is not taken up in any rigorously scientific approach to artwork, from art history to sociology of culture. Still, to reiterate, our understanding of the purported relations between muses and artists has nothing to do with religion, mysticism, or

myth, except that some elements of such discourses are used to contribute to our interpretation of the relationships between artworks, as extraordinary creations, and societal epochs, as products of human social interaction. Likewise, myth cannot be separated from rational thought, whether it is philosophical, scientific, or literal.

Furthermore, designating the artwork as a time traveler is challenging not only to common sense. It does not fit H. G. Wells' *Time Machine* either. He describes a special machine that, with its human travelers, passes through a scale of different times in the past and in the future. This time travel has become commonplace in science fiction. But, artwork is not a machine and cannot be a technical device. Unfortunately, the visionary potential of art, even including conceptual art, has been rejected as a meaningful idea by a number of art historians who deal with the visual arts and, in particular, painting.<sup>1</sup>

For some strong reasons, which will be clarified shortly, I stick with this approach, and many artworks are selected as examples that demonstrate its value. The central concept concerns the crossing of three time frames, i.e., past, present, and future in the (historical) present. The artworks selected for this book are not, of course, the only possible examples that illustrate this approach. In this case, the main criterion for selection may be understood as a compromise between a parsimony in writing and the unavoidable limitation of the author's knowledge of art. The author's university education is sociological and philosophical in focus, with an

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, an anonymous reviewer of an article of mine (published recently), in which I applied the same approach to analyzing some paintings, among other forms of art, offered the following general remarks: "Many other approaches might have been applied as well, and then the conclusions would be different." (!) Yes, I know, but in that case, my paper would have been on another topic and, I am afraid, would have lost its main point. The next remark reads: "Unlike literary texts, painting presents a scene frozen in its time and place, no more, no less." This is the position with which I completely disagree, and I will explain why as I elaborate the concept of the time-helix in this book. Of course, the time-helix is a natural phenomenon, or at least should be interpreted as such, although mainstream theoretical physics does not acknowledge even its hypothetical existence.

inclination toward the aesthetic sociology and philosophy of Georg Simmel, primarily because of his understanding of the present time as the archeologic surface manifestation of the depth and complexity of social time as a whole.

What follows next is a clarification of some of the words in the title of the book and particularly the future, more properly, its multiple meanings in artworks taken from different periods of modern history. In most cases, understandably, the future relates to the historical future, something that has already happened. For instance, from the fifteenth century onward, most of the future(s) of those societies have joined the past from the present-day perspective. Hence, some analyses of past societies are taken as a test of the truthfulness of artworks that were made one hundred to several hundred years beforehand. Of course, the same method is hardly applicable to the present day. Basically, we do not know what will happen to society in a hundred or more years from now, for this, of course, cannot be documented yet in the historical record. But, some elements of the future can be anticipated even nowadays in some artworks as they have been anticipated in the past.

In the last chapter, an ambitious attempt at recognizing the contours of our possible future is undertaken. Specifically, it is an anticipation of the coming of an extraordinary era with a better outlook for virtually all of humanity.

The reasons for postulating such an aesthetic cognition are explained in Chapter 1, which is based on the famous criticism of the Enlightenment by Horkheimer and Adorno. They argued against the objectivism of the analytical sciences, which they describe as ultimately insensitive to the fate of the lifeworld.

The works selected for the book are mostly from the visual arts and fiction. In these art forms identifying elements of different time frames is relatively easier than in some other art forms, provided that the interpretative framework is clear, coherent, and consistently attuned to a particular case. This theoretical approach is only partly adopted from philosophical work, primarily that of Merleau-Ponty (see Chapter 3), and outlines some transcendental dimensions of the artwork.

The different approach adopted in this book may also be compared with that adopted by Gonzalo Gutierrez (Gutierrez, 2013). He maintains that anticipating art begins with Marcel Duchamp and conceptual art, which is then followed by the vanguards. To be sure, we share the view that modernity has brought tremendous shifts in human knowledge, including the capability of prediction in some areas. Nevertheless, the capability of anticipation, albeit without exact precision, is pertinent to humanity from its beginnings, whereas the growing interest in the future as a secular time is specifically modern. Also, moderns do not accept the *Parousia*, i.e., the idea of God's visiting this world in rare moments of history. This belief, for example, can by no means empower workers' and human rights movements in general. Thus, socialism as a modern ideology expected that decisive actions for genuine social change would be taken by workers, engineers, and politicians interested in developing technologies that would facilitate human work. Liberalism, another modern ideology which is older than socialism, expected that the interactions among businessmen operating in the free market with the support of parliament, whose members are elected in free and fair elections, would work together to bring freedom to all citizens. Both expectations have failed miserably, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, post-democracy and new authoritarian regimes are knocking on the door along with threats of new imperialistic wars and divisions of the world.

Have these changes been anticipated in artworks created beforehand? Yes, they have, and this aspect will be discussed in the last chapters of the book. Anyway, the Muses have whispered to many extraordinary artists both in modern and premodern times. Yet, a combination of the arts and a durable peace is their central preoccupation (for the role of the Sirens, see Chapter 1). Their interests fit a horizontally organized social world with many sources of individual and collective creative practices. Both as a vision and as a real tendency among many people(s), the arts of peace are neither unilaterally progressive nor conservative or antimodern in terms of worldview. Also, the Muses' dialogues with authors are quiet and sometimes subliminal, while their



conversations unfold in a language known to both. In mythological terms, the Muses recognize Apollo as their protector, albeit the Muses do not prophesy the fate of Mt. Olympus and its residents. For them, the former is a boring place replete with intrigues and hypocrisies, like the castles of secular aristocracies with their frivolous monarchs whose power has not been designed for the benefit of the people, especially working people (cf. Chapter 5).

The relationship between artists and the Muses recalls Norbert Elias's vision of that segment of early modern European aristocracy who were inclined toward the peaceful life rather than toward warfare and knightly duels, and whose manners were sophisticated, especially as cavaliers toward women, which included playing music and singing (see Chapter 11). Likewise, a combined vision of Karl Marx's demand for shortening the workday in manufacturing, thus freeing time for workers to improve their education and other competencies, on the one hand, and Friedrich Schiller's vision of a permanent aesthetic curriculum for humankind, on the other, enables the imagination of a highly developed civilization based on a durable peace and sympathy for others (see Chapters 1 and 11). For Marx, in particular, the proletariat is the last class of people deprived of everything good in our civilization. Here, however, one should not forget another great name that unjustifiably languishes among reactionary conservatives. It is Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism and sociology, but also a fierce advocate of progress in the line of Condorcet. Eventually, he abandoned his inclination toward the cold reasoning of science and no longer considered science as the last stage of development of the human mind. Instead, he predicted that the last revolution would be female and basically aesthetic, following the revolution of the proletariat in the sphere of work.

To grasp how the Muses ultimately work for their earthly sisters' and brothers' emancipation is a matter of understanding the conversation between them and artists, between teachers and students. Also, this dialogue does not unfold exclusively in an atelier. It is rather a tacit and telepathic, even a consensual cooperation in linking art form with social substance, a deep desire of the Muses to reincorporate love into a peaceful world, on the one

hand, and the artist's search for the proper word, picture, or tonality to capture the essence of this desire, on the other. Muses and artists also act collaboratively on this project, by exchanging ideas, including ideas about the existing and the coming relations between individuals and groups. Social relations constitute the infrastructure of each epoch. They span from gender relations to (re)productive work (both of workers and of women as housewives).<sup>2</sup>

These communication pathways are constitutive of vertical and horizontal as well as transcendental and mundane dimensions of the everyday world, as they are captured in artwork. Of course, this exchange between art and society does not deliver steady progressive visions and optimistic messages, least of all sedations. Also, it cannot be denied that what determines history is not "empty pages of happiness" (Hegel). Disruptive processes are too strong and too numerous. Besides, they unfold in different directions with no visible, least of all converging, end, such as the "omega point" (Chardin). In any case, the pessimistic constellation is durable and prevailing and can hardly be changed, except in the rare moments when a constellation of so many stars is favorable, so to speak... Of course, the Muses do not deal with astrology or any other obscure devices. They are bright and very patient anthropomorphic beings. Most likely, they are eager to direct mankind toward an instance of evolution in which turnover is ultimately unavoidable. This is something that artists hardly perceive as an element of their awareness of history. After all, the

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, this is topically the proper place to briefly explain why I, as the legitimate author of this book, use both the "Ich-form," i.e. *I/me*, and a collective, "We-form," where the latter is more frequently used. The latter illustrates Newton's dictum that "we stand on the shoulders of giants." Science as well as the arts, let alone education, health, industry, etc., are the product of the collective efforts of many generations which have established the premises for our own work, as well. In my area of work, the giants are muses as well, those grand persons, women rather than men, who remain mainly anonymous on purpose. But, we/I know that their tacit knowledge and their wisdom on the whole is awesome. In this regard, my creative role in that enterprise, the author's *I*, is relatively small. I use this form mostly in footnotes where I deal with some personal aspects of my work—see, for example, the last chapter in the book.

ordinary description of the past in terms of the historical sciences does not provide any clue for how the future might look. On the other hand, artists' preoccupations with the female body (e.g., Picasso, even in abstract forms) or even just the female face (e.g., Leonardo) disclose a permanent passion, which must not be driven exclusively by their sexual urges (which, by the way, may be homosexual, bisexual, or a combination of other sexual orientations). In addition, Mariolatry, the adoration of the Mother of God, with her apparitions throughout the Christian world, far surpasses the Church's fixation on her crucified Son, the dead God (because Christians do not view the New Testament as a text in which some theatrical performances may have been inserted with Jesus as the main actor – see Chapter 4).

Otherwise, the Muses must indeed be unhappy with what they see in so many actualizations replete with the terrifying experiences of war and the killing fields, where no trails of artworks, save peace, can be found. Nevertheless, they also look beyond these walls in the hope that something good will be revealed, too, even though good currently looks like a grain of stardust. They are positive that the dust of good will one day assume a concrete and, moreover, significant form. As initiators of a creativity that passes from imagination into full reality, the Muses cannot lie about what they see as *dynameion* (Ernst Bloch), the great possibility of humankind, and replace it with false hope. Even if the celestial genesis of the Earth from the stardust following the Big Bang were only matter, only humans are free, for better or worse, to decide their own future. It cannot be ruled out, unfortunately, that a core in the upper social classes dreams about an annihilation from which only they will allegedly be saved. Alternatively, because most of the upper class is practically irreligious, since they do not believe that there exists any power above their own (and indeed, other civilizations in space do not use weapons as the evidence of their superiority), this class adores Nothingness (the discovery of the *boson*, for example, represents one of the last instances of the morbid search for that infamous substitute for the Womb).

In a class-based society, the frivolity of those in absolute power is especially dangerous (certainly more so than the atomic bomb). Perhaps, in its rise since the end of the Middle Ages, the upper class, which was already a middle class by then, was creative. Nevertheless, quite soon its creativity turned into destructiveness, which is primarily manifested in the destruction of natural resources and of human society, its horizontal and sympathetic ties in the first place; only the vertical line of obedience is left. On the other hand, peace—and this is why the Muses like it—leads to a broad and diversified form of creativity. It is a society in which inequalities will continue to exist, yet in negligible proportions. Only such a practice may divert us from the contemporary path to annihilation. By the end of traveling on the route to peace, humankind will face something similar to the creation of the Earth. The new scene is going to be spectacular rather than geological. It is a theatrical cosmic performance by our brothers and sisters in which stars will dance around Earth, as a sort of Great Round-Dance (from Jakov Gotovac's opera *Ero the Joker*). In the final chapter of the book, some paintings will illustrate this event as the encounter of the New Earth, this time shining like a star on one of its sides, with the New Heaven that opens its projection of a sustainable, playful, and enjoyable life here on Earth. This turnover is akin to Chardin's vision of the omega point of the converging routes of development, this time without its strictly Christian symbolism, which has become inadequate for a humanity unified by its diversity of religious and other beliefs. Similarly, the Muses, who were Greek symbols, are not only Greek anymore. They increasingly symbolize the energies of human creativity as a whole, which will eventually enable its encounter with cosmic others, where the original homeland of the Muses is likely located.

With such a vision of the major historical achievements of the Muses' whispers—thanks to which many people will become capable of embarking upon a new era in which a greater universe of various beings will open itself up to human understanding and to new waves of association with others—we will close the book. Readers are invited to follow this path of great hope. As a great traveler and mystic (Ouspensky) said, it is the Wisdom who plays

in the world. This is a world of and for children, who always live next to us as well as within us. The child is the central symbol of creativity (see, for example, the works of Heraclitus, Nietzsche, and Cassirer). Likewise, we understand human beings as one among many cultural species in the universe. In it old and young generations meet. Thus, cultures grow along with lives. The human culture is primarily agricultural (Maharishi). It is initially raised in the gardens in which children see and hear more than their elders, temporarily outgrowing the latter. We say “temporarily” because many new sounds and appearances emerge from these old gardens. Eventually, it cannot be said that the older generations have died: “Other echoes // Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?” (T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, lines 19–20).