Heidegger and Nietzsche on the "End of Art"

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In an afterword to Heidegger's 1936 essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art," one finds a surprising endorsement of Hegel's thesis on "the end of art".[1] Indeed, for all his questioning of Hegel's metaphysics, Heidegger seemingly accepts Hegel's famous diagnosis that art in the modern world "counts no longer as the highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself."[2] In what follows, I examine Heidegger's thinking on the topic of the "end of art" by exploring a tension in Heidegger's 1936-37 *Nietzsche* lectures on "Die Wille Zur Macht als Kunst." On the one hand, Heidegger endorses Hegel's "*Ende der Kunst*" thesis, the view that great art dies of 'aesthetics,' understood as the subjectivisation of art. On the other hand, Heidegger remained committed to the Nietzschean thesis that art represents a "countermovement to nihilism" [*Gegenbewegung gegen den Nihilismus*]. I suggest that Heidegger never fully resolved the tension between these two commitments, a tension that perhaps explains his ambivalent stance towards modern art.

1. Heidegger's Nietzscheanism: Art as Countermovement to Nihilism

In order to understand Heidegger's relationship with Hegel and Nietzsche on the end of art, we need to consider how Heidegger situates Nietzsche in the history of aesthetics. To do so, I shall analyse two sections of the *Wille Zur Macht als Kunst* lectures, entitled "Die Fünf Sätze über die Kunst" and "Sechs Grundtatsachen aus der Geschichte der Ästhetik" respectively.[3] Here I wish to highlight Heidegger's emphasis on the Nietzschean thesis on art as a countermovement to nihilism, and his

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[1] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art"; in: *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge 2002, 50-52.

[2] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art,* Vol. I, trans. by T. M. Knox, Oxford 1975, 103.

[3] Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, Pfullingen 1961, 56-74 and 74-91.

simultaneous endorsement of the Hegelian thesis concerning the end of art in modernity.

The "Die Fünf Sätze über die Kunst" attempts to present Nietzsche's "total conception of the essence of art".[4] It is clear that Heidegger is concerned with the metaphysical character of Nietzsche's thinking on art as an expression of will to power, which is far removed from a traditional or Kantian approach to aesthetics. As Heidegger observes, Nietzsche's "active" aesthetics begins with the phenomenon of the artist, the one who brings forth beings through artistic creation, for the artist's bringing-forth belongs to a mode of life [*Leben*] that is itself a manifestation of Being [*Sein*], understood as *Wille zur Macht*.[5] Contra Kantian aesthetics, Nietzsche creates an expanded conception of the artwork, encompassing cultural production, the creation of moralities, as well as social and political institutions. As Nietzsche remarks in a famous note: „Das Kunstwerk, wo es *ohne* Künstler erscheint, z. B. als Leib, als Organisation (preußisches Offizierkorps, Jesuitenorden). Inwiefern der Künstler nur eine Vorstufe ist. Die Welt als ein sich selbst gebärendes Kunstwerk."[6]

For Heidegger, this expanded Nietzschean concept of artist makes art "das Grundgeschehen alles Seienden," where „Seiende" are understood as self-creating, or created, "ein Sichschaffendes, Geschaffenes".[7] Art is grasped by Nietzsche as the creative [*das Schaffende*] in the broadest sense, going beyond the 'fine arts' to include political bodies, religious orders, and so on. Art thus becomes the principle of a new mode of valuation [*Wertsetzung*] of *das Seiende*, one that supplants previous forms valuation such as religion, morality, and philosophy.

Heidegger draws attention here to the metaphysical background and significance of Nietzsche's account of art, all with the aim of presenting the Nietzschean conception of art as will to power as a final stage in the modern metaphysics of the subject. According to Heidegger, the system of Christian morality and Platonic metaphysics, which served as the previous principle of valuation, rested on a

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4 Heidegger, *Nietzsche* I, 66.
5 Heidegger, *Nietzsche* I, 66.
6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Wille Zur Macht*, n. 796.
7 Heidegger, *Nietzsche* I, 69.

fundamental interpretation of the meaninglessness of the sensuous world. According to this "two-world" metaphysical schema: „Diese Welt taugt nichts, es muß eine „bessere" Welt sein als diese in die Sinnlichkeit verstrickte, es muß eine »Wahre Welt« darüber geben, das Übersinnliche. Die Sinnenwelt ist nur eine Scheinbare Welt."[8]

The metaphysical schema of sensuous and supersensuous world devalues our human world of sensuous experience in the name of a transcendent source of value and truth (God). Nietzsche, however, famously reverses the Platonic schema, denouncing the Platonic supersensuous world, the source of true morality, as a lie, an error, and elevating the sensuous world—for Plato the world of semblance and error—to the status of the true world. In this way, Nietzsche decisively reverses the Platonic devaluation of art and sensuous experience, transforming art, which finds its element in the sensuous, into a new principle of the revaluation of Life. Hence we arrive at the fourth statement on Nietzsche's philosophy of art.

2. Die Kunst ist die auzgezeichnete Gegenbewegung gegen den Nihilismus[9]

Art is the most distinctive expression of an affirmative will to power that runs counter to the Platonic-Christian metaphysics underlying the development of European nihilism. Here the artistic will to power is that of creating and giving form, which now encompasses the metaphysical task of positing value and affirmatively interpreting existence. Against the nihilistic negation of life by morality and metaphysics, Nietzsche posits the ideal of "der *Künstler*-Philosoph"[10]; the one who goes 'counter' the life-negating nihilism of Christian-Platonic metaphysics, and who creatively gives form and value to beings as a whole. In this sense, art, for Nietzsche, overturns the metaphysical schema of sensuous and suprasensuous worlds such that art now reveals truth to reside in the sensuous world.

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8 Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 70.
9 Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 71.
10 Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 71.

This brings us to the decisive fifth statement: "Die Kunst is mehr Wert als 'die Wahrheit'."[11] According to Heidegger, Nietzsche takes 'truth' here in the Platonic sense of an ideal supersensuous essence, but also in the positivist sense of empirically verifiable fact in the sensuous world. Thus Nietzsche's reversal of the Platonic two-world metaphysical schema raises the question of the meaning of truth and its relation to Being. And this is a question, Heidegger argues, that Nietzsche neglects, relapsing into Platonic metaphysics by assuming the traditional conception of truth as correspondence, rather than inquiring after the originary sense of truth as *unconcealment* [Unverborgenheit]. As Nietzsche remarks: "Wir haben die *Kunst*, damit wir *nicht an der Wahrheit zu Grunde gehn*."[12] This statement, for Heidegger, assumes that truth means the 'true world' of the supersensuous, as opposed to the expansive power of the sensuous world, which Nietzsche now takes to be the 'true world'. In sum, for Nietzsche, art is the "größtes *Stimulans* des Lebens,"[13] where *Leben* is understood as *Wille zur Macht*; yet the question of truth and its relation to art, let alone the meaning of Being as Life, are left in oblivion. This unthought "raging discordance" between art and truth demonstrates Nietzsche's ensnarement within the forgetting of Being definitive of Western metaphysics.

3. Heidegger's Appropriation of Hegel's 'End of Art' Thesis

The important point for our discussion is that Nietzsche's account of the essence of art as will to power takes art to be the countermovement to the nihilism of Platonic-Christian metaphysics. Nonetheless, according to Heidegger, Nietzsche's approach remains "aestheticist," rooted in the metaphysics of subjectivity, albeit an aestheticism that inverts Kantian disinterested pleasure in favour of an affective bodily *Rausch*. To make this claim clearer, however, we need to examine Heidegger's situating of Nietzsche within the context of the history of aesthetics. Although the "aestheticist" approach to art ostensibly culminates with Hegel, who announces the

[11] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 73.
[12] Nietzsche, *Die Wille Zur Macht*, n. 822.
[13] Nietzsche, *Die Wille Zur Macht*, n. 808.

"end of art," it concludes with Nietzsche's metaphysics of will to power, his alleged reduction of aesthetics to a "physiology of art."

What is the 'aestheticist' approach to art? *Aisthetike episteme* is knowledge of *aisthesis*: "Wissen vom sinnlichen, empfindungs- und gefühlsmäßigen Verhalten des Menschens and von dem, wodurch es bestimmt wird."[14] In the modern sense, aesthetics involves the inquiry into human feeling with regard to the beautiful as evoked by nature and art. Philosophical meditation on art becomes *aesthetics*, oriented towards the subjective experience of beauty grounded in the feeling of "disinterested" pleasure. This modern emphasis on subjective experience [*Erlebnis*] stands in sharp contrast with the originary Greek experience of art as *techne*. This is Heidegger's first *Grundtatsache* in the history of aesthetics: Greek art is beautiful without aesthetics. The second *Grundtatsache* is the birth of philosophical aesthetics from the ashes of great art. As in modernity, with the Greeks the aesthetic approach to art emerges "in dem Augenblick, da die große Kunst, aber auch die gleichlaufende große Philosophie zu ihrem Ende gehen."[15]

The all-pervasive conceptual schema of *hyle-morphe*, *materia-forma*, then becomes paradigmatically applied to the work of art. This matter/form schema, deriving from produced equipment, has since become entrenched as the prevailing way of understanding both things and works. Art, originarily, is the human capacity for bringing-forth through knowing, which is distorted by the matter/form schema into the more familiar opposition between technical skill and the production of beautiful things. Once art as *techne* is explicitly rendered as the *Herstellung* and *Vorstellung* (producing and representing) of beautiful things, however, we arrive at the modern *aestheticist* approach to art as that which elicits aesthetic pleasure for a contemplating subject.

This "aestheticist" approach to art implies the *subjectivisation* of the artwork. Indeed, it is the modern *metaphysics of subjectivity* that explains the end of art through aesthetics. With this we arrive at the third *Grundtatsache* in the history of

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[14] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 75.
[15] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 78.

aesthetics: the advent of modernity. Heidegger's central claim is that the modern age, with its emphasis on the self-certainty of the human subject, transforms the manner in which beings are disclosed. In modern metaphysics, commencing with Descartes, we find that "die Gewißheit allen Seins und aller Wahrheit auf das Selbstbewußtseins des einzlenen Ich begründet wird."[16] The self-certainty of the human cognitive subject becomes the standard for representing and defining the intelligibility of beings. Accordingly, meditation on the beautiful in art shifts towards our human state of feeling, *aesthesis*, from which philosophical aesthetics emerges as the paradigm for understanding art.

What is peculiar is that this aestheticisation of art already prefigures its end; great art begins to decline just as aesthetics becomes ascendant. Heidegger thus defines *das große Kunst* here in strikingly Hegelian terms: „Die Kunst und ihr Werk sind nur notwendig als ein Weg und als ein Aufenthalt des Menschen, in dem ihm die Wahrheit des Seienden im Ganzen, d.h., das Unbedingte, Absolute sich eröffnet."[17]

Great art is great in that it is an "absolute need"; it refers to works that perform an ontological disclosure of the truth of beings. It is great art in this sense that begins to decline in the modern age. Agreeing with Hegel's diagnosis, Heidegger observes, „daß die Kunst ihr Wesen, den unmittelbaren Bezug zur Grundaufgabe, das Absolute darzustellen, d.h. es als solches maßgebend in den Bereich des geschichtlichen Menschens zu stellen, verliert."[18]

The fourth *Grundtatsache* emerges from the aestheticisation of art and completion of aesthetics in modernity: the end of the *große Kunst*. The end of art occurs just as philosophical aesthetics reaches its climax in Hegel's philosophy of art, the moment when aesthetics is *aufgehoben* with the announcement of the end of art: "In dem geschichtlichen Augenblick, da die Ästhetik ihre großtmögliche Höhe, Weite und Strenge der Ausbildung gewinnt, ist die große Kunst zu Ende. Die Vollendung der

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[16] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 81.
[17] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 82.
[18] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 83.

Ästhetik hat darin ihre Größe, daß sie dieses Ende der großen Kunst als solches erkennt und ausspricht.“[19]

Heidegger cites various statements of Hegel concerning the end of art, including the famous remark that “In allen diesen Beziehungen ist und bleibt die Kunst nach der Seite ihrer höchsten Bestimmung für uns ein Vergangenes.”[20] What is striking is that Heidegger seemingly endorses Hegel’s thesis on the end of art. The fact that art has continued since Hegel’s day, having become the elite province of an expert audience, is no refutation of the end of art thesis. On the contrary, this provides proof of Hegel’s claim “daß die Kunst die Macht zum Absoluten, ihre absolute Macht verloren hat.”[21] The confirmation of Hegel’s thesis, which Heidegger underwrites, ushers in the fifth *Grundtatsache* in Heidegger’s narrative of the fate of art in modernity.

This event is the artistic reaction to the Hegelian diagnosis of the end of art that becomes manifest in the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Indeed, romantic decadence is another symptom confirming Hegel’s thesis on the end of great art. The romantic celebration of pure feeling, exemplifed in Wagner’s music, results in art’s utter subjectivisation: “das selige Grauen des Hinschmelzens im Genuß, das Aufgehen im »bodenlosen Meer der Harmonien«, das Untertauchen im Rausch, die Auflösung im reinen Gefühl als Erlösung.”[22] This rhapsodic critique can be summed up in a word: art becomes *Erlebnis*. Wagner’s extreme subjectivisation of the artwork, coupled with a romanticist privileging of music, results in a “barbarous” conception of the artwork as *Erlebniserreger*.[23]

This aestheticisation and subjectivisation of the artwork are a reaction to the withering of knowledge and tradition in the nihilism of technological modernity: the “wachsende Ernüchterung and Verödung des Daseins durch Industrie, Technik und Wirtschaft im Zusammenhang mit einer Schwächung und Aushöhlung der bildenden

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[19] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 83.
[20] Heidegger, *Nietzsche* I, 83.
[21] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 83.
[22] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 85.
[23] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 85.

Kraft des Wissens und der Überlieferung."[24] Such aestheticisation represents, however, not a countermovement to, but rather an expression of, modern nihilism. Art abdicates its ontological vocation to disclose truth, is utterly subjectivised into *Erlebnis*, and becomes a merely cultural-industrial activity divorced from knowledge or tradition. The aestheticisation of the world, as a symptom of the end of art but also of the nihilism of modernity, is the sixth and final *Grundtatsache* in the history of aesthetics.

Heidegger thereby makes explicit the connection and the contrast between Hegel's end of art thesis and Nietzsche's more radical diagnosis of nihilism. For Hegel, art comes to an end in modernity, falling prey to nihilism, but is *aufgehoben* by philosophy. For Nietzsche, by contrast, art is to be pursued as the *Gegenbewegung* to nihilism, a move that Heidegger, surprisingly, takes to be an *Auswirkung* of the Wagnerian will to the "*Gesamtkunstwerk*."[25] Hegel's end of art thesis implies that art becomes an object of speculative knowledge; accordingly, Hegel's aesthetics is articulated as metaphysics of spirit. For Nietzsche, by contrast, the philosophical meditation on art must now become "eine 'Physiologie der Kunst'."[26]

From this contrast, Heidegger concludes by pointing out the contradictory tendencies in Nietzsche's thinking on art: on the one hand art is a countermovement to nihilism, while on the other knowledge of art is "physiology." In a questionable move, however, Heidegger then defines Nietzsche's remark as flattening aesthetics into a reductive scientistic empiricism: "die Kunst wird der naturwissenschaftlichen Erklärung ausgeliefert, in ein Gebiet der Tatsachenwissenschaft abgeschoben."[27] This remark has provoked considerable scholarly comment. Jacques Taminiaux notes the paradoxical character of Nietzsche's "antinihilistic meditation on art in terms of a physiology,"[28] which, as Babette Babich observes, "is resolved in the expression of

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[24] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 87.
[25] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 90.
[26] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 90.
[27] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 91.
[28] Jacques Taminiaux, "On Heidegger's Interpretation of the Will to Power as Art"; in: *New Nietzsche Studies* 3:1/2 (1999), p.13.

physis as *Rausch*, or the point of intersection of *physis-techne*."[29] Drawing on Fink's reading of Heidegger's Nietzsche, Taminiaux interprets Nietzsche's recourse to physiology here as an implicit reference to *physis*, thus showing the "ontological proximity between the discourse of the presocratic thinkers, called 'physiologists,' above all Heraclitus and Parmenides, and on the other hand the poetic language of tragedy."[30] On Taminiaux's reading, Heidegger resolves the apparent paradox of a physiology of art, which is also a reductive scientistic nihilism, by construing it as a reversal, rather than a culmination, of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetics.[31] Such a reversal of Kantian aesthetics makes Nietzsche "the most Greek of Germans, preceded only by Hölderlin."[32]

This ingenious interpretation rescues Heidegger's Nietzsche from the charge of scientistic reductionism or nihilism. Yet one may still ask whether it underplays the *critical aspect* of Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche (Heidegger's charge that Nietzsche reduces aesthetics to "applied physiology"), and whether it ignores the *reductionist tendency* of Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche on this point (his assertion that Nietzsche's "physiology of art" refers to the effect of art on our nervous system). For Heidegger clearly states that Nietzsche's account of art reduces aesthetics to a physiological phenomenon: "Der Gefühlzustand ist auf Erregungen der Nervenbahnen, auf Leibzustände zurückzuführen."[33] *Contra* Taminiaux, this remark suggests that Heidegger is not simply restoring Nietzsche's thinking on art to its pre-Socratic origins but also arguing that Nietzschean aesthetics becomes an aesthetics of corporeal experience. Indeed, it is the apparent contradiction between art as countermovement to nihilism, and aesthetics as "applied physiology," that motivates Nietzsche's inversion of Kantian aesthetic contemplation into Nietzschean bodily *Rausch*. The Hegelian end of art is thus transfigured into the Nietzschean end of aesthetics, an inversion that brings aesthetic inquiry into art to its conclusion.

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[29] See Babette E. Babich, "Heidegger's Relation to Nietzsche's Thinking: On Connivance, Nihilism, and Value"; in: *New Nietzsche Studies*, 3: 1/2 (1999), 23-52.
[30] Taminiaux, "On Heidegger's Interpretation of the Will to Power as Art", 15.
[31] See Babich, "Heidegger's Relation to Nietzsche's Thinking".
[32] Taminiaux, "On Heidegger's Interpretation of the Will to Power as Art", 14.
[33] Heidegger, *Nietzsche I*, 91.

Although Heidegger rejects Nietzsche's alleged reduction of art to physiology, he nonetheless retains the Nietzschean conviction that art can serve as a "countermovement to nihilism." At the same time, he remained faithful to the Hegelian paradigm of art. Indeed, Heidegger transfigures the Hegelian claim that art is superseded by philosophy into the esoteric pronouncement that poetic thinking subtly envelops art in response to its ontological degradation. Heidegger's own thinking on art, I suggest, remained caught between these Hegelian and Nietzschean perspectives, resulting in a tension between modern art as ontologically decadent *and* as "saving power" *contra* nihilism. This tension is discernible in his ambivalent remarks on the possibilities of modern art, on the degradation of literature, the danger of cinema as an expression of *Ge-stell*, and the destructive effects of modern technology on the possibility of genuine art.[34]

The later Heidegger, however, seemed to become aware of this difficulty, realising that his affirmation of certain unique cases of modern art (Van Gogh, Cezánne, Klee) conflicts with his qualified endorsement of the Hegelian 'end of art' thesis. In a 1960 marginal remark in the "Ursprung des Kunstwerks" essay, for example, he notes that his quasi-Hegelian claim that great art "dies" in the element of *Erlebnis* "does not say, however, say that art is absolutely at an end."[35] That would only be the case if modern art were to remain mired within the metaphysical subjectivism of *Erlebnis*. Like Hegel, Heidegger maintains that art will continue to perfect itself, but only by overcoming metaphysical subjectivism—by overcoming 'aesthetics'—in favour of a renewed experience of *das Sein*: "Everything depends on getting out of *Erlebnis* and into *Da-sein*, which means achieving an element for the 'becoming' of art quite other than *Erlebnis*."[36] It is in this sense, perhaps, that Heidegger eventually abandons his Hegelian commitment to the end of art thesis, returning instead to the properly

[34] See, for example, Heidegger's remark that modern art works are "the steering-steered [*gesteuert-steuernden*] instruments of the cybernetic language of information exchange" (*Zur Sache des Denkens*, Tübingen 1966, 64). See also Julian Young, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge 2001, 120-121 for an account of Heidegger's "sweeping condemnation" of modern art, a criticism based upon the assumption of the end of great art in technological modernity.
[35] Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", 50, fn. b.
[36] Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", 50, fn. b.

Nietzschean theme of art as a “countermovement” to the subjectivisation of art in modernity.