

CARL HUMPHRIES

AUTHENTICITY AND ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION
IN THE MODERN AGE: HEIDEGGER'S
"ANTI-AESTHETIC" CONCEPTION RECONSIDERED

This paper offers a partial defence and a partial critique of the views put forward in Heidegger's essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*. According to the author, the validity of Heidegger's position is limited by the fact it inherits the partial character of his account of the way in which human intelligibility is phenomenologically and ontologically grounded in temporality.

Artykuł *Autentyczność i reprezentacja artystyczna w epoce nowoczesnej: ponowne spojrzenie na koncepcje 'anty-estetyczną' Heideggera* proponuje obronę i zarazem częściową krytykę punktu widzenia znanego eseju Heideggera pt. *Źródło dzieła sztuki*. Według autora, słuszność pozycji Heideggera jest ograniczona przez fakt, że przejmuje ona niekompletny charakter modelu opisującego, jak ludzkie rozumienie jest fenomenologicznie i ontologicznie ugruntowane w czasowości.

In his well-known essay on the subject of the origin of the work of art, Heidegger claimed a special significance for art as a unique source of authenticity in modern times¹. This significance, according to him, rests on its capacity to make manifest an intuition about the nature of human existence that offers an alternative to what he himself considers the predominant attitude informing modern culture. The attitude he seeks to oppose is revealed in aspects of our culture that imply an understanding of the world as, in essence, populated by objects whose only value is thought to be extrinsic and, more often than not, instrumental. Such an attitude seems

¹ M. Heidegger *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* Ditzingen: Reclam Universal-Bibliothek 1986. The essay in question was first delivered by Heidegger as a lecture in 1935-1936, and then subsequently revised.

to amount to a form of subjectivism, since it involves treating phenomena as only mattering to the extent that they elicit positive subjective reactions from us, or help us in the realization and fulfilment of what are essentially subjective projects and concerns.

For Heidegger, this understanding has its origins in the idea of a human subject essentially detached from the world that seeks to come to know that world simply by reflecting on the contents of its consciousness. That idea, of course, provided the context within which the sceptical problematics of Cartesian epistemological dualism unfolded, but for Heidegger it has been transformed by the subjectivism of modern life into a positive conviction that human beings can, indeed, grasp the essential nature and value of things from a detached position of roughly the same kind. If Heidegger's view is correct, then it represents a far-reaching and profound critique – one that takes in the purely observational perspective of science, the exploitative, instrumentalising approach of corporations and individuals towards the natural environment, and much else connected with our everyday social and political life, inasmuch as we inhabit societies whose citizens are encouraged to conceive of themselves as, above all, clients of both the state and one another in the contractually mediated dispensation of services and distribution of resources.

Heidegger's view of modern culture as in the grip of a pervasively destructive subjectivism motivates his conception of art as capable of delivering an insight that stands opposed to this, and is meant to directly entail wholesale rejection of the conception of the representational function of art that normally informs modern notions of aesthetic appreciation. According to this conception, representations are held to be capable, at least in principle, of presenting things as what they really are, and in the paradigm cases of successful representation it is assumed that this is what they do. For Heidegger, such a conception takes it for granted that art can do justice to the true and essential nature of things while presenting them as objects straightforwardly representable to an observer, and he takes this to reflect the same sort of conception of the essential nature of things as that which he takes to underlie the instrumentalising subjectivism of modern times. At the same time, he argues that *authentic* artworks are those that succeed in bringing to our attention, and making experientiable, an alternative understanding, by confronting us with a context where we experience the inappropriateness of precisely this commitment to the essential representability of things – the sort of context where we would least expect it to be problematic since it is that of outwardly representational art itself.

Before proceeding to the main point that I wish to make in relation to Heidegger, I will mention and briefly discuss two other critical perspectives. These, I hope, will be helpful in setting my own response in context.

The first of these does not involve a rejection of the overall thrust of Heidegger's analysis, but points out that much of what is supposed to be represented in the art of cultures in which such a paradigmatic commitment to representability is operative is *itself* constituted in terms that presuppose such a commitment, before coming to be represented in artworks themselves. The formality of the poses in traditional European portraiture, the classical arrangements of architecture and landscaped nature that form the background to paintings of classical and biblical scenes, and the mythological and religious contexts from which the narrative content of those works originate all seem, in their own particular ways, to presuppose just that sort of paradigmatic commitment to representability independently of how they figure in representational art. If that is so, then Heidegger's account is only really valid for art specifically concerned with things that are *not* part of any cultural framework that already involves that sort of paradigmatic commitment – as with van Gogh, perhaps, whose painting of a pair of shoes exemplifies for Heidegger the defining role he wishes to assign to authentic artworks.

Heidegger's position thus shares many preconceptions about the proper subject matter of art with the Romantics, for whom art's real significance lay in its capacity to make manifest the content of our intuitions about the existence in nature of spiritual depths unreachable by the rational intellect. As has been noted, in this respect Heidegger's thinking strongly echoes that of thinkers such as Hölderlin or Schelling².

This implies that whether we embrace or reject a representationalist aesthetic culture of art will most probably depend on what we think it means for a culture to operate with a paradigmatic commitment to representability as something that plays a constitutive role, so that it informs the very subject matter of representation. Heidegger's own position here coheres around the claim that it is just such a representational culture that has brought about the self-destructive afflictions of modern life, because of its links to an instrumentalising subjectivism. To the extent that one shares his sense of those afflictions and their provenance, it is hard to deny the force of that claim.

² See K. Hammermeister *The German Aesthetic Tradition* Cambridge: CUP 2002 p. 173-189.

On the other hand, we might consider how much poorer our lives would be without the many riches and subtleties that are, arguably, part of the legacy of this kind of representationalism as it has manifested itself within our own civilisation. Heidegger himself, in seeking to elaborate his distinctive account of the ‘truth-event’ furnished by authentic art, identifies Plato as the ultimate source of the Romanised *adequatio rei* paradigm of truth that he himself rejects on account of the fact that it makes the concept of truth dependent on a prior paradigmatic commitment to representability. In so doing he inadvertently reminds us – if we needed any reminding – of the role that Platonic thinking has played in underpinning our own culture’s traditional commitments in this area. The obverse of this is that our appreciation for the cultural riches produced under the influence of such thinking should make us cautious about any invitation to embark on a wholesale rejection of that thinking itself. Is it mere coincidence that these cultural riches emerged in a culture whose flourishing seems to have been closely intertwined with its faith in the power of human beings to capture reality in various kinds of representation?

...

The second critical perspective goes further, since it questions the underlying validity and relevance of Heidegger’s overall approach. Like the first, it hinges on the common ground that he shares with Romantic thought, in claiming that art is able to offer insights into reality that transcend what is conceptually formulatable in rationally comprehensible terms.

Heidegger’s account, like much of his philosophy, hinges on a contrast between what it means for something to be the sort of entity whose essential nature can be straightforwardly revealed to a detached observer, and what it means for it to be the sort of entity whose essential nature resists this thanks to its dependence – specifically at the (hermeneutically construed) ontological level of analysis – on human involvements that are fundamentally temporally situated. In *Sein und Zeit* this point is made through a consideration of equipmentality, and the phenomenological dependence of what we can observe of entities on their prior practical availability, from which it follows that they must always first be intelligible with reference to the context of use furnished by human involvements that, in turn, have in common the fundamental horizon that is their temporality³. In his essay on the work of art the point is made another way: it is argued that the “thingly” character of the artwork cannot be reconciled with its character as *artwork* without invoking a conception of “thinghood” at odds with the existing standard conceptions of what a thing is –

³ M. Heidegger *Sein und Zeit* Tübingen (1927/1993) Division I Section 3 § 14-16.

conceptions that may also play a role in motivating some of our traditional commitments to the essential representability of things. Since the concept of a thing is basic and, according to Heidegger, should therefore correspond to a unified conception, this counts in support of his intuition that part of the very nature of things, *qua* things, is that in order for some aspect or aspects of their essential character to be capable of being revealed some other aspect or aspects must be closed off from being revealed.

This second criticism accuses Heidegger of thereby requiring us to surrender, in principle, any aspiration in the direction of being receptive to forms of rational comprehensibility that could otherwise be thought of as potentially there to be discovered in our world. Heidegger's claim, that the essential character of things is such that we can only ever partially know them as what they essentially are, establishes a paradigm of intelligibility for things in the world that is, it seems, fundamentally opposed to what is presupposed by the notion of rational comprehensibility. This is because the latter is taken to involve some kind of aspiration – however open-ended – towards a unified conceptual understanding, as shown by the demand for inferential consistency that regulates the conceptual content of our commitments insofar as we are concerned to be argumentatively rational⁴.

The force of the criticism comes from the fact that it makes explicit the sense in which we seem to be brought into a kind of religious commitment by Heidegger's thinking, as a precondition for finding his overall account plausible. This is especially troubling for anyone inclined to view Heidegger's philosophy through the lens of an overriding concern for how the theoretical insights of philosophers might translate into a social praxis aimed at actually changing the conditions in which, historically, we find ourselves. As with several other thinkers of the modern age, the claim that this thinking involves what ultimately amounts to a religious com-

⁴ This is what lies at the bottom of the critique of Heidegger put forward in various texts by Apel and Habermas, against the background of ideas derived from Peirce and, ostensibly, from the later Wittgenstein. See K.-O. Apel *Transformation der Philosophie* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973 vol. 1 p. 202-221, as well as the other texts by Apel and Habermas listed in the references below. Their appeal to a unifying impulse in human rationality appears to be reinforced by the claims of those analytical philosophers who have asserted the centrality of inference in defining not only the nature of rational commitment but also that of communication itself. See D. Davidson *Truth and Meaning* "Synthese" 17, 304-323, 1967; W. Sellars *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge MA 1956/1997; R. Brandom *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge MA 1994, and J. McDowell *Mind and World* Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge MA 1994.

mitment cuts deep, because it implies that the content of the body of thought in question has its proper home outside of the realm of rational discursive debate which, for ethical as well as practical political reasons, we are inclined to take to be the proper setting for working out concrete solutions to the collective issues and concerns of our societies. It is hardly surprising, then, that such thinking tends to be objected to on the grounds that it has the effect of promoting in society a fatalistic acceptance of the very features of modern life that, in theoretical terms, it holds up as problematic.

Accepting the critique would imply that the philosophies in question lack the traction they would need to have with the internal discourse of modern societies to impact on any collective decisions the inhabitants of those societies might make about their future. That would leave one with a choice between fatalism, motivated by whatever sympathy one retains for the philosophy in question, and a pragmatic embrace of whatever is possible within the limits imposed by the ethical and practical norms of the discursive communities of modern societies.

But there is, I think, room for a questioning of the premises of this line of criticism as it relates to Heidegger. Exactly what that would involve is something that lies outside of the scope of this paper, but it would essentially mean showing that the appeal to rationality as a constitutive ideal, where this supposedly undercuts the social relevance of any critical discourse built on a Heideggerian construal of the limits of intelligibility, is itself undercut by some more basic set of considerations that may turn out to be more or less in line with the Heideggerian position itself. It can be argued that the project of linking a procedural commitment to holistic rational consistency to a generalized model of human linguistic communication, which is a feature of the directions in post-Fregean (and post-Peircean) philosophy that inform this line of criticism, incorporate some unfounded assumptions about the freestanding nature of human thought and language use.

Such assumptions might come in for rejection not just by Heideggerians themselves, but also by those sympathetic to the later Wittgenstein, especially given the direction that interpretations of this philosopher's work have gone in over the last few decades, stressing as they do the way in which the normative character of the rules governing language use and, through this, conceptual meaning more generally, ultimately devolve onto forms of life that are concrete and particular. In that context it becomes plausible to think of the more reflexively rational, argumentative discourses of modern societies as presupposing a much less reflexive background of everyday linguistic and communicative practices that need not necessarily be accountable in themselves to the regulative ideal of an aspiration towards a rationally unified body of conceptual commitments corresponding to our understanding of the world. In that case there are grounds

for regarding the viability of Heidegger's overall philosophical model as an open and unresolved issue: it may be that what it calls for is another kind of discourse – one that distinguishes between the pragmatically rational norms required by a society's reflexive discourse about its own collective future and the standards of intelligibility internal to particular everyday practices, and to the forms of life in which these are embedded, without assuming that the latter can be straightforwardly "levelled-up" and turned into what they would have to be if they *only* existed as elements of the former.

...

The first line of criticism of Heidegger's thought mentioned here raised some doubts about the scope of its implications for our understanding of representation in art, but left open the issue of the validity of his philosophy as a whole. The second took aim directly at the latter, but I have suggested that there might be reasons for doubting its effectiveness. This brings me to my own position, which is also critical in some ways of the larger structure of Heidegger's thought, but nevertheless sees it as achieving some important insights.

One can take the view that the form of Heidegger's account is coherent and correct, but in a way that falls short of *general* validity, since it fails to acknowledge the various *different* ways in which the possibility or impossibility of things' being fully and essentially revealed or represented can be affected by their dependence on human involvements, given the diversity *internal* to the varied forms of temporal situatedness exhibited by those involvements⁵.

⁵ There are both parallels and differences between the critique of Heidegger put forward here and that of Cassirer, who also argued that Heidegger's position contains important insights but lacks the general validity it claims for itself. Cassirer argued, from a neo-Kantian stance, that Heidegger's view of temporality as a basic feature of the human condition fails to take account of the wider context for human knowledge developed by Kant in respect of what lies beyond the scope of pure reason. In so doing Cassirer invests a potentially foundational significance in the more or less abstract forms of knowledge achievable in the natural and formal sciences – something that would be difficult for a phenomenologically oriented thinker like Heidegger to accept as it brings with it the threat of a naturalistically reductive psychologism. The critique put forward here, on the other hand, requires no such commitments, since it argues that Heidegger's account fails to achieve general validity with respect to its own starting point – namely, the proper phenomenological characterization of human involvements and the structures of intelligibility internal to these. See, especially: E. Cassirer *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik. Bemerkungen zu Martin Heideggers Kantinterpretation* [in:] „Kant-Studien“ 36, 1-16. See also: E. Cassirer *Zur Logik der Kulturwissenschaften* Göteborg: Göteborgs Högskolas Årsskrift 47.

The unitary character of Heidegger's ontological framework for understanding the temporality of human existence commits him to a unitary view of what that temporality amounts to in respect of human involvements. It commits him to a unitary conception of the essential nature of involvement *per se* – of our involvements, that is, insofar as these correspond to what involvement must amount to in ontologically terms, where the fact of our being involved in the world is taken to constitute an ontologically basic feature of our existence. In *Sein und Zeit* this is apparent from the fact that all involvements are taken to exhibit a structure of dependency whereby the significance of an involvement at a given juncture is determined by its relation to a set of historically prior conditions whose own significance is established with reference to projected future possibilities⁶.

In his later essay Heidegger reveals a similar commitment to taking whatever lies at the most basic level of reality as being the sort of thing that necessarily corresponds to a unitary conceptual characterisation. He argues that while the concept of a “thing” cannot be made definitionally explicit in any way that would fit with the fact that we apply it unproblematically to both everyday thing-like objects and to artworks, it remains basic to our conceptual scheme, and so *must* correspond to a unified conception of “thinghood”. Thanks to this, he feels justified in assimilating the impossibility of reconciling these instances of “thinghood” into the essence of the concept itself, by conceiving of the essences of things in terms of the structure of mutually dependent elements of concealment and disclosure that, for him, defines the truth-event manifested in authentic art.

The unitary conception of the essence of what it means to be involved in the world that, for Heidegger, counts as a hermeneutically construable ontological fact about our existence, supplies the rationale for both

⁶ To be sure, Heidegger leaves room for variations of emphasis within this framework, in the form of the different temporal *ek-stases* corresponding to the heightened future-orientedness of practical undertakings, the heightened backward-looking character of reflectively constituted attitudes or states of mind, and so on. Yet this does not alter the fact that *all* human involvements, for Heidegger, share this more basic underlying temporal structure, and *must* do so, since this provides the phenomenological grounding for his adoption of the hermeneutic approach where ontological matters in general are concerned. In fact, such a unitary characterisation of our involvements with respect to this feature seems more at home in the kind of epistemologically centred philosophy Heidegger opposes – the kind that would prefer to treat as basic those features of reality most compatible with a conception of it as the object of knowledge by a detached subject. Why else assume that any differences between the various kinds of human involvement are in principle incapable of being so fundamental as to have implications for the underlying temporal structure exhibited by the essence of human involvement itself?

his unitary conception of the temporality of involvements and his conviction that the nature of things is such that the truth about their essential character only ever comes to light as a structure of mutually dependent forms of concealment and disclosure. Yet we are surely entitled to ask what it is that ultimately grounds this commitment to the unitariness of the ontologically basic. In the context of Heidegger's philosophy, this commitment has a methodological centrality since it secures the generality of scope of the hermeneutic approach to ontology, but that does not in itself establish it as being metaphysically neutral. This is because the methodological validity of the hermeneutic approach is itself grounded in the phenomenological disclosure of what Heidegger takes to be the common, temporally situated structure of our involvements, but it remains open to question whether what that phenomenology actually discloses *is* any such unitary structure of temporality that would successfully ground the hermeneutic approach in absolutely general terms.

Perhaps the most readily accessible counterexample to Heidegger's unitary model of the temporality of our involvements resides in the sheer sensuous immersion in our own bodily affect that is, for all of us, a part of what it means to be alive. There is no phenomenological basis for thinking that this has to always involve a form of sensuous unfolding in the present that makes essential reference to the future implications of anterior states of affairs⁷. As the philosopher Michel Henry points out, such an immersion in sensuous self-sameness falls outside of what can be recognised as involvement in Heidegger's sense, since the very concept of a *phenomenon*, for Heidegger, requires a reference to a noetic content that brings with it a commitment to taking appearances at face value inasmuch as they specifically reveal how things are in a *world*, where the concept of "world" necessarily refers to something distinct from sheer bodily affect⁸.

⁷ For another quite different counterexample, whose elaboration lies beyond the scope of this paper, we might consider the different ways in which we find it natural to contemplate, imaginatively, the various aspects of our relationship with someone who has passed away, or with someone whose life is just beginning, or with someone whose temporal-historical relation to us brings them ever closer to or farther away from one or other of these two possibilities.

⁸ See M. Henry *Material Phenomenology and Language (or, Pathos and Language)* "Continental Philosophy Review" 32, 343-365 (1999). For a critical discussion of Henry's approach see D. Zahavi *Michel Henry and the Phenomenology of the Invisible* "Continental Philosophy Review" 32, 223-240 (1999). Zahavi's critical points do not, however, affect the relevance of Henry's ideas to the criticism of Heidegger put forward here. They only suggest that Henry's alternative phenomenology – if that is what it should still be called – also falls short of the general validity it aspires too.

If this immersion in what our bodies say directly about the significance of being alive is fundamentally separate from the realm of phenomena Heidegger is concerned with, then it cannot constitute an alternative model of what human involvement as such amounts to. More specifically, it cannot fulfil an equivalent role to that of involvement-with-a-world, in terms of deflating the post-Cartesian tradition of epistemological dualism and the subjectivism of modern culture. Yet to leave the matter there would be to miss a crucial point, which is that many of our collective practices are formed in such a way as to bridge the gap between this kind of sensuous immersion in bodily life and the kind of involvement that *does* presuppose a world, since they are constructed in a way that gives an ineliminably basic role to both. Here one need only think of medical practices of pain-alleviation, erotic and culinary practices connected with the pleasures of the senses, smoking, physical work and recreation, etc. In such areas of human life it is entirely natural for episodes of sensuous unfolding in the present to be recognised as intrinsically valuable or significant as they happen, or after they have happened, without essential reference to a background frame of reference in which future implications define an anterior state of affairs. Such recognitions often do have practical and ethical implications for how we comport ourselves with reference to the world⁹.

The picture becomes richer if one takes the expressivity of human vocal and bodily gesture as a way in which we, *as* our bodies, make visible and audible to *others*, and in some cases feelable by *them*, the significance internal to this kind of affectivity. Such expressivity is, after all, taken up in the public practices of art forms like music and dance, as well as in the plastic arts, where it is developed into a more complex play of forms and qualities. At this point it becomes very much a part of our involvement-with-a-world, but in a sense that is, I suspect, richer than that envisaged by Heidegger, since it must be defined with reference to communities of shared sensibility and affect as well as communities of shared prepositional commitment.

The presence within art of a play of elements such as constitute a counterexample to Heidegger's conception of the fundamental temporality of human involvements suggests that the decision to adopt a hermeneutic approach to understanding the significance of art in general, as advocated

⁹ It is revealing that we sometimes find it meaningful to reflect on such episodes, once they are in the past, in terms that need not involve them being comprehended in terms of any present or future implications at all. Such reflective recognitions of their intrinsic significance seem to register the fact that our immersion in sheer sensuous unfolding can be such that futurity, if it is there at all, is defined exclusively in terms of what is projected from the (phenomenological) present.

by Gadamer¹⁰, must proceed from a broader methodological commitment to the hermeneutic method than is legitimized (for dealing with ontological matters) by just the presuppositional character of the understanding internal to our involvements. This is because such a character is *only* disclosed by those involvements insofar as they conform to the model of temporality proposed as basic by Heidegger, whose scope is cast in question by the counterexample itself¹¹.

How far this undermines the validity of the more elaborate hermeneutic-ontological approach to art propounded by Gadamer remains an open question, but it does seem reasonable to conclude that art involves a more complex play of manifestations than can be straightforwardly accommodated there: one whose implications for the status of representation in art would be correspondingly harder to reduce to any single unitary model¹².

Carl Humphries – e-mail: humgin4@yahoo.co.uk

¹⁰ See H.-G. Gadamer *Wahrheit und Methode* Tübingen 1960.

¹¹ What is disclosed through the method of hermeneutic-ontological inquiry, and the validity of that method itself, stand in a relation of mutual interdependency. This relation is sometimes criticized as amounting to a circularity. However, circularity as such is not regarded by advocates of the approach as intrinsically problematic, since it is what that method leads us to expect to encounter, wherever the method itself is appropriate. The point of the counterexample(s) presented here, though, is to show that the circularity in question fails to encompass what it ought to, given the generality of its claims. So it amounts to an internal critique of the hermeneutic-ontological approach to the question of representation in art.

¹² This line of criticism leaves room for an acknowledgement that Heidegger's model of temporality largely works for those areas of human life that essentially lend themselves to being understood in hermeneutic-ontological terms, which may also correspond to a major part of what lends itself to being understood in the sort of phenomenological terms inherited from Husserl: that is, areas where we can, and – if we are to avoid falling into the wrong forms of scepticism or idealism – *must* acknowledge the givenness of our implicit understanding as capturing what things in the world really are, insofar as they correspond to what they present themselves as being. To accept *that* is to accept something of great importance, but it does not mean we should also accept the resulting perspective as exhaustive. Some aspects of what human life *consists in* simply fall below the level of this kind of relation-to-world, in that they inhabit a realm of immediacy internal not to the private mental life of a subject, but to their "private" sensuous existence. This is not strictly *private* since to some extent it is shareable with others, even where it may be closed off from any formalized *public* understanding. (However, where that is the case it can only figure in the analysis of hermeneutically unfoldable structures of givenness as what defines some of the points where that unfolding reaches its analytical terminus.) It might perhaps be the case that the structures of intelligibility that a thinker like Heidegger is concerned to bring to the fore, and those elements of what it means to be alive as a human being that fall outside of his approach, also *necessarily* stand in some more basic relation(s) of interdependency as a condition of being present in human life as they are, but an examination of that issue would take us far beyond the scope of the present paper.