

Hegel as a Philosopher of Modern Art

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ABSTRACT. Hegel addresses the main problems of the modern philosophy of art in a distinctive way. He sidesteps the problem of the objectivity of judgments of taste, and he concentrates instead on how certain undeniably important works of art fulfill a central function of art. Hegel's broadly functional approach to the philosophical understanding of art is described and defended.

Hegel approaches the philosophy of art as a distinctly modern theorist of the arts. First, he discusses the major modern, so-called fine arts — architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and literature (epic, dramatic, and lyric poetry, with brief references to prose fiction) — and not, for example, gardening, weaving, book illumination, or vase painting. (Hegel of course did not know film, television, video art, conceptual art, or performance art.) Second, the major problems about art that Hegel treats are the familiar problems of the significance of art within modern culture. In contrast with the successes of modern natural science in offering a person-independent representation of the physical world as a system of material substances undergoing changes according to laws, art traffics in imitations or imaginatively constructed, often fictive, representations that aim at involving an audience imaginatively and emotionally. In the modern world, art is also no longer firmly embedded in cult, ritual, or religion. Modern artists working in any medium are largely free to choose their subject matters and methods of artistic rendering, without subservience to the needs of religious representation. Hegel distinguishes between free art (*freie Kunst*) and subservient art (*dienende Kunst*) that serves aims extrinsic to art, as in industrial, technological, or practical arts such as the design of tools or useful machines. Only the former is the proper subject matter of the philosophy of art.

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Once the making and the reception of works of art is significantly free from either religious or practical purposes, and once it is clear that artworks represent subject matters for the sake of imaginative and emotional involvement, it is then natural to ask what the point of the practices of making and responding to art is. Is art a serious business or not, in comparison with, say, either science or religion? Or is it a matter primarily of entertainment or idle pleasure, so that no failure to know anything or to be committed to anything attaches to anyone who simply does not care about art? It may be thought that one likes or does not like certain works as one pleases, and the place of works of architecture, sculpture, painting, music, and literature in a serious educational curriculum may come to seem questionable. And if works of art have no serious, extrinsic importance, practical or cognitive, then how can we tell which things are works of art at all? The piano works of Mozart, the paintings of Leonardo, and the novels of Goethe are all very different from one another, not to mention the millions of variations of medium, subject matter, and treatment found in the productions of more minor or amateur artists. If we cannot regard certain central works as addressing an important problem of human life in an especially successful way, then how, if at all, can we speak of works of art as members of a clear and identifiable kind? Perhaps the word 'art' is nothing more than an honorific term that is empty of descriptive content.

Though he addresses these central questions about the nature and value of modern fine art, or free art, Hegel's approach to them is strikingly different from that of many modern philosophers of art. To begin with, unlike Hutcheson, Hume, and Kant, or in the twentieth century Monroe Beardsley, the problems of evaluation and of the justification of judgments of taste play no role in Hegel's theory of art. Hegel takes it more or less for granted that there is a broad consensus, albeit with very rough edges, about what the most central media of art at various historical times have been and about what the most important achievements within those media are. It is simply out of the question, for Hegel, that anyone could deny the distinctive significance for their cultures of Homer's epics, the Greek sculptures of Phidias and Praxiteles, the religious paintings of Giotto, Bellini, or Raphael, the music of Bach and Mozart, or the poetry of Goethe. Undertaking to settle borderline cases exactly by reference to some postulated procedure for decision is a fool's errand. What is important for the phi-

philosophy of art is that certain works in certain media at certain historical moments have been important within their cultures, and the central task of the philosophy of art is to give an account of this importance.

Second, Hegel locates the significance of art in its role in cultural life in general, not in relation to the psychological needs of individuals. Unlike Hutcheson, Hume, and Kant, Hegel treats art as an essentially historical and cultural phenomenon. Rather than talking of the needs of human individuals, without reference to any historical epoch or culture, for images of freedom, for 'deep' pleasure, or for metaphysical reassurance, Hegel instead undertakes to characterize how different forms of art under changing historical and cultural conditions have satisfied collectively experienced needs in strikingly different ways. While Hegel offers a general characterization of the task of art as such for all human beings at all times — art is the sensuous appearance of *Absolute Spirit* — it is also integral to his view that Spirit develops itself historically in relation to human life. We may take Absolute Spirit to be, very roughly, the union of collective, human rational activity at a historical moment with its proper object, that is, with the forms of social and individual life at a given moment that that rational activity is essentially devoted to understanding, justifying, and sustaining. Because what human beings collectively find most worth doing changes historically — both as their technological situation changes and as their understanding of their own needs and interests develops (thus affecting their technologies) — what art is concerned to express changes. What is, for human beings, highest — the forms of life and activity that predominantly solicit and demand their allegiance — changes, as both social life and the understanding of values develop from the world of the early Mesopotamian civilizations to the worlds of the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and medieval and modern Europeans. As a result, both what is to be expressed by art and the material media that are appropriate to artistic expression change and develop as well. Spirit “generates out of itself works of fine art as the first reconciling middle term between pure [but undeveloped, abstract, and empty] thought and what is merely external, sensuous, and transient, between nature and finite reality [on the one hand] and the infinite freedom of conceptual thinking [on the other]” (1975: 8), as human beings seek to determine the appropriate uses of their rational powers to construct a way of life and to express their determinations in sensuous,

material, artistic forms.

Given his social, collective, and function-oriented understanding of the nature and task of art as a historical phenomenon, Hegel proceeds, at once both normatively and descriptively, to characterize in more detail how specific media of art and how certain central works within those media have been historically salient in fulfilling art's function. His treatment is neither 'neutral' and purely descriptive — all philosophical thinking is bound up in the discernment of functions and values — nor purely prescriptive — it is not the task of philosophy to lay down rules for art a priori, without regard for how artists have historically discovered what will work at specific moments to fulfill art's function. Instead he proceeds, as he puts it, lemmatically (1975: 24), taking for granted art's function in response to the development of Spirit, and then picking out various important works and describing in more detail exactly how they fulfill art's function in their specific combinations of materials, forms, and subject matters.

As a result, given both the selectivity of Hegel's choice of examples and his extraordinarily broad brush narrative of humanity's developments, it can seem as though Hegel's elucidations of art's powers are arbitrary and heavy-handed: the product of his own less than well-founded version of an only semi-secularized Christian redemption story and of his own haphazard preferences and happenstance encounters with specific works.

Two thoughts, however, can help to moderate this appearance. First, Hegel's account of the functions that art serves historically is plausible enough in immediately anthropological terms, independently of his grand story about humanity's development. As Hegel poignantly observes,

'[Man] has the impulse, in whatever is directly given to him, in what is present to him externally, to produce himself and therein equally to recognize himself. This aim he achieves by altering external things whereon he impresses the seal of his inner being and in which he now finds again his own characteristics. Man does this in order, as a free subject, to strip the external world of its inflexible foreignness and to enjoy in the shape of things only an external realization of himself. Even a child's first impulse involves this practical alteration of external things; a boy throws stones into the river and now marvels at the circles drawn in the water as an effect in which he gains an

intuition of something that is his own doing. This need runs through the most diversiform phenomena up to that mode of self-production in external things which is present in the work of art.' (1975: 31)

The claims that the making of works of art originates in impulses of this kind, that these impulses then develop as we change in relation to our social forms of life, and that audiences look to works of art in order to participate in the satisfaction of such impulses afford a compelling starting point for rooting the production and reception of works of art — something present in all cultures — in deep, shared, but historically evolving human needs.

Second, by attending to central cases of historically important art, Hegel fills in the details of his account of the historical development of art in an illuminating way. Throughout his historical survey, Hegel emphasizes that an understanding of the work — perhaps less than fully articulated, but nonetheless present within practices of reception — is itself essential to the artwork itself. As the expression in sensuous form of what human beings hold to be highest as a way of life, the artwork is an essentially communicative phenomenon. It articulates — in sensuous materials — a historically salient sense of what it might be for shared rational activity to find satisfaction in a way of life. The artwork does this through inviting and sustaining a variety of responses, including awe, reverence, appropriation in cult, worship, and 'freer' modern, individual audience identification with the artwork as a crystallization of attention and gesture. Although in modernity, where individuals are freer to choose more specific and differentiated courses of individual life than were available in more traditional cultures, there is considerable scope for an individual artist's choice of subject matter, materials, and manner of working, and also for variations in individual audience response, the artwork remains in its essence, or successfully in its central instances, a vehicle of the articulation, expression, and communication of shared impulses and possibilities of self-recognition. It is culturally situated and culturally communicative; even where it is distinctively original, it is not the product of any arbitrary, chthonic, self-standing individual psychology alone. Combining technical mastery, internalization of the history of achievements in a medium, and awareness of the shape of rational activity in social life, the artist must find,

more than arbitrarily invent, a way to speak in artistic forms to a historical present.

Hegel divides the history of art into four distinct phases. Strikingly, these phases are distinguished from one another primarily by reference to which form of art, given its material possibilities of expression, is most appropriate to the stage of development and self-understanding that rational activity has reached. Though many forms of art exist simultaneously in many historical moments, only one is centrally suited in any epoch to the task of Spirit's sensuous expression.

Hegel finds the beginnings of art as the expression of Spirit within the cults and religious practices of ancient Persia. The Zoroastrians worshipped light as the absolute source of all growth and value, but were able to express this understanding only in the most abstract and indeterminate forms, in for example, towers oriented as sites of religious ritual. The towers of Babel and Bal in their undifferentiated verticality express unarticulated awe directed at the sun, while their labor-intensive physical construction for this end unites peoples in the activity of expression. The ling-nams and distorted figures of ancient India express a similar abstract and undeveloped understanding of a natural life force as what is to be revered. In giving vague, indeterminate expression in sensuous forms to an understanding of what is sacred, the works of the ancient Persians and Indians stand as forms of pre-art, highlighting the origins of all art in collective religious impulses.

Art proper begins with the Egyptians, the first people to develop a conception of the immortality of the soul in relation to the body. In the colossi of Memnon at Luxor, in the figures of the Sphinx, and finally in the pyramids as tombs in which the body is preserved for further life, one finds an essentially abstract understanding of continuing life and its value. In virtue of the abstract referentiality of these works to continuing life, Hegel dubs this phase of art *Symbolic*. Architecture, specifically the building of such abstractly referential works rather than, say, of dwellings or places of work, is the medium of art naturally suited in its heavy, space-occupying materiality to this abstract referentiality, and it is the dominant form of art in its symbolic phase. The transition to the subsequent phase begins when the artificers of such works become increasingly aware of the significance of their own labors in giving particularized shapes to the sculptural figures

they created, initially as decorations and supplements to predominantly architectural works, but later as self-standing works on their own.

The second phase of art proper is the *Classical* phase of the ancient Greeks. Here the gods are presented as human figures fully realized in sculpture, the central form of art in its classical period. In the work of classical Greek sculpture, the god or, later, the hero or athlete or public figure, is fully sensuously present. Hegel compares the Greek sculpture in its living presence to a thousand-eyed Argus (1975: 154) that manifests its sensuous meaningfulness to its audiences in their physical space, as it serves as a focus of worship and of the self-celebration of the Greek way of life. The understanding of the sacred that is expressed is no longer abstractly referential. Instead the sensuous presence of the sculpture as a living, meaningful unity of form and material expresses reverence for Greek achieved humanity. During this phase, and only during this phase, art is the highest, most adequate form of expression of the human self-understanding of the sacred.

The third phase of art proper is modern or, in Hegel's terminology, *Romantic* art. Greek self-confidence in the achieved humanity of the male Greek aristocracy broke down under the pressures of trade and increasing ancient cosmopolitanism. In the Roman form of life, both citizens and aliens came to live under forms of imperial law governing commercial transactions. As trade increased, individuals living under Roman rule found themselves increasingly forced to draw back from automatic immersion in any givens of social life, in order to ask themselves: what is expected of me in this transaction and by the law? How might I as an individual (rather than naturally, as a Greek) regulate my conduct in these circumstances? Christianity, as a religion of initiation through baptism and conversion gave similar prominent expression to a sense of the powers of individuals to shape their courses of life.

As a result of these developments in socially embodied self-understanding, modern or *Romantic* art takes inwardness as its proper subject matter. Inwardness — a sense within the person of revering or honoring something, which sense is to be expressed continuously in future action — and *its* proper objects are now what is highest for us. The artistic media properly suited to expressing this sense of the importance of inwardness in sensuous forms are, successively, painting, music, and poetry (lyrical and

dramatic literature).

In contrast with sculpture, the flat surface of a painting can show not only a single object or a local group of objects, but an object, in particular a human figure, in relation to a larger environment and horizon that might contain anything. Hence a painting can show a human figure devoted to or thinking about something of importance, pre-eminently the devotion of the Madonna to the child and the devotion of Jesus in his suffering to his task. The human sensuous beauty of Greek sculpture is abandoned in favor of the depiction of inwardness in relation to its surroundings and objects of devotion. In addition, the painting is made for a beholder, who must be conscious of his or her position and so of himself or herself as an individual. Instead of existing as a self-standing object in a public space that it inhabits on its own, a painting is essentially *for* a viewer. In many of its central instances, modern painting determines just one point of view (opposite the vanishing point) as primary for seeing the significance of what is presented. In the initial phases of the depiction of religious themes in Renaissance Italy, Giotto and Bellini picked up Byzantine motifs of reverence, but developed techniques of perspective, coloring, and the rendering of landscapes and multiple figures. Religious painting reaches its heights of technical accomplishment with Raphael, but begins soon thereafter to decline into Baroque mannerism as a result of the pursuit of increasingly dramatic effects oriented toward the painterly surface. A late phase of successful painting appears in Dutch and Flemish painting of everyday life, as in the Van Eycks and David Teniers, where the music of colors is used to celebrate and accept modern, domestic, independent life.

Music develops the expression of inwardness even further, as it abstracts from all depiction. Its material is vanishing sound, organized into overall plots of “cadenced interjection” (1975: 903) that represent abstractly the plights and possibilities of subjectivity. By organizing their acoustic material, composers invite audiences to follow and dwell in patterns of development, involving thematic statement, complication and resistance, and resolution. In its abstraction from definite depiction, music resembles architecture, but, unlike architecture, it is a form of art that is generated by and addressed to modern inwardness.

Poetry combines the temporal development of music with the specific representationality of painting. It is the universal modern art, the art most

adequate to rendering anything in its significance in relation to human life and feeling. Hegel discusses ancient epic, especially Homer, as a precursor to modern poetry, but differing from it in its orientation to collective, tribal values and to a cruder form of technological life, where inwardness was not of importance. Dramatic poetry reaches one pinnacle of development with Sophocles and his depictions of collisions of right with itself, as in the clash in *Antigone* between Creon's insistence on public order and Antigone's standing on the values of family and piety. Among modern dramatists, Shakespeare is pre-eminent in his ability to depict fully individualized, passionately ambitious, articulate characters whose ego-driven individuality sets them at odds with their social circumstances, leading often to their tragic downfall, as the rights of reasonable modern social life must be reasserted, but sometimes to their comic self-overcoming. Modern lyric poetry is able to take into view any subject matter whatsoever, from daffodils in a field to the French Revolution, with the aim of achieving through the presentation freedom "not *from* but *in* feeling" (1975: 1112). Though his treatment of it is exceedingly brief, Hegel notes that modern fiction, as in Cervantes and Sterne, can develop the "prose of life" (1975: 1107), in such a way that an attitude of "objective humor" (1975: 609, 1235) — that is, bemused acceptance of the happenstances of life—can be expressed and cultivated for an audience.

In each of the modern arts of painting (after its initial religious phase), music, and literature, and pre-eminently in literature, the task and achievement of modern, Romantic art is to express imaginative and emotional attentiveness to the particularities of modern life rather than, as it was with the Greeks, to embody the most adequate understanding of what is highest. That latter task is now allotted first to religion and then to philosophy. Hence "art, considered its highest vocation" as the most adequate form of human-self understanding "is and remains for us a thing of the past" (1975: 11). We no longer worship art or worship by means of art; our attitude toward art involves more enjoyment, distantiating, and critical reflection. But this is neither to say that art disappears nor that it is insignificant for us. It is instead freed from direct subservience to (often inchoate) religious impulses, so that it may now explore and reconcile us to quite particular circumstances of life and feeling.

As already noted, it is possible to find Hegel's metaphysics of Spirit or

rational activity — as essentially aiming at the achievable end of reasonable, freedom-embodiment, and satisfying social life — to be heavy-handed: a last gasp, implausible refiguring of a Christian theodicy. Hegel seems, moreover, insensitive to the interest of the forms of radical artistic experimentalism (already discernible in his lifetime in the writings of Jean Paul) that would lead to modernism and post-modernism. Hegel remains always concerned more with art as a social phenomenon involving communicativeness than as a form of iconoclasm that resists social life. Indeed, we might well wonder whether *any* philosophical theory of art can respond adequately to the wildness and unpredictability of modern art.

Hegel's most important, contemporary German language commentator, Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert, lists three conditions that she takes to be necessary and sufficient for the contemporary relevance of a philosophical theory of art (2005: 10).

Conceptual Explication: the essence or, alternatively, the central function of centrally important works of art must be explicated.

Methodological-Historical Rigor: the theory must include an insightful, stage by stage, retrospectively plausible explication of art as a historical, cultural phenomenon. That is, the historical development of art and of the practices of art must be clarified in relation to the historical development of other cultural practices.

Comprehensive Formulation: the individual shapes and modes of appearance of both modes of art and specific works of art must be grasped in both their functional equivalence and their contentful variation from one another. That is, it must be shown in detail how a central function of art — for example, the presentation of a higher, spiritual content — is fulfilled by different works in different epochs in different ways.

It is, of course, possible to wonder whether these are the correct conditions for, let us say, the truthfulness of a theory of art. Several specific worries arise. First, the comprehensive formulation requirement seems very strong, if it is taken to apply to most of the things that are called art. Alternatively, if it is weakened so as to apply only to especially central and important works, then we seem to need an independent criterion for what

is central, and it is not clear that we have one apart from the general conceptual explication on offer. The risk, that is, is that the theory offers a conceptual explication only of particular works that it favors. Second, in light of this worry, we may wonder whether the first and third conditions might be inconsistent with one another. Perhaps the demand for comprehensiveness, in any reasonable understanding of this term, cuts generally against the possibility of conceptual explication and the specification of an essential function, and vice versa. Third, it is not clear that there is any such thing as “the historical development of other cultural practices” as it is specified in the second condition. Rather, perhaps the historical development of cultural practices is simply motley and haphazard, so that any philosophical story about it will be just as tendentiously one-sided as an explicatory history of art.

I am not insensitive to these worries. But then what alternative criteria for the adequacy or truthfulness of a philosophical theory of art might we prefer? Extensional adequacy to every thing that is or has been reasonably called art, including not only canonical works, but children’s drawings, my musical compositions, works that experiment in new media, and all the rest, seems a fool’s errand. At best, extensional adequacy to all this will be purchased at the cost of utter lack of illumination, as in, I dare say, George Dickie’s institutional theory. If we care about illumination of the significance of art, there is, I think, little reasonable alternative to taking Gethmann-Seifert’s criteria seriously.

Whether Hegel’s philosophical theory of art satisfies them is yet another question. As already hinted, we may want to take certain iconoclastic, modernist works more seriously than Hegel does: that is, works that take as their point of departure the non-existence of recognized, shared, communicable human interests and that instead undertake to provoke their audiences to change, so as to enter into a new sense of their interests, against the grain of commercial culture. Second, we may want to resist the thought that the work of the philosophy of art can be completed conclusively. Rather, any philosophical theory of art might be taken to be aiming at the clarification of the works and practices of art that are taken to be central from a specific historical position that is itself open to some forms of significant, unanticipatable development. In this case, the philosophical theory of art would remain more open-ended — that is, more continu-

ous with criticism, including adventurous criticism, and less controlled by a conclusively shaped narrative of Spirit — than Hegel finally takes it to be.

But whatever our worries along these lines, Hegel's example in generating an historico-functional theory of art and in setting developments in art in relation to developments within other spheres of culture is unavoidable. His detailed insights into the historical saliences and material possibilities of meaning of individual forms of art and of specific works are unmatched by any other philosopher of art. The works of other, later, function-oriented philosophers of art, art historians, and theorists of art (such as Gyorgy Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Erwin Panofsky, R. G. Collingwood, John Dewey, Theodor Adorno, and Arthur Danto) would be inconceivable in the absence of Hegel's work, and his specific understanding of art in relation to modern life can stand comparison with the best of their insights.

References

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