

Heidegger's Modernism: What Does the Overcoming of Aesthetics Really Amount to?

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ABSTRACT. Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" provides an elaborate model of the work of art, understood as "the setting-itself to work of the truth of beings." According to most interpreters, this model refers to the "great art" of the ancients that Heidegger presents as a desirable alternative to the merely "aesthetic art" of his historical present. Contrary to this view, I advocate a reading, according to which the principal reference of the model is the art of the present age, while the art of the ancients is evoked in the essay to exemplify the true significance of the phenomenon. "The Origin," as I argue, is concerned with art as such, which is, however, an essentially modern idea that contains the opposition of "great" and "merely aesthetic" as one of its major traits. Relying on the work of Jay M. Bernstein, I argue that Heidegger's "overcoming of aesthetics" is not the task of abandoning aesthetics, but, quite to the contrary, the definitive task of the (modernist) aesthetics itself. I support my interpretation by focusing on the relation between exemplarity and materiality that Heidegger's conception of art shares with the modernism of Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell.

I.

Martin Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935-1936) is dedicated to the question concerning the essential nature of art. This question is answered in the essay by an elaborate phenomenological model, the general outline of which is well known. The essential nature of art is "the

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setting-itself to work of the truth of beings" that takes place as an open-ended strife between "world" and "earth" – two essential dimensions of an artistic entity. Alongside the immediate question – What does this formula actually mean? – another important question might be posed: What should the model summarized in this formula be applied to? My paper will focus on the second question, and I shall approach the meaning of art as it is posed in "The Origin" through the prism of the question concerning its reference. I shall begin by presenting the dominant view on the subject according to which the art of "The Origin" is the "great art" of the ancients, extinct in the historical present of the essay. I will take Julian Young's *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art* (2000) as a representative version of this reading. Contrary to Young's view, I shall defend a reading according to which the art of "The Origin" is the modern art, while the art of the ancients is evoked in the essay to exemplify something like modern art's "utmost possibility." Moreover, as I shall argue, saying this amounts to saying that the essay is concerned with art as such, since the idea of art that we possess is essentially a modern, or rather a modernist idea. My view relies to a great extent on the work of Jay M. Bernstein and on his reading of "The Origin" in *The Faith of Art* (1992) that, alongside his *Against Voluptuous Bodies* (2006), will be my main reference on the matters of modernism and modernity. In the last part of the paper, I shall compare a few essential points of Heidegger's position with yet another version of aesthetic modernism – the one that is common to Michael Fried and Stanley Cavell. The main focus of my analysis will be the essential relation between exemplarity and materiality that pertains to the modernist conception of art.

2.

The point of departure for the following considerations is Heidegger's made in passing, yet frequently quoted, remark that in "The Origin" he is concerned with and only with "great art" (Heidegger 2002, 19). This remark that appears in the beginning of the second chapter is a perplexing one, since the opening passages of the essay as well as the whole of its argument up to that moment didn't suggest that it is concerned with anything but the essence of art as such. Is the essay, then, concerned with just a

certain kind of art? If so, how should we distinguish this kind of art from the other entities that go by the same name? Is it an essential difference or rather a matter of artistic quality? What *is* great art?

According to the dominant interpretation of Heidegger's position, great art should be identified with the art of the past (especially ancient Greece, but anyway not later than the Middle Ages) and categorically distinguished from the "aesthetic art" of the modern age. Great art is characterized, first of all, by the "ethical conception" that governs it: the truth-disclosure, the most identifiable feature of Heidegger's model, is conceived as a disclosure to an historical audience, a people, of "the proper way to live." (Young 2000, 8-9) Moreover, the audience to which this truth is disclosed should unequivocally recognize its advent. As Young puts it, "nothing less than the reception of the artwork by a culture ('people') as a whole is sufficient to establish its 'greatness'. Art is only great if, like the Greek temple or medieval cathedral, it possesses world-historical significance." (Ibid, 7) Finally, Young underlines that Heidegger's view coincides with Hegel's famous thesis, discussed in the afterword to "The Origin", according to which this kind of art – art "with regard to its highest vocation" – is and remains to be "a thing of the past" (Heidegger 2002, 51; Young 2000, 1).

Great art, according to this interpretation, is opposed to the aesthetic conception of art that prevails in the modern age and is a derivative of the subject-object relations constitutive of the onto-historical paradigm of this age. The aesthetic conception of art takes the artwork as an object of (aesthetic) experience of the perceiving subject, while, in Young's words, "the essential thing about art, on this approach, is that it is beautiful." (Young 2000, 9) Finally, the aesthetic approach to art necessarily reduces it to entertainment – "the domain of the pastry chef," as Heidegger sarcastically puts it elsewhere (Heidegger 2000b, 140). Therefore, according to Young, the aesthetic conception of art essentially contradicts its ethical conception. Moreover, on the basis of Heidegger's remark that "experience is the element in which art dies" (Heidegger 2002, 50), it is argued that the aesthetic conception of art is not only a successor of the ethical conception, but also its killer. (Young 2000, 8-9) Thus, the model of the artwork drawn in "The Origin" refers to the great art of the past and aims at regenerating the possibility of its rebirth in the future (Ibid, 15). This endeavor – the

ontological project of "overcoming of aesthetics" – should be maneuvered, so to say, over the head of the "insignificant" art of the 1936-present.

The most obvious reason to doubt this reading is that it is at odds with the actual artistic material evoked in "The Origin." Heidegger exemplifies his conception of art using two major examples: a Van Gogh's painting and the temple in Paestum. The first obviously belongs to the supposedly "art-less" age of modernity. The price Young pays for making his case is declining the analysis of the Van Gogh as "inconsistent with the real thrust of this essay" (Young 2000, 5), and basing his interpretation entirely upon the temple passages. However, besides the temple (and a few artworks evoked in its context) all of the artworks mentioned in the essay undermine the confinement of its sphere of reference to the art of the ancients: a poem of C.F. Meyer, Hölderlin's "Rhine", Beethoven's quartets... Since it has been stated that the essay is concerned only with great art, we may suppose that all of the examples above belong to this category (something, I think, we tend to do without reservations). Thus, there are good reasons to think that when Heidegger speaks of great art he actually means what everybody else usually means by great art: outstanding or, as we shall specify in what follows, *exemplary* achievements of human artistic activity up to this day.

Moreover, Heidegger definitely presupposes that his readers know what art is or, at least, are acquainted with artistic phenomena, and possess an idea that enables them to recognize a certain set of entities as belonging to this category. Heidegger's aim is to explicate the ontological content of this ontic acquaintance, while providing a phenomenological analysis of the idea that subsumes them. Undoubtedly, the example of the temple plays a special role in this analysis; not, however, because this is the only example in the essay worth to be called art, but because it is the *paradigm* for all of the art treated there. The artworks that Heidegger is concerned with, I believe, are the artworks of his age, while the evocation of the Greek temple exemplifies *how* we should regard these works. To put it in grammatical terms, Van Gogh (as a representative of the modern art) is the subject of Heidegger's statement, whereas the temple is the predicate. Thus, the question that Heidegger formulates in the end of his essay about the place of art in the contemporary age of being (Heidegger 2002, 51) is not a question whether a Van Gogh is "great" enough to be treated as a

temple, but rather the question whether we are able to answer its claim to be treated so.

This point becomes clearer if we recall that Heidegger himself does not speak about "aesthetic art," but rather about "aesthetic consideration of art." Aesthetic conception of art and what Young calls the ethical conception are not two kinds of art but indeed two kinds of conception. Yet, and this is the point Young overlooks, these conceptual possibilities pertain to the very "origin" of the phenomenon discussed in the eponymous essay. Moreover, the relation between these possibilities, and specifically between the ideas of truth and beauty, upon which they are centered, is not an exclusive dichotomy. For while undoubtedly Heidegger does attack aesthetics, his aim is not to abrogate the idea of the beautiful and the realm of the aesthetic experience, but rather to give an accurate account of their true meaning. Heidegger does not deny the fact that art generates aesthetic experience, and that this experience essentially pertains to art. What makes experience "the element in which art dies" is its posing as art's *raison d'être*. What Heidegger points out is that the fact of aesthetic experience itself does not suffice to account for art being more than entertainment. The problem is that the subjectivist approach to art either reduces art to "domain of the pastry chef" (i.e. says that art doesn't *really* matter), or just fails to provide a satisfying account as to *why* it does. So Heidegger turns the tables: art matters not because it is beautiful, but is beautiful because it matters. Heidegger's conception of art does not oppose beauty to truth; quite to the contrary, "The Origin" rearticulates the relation between those concepts in a way that does not enable their opposition: "Beauty is one way in which truth as unconcealment comes to presence" (Heidegger 2002, 32), "beauty belongs to the advent of truth." (Ibid, 52-53)

Aesthetics either deprives art of its significance or is obliged to go beyond itself. The second possibility is the one Heidegger is pursuing in his philosophy of art. Nevertheless, and this is a crucial point, the necessary duality of these possibilities pertain to the essence of art – and moreover, as I shall immediately explain, to the very essence of aesthetics. This essence is an historical essence and we could not understand Heidegger's aesthetic model without a certain account of modernity, to which the possibility of great art is critically related.

3.

According to Bernstein, modernity is an age constituted by the separation of the domains of truth, morality and beauty (Bernstein 1992, 2) – a separation emblemized by the division of Kant's *Critiques*. This division, as Bernstein puts it, is "alienating art from truth and morality" (Ibid, 2). Truth in modernity (and this is a point well-known to Heideggerians) becomes identified with the quantifiable truth of the modern sciences in what Bernstein calls "truth-only cognition." Bernstein terms the modern deprivation of art "of its power to speak the truth" "aesthetic alienation," which, as Bernstein emphasizes, also "entails that 'truth' and 'goodness' are alienated ... from themselves" (Ibid, 5). Identifying the "disenchantment of the world" that overrules modernity as *aesthetic* alienation pinpoints the specificity of the modern subject-object relations as the core of this process: all the meaning that a singular material object can possess is being reduced to the categorical apparatus of transcendental subjectivity (Bernstein 2006, 6). "Individual embodied experience," on the other hand, is left without legislative authority in modern social practice. Bernstein's main point is that alienated, "merely aesthetic" art is launched by this historical situation as a "critique of modernity" (Bernstein 1992, 3) that voices the possibility of its overcoming:

...art that has become alienated from truth doesn't suffer alienation silently; on the contrary, the protest of aesthetic art, its way of being more than merely aesthetic, is what first reveals truth-only cognition as domination and hence opens up their suppressed history. Aesthetics is from its beginnings the overcoming of aesthetics. (Ibid, 66-67)

The ambiguity of self-overcoming is also responsible for what Bernstein recognizes in Heidegger as a "double reading" of Kant's third *Critique* (Ibid, 80), whose "ambiguous legacy" (Ibid, 7) is responsible both for art's autonomy/alienation from truth and morality, and for establishing its critical potential vis-à-vis this division. Thus, in passages dedicated to Kant's doctrine of the beautiful in the lectures on Nietzsche Heidegger defends the "disinterestedness" of the reflective judgments of taste from Nietzsche's critique:

The misinterpretation of "interest" leads to erroneous opinion that with the exclusion of interest every essential relation to the object is suppressed. The opposite is the case. Precisely by means of the "devoid of interest" the essential relation to the object itself comes into play. The misinterpretation fails to see that now for the first time the object comes to the fore as pure object and that such coming forward into appearance is the beautiful. The word "beautiful" means appearing in the radiance of such coming to fore. (Heidegger 1976, 110)

We shouldn't be appalled by the appearance here of the term "object" – that seems to embody precisely the way Heidegger would *not* want us to conceive of the work of art. As Heidegger explains later in the same text, although the approach to the artwork as an object of aesthetic experience starts within the subject-object dichotomy, the nature of the aesthetic relation is such that "by having a feeling for beauty the subject has already come out of himself; he is no longer subjective, no longer a subject" (Ibid, 123). The object, on the other hand, appears in the aesthetic experience in "its own stature and worth" (Ibid, 109) and, therefore, stops being "objectified" in the sense implied in the subject-object relations as they appear in modernity and are being continuously critiqued by Heidegger. To encounter something in "its own stature and worth" is to discover meaning and value that originate in the object of encounter rather than being imposed on it by the subject: "meaningfulness that is not (sheer) consequence of our doing," as Bernstein describes the stake of disinterestedness in Kant (Bernstein 2006, 59). In modernism, as presented by Bernstein, however, this idea is essentially associated with the meaning that is intrinsic to the *materiality* of the encountered object and hence pertains to the very *aesthesis* of the aesthetic realm. Art understood as critique of modernity is the "systematic bearer" of the claim for the possibility of "material meaning" – "a thing's meaning in excess of our meaning it" (Ibid, 261). Since art, in this view, is the repository of resistance to the "dematerialization of nature", the "core of art's rationality potential relates to the role and status of artistic mediums" (Ibid, 74). "The idea of artistic medium," Bernstein writes, "is perhaps the last idea of material nature as possessing potentialities of meaning" (Ibid, 75).

4.

We have started with the notion of "great art" and arrived at the "idea of artistic medium". In the modernist conception of art these two are being essentially interrelated and so, as I will now try to show, they are in Heidegger. I have proposed to interpret great art – which, according to Heidegger's perplexing remark, is the only true subject of "The Origin" – not as a categorically different kind of art, but just as art superior in its quality or, in other words, *exemplary* art. Now, we should approach the latter concept with more precision, for though our interpretation makes the remark consistent with the artistic instances discussed in the essay, it doesn't account for a more principal difficulty this remark generates: if the model proposed by "The Origin" is valid only for great art and not for art as such, the main question of the essay concerning "the origin of the work of art" (which, as Young rightly points out, is the question "what is art?") seems to remain unanswered. I do not think, however, that Heidegger had posed one question and then decided to answer another one. Rather, the case is that art is a very special phenomenon, the essence of which "shows itself" only in an *exemplary* manner – a fact that necessitates the peculiar method of its disclosure. As Heidegger famously suggests to his readers, "in order to discover the nature of art ... let us approach the actual work and ask it what and how it is" (Heidegger 2002, 2). Great art is the art that is able to answer these questions. In one of the programmatic texts of late modernism, Michael Fried formulates a very similar idea (with an important difference, on which I shall immediately comment):

...what modernism has meant is that the two questions – What constitutes the art of painting? And what constitutes *good* painting? – are no longer separable; the first disappears, or increasingly tends to disappear, into the second. (Fried 1968, 124)

Indeed, it was modernism that has placed the logic of exemplarity – the ability of a work to speak in the name of art as such – in the very core of art's essence. In his early writings Cavell develops this idea while conceptualizing the contemporary situation in the arts. This situation is characterized by the fact that the belonging of certain entities to the category of art is not trivially given, but is a matter of skepticism and acknowledgement (Cavell 1976, 188). The artistic success of a work in this situation is a

success to be art at all. This, as we already know from Bernstein, amounts to succeeding to generate an empathic encounter, to disclose meaning internal to an artistic medium as a representative of material nature. Since the specificity of the material basis is the register responsible for the division of the arts, for Cavell and Fried, as it is also for Heidegger, being an artwork entails belonging to one of the arts. Therefore, the modernist situation in art manifests itself in that the media are not given *a priori* (Cavell 1979, 103). For instance, "we do not know *a priori* what painting has to do or be faithful to in order to remain a painting." (Ibid, 106) This is why Cavell describes the task of the modernist art as the task of *creating* a medium. The fact of this task is, actually, the *only* thing we *do* know about art *a priori*, since this feature essentially pertains to our idea of art. All other content art can possess is being produced in a local accomplishment of this task, i.e. an historical disclosure of material meaning.

It is important not to misinterpret Cavell's "creation of a medium" as an act of subjective will. As Cavell puts it, "the medium is to be discovered, or invented *out of itself*" (Cavell 1976, 221 – emphasis added). The "creation of a medium" *is* a discovery of a meaning that exceeds the subject-object relation. If the essence of art resides in its claim for the possibility of meaning intrinsic to material nature (i.e. not stipulated by the concepts of a subject), and if an artistic medium is a representative of the nature possessing such meaning, it is not enough for an artwork to be established *in* a medium, regarded as a pre-given realm of possibilities, but rather it should *create* a medium – articulate this realm of possibilities anew. This is what Heidegger means when in his analysis of "earth" he writes that in the work of art the materials of which it is wrought "come forth for the first time": the rock, for instance, "comes to bear and to rest and so first becomes rock." (Heidegger 2002, 24)

Therefore, the theoretical locus of "great art" bounds the logic of exemplarity with the issue of the artistic medium. The latter term, however, is an ambiguous one, since it is used to designate alternately one of the arts and the material basis of an art. The essential relation between the two, central to Bernstein's position, is less explicit in Heidegger, who himself doesn't use the term. Nevertheless, while the "first time" rhetoric of the "earth" passages attests to the logic of exemplarity in relation to the latter meaning, some other texts clearly bring it to forth in relation to the for-

mer. Juxtaposing the passage from "The Origin" that contains the remark about great art with a passage from a later text that appears to make the same point is insightful in that regard. In "The Origin" Heidegger writes:

Precisely in great art (which is all we are concerned with here) the artist remains something inconsequential in comparison with the work – almost like a passageway which, in the creative process, destroys itself for the sake of the coming forth of the work. (Heidegger 2002, 19)

In "Language" (1950) Heidegger writes:

The poem was written by Georg Trakl. Who the author is remains unimportant here, as with every other masterful poem. The mastery consists precisely in this, that the poem can deny the poet's person and name. (Heidegger 2001, 193)

"Great art" is "masterful art". A "masterful poem" is a poem that is able to speak in the name of poetry as such, and not, among other unwanted possibilities, in the name of the subject that had created it. This, indeed, is the way in which Trakl's poem functions in "Language." This is also one of the central ideas Heidegger formulates while discussing the role of poetry in "destitute times" or, in other words, in modernity: "'poets in destitute time' must especially gather in poetry the nature of poetry" (Ibid, 92) – which almost literally coincides with Cavell's description of the task of the modernist artist: "to achieve in his art the muse of the art itself – to declare, from itself, the art as a whole for which it speaks" (Cavell 1979, 106)

But if the task of speaking in the name of one's art belongs to modernity as "destitute times" in which gods have fled or – which I take to be saying essentially the same – times in which the nature had been disenchanting, is it legitimate to ascribe it to art as such? Interestingly, from the question regarding appropriateness of applying the conception of "great art" to anything but the art of the ancients we have turned to the opposite one: is it appropriate to apply a model that seems to be essentially modernist to the art of the past – to a Greek temple, for example? In Bernstein's view, this is exactly what Heidegger is doing: "projecting back into the Greek

past a conception of art which only modernity makes possible" (Bernstein 1992, 72).

Here, however, it will be useful to evoke another extremely important moment in Cavell's conception of modernism that that consists in a peculiar doubling of the historical and the ontological. Modernism is not an historical epoch in which art operates in a principally different way than in the previous ones. On the contrary, as Cavell puts it in "Music Discomposed," "modernism only makes explicit and bare what has always been true to art. (That is almost a definition of modernism, not to say its purpose)" (Cavell 1976, 189). In my view, rather than saying that modernism discovers some "a-historical" essence of art, it would be correct to say that (for the reasons described by Bernstein) the modern – i.e. our and Heidegger's – idea of art is launched by modernity. One of the most characteristic features of this idea, however, is its ability of retrospectively subsuming a variety of instances from the past, which were not seen in their time as belonging to one category. Heidegger is not unaware of this doubling. Thus, elsewhere he says: "*all* essential poetry also poetizes "anew" the essence of poetizing itself. This is true of Hölderlin's poetry in a special and singular sense." (Heidegger 1996, 9) The creation of a medium – poetizing "anew" of what poetry is, in case of poetry – pertains to *all* poetry, which is to say, to art as such. "The special and singular sense" in which Hölderlin's poetry serves this mission, however, pertains to the exemplarity of the modernist poetical doing, which historically discloses what was always true of "all essential poetry" – of all "great art" – that is, the logic of exemplarity itself.

The reading of Heidegger that I have outlined here can be summarized in the following points:

1. Great art and aesthetic art are not two distinct kinds of art but two irreducible aspects of our idea of art.
2. This idea is an historical one; it essentially pertains to modernity.
3. Aesthetics as a major specification of this idea cannot be easily done with, since what is at stake in art – the possibility of genuine poetic disclosure – is the quest for "*material* meaning."

4. The relation of great art to art as such in the rhetoric of "The Origin" reveals the logic of exemplarity as an essential feature of our idea of art.
5. Exemplarity and materiality are essentially interrelated. The materialist task of art – the creation of a medium – is a necessary condition for art to be great. Hence, the theoretical locus of great art ties together the ideas of materiality and exemplarity, and this is the modernist, oftentimes overlooked, aspect of Heidegger's philosophy of art that I have tried to articulate in this paper.

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