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HEGEL'S DIALECTICS WAS GEARED TO ART. HE HAD NO BUSINESS 'ENDING' IT.

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In this paper I try to defend what Hegel called 'autonomous' art against Hegel's own view that it is an inadequate vehicle for what is at stake in human self-realization.<sup>1</sup> I argue that Hegel's notion of dialectics is tailor-made for autonomous art and that his reason to refer art to the past, or, as some have put it, to proclaim the end of art or of art history might just as well have induced him to put art at the summit of culture.<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

According to Hegel philosophical (and religious) thought as well as the arts present the products of the self-conscious human mind. Art and philosophy are ways of reaching out to self-conscious understanding of humanity's position within reality. Hegel thought that at a certain stage philosophy superseded art as a vehicle for self-consciousness—his so-called thesis of the end of art—but his argument that art has become a thing of the past is hardly compelling, since it hinges on certain of his more general assumptions.<sup>3</sup>

Like someone driving a car, a painter will from time to time check the canvas to ensure that his painting proceeds in the right direction. However, painters unlike drivers cannot normally recur to directions or strategies laid out by others. While registering what is already on the canvas the painter's vision projects the direction his painting is to take. He is not merely a beholder of his work, not even merely the first in line. Instead, he is the one with the opportunity to change the work. His beholding is actively also a projecting which steers his manipulations.<sup>4</sup> This short characterization of the painter's role with regard to his own work does not imply that painters will normally have the image in their minds before putting it onto the canvas. Instead, the resultant image presupposes a process of acting out and taking in and a feeding from what is already on the canvas back to the artist's intentions. Creating a work of art is a dialectical process if anything is. Art appreciation must take that into account: it implies an interest in why a work is as it is and what the artist is communicating with it. The appreciation of a work of art must lay bare this dialectical process if it is to procure the right understanding of its meaning.<sup>5</sup> In this the beholder appreciates both the self-conscious meaning in the work and the process that led to it. Thus characterized—and this characterization is not farfetched—art should prove much more pivotal to Hegelianism than either philosophy or religion are alleged to be.

### PHILOSOPHY AND ART

Both philosophy and art have their peculiar advantages over each other. Philosophy is advantageous in that it is somehow transparent to the truth of its texts—more so than religious texts, which make ample use of metaphor and imagery to convey their truth. Philosophy's advantage resides in discursive meaning's foundation in conventionality, that is, the meaning of a sentence does not presuppose any sort of resemblance between words and things. The arbitrariness of discursive semantics (and syntax) implies that saying and describing involve presenting things through a means that has nothing whatsoever to do with them, as a consequence of which one can forget all about the means once their meanings have been successfully brought to mind. (Hegel's thesis of the transparency of philosophical conceptuality). Pictures—and most other art forms—on the contrary need their own characteristics to make present those of their subject matter. One cannot grasp the meaning of a picture without continuously taking the picture itself into account. From the vantage point of philosophy it may seem that due to its sensuousness art never really reaches its truth.<sup>6</sup>

However, art also has a certain advantage over philosophy in that a work of art does not present its meaning *in itself* as its end product, but presents it together with the creative process that went into producing it. And this is an advantage according to Hegel's own sense of truth as being the result of a process, not as merely something in itself. No truth, Hegel thinks, is really true unless it unveils the very processes that led to it.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, the aesthetic appreciation of a work of art is especially fit for truth in this sense. So what seems to be Hegel's problem?

In the *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik* Hegel addresses the objection, posed against the discipline of aesthetics, that art is an unworthy subject for any science because it is merely appearance. Hegel argues here that, contrary to this objection, it is the immediacy of sense perception that is mere appearance, since this is not (yet) determined by thought and therefore not informative about truth or reality at all.<sup>8</sup> Art does not suffer from this uninformative nature of sensuous immediacy because it *is* mediated by thought. However, Hegel also thinks that only contents whose essence shows in their sensuous appearance may form the contents of art.<sup>9</sup> This accords with Hegel's views about ideas, which he takes as concepts that are in immediate agreement with their external being, their appearance (VA 151). Hegel thought that the Greek gods showed their essence in such a manner (VA 24). Christian truth, however, is not presentable in sensuous form, as aren't the thoughts of the Hegelian era about *Bildung*, the education of reason. The worshipping of artworks, which is usually motivated by a reliance on the presentability of divinity, thus becomes a thing from the past.<sup>10</sup> Sociologically, we are no longer seeking for that kind of satisfaction which the ancient Greeks found in their art, and logically, the education of reason asks for other means than works of art can provide for—such as general rules and principles, and moral tenets that we can apply to particular events and things. In short, art provides a different type of satisfaction, less deep, presumably, than the old religions provided us with. Secondly, whereas worshipping God requires religion, *Bildung* requires philosophy.<sup>11</sup> Neither of these has any use for art. I am not going to defend philosophy and religion's need for art—in fact I fully agree with this assessment. Hegel's additional argument, however, that art has lost its self-evidence for its audience can easily be reversed in our present culture. The arts that we exhibit in museums and art galleries may indeed have lost their self-evidence for the majority of our contemporaries, but new art forms have emerged which are as self-evident as religious art may once have been, if not more so—I refer to film, photography and television.<sup>12</sup> The *question* is, therefore, whether Hegel rightly assesses art as such as something past, a 'Vergangenes' (VA 25).

#### ART'S DEEPEST NATURE OR 'GOAL'.

Hegel's paradigm of 'art', however, the art that, allegedly, is superseded by philosophy, concerns the arts that were fit to present God or gods, such as the arts of Greece. All other arts or periods in the history of art are supposed to strive to those arts' status, or at the least, are said to lack it. However, nowadays we see as our paradigm of 'art': the autonomous arts of the last few centuries. These arts' autonomy we see as primary over a servility to religion or to whatever other set of truths or truth-like propositions, because—to put it cursorily—we think the meanings of a work of art got there as a consequence of some person or group of persons putting it there, and it is the inherent coherence of the work through which we measure its success. When I say that Hegel's dialectics was geared to art then the art I am referring to is our present-day autonomous variety, not Hegel's allegedly superseded, religious one. Hegel's dialectics is geared to the arts that we nowadays recognize as such. But do our arts conform to Hegel's definition of what art is supposed to be or do?

I think they do. Hegel defines a work of art as the presentation of an idea in its sensuous form. Only those ideas which can be presented sensuously can belong to the contents of art—so, Hegel argues, the contents of art are limited.<sup>13</sup> Hegel—circularly—defines an idea as that thought that admits of sensuous presentation. He thinks that beauty is the perfect attunement between the thought and its presentation. This attunement has two consequences of which I am not sure whether Hegel considers either one. First, by definition, the idea can only be identified through its sensuous presentation, since it is nothing beyond that presentation: the sensuously accessible work of art and its meaning are mutually definitive. Secondly, there is no other route to such identification of the idea than through the work of art that presents it. To retrieve a

work's idea we seem to need art criticism and the judgement of taste rather than philosophy. These further two qualifications of Hegel's notion of art as the presentation of ideas fit better with the present-day paradigm of autonomous art, than with Hegel's own religious paradigm.

The major distinction between the two paradigms of art resides in what we take to be art's deepest nature or 'goal', as Hegel calls it. Hegel explicitly states that art's deepest goal is to present truths about absolute mind, i.e. about God. He thinks that present-day art has an effect on its beholders that is different from the effects of divine art:

"What is being caused in us now by a work of art, apart from an immediate pleasure, is a judging wherein we put the contents and the means of presentation of the work, and their appropriateness or inappropriateness before our thoughtful appreciation." (VA 25).

Hegel's subsequent critique that, for us, such art has lost its truth and liveliness and has been reduced to its images resembles our own response to certain present-day works that resemble advertising more than they resemble any of the traditional arts. Indeed, lack of vividness or profundity, and reduction to sheer imagery form interesting criticisms of developments in art, but what can be wrong with judging the appropriateness of a work of art to its contents? That critique seems particularly unavailable for a theory like Hegel's which takes beauty to reside exactly in the appropriateness of an idea to its presentation. The critique also fails to prove the correctness of Hegel's premise, i.e. his taking religious art as art's paradigm case. I submit instead that, with the historical advent of autonomous art,<sup>14</sup> art reaches its essence of being a vehicle for the celebration of the communicability of Geist—indeed—albeit Geist in its solely recognizable form: our own self-conscious understanding. This is 'Geist' in Kant's sense, who saw art as celebrating the communicability of human mental life.<sup>15</sup> This assessment fits well with Hegel's prioritizing of the beauty of art over that of nature (better, indeed, than with Kant's putting natural beauty first). In art, the human mind has formed natural matter after his conscious self-understanding. It is the appropriateness of the latter: expression in art, which we judge in art criticism.

#### DIALECTICS AND EXPERIENCE.

From art, let us now look at one of Hegel's general philosophical notions, that of 'dialectics'. Hegel's notion of dialectics is formed on the basis of deep insight into the nature of human psychology. In the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, he writes:

"This *dialectical* movement/development ('Bewegung') which consciousness applies to itself, both to its knowing and to its object insofar as the new true object originates from it, is, as a matter of fact, called an *experience*." (PG 78).

Experience is here defined as the event of consciousness taking into account the strangeness of an object, realizing the immediacy of his own preceding thoughts and producing a new truth while reflecting on this whole process of moving to and fro. *In general*, 'experience' forms the model of the development of, for instance, science, society, philosophy and art. From the point of view of *any specific truth* Hegel remarks in the *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*,

"The true is the whole. The whole, however, is merely the essence that realizes itself through its development." (VA 24).

### THE TRANSPARENCY OF PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTS.

The divine, or eternal, Hegel takes as merely the beginning of the process, as still immediate to itself, self-enclosed, and unself-conscious. Truth, on the other hand, is the end result of the process that leads towards it. Truth is the end product of experience, or of experience-like events. Philosophical understanding not only is the object and goal of cognition, it is its very subjective happening. The aim of thought, therefore, is an experiential dialectical process of attaining true insights. Now Hegel also alleges that, relative to religious imagery, philosophical concepts are transparent to truth. This thesis seems unable to capture the experiential nature of dialectical reflection. Reading supposedly transparent philosophical texts ought to bring one directly into contact with their truths—as if the thoughts expressed in a text could be taken in directly and this would suffice for understanding them. But of what type is such philosophical truth that it does not presuppose an experiential dialectics for its reception? Did Hegel take philosophical truth to be autonomous and static and immune to its inherent negation? Elsewhere, he would have characterized such truths as dogmatic: as if they could be assessed in themselves as true or false, like, for instance, the truths of geometry (PG 40-41). Philosophical truth according to Hegel is not merely in itself, it is the product of a process which somehow includes the process in the product—a characterization, however, that is hard to reconcile with the claim of the transparency of philosophical concepts, with its Platonist make-up.<sup>16</sup> Lu de Vos thinks that in the end Hegel's only theme is the idea—the sensuous realization of concepts.<sup>17</sup> My position assumes some such thesis.

Three options prevail. Either this claim to conceptual transparency is to be further qualified and made so subtle as to disable Hegel's hierarchy,<sup>18</sup> or one gives up its very idea,<sup>19</sup> or, lastly, one redresses the position of the arts at the lowest level of self-consciousness. The latter motivates my scheme. To begin with I will pose a rhetorical question. To arrange things into a hierarchy, they must at least be commensurable, but are art, religion and philosophy in effect commensurable practices; do they indeed regard similar types of event of self-conscious, dialectical reflection? According to Hegel all three are characterized equally by an inherent dialectical development, but in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* we find the curiosity, that, whereas both religion and philosophy are thought of as representing the truth, art is said to present it. This distinction concerns the relations between the means and the meaning of the texts or works under consideration. The means used by religion and philosophy can allegedly be disposed of once their meanings have settled in our minds, whereas those of the arts can be disposed of only at the immediate expense of a work's very meaning. The method for establishing the intricate linkage between a specific work and the idea it presents is art criticism, as I submitted above in discussing Hegel's assessment of the peculiarities of the then new arts: the judgement as to the appropriateness of the artistic means to the meaning of the work. This type of judgement is far less directly concerned with truth than with its appearing and with the dialectics of the artist's creativity. (I am defending an enhanced form of formalism here, which takes into account reference to what is literally outside of the work, such as the thoughts, works or real events it cites.) My point is, that the means for the art critic to judge art's truth lies in her dialectical, appreciative experience of the work of art and the manipulations that got into producing it. The best way, therefore, out of the predicament of the apparent non-dialectical nature of what is at the summit of the Hegelian system: philosophical conceptuality, seems to be to take art, instead of philosophy, as the paradigm of the dialectics of 'understanding' and of dialectical, that is, *experientially developing* truth.<sup>20</sup> The psychological reality of an artist's individual style as realized in and retrieved from his works answers to the phenomenology of the mediated dialectical realization of truth.<sup>21</sup>

Hegel thought that the dialectical development of truth can be found as well in aspects of reality (PG 44). One can see the attraction of this old Rationalist myth for one who wants to prove that our knowledge in effect fits reality, and why this should be the case. However, why would developments in reality take the form of human experience—which is, after all, the experience of embodied thinking creatures? Not everything in reality is embodied (events aren't) nor is everything thoughtful which has a body (stones, plants and animals in general aren't). If we take a closer look at the artist's creativity, much like Paul Crowther or Richard Wollheim do nowadays,<sup>22</sup> we might recognize that the dialectics of developments in art history (at least) stems from the *psychologically* real considerations accountable for the greatest part to the artist instead of to heteronomous reality. Recognizing the effects of this through art appreciation answers perfectly well

to the experiential phenomenology of Hegel's dialectics of truth. Meritorious art is not the outcome of dialectical processes in reality, but eventually derives from the experiential processes that make up an artist's creativity (which may or may not reflect certain developments in culture or history—these developments however, never determine the artistic merit of a work). This dialectics of creativity can be seen to relate to the mind and intentions of the artist as much as to his bodily actions.<sup>23</sup> The artistic proof of the communicability of human feeling is related to the thoughts and body of the artist: to his being in the world. Art's deepest goal is not the Platonist longing for philosophical and religious truths which art cannot but fail to reach. Instead, our embodied being in the world defines as the highest aims of humanity those of securing inter-human communication in dialectical manner through sensuous accessibility. It is these aims that are less at stake in religion or philosophy than in art. In autonomous art humanity realizes its highest aims.

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#### NOTES

1. I will not take ugliness as its prevalent aesthetic nature (as Gethmann-Seifert does in her paper elsewhere in this volume).
2. Arthur Danto thinks that art has changed (with Warhol's Brillo boxes) but he does not refer it to the past, but takes it, instead, to rely more than before on philosophical theory for its existence as art. I am not sure what to think of Danto's thesis, but that it lacks consequence. (Cf. Danto "The Artworld"; Danto "The End of Art", and recently Danto *After the End of Art*. Adorno too thought that art had become unself-evident but at least he didn't for that reason disqualify art, but saw reason to distinguish 'Bild' (representation) from 'Abbildung' (image) and to specify and defend the former's significance. Adorno *Ästhetische Theorie*.)
3. Hegel *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik.*, 20-26. (Henceforth abbreviated as VA).
4. Compare the following considerations: "Where to put the next dot of paint? Which colour should it have, which brush to use, how quick should I move the arm that puts down the paint, in what direction—what orientation should the dot have? What should I refrain from doing (considerations concerning the styles one does not want to copy). These questions concern the road the artist is to lay out and the strategies he is to follow while painting his work. Cf. Wollheim *Painting as an Art*, Chapter One: "What the Artist Does".
5. Among other things, the paint on a painting is not the result of an arbitrary sequence of coincidences. This is what distinguishes a work of art from the lack of intentionality in the scribbling of a chimpanzee or the highly self-contained intentionality of a schizophrenic.
6. Today we rather tend to see things from the vantage point of art, arguing that the thesis of philosophical concepts' transparency should be dismissed. I have a quarrel with both of these positions. Against our contemporaries I hold the practice of the weighing of arguments as typical for philosophy, and as mostly irrelevant for the creation of art. My argument with Hegel I develop in the paper.
7. Cf. Hegel *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 47 and 56. (Cited henceforth as: PG)
8. John McDowell *Mind and World*, rehearses this rebuttal of the Myth of the Given.
9. I submit Hegel did not do a good job understanding art's functionality. He took art as a means of presenting truths of the kind that can better be presented by conceptual means, in (philosophical and religious) texts, truths that cannot be better presented than through philosophy. He took his own medium of philosophy as the paradigm for art merely by stipulation. Interestingly Hegel's definition of the 'ideas' that are presented in works of art is circular: such ideas answer the internal teleology of the relevant work that forms its presentation. Ideas such as these (whatever their nature) seem incompatible with the ideas of philosophy. Rather than being less deep, they are different in kind: they are experiential.
10. With this sociological remark I can agree.
11. The artist cannot get away from such developments as these (VA 25). He cannot abstract from it to artificially bring about a special loneliness that enables him to restore what is lost (VA 25).
12. One might want to deny that television is an artistic medium, but this is not going to be of much help, since it transposes the problem to the definition of art. I know of no definition of art that sees television as of its essence non-artistic, and theses as to the non-artisticity of photography, such as the one defended by Roger

Scruton, in Scruton "Photography and Representation" have come under serious criticism, for instance by Currie, *Image and Mind*.

13. I am unsure about the nature of the sensuousness of art if it is to exclude certain types of contents. I can see how it is impossible for a picture (but not for a sentence) to assert, question or deny that something is the case. But neither should the meaning of pictures be restricted to what is visually there in the picture to be seen. Certain aspects of a picture's meaning derive from the picture's powers to activate our imagination. Through our imagination we can see movement in a still picture, and grasp its expression; or we can see how the near past or future of a depicted event was or will be like. This, which I call, 'intimation', I have developed in Gerwen *Art and Experience*, chapter Seven, and in Gerwen "Expression as Representation". Hegel's dialectics of experience is particularly apt to catch the ins and outs of intimation, which I take to be the mechanism of representing the mental aspects of a work's subject matter. Some such notion should be developed by a Hegelian who thinks of art as the presentation of self-conscious mind.

14. Hegel's sociological, or historical thesis that something has changed with the advent of autonomous art obviously is important in itself, but its aesthetic or philosophical assessment is flawed.

15. "[...] taste is our ability to judge a priori the communicability of the feelings that (without the mediation by a concept) are connected with a given presentation." (Kant *The Critique of Judgement*, B296, Pluhar, 162.). For further comments see Gerwen *Kant's Moral Philosophy of Art*.

16. Cf. Kimmerle "Hegels esthetica. De lust van het raadsel" for a critique of such Platonism in Hegel, using "Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus" form 1797 as a witness à charge.

17. In Vos *Das Ideal. Anmerkungen zum spekulativen Begriff des Schönen*.

18. Cf. for this, Goodman's comparison of science and art in Goodman *Languages of Art*, 242-264.

19. Which option led Derrida to take up deconstruction.

20. Hegel's characterization of philosophical understanding in terms of the labouring of concepts, 'die Arbeit des Begriffs', points in this very direction since concepts produce their meaning relationally, via the reader's play of associations based in the language's grammar.

21. This model of artistic creativity is vastly different from present-day models of science as a set of logically coherent individual truths, embedded in fixed and accepted theories. (PG 44). Hegel thinks of his own theory as forming the summit of the history of thought, but he in no way neglects his predecessors. On the contrary, historiography has been given a new impetus by Hegel's endeavours to understand later thought in terms of a response to preceding thought. So what about the transparency of philosophy on this count? Previous stages must be retained (as consciously as possible) in later stages. Art is the best model for this thesis too.

22. Cf. especially Crowther *Art and Embodiment. From Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness*, Wollheim *Painting as an Art*, and Wollheim "Pictorial Style: Two Views".

23. No intentional fallacy is involved here.

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