

The Death of Art and the Political Implications

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Abstract: Heidegger's *On the Origin of the Work of Art* tackles Hegel's death of art, particularly in the Epilogue. This has a striking political implications for National Socialist, liberal, and Marxist societies.

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The fundamental struggle of our existence is the discord between the roles of beast and thinker. On the one hand, we are a temporary animal no different than a fox or a bluejay. We eat and sleep; we're bound by a body. On the other hand, we have eternal influence on the universe we shape. We are complicated as we love and lose. Perhaps most importantly, however, we engage in an activity we call art.

But according to Heidegger, for the West, great art died with the Ancient Greeks. The birth of aesthetics ended great art – that is art for art's sake. Heidegger quotes Hegel's *Aesthetics* at the end of his “The Origin of the Work of Art.”

Art no longer affords the satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone ... Art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past ... [It] invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is.

Art increasingly is focused on form and structure and not complete spirituality. There is something dry and mechanical about the constraints of a sonata in Beethoven's work. Although Beethoven's work might be beautiful, it is created to be analyzed, not to be enjoyed for the sheer pleasure of it. Perhaps we do have the liberating nature of music still in us, at least as children. Children will sing made-up songs with made-up words or bang random keys on a piano to achieve this sense of pleasure that adults just do not see, as we are conditioned against it as we are bound by form and structure.

This extends far beyond music, however. Children do not color inside the lines. They'll scribble a bunch of crayons on a white sheet of paper and bring it to their parent/guardian with a sense of elation. Either we lie and say it is good, when we know they do not conform to our conditioning of what art is or we tell them to color inside the lines and do better to conform to our conditioning of what art is. Either way, as you probably recognize, we are constrained by our structures to accept what is beautiful.

Of course, we differ on what is beautiful. I might like punk while you prefer classical. But no matter what genre we're operating in, we're still operating in a constructed framework of music – and the rules that follow it.

Even this post-modern response to art, the splattering of paint on canvases and music that is so dissonant and abstract some people would consider it painful, is still just a reaction to the structural frameworks that constitute art.

So where is the spirit in art? The death of art, like the death of a grandparent, is irreversible. There's no going back. The structures we have sound too good to us for anybody to turn back to the great, child-like art of the Greeks. We must work within these structures, still. But our purpose can change. Instead of making art to be evaluated, we should try to make art for art's sake. This is not a revolution; musicians and artists are already doing this! And we, the artists, will fail. Consciously or not, we will make music to be evaluated and judged by philosophy/aesthetics. They'll hold the art up to the standard of other art. This is something a true artist for art's sake wouldn't do. And I think it's something we should strive for, but not achieve.

Of course, art is not just music, pottery, painting, etc. Art is everything we produce. Art is our purpose. Our purpose is not survival: it is continuation of our soul instilled upon other things – this is art. Art is a piece of humanity instilled on an object. We personify everything. We have personal relationships with objects/art. We remember the tunes we fell in love to is an example for more traditional art. We have affinity for our children; kids are a less conventional idea about what art is, but I think they are an incredible example of art. Other humans are our artwork, too. We instill ideas upon them. Friends are canvases. We want our friends to be like us, to a degree whether small or large in order for them to like us. That's why we argue with family about politics at Thanksgiving, in order to hope that we are liked by each other. If you really hate someone and you're arguing with them for argument's sake, that's also valid but a different story entirely!

So, art is an assortment of things and in a vague way, applies to everything. We follow the structures of art in both what we traditionally mean by art (novels, music, pottery, paintings, etc.) and by the extended definition of art (children, friends, motorcycles, tweets, etc.). Pure, great art has been killed by aesthetics, which is a branch of philosophy. Philosophy has inhibited our ability to formulate great art in the purest form but on the other hand, it will be the instrument of our liberation.

Heidegger says, “The foregoing reflections are concerned with the riddle of art, the riddle that art itself is. They are far from claiming to solve the riddle. The task is to see the riddle.”¹ The foregoing reflections being the principle work of the essay, and the riddle of art, as Heidegger explains, is art itself.

The death of art might leave us in despair, there is no singular response or solution to the death of art for art's sake. As children, as the tiny gods, we create art of all kind. Entire worlds are crafted. But as we develop and grow, art dies. The spirit, of all living diminishes/transforms from an innocence associated with childhood to the nuanced but almost grim reality of adult life.

I don't believe the solution to be to revert to the childlike state, if this is even possible. Why should we neglect responsibility, the survival of the species that depends on our responsible action?

¹Epilogue of “The Origin of the Work of Art”

However, I think there is value in appreciating children. We can again live through that state through children whether as parent, relative, or teacher. For those that do not care for children, there are other creations to interact with to gain a sense of innocence to the cruelties of the world (not that I am saying the world is inherently cruel).

The way we treat children in our various institutions whether in the familial household or the church or the school, children are usually subjected to being under the authority of someone. In the household: the parent or guardian. In the church: the religious leaders. In the school: teachers and administrators.

It is no secret that authority and politics are tied to one another. So if we are going to reject our childhoods, accept responsibility, and make and comprehend art the way we do, we indeed are no longer going to be told what to do. But all political ideologies, even the ones that claim absolute freedom, dictate what is to be done by an authority whether by a dictator or a democracy. Political ideologies do two things: for those that subscribe to them they make us feel as if we are the adults (making obvious calls and accepting responsibility) but to those who oppose the ideology they feel like children (oppressed by some tyranny whether it is communist or capitalist, etc.)

Heidegger saw a decline of the West into a despair of nihilism.² He also feared both Anglo-American capitalism and the socialism of the Bolsheviks so he became a fascist.³ While this course of reasoning would not be accepted by most, there is an appeal in a dissatisfaction with the way things currently are. People are dying of starvation or more mundanely, we have to work more hours than we feel we should in a week just to keep food on the table. Shouldn't robots be doing all this work for us by now?

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, we have been basically left with one option: capitalism. But since the fall, the dissatisfaction in traditional capitalism has led to the social-democratic so-called "Pink Tide" movement in Latin America, the advent of social democracy in the United States with the emergence of Bernie Sanders as a popular political figure but this is coupled with the presentation of fascist or fascist-esque Donald Trump and Brexit.

Capitalism is not the only option. But it seems impossible to even reform the system, no talk of a revolutionary change.

But what does this distaste for the systems that we have to do with art?

Art can be both the conventional and expanded sense is a response to political structures that overarch us in our lives. What I mean by this is that art is a cycle: not only is it something we do to instill values on others, it is also a response to political structures. And for children, their art differs from ours in their innocence.

So, the discussion points I hope to spark are as follows:

1. Do children really experience the world differently from adults in terms of art?
2. What is the connection between authority and politics in relation to art?

²"Heidegger, National Socialism, and Modern Technology" *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity : Technology, Politics, and Art* Michael E. Zimmerman (1990)

³"A Revolution After All?" *Heidegger; Žižek and Revolution* Tere Vaden (2014)

and finally

3. Is there a connection between the art we produce and the politics we subscribe to?

Sources and Further Reading

“The Origin of the Work of Art” Martin Heidegger (1935)

“The Politics of Repetition” *Thinking with Heidegger: Displacements* Miguel de Beistegui (2003)

Echoes: After Heidegger John Sallis (1990)

“Heidegger, National Socialism, and Modern Technology” *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity : Technology, Politics, and Art* Michael E. Zimmerman (1990)

Heidegger, Žižek and Revolution Tere Vaden (2014)