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Heidegger's Ontology of Art

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Introduction: World, Being, and Style

Heidegger is not interested in works of art as expressions of the vision of a creator, nor is he interested in them as the source of aesthetic experiences in a viewer. He holds that “modern subjectivism . . . immediately misinterprets creation, taking it as the self-sovereign subject’s performance of genius” (GA 5: 63/Heidegger 1971: 76), and he also insists that aesthetic experience “is the element in which art dies” (GA 5: 66/Heidegger 1971: 79). Instead, for Heidegger, an artwork is a thing that, when it works, performs at least one of three ontological functions. It *manifests*, *articulates*, or *reconfigures* the style of a culture from within the world of that culture. It follows that, for Heidegger, most of what hang in museums, what are admired as great works of architecture, and what are published by poets were never works of art, a few were once artworks but are no longer working, and none is working now. To understand this counter-intuitive account of art, we have to begin by reviewing what Heidegger means by world and being.

World is the whole context of shared equipment, roles, and practices on the basis of which one can encounter entities and other people as intelligible. So, for example, one encounters a hammer as a hammer in the context of other equipment such as nails and wood, and in terms of social roles such as being a carpenter, a handyman, etc., and all such sub-worlds as carpentry, homemaking, etc., each with its appropriate equipment and practices, make sense on the basis of our familiar everyday world. Heidegger calls this background understanding our understanding of being. As he puts it in *Being and Time*, “being is that on the basis of which beings are already understood” (SZ: 7).

When he wrote *Being and Time*, Heidegger thought that he could give an ontological account of the universal structures of Worldhood and thus ground a “science of being.” He was, therefore, not interested in what he called ontic accounts of specific sub-worlds and various cultures. It was only in the early 1930s that he realized that, in our Western culture at least, the understanding of being has a history. Then, he saw that the specific way that beings are revealed – what he then calls the truth of being – determines how anything shows up *as* anything and certain actions show us *as worth doing*. For simplicity, we can call the truth of being of a particular culture or a specific epoch in our culture the *style* of that world.

Style is the way the everyday practices are coordinated. It serves as the basis upon which old practices are conserved and new practices are developed. A style opens a disclosive space and does so in a threefold manner: (a) by *coordinating* actions; (b) by determining how things and people *matter*; and (c) by being what is *transferred* from situation to situation. These three functions of style determine the way anything shows up and makes sense for us.

One can best see these three functions of style in another culture. Sociologists point out that mothers in different cultures handle their babies in different ways that inculcate the babies into different styles of coping with themselves, people, and things. For example, American mothers tend to put babies in their cribs on their stomachs, which encourages the babies to move around more effectively. Japanese mothers, contrariwise, put their babies on their backs so they will lie still, lulled by whatever they see. American mothers encourage passionate gesturing and vocalizing, while Japanese mothers are much more soothing and mollifying.

In general American mothers situate the infant's body and respond to the infant's actions in such a way as to promote an active and aggressive style of behavior. Japanese mothers, in contrast, promote a greater passivity and sensitivity to harmony in the actions of their babies. The babies, of course, take up the style of nurturing to which they are exposed. It may at first seem puzzling that the baby successfully picks out precisely the gestures that embody the style of its culture as the ones to imitate, but, of course, such success is inevitable. Since *all* our gestures embody the style of our culture, the baby will pick up that pervasive style no matter what it imitates. Starting with a style, various practices will make sense and become dominant and others will either become subordinate or will be ignored altogether.

The general cultural style determines how the baby encounters himself or herself, other people, and things. So, for example, no bare rattle is ever encountered. For an American baby a rattle-thing is encountered as an object to make lots of expressive noise with and to throw on the floor in a willful way in order to get a parent to pick it up. A Japanese baby may treat a rattle-thing this way more or less by accident, but generally we might suppose a rattle-thing is encountered as serving a soothing, pacifying function. What constitutes the American baby as an *American* baby is its style, and what constitutes the Japanese baby as a *Japanese* baby is its quite different style.

Once we see that a style governs how anything can show up *as* anything, we can see that the style of a culture does not govern only the babies. The adults in each culture are completely shaped by it. It determines what it makes sense to do, and what is worth doing. For example, it should come as no surprise, given the caricature I have just presented of Japanese and American culture, that Japanese adults seek contented, social integration, while American adults are still striving willfully to satisfy their individual desires. Likewise, the style of enterprises and of political organizations in Japan aims at producing and reinforcing cohesion, loyalty, and consensus, while what is admired by Americans in business and politics is the aggressive energy of a *laissez-faire* system in which everyone strives to express his or her own desires, and where the state, business, or other organizations function to maximize the number of desires that can be satisfied without destructive instability.

The case of child rearing helps us to see that our cultural style is in our artifacts and our bodily skills. Since it is not something inner, but a disposition to act in certain ways

in certain situations, it is misleading to think of our style as a belief system, scheme, or framework. It is invisible both because it is in our comportment, not in our minds, and because it is manifest in everything we see and do, and so too pervasive to notice. Like the illumination in a room, style normally functions best to let us see things when we don't see *it*. As Heidegger puts it, the mode of revealing has to *withdraw* in order to do its job of revealing things. Since it is invisible and global, our current understanding of being seems to have no contrast class. We can't help reading our own style back into previous epochs, the way the Christians understood the Greeks as pagans in despair, and the Moderns understood the Classical Greeks as already being rational subjects dealing with objects. So how can we ever notice our style or the style of another epoch in our culture?

The Work of Art as *Manifesting* a World

Heidegger answers this question in two stages. First, he shows that art is capable of revealing someone else's world. He shows this by describing a Van Gogh painting of a peasant woman's shoes. (Whether, as art critics debate, the shoes are really a pair of peasant shoes or Van Gogh's own shoes is irrelevant to how the picture works.) Heidegger claims that the shoes are not a symbol; they don't point beyond themselves to something else. Instead, Van Gogh's painting reveals to us the shoes themselves in their truth, which means that the shoes reveal the world of the peasant woman – a world that is so pervasive as to be invisible to the peasant woman herself, who, even when she deals with her shoes, “simply wears them . . . without noticing or reflecting” (GA 5: 23/Heidegger 1971: 34).

The Van Gogh painting, however, manifests the peasant's world to the viewer of the painting. Art, then, can be seen as manifesting a world *to those outside it*. But, of course, a culture's language, its artifacts, and its practices all reflect its style. This leaves open the question: if the style necessarily withdraws, *how can anyone ever come to see the style of his or her own epoch?* To answer this question, we need to look further into Heidegger's account of the special function of art.

The Work of Art as *Articulating* a Culture's Understanding of Being

Heidegger's basic insight is that the work of art not only *manifests* the style of the culture; it *articulates* it. For everyday practices to give us a shared world, and so give meaning to our lives, they must be focused and held up to the practitioners. Works of art, when performing this function, are not merely *representations* of a pre-existing state of affairs, but actually *produce* a shared understanding. Charles Taylor and Clifford Geertz have discussed this important phenomenon.

Taylor makes this point when he distinguishes shared meanings, which he calls *inter-subjective* meanings, from *common* meanings. As he puts it: “Common meanings are the basis of community. Inter-subjective meanings give a people a common language to

talk about social reality and a common understanding of certain norms, but only with common meaning does this common reference world contain significant common actions, celebrations, and feelings” (Taylor 1979: 51). Taylor calls the way common meanings work, *articulation*.

A year after Taylor’s article, in his famous paper on the cockfight in Bali, Clifford Geertz introduces the notion of style and argues that works of art and rituals produce and preserve a style. “A people’s ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic *style*. . . . Quartets, still lives, and cockfights are not merely reflections of a pre-existing sensibility analogically represented; they are positive agents in the creation and maintenance of such a sensibility” (Geertz 1973: 451). We might say, then, that art doesn’t merely *reflect* the style of a culture; it *glamorizes* it and so enables those in the culture to see it and to understand themselves and their shared world in its light.

To appreciate the way the phenomenon Taylor and Geertz have seen defines art’s function, it helps to turn to Thomas Kuhn. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn argues that scientists engaged in what he calls normal science operate in terms of an exemplar or paradigm – an outstanding example of a good piece of work. The paradigm for modern natural scientists was Newton’s *Principia*. All agreed that Newton had seen exemplary problems, given exemplary solutions, and produced exemplary justifications for his claims. Thus, for over two centuries scientists knew that, insofar as their work resembled Newton’s, they were doing good science.

The Newtonian paradigm was later replaced by the Einsteinian one. Such a paradigm shift constitutes a scientific revolution. After such a revolution, scientists see and do things differently. As Kuhn puts it, they work in a different world. They also believe and value different things, but this is less important. Kuhn is quite clear that it is the paradigm – the exemplar itself – that guides the scientists’ practices and that the paradigm cannot be explained in terms of a set of beliefs or values and spelled out using criteria and rules. As Kuhn notes, “paradigms may be prior to, more binding, and more complete than any set of rules for research that could be unequivocally abstracted from them” (Kuhn 1970: 46). Kuhn explicitly describes the work of science as articulating its paradigm: “in a science, . . . like an accepted judicial decision in the common law, [a paradigm] is an object for further articulation and specification under new or more stringent conditions” (Kuhn 1970: 23).

It seems almost inevitable after Kuhn to see whatever articulates a style as a paradigm. And, indeed, Geertz says: “it is [the] bringing of assorted experiences of everyday life to focus that the cockfight . . . accomplishes, and so creates what, better than typical or universal, could be called a paradigmatic human event” (Geertz 1973: 450). To sum up and generalize what Taylor, Geertz, and Kuhn have taught us: a cultural paradigm collects the scattered practices of a group, unifies them into coherent possibilities for action, and holds the resulting style up to the people concerned, who then act and relate to each other in terms of it.

Heidegger was the first to give a satisfactory ontological account of this phenomenon. He takes as his example the Greek temple. To begin with, it is clear that the temple is not a representation of anything; moreover, it is not the work of an individual genius. Nonetheless, the temple opened a world for the Greeks by articulating their style. The Greeks’ practices were gathered together and focused by the temple so that they saw

nature and themselves in the light of the temple. Everything looked different once the style was articulated. As Heidegger puts it, "tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their distinctive shapes and thus come to appear as what they are" (GA 5: 31/Heidegger 1971: 42).

The temple also held up to the Greeks what was worth doing by manifesting distinctions of worthiness: "it is the temple work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being" (GA 5: 31/Heidegger 1971: 42). The temple thus "gave things their look and men their outlook on themselves" (GA 5: 32/Heidegger 1971: 43). And, like every cultural paradigm, it illuminated *everything*. Thus, as Heidegger says, "the *all-governing* expanse of this open relational context is the *world* of this historical people" (GA 5: 31/Heidegger 1971: 42).

Heidegger is not the first to have seen the role of artistic articulation. Hegel, Nietzsche, and Wagner had already discussed the function of the artwork in giving a people a sense of their identity. But Heidegger is the first to have defined art in terms of its function of articulating the understanding of being in the practices and to have worked out the ontological implications. Thus, Heidegger could argue against Nietzsche and the Romantics that it was the *artwork*, not the experience of the *artist* that had ontological significance. Likewise, he could deny Hegel's claim that philosophy was superior to art, since what art showed symbolically, philosophy could rationalize and so make explicit.

Kuhn saw that the fact that the paradigm cannot be "rationalized" but only imitated is crucial to the paradigm's function. He says: "the concrete scientific achievement, as a locus of professional commitment, [is] prior to the various concepts, laws, theories, and points of view that may be abstracted from it. . . . [It] cannot be fully reduced to logically atomic components that might function in its stead" (Kuhn 1970: 11). The fact that the paradigm cannot be rationalized makes it possible for the scientists to agree without having to spell out their agreement. As Kuhn says, "the practice of normal science depends on the ability, acquired from exemplars, to group objects and situations into similarity sets that are primitive in the sense that the grouping is done without an answer to the question, 'Similar with respect to what?'" (Kuhn 1970: 200). At a time of a scientific revolution, however, Kuhn tells us, the paradigm becomes the focus of conflicting interpretations, each trying to rationalize and justify it.

Similarly, Heidegger holds that a working artwork is so important to a community that the people involved must try to make the work clear and coherent and codify what it stands for. But the artwork, like the scientific paradigm, resists rationalization. Any paradigm could be paraphrased and rationalized only if the concrete thing, which served as an exemplar, symbolized or represented an underlying system of beliefs or values that could be abstracted from the particular exemplar. But the whole point of needing an exemplar is that there is no such system, there are only shared practices. Therefore the style resists rationalization and can only be displayed. Heidegger calls the way the artwork solicits the culture to make the meaning of the artwork explicit, coherent, and all encompassing, the *world* aspect of the work. He calls the way the artwork and its associated practices resist such explication and totalization the *earth* aspect.

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Heidegger sees that the earth's resistance is not a drawback but has an important positive function.

To the Open there belong a world and the earth. But the world is not simply the Open that corresponds to clearing, and the earth is not simply the Closed that corresponds to concealment. Rather, the world is the clearing of the paths of the essential guiding directions with which all decision complies. Every decision, however, bases itself on something not mastered, something concealed, confusing; else it would never be a decision. (GA 5: 43–4/Heidegger 1971: 55)

Heidegger understands that if actions were fully lucid, as Sartre would have them be, they would be arbitrary and freely revocable and so not serious.¹ Like disposedness (*Befindlichkeit*) in *Being and Time*, earth supplies mattering and thus grounds the seriousness of decisions.

In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” however, earth is understood no longer as an aspect of human being but as a function of the tendency in the cultural practices themselves to open worlds: “The earth cannot dispense with the Open of the world if it itself is to appear as earth in the liberated surge of its self-seclusion. The world, again, cannot soar out of the earth's sight if, as the governing breadth and path of all essential destiny, it is to ground itself on a resolute foundation” (GA 5: 38/Heidegger 1971: 49). Thus, earth is not passive matter, but comes into being precisely as what resists any attempt to abstract and generalize the point of the paradigm.

The earth appears openly cleared as itself only when it is perceived and preserved as that which is by nature undisclosable, that which shrinks from every disclosure and constantly keeps itself closed up. (GA 5: 36/Heidegger 1971: 47)

The opposition of world and earth is a strife. But we would surely all too easily falsify its nature if we were to confound strife with discord and destruction. In essential strife, rather, the opponents raise each other into the self-assertion of their natures. (GA 5: 37/Heidegger 1971: 49; translation corrected – *Streit* does not mean striving)

The temple draws the people who act in its light to clarify, unify, and extend the reach of its style, but being a material thing it resists rationalization. And since no interpretation can ever completely capture what the work means, the temple sets up a struggle between earth and world. The result is fruitful in that the conflict of interpretations that ensues generates a culture's history.²

Such resistance is manifest in the materiality of the artwork. A Greek tragedy requires the sound of the poetry to create a shared mood for the spectators and thus open up a shared world, so, like all literary works, tragedies resist translation. More generally, Heidegger tells us:

the temple-work, in setting up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work's world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work

sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word. (GA 5: 35/Heidegger 1971: 46)³

What is dark and hidden and what is out in the open differs from culture to culture. How the line between the two is drawn is an aspect of the unique way the style of each particular culture is elaborated.

World demands its decisiveness and its measure and lets beings attain to the Open of their paths. Earth, bearing and jutting, strives to keep itself closed and to entrust everything to its law. The conflict is not a rift (*Riss*), as a mere cleft is ripped open; rather, it is the intimacy with which opponents belong to each other. This rift carries the opponents into the source of their unity by virtue of their common ground. It is a basic design, an outline sketch that draws the basic features of the rise of the lighting of beings. (GA 5: 51–2/Heidegger 1971: 63)

In each epoch, then, the struggle between world and earth and its rift design manifests a different style. The temple requires the stone out of which it is built in order to do its job of setting up the tension between structure and stone; a temple made out of steel would not work. The cathedral, in its different style, uses stone and glass to show the struggle between light and darkness and that light is winning out. We now construct debased works of art like the national highway system, which imposes such an efficient order on nature that earth is no longer able to resist.

The answers to our earlier questions should now be clear: the special function of art is precisely to let each group of historical people see the style of their own culture by showing it in a glamorized exemplar. Moreover, we can now add that such a function is an ontological necessity. As Heidegger puts it, “there must always be some being in [the] open, something that is, in which the openness takes its stand and attains its constancy” (GA 5: 49/Heidegger 1971: 61).

It follows that appreciating artworks when they are working, to talk like Heidegger, is the furthest thing from having private aesthetic experiences (GA 5: 55–6/Heidegger 1971: 68). Yet art is somehow connected with beauty. Heidegger describes art as “the shining of truth” (GA 5: 52/Heidegger 1971: 64), and describes beauty as the way artworks shine: “this shining . . . is the beautiful,” he says (GA 5: 44/Heidegger 1971: 56).

But how does the temple shine? It is white, of course, and dazzling in the Greek sun, but what about other artworks such as somber cathedrals or dark tragedies. Do they shine too? Not literally, but remember that thanks to artworks some aspects of things and practices become salient and others marginal and that makes some ways of acting show up as worth doing, and others not show up at all. Thus the Greeks saw life and the cosmos *in the light of* their artworks. This is presumably the metaphorical sort of light Heidegger has in mind.

The way in which art thoroughly spans the being-in-the-world of human beings as historical, the way in which it illuminates the world for them and indeed illuminates human beings themselves, putting in place the way in which art is art – all this receives its law

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and structural articulation from the manner in which the world as a whole is opened up to human beings in general. (GA 53: 23)

To sum up: the work of art doesn't *reflect* the style of the culture or create it; it *illuminates* it.

Normally the illumination in the room must withdraw to do its work. But sometimes we can see the light bulb and also see everything in its light. In this way the artwork, like the sun in Plato's Allegory of the Cave, makes everything in the world intelligible, yet we can gaze upon it; but with the important difference that Plato thought the ground of the intelligibility of the world had to be outside the world, whereas Heidegger holds that it has to be something within the world. That means that, rather than being eternal like the Good, works of art can cease to work or, as Heidegger puts it, works of art can die.

The Aegina sculptures in the Munich collection, Sophocles' *Antigone* in the best critical edition, are, as the works they are, torn out of their own native sphere. . . . [E]ven when we make an effort to cancel or avoid such displacement of works – when, for instance, we visit the temple in Paestum at its own site or the Bamberg cathedral on its own square – the world of the work that stands there has perished. (GA 5: 29–30/Heidegger 1971: 40–1)

Another way to express the artwork's fragility is to note that, unlike Plato's idea of The Good, the work of art shows itself to be created. "[A] work is always a work, which means that it is something worked out, brought about, effected. If there is anything that distinguishes the work as work, it is that the work has been created" (GA 5: 45/Heidegger 1971: 56). But this does not mean that Heidegger follows Nietzsche in emphasizing the creator of the work. In fact, Heidegger claims that "art is the origin of the artwork and of the artist" (GA 5: 46/Heidegger 1971: 57). But Heidegger adds that "the impulse toward such a thing as a work lies in the nature of truth" (GA 5: 45/Heidegger 1971: 57; translation modified). Truth for Heidegger means disclosing. So, for Heidegger, opening a world is a way truth sets itself to work. We can now understand this to mean that a culture's practices tend to gather so as to open and illuminate a world, and they use the artwork to do so. Indeed, in his marginal comments to "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger repeatedly notes that what he is referring to here is what he later calls the event of appropriation (*das Ereignis*). That is, what ultimately makes truth and art possible is the way cultural practices tend toward making sense, the way they gather together to bring things out in their ownmost, to let things and people appear in a rich rather than in a banal way.

Thus far Heidegger has pointed out that the function of the artwork (like the accepted scientific paradigm) is to articulate the understanding implicit in the current practices. Paradigms thus reveal the current style to those who share it. But having devoted most of his essay to a description of the temple as the focus of the struggle of earth and world that fixes a culture's style and holds it up to the people, Heidegger has not yet arrived at the origin of the work of art – the way artworks work when they are functioning at their best, nor has he described how the practices come together to create new artworks that disclose new worlds. He turns to these issues at the end of his essay.

Heidegger: Artworks as *Reconfiguring* a Culture's Understanding of Being

Only when he realized that being itself had a history was Heidegger able to describe what he calls the *origin* (*Ur-sprung*) of the work of art. In setting the stage for this further move, he says:

in the West for the first time in Greece . . . [w]hat was in the future to be called being was set into work, setting the standard. The realm of beings thus opened up was then transformed into a being in the sense of God's creation. This happened in the Middle Ages. This kind of being was again transformed at the beginning and in the course of the modern age. Beings became objects that could be controlled and seen through by calculation. At each time a new and essential world arose. (GA 5: 63–4/Heidegger 1971: 76–7)

Such changes are cultural revolutions and, as in scientific revolutions, they are made possible by the establishment of a new paradigm. As Heidegger says: "at each time the openness of what is had to be established in beings themselves, by the fixing in place of truth in figure" (GA 5: 64/Heidegger 1971: 77). That is, in each such case the being that shines in the clearing not only *configured* the style of the culture; it *reconfigured* it.⁴ It follows that each time a culture gets a new artwork, the understanding of being changes and human beings and things show up differently. For the Greeks, what showed up were heroes and slaves; for the Christians, they were saints and sinners. There could not have been saints in ancient Greece; at best there could only have been weak people who let others walk all over them. Likewise, there could not have been Greek-style heroes in the Middle Ages. Such people would have been regarded as prideful sinners who disrupted society by denying their dependence on God and encouraging everyone to depend on them instead.

Once Heidegger describes the function of artworks when they are functioning as *revolutionary paradigms*, he can generalize the notion of a cultural paradigm from a work of art working to anything in the world that not only focuses, or refocuses, the current cultural style, but establishes a new one. Thus, he says:

one essential way in which truth establishes itself in the beings it has opened up is truth setting itself into work. [The temple as articulating the Greek culture.] Another way in which truth occurs is the act that founds a political state. [Pericles, and, perhaps, Hitler.] Still another way in which truth comes to shine forth is the nearness of that which is not simply a being, but the being that is most of all. [God's Covenant with the Hebrews?] Still another way in which truth grounds itself is the essential sacrifice. [The Crucifixion?] Still another way in which truth becomes is the thinker's questioning, which, as the thinking of being, names being in its question-worthiness. [Philosophers do this by introducing a new vocabulary, like "subject/object," and "autonomy." In this sense, for Heidegger, revolutionary scientists like Galileo and Einstein are thinkers too]. (GA 5: 49/Heidegger 1971: 61–2)⁵

In Heidegger's terms, articulating works of art *establish* a style; now Heidegger tells us, *founding* works reconfigure it. But just how does this founding work? After giving

examples of articulators like the Greek temple, the Bamberg Cathedral, and the tragedies of Sophocles, Heidegger suddenly, toward the end of “The Origin of the Work of Art,” without examples, offers a few hasty remarks on the function of the artwork he calls founding: “We understand founding here in a triple sense: founding as bestowing, founding as grounding, and founding as beginning. . . . We can do no more now than to present this structure of the nature of art in a few strokes” (GA 5: 63/Heidegger 1971: 75). Heidegger’s three modes of founding correspond to the past, present, and future. First is *bestowing*, the role of the past. A new understanding of being must be incomprehensible yet somehow intelligible. To account for this possibility, Heidegger returns to an idea already touched on in *Being and Time* (see SZ: ¶74). In a historical change, some practices that were marginal become central, and some central practices become marginal. Reconfiguration is thus not the creation (*schaffen*) of a genius, but the drawing up (*schöpfen*) of the reserve of marginal practices bestowed by the culture as from a well (GA 5: 63/Heidegger 1971: 76). What ultimately bestows the material for the new style is the style of a people’s language. Art takes place in a clearing “which has already happened unnoticed in language” (GA 5: 62/Heidegger 1971: 74).

So Heidegger now generalizes language to any form of “poetic projection:” “projective saying . . . brings the unsayable as such into a world” (GA 5: 61–2/Heidegger 1971: 74). “Genuinely poetic projection is the opening up or disclosure of that into which human being as historical is already cast. . . . Founding is an overflow, an endowing, a bestowal” (GA 5: 63/Heidegger 1971: 75–6).

In *grounding*, the present has to take up the marginal practices already in the culture into a new style that makes them central. Given the current understanding, the new style will, of course, seem weird and barely intelligible. “The setting-into-work of truth thrusts up the unfamiliar and extraordinary and at the same time thrusts down the ordinary” (GA 5: 63/Heidegger 1971: 75).

This makes possible a *new beginning* by opening a new future. Of course, a new style does not arise *ex nihilo*. Marginal practices of various sorts are always on the horizon. For example, the printing press and Luther were already moving people toward the individualism and freedom from authority that became central in Descartes’s attempt to take over his life and education from the ground up. Thus, when speaking of the new beginning, Heidegger adds that while the new beginning is “a leap,” “what is thus cast forth is . . . never an arbitrary demand” (GA 5: 63/Heidegger 1971: 75). He explains: “the peculiarity of a leap out of the unmediable does not exclude but rather includes the fact that the beginning prepares itself the longest time and wholly inconspicuously” (GA 5: 64/Heidegger 1971: 76).

The new beginning sets up a new future, by calling the people in the culture to be preservers.

Preserving the work does not reduce people to their private experiences, but brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work. Thus it grounds being for and with one another as the historical standing-out of human existence in reference to unconcealedness. . . . The proper way to preserve the work is cocreated and prescribed only and exclusively by the work. (GA 5: 55/Heidegger 1971: 68)

Heidegger admits he gives no example of reconfiguration. Such examples, Heidegger admits, are only "initial hints" (GA 5: 55/Heidegger 1971: 68). Indeed, the examples he uses are all Greek – the temples, the tragedies, the classical philosophers – and, as such, are powerful articulations of an already existing cultural style. There may well be good reasons for his not being able to find any examples of reconfiguration in Greece. As Kierkegaard remarks in his discussion of the Christian notion of the fullness of time, and Heidegger repeats in his appropriation of Kierkegaard's notion of the *Augenblick*, the experience of radical transformation of self and world is what differentiates the Christian world from Antiquity (SZ: 338, note). After all, the Greeks believed in endless cycles of the same; not in radical creation. The most striking example of such a radical cultural transformation of a new beginning is the transformation of the Hebrew world into the Christian world.

So let us take a simplified account of this transformation as an illustration of the three aspects of founding. We are told that the Jews followed the Law so that one was guilty for one's overt acts, and that Jesus changed all this when, in the Sermon on the Mount, he said that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Jesus thrusts down or marginalizes the ordinary – the Law and the overt acts it condemns – when he practices healing even on the Sabbath, and he introduces the extraordinary new idea that what really matters is that one is responsible for one's desires. Purity, not rightness of action, is what is essential, and, in that case, one can save oneself not by will power, but only by throwing oneself on the mercy of a Savior and being reborn.

One might reasonably object that this emphasis on desire can't be such a radical change from Judaism after all, since the eighth commandment already enjoins one not to covet anything that is one's neighbor's, and coveting is surely a case of desire, not overt action. But Heidegger would surely be the first to point out that, if Jesus had not had some basis in the previous practices – something bestowed by the past – no one would have had a clue as to what he was talking about, so it was essential that, in his grounding of a new world, he take up and make central a marginal practice already bestowed by the culture. In the unique case of the Ten Commandments, it seems that the amount of marginal practice bestowed by the tradition can be quantified; it is reflected in one out of ten commandments.

But, of course, this is only the beginning. A world transformer such as Jesus can show a new style and so can be followed, as Jesus was followed by his disciples even though they could hardly understand what they were doing. But he will not be fully intelligible to the members of the culture until the preservers become attuned to his extraordinary new way of coordinating the practices – his new beginning – and articulate it in a new language and in new symbols and institutions.

Thus, although Heidegger never says so, it seems there must always be two stages in each cultural revolution: reconfiguration that thrusts down the ordinary and introduces the extraordinary, followed by an articulation that focuses, and stabilizes the new style. Thus Jesus is interpreted in terms of *caritas* by St Paul, Galileo is interpreted in terms of *gravitas* by Newton, and the implications of Descartes's new idea that we are subjects in a world of objects is worked out in terms of *autonomy* by Kant. It is because

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Kant is merely an articulator that, for Heidegger, Descartes, as a reconfigurer, is a more primordial thinker than Kant.

Conclusion: Can an Artwork Work for Us Now?

Heidegger thinks that our current understanding of being levels all meaningful differences and hides the earth so now there are only negative exemplars of our style – Heidegger takes as an example the power station on the Rhine, and another example might be our walk on the moon. So far the West has not produced any reconfiguring work of art that sets forth the earth and restarts history with a new struggle between earth and world. The question then arises for Heidegger whether our flexible style that turns everything, even ourselves, into resources could ever be reconfigured.

Of course, one cannot legislate a new beginning. But perhaps our marginal practices could gather into a new style, one, for example, in which marginal practices and attunements like awe in the face of nature from our pre-Socratic past would begin to coalesce with the nature worship of the Romantics to affirm what is sometimes referred to as the Gaia Principle, i.e. that nature is god. Perhaps then some new paradigm would make those marginal practices central and marginalize our current practices, which, as Heidegger once put it, “are turning the earth into a gigantic filling station.” Preservers might then see nature in the light of the new god, put solar panels on their homes and stop buying SUVs.

It is too early to see how such a work of art manifesting this new understanding of being might begin to work, but a hint of how a different sort of new paradigm almost worked can be found in the music and style of the 1960s. Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and other rock groups became for many the focus of a new understanding of what really mattered. This new style coalesced in the Woodstock music festival of 1969, where people actually lived for a few days in an understanding of being in which mainline contemporary concerns with order, sobriety, willful activity, and flexible, efficient control were made marginal and subservient to pagan practices, such as openness, enjoyment of nature, dancing, and Dionysian ecstasy, along with neglected Christian concerns with peace, tolerance, and non-exclusive love of one’s neighbor. Technology was not smashed or denigrated; instead, all the power of electronic communications was put at the service of the music that articulated the above concerns.

If enough people had recognized in Woodstock what they most cared about and recognized that many others shared this recognition, a new style of life might have been focused and stabilized. Of course, in retrospect it seems to us who are still in the grip of the technological understanding of being that the concerns of the Woodstock generation were not organized and encompassing enough to resist being taken over by the very practices it was trying to marginalize. Still we are left with a hint of how a new cultural paradigm might work. This helps us to understand why Heidegger holds that we must foster human receptivity and preserve the endangered species of pre-technological practices that remain in our culture so that one day they may come together in a new work of art, rich enough and resistant enough to reconfigure our world.

Notes

- 1 This argument is first made by Søren Kierkegaard in his account of the breakdown of the Kantian ethical, and filled in phenomenologically in the freedom chapter in Merleau-Ponty (2002).
- 2 It is interesting to note that rituals, unlike the temple, do not set up a struggle between earth and world, presumably because they do not try to unify the whole culture. (The Balinese cock-fight Geertz analyses only glamorizes the role of the males.) Cultures that do not have artworks in Heidegger's view do not have a history, since, for him, history means the series of total worlds that result from a struggle of interpretations as to the meaning of being. But it seem there can be more local works of art. The US Constitution, like a work of art, has necessarily become the focus of attempts to make it explicit and consistent, and to make it apply to *all* situations. Such attempts are never fully successful but this is not a drawback. The resulting conflict of interpretations is an important aspect of the history of the republic.
- 3 The last phrase is a surprise. One would have expected the *sound* of the word as its earthy component. The naming power seems to be what opens a world. This may be simply a mistake on Martin Heidegger's part. But it may not be, since he never corrected it in his marginal notes.
- 4 Heidegger also says: "whenever art happens – that is, whenever there is a beginning – a thrust enters history, history either begins or starts over again." (GA 5: 64/Heidegger 1971: 77). Heidegger seems to be confused about whether the Greek temple articulated or reconfigured because, in fact, it does neither. As the beginning of the history of being, the Greeks do not yet have a unified understanding of being to renew or to reconfigure. The temple and the Pre-Socratic thinkers had to take the style that was already in the language and, for the first time, focus it and hold it up to the people. According to Heidegger, this is the origin (*Ur-sprung*) of our Western culture.
- 5 In this connection it is interesting to note that Heidegger, who is infamous for saying that great philosophy can only be done in Greek or German, in GA 54 says that Descartes is a greater thinker than Kant, even though Descartes wrote in Latin and French, and never wrote a word in Greek or German.

References and further reading

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