

POWER-STRUCTURES

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1. Culture and Political Power in The Past

Art always contains an element of the unruly, an anticipation of that consciousness of freedom which cannot be contained by states and their rules and laws. As the works of art are not easily and always contained in the religious and metaphysical limits set by the conformist thinkers of power, and since they reflect realities which the rulers would rather not confront, art has been viewed with suspicion where it did not merely glorify the status quo. Art is always the sphere where elements of human history as a whole are concentrated in one focal point, where the general is experienced as the individual. Its measure is humaneness, which is always in a state of tension with the social situation in which it finds itself. This element makes it highly dangerous in the eyes of all ruling powers, the state and the church. Because of this fear, artists have been persecuted, banned and murdered from antiquity to the present and their works destroyed and burned. Laurence Berns has reformulated the ancient dilemma posed by the trial of Socrates, "the greatest hero of freedom of thought" - a dilemma that exposes one of the roots of the perennial censorship controversy: "Is philosophy, the intransigent quest for truth (including the truth about politics and religion), inherently subversive? Does it necessarily undermine political society and conventional morality, or, on the contrary, is a good society impossible without freedom to philosophise?"

As long as art is produced in a society which is not yet hierarchically structured, art is limited only by the will of the community in which it functions. One should not idealize such structures, as these traditional societies are limited and limiting in the scope of their artistic possibilities and are not normally conducive to the formation of individualistic art forms. Art in such societies is bound to the collective will and the limits of the collective consciousness. But at least they also lack the centralized power which can call the singers or the shamans to order when their songs or their images are contrary to the interest of the ruler. Even in more highly structured societies, like the kingdoms of West Africa, ritual and the arts which accompany ritual are largely a matter of the community which both funds the festivals and takes an active part in them.

One of the archetypal forms of art is the praise song and the commemorative statue. Heroes are sung about or their likeness erected in stone at a public place. One of the ways to be "immortalized" is to be mentioned in the writings of a great artist or to be painted by a great painter. The kings of all times knew the power of artists to make or destroy their image for the present and the future. The great cultures of Sumer, Babylon, Egypt, Persia, India and China employed thousands of artists for the greater glory of the rulers and the religious temples. That thousands of slaves were used to build these edifices and that many collapsed under the hard work, famine and torture while doing this, that the peasants of these states were bled dry to provide the funding for them, is often forgotten when we admire these works of great culture.

Political and economic power can have both an inhibiting and a supporting role for culture and the arts. When the palaces of the kings or the temples of state religions become the centre of culture, we can assume that nothing is produced within the ambit of these power structures which questions the basic law of these societies. The artist is "free" only within these parameters. The interplay between positive and negative elements of courtly patronage have been sharply delineated in Goethe's *Tasso*, a drama in which Goethe describes his own uneasy relationship to the court in Weimar under the guise of the Italian Renaissance poet. On the one hand, kings had the resources to support the arts and the desire to glorify their rule and see to their future memory; on the other hand, this very desire set clear limits to what the artists could create and what was impossible. In turn, artists at the court could and did "educate" the court at which they were working, and thus often created a highly sophisticated audience for the arts.

Even relatively smaller kings, like King Salomon, had ambitions to show their wealth and power by extravagant building projects. The new acropolis of Jerusalem was built with all the splendor and sumptuousness of an old oriental metropolis, and he integrated palace and temple to show the relationship between the divine king and the cult of the tribal god. Such works of architecture not only involved great slave armies, but were also extremely costly, so much so that even the rich Salomon was nearly bankrupted.

The Greek tyrants also had a clearly defined role in cultural politics. Corinthos under Periander was the leading city in this respect. Transforming the rural Dionysos festival into an urban art form, he prepared the ground for Athenian tragedy at the time of Peisistratos, and this became the representative art form for the urban community. Their houses were open to singers and poets. Equally the architecture of the Greek cities was

massively changed by the tyrants who used the resources they generated to build temples as well as water conduits which were astonishing engineering feats for the time. Of course, there are tensions and contradictions within the ruling ideologies of such monarchical states. Christianity, for example, has for two thousand years lived with the tension which arose out of fact that it incorporated one of the great human utopias, yet at the same time was participating in and exercising the very power which had to prevent this utopia from becoming reality. Those who stubbornly clung to the utopia, as they perceived it as the original founding idea of the church, more often than not were suppressed, their writings and teachings forbidden, and their bodies consumed by the flames of the stake of the Inquisition. Christianity shows quite clearly how any idea can be ruined once it becomes the ruling idea.

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Biographical Sketch

Peter Horn studied German and English at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1971 he graduated Ph.D. from the University of the Witwatersrand with a thesis on "Rhythm and structure in the poetry of Paul Celan", and was offered the chair of German at the University of Cape Town in 1974. From 1987 to 1990 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and from 1993-1994 Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University. He was president South African Association of German Studies (1989-1997), president of the Institute for Research into Austrian and International Literary Processes (Vienna) (2001-), on the executive committee of the Elias-Canetti-Gesellschaft, the National Executive of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) (1991 - 1992), the National Executive of the South African Writers' Association. Besides he was Honorary Vice President of the National Union of South African Students (1977-1981), Trustee of the South African Prisoners' Educational Trust Fund (1980-1985), and a member of the Interim Committee of the Unemployed Workers' Movement (1984/5). In 1974 he received the Pringle Prize of the South African English Academy for an essay to the concrete poetry, in 1992 he received the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (Honourable Mention for *Poems 1964-1989*), and in 1993 the Alex La Guma/Bessie Head Award and in 2000 the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for the short story collection *My Voice is under Control now*. In 1994 the University of Cape Town granted him a Honorary Fellowship for life. Two of his volumes of poetry and numerous other publications by him were banned for possession during the Apartheid regime. His poems are anthologised in most major anthologies of South African poetry, and more than 100 have been published in journals. He has published numerous contributions to academic books, learned journals, and reviews and review articles.