

## Art is useless, long live Art

### - *Introduction*

After the creation of social media, mankind has become obsessed with beauty and self image. To live a pretty, picture-worthy life has become a moral imperative for all social classes, ranging from the actress to the waiter, the penniless and the billionaire, even though the facade is obvious to almost everyone with eyes. And yet, everyone still strives to get that good looking shot of their food, that like-grabbing lighting, that minutely crafted aesthetic. Especially in these trying times, beauty and art have become an escape to many from the harshness of the outside world, providing comfort and a chance to create a better reality. In a sense, hedonism and the cultivation of art are more prominent now than it has ever been, so why are we so keen to dismiss beauty and art as “vain” and “useless”, if we are all so dependent on them? Why are we so eager to bash on current artists and call their work “non essential” with the same breath that we use to praise the books we read and the movies we watch? This essay will therefore focus on the importance of art, not just in our current situation but in the history of mankind, as it is the only thing that truly gives meaning, more than any other human activity, to our mortal life.

### - *A nihilistic approach*

“All art is quite useless.” This is the statement Oscar Wilde used to close off his *Preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray*. It matches up with what society’s current view of art and beauty is, but it is an incomplete statement. “All art is quite useless”, and so are all the noble sciences--mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology--held so highly by the intellectual world. “All art is quite useless” and so are all the buildings we build from the ground up, all the food that we make to be wasted, all the money we stack in our vaults, all of this system that seems to be deciding our fate everyday. “All art is quite useless” he said, but so is everything else that we make.

Surely this is not how the majority of us seems to perceive it, as we still gladly continue to do all of the above, although we must know, deep down, how vain our efforts are. Still, it runs deep in mankind the idea that we need to leave a trace behind, a mark that stands the tests of time, even long after its creator’s death. Nothing matters, however, in the end, as it is not granted that what we make will last forever. But in the uselessness of it all, wouldn’t it be at least comforting if we died in the certainty that, at least, what we made was beautiful? If nothing is real and all we live for is made up, then let men create freely, without the bounds of “progress” to tie us up. The “supremacy” of art lies therefore in its beauty. In Dostoevskij’s *“I demoni”*, Trofimovic says *“La scienza stessa non sussisterebbe un momento senza la bellezza, – lo sapete, voi che ridete? – diventerebbe una volgarità, e non inventereste più un chiodo!”* It is, in fact, out of our love for beauty that most things have been made, including humanity itself.

### - *Cathartic use of art*

All rhetorical exercises aside, it is not true that art is completely pointless. The first to theorize the cathartic aspect of art was Aristotle in his *Poetics*: he noted that, while watching the heart-wrenching

spectacle of the tragedies, the greek public seemed somehow elated. He went on stating that the true objective of theatre was in elevating the public's soul and relieving it of its troubles and worries. In the 19th century, this concept was taken to the extreme by the Romantic movement, applying the concept of "sublime" to the artistic experience. For example, the idealist philosopher Schelling described art as the culmination of spirit and nature, the two components of his universe, and, as such, the most divine thing man could produce, meant to elevate his own spirit towards God.

The concept of "catharsis" does not only exist on a theoretical level. During quarantine, it has become more commonplace to see people writing, painting, making music, or practicing any form of art. It should not be surprising that so many turned to art as a way to keep sane: it has been stated by many modern psychologists that, in times of extreme stress, the human brain tends to go back to childhood passions and interests as a coping mechanism, and, as a result of that, we become more artistically productive. Beauty and art therefore exist because men cannot physically *live* without it, both as a way to deal with their own demons and as an innate talent: if one was to give a pencil to a toddler, he or she will not start writing numbers or counting things, but they will surely *draw* something, even the most simple shape. As Dostoevskij puts it, art is "*la forma di bellezza senza il cui conseguimento forse non acconsentirei nemmeno a vivere...*", and for a good reason: if art does not exist, we do not exist either.

#### - Conclusion

It needs to be pointed out that, according to the author, his ideal of beauty "*è già stata conseguita*", which in itself is a nod to Nietzsche's theory of the death of art. This cannot be further from the truth, as art history progresses long after the publication of this book. And, in my opinion, here lies the secret that makes art and beauty so vital and immortal: their subjectivity ensures that, even if there was only one man left making art, it will still be alive.