

## Editorial: Bioethics and Art before Nazism: Fritz Jahr between 1924 and 1933

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The concept of bioethics has, from the very beginning, been linked to art. Two years before publishing his pioneer article in *Kosmos* magazine, Fritz Jahr was a primary school teacher in Halle an der Saale. During the 1924-1925 school year, he had the opportunity to explore the power of music as a teaching tool for small children. The results of these investigations were included in his article *Der Tonsatz als Unterrichtsmethode* [Musical composition as a teaching method]<sup>i</sup>, published in 1926. In it we find the matrix of his thought that outlines an ethical concept in constant dialogue with the sources of art -painting, literature and most especially, music.

### Musical composition and moral education

Inspired by the work of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss, Jahr develops a methodology that proposes music as a *via regia* to mould thought and character in young children. He starts by giving his pupils a series of composition exercises [*Tonsatzübungen*], commencing with simple, monochord recitatives, sustained, for example, by the note G:



The fall-sun smiles from the sky. - Slowly and sadly leaves are falling.  
[*Die Herbst-sonne lacht vom Himmel - Langsam und traurig fällt das Laub*]

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Given that only one note is used, variations are exclusively rhythmical. However, Jahr holds that mood changes can be promoted by playing with these brief temporal oscillations. He proposes to later increase complexity by introducing minimal movements based on half tones or a tone below or above the tonic:



The fall-sun smiles from the sky. - Slowly and sadly leaves are falling.

As the phrase that is “sung” is always the same, rhythmic-melodic variations seek to underline the contrast –the text, separated in two sentences by silence in the musical score, always says “The fall-sun smiles from the sky. - Slowly and sadly leaves are falling.” [Die Herbst-sonne lacht vom Himmel - Langsam und traurig fällt das Laub].

At a more advanced stage, and repeating his method, Jahr slowly introduces simple scales as of an ascending sequence in C tonality for the first sentence and a descending sequence in Bb m for the second. The contrast between the mayor and minor keys generates an atmosphere of joy and sadness, respectively.



The fall-sun smiles from the sky. - Slowly and sadly leaves are falling

What was the purpose of this innovative methodology? Jahr based himself on the concept that musical sensitivity is easily understood by the child, who begins to mould a harmonious relationship with his own body and with language, through audition.

It is therefore not surprising that a year later, when he publishes his first, decidedly bioethical article *Wissenschaft vom Leben und Sittenlehre* he should use Wagner’s opera “Parsifal” as reference to express the desirable relationship of the human being with plants, in a musical and poetical key. He refers to the third act, when on Good Friday, the stem and flower is protected by treading carefully along the river bank. A short time later, in 1927, in his now well known article Bio-Ethik, published in the Kosmos magazine, he will again refer to *Parsifal*, expanding his thoughts on the

moving scene of the death of the sacred swan at the hands of a young man, in the first act of the opera<sup>ii</sup>.

The other important reference to Wagner is also found in 1926, when Jahr evokes Hans Sach's speech in the opera *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. The phrase Jahr proposes couldn't be more suggestive: "The art of making poetry is nothing more than the interpretation of a dream" Why does Fritz Jahr refer us to this passage?

We should remember that both the script and the music of the opera were Wagner's original creation, designed to establish the coordinates of the creative event. The theme revolves round a singing competition where the two final candidates also vie for the hand of a beautiful lady. One of the candidates represents technical virtuosity and formal excellence, the other disregards all the rules of composition but has the gift of creation. Hans Sach, the elderly cobbler and mastersinger, wants the second contestant to be given the chance of winning, which of course he does and also marries the lady.

What then, does the art of composing consist of? Not in a series of learned principles but in the liberty to dream. Unique style makes a true artist, thus opening a relation between the ethical act and the creative event<sup>iii</sup>.

### Literature and painting

Along the same line, Jahr makes use of literary references to back his bio-ethical conception. In order to approach his perspective regarding the human being's ethical relationship with plants, he uses Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Angel", published in 1943. The story is about a boy, the son of humble parents, who took care of a flower in a dark cellar, because she was his greatest and only source of joy. When the boy dies, God not only takes his soul, he also takes all the flowers that surround him, among which was the flower the boy had so lovingly looked after. In heaven, God kisses the poor, withered flower and she acquires a voice and sings together with the angels.

Shortly afterwards, in 1927 and on the subject of animals, he will appeal to another literary text, "Der heilige Haß" (Holy Hatred) by Richard Voss, in this case, in order to compare occidental thought with that which came from India. It is about a boy, belonging to a lower Hindu caste, who refuses to kill a poisonous snake because, he argues, "snakes are also our sisters". Jahr in this way introduces the complex matter of ethical relativism –which will in fact undergo a mayor development during the whole of the XX century.

Finally, an example taken from the world of plastic art. In this case the etching by Fidus “Thou shall not kill”, that shows a child standing in front of a young deer to prevent the hunter from shooting the animal.

Notice the androgenous features of the child. It is interesting to point out that Fidus was the pseudonym of the German painter and publicist Hugo Reinhold Karl Hohann Höppener, 1868-1948, who was one of the first collaborators of the first homosexual magazine in the world, *Der Eigene*. Banned during the Nazi years, his images were recovered after his death, by the psychedelic movement of the 60s, and are today highly valued.



Fidus: „Du sollst nicht töten!“ 1892

### **Is a universal language possible? The ethical value of the erotic diversity of languages.**

One more aesthetical reference, in this case indirect and curiously embedded in the critique that Jahr makes of Esperanto as a “sole universal language”<sup>iv</sup>. His line of argument consists in showing the virtues of other languages, such as Ido, Esperantita or Interlingua. Although the argument is tinted with the linguistic debates of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the underlying principle still holds true.

What do artificial languages such as Ido offer? The question not only acquires a technical dimension but also a fundamentally ethical one. Because Jahr’s enthusiasm in his pioneer article in 1924 lies in the value that is conferred on the diversity of languages “contained” in Ido. Such diversity, that at times makes it similar to Italian, French or Spanish, puts into play the erotic hues of human phonemics.

Take, for example, the Our Father prayer, in Ido, as Fritz Jahr probably heard it:

Patro nia, qua esas en la cielo,  
tua nomo santigesez;  
tua regno advenez;  
tua volo facesez quale en la cielo  
tale anke sur la tero.  
Donez a ni cadie l’omnadia pano,

e pardonez a ni nia ofensi,  
quale anke ni pardonas a nia ofensanti,  
e ne duktez ni aden la tento,  
ma liberigez ni del malajo.

Is this not perhaps an extraordinary example of the musicality of the language? Even though the subject might exceed this editorial, let us say that Jahr's interest, on mediating in the discussion with Esperanto, lies in the ethical-aesthetic potency that he attributes to Ido, more so than in the linguistic technicality of one language or the other.

### **Before Nazism; Die bioethische Betätigung**

Finally, let us remember that this issue of Aesthetika deals with a segment of Fritz Jahr's work, the period between 1924 and 1933. The selection is clearly intentional; it refers to the production prior to Hitler's rise to power in Germany.

Was it possible to continue thinking and writing from a bio-ethical viewpoint under the rule of Nazism? For us Latin Americans that have undergone fierce dictatorships, it is practically impossible to avoid the question.

However, we do leave the matter open for future debate. In the meantime we shall enjoy this first selection of articles written in Spanish<sup>v</sup>. A selection that starts and ends with Fritz Jahr's concern for children. From moral education through musical composition (1924) to his acute reflections on the child and technology (1933), we read a constant.

It is about what he visionarily called *Die bioethische Betätigung*, "A bioethical activation", in other words it is not a general speculation of the world, but a taking of position in act.

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<sup>i</sup> This article, the first known to be written by Fritz Jahr, was published by Hans-Martin Saas in the original German. This edition includes the musical scores and illustrate the recitative passages suggested by the author, some of which we have reproduced in this editorial. There is an English version translated by Irene M. Miller and by Hans-Martin Saas himself in *Fritz Jahr. Essays in Bioethics 1924-1948* (2013) Münster: Lit Verlag.

<sup>ii</sup> See article Nachträglich of (bio)ethics (Aesthetika Volume 6 / Issue 2), especially the comment by Natacha Salomé Lima (<http://eticaycine.org/Parsifal>).

<sup>iii</sup> On this matter see Alejandro Ariel's excellent book "Style and the act", Published in Buenos Aires by Editorial Manantial, 1994.

<sup>iv</sup> *Weltsprache und Weltsprachen. Die Mittelschule. Zeitschrift für das gesamte mittlere Schulwesen*, 1926, 44:96-97. Jahr's criticism of Esperanto is part of a wider discussion in "Die Mittelschule", which originates from an article by Josef Driesler, *Esperanto in der Mittelschule. Selbsterlebtes*, "Esperanto in

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Middle-School. Our experience”, *Die Mittelschule. Zeitschrift für das gesamte mittlere Schulwesen*, 1923,37 (4):25-28, 33-35.

<sup>v</sup> Reference to the 1924 articles was taken directly from Hans-Martin Sass’ German and translated into Spanish by Agueda Dono and Michael Fisher, as well as the articles written in 1926, 1927 and the last one, The Child and technology, 1933. The others were translated into English by Elina Ioan. Technical revision of all the material was done by Natacha Salomé Lima and Irene Cambra Badii, in some cases taking as reference the pioneer edition for Latin America, in Portuguese, by Leo Pessini (São Paulo) and by José Roberto Goldim (UFRGS). General edition was in charge of Juan Jorge Michel Fariña, in the framework of the Research Project “Bioethics and Human Rights, an approach to the Unesco Declaration”, University of Buenos Aires, 2011-2014.