AUDIO-VISUAL ART &TECHNO IN CULTURE AND CIVILISATION

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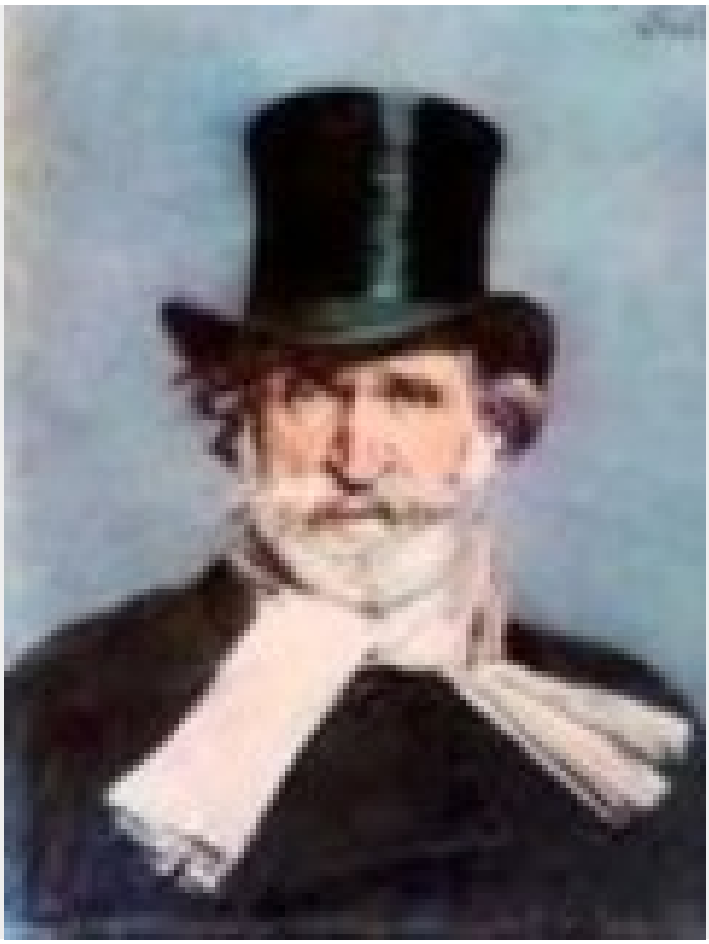

Category: Opinions

Prof. Khatchatur Pilikian, London, 3 March 2013

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Popular beliefs about opera are themselves 'operatic', hence often grandiose, fabulous and sometimes even majestic. Verdi, **"*the only man capable of writing grand operas*"** (Rossini) genuinely believed that **"*to copy reality can be a good thing, but to invent reality is better, much better*".** Verdi is only echoing what his compatriot Leonardo da Vinci had succinctly expressed three centuries before him that **"*the painter contends with and rivals nature*"**, a belief shared also by twentieth century's own Pablo Picasso who said emphatically**: "*Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realise truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand*."**

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What a fantastic metaphorical term, **Culture**, to denote the social, spiritual, intellectual and artistic endeavours of human societies, indeed of humanity as a whole. **Culture** has no proper antinomy, unlike **Civilization**, which can be contrasted with **Barbarism.** The so-called 'barbaric' people or societies were also thought to be in possession of culture, albeit 'less civilized' ones. The cultivated human beings became closer to being civilized. For many centuries, the meaning of **culture** was

focussed on the concept of a **process**, as in the act of cultivating the soil of the earth, not only individually, but especially as a society of humans. **Civilization**, having the 'city' as its core, pushed the development of the metaphor to mean not only the process, but also the **product** of that process. As a result, **Language**, being the most valued commodity of that product, became also the yardstick of **Civility**.

For the Greek citizen of the great Greek Civilization of the 5th century B.C., a foreigner's language sounded like **bar-bar-bar** or unintelligible to their 'civilised' ears (an echo of it resounds in the English language, as "it's all double Dutch to me.") Hence a foreigner, like the Nordic German or the highly civilized Egyptian, was a 'barbarian' for the Greeks.

Stretching the concept further, the conquered 'foreigner' became not only barbarian, but also a foreigner in his own land. Thus, when Germanic invaders conquered the Celts, they called them ***Wealas***=**foreigner**, hence the ***Welsh*** 'became' foreigners in their own homeland! The Welsh in their turn called the invaders merely the ***Saxons***, without distinguishing the different tribes constituting the invaders. But the name of one of these tribes, the ***Angles***, was used as the name of the Germanic branch of the language they spoke, the ***English***, long before the country came to be known as ***Englaland*** or England, ca AD 1000.

When culture began to be recognised as the end product of a process, civilization was envisaged as the means for that end; in other words, **culture** signified the values and meanings of that process, while **civilization** implied its material organisation. It is in that contextual process that **culture** developed to express the most cherished desire of us all-- **freedom**, ultimately aspiring for its end product-- **happiness**. But it is in civilization or **Civic Society** that the human desire for freedom and happiness can be materialised. A **Civic Society** therefore essentially implies a **non-racist, multi-cultural** society-- the building block of **multi-cultural civilization.** Furthermore, the most cherished essence of the **universality of art** is the product of and witness to that **humane necessit**y embedded in culture-civilization duality.

Art is born out of **necessity**, both objective and subjective. As one of the founding fathers of Greek Drama argued, *"Art is feebler than necessity"*. Surely the source of the veracity of Aeschylus' message is the cultural history of mankind.

No art form, not even **Theatre**, has ever surpassed the power of necessity. A powerful necessity to combine all Art & Techno forms into a single medium of communication has challenged humanity for thousands of years. **Theatre** was the outcome of that necessity.

Happening as a single entity in a socially enhanced and newly created architectural environment, it was given no particular name other than **Theatron**, meaning simply **to watch, view** or **look** at a **Drama,** the latter meaning an **act/deed**, performed by a **Chorus**=**Group of Dancers and Singers**. The performance of the Chorus (in goat-like dresses and masks) had already its name baptised as **Tragoidia**=**Goat-Song,** dedicated to Dionysus, the deity of dual birth, regeneration and wine.

Hence **Theatron** was a visual phenomenon par excellence, and for the Athenians of 5th century B.C., it was their Forum for **Mytho-Poetic, Audio-Visual Literacy**, alongside its much tormented twin, **Democratia=Sovereignty of the People**, indeed their Forum for **Socio-Political Literacy**. Consequently **Theatron** and **Democratia** were cherished as safeguards against **Timocratia**=Sovereignty of the Chosen-Wealthy and **Ochlocratia=**Sovereignty of the Mob. **Theatre was the Forum where the mob (Ochlos) was transformed into people (Demos).**

It is fascinating, nevertheless, that the history of that visual phenomenon named **Theatron** pushed the art of **Poetry**, the jewel in the crown of that most valued yardstick of civility, **Language**, to the forefront of all creative expressions. It unified the performances of the Chorus and its Leader with that of the *dramatic personae*. Hence **Poetry**, meaning "**the art of the maker of things/words**", became the single most valuable medium to be assembled at socially enhanced time and place, to recreate the original visual happening/deed (Drama), worthy to be looked at (Theatron), contemplated on and reacted upon, again and again, by a large audience.

Twenty centuries later, in the 16th century Italy, in Florence, another composite art form was born. Hoping to revive the original Greek Drama, late Renaissance Italy ended up creating something different, **Opera**, which literally meant **a work.** It was a new audio-visual phenomenon, where **Melos=Song**, more than **Poetry=word,** eventually became the raison d'être of its drama. Notwithstanding their historic difference in the emphasis of the essential medium, Opera's **Meloidia=Tune-Song** echoed the root meaning of **Tragoidia/Tragedy=Goat-Song.** Hence opera's early names: **Favola in Musica** (Monteverdi) then **Melodrama in Musica** (Verdi).

Just three centuries later, on 31st January 1839, the Englishman Talbot read before the Royal Society his ***"Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or the process by which natural objects may be made to delineate themselves without the aid of the artist's pencil"***. Talbot's 'Drawing', later called **Photography=Drawing with Light, or Light-Pictures,** was a radically new approach to visual communication.

Towards the end of the 19th century and ushering in the 20th century, the state of the Art & Techno gave birth to **Kinomatography=Moving-Pictures,** thence **Cinema,** the most popular and the most powerful visual medium ever to be created by the Homo sapiens. Those who believe that "nothing is new under the sun" might link this new twentieth century visual phenomenon to Plato's parable of the cave (in the "Republic"), where an individual soul is watching the shadows of life pass him by. But suddenly in the cinema-theatre, millions of pictures are set into motion to move the souls of tens of thousands of individuals, anytime and anywhere in the world. In 1936 Marconi's **Electronic Television** eventually pioneered the influx of that 'Platonic cave' installed in a box in every household.

Lo and behold, the further advances in audio-visual techno brought us even closer to Plato's parable

of the cave, albeit on a gigantic scale. By the end of the 20th century, a new state of the Art & Techno medium, **Holographs=Whole-Pictures,** created **Holograms=Whole-Images** to 'personify' actors on the stage. It eventually paved the way for the computerised visual phenomenon of **Virtual Theatre**, hence **Virtual Reality**, the most powerful audio-visual medium for the manipulation of the senses of the spectator ever created. The probability for such **total manipulation** has the potential to destroy social interaction and entice people to act as a mob and endanger evermore our most precious Socio-Political Forum itself --**Democracy.** I can now appreciate better what the great scholar of Ancient Greek culture, Dr M. I. Finley meant when he wrote that Plato was

> **{…} the most powerful and most radical anti-democratic moralist the world has ever known.**
>
> (M.I. Finley**. The Ancient Greeks**. Pelican Books, 1966, p.140)

There is a petrified rift between theory (abstract knowledge) and practice (concrete knowledge) throughout the human history. Eliminating that rift might be the most humane task that the Info Tech revolution would accomplish, if only driven away from the obscene madness of profiteering at any cost, even at the cost of destroying life on Earth.

I believe preserving our inborn humanity is now a vital necessity. Thus we must keep Info Tech under human control, instead of it controlling us. There is no danger in letting holograms 'act' like humanoids. It will be tragic for humanity if we become mere holograms by being really and Globally manipulated in the bliss of **virtual** reality, with no inner mind and soul to breathe **Real Hope**. **Art** (visual, aural, tactile, kinetic and rhythmic) is our childhood sunrise. Engaging in art in **practice** to therein experience the acquired **abstracted literacy**, enhances the **sunrise of hope** of each human being. **Beauty** is its warmth. **Youthful soul** is its reward. **Patience** is its guardian angel.

To Continue

- The Ensemble of Poetry, Song, Dance & Epic Tale in Armenia.
- The Birth of Opera in the Armenian Culture