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Locating the Artist Within the Work

Introduction

The task of defining a work as art is charged with debate and dissent. Attempts to define art tend to introduce a problematic exclusionary nature, forcing the definition of artwork into a realm of condemning subjectivity. Art becomes recognized as legitimate based on either an institutional or personal rubric, which threatens to ignore the works that differ from one's accepted standard. Here, an effort will be made to escape from any rigid limitations that are introduced when determining the criteria—or lack thereof—for labelling an object as a work of art. My point of departure is Martin Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, which claims that a work of art reveals the essence of a thing. The present discussion will focus on the same claim, but diverge from Heidegger's definitions. For him, essence is an absolute, a truth that will always be gleaned by anyone who views an artwork. The following paper will be based upon a destruction of this universal assumption. To claim that meaning is consistent through the process of imagining, creating, and viewing is to ignore the variability of human interpretation. I argue that it is impossible to define the essence revealed by the work of art. It is through the artist's endeavor to communicate the unsayable, and through the spectator's attempt to understand that which can not be received, that the true work of art is labelled as such. Artwork therefore reveals the impossibility of showing reality in its truth.

In order for a work of art to truly be considered as such an agreement must be reached between its maker and audience. The artist must attempt to insert their entire being into a work, and by doing so will divulge an unsayable truth, and create from this point of intentional reveal. It is only through a conscious vulnerability that the artist can open themselves up within the work. The viewer must be able to recognize this intimate disclosure. However, in this recognition a frustration is experienced. The viewer is unable to name or understand the nature of familiarity with the artist that the work reveals. It is this attempted, yet failed, communication of the artist's self that produces the appeal of art. Without this unexplainable element, art would become obsolete and uninteresting. In order to determine if a piece can be qualified as "art", one is forced to turn to the consistency of the trace presence of artist in the work. Only through an unexplainable reflection of the artist within work can a depth of meaning be produced. Whether an artist is able to insert themselves within their piece, and if there is a potential for the spectator to recognize their presence, determines if a piece is truly art. The optimal medium for such an undertaking will be one that exists in a state of temporality. A piece that is confined to a static state has an inherent limit to what it exposes: the unfolding of action over time, and the slow reveal of content, allows for an infinitely complex examination of the piece. As the artist is given room to disclose themselves in a controlled and temporal manner, the ambiguity of their work is lessened. The work will be able to better reflect the artist: just as in life, one moment is informed by the last, the work that unfolds over time will be able to introduce a continuously evolving concept of who the artist is. In order to lessen the ambiguity of meaning, each moment will be individually crafted by the artist in an attempt to make their own reality a tangible object for shared comprehension by the artist and those who view their works.

Defining Art

When one considers a cultural movement or organization, it is impossible to divorce the art that they produce from that group's overall makeup. The productions of a community of people, their preferred mediums, and the messages that they choose to convey are all embedded within their culture. The origins and history of any artist can be traced back to the society in which they were raised. The origin and culture that an artist identifies with will necessarily have an influence over the work that they produce. Therefore, traces of their childhood influences will remain within their work. No two artists have been raised in exactly the same way. This variation makes it impossible to pinpoint the exact parameters of what art is based on content, as every piece will be born from a different cultural context. One is not able to claim that a specific set of guidelines are superior over others, as no two artists will fit within the same guidelines. Attempting to define art by a criteria of content is an impossibility if one wants to allow for artistic variety.

Rather than name a certain culture's style as the only form of accepted art, we will search for a different means of definition. It would be possible to turn to the pieces displayed in museums as a reference for classification, as the knowledge of a curation process, the expectation of an academy education, and the popularity of these pieces all seem to point to a widespread agreement of the recognition of these particular creations as true works of art. However, wandering around galleries only results in an exposure of institutionally approved work, excluding pieces produced by those who are not widely acclaimed, rather than those whose cultural origin do not fit the traditional standard. The problematics of a criteria for acceptance are still in place: the standard here is the allocation of limited wall space by curators.

In light of the inherent exclusion that this produces, it becomes necessary to turn to the content of artworks themselves to produce a comprehensive understanding of the term.

Martin Heidegger has claimed that a thorough exploration of the artwork must originate in the one who produces the art. A complete understanding of the artist, and their process of creation, is entangled within a cohesive idea of a piece of art. As we seek to avoid attaching traces of strict exclusion to the title of artist, an artist will be considered as one who sets out to make art. Whether it be a student producing a final project to earn a degree, a woodcarver smoothing out the lines of a chair, or a child drawing on a wall with their mother's make-up, the artist has an intentionality to create. The artist is one who attempts to project their self into the work: in their production, the combination of bodily involvement and mental attention ensures that the mark of the artist is inseparable from the finished product. Even a line of code dictating an action in a video game bears traces of the artist's hand in its formation. Therefore, the *true* artist has an awareness of intention—whether it be completely formulated or simply the idle focus given to the hand of a doodler—that they are undergoing a process of creation. The result of this process is the *true* work of art.

It will become quickly apparent that this definition is one that could be applied to anyone. There is no person who can not, in some form or another, participate in this world of production. Some may be discarded as mere technicians, while others will simply be dismissed as bad artists. Why does this rejection exist? It is impossible to deny the favoritism granted to different pieces. One individual may value a work that another detests, yet nevertheless the two will agree that they both possess a personal hierarchy when evaluating works of art. The opinion of the viewer, regardless of the artist's intention, will inevitably be included in the reception, and acceptance, of

a work *as* art. The viewer seeks to gain something from an artistic creation. They expect to be able to draw a reaction, emotion, knowledge, *something*, from the work that they are viewing. The artist must attempt to deliver this elusive element. Martin Heidegger defines this as the *essence* of a work of art.

In order to understand his usage of the term essence, it is necessary to outline Heidegger's understanding of truth, as the two concepts remain inextricably linked in his discussion of works of art. He equates truth with essence: to understand an object, or thing, one must "turn toward the being, think about in regard to its Being, but by means of this thinking at the same time let it rest upon itself in its own very essence" (Heidegger 157). Here—albeit in a roundabout fashion—Heidegger has suggested that understanding the truth of an object can only be done by returning to the object itself. One must only rely on the qualities of the thing they are trying to understand in order to fully understand it: to focus on associations, related substances, or preconceived definitions does not describe the thing itself. In other words, "a thing, as everyone thinks he knows, is that around which properties have assembled" (Heidegger 148). In this presumptuous comment it is suggested that we return to a basic observation of a thing, rather than its abstracted place in philosophical or scientific thought, to undertake a process of understanding. It is then that the truth of an object in and of itself can be revealed. Any other process of conceptualization will lead to an understanding of another's perception of the thing, rather than the truth of that which is being contemplated.

Considering the origins of art is simply an extension of this project. In order to explain how a piece has come into being one must examine the piece itself. Following this logic, Heidegger provides the caveat that "the origin of something is the source of its essence" (143).

One must not only examine a work to determine its origin: one must examine the origin to contemplate the work. The two become intertwined, and divorcing the birth of a work from its existence as a finished product is impossible. It is the two, artwork and artist (its physical origin) that define Heidegger's essence of art. It is in this relationship that his definition of a work of art can begin to emerge. The origins of a thing of use lies with its blueprint, the packet of instructions that accompany it and outline its creation, in the mind of one who has conceptualized its making rather than the maker itself. As previously established, the origins of art lie with the artist: the artist's life will therefore influence their work. A work of art is thus defined by the reciprocal relationship that it has with the one who intended for it to have meaning: the artist. The work reveals something of the artist and allows for this element to be sensed by future audiences after it has reached its final form. The process of creation, the conceptualization, and the viewership of the work can all be experienced simultaneously when one gazes upon the finished product.

Here we must depart from the logic of Heidegger. In *The Origin of a Work of Art*, the claim is made that the original intention of the artist is immediately understood by the viewer when they gaze upon a work. He grounds his argument in an analysis of one of Van Gogh's paintings of a pair of shoes. "The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field. Only here [in the painting] are they what they are... From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tendency of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind..." (Heidegger 159). Here he has eloquently sketched an image of the 'truth' that Van Gogh intended to reveal in this particular painting of shoes, the truth that the

viewer is supposedly able to glean from gazing at the piece. This romantic ideal of a relationship between artist and art-consumer is merely a fantastical fabrication. As Meyer Schapiro bluntly states: “Alas for him, the philosopher has indeed deceived himself. He has retained from his encounter with Van Gogh's canvas a moving set of associations with peasants and the soil, which are not sustained by the picture itself. They are grounded rather in his own social outlook with its heavy pathos of the primordial and earthy. He has indeed ‘imagined everything and projected it into the painting.’ He has experienced both too little and too much in his contact with the work” (Schapiro 139). It becomes clear that the unambiguous communication of meaning which Heidegger has imagined is one that can not exist as an absolute, and through no fault of either artist or viewer.

The response to this critique will not be a condemning of Van Gogh as a failed painter, but rather a re-examination of the relationship between artist and audience. Perhaps for a work to be deemed art, its ‘essence’ must lie outside of the agreement between artist and viewer of the work's meaning. A singular truth, or essence, can not be located within a work. If such a consensus was necessary, only a dictionary would be given the title of “art”. Therefore, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of an essence is necessary. One must seek instead for an explanation that escapes the absolute essence, but allows for a location of sensation or feeling: an individual truth within each work of art. This truth is impossible to pin down as a single concept, but can instead be gleaned through varying interpretations. The only constant is the presence of a source of meaning.

In Place of Essence

In the re-defining of the space that Heidegger calls essence, we must attempt to understand the nature of the connection between the intentionality of the artist and the interpretation of the viewer. In the widespread appreciation of art by those other than artists, it is clear that a relation between the two must exist. As demonstrated by the misunderstanding with Van Gogh's shoes, this can never be defined as an absolute essence. Instead, there is a temptation to believe that another location of meaning is present. Instead of an essence, an artwork possesses a spirit of some sort: a lingering of the artist's intent remains. This frustrates the viewer who searches for a stable meaning. They are simultaneously able to detect its presence, yet incapable of understanding its nature or reaching a satisfactory definition of exactly what they are sensing. It is in this agonizing attempt at understanding that the viewer is inextricably drawn to art. They can glimpse a source of meaning, an intensity of thought, yet are infinitely unaware of its nature or signification. Despite this necessary failure, they strive to reach a concrete meaning. The idea of a piece that reveals something other than knowledge or emotion, but an indecipherable trace of the artist themselves, is a concept foreign to the viewer who searches for a finite truth in work.

By acknowledging this mystical element of art, the question of the origin of the element arises. Here the fundamental concepts proposed by Heidegger resurfaces: "the work arises out of and by means of the activity of the artist" (Heidegger 143). However, he continues "in themselves and in their interrelations artist and work *are* each of them by virtue of the third thing which is prior to both, namely that which also gives artist and work of art their names- art" (Heidegger 143). In these statements he is alluding to that same unnamable element while

introducing the frustration of viewership into the process of creation as well. He implies that the artist produces that which belongs to a realm of understanding outside of human knowledge. The existence of 'art' is not one that is readily understood by the human mind, trapped as it is in a structured world of logic and definitions. It is perhaps this inherent mystery that gives art its undeniable appeal and allure. The puzzle of its meaning is a fatal attraction, one which has managed to captivate human interest for the entirety of its recorded existence.

While trying to understand this attraction, Walter Benjamin offers an explanation that again turns to the origin of a work. His argument differs slightly from Heidegger's: he seeks to reveal a manifestation of the artist in artwork through a discussion of each piece's individual history, rather than in the in the process of creation. He explains the 'aura' of a work of art to be "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence" (Benjamin 3). Every work of art has been produced in a particular instant of the artist's life. The artist's experience until that moment and the political sphere at any instant of viewership, as well as the physical location of the piece all imbue it with a specific history. Its reception and value are influenced by this history. The life of the artist will have a direct influence on the meaning of the work. Every brush stroke, sentence, or sound will be made by the artist, and their personal experiences will inevitably have an effect on anything that they produce.

This aura is something that is always located within a work of originality. Only the unique piece, crafted with the artist's full intention of personal disclosure, possesses an authentic aura. It is this aura that the artist struggles to produce. In both possessing and emanating an aura

the work of art is given a quality that can not be easily named, and can not be replicated. Any attempt to reproduce the work would result in a hollow creation, one devoid of the history and spirit of the artist that gives the original its appeal. The viewer, more often than not without a conscious intention, strives to identify and name this element in an attempt to place the piece within an understandable, and therefore comfortable, context. They are pressed to denote a title for the incomprehensibly hypnotic aspect of the work that gives it its character. This search is doomed to failure. Just as the artist does not know how or what they have made, the viewer is unable to find a definable meaning of the work that corresponds with the limits of linguistic expression. While human communication is rooted in language, the meaning of the artwork transcends its boundaries.

This captivating, infinite frustration marks the works of art that are recognized as conveying *truth*. In the words of Hal Foster, it simultaneously evokes “on the one hand an ecstasy in the imagined breakdown of the image-screen and/ or the symbolic order; on the other hand a horror at this fantasmatic event followed by a despair about it” (Foster 165). Viewer and artist alike relish the departure from their systematic world of regulatory limitations. Art offers an opportunity to break free of the laws of the ‘civilized’ world. This joy is utterly terrifying. The very existence of order is a result of this horror: human society is structured in an attempt to gain control over the chaos of life. It allows for the illusion of authority, directly contradicting the way of life demonstrated by the natural world. The utter removal of this power can only be experienced in art- to let it enter into daily life would signify an upheaval of human restraint. The violence depicted in works: the rampant objectification of other’s bodies, scenes of gore and horror, the total disregard for the other... all seek to destroy the structure upon which society

gingerly stands. This order exists to reassure the civilized individual: art exists to liberate them from their self-imposed restrictions.

Nietzsche provides an essential understanding of the dichotomy of structure and chaos in the opposition of the Greek deities Apollo and Dionysus. He claims they are the “living and visible representatives of *two* art worlds which differ in their deepest essence and highest goals. Apollo stands... as the transfiguring genius of the *principium individuationis*, through whom alone release and redemption in semblance can truly be attained, whereas under... Dionysus the spell of individuation is broken, and the path to the... innermost core of things is laid open” (Nietzsche 76). It is only through the unity of the two that art can be found. Dionysus stands for chaos, passion, and pleasure. He denies all that is rigid or dictated, and seeks only to serve the forbidden tendencies of humankind - carnal, violent, and unrestrained. In contrast, Apollo appears as a representation for the logical world of structured life. Cognition, contemplation, and order make up the values of an Apolline work. The two figures stand for dance, movement, chaos, and poetry, lyric, song: all forms of artistic expression. Nietzsche’s statement is one demanding the unification of these two forces in every work of art. Humans exist in a world of culture. To deny the patterns in their habits and actions would be a falsification of their nature. However, they are also beings belonging to the animal kingdom. They too experience the pull to fight, mate, and destroy. The true work of art will succeed in recognizing these opposing forces and bring them into harmony with each other.

By containing a truth within the work, the art is able to balance these two mediums and methods, bringing the duality into a unification that serves to expand upon the strengths of the two deities: the chaos of Dionysus is given an understandable structure through the logic of

Apollo, and with the “reconciliation of two opponents... for the first time the jubilation of nature achieves expression as art” (Nietzsche 20). Here, art is granted a power to translate the incomprehensible natural world into something tangible to be appreciated and understood by those who have attempted to remove themselves from it. Humans are granted permission to live the untamed beauties of the world around them without relinquishing the grasp on civilization that they hold as a lifeline. Nietzsche’s understanding allows for spectators to come to terms with the urges that they shy away from. Their drives to passion are given shape in a way that is separated from habitual life, yet intimately produced from it. They may view and appreciate that which they fear within themselves in a way that is permissible. “Art alone can re-direct those repulsive thoughts about the terrible or absurd nature of existence into representations with which man can live” (Nietzsche 40). Gazing upon a scene of violence is accepted, participating in one strictly forbidden.

While Nietzsche’s explanation is rooted in the performance of Greek tragedy, the same combination of drives is the phenomenon to which Foster has referred. Art alone can break down the boundary that exists between the chaotic and the ordered. The combination of the two shows both the prowess of human logic, as well as the pure animal that still lies at the heart of human nature. Art makes this visible. However, Foster’s argument moves past the initial joy at the unification of the two drives. In meeting, a denial of humanity’s removal from nature is brought to the attention of both artist and viewer. The appeal of art therefore lies not only in the unification of Apolline and Dionysiac, but also at the juncture between joy in release and the fear that it produces.

Locating the Real in Art

The concept of an unknowable paradox, capable of revealing meaning, can also be located within the works of Jacques Lacan. In his essay “Beyond the Reality Principle” he brings a phenomenological concept into the framework of a psychological investigation, in an attempt to convey the hopelessness of understanding an event in its totality:

“...this is certainly the traditional position on this problem which... is found anew in two of the doctrine's fundamental concepts - namely, in the ambiguity of a critique which, (1) with the thesis ‘nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu,’ reduces reality's action to its point of contact with pure sensation that mythical entity, in other words, reduces it to being nothing but the blind spot of knowledge, since nothing is recognized there, and which (2) imposes all the more strongly, whether this is made explicit or not in ‘nisi intellectus ipse,’ as the dialectical antinomy of an incomplete thesis, the primacy of pure mind, insofar as it constitutes the true moment of knowledge, through the essential decree of identification, recognizing the object at the same time that it asserts it” (Lacan 61).

Here, the two concepts merge to outline the failure of phenomenology. The first focuses on the peripatetic axiom “nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu” (roughly translated ‘nothing is in the intellect which was not first in the senses’). It makes a claim that the route of all human thought lies in that which is sensed, rather than taught or known. The thesis, used as a proof of a ‘mythical’ entity, alludes to the inability to locate the origin of these senses. It is this inability which produces the “dialectical antinomy of an incomplete thesis” - it fails to acknowledge that which has produced the senses, and made thought possible. Rather than arising from a mythical birth, Lacan finds the origin of thought in *sensation*, and this origin locates “the

true moment of knowledge” as a moment that can not be understood or remembered. One is not able to trace the origin of their worldly comprehension to a particular moment in time, rather it emerges from an existence of interaction and feeling that exists outside of a particular lesson or logic. Human thought is merely an echo of this truth. It can not hope to compete with the perfection of the truth, and is therefore forced into a world of linguistic semblance: a world which constantly approaches, but can never grasp, the truth out of which the intellect arises. “This true reality is constituted by the system of references that are valid in already established sciences - in other words, mechanisms that are considered tangible in the physical sciences, to which may be added the motivations considered utilitarian in the natural sciences” (Lacan 62). Words and science become a substitute for the incomprehensible senses, allowing the ‘true reality’ to continue its arcane existence in a manner that the human mind can grasp.

It is this reality, or Real, which produces the frustration experienced by the viewer when contemplating the work. In the vulnerability of the artist, they have included an incomprehensible personal element in their work. In other words, the reality in which they live has become a part of their work. The experience of true reality is one that can never be understood: one will eternally fail to understand the allure of the pieces of art that lie before them. The source of frustration in viewing art is one and the same. In the process of their production, the artist has inadvertently conveyed the true experience of their reality into the painting. Their craftsmanship, wholly influenced by their past, present, and potentiality, will reflect them in a way that is not possible in an understandable way. The historical element which Benjamin attaches to the work’s aura is made possible through the work of the artist. A linguistic commentary on an object will be understood to convey those signifiers which bare the closest

resemblance to that which they are attempting to describe. Similarly, the artwork bares the closest resemblance to the reality out of which the artist creates. Behind both the language and image is the input of the artist: it is here that the true meaning of the piece is located. The only aspect of an image that is identifiable within language is simply its physical characteristics. The knowledge that can not be gained is that which bares the purest replication of the artist themself. Nietzsche's combination of the Apolline and Dionysiac drives has posited an alternative understanding of this same truth. If the intellect is produced by the senses, and the sense is born out of the true reality, one can imagine that the latter may be approached by a reversed process of its creation. A combination of the two knowable proceeding functions has the possibility of producing a rough approximation of the Real. The Dionysiac appears in the sense, the intuitive, emotional, chaos, while the logic of Apollo takes the form of the intellect: the two together are able to replicate truth.

In light of the establishment of art's enigmatic element, it now becomes necessary to return to the remark of Hal Foster concerning the "horror at this fantasmatic event followed by a despair". By recognizing that the viewer is unable to understand a work in its entirety, a terror at this inexplicable is produced. In examining art, one is at first comforted by the recognizable imagery. The replication of the known world eases the viewer into a receptive state. Urged on by their initial comprehension, they are then compelled to attempt to dive deeper into the piece before them. It is at this moment of surrender that the potential for glimpsing the absolute truth becomes possible. However, the viewer can never be ready to receive this knowledge. They are trapped in a world of sciences and language: escaping these boundaries is impossible. Just as the Dionysiac relies upon the structure of the Apolline to be understood, the Real requires a

translation in order to be successfully communicated. Such a translation perverts the purity of knowledge, and it is instantly reduced to the echo of truth that the human intellect is made of. Through this reduction it is possible for the viewer to contemplate the work. While one may be tempted to understand this failed translation as merely a source of annoyance, Foster has brought to our awareness the terror that it can produce.

In his own reading of Lacan, Foster has procured the object of art as a shield for the awe-ful meaning that it possesses: “the screen allows the subject, at the point of the picture, to behold the object, at the point of light. Otherwise it would be impossible, for to see without this screen would be to be blinded by the gaze or touched by the real” (Foster 140). He invokes the gaze, a form of viewership which captivates subject and object alike. It ties them into a relationship of revelation. The two are laid bare for one another, and an ownership through viewership is allowed to take place. It is within this connection that the viewer’s frustration at their inability to completely possess a definition of the artist’s ‘essence’ takes place. The gaze implies a control over the object: without comprehension, this control can not be complete. The object within which the truth is located provides a placation of this frustration. The viewer can see an image, read a novel, or hear a song, and feel a momentary satisfaction in an apparent comprehension. When their misunderstanding is realized, the loss of understanding transforms the temporary confidence, revealing the origin of Foster’s horror and despair.

Producing a work capable of conveying an unknowable truth is not an achievement to be taken lightly. To do so, the artist must dedicate their entire being to the process of production. Their history builds the foundation, their bodies carry out the construction, and their desires for the finished product sculpt the particulars of the project. An artist who acts with fear is rendered

unable to deliver this truth in their work. Through the hesitation that this fear produces, they are closing a part of themselves off from their own creation. Without realizing it, they have deprived their work of the source of viewers' fascination. One faced with such a piece would simply see the surface characteristics of the work in front of them. There would be no inexplicable draw to explore, to uncover a hidden truth; there would be no truth to be found. One is tempted to describe such a piece as uninteresting, a mere display of technical skill, devoid of artistic prowess. In order to avoid this fate, the artist must dedicate themselves completely to the task of production. Any inspiration that strikes them must be seized upon, any sudden impulse must be considered and carried out. The artist must be bold. To dismiss a part of their process as a mistake is to experience a halt in the process of creation: one who considers their own work a failure has closed themselves off from the potentiality of future productions. Only through this uninhibited intentionality can the artist deliver. Whether the process lasts an hour or years, the final product must reflect every ounce of thought and effort. Each step of creation must be traced in the finished piece.

Let us now return to the piece which captured Heidegger's interest. In Vincent Van Gogh's rendition of a pair of shoes, the viewer instantly finds themselves enthralled. The image itself is simple. The shoes lie on a blurred grey background, suggesting a dreary bleakness, perhaps a rainy day. They are tattered and black, with limp laces carelessly strung through the worn holes. It is possible to continue in this manner, detailing the exquisite shading and thoughtful brushstrokes, analyzing every speck of the canvas: to do so would be to reduce the piece to a mere picture. While Van Gogh's craftsmanship is undeniable, praising it does little to

approach the message that lies within the work. It only serves to satisfy the viewer's need for understanding, to provide them with an inkling of mastery over the art.

The true meaning lies in the confusion that is produced by gazing at the image. One's eyes may be drawn to a particular smudge of paint, distorting the edge of the canvas and blending with the shadow of the shoes. Perhaps it is the insides of the garment which captivate the spectator's gaze. Their hidden depths may in fact suggest something that lies beyond the naked eye. Despite Heidegger's attempt to understand their beckoning, no answer for the foreboding appeal presents itself. Looking past the hollow interior, the contrast of the leather and the floor shines brightly, creating a sharp line of distinction, standing in opposition to the smooth composition of the rest of the piece. One may be tempted to attach a label, to declare this separation some sort of metaphor for Van Gogh's past. While the artist could be communicating something of the sort, it is impossible for the viewer to know. They can only guess, grasping at a potential nostalgia, loss or poverty to explain the image. Any posited explanation will fall short of an indisputable answer. The viewer will be left to continue their silent contemplation. Their curiosity will remain unsatiated. Any new discovery in the composition of the work will only serve to reproduce the feelings of joy at the approach of the Real, the failure to grasp its meaning, and the terror at the revelation of the understanding that could have occurred. The cycle will continue, trapping the spectator in a state of never ending fascination, one that can only be overcoming by turning to the next available mysterious work.

While all works of art may be able to convey a truth about the artist, there are certain pieces who manage to diminish the ambiguity of the meaning that the viewer is given access to. Some works are painfully straight forward, while others remain confined to a field of utter

abstraction. In a painting such as Van Gogh's shoes, there is a distinct divide between the clarity of subject matter and intention of meaning. Anyone who sees the canvas will be able to identify the shoes for what they are. They will see the wear, the scuffs, the hints of dirt. In this way, the painting is deceptively obvious. Rather than in the object depicted, the confusion emerges when one seeks for the motivation behind the painting. The viewer is at a loss when attempting to identify the meaning of the work. Perhaps Heidegger's interpretation is correct, and the "artwork lets us know what the shoes are in truth" (Heidegger 161). Unfortunately, Shapiro's response to his interpretation rings true: "it would be a mistake to suppose that the truth he uncovered in the painting-the being of the shoes-is something given here once and for all and is unavailable to our perception of shoes outside the painting" (Shapiro 138). The meaning of the painting is uncertain: any truth that is gleaned is a truth separate from both canvas and shoes, and is aligned solely with Van Gogh's process and product. It is by attempting to draw a concrete meaning from the image that a confusion emerges. The already present frustration of the viewer is amplified, and they are left farther from an answer than when they first stumbled across their question.

The Approach of Literature

When one is presented with a single frame or canvas, there is an inherently stagnant nature to the art. One sees a subject frozen in time. There is no possibility for a growth to be observed: one sees both beginning, end, and process in a single moment. The effect is overwhelming. It is impossible to isolate the subtleties of the work's meaning. Everything that is available to know is thrust upon the viewer. The passage of time allows for the slow reveal of content. In this attempt to lessen the ambiguity of the work's meaning the viewer is able to

approach the truth of the artist. In this measured disclosure, information is able to build upon moments that the spectator has already experienced. The content of the work can both inform and be informed by itself. Every instant of consumption offers new information, tantalizing the viewer. They are constantly deceived into thinking that they are approaching an answer, and that the truth of the work will be revealed as the seconds pass by. While the end produces the same frustration, and the art does not finally relinquish its truth, the exploration has managed to guide the viewer's intake of material. Every image on a screen, stage, or page has been molded to expand upon that which has been previously revealed, and influence that lies ahead. The single image can not hope to offer the same context to the meaning that is gleaned through viewership. It is unable to craft a context for contemplation, or to lead a viewer through the process that the artist intended. The artist must only hope that their intention will be guessed at, and that the meaning the work was meant to produce bears a slight resemblance to the inkling that the viewer will take away.

This is not to say that there are no still images who seek to escape from the limitations of their medium. In the Dada canvas one can see "tickets, spools of cotton, cigarette butts, that were linked with painted elements... thereby the public was shown: look, your picture frame ruptures time; the tiniest fragment of daily life says more than painting" (Benjamin 299). Despite the radical nature of Dada, disrupting the traditional usage of the unchanging canvas, there is an acknowledgement of its shortcomings. The Dadaists tried to defy the boundaries of the image, forcing a linear movement forward through history out of an object that can not transcend its moment. The ambiguity still persists within their unconventional canvases. The artist can not dictate the path that eye will follow. Even if the artist's intention was to view the spool out of the

destructive context of a cigarette, who is to say that the viewer will adhere to this progression. It is an impossible display of trust. In spite of their complete disruption of the tradition canvas, the restriction of the image can not be overcome.

We will therefore turn to those media which leave behind the confines of the still image, and who allow for a progression of time to lessen the ambiguity of the piece. The unfolding of a story, the notes of a melody, the rolling of the film, or the deliverance of a monologue onstage are able to achieve what the image can not. Every instant belongs to a predetermined procession of events. The consumer is carefully guided through an experience of appreciation. While the truth of the artist's nature still remains hidden, the expanse of speculation is shortened. The frustration of the hidden meaning becomes focused, and the spectator is able to approach the terrifying truth of the work. Of these media, literature emerges as a contender for the most adept at reducing the ambiguity of the piece. While simultaneously managing to preserve the reader's autonomy of interpretation, literature allows for the reveal of the artist, and in doing so produces an almost-comprehensible work of art. The words on the page guide the progression of events: that which is definitive in the author's mind is stated on page. Nothing unfolds out of the order in which it was intended, and each word holds within it a discovery which transports the reader further into the world of the author's being. The page also allows for a replication of the same viewer's freedom that an image provides. The pace of intake, the location of consumption, and the previous knowledge are all factors that make the reader's experience one that is wholly their own. It is this combination of artist's intention and personal interpretation that enables the art to reveal a meaning that transcends the words on the page, as well as the tangible knowledge of either author or reader.

It is through the usage of language that literature is able to provide an insight that other media can only dream of producing. The foundation of language lulls the consumer into a feeling of security, mimicking the linguistic nature of human thought. They are comforted by the familiarity of the medium, and are receptive to the meaning that the text strives to reveal. A painting or song functions through a means of communication which differs from the state of logic to which the human mind will always revert. Literature has the ability to actualize the aims of art that Nietzsche has outlined: the text grants for a literal execution of his yearning for the Dionysiac to speak through the Apolline. The structure of language gives a voice to the inexpressible meaning of artist and art, and the reader is able to grapple with their frustration on recognizable grounds, rather than search for the unknown in alien realm.

The text is able to form the bridge between the rigidity of the Apollo and the chaos of Dionysus: “Science is crude, life is subtle, and it is for the correction of this disparity that literature matters to us. The knowledge it marshals is, on the other hand, never complete or final. Literature does not say that it knows something, but that it knows *of* something, or better, that it knows *about* something - that it knows about men” (Barthes 35). This “knowledge about” points to the ability of the text to allude to an understanding that a painting lacks. Through the usage of language, there is an implication that what is conveyed has been both historically informed and has the potential to explain the author’s thoughts. We can assume that the latter is an impossible task. The power of literature lies in its deception: while reading, one is almost able to believe that they have been invited into the author’s mind. The illusion lasts for the duration of a text before being shattered upon completion, as the reality of the impossibility of comprehension returns with full devastating force.

The “knowledge about” provides the written text with its appeal. It can convey aspects of human nature in a way that speaks to singularity of life, yet also allows for the possibility of a shared experience. While all lives are unique, they share a commonality of emotion. Literature seizes upon this commonality as a means to produce a content that can be widely appreciated. In writing, the author takes “to the extreme that which is incommensurable in the representation of human existence. In the midst of life’s fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living” (Benjamin 146). While offering a possible insight into the mind of the author, the text informs the reader about the impossibility of this task. It manages to communicate its own misunderstanding through this revelation.

The reader is drawn in further by the assurance that their frustration is simply a facet of the human attempt to understand art. The unknown becomes a constant, and a point of commonality between readers, both amongst themselves and with the author. A text will not shy away from its own complexity: “the ‘meaning of life’ is really the center around which the novel moves. But the quest for it is no more than the initial expression of perplexity with which its reader sees himself living this written life” (Benjamin 155). It is in the similarity to the complexity of life that the text finds its power. It is relatable in a way that an image can not hope to be. Built from a foundation of logic striving for truth, constantly presenting questions that go half answers, the text speaks to the human in its own language. The colors and shapes on a canvas or photograph may be aesthetically pleasing, and reminiscent of past emotions or experiences, but the truth of the artist that they convey remains vague. They can not hope to

compete with the familiar mystery posed by language. It is a puzzle that humans have resigned to leaving unanswered, easing the pain of constantly misunderstanding the work of art.

There are certain texts which strive to imitate the progression of thought to an uncanny degree. While some authors, notably Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, chose to employ the narrative mode “stream of consciousness” in an effort to replicate the trajectory of thought as closely as possible, their texts are still mere representations. In recognizing the impossibility of truly showing thought, a text who wishes to convey *true life* must be aware of its limitations. It must seek to communicate the essence of the author through the medium in which it is confined, rather than attempting a poor depiction of that which can never be conveyed. *Nausea*, by Jean-Paul Sartre, approaches a balance between truth and text:

“Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that’s all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition. From time to time you make a semi-total: you say: I’ve been travelling for three years, I’ve been in Bouville for three years. Neither is there any end: you never leave a woman, a friend, a city in one go. And then everything looks alike: Shanghai, Moscow, Algiers, landmark, you realize you’re going with a woman, in some messy business. This time of a flash. After that, the procession starts again, you begin to add up hours and days: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. April, May, June. 1924, 1925, 1926” (Sartre 23).

Sartre has undertaken a delicate task. He has transfigured the human thought process into a format that bears a semblance to the traditional literary style. While relatable in subject matter, the text itself retains the eloquence that rarely appears in one’s internal dialogue. Through this translation Sartre has pronounced the impossibility of replicating thought. He has instead

attempted to *show* the process of rumination, rather than imitate it. This allows the reader to approach the state of consideration that Sartre intended to convey. The progression of ideas has remained faithful to Sartre's intention, each one building off the last, walking the reader through the formulation of a notion. While it is impossible to determine his exact state of mind, Sartre has revealed a personal method of contemplation, and in doing so allowed the reader to gain an insight into his personal "essence". In other words, the ambiguity of Van Gogh's painting is lost, and the reader is almost able to grasp the terrifying truth of *who Sartre is*.

The Shortcomings of Film

Just as literature has made use of time, so too has film utilized this structured reveal of communication. Much like the written page, a film dictates the sequence of consumption and viewership. The audience is led through the events which unfold: each scene is crafted to produce specific reactions and emotions. The producer has intended for every character development or plot reveal to contain a precise significance. The intense and exhaustive shooting and editing process has ensured that the effect of the film on viewer is maximized. In short, cinematography has achieved the optimal lack of ambiguity, producing the exact image, story, and emotion that its maker had envisioned. Unfortunately, in doing so it has left behind the alluring realm of art for a crude mimicry.

In recalling Heidegger's initial claim, we are reminded of the origin of an artwork's 'essence': in the origin of art. In examining a painting, a part of the painter is revealed, in music, the composer, in literature the author... even in the production of theatre one may cite either the playwright or the actor as the artist, depending on the source of the audience's appreciation. In film this is not a feasible possibility. An amalgamation of effort is required for the work to be

created. The result is a hollow reception. Rather than approaching a truth about the artist, an insight into their history, their influences, their very person, the audience is left with a filtered production. Any personal artistry has been edited away by the hands of either the collaborators. Even when a single individual shoots and edits a film, the technology that has been utilized distorts the ability to convey the truth of the artist.

In a theatrical production, the director and playwright may offer advice to the actors leading up to the moment that the curtain rises. As soon as the lights dim and the play starts, there is no altering the performance. The actors rely on each other, each one is pressured to deliver to the best of their ability: there is no screen between their bodies and the audience. Everything that happens on stage contributes to the overall effect, placing each actor into the role of artist. There can be no errors, as there can be no retracing of an act. The performance can not be changed or adjusted, but must exist exactly as unfolds. The knowledge of this finality leaves the audience mesmerized. As in literature, they are led from event to event, drawn further and further into the minds of the actors. As the actors bow and leave the stage the audience experiences a devastating emptiness and loss. There is no hint of this creation and destruction of illusion in film. While the stage actor is able to deliver an artistry in their work, “the film actor very often is denied this opportunity. His creation is by no means all of a piece; it is composed of many separate parts... Let us assume that an actor is supposed to be startled by a knock at the door. If his reaction is not satisfactory, the director can resort to an expedient: when the actor happens to be at the studio again he has a shot fired behind him without being forewarned of it. The frightened reaction can be shot now and be cut into the screen version” (Benjamin 10). The

destruction of the actor's autonomy is merely a single aspect of the distortion of artistry that film indulges in.

Perhaps the most drastic deviation appears in the departure from interpretation in favor of repetition. In the expert of Sartre's *Nausea* it is possible to locate a respect for the impossibility of replicating reality. There is no such consideration in cinematic productions. The process of infinite retakes and instrumentalized adjustments leaves both the original script and the work of the actors completed distorted in the final production. "This circumstance, more than any other, renders superficial and insignificant any possible similarity between a scene in the studio and one on stage... in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure... The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology" (Benjamin 12). The reality on screen has surpassed the distance that an artistic representation requires. Rather than approaching the artist's self through the work, the lens of the camera has crafted a virtual mimicry. In the implication that humanity is able to depict the world in a true manner, the human element is lost, and the film becomes nothing more than a demonstration of technology.

Unfortunately for the art enthusiast, the rise of film accompanies a decline in the mysterious allure of art. In painting, writing, or acting the artist is required to perform a complete reveal of their own person. It is a necessary disclosure if the art is to be received with an eager wonderment. In the face of an empty piece, an audience will quickly dismiss the work before turning to another which adequately provokes their curiosity and masochistic search for truth. By contrast, the film makes no attempt to engage the viewer's interest. It seeks instead to exploit

their hatred of boredom. Just as the audience abandons the work that does not invoke an obsessive contemplation, they will leave those activities which fail to captivate them completely. The film industry has realized that “the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration from the spectator... A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it... the distracted mass absorbs the work of art” (Benjamin 16). In doing so they have denied the public the chance to be taken in by film. Through their confidence in the societal search for distraction over concentration, they have deprived film of any element requiring intellect. Instead, the screen serves only to deliver flashing pictures, loud noises, and a constant stream of changing stimuli to ensure an audience’s total attention.

Only the work that respects the intelligence of the viewer is able to escape this trap. While the appeal of entertainment is addictive, when faced with the challenge of understanding of - and through understanding, potential mastery over - a work, an individual’s curiosity will overcome the initial urge to be amused in favor of the delight of understanding. The triumph of literature over film lies in the permission it grants the audience to exert their own intelligence. In being handed an opportunity to think, the reader is given an autonomous role in consumption. In film, the images unfold at a set pace: multiple senses are targeted, overwhelming the viewer. A text or painting “invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he can not do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It can not be arrested” (Benjamin 16). The viewer is hereby deprived of the fear and joy that art should provide. Their emotions are predetermined and superficial. Without the chance for personal exploration, cinema destroys the potential for a complete appreciation of the depth of art. There is no truth to be found, and therefore no

motivation for an investment in the work. The result is an artificial relationship between ‘artist’ and viewer. With no prospective intimacy lying hidden within the work, both audience and artist alike become disengaged and uninterested with the piece. The audience learns nothing of the artist, and therefore can not claim to have participated in an act of artistic consumption.

Conclusion

In the introduction of time within the work of art, the artist is able to convey a more accurate representation of themselves within the work. They are able to follow the model of their own life: each event is influenced by the last, and each experience is only truly understood through the information that the work has already disclosed. Perhaps technology has recognized this possibility, and in its eagerness to reveal the ultimate truth has left the artist far behind. In order for a vulnerability to be sensed, there must be an intimacy within the work. The challenge for the contemporary works of cinema will be to include the artist in the finished product. They must not be cut out by a process of editing and cutting scenes. For a film to be understood as a work of art, there must be a respect for the artist, and the origin of the work itself.

Defining the appeal of a work of art is an insurmountable task. Humans are only capable of a rough approximation of an understanding. Despite the limitations of the spectator’s comprehension, a negative definition may be possible. One may safely assume that there is no consistent explanation for the allure of art. Each piece has been uniquely crafted, and it is through this individual process of production that beauty - and horror - of a work is born. The creation unleashes part of the artist into the work. Only one who has lived the artist’s life, shared their history, and experienced their exact thoughts and feelings is capable of producing an identical work. Just as the work has been drawn from the individual life, it also holds the key for

an insight into the artist themselves. Such an intimate understanding is a horrifying experience: it would imply a glimpse of their entire self, their every emotion, thought, and feeling. The extent of this complete insight is more vast than one's image of their own self: to know another with that degree of familiarity is an impossibility.

Regardless of the terror that is attached to this ultimate insight into the artist, it holds a deadly appeal as well. This intimacy is both feared and longed for. The potential for understanding incites a joy which can not be paralleled. It is the approach of this understanding which provokes the fascination with and appreciation of art. The desire to understand those around us surpasses all others wants. Art allows for the illusion that one is able to satisfy this yearning. Producing this effect is a colossal feat. It requires a boundless confidence on the artist's behalf. They must be willing to lower all personal boundaries, any inner reservations, if they are to allow their work to captivate future audiences. The work of art can not be produced without the artist, for it is the artist who allows the work to unfold: "whenever art happens - that is, whenever there is a beginning - a thrust enters history; history either begins or starts over again" (Heidegger 201). It is the life of the artist that makes the art. Each work shows the complete history of the artist, and allows for a period of reconstruction to take place. With a record of their life up to that point safely preserved, the artist is free to begin their next work, to create another opportunity for their audience to attempt to understand their truth.

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