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MARTIN HEIDEGGER, 'THE ORIGIN OF THE WORK OF ART' ['DER URSPRUNG DES KUNSTWERKES'] (1935)

Martin Heidegger 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Basic Writings*, New York: Harper Perennial, 2008, 139–212.

What ... is art that we rightly call it an origin?

(Heidegger 2008: 196)

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), author of *Being and Time* and one of the major philosophical figures of the twentieth century, wrote 'The Origin of the Work of Art' in the Germany of the 1930s. The essay is concerned with the way in which truth is manifested in art. Heidegger refutes the idea of a metaphysical or essential truth, but allows truth as something with historical origins, created by man. The difficulty and poetics of Heidegger's ideas are not readily summarised; the essay, in a sense, enacts the ideas it attempts to describe. Its simple, clear language belies a tightly formed, subtle and demanding thesis, the reading of which is complicated by the fact that at the time it was written, Heidegger was a member of the Nazi Party.

Heidegger's first task is to understand what kind of a thing a work of art is. His particular brand of phenomenology refutes the notion that an object can be thought about as an entity separate from human beings. A hammer can be transformed into an abstract set of properties by thinking about it, but in order to reveal its essence, it must be considered in a way proper to its being – as something people use. Rather than abstract it into measurements or metaphysical ideas, we must attend to its nature as equipment. However, art is rightly defined as a different kind of thing

to equipment – it is separate from the world of everyday things like hammers in that it allows us space for reflection about the world. It is in this reflective space that, to cite Heidegger's example, Van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* (1886) can let us know what things are in truth – what they mean and how they belong in their world. The shoes are items which belong to a world of meaning which itself is revealed in the painting. In Van Gogh's shoes:

the toiling tread of the worker stares forth ... [they are] pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread ... the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death.

(Heidegger 2008: 159)

These resonances suggest that the world is something imbued with meaningful sensations, not just an array of objects into which meaning is projected. Heidegger's other example, a Greek temple, opens a world wherein 'birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny [of a] historical people' (Heidegger 2008: 167). A work of art itself defines and gives shape to humankind's sense of itself as historical, but it can never fully define or encapsulate a historical world, thereby rendering the world a thing partially concealed – not fully in truth.

The world, imbued with meaning, is grounded in earth. Earth is in itself worldless – it stands for nothing in particular:

If we ... [break] open the rock, it still does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been opened up. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the same dull pressure and bulk of its fragments ... Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate it.

(Heidegger 2008: 172)

Earth is essentially impenetrable, hidden from our view; even more so than the world, it remains concealed. The work of art manifests a relationship between world and earth in which they are brought to bear on one another in a way that impels them to reveal or 'unconceal' themselves in their fullness. Whereas equipment 'disappears into usefulness', the Greek temple does not cause the matter it is made of nor the matter around it to disappear, but rather to come forth in a new clarity. The temple gives definition to its immediate surroundings by contrast with them – it 'gives to things their look and to men their outlook

on themselves' (Heidegger 2008: 168). Art makes earth and world shine forth in a new brilliance.

It is in this relationship between earth and world in the work of art that Heidegger defines the question central to his discussion – that of truth in art. Heidegger locates the origin of truth in art itself. This is not the truth or otherwise of particular assertions, but more like the truth inferred by 'true friend' – true, unconcealed *being*. He states that:

Truth does not exist in itself beforehand, somewhere among the stars, only subsequently to descend elsewhere among beings ... the happening of truth ... is historical in multiple ways.

(Heidegger 2008: 186)

Truth happens as a result of a historical process of work. The work that forms the painting or the temple is of a special nature, one which instigates *strife* – a kind of wrenching away from settled norms wherein earth and world complement each other harmoniously. Strife manifests in the work of art as an antagonism or *rift* between earth and world, and it is here that something new and previously unknown to us makes its presence felt. The rift between earth and world provides an open region for each to force the 'unconcealment' of the other and, in the process, for the work of art to give truth its historical definition. This process 'happens in the midst of beings' (Heidegger 2008: 180), and thus brings out something of the 'truth of being' in the world around and outside the work of art. Van Gogh's peasant's shoes:

make unconcealment as such happen in regard to beings at a whole. The more simply and essentially the shoes are engrossed in their essence, the more directly and engagingly do all beings attain a greater degree of being along with them.

(Heidegger 2008: 181)

In this sense, art itself is an origin of truth in the world: art creates truth.

The encounter with Heidegger's thought has raised the debate about whether his philosophy is in some way reflective of his involvement with the Nazi Party. For some, the notion of truth is in itself, inherently totalitarian or fascistic – an assertion which is central to much postmodern theory. When Heidegger states that truth manifests not just in art but also in the founding of a political state or through an essential sacrifice, there can be little doubt that he is thinking of the formation of Hitler's Germany of the 1930s. Indeed, Heidegger's insistence that 'as a world opens itself up, it submits to the decision of a historical humanity

the question of victory and defeat ... mastery and slavery' (Heidegger 2008: 186), suggests that the historical process of unconcealment involves the subjugation of others. The critic Andrew Benjamin notes that Heidegger:

hoped to disclose the political mission that derived from this insight: the creation (not production) of art was the history-founding act of a people, very much on a par with the founding of a state or with the poiesis of philosophical leadership.

(Benjamin 2005: 76)

The philosopher Slavoj Žižek agrees that Heidegger's assertion of man's decision to assume his place in a historical situation as the key to the sense of being 'locates the historico-political act of decision in the very heart of ontology itself' (Žižek 2000: 20). But rather than seeing Heidegger's project as inherently fascist, Žižek argues that what this kind of criticism of Heidegger rejects:

as proto-Fascist decisionism is simply the basic condition of the political. In a perverted way, Heidegger's Nazi engagement was therefore a 'step in the right direction'.

(Žižek 2000: 21)

The dangers of Heidegger's philosophy are evident, but there is a concomitant danger in being noncommittal and abstaining from truth claims because of concerns about their totalising potential. The danger here would be mere acceptance of a liberal status quo which confers an automatic relativisation of the authentic in art. With a close reading and an awareness of the dangers of his philosophy, the revolutionary potential of art to revitalise belief in the world is perhaps detectable in Heidegger's ideas.

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WALTER BENJAMIN, 'THE WORK OF ART IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL REPRODUCTION' (1936)

Originally published in the *Journal for Social Research* (*Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*) of the Frankfurt School, edited by Max Horkheimer. Although a translation into English of an earlier version is included in H. Elland and M. Jennings (eds), *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, London: Routledge, 2006, the references here are to the English translation of the essay by Harry Zohn from H. Arendt (ed.), *Walter Benjamin, Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1992, 211–44.

Modernism is often understood in terms of the purity of geometric abstraction, a formalist art for art's sake that allowed painting and sculpture to break away from representation. The role of the political in shaping avant-garde movements tends to be forgotten in this kind of account. Walter Benjamin's (1892–1940) 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) is crucial in this context, beyond its pioneering critique of photography and cinema. Benjamin does not stop at describing the aesthetics of art made under the conditions of new technology, but investigates the political consequences of its evolution. In providing a detailed account of the formal qualities of reproducible artwork, he demonstrates how these qualities are always already political. In doing so, he draws conclusions which remain relevant today in helping to understand the ways in which the production of art continues to change in the wake of the digital revolution, with new forms and platforms emerging constantly.

Benjamin identified the impact of the emerging medium of cinema and the essay is one of the earliest attempts to systematically understand the difference between moving images and other forms of representation, in terms of both structural construction and audience relationship. He helped found the sociological study of popular forms of culture, from shop displays to advertisements to drug use, popular music and films, but the essay's real focus is the consideration of a broader process of the democratisation of art's production and consumption. Benjamin understood that modern art was defined by an incessant drive to widen its formal and social base, incorporating new subjects, methods and audiences. He recognised the deep ambivalence that lies at the heart of