



Chapter Six

“LES AR-Z ET LES SCIENCES”: AESTHETIC THEORY AND AESTHETIC POLITICS IN COMTE’S LATE WORK

Stefanos Geroulanos

Art [1] nm (ar; le t ne se lie pas: l’art oratoire, dites: ar oratoire, et non l’ar-t oratoire; au pluriel l’s ne se lie pas, les arts et les sciences, dites: les ar et les sciences; cependant cette liaison plaît à quelques-uns, qui disent: les ar-z et les sciences).¹

In the 1848 *Discours sur l’ensemble du positivisme* (*A General View of Positivism*), published in the middle of the June Days of the 1848 Revolution, during an apogee for positivism as a movement, Auguste Comte proposes a dual, complex role for art and the artist of the positive age.² First, he says, art will lose the towering, if excentric, place it holds in the current social system: it will lose its autonomy, irregularity, exuberance and power, the separate realm through which artists engage and influence social activity. But, second, art will acquire a new force, and the artist, having come to accept his dependence on science, industry and technique, will become the figure who outlines the future.

In his efforts to accomplish this object, the Positivist poet will naturally be led to form prophetic pictures of the regeneration of Man, viewed in every aspect that admits of being ideally represented. And this is the second service which Art will render to the cause of social renovation; or rather it is an extension of the first. Systematic formation of Utopias will in fact become habitual; on the distinct understanding that, as in every other branch of art, the ideal shall be kept in subordination of the real.³

It is an astonishing formulation. One might expect art to decline in the positive age, to become incidental or ornamental, a genre of comfortable if pointless pictorial speculation

1 Emile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, s.v. art.

2 Auguste Comte, *Discours sur l’ensemble du positivisme, ou Exposition sommaire de la doctrine philosophique et sociale propre à la grande république occidentale*. (Paris: Mathias, 1848); translated as *A General View of Positivism* (Cambridge University Press, 2009 [1864]). On the context of the publication, see Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chaps. 6 and 7, and vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 7, 162.

3 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 335.



that enlivens without genuinely affecting. It is not merely, as Mary Pickering notes, that in the positive future “the mind would gain satisfaction in directing its energy toward the arts.”⁴ Comte proposes, in fact, that not only will art participate in the regeneration of society and, indeed, that of human nature itself—not only will it come up with depictions of the present and the future, of ideals to follow, but it will indeed form *systematic utopias*. These are ideals to draw out from the new present; conditions envisaged by a normalized time that subjects itself to them because it finds itself perfected and represented in them. Art will acquire a different prophetic voice than the ones it has enjoyed in the past: subservient to the real, it will posit the ideal and depict futures toward which this real will move. Crucially, these are *futures* in the plural, *systematic utopias* imagined as varying or manifold, as if the future held multiple acceptable idealizations of the present, as if the path to utopia were imaginable but not singular.⁵ The course of future history is not fore-ordained, in that multiple prospects bearing in themselves multiple pasts can be found in normal positivity, in a present time that carries within it a splendor and plurality that could unfold and change genuinely. There *is* an absolute, there *is* a sublime, and this is to be temporized not only in a future that is planned for, and yet pluralized; instead, this absolute is set as a structure of the future’s plurality. All the same, this art that promises alternative paths joins with, yet struggles against, that world that deploys a well-defined, fully ordered immanent principle. Art both brings the present to the future and confirms that future’s essential divergence from an immanent, ordered current time.

This chapter aims at an interpretation of Comte’s position on art and aesthetics in his later work, in particular their paradoxical status in a world structured by science in the anticipated positive polity. It focuses on the *Discours d’ensemble du positivisme* rather than the whole *Système de politique positive* because of the urgency evinced in the *Discours*, because of its harried writing and frail construction in the midst of 1848, and because of its attempt to reconstruct Comte’s conceptual system. A broad context here is provided by Saint-Simonian conceptions of community, leadership and socially valuable art,⁶ by Hegelian conceptions of art at the end of history and by Romantic understandings of the tension between art and life, to which I shall return. My main concern here is the value of aesthetics in Comte’s exposition of the positive polity, where art is depicted as playing a role that is, on the one hand, idealizing and normalizing and, on the other, authentically creative and transformative. Comte’s positivism is of course an unlikely site for a full-blown aesthetic theory, something that commentators have repeatedly noted and that Comte himself acknowledges when first entertaining the subject. It is this unlikely status that makes it so remarkable that he insists no fewer than four times in the first two pages that art plays an important role in the social regeneration he proposes as an essential component to positive politics.⁷

4 Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, vol. 3, 204.

5 Comte also encourages utopias, in the plural, in *A General View of Positivism*, 303–304.

6 Neil McWilliam, *Dreams of Happiness: Social Art and the French Left* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

7 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 3, 291–92. See Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-Theistic Program of French Social Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 99n.38.

At issue in the paradox is also the place of Comte in the history of notions and figures of a regeneration of Man, of a “New Man,” of social renovation as a profound transformation of society and Man themselves. The dream of such a regeneration dates largely to the French Revolution; as historians and critics such as Mona Ozouf, Jean Starobinski and Bronislaw Baczko have shown, it was essential to the understanding of art and architecture, of dreams of the future, of the revolutionary festivals instituted by Robespierre, the speculative architecture of Nicolas Leroux, the *code civil* of Napoleon. In 1848 and following decades the motif emerges again—not only on the march of socialism but also with its opponents, notably Wagner, and it persists into the avant-garde plans and dreams of the new century and the political regimes of the 1930s. Given the temporal structure Comte designed for the course of modern order and progress, which became more central to his later synthesis, and which treated the entire period since 1789 as a transitional revolution that had yet to be brought to a close and that only positivism could correctly conclude,⁸ art comes into Comte’s late work to play a major role for social regeneration—uniting the scientific, industrial and technological dimension in the social as well as his newfound focus on women and the working class as historical agents of positively organized progress.⁹ Particularly curious in this context is Comte’s sense of art as contributing to the crafting of a future defined by *order* but nevertheless open to this prophesy: It would not be an overstatement to write that Comte was at once singular in sustaining the paradox and, in retrospect, widely shared. In the 1920s and 1930s a highly similar principle—of a world already largely in order yet needing depiction and realization of the future—would become essential to socialist realism as much as to architectural modernists like Le Corbusier.

The Conceptual Structure and Dynamics of the *Discours sur l’ensemble* and the Sixty-year Revolution

Comte opens the *Discours sur l’ensemble* with a dual task: to reaffirm the completeness and maturity of positivism, particularly as a doctrine for social reorganization, and to modify it by showing how only now, after it has been rendered subservient to order and progress and, as it properly considers and comprehends feeling within society, can it offer a proper plan and approach for this reorganization. It is a delicate dance that, even while it relies for its details on the particular conceptual scaffolding that Comte has built in the past and is now reconstructing: his fundamental division of history into three ages, his amendment of the earlier rationalistic positivist theory, his understanding of the relation of nature to society and his sense of the capacity of his approach to transform the latter and bring it into conformity with the former. His articulation of an

8 Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity*, 117.

9 Comte argues this despite his sense that art had thrown off the yoke of theocracy well before science did, which is consistent with his dismissal of modern art but could be said to clash with the conviction that art is now in a different stage than it has been.

aesthetic politics is the goal of this scaffolding, which is also to say that it is consequent or derivative, and for this reason it matters to look at the structure and dynamics that lead to its propositions.

Comte's use of concepts in the *Discours sur l'ensemble* follows a fairly clear—albeit internally very tense—structure. Comte systematically structures concepts in terms of the way they cross from the order of nature to the synthesis of human society, and the purpose of his “positive synthesis” is, by and large, to bring conformity to the two such that society, thanks to his “science” of society, can be at once the ordering and fulfillment of a human nature that complicates the phenomena and order of the natural or inorganic world. Just like the natural order, the human one is subject to laws, though these remain largely hidden from view. The gap or lapse between the two parallel orders—which Comte never proposes to flatten to a single order, but always to harmonize—is traversed by a number of dynamic concepts: Thought, Feeling, Action, Moral Unity. As opposed to stable, or ordering concepts, that belong to either order and are coextensive with its laws, these transversal concepts bear on them both the disorder of the contemporary world and the need and possibility of bringing it together. Thought, feeling, action seem disordered and confused in that they are subject to natural laws, but are, like these laws, distended in a disorderly and illusion-ridden society. *Because* they are subject to laws from both orders, *because* they are experienced as disordered in human society, and finally *because* they offer man a way of thinking and thereby effecting *both* society and his own nature, they form the terrain on which the work of positivism is to be done, and, conversely, they set the terms and horizon (or, to keep with the metaphor of the terrain) of this work. *Reorganization* and *Regeneration* as concepts carry precisely the sense of a singular return to “laws of social development”¹⁰ that can establish social as well as mental harmony.

This is a substantive shift for Comte, begun already in the 1843 *Discours sur l'esprit positif* and closely linked as much to his concern for mental harmony as to his social theory.¹¹ After decades of advocating Reason as the structuring premise for positive science, by the *Discours* he had become convinced that laying the blame for social ills on a deficiency of Reason was untenable. In the social realm, itself, it was imperative to recognize the priority of Feeling over Reason and urge their conformity, and the shifts proposed in the *Discours* follow this disarticulation.

With this conceptual structure and dynamic in mind, we might begin to set the stage for interpreting at once the meaning of 1848 in his thought and the particular role of art in Comte's pursuit. “Revolution” carries two accents. The first is decidedly negative, as Comte presents the world as undergoing a continued revolution that began in 1789 and that *must* be brought to an end.¹² However, the second accent is rather different in style and character: It partakes of the need to reorder the world that *is* taking place in the

10 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 24, 303.

11 See Auguste Comte, *Discours sur l'esprit positif* (Paris: Vrin, 1995), § 19 et al.

12 Thus, for example, the cover pages of the *Système de la politique positive* present the book as appearing in “the 63rd year of [...] the Revolution” as if this Revolution would only end with positivism's achievement.

move from a Theological to a Positive worldview. The revolution of the past six decades thus at once does and does not coincide with the Metaphysical stage, when this last is conceived as a transitional stage between the Theological and Positive ones.¹³ The confusion that is declared and felt during the Metaphysical stage remains, in the *Discours sur l'ensemble du positivisme*, linked both to social disorder and metaphysical reorganization—a resistance to the finality, suppleness and completeness of positive law. Intellectual crisis and social crisis go hand in hand: Resolving one means resolving the other and, thus, terminating the revolution involves *completing* it—as politicians and philosophers had time and again claimed to be doing, at least since Napoleon and the consuls’ proclamation on 25 Frimaire of Year VIII that “the revolution is finished”—would be to achieve this goal. In the *Discours*, Comte describes the present moment in terms of an “immense sphere” that “is opened” for the application of his theory at the very moment that he is laying it down. 1848 is then not a new revolution; it is the extension of the 60-year transformation and the chance to “terminate”—achieve, complete, harmonize—the social revolution¹⁴ that has been in motion and the spark for demonstrating once and for all that, despite what has been claimed of positivism, it is in fact “favorable to Feeling and even to Imagination,” thanks to which this termination can occur.¹⁵ Put differently, it is the moment when positivism can become and be recognized “at last as a complete and consistent whole”¹⁶ that is fully applicable to a world in dire need of order and harmony, a world in which “Reason has become habituated to revolt.”¹⁷ This isomorphism—in fact the mapping of the completed positivist system onto a long-running revolution that is about to be ended—conducts precisely the two sides of the image that Comte is so intent on projecting. First, that the social transformation under way is a spiritual or moral reorganization¹⁸ and, at the same time, that positivism’s turn to Feeling (or “Affection”¹⁹) to buttressing (or “advancing”) the “benevolent emotions,”²⁰ is both the political truth underlying its purpose and the “comprehensive and durable” synthesis for the social and moral spheres.²¹

This generates a fairly straightforward tension in Comte’s text: If positivism is now to “comprehend the moral sphere”—the verb “comprehend” being understood in both of its usual senses—to discard the priority of a belief in Reason, which had originally ordered and sustained it, and instead recognize this moral sphere as the sphere of the “movement’s” application and the essence of man, how can positivism remain committed to the *Order* and *Progress* that it has declared as its scientific system and goal? How can Comte hope to restore *harmony* between the order of nature and that of society while

13 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 19–21, 33–35.

14 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 3.

15 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 1.

16 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 7.

17 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 21.

18 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 2–4.

19 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 12.

20 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 24–25.

21 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 12.

destabilizing the very source of Order? Art is a weapon unsheathed at precisely this theoretical and political juncture; but before pursuing it further, it is worth looking at the shift, as regards art, from Comte's early work, in more detail.

Earlier Comments on Art and Contemporary Comparisons

In his early work, notably the *Cours de philosophie positive*, Comte engaged art as a coefficient of industry, an effect linked to the particularities of social organization. Granting considerable significance to it in the polytheistic era, he attributed to Greek art a capacity and a force that he saw as entirely missing in the present forms of art, which are daunted by the lack of moral harmony more broadly characteristic of the present. Greek polytheism had allowed for the arts to appear as pure expressions of “what was in every mind.”

The want of [moral] harmony [between the active interpreter and passive spectator] is the main cause of the feeble effect produced by the greatest modern worlds of art, conceived, as they are, without faith, and judged without conviction, and therefore exciting in us no impressions less abstract and more popular than those general ones which are a consequence of our human nature.²²

Central among the arts here was Architecture, which was singularly significant for him for its distinct improvement over time. Unlike British and German philhellenes, who identified ancient Greek architecture as singularly important for its identification of the sublime, Comte identified Greek architecture with moral harmony but treated the Gothic cathedral as aesthetically far superior. In it, “the moral power of the art attains a sublime perfection which is nowhere to be found among the temples of antiquity, notwithstanding the charm of their regularity.”²³

Having established the sharp difference between non-modern and modern art, Comte then recalibrates the concept “Art” affirmatively in terms provided by practical and industrial arts, that is, a sense that is largely defined and modulated by the less-aesthetic sense of the term “art” we find in terms like “arts of management,” “medical arts,” and so on. Art and technique are generally identified at this point, with the latter taking priority, such that art would exist as an order of ideas separate from the scientific order, but impelled in the same direction. This, Comte treats as promising:

Modern society [...] has been from the beginning of the Middle Ages, one long stage of transition, directed by monotheism—the social state presenting no stable and marked aspect, and the philosophy favouring scientific more than aesthetic development. All influences have thus concurred to retard the course of the fine arts; and yet, all evidence proves that there has not only been no deterioration, but that genius of this order has attained and surpassed the elevation of the noblest productions of antiquity, while it has opened now provinces of art, and declined in no other respect than in social influence. To all who judge be a higher

22 Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, trans. Harriet Martineau, vol. 3 (London: George Bell and Sons, 1896), 39.

23 Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, vol. 3, 42.

criterion than the effect produced it must be evident that, in spite of unfavourable circumstances, the aesthetic, like all the other faculties of Man, is under a condition of continuous development. When a stable and homogeneous, and at the same time progressive state of society shall have become established under the positive philosophy, the fine arts will flourish more than they ever did under polytheism, finding new scope and new prerogatives under the new intellectual regime.²⁴

The promise is delimited in two ways: first, we are starkly within the ideology of social art prevalent in nineteenth-century art—art valuable for the improvement of society—a conception that Saint-Simonian circles had already delineated as relevant to their own projects.²⁵ Comte’s particularity lies in his criticism of art’s social influence, which because of modern moral troubles he treats as unpromising under the current regime. Second, the advance of art participates with the advances of the sciences in a more general human progress.²⁶ The proposed “flourishing” is here crucial, in that art already appears as liberated in the positive age, *but* its function and space will be the consequence of, rather than a participant in, these advances. When Comte thus speaks of art, he is speaking first and foremost in terms of “arts of management” and “medical arts,” and the consequence is one of aligning the capacities of art, regardless of limitations, with this particular modality of art’s relation to life. Art, in other words, is not poetry or, rather, poetry is not unless and until it can be a poetry that is underwritten by the laws that line the rest of human life.

One may point to three theoretical systems among which Comte’s choices are suspended, even though there is little evidence to link Comte to the latter two. The first is the movement arguing for social art in early nineteenth-century France, a movement to which Henri de Saint-Simon and the Saint-Simonians who followed him had contributed. Art had to be socially valuable, it had to point to an improved and aesthetically superior future in which order was scientifically set to harness class antagonisms and intellectual strife and demagoguery. Even allowing for the *sui generis* character of his writing, Comte could in principle be read as framing his argument by way of social art and Saint-Simonian theory. That art was to be united with science and to offer compelling futures in such a manner as to allow for a new aesthesis was broadly in tandem with Saint-Simon’s approach in *L’Organisateur*. But there were three radical points of difference. First, Art in Comte concerns, as we have seen, a renaturalization and reharmonization of society so that its laws would be in tandem with those of nature. At the same time, Comte neither declared art to be simply *socially* useful in the present—he understood it as the necessary umbrella and hinge for his other domains, and one that needed to be overturned in order to find this necessary locus. Nor, third, did he postpone the absolute that art would offer into the future: He instead allowed it to perform a temporal loop quite different to Saint-Simon’s thanks to which, isomorphically to the role it had played in the

24 Comte, *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, vol. 3, 43.

25 For Comte on Social Art in the *Discours*, see 32, 343.

26 See Jean-François Braunstein, *La philosophie de la médecine d’Auguste Comte* (Paris: PUF, 2009), 56, which I mention here for the emphasis on medical art, order, and normality.

past, it could facilitate a social and political dynamism for future transformations (again in the plural). The other two theoretical points of reference are G. W. F. Hegel's and the young Richard Wagner's. The comparison to Hegel is notable because of the broad-stroke similarities between the vectors of history proposed by the two, and by Comte's bastardization and reversal of the notion of an effacement of art at the end of history, thanks to which art as known thus far would disappear. It is, however, the Wagner case that provides the most significant counterpoint to Comte.²⁷ In no other aesthetic and *soi-disante* revolutionary theory in the mid-nineteenth century was the artist given such broad rein over his audience and the nation as Wagner offered; Comte did not go that far: He did not abandon rationalism and progress at all, but he did suggest that art entered the picture and staged an Artist-audience relationship that restructured the social precisely by re-naturalizing Feeling and Sentiment. The 1848 context and the paradoxes of the *Discours* make these reference points all the more pressing.

Comte's Aesthetic Politics and Its Paradoxes

Art is not the only "new" subject for positivism in the *Discours*—Comte portrays "Woman" and Religion (positively conceived) as unexplored spaces of promise. Positivism however reaches art differently than it engages Woman—whom it incorporates—or than it pronounces Religion, which it determines as an umbrella covering its unity and social purpose. Not only does Art now encompass Poetry—besides Music, Painting, Architecture as well as the scientific arts—Art is instead awarded the seemingly impossible role of resolving the revolutionary tensions—between Order, on one hand, and Feeling on the other—and restoring "our normal state," the state that has never before existed. Its place in the conceptual webbing of the *Discours sur l'ensemble* is analogous to its role in the future polity. By finding its place in the positive society, Art brings the Revolution to a close, submits to laws, and opens to its own supposedly true flourishing.²⁸ We might term this expression of "penultimism" Comte's *conceptual-political subjunctive*.

Art, so far as it is yet organized, does not include that part of the economy of nature which, being the most modifiable, the most imperfect, and the most important of all, ought on every ground to be regarded as the principal object of human exertions.²⁹

Expressed here in the negative, the subjunctive marks the promise of the harmonization of society and Feeling. By standing on the threshold between its historical failure and its

27 On Wagner, see my "The Sovereignty of the New Man after Wagner," in Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos and Nicole Jerr, eds, *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 440–68, and Eric Michaud, "1933: le Triomphe de Richard Wagner. La destruction de la politique," in Pascal Huynh, ed., *Le Troisième Reich et la musique* (Paris: Musée de la musique/Fayard, 2004), 59–66.

28 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 294 et al.

29 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 32.

positive flourishing, Art bears both the promise and the supposedly troubled history of its meaning.

To quote this place in Comte’s conceptual web, and in the dynamism of the present moment, however, is also to note that the webbing of the *Discours* is something of a moving target, full of tensions in Comte’s repeated redefinition of not only Art but related concepts as well. To explain his particular blend of aesthetic politics is to articulate these tensions against the imaginary of Art as Comte proposes it in the subjunctive and in its supposed history; the remainder of this chapter proposes to do precisely that, first drawing out the tensions and disjunctions, then noting Comte’s manner of imposing continuity, finally closing by explaining the regenerative project across these projections of past, aesthetic politics and future.

Tensions

Originally introduced alongside Feeling, Art in the fifth chapter of the *Discours*—on Art’s place in positivism—is suspended between Feeling and Imagination, yanked sometimes one way sometimes the other. If, in the Introduction, Comte could describe positivism as “favorable to Feeling *and even* to Imagination,” the pressure this introduces as, Imagination gradually becomes central to the system, is palpable: Imagination and Feeling need to be regulated into the system without fundamentally disturbing its purposes and structure. The two concepts of Feeling and Imagination are supposed to be straightforward or commonsensical: The former treats emotional activity as a pre-rational, almost natural, behavior on behalf of each individual; the latter is seen more explicitly as a refusal of reason, an attempt to provide specifically social bases for the flight from the natural and the rational, bases that are tantamount to morality. If Art is meant to mark the softening or opening of positivism—its recognition of the moral sphere, this moral sphere is now *at times* attached to Feeling (defined as supreme over Reason) and that emerges from Imagination (inferior and opposed to Reason, more basic or primitive)—it is to do so by arranging the different levels of Imagination/Reason/Feeling and to manage Feeling in a manner that is scientific yet primitive, ordered yet authentic. Divorced as these aspects of human life have been from one another, the comedy of their remarriage is tantamount to their fusion at the edges and also to their hierarchization. Thus, Comte can propose, seemingly without paradox, his assertion that the intellect must be free, but “We must control its natural tendency to unlimited digression.” Digression thanks to the imagination *poses* a problem, but one that can and must be harnessed for the restoration of society.³⁰ In ignoring this, scientific investigation has failed to achieve what it sought, and has brought with it a negative effect not only on art itself but on moral progress.³¹ Yet the hierarchy and reintroduction—indeed the promise of regeneration through Imagination and Feeling—are anything but straightforward: Art is supposed to affect Reason and be

30 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 280, 291.

31 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 292.

itself rational; yet at the same time it is supposed to, in a sense, rule over reason by ranging between Feeling and Imagination.

Two further paradoxes crisscross the argument. First, Comte sutures a thoroughly neoplatonic theory of Art's purpose with a counter-theory according to which Art needs at all times to be subordinate to reality. On one hand, it is responsible for the identity of the True, the Beautiful and the Good, a point that Comte repeats ceaselessly.³² It is responsible for designing "types of the noblest kind," which society could and should then attain.³³ Yet *by the same token* the ideals are and must be "always subordinate to the real."³⁴ The second paradox is just as frustrating: Art should *not* govern³⁵ and yet it should imagine, articulate and design Utopias. It should remain subordinate to "the actual laws of social existence" and not pretend to be structuring them, yet it should pave and show the way for Feeling to imagine them modified and pursue their correct modification.

Impositions of Continuity

Comte sees no paradox in any of these disjunctions—no reason to interrupt or question the viability and consistency of the hierarchical remarriage of Feeling, Reason and Imagination that he proposes, nor of the paradoxes of idealism and governance that he awards to Art. Three distinct moments of the chapter serve as movements intended to impose continuity and non-contradiction. First, his history of Art; second, his theory of expression and representation, which subtends and replicates the structure of the transversal concepts coming to their own and restoring the balance of nature and order; and, third, his fusion of the subjunctive promise of art with the polemical situation of the present.

Comte's history of art roughly parallels the three-stages theory of history: twice in the chapter Comte traces the place of Art in the polytheist, monotheist, and metaphysical eras with a promise to its rejuvenation and perfection in the positive. Yet here Comte is at his least Hegelian: Art does not quite *express* each age; it has never been "incorporated" into the social order,³⁶ but is always awry with respect to it (and not in a dialectical fashion). It expresses the best that those living within an age could express, but it confirms the ages' failure to think correctly, "positively"; not since polytheism, moreover, has art been allowed "free scope"; it has merely remained a dysfunctional tool of religious power.³⁷ Only particular exceptions are worthy of praise, notably medieval Cathedrals and the handful of the Great Men of art whom Comte admires. Piling invective upon invective on the remainder, and especially on poets of the century preceding him, Comte's art history amounts to a promise that none of this pre-history of the positive age will affect

32 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 300, 310, 320.

33 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 302.

34 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 302.

35 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 297–98.

36 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 314.

37 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 360.

regenerated society.³⁸ The latter will amount to the systematic unfolding of Great Men and Great Art, and by the same token, the restoration of the hitherto disjointed relationship between Art and society that will make possible Art as a mirroring of society and the *expression* of the new age.³⁹

The art–historical theory, wholly in keeping with Comte’s overall presentation of human history, also served to whitewash the gradations between Feeling and Imagination and to justify the effect Art would have in the positive age. In the pre-modern past, Feeling had lacked Reason to guide it; not to put too fine a point on it, Imagination had run amok in organizing the relationship between Feeling and the moral sphere because there was no systematic and rational form capable of providing the necessary normal order. As a result, some works could be works of genuine astonishment and wonder, but Art had been misguided throughout because it confirmed at once Man’s impotence over his world and the speculative or theological explanation of this world. These fundamental and longstanding misunderstandings of Art’s role were due to the insufficient recognition of laws, of the “fact that the highest phenomena are as much subject to laws as others.”⁴⁰ That men are ignorant of the laws of nature and the order of society is a mantra that Comte often locates next to his claims on art, as the two are linked, to suggest that the dynamic, “less rigid” higher laws grant humanity precisely enough room in which to modify life and order: Art serves exactly this purpose, namely the amendment, adaptation, modification of the laws.⁴¹ But this is *only* possible at a moment in human history when Reason has emerged and is rising to dominance, when the affective and imaginative registers are harnessed by it, and when the overly rational scientists can be held back to allow for the proper “remarriage.” Art may not be clearly attached to Feeling or Imagination in that it is constructive of them, as much as derivative of their order.

This also would explain Comte’s argument that Art should not govern yet should nevertheless organize ideals. At stake would be the direction of the harmony between human order and nature; the imposition of *laws* amidst a lack of proper understanding regarding natural laws, and the workings of society was instead very much attached to a misunderstanding of the capacity of man to reach from society into nature. Like Thought, Feeling, Action, Moral Unity, here the concepts of *representation* and *expression* become transversal concepts that break through from one order to the other. *Representation* is particularly valuable to Comte: *Because* Art is fundamentally representational for him, it provides a dual role—of at once “imitating” and “idealizing.”⁴² In representation, it “heightens” or stretches some features of reality and “suppresses” others.⁴³ Some of the novelty of the aesthetic theory in the *Discours* becomes evident in the movement of

38 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 316–18, 328, 334–35.

39 “The greatest epoch of Art has yet to come.” Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 317; on art as a mirror of society, see 306, 318.

40 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 33.

41 Thus, Comte claims that the only unmodifiable phenomena are the solar systems—toward all others, Man is “the arbiter.” Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 32.

42 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 312 et al.

43 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 307.

representation. While for Comte Art remains in the *Discours* allied to and coextensive with practices like “the medical art,” this alliance now seems more metonymic and idiosyncratic, oriented toward the claim to the co-implication of Art and science; representation is essential from Poetry, which lies on the speculative end of the variety of arts, to Architecture and Sculpture, which lie on the more practical, or realist, end. *Expression* at the same time links Art back to Feeling, eschewing the Imagination. Expression encodes representation in forms that are affectively and also rationally (albeit not *merely* rationally) expressed. In both cases, Art “influences Polity by the direction it gives to [...] types.”⁴⁴ Types, for which poetry depends on philosophy and which are direct results of the imagination, thus structure representation and expression into applicable forms that provide structure and direction without governing. Comte claims that types are very “insufficiently” or “imperfectly” understood at the present time; yet insofar as representation and expression arise transversally, like Thought and Action, out of the natural order and in order to function in human society, it makes sense that types are meant to be part of the harmonization of nature and society.⁴⁵ “The conception of the type is the same as the aesthetic imagination” itself, Comte insists, thereby arguing again that the capacity to direct social harmony in a manner consistent with nature must rely on positivism’s capacity to retain and encourage precisely this typology.⁴⁶ Creating such types involves the Imagination: it relies on the Imagination being given rein to operate freely, albeit not as freely as might lead to its separation from Reason and society. The creation of types is thus concomitant with Feeling and, unsurprisingly, intended to be rational. This “representation” assumes no distortion but merely “idealization,” no legend but merely idealization, no expression except that of a perfectionist’s rendition of the present, ultimately nothing but a positivist confirmation of the present as extending into the future. Thanks to the restoration of Art, the idealization of the present opens it to a future which *may* become fundamentally different, but not without an Art capable of abstracting, out of the present, in a direction that is identifiable yet also irreducible to present concerns. This kind of representation can, as a result, offer the move toward a utopia that is not entirely envisaged in the present, yet not capricious either. The conceit here is that governance need not fall within Art’s scope. Artists (poets, sculptors, musicians and architects) will be capable of asserting futures through the simple representation of past and present—indeed through the recollection of “all phases of the Past [...] with the same distinctness with which some of them have been already idealized by Homer and Corneille”—while using their futural orientation to “celebrate Humanity” as it stands now.⁴⁷ This peculiar temporal loop, in which Humanity, through its self-depiction, is open to a future in which it is transformed yet flattens the past into the present to celebrate itself, constitutes the refraction necessary for Artists to both rely on “the real” and submit themselves to it, while postulating, without caprice or confusion, the force of the future as an idealization of the present. This is the point when Artists

44 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 302.

45 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 302.

46 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 303.

47 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 325.

will relinquish their status and class as Artists to the philosophic Priesthood; the fusion of the two involves, for Comte, the capacity to, so to speak, govern without governing, to offer a future without enforcing it.

An almost inexhaustible series of beautiful creations in epic or dramatic art may be produced, which, by rendering it more easy to comprehend and to glorify the Past in all its phases, will form an essential element, on the one hand, of our educational system, and on the other, of the worship of Humanity.⁴⁸

In some respects, the art form that seems closest to this form of social organization is architecture, which Comte treats in a manner radicalized from his earlier work. While repeating his earlier claim on the power of medieval religious architecture, Comte now proposes a kind of total work of art in architecture (“the property which Architecture possesses of bringing all the arts together into a common centre”), and casts it as capable of forcing impressions on its audience—not only the inhabitants of its buildings—that are “*so powerful and so permanent.*”⁴⁹ While “far more dependent on technical processes; and indeed most of its productions are rather works of industry than works of art,” it carries within the capacity to shape a world and facilitate its direction for those inhabiting it. We will return to the problem of architecture at the end of this chapter, particularly with regard to positivism’s unlikely influences in the twentieth century.

The Final Fusion of Aesthetic Society and the New Man in the Subjunctive

Within this framework, Comte’s conceptual–political subjunctive provides the third sort of continuity and bears broader fruit. It is also here that the utopias and New Men of positivist art can emerge. Art is thus now in an odd holding pattern: it will be ready when the inversion into the new society occurs, and at the same time, it will effect this inversion. Comte replicates his conceptual–political subjunctive as the structure of the future’s dynamism over and over: “If,” “once” and “when” are operative terms that, attached to the future that can be rationally and scientifically anticipated, allow for Art to emerge both as it is conditioned now—a handmaiden of science becoming liberated to complete and reframe the power of science—and as a conduit of the promise of the new era, which is to effect, without submission on anyone’s part, the new world onto Feeling. Laws, at the same time, rely for their full bloom on the capacity of Art to effect social harmony and, hence, both an acceptance of natural laws within society and, by extension, the formation of social laws that can be recognized and felt within society. The comprehension of laws depends to a degree on the representation of types, on the guidance and harmonization of society and, in that manner, Art provides the chance to shift from a rationale of “understanding” laws to one of controlling and guiding them into

48 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 325.

49 Comte, *A General View of Positivism*, 312–13.

further harmony. Insofar as Comte identifies the transformation of Art—the recovery of its plenitude and force, its futurity, its capacity to cover the past—with this subjunctive inversion that completes the Revolution and establishes the Positive age, the paradoxes he has forced do not simply fall away, but provide the tension necessary for the promise of positivism in the imagined new age to become fundamentally and irreducibly aesthetic.

A Coda on Socialist Realism and Le Corbusier.

What might be an example of positivist Art? And, if we have difficulty identifying examples in his time, why would Comte's formulation deserve analysis beyond the technicalities involved in outlining his theory? It is worth closing here by reference to two twentieth-century approaches that could not be subsumed under the rubric of positivism, yet nevertheless involve very proximate conceptions of the place and value of aesthetics in the modern political universe: the world of socialist realism in the USSR, and the theory and practice of Art in modernist architecture, specifically in Le Corbusier.

Socialist realism's depiction of work offers a notable example, in that the dual operation of imitating *and* idealizing, guiding *without* governing, alongside the identification of socialist utopias in and by way of the artwork itself, offered precisely a kind of aesthetics of revolution that Comte would have approved.⁵⁰ In paintings of glorified labor, for example, socialist realism depicts a type that is at once a "New Man" and a radicalization of reality, the effecting of social regeneration. In these figures, history is completed (and cited) in entering the new Soviet age, and art proclaims the achievement of the subjunctive, the completion of the political revolution into an aesthetic transformation. Art cannot be treated as simply a matter of propaganda or of faith in a ruling aesthetic, and it cannot be theorized as operating *in contrast* to a science seen as

50 One need not agree with Boris Groys's account of socialist realism in *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), particularly the reduction of constructivism and socialist realism to a single line of derivation thanks to which "the Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project," to see that the Stalinist use of "the tradition" as a past to be brought back into the present, and the pursuit of a future that was to be at once structured and imagined, yet also allowed its own character and transformation. See p. 63: It is not for nothing that socialist realist aesthetics always speaks not of "portraying" positive or negative heroes, but of "incarnating" them by artistic means. In and of themselves the positive and negative heroes have no external appearance, because they express transcendental demiurgic forces. However, to demonstrate these forces in a manner that is "intelligible to the people" (the "people" here meaning not actual consumers of art but mortals who lack transcendental vision), they must be symbolized, incarnated, set upon a stage. Hence, the constant concern of socialist realist aesthetics with verisimilitude. Its heroes, as is stated in certain of the quotations cited above, must thoroughly resemble people if people are not to be frightened by their true aspect, and this is why the writers and artists of socialist realism constantly bustle about inventing biographies, habits, clothing, physiognomies and so on. They almost seem to be in the employ of some sort of extraterrestrial bureau planning a trip to Earth—they want to make their envoys as anthropomorphic as possible, but they cannot keep the otherworldly void from gaping through all the cracks in the mask.

dominant. On the contrary, it extends and represents this science. It does not govern, for it does not depict *all* of the new reality, but it sets within its (visual, architectural, or poetic) frame a part of this reality—its immanent principle perfected—while allowing what lies beyond the frame itself a freer rein than one would otherwise expect. Art for them involves a complex relation between technique and science, on one hand, and the fusion of aesthetic creativity and a normative singular regime in need of idealization on the other. Suturing these, it offers a future—or a set of futures—within and beyond its frame.

Le Corbusier also positioned himself, and in his case rather more explicitly, within a positivist framework. Amidst the supposed dregs of contemporary architecture and its pervasive negative effects on modern life and culture, Le Corbusier proposed in *Vers une architecture* (*Toward a New Architecture*) that the alternative “Architecture or Revolution?”⁵¹ be resolved in favor of the former. Architecture alone held the reins of a new and ordered world; it alone was capable of directing industry, business and construction into this world. “Industry has created its tools. Business has modified its habits and customs. Construction has found new means. Architecture finds itself confronted with new laws.”⁵² It is difficult not to hear loud and clear echoes of Comte in the claim that architecture is meant to follow such new laws as emerge from engineering, economy and mathematics, and with an eye to a new society of mass-production houses that architecture, “pure creation of the mind,” would serve to make beautiful:

The Engineer, inspired by the law of Economy and governed by mathematical calculation, puts us in accord with universal law. He achieves harmony. The Architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit; by forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree and provokes plastic emotions; by the relationships which he creates he wakes profound echoes in us, he gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and of our understanding; it is then that we experience the sense of beauty.⁵³

In proposing to normalize and order modern society—so “profoundly out of gear”—Le Corbusier would thus give quarter precisely to a Comtean art theory, offering it a radically different politics than Stalinism’s, yet all the same pursuing a New Man that would sheathe and shift the present into its own future. In an aesthetics that leads Feeling and Imagination to order and allows them to complete and perfect Reason, a completion of history into a new present and a new set of futures not limited by merely political revolution, but effected through business and order, a morality of transparent life, and a beauty to relay the present into its conditioned yet unpredictable future.

51 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (1931; New York: Dover, 1986), 269.

52 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 283.

53 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 1.

