

Philosophy Group

Report by Elizabeth Long

This is a very brief summary of different philosophies of art that the group discussed at our last meeting. It led to a most interesting discussion on art and its place in society.

Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860)

'life is painful and it would be better not to be born'. Schopenhauer's philosophy was a pretty bleak one but he maintained that art could alleviate that bleakness and make life bearable. In his work, 'The World as Will and Representation', he wrote that we experience the world as representation, our construction of reality which requires our consciousness to make sense of it. He also believed that there was a Will, a blind driving force that is found in absolutely everything that exists. He was quite clear that this was not God but a meaningless force. As part of these two strands he believed that we are all striving for more and more and are never happy. It is in our enjoyment of art that we escape this Will, particularly when we listen to music, which he saw as the highest form of artistic endeavours. This made him very popular with creative and artistic people, such as Wagner, Brahms, Tolstoy and many others.

Nietzsche (1844 - 1900)

Nietzsche, who was influenced by Schopenhauer and Wagner, believed that art could only be great if it balanced two opposing forces. He named these as Apollonian and Dionysian. Apollonian, after Apollo, the God of the Sun, is based on cool rational intellect and is all about light, reason and harmony. He claimed that most dialogue in art was this. Dionysian, after Dionysus, the God of the Earth, is passionate, emotional and ecstatic and tends to be music as it appeals directly to man's instinctive, chaotic emotions, not to reason. As far as he was concerned, only Wagner combined the two forces in his works to make them as great as the Greek tragedies.

Marxist View of Art / Aesthetics

Marx (1818 – 1883) did not write anything specific about art or aesthetics, even though he was well versed in world art, literature, classical music and painting and wrote poetry when young. However, Marxist theories have been applied by others since that time to art and to the history of art.

As far as Marxists are concerned, all art is a commodity and is part of the capitalist system. Artists are part of this society, and the time in which they live, which must inform their consciousness. Art is about society and the artist is always part of the culture, art is never independent or absolute. It emerges from a larger social and economic context, reflecting its own time and space. Marxists would claim that the popular belief that art is a mode of self-expression that reflects the spirit of the artist and the prior history of art itself is a myth.

Next meeting: 28 May 2019