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## On the Work of Art: Benjamin and Heidegger

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### I. Introductory Remarks

What lies below is an attempt to sketch a preliminary engagement of Heidegger and Benjamin taken together. Taken together does not mean here that Heidegger and Benjamin can or should be brought together such that each could be said to be more or less reducible to the other. Instead, it is probably better to keep them as far from one another as they have been hitherto. In this way we can preserve each figure's originality, and not force a connection or set of connections where really nothing solicits us to do so. For until recently, Benjamin and Heidegger together have not constituted a focus of much philosophical activity, and why this is so is perhaps only emotionally difficult to address.<sup>1</sup> After all, Benjamin's tragic suicide in 1940 at the Spanish border town Port-Bou was at some level the fault of Heidegger. If only the latter had not lent his philosophical powers to the deranged ends of National Socialism, it might be argued, then maybe the German-Jewish

Benjamin could have successfully escaped that early fall night. But such a hypothesis is at best hyperbolic, and at worst dangerously insensitive to the all-too-real complexity of that time. What went on in those years cannot be distilled to the responsibility of a few, as Hannah Arendt has rightly taught us. Millions more were complicit, and this is precisely the tragedy.

??????????? Nevertheless, that Benjamin died from what Heidegger had a hand in is most likely the primary reason for the dearth of philosophical exploration of the two taken together. One can imagine the undertaker of such an effort being haunted by its possible receptions. Would it be perceived as seeking reconciliation where none should be admitted? Or would it provoke the charge of being yet another intellectual exercise with no purpose beyond stimulating a small group of insiders, and in this way become guilty of the very social indifference of which Heidegger, however justifiably, is so often accused? These expectations are certainly legitimate, and surely anyone who endeavors to take Benjamin and Heidegger together must confront them sooner or later. As for what follows, however, I only wish to show *that* they can be brought together, if awkwardly, and done so with regard to three particular dimensions. Any sustained attempt to account for why I wish to do this, or whether such a project is worth doing at all, must be deferred to the future. Perhaps then, as Benjamin might claim, what occurred here will flare up like a lightning flash and all of a sudden make much more sense. But until that moment, I can only venture something like the following: if not just another attempt to offer up innovative scholarship, perhaps this paper can be read, on a grander scale, as trying to cross borders in a discipline that has become increasingly sectarian. For apart from the sociopolitical misgivings about taking Heidegger and Benjamin together, philosophical ones abound as well. Too often critical theory, associated with Benjamin, and existentialism, hermeneutics, and fundamental ontology, linked inextricably to Heidegger, are kept apart as if they have very little to offer one another. This is unfortunate, if for no other reason than such

divisions, at worst, create a Beckettian scenario wherein all communication breaks down, leaving each group irretrievably trapped within its own idiosyncratic discourse. Thus, if not a purely scholarly pursuit, nor a search for forgiveness between Heidegger and Benjamin and what they represent socially, politically, and ethically, then maybe what lies below can reach for a kind of forgiveness within philosophy itself, if only of the ? Continental? kind. But perhaps there is more than this to hope for.

## II. The Work of Art, Technology, Unconcealment and History

?????????? Around 1936, both Heidegger and Benjamin published essays concerning the work of art, ?The Origin of the Work of Art? and ?The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction? respectively. Very roughly, the former seeks the origin, or ?essential source,? of the artwork, and ends up locating it in art itself, which is for Heidegger a ?distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical? (*Basic Writings*, 202). The latter, among many other things, deals primarily with the history of the artwork?s forms and their dialectical relations to technological and social changes. While these characterizations suggest significantly different projects in spite of their similar titles, however, a close reading of the two side by side as it were reveals some compelling points of contact. As the heading above indicates, I will discuss these points of contact in relation to three distinct but interconnected areas: the origin and apotheosis of the work of art, technology and the work of art, and the work of art *qua* site of unconcealment and ground of historical change. What should emerge towards the end of this discussion is the sense that while Benjamin and Heidegger differ considerably with respect to their views on the artwork?s origin and apotheosis, as well as its relation to technology, for each the work of art reveals the hitherto concealed, and even grounds the possibility of radical

historical change.?

???????????? For Heidegger, like Benjamin, traditional aesthetic concepts hold the work of art in a kind of death grip. The notion of art *qua* formed matter is particularly troubling for him, since it belongs to the domain of mere things, though even there it ultimately becomes problematic. Indeed, this 'thing-concept,' Heidegger writes, bars the way to the 'workly character of the work,' such that the work of art can no longer 'rest upon itself in its very own essence' (157). In other words, rather than allow for us to think the artwork 'in regard to its Being' (157), this thing-concept directs our thinking elsewhere, that is it 'shackles reflection on the Being' of the work of art (156). What is forgotten, more specifically, in viewing the work of art as formed matter, is its distinctive relation to truth. For the artwork is essentially, according to Heidegger, a happening, or event, of truth: 'there is here an occurring, a happening of truth at work' (162). Stated differently, in the artwork the truth of beings is '[brought] to a stand,' or 'has set itself to work,' and thus 'opens up in its own way the Being of beings' (165). Hence by truth Heidegger does not mean something like accuracy, correctness, or clear and distinct knowledge, as he takes pains to stress here and in much of his later writings. Rather, and this is critical for his larger project of uncovering the supreme importance of Being both within and outside of philosophy, truth must be rendered in its ancient Greek formulation as *aletheia*, not-forgetting, or in Heidegger's terms, unconcealment. Only then, he proposes, can we break the metaphysical surface under which the history of Western thought has been submerged for so long, and thereby gain or regain the more 'originary' meaning of truth.

???????????? Now, if the work of art is a happening of truth, and truth is not correctness but unconcealment, what precisely does the artwork reveal? If at all familiar with Heidegger, one is tempted straightaway to reply

Being, but if not incorrect, such a response would doubtless leave hidden some of his most interesting, if intensely enigmatic, claims on this matter. In his treatment of a Van Gogh painting of a pair of shoes, Heidegger contends that what is disclosed therein is the "essential strife between *earth* and *world*." The former, which he describes more or less consistently as that which is self-secluding, sheltering, or concealing, provides a ground for, and also "juts through," the latter, which is something like a self-opening openness. In the case of the Van Gogh painting, whose subject matter Heidegger interprets as a pair of peasant shoes, though they were in fact the shoes of Van Gogh himself, on the one hand the earth might be regarded as the pastoral setting of the peasant's work, with its "quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field" (159). The world, on the other hand, can perhaps be said to comprise the moments of delight and sadness in the life of the peasant, the "wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death" (159). Simply, if crudely, put then, these joys and worries depend upon the yielding and sheltering earth, or the earth makes its giving and concealing character felt in the everyday pleasures and fears of the peasant.

????????? Having uncovered the essence of the artwork, or the event of truth that discloses the strife of earth and world, Heidegger proceeds to dig up its origin. In doing so, he comes to celebrate not painting but poetry as the form *par excellence* of the work of art. Rather than adopt the conventional view of the artwork's origin, which locates it in the artist and her/his activity, Heidegger contends that it is art itself from which both artwork and artist spring. Equally unconventionally, Heidegger defines art as, in essence, poetry. "It is due to art's poetic essence," he writes, "that, in the midst of beings, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual" (197). Poetry is "ascertained very broadly" here, Heidegger notes, and refers only to its "clearing projection," or its letting happen of the open region that "brings beings to shine and ring

out? (197). But if poetry in this broad rendering enjoys a privileged status as the essence of art, which in turn is the origin of the artwork and artist, so too does poetry in the more literal sense: ?the linguistic work, poetry in the narrower sense, has a privileged position in the domain of the arts? (198). Since poetry as commonly understood, or poesy, ?propriates in language,? and since ?language alone brings beings as beings into the open for the first time? (198), poetry, even more so than the Van Gogh painting, bears an essential relation to truth. It is, as Heidegger states simply, ?the saying of the unconcealment of beings,? or ?the founding of truth? (198-199).

?????????? Benjamin too holds the work of art in the utmost regard, but locates its origin and apotheosis in significantly different terrain than does Heidegger. Instead of seeking its source in art itself, in the sense of the clearing projection of language as a kind of condition for the possibility of all artworks, Benjamin traces the work of art back to its ?ritual function? (*Illuminations*, 224). ?We know that the earliest art works,? he tells us, ?originated in the service of a ritual- first the magical, then the religious kind? (223). In other words, in the earliest human communities, or ?cults,? artworks served solely as objects of worship and veneration, whose ?auras? both depended on and reinforced such reverence. For Benjamin, this ?ritualistic basis? of the work of art is important not in and of itself, however, but rather because it helps us better understand the ?cult value? of more contemporary artworks. It is this shroud of aura, uniqueness, or ?authenticity,? leftover from a bygone tradition, that Benjamin credits mechanical reproduction, reproduction via mechanical devices (i.e., the printing press), with possessing the capacity to rightly shatter. For the ?all-important insight? of his analysis of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction is that the latter ?emancipates? the former from its ?parasitical dependence on ritual,? and thereby reverses the function of art (224). That is to say, mechanical reproduction renders the work of art entirely ?useless for the purposes of Fascism,? which thrives on the aura of its

propaganda, and completely useful for 'revolutionary demands in the politics of art' (218).

Benjamin's view that the liberation of the artwork from its ritual function leads to 'revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art,' if not revolutionary criticism of social conditions, dovetails directly with his embrace of film as the artwork's apex. With its 'series of mountable episodes' (230), 'cutting' (233), 'close-ups' (236), 'shock effect' (237), the camera's 'lowering and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions' (237), the film inevitably places its audience in the position of the 'critic,' or 'expert.' With this change, traditional aesthetic concepts like concentration and distraction, which stem from the 'ancient lament that the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator' (239), begin to lose their conventional meanings. Unlike the viewer of a painting, who is said to be absorbed by it in her/his pure contemplation, the mass audience of a film indeed receives it 'in a state of distraction,' but not in any pejorative sense. For the 'distracted person, too, can form habits' (204), which is to say s/he can develop modes of thinking essential for critical engagement with art as well as society precisely by being distracted. More specifically, via the 'shock effect,' which 'meets this mode of reception halfway' (240), the audience is relentlessly bombarded by new images, sounds, words, and ideas that push the film apart from so-called normal experiences of reality. The result is a kind of gap between the film and the objective conditions it allegedly reflects that the audience cannot help but attempt to fill in. Thus, not despite but because of its distracting character, the film makes critics of its audiences. Hence Benjamin concludes the essay with the following: 'The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one' (241). The masses, by simply going to the movies, Benjamin seems to argue here, will form the sort of critical habits that once required rapt attention. The film and not its audiences, then, 'will tackle the most difficult and most important' tasks (240).

?????????? Thus we can safely claim that for Benjamin, technology affects several vital transformations not just in the realm of the work of art, but also in that of the sociopolitical. Though clearly critical of the notion of progress, as we see in the well-known "angel of history" image in the ninth of his "Theses on the Concept of History," Benjamin was similarly skeptical of what he calls, in his massive life work *The Arcades Project*, "the prognosticators of decline" (N1a, 4). In the Epilogue to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in the midst of discussing the dangers of "an aesthetics of war," particularly the one touted by the Italian Futurists, Benjamin espouses something like the position that technology is itself neutral, and thus only becomes destructive or restorative within a larger economic and political context, namely fascism with regard to the former, and communism with respect to the latter. He writes, with Nazi Germany in mind, "The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society" (242). If only technology would fall into the right hands, in other words, ones that could or would "sufficiently develop" its more positive powers, then it would come to serve humanity, rather than command and condemn it.

?????????? Heidegger, it seems, would be decidedly more wary of assigning technology anything beyond an ambiguous role where the work of art is concerned. Although he never out and out addresses technology in "The Origin of the Work of Art," his discussion of what he refers to as the "art industry" therein gives us some arguably helpful clues as to where he might stand more specifically. "The Aegina sculptures in the Munich collection, Sophocles' *Antigone* in the best critical edition, are, as the works they are," he argues, "torn out of their own native sphere" (166). Setting these artworks in new "worlds," to state the point differently, withdraws them from their own: "placing them in a collection has withdrawn them from their own world" (166). Heidegger's principal claim here is that, while "world-withdrawal and world-decay" are inevitable, since this

happens even to artworks left in their "native sphere," the art industry only exacerbates the problem. For in presuming to present and preserve the self-same work of art in various contexts, it only appears to have salvaged the "work-being" of the artwork, when in fact it has only saved its "object-being."

?????????? This attack on the artwork's semblance of authenticity, forged by the art industry, no doubt jibes with Benjamin's critique of the aura cloaking the artwork as a consequence of its long gone ritual function. Indeed, Heidegger's lament, "as bygone works they stand over against us in the realm of tradition and conservation" (166), echoes that of Benjamin nearly to the letter. But the overlap here, while significant, only extends so far. For while Benjamin views the displacement of the work of art from its ritualistic basis as a kind of emancipation or liberation, Heidegger sees the artwork's withdrawal from its native sphere as something regrettable, if unavoidable. Thus, if he never directly considers the role and effects of mechanical reproduction on the work of art, we could do worse than suppose that Heidegger would regard them with caution. That is to say, if he holds that the art industry sadly wrenches the artwork from its native sphere, then surely he would argue similarly with respect to mechanical reproduction. Postcards of the Acropolis, we can justifiably presume he would claim, brought to us by certain elements of mechanical reproduction, rip it from its proper place. Like the art industry, then, mechanical reproduction would for Heidegger only transmit the object-being of the artwork, and forget or destroy its work-being. In a word, technology would, as it does with everything else (see the "Question Concerning Technology?"), leave something to be desired.

?????????? Far from being a mere object of beauty, detached contemplation, or amusement, the work of art is, as underscored above, a happening or event of truth, according to Heidegger. Truth sets itself to work in the artwork, or brings beings, and thus Being, into unconcealment. The "not-yet-revealed, the un-uncovered" (185),

in other words, is brought to a stand in the work of art, and hence the 'Being of beings comes into the steadiness of its shining' (162). In the case of the Van Gogh painting, the conflict of the peasant's earth and world, the strife of her/his everyday joys and sorrows and the land that gives and takes, emerges from concealment. The truth disclosed here is not timeless and/or universal, but rather historical, Heidegger stresses. Hence the concluding statement, quoted above, that through the work of art truth becomes historical. Yet the artwork not only reveals historical truth, that is by bringing beings into unconcealment, but it also radically effects history itself. 'Whenever art happens' that is, whenever there is a beginning' a thrust enters history; history either begins or starts over again,' Heidegger declares (201). The work of art founds history, then, 'shaping' and grounding it in a way. In more specific terms, it initiates the 'transporting of a people into its appointed task as entry into that people's endowment' (202).

?????????? Along similar lines, Benjamin can be read as contending that film, if not artworks in general, brings things into unconcealment, and further, that it can and ought to alter history by way of its formal components, particularly the shock effect. Though he notes, as mentioned above, that so long as 'movie-makers' capital sets the fashion' film will not yield revolutionary criticism of social conditions (231), elsewhere he discusses precisely how it 'extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives' and exposes to us an 'immense and unexpected field of action?' (236). Just as psychoanalysis reveals unconscious drives, he argues, so film introduces us to 'the hidden details of familiar objects' (237). With its close-ups and slow motion, space and time 'expand' respectively, bringing to light hitherto unseen elements. In Jim Jarmusch's 1995 film *Dead Man*, for example, the close-up of Bill Blake's flaring nostrils before the scented paper rose and, just beyond, Thel's heaving bosom, brings to us the intimacy of the moment, creating an experience the intensity of which could not be replicated by a camera just a few more feet off. Likewise, the

slowed-down cable car crash in which the young Frida Kahlo is badly injured, depicted early on in the film *Frida* (2002), shows us the horror on each passenger's face, the bursting floorboards and shattering glass, and the agony of Frida as she falls and crashes against the floor. These otherwise concealed details, hidden away for whatever reason, in film come to "shine and ring out," to borrow Heidegger's words (197). To use Benjamin's, they constitute a "different nature," which "opens itself" only to the camera (236).

????????? These revelations, along with the many other dimensions of film, comprise what Benjamin, following Brecht's alienation effect concept, calls its shock effect. Like Brecht's epic theatre, which sought to detach, or alienate, its audience through various technical devices in order to move them to watch and judge both art and society critically, so the formal elements of film, in Benjamin's view, shock viewers into more critical positions regarding the film at hand as well as the social conditions to which it supposedly corresponds. As explained above, by never letting up, as it were, that is by presenting scene after scene, angle after angle, close-up after close-up, film makes impossible the kind of concentration demanded by other art forms such as painting and sculpture. "Like a bullet," Benjamin claims, the "constant, sudden change" of film "periodically assail[s] the spectator" (238). Any attempt to associate what appears on screen with what exists off of it is "interrupted" (238). Art and reality are severed, and the audience is left to scramble to critically compare and contrast the two. If such an effect indeed occurs, and further, the audience becomes disenchanted with its social conditions, revolutionary sociopolitical action emerges as the necessary, and perhaps sufficient, next step. As with Heidegger, then, Benjamin discovers something of a ground of historical change in the work of art.

### III. Concluding Remarks

?????????? We have seen that where the artwork's origin and form *par excellence* as well as its relation to technology are concerned, though there is some overlap here and there, Heidegger and Benjamin are for the most part at odds. While the former views the origin and apotheosis of the work of art as language and poesy respectively, the latter locates the artwork's origin in its ritual function and its pinnacle in film. As for technology, Heidegger can be said, on the basis of his discussion of the art industry, to approach its impact on the artwork with caution, whereas Benjamin is much more optimistic about this relationship. Yet with respect to the work of art as that in and by which unconcealment occurs, and, more important perhaps, that which effects radical historical change, Heidegger and Benjamin come considerably closer to one another. As Heidegger holds the artwork, specifically poetry, to be a space wherein something is brought out of concealment, Benjamin views the work of art, film in particular, as exposing "hidden details" and a "different nature." Likewise Heidegger sees the work of art as grounding and/or shaping history, while Benjamin, along similar lines, regards film, if not artworks generally, as capable of sparking radical sociopolitical action.

?????????? We must be careful, however, to distinguish similarity from sameness when it comes to this second point of contact. For while certainly open to interpretation, Heidegger's claim that the work of art "[transports] a people into its appointed task as entry into that people's endowment" (cited above), reads much like a kind of battle cry for National Socialism. Perhaps then it is no small detail that Heidegger closes the essay with a discussion of the historical position of the Germans, and a quote from the German poet Holderlin, "whose work still confronts the Germans as a test to be stood" (203). The work of art, on this reading, thus comes to look indeed like a force that alters history, but only for the sake of Fascism. As we have seen above, it is precisely Fascism, and its use of artworks shrouded in mystifying auras, that Benjamin praises mechanical reproduction for possessing the capacity to combat. Ideally for Benjamin, it must be stressed, the film will turn its mass

audiences into critics and experts both of art and reality, thus rendering them resistant to propaganda and ready for revolutionary behavior. For Benjamin, then, film in a way grounds historical change, but only the sort that would bring about Fascism's antithesis, that is communism.

???????????? If the differences here urge us to keep Heidegger and Benjamin far apart from one another, we must at least grant that for both the work of art brings things into unconcealment and, if utterly opposed in orientation, initiates major changes in human history. Thus for both the work of art enjoys a privileged place in the realm of human phenomena. It appears to even hover over politics, in spite of the vast importance attributed to politics by each, especially Benjamin. For both seem to hold that the origin of political action must be sought in the sphere of artworks, and not in that of ordinary human life, whether of the German *volk* or the proletariat respectively. Only art, in other words, can expose and change history. On this point, albeit an abstract one, Heidegger and Benjamin can be said to agree. If one looks any closer, however, the two begin to diverge again, each one headed in a radically different direction than the other. Their paths indeed cross, but only for a brief moment.

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*I* Though still very much in need of more attention, there have been some texts written, all within the past ten years, with the express purpose of engaging Heidegger and Benjamin taken together. Among them, two books, *Der Schwarzwald und Paris: Heidegger und Benjamin*, by Willem van Reijen (1998), and *Benjamin-Heidegger: ?ber Gewalt die Politisierung der Kunst*, by **Stefan Knoche** (2000), and an article, *Tradition, Crisis, and the Work of Art in Benjamin and Heidegger*, by Pierre Lamarche, in *Philosophy Today* (2001).

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