



Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)

HEGEL

Hegel was the most important German philosopher of the early 19th century. His all-embracing Absolute Idealism had an immense influence on later thinkers, his writings providing what is arguably the most systematic and comprehensive aesthetic theory. “It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that every philosophical aesthetician in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been either a Kantian or a Hegelian” (Cooper, p. 182)

Kantian aesthetics focuses:

- 1) on those characteristics of aesthetic experience that differentiate it from others (from knowledge and action)—the aesthetic as a separate realm from the theoretical and practical
- 2) on the contemplation of form as the defining characteristic of the aesthetic

Hegelian aesthetics emphasizes:

- 1) meaning and content in works of art
- 2) the best works of art are those that have as their content the most concrete and fully articulated idea

yet Hegel’s aesthetics would not have been possible without Kant and for post-Kantian romanticism (Schelling and the Schlegel brothers) which emphasized art and beauty as providing our most profound access to reality

Hegel’s early writings show him to be first a participant and then a critic of this romanticism in his early writings—a youthful exchange between Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling—Hegel speaks of the need for philosophy to become poetic and poetry to become philosophical by the time of *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* (1807) Hegel had become a critic of this romantic aestheticism

nevertheless the *Phenomenology* contains some of the most significant philosophical writings of the arts—a speculative analysis of tragedy, a theory of the development and dissolution of Greek art...

the *Phenomenology* can be read as a contest between the claims of art and those of philosophical science and while Hegel’s allegiance finally comes down on the side of science, recent philosophers like Derrida have pointed out that Hegel’s text is less scientific and more artistic than he thought

he later lectured periodically on aesthetics and the text

Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art is a collection of various student transcripts of his lectures and some of his manuscript notes for these lectures

more than any other previous philosopher Hegel took a comprehensive and many-sided interest in the arts

he traveled to many galleries and read extensively in literatures of the world

took a passionate interest in the opera and befriended a number of actors
nevertheless, he announced his controversial “end of art” thesis

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in the *Phenomenology* in the sections titled ‘Natural religion’ and ‘The religion of art’
Hegel develops a complex account of the dialectic of the production of reception of artworks
in which the meaning of the work of art is a function of the relation between:
the artist, the artwork, and the audience

he provides a narrative account of how art first emerges from a more mechanical craft

in this analysis those who admire a finished work do not really comprehend it if they focus only
on its surface beauty or form and fail to grasp the thought, activity and labor that the artist put
into the work

Hegel was critical of a tradition in German thought that included Kant
which regarded Greek sculpture as an unsurpassable model
on Hegel’s analysis this art was a failure despite its beauty

faced with this failure artists, on Hegel’s analysis, turned toward work that aim
at collapsing the distinction between artist and audience
such works of ‘living art’ like hymns or Dionysiac revels
this anticipates 20th century developments like participatory theater and art ‘happenings’
just as Hegel’s notion of ‘abstract art’ anticipates minimalist art in the 20th century

but the problem with this ‘living art’ is that it fails to achieve a fully conscious wholeness
because it must be either completely transient
or static and detached
what is needed is a medium that exhibits both motion and rest
this he finds in language
thus these forms of ‘living art’ are surpassed by tragedy

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Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art

for Hegel aesthetics is concerned essentially with the beauty of art rather than natural beauty
this is because art is one of the modes, along with religion and philosophy,
in which mind (*Geist*) or Absolute Spirit comes to know itself and its activities

The development of mind (*Geist*)

a human being is a mind

a mind is what it is at any given stage of development according to what it knows itself to be
a mind cannot know itself except through its relation to the external world

- 1) a mind knows itself in contrast to the external world
in order to know itself it must draw a boundary between itself and the world
- 2) a mind is not entirely cut off from what is other than itself
it incorporates parts of the non-mental world as its own
- 3) a mind knows itself by seeing its own reflection in the external world

self knowledge develops in stages over time

a single human mind does not acquire self-knowledge on its own but only in consort with other minds—and together with other minds forms a linguistic and cultural network

individual minds are thus integrated into a larger developing network

what Hegel calls *Geist* ('spirit' or 'mind')

the process of history is *Geist* becoming self-conscious of itself

art serves the development of mind

Art is a way in which the mind comes home to itself

Hegel defines the beauty of art as “the manifestation of the idea in sensuous form”

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Philosophy of Fine Art

from the “Introduction” to *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*

here Hegel defines the end or purpose of art

“the sensuous presentation of the Absolute itself” (Hegel, p. 144)

Hegel has already said that the “content of art is the Idea”

and its form is “the configuration of sensuous material”

Hegel distinguishes three main forms of art that are differentiated in terms of the relation that holds in each between idea and sensuous form

1) *symbolic art*

here there is a discrepancy between the idea grasped in a relatively crude and minimal way and a profusion of specific forms that attempt to embody the idea

the paradigm of such art for Hegel is the religious art of India and Egypt

here Hegel sees a restless search for the appropriate form for the gods

“The first form of art is therefore rather a *mere search* for portrayal than a capacity for true presentation; the Idea has not found the form even in itself and therefore remains struggling and striving after it” (Hegel, 149)

“such art strove to express a message that is too thin and elusive to be expressed adequately in a sensory, or in any other, form” (Inwood, p. 68)

in symbolic art the idea is not successfully expressed in sensuous form

according to Hegel the symbolic shape is imperfect because:

“(i) in it the Idea is presented to consciousness only as indeterminate or determined *abstractly*, and, (ii) for this reason the correspondence of meaning and shape is always defective and must itself remain purely abstract” (Hegel, p. 150)

Hegel here regards symbolic art as *sublime* in the sense that it testifies to a failure of adequation an insufficiency of artistic means

here Hegel manages to demote the sublime from the position it had in Kantian aesthetics where it was regarded as even more significant than the beautiful
for Hegel the sublime is a lower or preparatory stage of the beautiful

Hegel’s account of non-Western art has been often criticized
but to be fair it is based on a rather extraordinary range of knowledge for a thinker of his time and his lectures opened up the 19th century fascination and examination of non-Western art

2) *classical art*

here Hegel focuses mainly on art of Ancient Greece, and principally sculpture
classical art overcomes the defect of symbolic art

“it is the free and adequate embodiment of the Idea in the shape peculiarly appropriate to the Idea itself in its essential capacity. With this shape, therefore, the Idea is able to come into free and complete harmony. Thus the classical art-form is the first to afford the production and vision of the completed Ideal and to present it as actualized in fact” (Hegel, p. 150)

in Greek sculpture the idea is adequately expressed

“the statue does not point towards something unexpressed” (Inwood, p. 68)

the price that is paid for the supreme beauty of classical art is a certain limitation of the depth and intensity of its spiritual world

the gods have to be conceived in human terms

as Hegel puts it:

“Therefore here the spirit is at once determined as particular and human, not as purely absolute and eternal, since in this latter sense it can proclaim and express itself only as spirituality” (Hegel, p. 151)

this defect in classical art leads to a higher form

3) *romantic art*

romantic art cancels the completed unification of the Idea and its reality found in classical art and reverts in a higher way to the gap between the Idea and its sensuous representation found in symbolic art

here we see clearly Hegel’s dialectic in his theory of art

thesis: an initial statement

antithesis: a canceling or negation of the thesis

synthesis: a negation of the negation, and a return at a higher level to the thesis

thesis: symbolic art—art cannot adequately express its message, since it has too little to express

antithesis: classical art—art can adequately express its message, but its message is limited as Hegel puts it: “spirit is not in fact represented in its *true nature*” (Hegel, p. 151)

synthesis: romantic art—art cannot adequately express its message since it has too much to express, for what it has to express is spirit in its true nature which can never be presented in any sensuous form

‘Romanticism’ is a term associated with medieval Christianity and the romantics of Hegel’s day this romantic art takes as its theme the very inadequacy of insufficiency of bodily beauty

“The romantic form of art cancels the undivided unity of classical art because it has won a content which goes beyond and above the classical form of art and its mode of expression. This content—to recall familiar ideas—coincides with what Christianity asserts of God as a spirit” (Hegel, p. 151)

romantic art leads then beyond art itself for the Idea in romantic art can no longer be expressed in sensuous form

“Now Christianity bring God before our imagination as spirit, not as an individual, particular spirit, but as absolute in spirit and in truth. For this reason it retreats from the sensuousness of imagination into spiritual inwardness and makes this, and not the body, the medium and the existence of truth’s content. Thus the unity of divine and human nature is a known unity, one to be realized only by *spiritual* knowing and *in spirit*. The new content, thus won, is on this account not tied to sensuous presentation, as if that corresponded to it, but is freed from this immediate existence which must be set down as negative, overcome, and reflected into the spiritual unity. In this way romantic art is the self-transcendence of art but within its own sphere and in the form of art itself” (Hegel, p. 152)

thus the three stages of the development of art
mark three stages of the relation of the Idea to its shape in the sphere of art

“They consist in the striving for, the attainment, and the transcendence of the Ideal as the true Idea of beauty” (Hegel, p. 153)

The System of the Individual Arts

Hegel then goes on to mark out the individual arts
should be no surprise that he thinks the individual arts form a hierarchy
rising from those most tied to the constraints of the material world
to those that are most ideal

1) *architecture*

is connected with symbolic art
in this art the Idea, as concrete spirituality, cannot be realized (Hegel, p. 154)

2) *sculpture*

is connected with classical art

“In sculpture the spiritual inner life, at which architecture can only hint, makes itself at home in the sensuous shape and its external material” (Hegel, p.155)

the last three are connected together with romantic art

“Here the sensuous medium appears as particularized in itself and posited throughout as ideal. Thus it best corresponds with the generally spiritual content of art, and the connection of spiritual meaning with sensuous material grows into a deeper intimacy than was possible in architecture and sculpture” (Hegel, p. 156)

3) *painting*

“It uses as material for its content, and its content’s configuration, visibility as such” (Hegel, p. 157)

painting portrays not only the many forms of human consciousness by capturing expression and nuances of mood, it also conveys the subjective act of perception itself

4) *music*

moves further into the inner world by abandoning spatial form altogether

sound has no obvious material embodiment and must be heard sequentially, thus in time and time is the form of inner life

5) *poetry*

Hegel means here what we would call imaginative literature

is the supremely inward art

“Poetry is the universal art of the spirit which has become free in itself and which is not tied down for its realization to external sensuous material; instead, it launches out exclusively in the inner space and the inner time of ideas and feelings” (Hegel, p.158)

This leads Hegel to the ‘death of art’

“Yet, precisely, at this highest stage, art now transcends itself, in that it forsakes the element of a reconciled embodiment of the spirit in sensuous form and passes over from the poetry of the imagination to the prose of thought” (Hegel, p. 157)

Hegel suggests that art has completed its work

“What more is there for art to do? Art itself cannot reflect on art as a whole and the totality constituted by the arts and artforms. This is a task that can only be performed by philosophy of art, not by art itself” (Inwood, p. 71)

obviously the idea that art had nothing more to do was invalidated by late 19th century and 20th century art

“but Hegel’s thesis of the end of art as a significant vehicle of the human spirit is less easy to

refute” (Inwood, p. 71)

the dilemma presented by Hegel’s philosophy of art:
either art has a serious message or it is entertainment

if it is entertainment then it is dispensable—there are other forms of entertainment
if it has a serious message—then why can this message not be better expressed by philosophy,
science or religion?

If art is to be allowed a significant future, Inwood suggest Hegel needs to be challenged in one or
more of the following ways:

1) we might deny that our rational social order is destined to progress without interruption
thus art may one day once again play a significant role in the development of mind

2) we might reject Hegel’s notion of complete self-consciousness, at least to the extent that it is
entirely conceptual and scientific
“perhaps art is needed to gesture towards mysteries left by science”

3) we might resist Hegel’s attempt to discern a non-sensory meaning the sensory
perhaps painting simply explores shapes and colors—Kant’s formalism
while music explores a world of sound
this questions Hegel’s belief that ultimate meaning always lies in thought

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