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Beyond Kant's and Hegel's Aesthetics: Heidegger's Conception of Art as Unconcealment

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Abstract:

It goes without saying that the humanities in general, and art and literature departments in particular are often the likely scapegoats in any reform which seeks to cut down expenses or revisit the status of university departments in times of hardship.¹ For business-minded reformers, art and literature are either non-objective and non-practical fields of knowledge or at best they are intellectual luxury that is meant merely to satisfy people's aesthetic sensibilities. Written more than eight decades ago, Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art", is even more relevant to us today since it is one of the few original attempts that question our understanding of the essence and role of art in our life. A true understanding of the nature of art, argues Heidegger, can only be achieved once two metaphysical conceptions about art are overcome: aestheticizing art, a tendency which he ascribes to Kant; and losing faith in its ability to express truth in our modern times, a view for which he blames Hegel. In this essay, I examine Heidegger's deconstruction of Kant's aesthetics and Hegel's thesis of the death of art. In the process, I explore Heidegger's conception of the ontological and historical function of art drawing on his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art," cross-referring simultaneously to his essays: "On the Essence of Truth" and "the Age of the World Picture."

1. Kantian Aesthetics and the Severance of Truth from Beauty

It is true that Plato and Aristotle initiated the debate about aesthetics, but it is in *Critique of Judgment* that the taste and judgment of the beautiful blossoms into a full-blown conceptual category. Along lines which both agree with and depart from Aristotle and Sidney's conceptions of art, Kant posits that the ultimate aim of the work of art is pleasure. Three characteristics define the judgment of the beautiful in his view: subjectivity, disinterestedness and universality. The aesthetic experience of art neither rests upon concepts nor does it seek to generate any. Rather, it works through our feelings and emotions, a fact which renders it subjective. In addition, the judgment of the beautiful, unlike the judgment of the good or the pleasurable, seeks no gratification or any other pragmatic ends beyond the purely "disinterested" appreciation of the formal qualities of the object of art. In Kant's terms, art is "purposive purposelessness." Echoing Edmund Burke, Kant argues, quite paradoxically, that the judgment of the beautiful appeals as much to universality as to subjectivity. By dint of being purely subjective, that is detached from external constraints and agendas, the aesthetic experience is ineluctably universal and should be the same for all people. All in all, beauty in Kant's aesthetics is "a perceptual form whose subjective finality is felt as disinterested, universally communicable, and necessarily pleasurable."¹ Now, the question is: what does Kant's philosophy of art as it is expounded in *Critique of Judgment* amount to? What are its implications and how far does it influence subsequent contemplations of the nature of art?

As a matter of fact, Kant's enterprise in his third critique hints at creating a separate epistemological realm for the literary and the artistic where cognition is downplayed. Accordingly, Kant relegates art into the sphere of aesthetics while assigning the analytical categories of reason and understanding to other fields of knowledge, resulting in, therefore, a severance of beauty from truth, which are now regarded as two disparate and incompatible modes of judgment. And it is this epistemological rupture that drives some artists and critics to celebrate Kant's aesthetics while it incited implacable critical attacks from others. Mainly because the judgment of the beautiful in Kant's view is essentially disinterested, that is non-moral, non-egoistic and non-practical, art becomes fundamentally isolated from ethics. The reach of such a view become far more resounding than Kant himself would have ever thought. The disinterestedness of the subject's judgment of the work of art echoed later on powerfully in the "art for art's sake" movement, especially with figures such as Theophile Gautier, Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde.

2. Hegel's Thesis of the Death of Art

For Hegel, art is nothing but the embodiment of Idea in a sensuous form.² Understood within the Hegelian dialectic nature of history, Idea designates the spirit of the age; humanity's self-understanding or *Zeitgeist*. It is quite obvious then that Hegel distinguishes

1. Stephen, Davies et al. (2009), *A Companion to Aesthetics*, John Wiley and Sons, p. 408.

2. Friedrich, Hegel (2001), "From Lectures on Fine Art". *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. ed. Leitch et al. New York: Norton, 626-646. p. 628.

between the content of art as Idea, and its form which is a “configuration of sensuous material.”³ Art, like religion and philosophy, is a mode of expressing the spirit's truth. Indeed, what differentiates art from other fields of knowledge is its exclusive ability to render the most abstract of ideas in sensuous shapes- stone, wood, color, sound or words- which constitute beauty. In a move which discloses his indebtedness to Kant and Schiller, Hegel asserts that beauty is what really distinguishes the work of art, and it is through it that we come to understand the truth of the spirit, that is through beauty in art that man comes to himself. For him, beauty is the expression of freedom. Nevertheless, Hegel claims that art is not the highest mode of expressing the truth of the spirit because of its mere reliance on the sensuous and the emotional, and therefore falls short of evincing the far more complex reality of his age. Only philosophy and religion, by virtue of their dependence on cognitive modes of thought, can express the truth of the spirit as it manifests itself in the present time. They, as Hegel puts it so poetically, “have spread their wings above fine art.”⁴ It is therefore in the context of Hegel's philosophy of the dialectic progressive movement of consciousness towards freedom that art's mission comes to a halt. Art is fundamentally conceived of as a mere stage in the historical onward movement of Spirit. In an oft-quoted passage Hegel proclaims his famous [notorious for some] declaration of the death of art: “art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past.”⁵ Critics, however, caution against understanding Hegel's statement of the death of art in the sense that it ceases to play any role in our lives or it would no more provide satisfaction to people. Far from it. To be sure, Hegel's view is not that bleak. What he purportedly means is that art is no more the highest mode of expressing truth and satisfying people's spiritual needs as it used to do so exquisitely with in ancient Greek times and partly in the Renaissance.

3. Truth Redefined

Almost two centuries after Kant and Hegel, Heidegger could by no means elide his great predecessors' influential aesthetics. Indeed, his philosophy of art rests upon a critical review of both. If Emmanuel Kant draws a sharp line between truth and art, Heidegger's project assertively aims at restoring art to the realm of truth [or is it truth to the realm of art?]. Since Plato, the western intellectual tradition conceives of truth as correspondence, whereby the concept has to correspond to the reality of its referent. In “On the Essence of Truth”, Heidegger revisits the metaphysical conception of truth as correctness, and restitutes the pre-Platonic notion of *aletheia*, whereby truth is understood as un-concealment or dis-closure. With such a view, truth is never something there to be pinned down to a definite meaning, it is rather a play of concealment and un-concealment, presence and absence in which the subject is always already a part. Truth, understood by Heidegger, is “the clearing (Lichtung). There is a clearing within which an understanding of being or essence can prevail when incompatible possibilities of being are concealed or held back.”⁶ Rather than reducing truth into one-to-one correspondence, Heidegger refers to truth as modes of being, or as characters and properties of things which are alternately concealed and un-concealed. In Mark A. Wrathall's words, truth, in the Heideggerian sense, is a space of possibilities.⁷ That is why for Heidegger, the pre-suppositionless of being is an illusion, it is even an impossibility.

4. Art, Beauty and Truth

Now, what are the implications of Heidegger's re-working of truth on his conception of art? Within the metaphysical understanding of truth as correctness, art occupies, as it does in Plato's Republic, a peripheral position as it lacks ability to render reality as it is. Even with those projects which seek to mend the Platonic damage to imaginative literature, art is at best consigned to a realm where beauty and emotions are what primarily characterizes the work of art. In “The Origin of the Work of Art”, however, art and truth are reconciled, and truth, in the Heideggerian sense, is held as “the being and the becoming” of the work of art. If art for Kant is confined to the “ontic” aesthetic experience, for Heidegger it is primordially grounded in being; it has an ontological significance. It is through art that beings come to understand the world as well as themselves. Beautiful as it is, the Greek Temple is certainly to be drained of its significance if we are merely caught by its dazzling stately design and fail to see how it was a manifestation of the truth of the Greeks' being in a certain historical moment. Likewise, Keats' Grecian urn⁸ will be reduced to a “silent form” and a “Cold Pastoral” if it is merely perceived in purely Kantian aesthetic terms. The series of questions which Keats poses in the first stanza invite us to relinquish the seemingly comforting tendency to contemplate the formal beauty of the urn, and to inquire about its world and ontological being.

- What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
- What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
- What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (L 8-10)

The beauty of the urn, Heidegger would argue, is acknowledged so long as it discloses the way of life, or the spirit, in Hegelian terms, of the ancient people it portrays. Truth, says Heidegger, is the truth of Being. Beauty does not occur alongside and apart from this truth. When truth sets itself into the work, it appears. Appearance—as this being of truth in the work and as work—is beauty. Thus, the beautiful belongs to the advent of truth, truth's taking of its place.⁹

3. Ibid, p. 645.

4. Friedrich, Hegel (2001), “From Lectures on Fine Art”. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. ed. Leitch et al. New York: Norton, 626-646. p. 632.

5. Ibid.

6. Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth” tran. Sallis, J., in Krell, D.F. (Ed.), *Basic Readings*: Routledge, London. 1993, p. 135

7. Mark A. Wrathall, “Truth and Unconcealment”, *A Companion to Heidegger*. Ed. Dreyfus, Hubert L. et al. Cornwall: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005, p. 340

8. John Keats (1968), “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, Abrams, M.H., ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. New York: Norton, p. 851.

9. Martin Heidegger (1993), “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Basic Writings*, Ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper., 143-188. p. 176

The beauty of the urn is intrinsic to the truth it opens up about sex and gender relations in the second stanza, the immortality of art in the third stanza and religion and sacrificial rituals in the fourth. The crowning last two couplets of Keats' poem aphoristically sum up the Heideggerian view of beauty and truth as ineluctably bound; they perfectly echo his view that "beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness."¹⁰

5. The Historical Function of Art

For Hegel, art exhausted its function, and it has by force of the progressive movement of consciousness to step aside and give room for other discourses which are more amenable to a more perfect expression of truth. "Art considered in its highest vocation", he affirms in his *Lectures on Fine Art*, "is and remains for us a thing of the past." In *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, Julian Young claims that Hegel's statement shadows Heidegger's article which may be read as an earnest attempt to deal with the thesis of the death of art. I said an attempt because Heidegger himself considers it so:

The judgment that Hegel passes in these statements cannot be evaded by pointing out that since Hegel's lectures in aesthetics were given for the last time during the winter of 1828–29 at the University of Berlin, we have seen the rise of many new art works and new art movements.

Hegel never meant to deny this possibility. But the question remains: is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for our historical existence, or is art no longer of this character?

If, however, it is such no longer, then there remains the question why this is so. The truth of Hegel's judgment has not yet been decided.¹¹

It is remarkable in this instance that both Heidegger and Hegel are concerned with great works of art- and not with whatever work of art- that reveal the truth of spirit or being. In addition, both philosophers converge on the idea that Greek works of art constitute the acme of artistic grandor and majesty. However, while Hegel pessimistically claims that art lags behind other fields of knowledge which are capable of revealing spirit, Heidegger holds the optimistic view that art really matters and can still express the truth of Being, as it did in ancient times, provided that it articulates the historical reality in which it emanates. Art, for Heidegger, is necessarily grounded in history.

Along non-representational lines, art in Heidegger's essay assumes ontological and historical functions. Rather than representing readily present facts, great works of art not only create truth, but they also preserve it. Art is "the creative preserving of truth in the work. Art then is the becoming and happening of truth."¹² A work of art of such stature both embodies and reinforces a community's sense of *what is* and *what matters*. In conformity with his conception of being in *Being and Time*, art has ontological and projective functions since it "gives things their look" [what is] and "to people their outlook" [what matters]. In his essay "Heidegger's Ontology of Art", Hubert L. Dreyfus maintains that art "performs at least one of three ontological functions. It manifests, articulates, or reconfigures the style of a culture from within the world of that culture."¹³ To be sure, works of art reveal, in the same way Van Gogh's shoes reveal the peasant woman's world, the world in which they appear. But great works, as Dreyfus asserts, articulate a community's culture. In other words, they selectively illuminate such aspects of a culture in a way that results in an even deeper sense of self-identity and self-understanding. In Dreyfus' words, great works of art, like the temple in Heidegger's article, serve as paradigms or "models of" as well as "models for" a community. More importantly, Greater works of art, and few they are, are those which do not merely articulate the world but also bring forth profound changes in the conceptual structures of a culture. In non-Heideggerian terminology, greater works of art spark cultural and intellectual revolutions. The "the setting-into-work of truth", says Heidegger, "thrusts up the unfamiliar and extraordinary and at the same time thrusts down the ordinary."¹⁴ From a Marxist point of view, Heidegger's statement would translate into what Raymond Williams calls a "war of position" through which the emergent [unfamiliar] cultural structures take over the dominant [ordinary] ones. To conclude, the kind of great art which Heidegger holds in high esteem is certainly that which undergirds a revolutionary potential; that which shakes up the mundane and sets new beginnings into motion. "Whenever art happens", he says, "that is, when there is a beginning—a push enters history, and history either starts up or starts again."¹⁵

6. The Dialectic of Earth and World

A further reason why Heidegger was disconcerted by aestheticism is because he considers it as an offshoot of subjectivism which he defines in "The Age of the World Picture" as humanity's totalizing tendency to "master the totality of what is."¹⁶ In the modern world, the Cartesian epistemological willing to power over the object is pushed to its extremes and finds full expression in aestheticism and technology. Within this domineering metaphysics, the work of art is conceptualized as a stasis, as an object, the depths of which the conscious subject is always willing to fathom and pin down. In his attempt to deconstruct this totalizing metaphysical view, Heidegger

10. Ibid, p. 178

11. Martin Heidegger (2009), "The Origin of the Work of Art", qtd. in *Art Matters: A Critical Commentary on Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art"*, Harries, Karsten, Springer. p. 6.

12. Ibid.

13. Hubert L. Dreyfus (2005), "Heidegger's Ontology of Art", *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus, et al. Cornwall: Wiley-Blackwell, p. 407

14. Martin Heidegger (1993), "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Basic Writings*, Ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper, 143-188. p. 183

15. Ibid, p. 163

16. Martin Heidegger (1977), "The Age of the World picture", *Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, Trans. William Lovitt. New York: Harper & Row, p. 48

introduces the dual concepts of “earth” and “world” as two markers which “set-into-work” the work of art. Already an essential term in Heidegger’s conceptual edifice, “world” is defined in “The Origin of the Work of Art” as “the horizon of all our horizons—a totality of possible disclosures which constitute intelligibility for us.”¹⁷ In other words, it designates the web of significant relations in which the work of art exists; it is that which the work of art opens and discloses. Since truth also designates that which is concealed, “un-truth”, Heidegger introduces “earth” as a concept which points to the materiality and the surrounding environment of the artwork. In poetry, for instance, words would stand for the earth of the poem. According to Heidegger, truth in the work of art is set-to-work as a result of a tension between earth and world. In the process of this dialectic rift, earth, as a “self-secluding inexhaustible abundance of shapes and modes”,¹⁸ simultaneously offers itself and resists being exhaustingly interpreted by the meaningful world. In an intriguing comparison, Harries Karsten argues that the logic which governs the interplay between Heidegger’s earth and world is similar to the one which characterizes Nietzsche’s Apollo and Dionysus.¹⁹

If there is a phrase which probably encapsulates Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” it would probably be the one with which Harries Karsten titles his book: art matters. In his essay “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry”, Heidegger asserts that poetry is the “most innocent of all occupations.”²⁰ It is art that is capable of articulating the breadth and depth of people’s existential experience- the truth of being. In a world such as ours in which humanity is “enframed” by technology as Heidegger says, art should still hold a place of pride as a redeeming force.

7. References

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17. Martin Heidegger (1993), “The Origin of the Work of Art”, *Basic Writings*, Ed. David Farrell Krell. San Francisco: Harper, 143-188. p. 185

18. *Ibid*, p. 172

19. Karsten, Harries (2009), *Art Matters: A Critical Commentary on Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art”*, Springer, p. 136

20. Christopher E. Macann, *Martin Heidegger*. London: Routledge. 1992. p. 232