Antoon
Van den Braembussche

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An Introduction to Philosophy of Art

Springer

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Foreword

Antoon Van den Braembussche rightly observes at the beginning of this admirable book, available for the first time in English, that the philosophy of art is a burgeoning field. Not only is its literature expanding rapidly, but so are the perspectives of its practitioners. This is not surprising. The philosophy of art exists because art exists, and for more than a century now art has been unfolding at a dizzying pace. Indeed, its development continues to accelerate, and it is no exaggeration to say that in recent decades the art world has witnessed an unprecedented explosion of new movements and forms. Against this background, someone coming to the philosophy of art for the first time needs an introduction, and an introduction of a particular kind. But what should such an introduction include, and how should it proceed? It is hard to imagine a better place to look for answers to these questions than *Thinking Art*.

One might start by noting that the philosophy of art is a peculiarly challenging field to introduce. For one thing, its subject matter is elusive in comparison with other areas of philosophy. In the theory of knowledge, for example, we do not have to look far beyond ourselves to find the target of reflection: we all perceive and think and claim to know things, however we may interpret these activities philosophically. Philosophers of art, on the other hand, are not only confronted with the established arts – painting, sculpture, music, and so on – but with a variety of objects that are not readily classifiable and even create entirely new categories. If Marcel Duchamp purchases a snow shovel in a hardware store and displays it in a gallery, what is it? A performance? A sculpture? Is it art at all? The subject matter of the philosophy of art assumes such myriad forms because it is a cultural phenomenon issuing from the creative freedom of the artist. It is this complex and unstable reality that aesthetics must master. An effective introduction to the field must therefore go as far as it can toward matching the breadth, depth, and complexity of its subject. Unlike a casual social introduction, which at best offers the bare condition for becoming better acquainted with someone later on, the aim of a philosophical introduction is to leave the neophyte with a genuine knowledge of the field, and, ideally, to provide those already initiated with fresh ways of looking at familiar things.

There are various ways to accomplish these ends. One could take a largely historical approach and discuss in serial fashion what this or that philosopher has said about art, or one could take a more thematic or issue-oriented approach with a

minimum of history. Both paths can yield good results, but the exclusive pursuit of either runs the risk of giving an impoverished picture of a field that embraces a rich array of themes evolving in a fascinating history. The author wisely takes a middle course. He gives the reader an excellent sense of the history of aesthetics, but without making his discussions of particular aestheticians occasions for displays of historical erudition for its own sake. He is doing philosophy, not writing chapters in the history of ideas. His point is to make the account of pivotal figures in the history of aesthetics come to life in terms of the issues and themes that have occupied and still occupy philosophers who think about art; or, from the other direction, to show that the issues on which aestheticians reflect can only be seen clearly through the lens of historical efforts to address them. He is not interested in engaging in flashy (or tedious) conceptual acrobatics carried out in some ethereal region far above the artworks themselves. His thematic and historical investigations are tethered firmly to art itself.

One of the chief virtues of the work's historical dimension is the scope and depth with which it covers the thinkers it discusses. The author may not have intended *Thinking Art* to be a history of aesthetics, but it can serve as one, since it considers – perceptively, sympathetically, but also critically – many of the key figures in the field. A difficulty in introducing the thought of particular aestheticians is that the positions they take on art are usually rooted in their general philosophical outlook, which means that grasping the former hinges on understanding the latter. This puts a double burden on the writer, who must give an accurate account of the philosophical underpinnings of a given thinker's aesthetic position and then of that position itself. The author of *Thinking Art* meets this challenge in exemplary fashion. A case in point is his discussion of Kant. One can write on Kant's theory of knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason* without so much as mentioning his aesthetic theory as it is developed in the *Critique of Judgement*, and many have done just that; but one cannot understand Kant's aesthetic theory without having a grasp of Kant's theory of knowledge and even of his moral theory in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The author presents a remarkably concise and intelligible exposition of Kant's general position (it could stand alone as a brief introduction to Kant's thought), and then of the Kantian aesthetics grounded on it. Equally effective is his treatment of Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, all philosophers whose aesthetic views are inseparable from their ontological and epistemological positions.

In reflecting on the themes aestheticians have promoted and engaged, the author takes a sophisticated and critical path. His discussion of the venerable topic of *mimesis* illustrates this nicely. One could introduce *mimesis* with a simplistic presentation and then subject it to a dismissive criticism, which is common enough in texts on aesthetics. The author's approach is more interesting and nuanced. He addresses *mimesis* in its complexity and depth. He does round up the usual suspect (Plato) and discusses the usual reading of *mimesis* as the imitation of sensuous appearances; but he also develops its broader meaning, which turns out to be expansive indeed. Through a fascinating discussion of Giacometti, he shows convincingly that even the notion of imitation as the copying of perceptual appearances still has a viable life, filtered, in Giacometti's case, through his struggle to capture the

human form. True, the sculptures that we identify as Giacometti's signature works – elongated, roughly modeled figures of women, dogs, and men – are hardly trompe l'oeil works. In the artist's estimation, however, they were imitations of reality, which suggests that the naive trompe l'oeil conception of *mimesis* hardly exhausts the notion. The author goes on to observe that there are three senses of *mimesis* in aesthetic theory: as imitation of sensory appearances; as depiction of emotions and ideas (giving *mimesis* a place even in expressionist theories); and as the representation of a higher, ideal, reality. Since it has so many forms, the author argues, *mimesis* can be found in such varied aesthetic theories as expressionism, formalism, Neo-Marxism, and post-structuralism. Typical of the author's adventurous and revealing approach is his argument that Hegel, while vigorously critical of the trompe l'oeil version of the mimetic theory, still left room for another meaning of *mimesis*. The point is that the philosophy of art excludes *mimesis* from its battery of insights into what art is and does only at its own peril.

The introduction of such a seemingly unlikely figure as Giacometti into the discussion of *mimesis* is the kind of link to the concrete that makes Van den Braembussche's approach effective and illuminating. Something similar occurs in his treatment of the Collingwood/Croce version of expressionism. Expressionism, in its rudimentary form, typically holds that the work of art expresses the artist's emotion. In the Collingwood/Croce version, emotion is less important than the claim that the work of art resides in the artist's mind as a creative idea whose material realization in the world is not essential. Expression of the idea within the mind is all that is needed. This conception is likely to strike a reader as odd, to say the least. The author's criticisms of the view are fair and to the point. He reminds us, for example, that the Collingwood/Croce version of expressionism "grossly underestimates the importance of the medium and of the resistance that it offers." At the same time, his discussion of Joseph Kosuth shows how a significant contemporary artist subscribes to just such a view, at least in modified form. In Kosuth's case, what is expressed is not the artist's emotion but an idea, and it is essentially the idea that is the work of art. The introduction of Kosuth again shows the connection of a classical doctrine, in this case, expressionism, to the contemporary art world, and specifically to conceptual art. Indeed, such connections between art and philosophy, and between philosophical views, run throughout the work, weaving a rich aesthetic tapestry.

The author does not restrict his introduction to classical theories such as expressionism and formalism. He opens it up to views, particularly those of Hegel and Danto, that attempt to come to grips with art's historical dimension and with the ambiguous notion of the "end of art." The latter theme has had considerable resonance among recent artists and critics, many of whom would consider themselves to be members of the postmodernist camp. The author has much of value to say about postmodernism and poststructuralist thought.

Among postmodern thinkers, philosophy of art shifts in the direction of cultural criticism. Traditional aesthetics explores the nature of aesthetic experience and the work of art, what the work is and what it accomplishes, and how it is related *as art* to other things – to the world, to history, and so on. Postmodern thinkers, on the other

hand, tend to focus on art's external relations (to economic life, for example) and on what such relations have done to art (made it into a commodity, and the like); they focus, that is, on art's fate within a certain set of cultural and historical circumstances. Pushed to an extreme, particularly under the lingering influence of the Marxist notion of superstructure, such an approach may have unfortunate consequences for aesthetics. It's as if one had a philosophy of the automobile but never got beyond discussing the advertising and marketing of cars, their role in class relations, and so on: all very interesting, but utterly uninformative about the automobile itself. On the other hand, one can certainly argue that economic and social circumstances are in fact important aspects of the context in which we experience art. Important too, if perhaps wrongheaded, is the claim of some postmodernists that art itself has virtually dissolved into such relations, and that any effort to define art in the sense of capturing the essence that distinguishes it from other things is bound to fail, precisely because art is not, in fact, fundamentally different from other things. Like them, so the argument goes, it derives its meaning from the web of social, cultural, and economic relations in which it is only one strand among many.

If clarifying the nature of art is the principal challenge facing the philosophy of art, clarifying the nature of the discipline itself poses its own difficulties. The author examines the ways in which the philosophy of art differs from scientific approaches to art, from the sociological or the psychological, for example, which reach their conclusions on the basis of empirical investigation. While aesthetics should be firmly rooted in the reality of art, its claims are not inductive generalizations. Nor should its statements be confused with particular aesthetic judgments. Aesthetic judgements are always about some specific work or artistic event. Statements in the philosophy of art, on the other hand, are intended to be universal claims. They represent efforts to get to the essence of art. They should be supported by argument and be alert to the dangers of one-sidedness. This does not mean that there cannot be "cross-fertilization" among the philosopher, the artist, and the critic. Philosophical views may be implicit in the aesthetic judgments of the critic, as the author's discussion of reactions to the work of Luc Tuymans shows, and artists may make what are in fact philosophical claims. This is perfectly innocent, unless the artist or critic naively turns such claims into limiting prescriptions about what art ought to be. Prescriptions are normative and exclusive. In the case of the artist, advancing them usually means nothing more than setting forth a program for artistic action. There is nothing wrong with manifestos and motivating theories, provided that they are not confused with philosophy or used to stifle creativity. In the case of the critic, however, the adoption of a one-sided aesthetic position as a criterion for aesthetic judgment may have the unhappy effect of closing the mind to all art that fails to pass the prescribed theoretical test.

Perhaps the key lesson of this book lies in its stance against exclusion and narrowness in the philosophy of art and in the realm of art generally. The philosopher, in order to do justice to art, should be accommodating and generous. The spectator and the critic should be equally hospitable in their judgments about particular works. This is captured in the author's claim that a "well-balanced" aesthetic judgment should take into account the work's mimetic and expressive aspects, its formal and symbolic

possibilities, and its social and historical dimensions. The art work demands it. Art, then, should have the first word and the last. Philosophy comes in between, and its worth is measured not by the creation of bold new theories but by the degree to which it achieves insight into the nature of artistic phenomena. The author wisely echoes Hegel at the end of his epilogue: "…art is always ahead of philosophy. When thinking about art, the understanding only comes afterwards, when philosophy – like the owl of Minerva – spreads its wings in the silence of night."

Georgetown University   John B. Brough
July 9, 2008

Preface

This is the first edition in English of a textbook that was originally published in Dutch in 1994 and has since become a classic in the Dutch worlds of art and philosophy.

Although this book was written primarily as a textbook to be used in art philosophy education, it is also addressed to all those who wish to deepen their understanding of art.

The primary objective of this book is to set forth a ***systematic*** and ***understandable*** introduction into a number of basic concepts and theories from philosophy of art. However fascinating and intriguing it may be, aesthetics has often been accused, and not unjustly so, of being unsystematic and unclear. Its usually haphazard use of concepts tends to confuse rather than enlighten the reader. In this book, on the contrary, conceptual clarification and theoretical transparency have pride of place. But the pursuit of clarity and lucidity should not come at the cost of the richness and complexity of the art theories under discussion. However, one cannot avoid a certain tension between these two goals. I have aimed for a balance between, on the one side, the attempt for clarification and, on the other side, respect for the originality and depth or profundity of the philosophical viewpoints on art.

The second objective of this textbook is to provide a ***theoretical framework*** that allows the reader to think about art and discuss art from varying points of view. For this reason, the art theories discussed, such as the imitation theory, the expression theory, formalism, symbol theory, idealist, neo-marxist, phenomenological and postmodern theories, are not only exposed in a methodical manner, but they are also systematically compared with one another. This enables the reader to fix his own position within philosophy of art and to account for the advantages and disadvantages of the various approaches. These issues appear as a leitmotiv throughout this book.

The third objective of this book is to shed light on the ***relationship between, on the one hand, the philosophy of art, and, on the other hand, concrete examples from art history or the contemporary art world***. Nearly every chapter, then, treats the work of an artist, a specific vision of an artist, or a specific artistic phenomenon as an illustration of the art theory discussed. The purpose is always to show the close connection between philosophy of art and developments in the history of art or the contemporary art world itself. On the one hand, philosophy of art often derives its issues from the evolution of art itself. On the other hand, artists and critics

often justify artistic innovations or aesthetic judgments using arguments found in the philosophy of art. This cross-fertilization shows not only the practical value of art philosophy, but also its inextricable connection to the history of art and recent developments within the art world. I have not restricted myself to one or two art forms here, but I have strived for a more balanced approach, discussing not only painting and architecture, but also poetry, film and video clips. This allows to encompass nearly all art forms, albeit in some cases merely to illustrate a particular philosophical theory.

The fourth objective of this textbook is to present the state of affairs of aesthetics in a way that is as ***objective as possible*** in addition to being ***representative***. Even though my personal preferences have determined the final selections contained in this book as well as the composition of the book itself, I deliberately attempted to put aside my own personal viewpoints as much as possible in discussing the theory and practice of art. Nevertheless, this is not a neutral but rather a critical account of the concepts within the philosophy of art and the art world. The most important objections against the various theories discussed are repeatedly brought to the forefront. Of course, the selection of these objections and the way in which the different viewpoints are compared is also a reflection of personal preference.

In everyday life, we often make comments about what might be considered beautiful and or ugly. Such things as simple tools and natural phenomena are objects of such aesthetic judgments: a chair, a tea set, a sunset or a sunflower. Especially in our contact with art, we are quick to state our preferences. Some people enjoy Bach while others prefer The Beatles. There are those who regard Joseph Beuys as a pioneer of modern art, while others do not even consider his "work" as art. Art critics discuss why a certain work of art, a movie or a novel, a theatrical performance or a piece of music, is regarded a failure or a success. In all these aesthetic judgments we try to convince others of what art really is or should be. In this sense, our daily lives are filled with the questions that are central to the philosophy of art, or aesthetics.

Is art a matter of imitation, in which the ability of artists to represent reality is at stake? Or is art above all about what the artist has tried to express? Or should art be identified with our own emotional response? In other words, is art only art when it moves us and touches us deeply? Is art not rather a matter of originality, of new ideas, through which the artist surprises us and incites us to experience the world differently? Or through which the artist makes us change our minds about art itself? Is art mainly about form and technique in that each sensation or idea becomes irrelevant to the value of a work of art? Or should our main consideration be the way we actually pass judgments on art? And does not the aesthetic judgment itself divulge the secret of why we consider art in certain ways and adhere to certain norms?

All these questions are addressed in the Part I of this book that is entirely devoted to ***The Essence of Art***. Here the classic theories on art, which answer the central question "What is art?" from various perspectives, are discussed at length. These classic theories from Plato, Nietzsche, Collingwood and Susanne Langer and others, continue to be influential.

Every art theory at least implicitly answers the question of what art is. But there are other questions as well. Can we discuss art at all without considering its historical development? Should we not acknowledge that a work of art only acquires meaning in relation to previous works of art? Should we still speak about progress or accept that we are living in a time in which art can no longer renew itself? What is meant by "the end of art"? What can be said about the relation between art and society? How can a work of art be traced back to the spirit of the times and the social context? Is art a reflection of the social–historical context? Or is it relatively autonomous, and is the social context only indirectly revealed in art? How should one understand the social function of art? Should art contribute to the emancipation and political awakening of the people? Or should it primarily fulfil a critical function? Should it express harmony, or rather give shape to the inner conflict of modern man?

Part I begins to answer these questions by putting in context the well known debates on the very nature of art. Part II is devoted to **Art in a Historical and Social Perspective** and discusses the influential theories of Hegel, Danto, Adorno, Walter Benjamin and others. Here the debate about the 'end of art' will be discussed at length. Other crucial questions such as the way society is reflected in the work of art, the way technological advance has determined, and still is determining the form, the aura and/or the aesthetical experience of the art work, will be addressed.

Over the last several years, an important part of aesthetics has focussed on the analysis and the interpretation of art. Especially postmodern discourse, led by French thinkers such as Lyotard, Derrida and Baudrillard, has challenged numerous classic and modern views on art. Here art is considered a language that should be studied independently of any historical context. More precisely, art is seen as a sign system of which the internal structure demands particular attention. But, next to that, other themes and questions followed. Is the time of the grand meta-narrative, which was so characteristic of modernity, gone for good? What does this imply for our views about art? Does art refer to reality at all? Is not the meaning of a work of art strictly autonomous? Does it only refer to other works of art, excluding all reference to that which lies outside the language of art? Is the end of representation near? Is the division between high art and low art still relevant at all? Have mass media transformed our whole social environment into a big sham to which art is inextricably connected? Because here the work of art is studied as a language or a sign system, Part III is called **The Language of Art**.

The Dutch original of this book has been written in 1993. The Dutch original has been somewhat revised and updated in respectively 2000 and 2007. For the English translation the manuscript and the bibliographical segments have been thoroughly revised, updated and adapted for an English audience.

various stages of the final editing and production of the English manuscript. Translating a philosophical work is an extremely difficult task. I wish to thank Michael Krass, Rutger Cornets de Groot, Thérèse Lorenz and Tina Ortiz, who contributed to the English translation of the book in one way or the other. The most grateful I am, however, to Dick van Spronsen and Shailoh Philips who helped me during the final editing of the manuscript. Thanks to them the book as now almost as readable in English as in Dutch. Finally I wish to thank warmly Professor John Brough for his willingness to write an inspiring foreword to this book.

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Chapter 1
Introduction: What Is Philosophy of Art?

1.1 The Current Interest in Philosophy of Art

Over the past few decades, the philosophy of art has enjoyed a remarkable revival. More and more studies are being devoted to the philosophical or theoretical probing into questions about the meaning of art. This gradual but steady expansion in the field also suggests a broadening group of potential readers. Indeed, the present situation may perhaps be characterized as not simply a revival but as an unprecedented breakthrough. There are three major developments that help explain this.

Firstly, today's increased importance of philosophy of art is due to modern art itself. Revolutionary avant-garde movements, attempting to transcend existing norms in art as early as around 1910, unleashed a process that has challenged any supposedly self-evident notions of art ever since. This process still continues today. Modern art is constantly pushing the boundaries of the "artistic", seeking and providing new answers to the question of what art really is. Not surprisingly, every new movement is accompanied by a theoretical discourse to justify its premises. In the art world, the permanent drive for renewal has urged more and more artists to turn to philosophy to support their concepts of art. Artists have sometimes taken this approach to such extremes as to identify *thinking* about art with art itself, as has happened in conceptual art. In any case, this explains the growing significance of art philosophy to the development of art.

A second reason for this renewed interest in the philosophy of art, or aesthetics, can be found in recent developments within the art world. The rise of so-called postmodernism in the arts in the late 1960s abruptly ended the sense of linear progress that used to characterize modernism. The net result was a fragmentary and utterly dispersed art world, in which the boundaries between art and non-art, between art and popular culture, between art and design, between art and daily life, and so on, were extremely difficult to discern, to maintain or to disentangle. A general sense of disorientation ensued, with art being judged according to arbitrary criteria that seemed based on strategic positions within the art world rather than on sheer conviction. This resulting *malaise* of contemporary art was first signaled in France as "*la crise de l'art*" (the crisis of art) and even as "la haine de l'art" (*the hatred for art*) or "*le complot de l'art*" (the conspiracy against art). Anyhow, worldwide the

postmodern condition of art led to a "crisis of legitimacy" which stimulated theoretical reflection on art as never before. Tellingly, most collections of theoretical essays presented at the Documenta in Kassel and several other international fairs in recent years were extremely heavy, both in size and in content, teeming with philosophical quotations and reflections. Needless to say that this has aroused an unusual and wide interest in philosophy or aesthetics.

A third reason may be found in philosophy. Contemporary philosophers show a renewed interest in the philosophy of art and/or aesthetics. This is borne out by a great number of publications of monographs and new introductions, including this book. The reasons for this renewal vary widely with the different philosophical traditions. French post-structuralism, for instance, seems to be the fruit of a kind of congeniality between art and philosophy, mostly inspired by German thinkers such as Nietzsche (Deleuze), Kant (Lyotard) and Heidegger (Derrida). In sharp contrast, analytical philosophy moved away from the system building approaches from German Idealism towards more methodological approaches that submit such concepts as representation, expression, artistic form and aesthetic experience, and such theories as the institutional theory of art to critical scrutiny.

What, though, is meant by the terms "philosophy of art" and "aesthetics"?

1.2   The Terms "Philosophy of Art" and "Aesthetics"

Thinking about art is usually classified under the general heading of "philosophy of art" ("art philosophy" for short) or "aesthetics". As such, thinking about art and beauty is as old as philosophy itself: already Plato and Aristotle developed philosophical views on art and beauty which are still relevant to-day. Also numerous medieval authors thoroughly discussed the nature of art and beauty. The recognition of aesthetics as an independent philosophical discipline, however, did not take place until the eighteenth century.

It was Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–1762) who in 1735 coined the term *aesthetics* for this new discipline. In his later work, especially in his *Aesthetica* (published in 1950–1958), he circumscribed aesthetics as the "science of sense knowledge". With his conception of aesthetics, Baumgarten sought to reassess the entire area of sense experience, which had been deemed inferior to rational knowledge by the metaphysical and logical traditions within Western philosophy since ancient times. This also explains why he used the term "aesthetics", which stems from the Greek word "aisthesis", meaning "sense perception" or "sensation". But aesthetics comprised much more than what we usually understand by sense perception. It included, according to Baumgarten, the whole range of sensibility that was bypassed by modern science, such as taste, judgment, imagination, experience of the fine arts and beauty, and so on. Especially the judgment of taste in its wider meaning as the "sense of beauty" or the ability to judge according to the senses (and thus not according to the intellect), was to be the central object of aesthetics. "According to the senses" here means "based on feelings of pleasure or displeasure".

In his view, aesthetics should not only be concerned with taste but also contribute to a further cultivation and perfection of taste and sensibility.

More specifically, the science of aesthetics would, still according to Baumgarten, establish the rules or principles of artistic or natural beauty from individual "taste." Conceived in this way, aesthetics almost immediately fell into discredit, although the term itself was maintained to designate the new field. However, Kant, who came immediately after Baumgarten, still was not very clear as to what aesthetics exactly meant. Indeed, in his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant still used aesthetics in its original and very broad meaning as the science of sense perception. As we will see in Chapter 6, Kant's so-called "transcendental aesthetics" is in fact not about the judgments of beauty but about judgments based on sense perception. Only in his *Critique of Judgment* did Kant use the adjective "aesthetic" to refer to judgments of beauty, or what are now commonly called "aesthetical judgments". So, although at first sight Kant seems to accord with Baumgarten, nothing could be further from the truth. The differences between him and Baumgarten are quite fundamental. First of all, Kant systematically distinguishes between sense perception per se and aesthetical judgment. And secondly, Kant based this distinction on a transcendental inquiry into the *a priori* conditions presupposed by empirical and aesthetical judgments, respectively. This explains why he did not believe that Baumgarten's aesthetics could ever establish objective rules, laws or principles of natural or artistic beauty.

Also Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) considered the term aesthetics hopelessly unsuited and superficial. One important reason for the inadequateness of the term was in Hegel's view that it referred to both artistic *and* natural beauty, whereas he aimed to restrict aesthetics only to questions pertaining to art and its history. But also Hegel continued to use the term, since it had, as he pointed out, already made its way into common language. And so it remains until the present day: the term "aesthetics" is still widely used, not seldom as a synonym for philosophy of art, although, like Hegel, many contemporary philosophers consider it to be misleading and outdated. And today, even more so than in Hegel's time, there are other reasons to be wary of the term "aesthetics".

Since Hegel, the term "aesthetics" has acquired a number of very different meanings. Firstly, aesthetics sometimes refers to an *empirical* investigation into the underlying factors that contribute to aesthetic experience or perception. In this strict definition, aesthetics appears as a branch of experimental psychology, although physiology and physics, especially optics, are also quite important to the study of aesthetic experience or perception. This first use is mostly called *empirical* or *experimental aesthetics*. Secondly, the term "aesthetics" is also used to refer to the systematic study of stylistic and expressive elements, such as composition and design. Thirdly, another use of "aesthetics" is in referring to the various ways that beauty can be studied, including both the experience and the perception of beauty. In these three frequent definitions, the meaning of "aesthetics" is not necessarily philosophical, which undoubtedly explains why some modern philosophers characterize their field as *philosophical aesthetics*. This explicitly philosophical interpretation is in fact a fourth use of the term "aesthetics"!

However, upon closer inspection, even this last definition of "aesthetics" is not the same as "philosophy of art", because philosophical aesthetics does not only deal with the beauty of art but also with the experience of beauty in general. Philosophers who emphasize aesthetic experience do not generally make a fundamental distinction between the way we experience beauty in nature and the way we experience it in art. For them, both these aesthetic experiences are analogous and equally important, and they tend to retain the term "aesthetics". Yet not all art philosophers agree that the aesthetic experience of natural beauty falls within the scope of art philosophy. That is why Hegel, for instance, preferred the term "philosophy of art" to "aesthetics". Seen from this point of view, "philosophy of art" is less broad than "aesthetics", since it deals exclusively with reflections on art. For pragmatic reasons, however, we shall continue to use the terms "philosophy of art" and "aesthetics" as synonyms, always bearing in mind the implications referred to above.

1.3   Philosophical Versus Scientific Inquiry into Art

More important than the terminological question, however, is the precise definition of the philosophical discipline under discussion. Whichever term is used, we must always be aware of the *fundamental* difference between an *empirical* and a *philosophical* inquiry. This difference is so essential that it deserves further explanation. It is, after all, the difference between an empirical-scientific study of art on the one hand and a philosophical study on the other.

The question of how we are able to form an optical image of a painting implies an empirical study based on the psychology, physiology and physics of sense perception. However, the moment we ask ourselves *how is it possible that we can perceive a painting at all*, we find ourselves entirely within the realm of philosophical reflection. The philosopher will attempt to examine all that is presupposed in our sense and/or aesthetic perception and what it is that makes it possible. He will remind us that space and time are presupposed in every perception, and that without these presuppositions there would be no question of perception at all.

Another example that illustrates this difference is the following. Let us consider a painting of a war scene. If we ask ourselves what technical means were used by the artist to render the scene, the answer can only be arrived at empirically. An art historian will tell us which color combinations were available to the painter, to what extent he made use of perspective, etc. However, as soon as we ask ourselves whether a representation of a "war scene" should be the subject of painting, we find ourselves right in the middle of philosophy of art. The same holds true when we doubt the possibility of the war scene on the canvas being an exact imitation of something that actually occurred. Is an objective representation of reality at all possible? Is not even the most realistic depiction always influenced by the artist's interpretation? These types of question transcend empirical examination and are typical of philosophy of art.

Finally, let us look at a third example. Suppose we want to know under what conditions Mozart composed his *Requiem*. To answer this question, we are dependent on empirical information, in this case biographical research, for instance. However,

as soon as we ask *if and to what degree such information is relevant or necessary for an aesthetic judgment of Mozart's Requiem*, we are back in the philosophical realm. Such a question *cannot be answered on empirical grounds*. So far, we can conclude that the fundamental difference between an empirical and a philosophical inquiry is not so much determined by the subject of investigation as it is by the type of questions asked. In other words: the difference is determined *not materially* but *formally*. This means that any art subject can be examined both from an empirical-scientific perspective and in philosophical terms.

We can clarify the difference between a scientific and a philosophical inquiry into art in yet another way. An aesthetic judgment such as "This painting by Piero Della Francesca is beautiful" can never be empirically proven or refuted. A simple empirical judgment such as "*The Virgin of Hope* is a painting by Piero Della Francesca" is, on the other hand, open to empirical examination. Aesthetic statements are neither true nor false. They are *normative* statements and as such neither verifiable nor refutable in the common sense of the word. They do not belong to the realm of "what is", but to the realm of "what ought to be"; they are concerned with norms, not with facts. In this sense, aesthetics can be compared with ethics, as moral norms also play a central role in ethics. Aesthetic statements, like moral statements, are *value judgments*, not empirical judgments. It would therefore be absurd to speak of "scientific aesthetics". "Empirical aesthetics" or "scientific aesthetics" is in fact a *contradiction in terms*!

Note that here too the difference between a philosophical and a scientific approach to art is determined formally, not materially. In sociology of art, for example, it is possible to study aesthetic judgments empirically. In this case, however, aesthetic judgments or judgments of taste are regarded as facts. An empirical study conducted by Pierre Bourdieu will illustrate this. He confronted members of different professions and social classes with artworks and recorded their aesthetic judgments to answer the question if and to what extent judgment of taste correlates with social position. One of his conclusions was that members of the working class have much less appreciation for artistic experiments than university graduates or members of the upper classes. Bourdieu's own judgments as a researcher are not value judgments but empirical judgments about the judgments of taste of others! However, as soon as Bourdieu imposes his own views on art, something he is occasionally unable to resist, he departs from the realm of empirical research. At such moments, he too finds himself in the middle of philosophy of art, where the only arguments that count are of a philosophical rather than of an empirical nature.

1.4 Art Criticism Versus Art Philosophy

In the light of our discussion above, it is relatively easy to pinpoint the distinction between empirical and art philosophical judgments, between scientific and philosophical studies of art. The same cannot be said of the basic distinction between art criticism and art philosophy, which would seem somewhat more complicated to determine.

It is true that art critics make frequent use of empirical statements, one of their aims being to provide information about the contemporary art world. However, the final objective of art criticism is a normative one. The art critic is expected to pass a judgment on an exhibition, a musical performance, a film or theater production. Based on his or her own aesthetic experience and/or taste, the art critic is expected to express whether or not he or she found the exhibition, musical performance, film or theater performance beautiful, successful, entertaining, etc. In other words, the art critic pronounces a so-called aesthetic judgment. Thus far any confusion with philosophical statements about art seems unlikely.

However, the distinction between art criticism and philosophy of art becomes somewhat more problematic once we realize that the aesthetic judgments given by the art critic are often implicitly or even explicitly based on more general art philosophical perspectives and/or convictions. Art critics often explicitly support or justify their aesthetic judgments *using* art philosophical arguments *normatively*. Their own philosophical perspectives are sometimes so dominant that they cease to be open or receptive to the aesthetic experience of the work of art or artistic expression they are contemplating! In all of these cases, it seems as though the aesthetic judgment is simply a derivative of the critic's art philosophical views.

A second problem is that the theories of many art philosophers are said to be largely determined by their own tastes, personal preferences and their own aesthetic experiences and judgments of artworks. Philosophy of art, in this case, would seem to be derived from previous aesthetic judgments and would thus only appear as a kind of rationalization or justification of the own personal taste of the philosopher concerned.

Both of these problems are remarkable instances of circular reasoning. While the aesthetic judgment seems to stem from the critic's art philosophy, the philosophical viewpoints of philosophers seem to be derived from their particular aesthetic experiences and judgments as art lovers!

In fact there *is* a crucial and fundamental difference between an aesthetic and an art philosophical judgment, however indistinguishable they may appear in practice, or however much they may seem to presuppose one another. Indeed, an aesthetic judgment is always about *one specific* artistic event, *one specific* work of art, or the artwork of *one specific* artist (or even from *one specific* artistic movement or period). Such a judgment is generally inspired by the critic's aesthetic experience when confronted with a *particular* form of expression. It is therefore *a normative statement or value judgment*, which in principle remains limited to *this* one event, *this* artwork, *this* artist or *that* movement. An art philosophical statement, on the other hand, is not about one specific manifestation of art but a claim or judgment about the *essence* of art: it always concerns an art form or art *in general*. It is, as a rule, not rooted in aesthetical experience, but in essential insight. Consequently, it is not normative, not a value judgment.

The following quotation may serve as an example of aesthetic judgment: 'To me, the paintings of Luc Tuymans are very beautiful. I saw his work at an exhibition, and I find it exquisite' (Bernard Dewulf in Nieuw Wereldtijdschrift, 1999, 56). What Dewulf, as an art critic, is expressing here is his aesthetic experience of Tuymans'

work. Here we are, without question, dealing with an aesthetic judgment: the statement is both appreciative and normative, yet remains limited to the work of an artist. Only rarely do art critics express their aesthetic judgments directly or clearly, instead they will use similes or metaphors to evoke the aesthetic experience, which virtually defies description! After visiting another exhibition of Tuymans' work, Bianca Stigter wrote as subtly as meaningfully: 'Tuymans' canvases express a remarkable sort of indifference. The images seem fleeting. If you walk away from a painting and return to it, you almost expect that in the meantime the painting has changed' (NRC Handelsblad, 1 September 1995, CS, 5). This is a beautiful metaphorical representation of a manner of painting which highlights the 'vanishing point of the image' and in which the artist, in his urge towards purification, creates images that become visible the moment they disappear, or disappear the moment they become visible.

A well-known statement by Luc Tuymans is: 'All art is the art of painting'. This is a full-fledged art philosophical statement, since it is clearly a statement about all art as such. Another well-known statement by Paul Klee is that 'Art does not make the invisible visible, but the visible invisible'. This too is an art philosophical statement, since it refers to the essence of all art. Statements such as 'poetry is what makes the invisible appear' (Nathalie Sarraute) or 'In the art of painting, you must create an impression of authenticity with the help of the inauthentic' (Edgar Degas) are also art philosophical by nature, because they concern the essence of a specific art form.

The difference between an aesthetic judgment and an art philosophical statement can be explained in yet another way. Quite often, an aesthetic judgment is immediately accompanied by an art philosophical justification. A fine example can again be found in Bernard Dewulf's previously quoted reviews: 'Tuymans' work is extraordinarily suggestive, in the good sense of the word – rather than vagueness, it suggests purification' (p. 60). Dewulf's aesthetical judgment is here accompanied and justified by a somewhat implicit philosophical statement about art as such, arguing that art, in order to reach its essential state, should be able to purify its means and leave out the superfluous. Again, the difference between an aesthetic statement and an art philosophical statement is perfectly expressed here: while the aesthetic appreciation concerns Tuymans' work itself, the art philosophical statement applies to all art in general, to the essence of all (good) art.

1.5   The Ideal–Typical Viewpoints in Philosophy of Art

Regardless of the nature of philosophical inquiry, there are various viewpoints or perspectives from which to consider art. These viewpoints are ideal-typical because they are abstracted from the existing literature on the philosophy of art, and are not included in any literature *as such* or *in any absolute pure form*. Even so, most theories center on a specific viewpoint although occasionally other perspectives may be implied.

The viewpoints discussed in the first part of this book, The Nature of Art: Classical Answers to the Question "What is Art?", can be illustrated as follows:

Physical Reality
|
Artist → work of art → art beholder
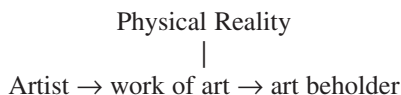
To begin with, one viewpoint is the relationship between the work of art and physical reality, in other words, reality that is sensibly perceptible. This viewpoint is central to the imitation theory. According to this theory, the essence of art is the imitation or exact representation of sensible reality. The imitation theory in its strict sense has been derived the theory of mimesis, a conception of Plato which has a much broader meaning, as we shall see in Chapter 2. The imitation theory as such, which has known his heyday in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, has been increasingly criticized during the twentieth century. In Chapter 2 we will closely consider the most important objections against the imitation theory as such, but also briefly discuss the most important recent theories on pictorial representation in general, such as conventionalism and the neo-naturalist theory

A second point of view is the *relationship between the artist and the work of art*. This viewpoint is fundamental to the so-called *expression theory* of art. According to this theory, the essence of art is the artist's self-expression. Here, the work of art is approached from the point of view of the artist, the original state of mind, the original idea underlying the work of art. It fits well with the popular idea that art is predominantly about the artist's original purpose or intention. Some supporters of the expression theory, however, go so far as to claim that the artwork already exists in the artist's mind and that its material manifestation is entirely unimportant. The expression theory has also stirred up emotions and led to biting criticism. The subject is, however, so fundamental that it demands proper attention. Chapter 3 is entirely devoted to this discussion.

A third perspective is limited to the *contemplation of the artwork itself*. This perspective is characteristic of *formalism*. This theory departs from the assumption that a work of art must be considered for its own sake, in terms of its own merits. The essence of the work of art is the pure form, not the content. Advocates of formalism therefore reject any reference to reality or to the artist's intention. The work of art is completely autonomous and may only be judged in terms of its formal properties. The classical formulation and defense of formalism in music, painting and poetry, respectively, will be critically discussed in Chapter 4.

It goes without saying that, in the quest for the essence of art, no single theory will suffice. Some philosophers of art therefore promote the view that the true essence of art is a *synthesis of form and expression*. Nietzsche's view on the work of art as a synthesis of the Dionysian and the Apollinian will, of course, be of pivotal concern here. But we will also probe into the theory of Susanne Langer, who, in the footsteps of the early Wittgenstein and Ernst Cassirer, the German founder of symbol theory, argued for a similar synthesis. The artist's studio of Chapter 5 will be devoted here to Kandinsky's well-known argumentation in favor of a synthesis of form and self-expression, of pure form and the spiritual mission of the modern artist. These issues will be discussed in Chapter 5.

A fourth viewpoint concentrates on *the relationship between the artwork and the beholder*. This perspective concentrates on the aesthetic experience aroused not only by the work of arts but also by natural objects. It is focused, more specifically, on the analysis of aesthetic judgment, which was first systematically examined by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Kant's influence on modern aesthetics can hardly be overestimated. The whole of Chapter 6 is dedicated to Kant's work. The reason why we do not discuss Kant until that chapter is that he anticipated all preceding classical theories into one synthesis, even though he is usually seen as a founding father of formalism.

Characteristic of the classical theories included in the first part of this book is that they ignore the *historical* and *social* contexts of art. A number of viewpoints which are of the utmost importance to the further development of aesthetics are therefore absent in Part I but will receive full attention in Part II, called "Art in a Historical and Social Perspective". I therefore suggest updating the classical diagram as follows:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{Socio-historical} \\ \text{Context} \\ | \\ \text{Artist} \rightarrow \text{work of art} \rightarrow \text{audience} \\ | \\ \text{Art historical} \\ \text{Context} \end{array}$$
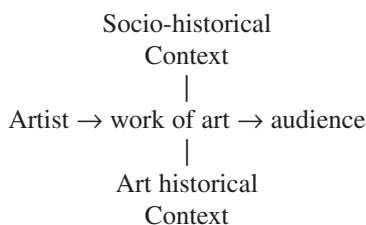
A fifth viewpoint is the *relationship between the work of art and the art historical context*. This view focuses on the art historical perspective, which was first introduced into aesthetics by Hegel. According to Hegel, the history of art belongs to the essence of art itself. Since Hegel identified the evolution of art with the "unfolding self-consciousness of the spirit", the history of art, he argued, ended shortly after Romanticism. In Chapter 7 we will not only expose the broader philosophical system which inevitably led to the Hegelian thesis on the end of art, but also discuss in some detail the more recent defense of this thesis by the well-known American art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto. Chapter 7 is concluded with a thorough criticism of both Hegel's and Danto's argumentations in favor of the "end of art".

A sixth point of view is the *relationship between the work of art and the socio-historical context*. How does a work of art relate to its social context? Is art a reflection of social reality or is it only indirectly related to it, and if so, in what way? What about the social function of art? These questions will be addressed in depth in Chapter 8, which is entirely devoted to the neo-Marxist perspective. After a systematical account of Georg Lukács' defense of classical realism, we will delve into the expressionism debate of the 1930s, involving, next to Lukács, Ernst Bloch and Bertold Brecht. After considering his devastating critique of Lukùacs' realism we will explore Adorno's subtle and delicate defense of modernism. In spite of the decline of Marxism in the West, Adorno's views on art are still relevant and influential. This also, and even more so, applies for Walter Benjamin. The chapter closes with a detailed discussion of Benjamin's seminal essay on the technical reproducibility of art.

Part III, called "The Language of Art: From Phenomenology to Poststructuralism", starts with the phenomenological perspective, which links the theories outlined in

Part I and Part II on the one hand, to post-structuralism, which has become of enormous importance to contemporary art philosophy, on the other. Contrary to classical and modern theories that approach art from a pre-determined concept, phenomenology seeks to reveal the original experience of the artwork, i.e. the *immediate* experience that occurs without any intervention whatsoever of preconceptions. This open attitude, explored in Chapter 9, leads to far-reaching insights into the age-old issue of perception, the bodily predetermined experience of space and depth (Merleau-Ponty) and the original experience of the thing as such, the exploration of the materiality of the work of art, the way it brings about the truth (Heidegger). Merleau-Ponty as well as Heidegger were "on the road to language", heralding the development of semiotics (see Chapter 10). It was not until post-structuralism, however, that the radical consequences of this tendency would be fully felt, leading to a fundamental criticism of Western metaphysics as well as of traditional Western views of art, the latter being inextricably linked to the former. Finally, in Chapter 11, we will exhaustively explore this post-structuralism via the works of Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson.

Further Reading

The last decade some interesting anthologies on aesthetics have been published:

Stephen David Ross (ed.), *Art and its significance: an anthology of aesthetic theory*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994 (Originally published in 1984).
David Goldblatt and Lee Brown (eds.), *Aesthetics: a reader in the philosophy of arts*, Upper Saddle River, N.J: Prentice Hall, 2004 (Originally published in 1997).
Eric Dayton (ed.), *Art and interpretation: an anthology of readings in aesthetics and the philosophy of art*, Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 1998.
Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (eds.), *Aesthetics and the philosophy of art: the analytic tradition: an anthology*, Malden, M.A. : Blackwell Publishers, 2004.
P. Kivy (ed.), *The Blackwell guide to aesthetics*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2004.

In the recent boom of anthologies the following threefold project deserves to be mentioned separately:

Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger (ed.), *Art in theory 1648–1815: an anthology of changing ideas,* London: Blackwell, 2000.
Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger (ed.), *Art in theory 1815–1900: an anthology of changing* idea, London: Blackwell, 2000.
Charles Harrison, Paul Wood, Jason Gaiger (ed.), *Art in theory 1900–2000: an anthology of changing ideas*, London: Blackwell, 2002.
(This project embodies a rather complete survey of theoretical insights, which have accompanied the development of Western art since 1648. It contains not only texts from philosophers, but from artists, art critics, writers, psychoanalysts, politicians, and so on. The three volumes offer a gigantic and historically sound reconstruction of important, often forgotten texts. Most of the texts are quite readable.)

Quite old, already classical but still interesting readers are:

Melvin Rader (ed.), *Modern book of aesthetics: an anthology*, New York: Dryden Press, 1979
    (Originally published in 1935).
Joseph Margolis (ed.), *Philosophy looks at the arts. Contemporary readings in aesthetics*. Temple:
    Temple University Press, 1987 (Originally published in 1962).
W.E. Kennick (ed.), *Art and philosophy: reading in aesthetics*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979
    (Originally published in 1964).

In the seventies and the eighties two excellent readers saw the light:

George Dickie and Richard J. Sclafani (eds.), *Aesthetics: a critical anthology*, New York: St.
    Martin's Press, 1989 (Originally published 1977).
Patricia H. Werhane (ed.), *Philosophical issues in art*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall,
    1984.

**During the last decade a lot of introductions into philosophy of art have been
published. Some older, almost classical introductions are:**

Arthur Weiss, *Introduction to the philosophy of art*, Berkeley, CA: Berkeley University Press,
    1910.
Edward Bullough, *Aesthetics: lectures and essays*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977
    (Originally published by Stanford University Press, 1957).
Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics. Problems in the philosophy of criticism*, New York: Hackett
    Publishing Company, Inc., 1981 (Originally published in 1958).
George Dickie, *Introduction to aesthetics: an analytical approach*, Oxford, 1997. (Originally
    published in 1971 under the title: *Aesthetics: an introduction*).
Anne Sheppard, *Aesthetics; an introduction to the philosophy of art*, New York: Oxford University
    Press, 1987.

Some excellent, more recent introductions are:

Gordon Graham and Richard Eldridge, *An introduction to the philosophy of art*, New York:
    Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Standard works on the history of aesthetics:

Katherine E. Gilbert and Helmut Kuhn, *History of aesthetics*, Westport, Conn., Greenwood, 1972
    (Originally published in 1939).
Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz, *History of aesthetics*, 3 Vols, Den Haag: Mouton, 1970-74.

On Aesthetics in the Middle-Ages:

Umberto Eco, *Art and beauty in the Middle-Ages*, (transl. by H. Bredin), New Haven, CT: Yale
    University Press, 1986.

Specific on American aesthetics:

Rufus L. Anderson, *American muse: anthropological excursions into art and aesthetics*, Upper
    Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000.

For the quotes on Luc Tuymans in 1,4, see:

Bernard Dewulf, "De Zuivering" (Purification), *Nieuw Wereldtijdschrift*, Vol. 16, 1999, nr. 6,
    55–60.
Bianca Stifter, "Ik wil schilderen zonder deemoed.; Schilder Tuymans over weerstand en geweld"
    (I want to paint without humility. Painter Tuymans on resistance and violence), in: *NRC
    Handelsblad*, 01-09-1995, p. 5.

Chapter 2
The Imitation Theory

2.1   Introduction

In his now classic conversations with Goethe, Johann Peter Eckermann describes how on February 26, 1824, the then 74-year-old prince of German literature showed him a series of engravings and drawings, pointing out what he considered the most excellent of each genre. Goethe also handed Eckermann a few etched sheets by the famous animal painter Roos, and asked him what he thought. A quick characterization of the etchings followed: "They were all of sheep, in every posture and situation. The simplicity of their countenances, the ugliness and shagginess of their fleece, were represented with the utmost fidelity to nature." Upon which the aged genius reflected, as eloquently as meaningfully: 'I always feel uneasy,' Goethe said, 'when I look at these beasts. Their state, so limited, dull, gaping and dreaming, excites in me such sympathy, that I fear I shall become a sheep and I almost think the artist must have been one. At all events, it is most wonderful how Roos has been able to think and feel himself into the very soul of these creatures, so as to make the internal character peer with such force through the outward covering. Here you see what a great talent can do when it keeps steady to subjects which are congenial with its nature' (Eckermann, 1998, 46–7).

These considerations immediately confront us with an important characteristic of visual art, i.e. its capacity for imitation or realistic representation. In the ensuing reflections, both poets emphasized time and again the realism and accuracy of Roos' depictions of not only sheep, but dogs, cats and animals of prey too. They pay particular attention to the resemblance between the etchings and reality. Roos's animal scenes are not simply equated with nature; they are also compared to it. It is the *resemblance* between the representation of nature and nature itself that demands all attention here. There is a suggestion of an "as if-relationship" to nature: apparently Roos's talent is that he, like no other, is able to create an *illusion*, to provide the spectator with an image in which the actual animals can be *recognized*.

We also encounter in Eckermann's description a second important characteristic of visual art, i.e. its capacity for expression. The image that Goethe evokes of these depicted sheep is neither neutral nor purely descriptive but points to the immediate expressive potential of their pictorial representation. As an art lover, Goethe perceives

the expressions of the sheep and what they symbolize. It is thanks to Roos's ability to empathize, thanks to his spiritual affinity with the animals that he has succeeded in expressing their inner character. "A sympathy with these animals was born with him, a knowledge of their psychological condition was given him, and thus he had so fine an eye for their bodily structure," explained Goethe, who once again praised the painter for having restricted himself to that for which he was created" (Eckermann, 1998, 47). Yet Goethe appears to remain within the boundaries of imitation, considering Roos, as a painter, simply a medium – however talented and suited – that is wholly subservient to the goal of *representing* nature as faithfully as possible. Yet in a way, the external, pictorial imitation is merely a pretext, is itself a medium or a means for revealing the inner nature or essence of the animals.

Although at first glance this anecdote may appear rather innocent, it actually faces us straightaway with an age-old debate among philosophers of art on the ability of art to imitate or represent reality. The views of those who believe that this ability is art's pre-eminent quality are usually jointly referred to as the "imitation theory".

The question here is of course what is to be understood by "reality". In a strict sense, the theory refers to imitation of a reality that can be perceived through the senses. This is an important restriction. It does not, however, necessarily imply that it concerns a representation of inner reality, to which Goethe also refers, or a portrayal of social reality. It solely concerns sensory perception. However, the imitation theory need not be limited to the visual arts. On the contrary, it is a theory which asserts that the essence of each art form is based on the imitation of a sensibly perceptible reality. This means that, in this view, literature, drama, photography, film, music and dance, for instance, are all essentially imitations of a physically perceptible reality as well!

The imitation theory is often associated with the concept of "mimesis", a Greek word that originally meant "imitation", "representation" or "copy", specifically of nature. The word also had other connotations, as we shall see. The concept of mimesis is found almost everywhere in the philosophy of art. It does not, however, always mean the same thing but covers a wide range of alternative interpretations. It often implies "representation" rather than "imitation". When used in this sense, the mimetic quality of an artwork very generally refers to the way in which "reality" is represented or portrayed in the work. Here, the definition of "reality" is much broader than in the case of the imitation theory in its strictest sense. On closer inspection, it can refer to the inner reality or to the entire social context. When we call a novel "realistic", for example, we can take this to mean that the novel provides a faithful image of the inner world of the characters or of a certain social and/or historical reality. In this case, "mimesis" means "representation" rather than "imitation". Sometimes the term "reflection" is used, e.g. to describe a realistic novel as a "reflection" of social and/or historical reality. The mimesis concept can be taken so far as to consider an experimental novel – James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example – a better representation or portrayal of the human soul, of the subjective stream of consciousness or even of the unconscious instinctive life, than a traditionally narrated "psychological" novel.

The concept of "mimesis" therefore ultimately has a much broader definition than "imitation". This variety goes back as far as classical antiquity. Plato used

"mimesis" in the sense of "representation" or "imitation" as indicated here. Aristotle, on the other hand, saw "mimesis" as more than simply the imitation of reality: for him, the concept refers to the representation of general human types and acts rather than to the imitation of nature and specific, existing human types and acts. The artist, he argued, does not imitate nature or reality, but represents nature or reality as it should, or could, be. According to this view, mimesis is a portrayal of what is possible, so that the artistic creation can be very "unrealistic". It could, for instance, portray certain myths to the public. Aristotle regarded Greek tragedy of his time as the high point of mimesis. In Greek tragedy, human fate was staged by means of mythological stories: the point was not to imitate every-day reality, but to portray human destiny in such a way that the observer was cleansed, so to speak. Aristotle called this purgation "catharsis". While Plato rejected Greek tragedy because he believed that the cruelty portrayed might incite the audience toward "imitating" or "following" it, Aristotle actually assumed that the tragedy would purge the audience to such a degree that they would most definitely renounce any acts of violence. Seen in this light, tragedy had a positive effect: by enacting violence and emotion, tragedy liberated the audience, if only through showing the disastrous consequences of certain actions. Although Plato and Aristotle differed in their concepts of mimesis and as a consequence profoundly disagreed in their evaluation of the effects of Greek tragedy, they did agree that tragedy was essentially a matter of imitation. In their discussions of other art forms, including painting, they also both believed that imitation was the primary aim and destiny.

Because of its emphasis on direct, unmediated imitation, Plato's mimesis theory can be seen as the starting point for the later imitation theory. However, whereas in Plato all imitation was traced back to the supernatural world, the subsequent imitation theory takes invariably the sensibly perceptible reality as its sole model or criterion. While Plato's mimesis theory is still embedded in an idealistic point of view, in which actual reality is identified with the *world of ideas*, the subsequent imitation theory falls completely within the perspective of "realism" that sees a work of art as *a copy* of sensibly perceived reality. This also explains why the increasing criticism of the imitation theory has developed into a criticism of "realism". In view of the great relevance of this aspect to the philosophy of art, this chapter is largely dedicated to Plato's mimesis theory and to Gombrich and Goodman's criticism of the views that are commonly associated with realism and that they censured as naïve. After a short interlude on the wider philosophical debates on pictorial representation I will end with a glimpse into the artist's studio, more particularly Alberto Giacometti's restless and paradoxical pursuit of imitation, the perfect rendering of what he actually saw.

2.2   Plato's Theory of "Mimesis"

Plato's fundamental contribution to the so-called imitation theory is apparent from the ideas about mimesis that he set out, in characteristic dialogue form, in Book 10 of *The Republic*. To gain an adequate understanding of Plato's theory of art, we

should take account of his conception of reality, which is closely linked to the so-called *theory of ideal Forms*. According to Plato, the phenomena that we call "nature", "experience" and "reality" belong to the world of appearances, the phenomenal world. The world, as we perceive it, is in constant flux, he argued. We never perceive the same object in the same manner twice. The objects we perceive, the point of view from which we perceive them, and even the perceiver, are all subject to constant change, and yet we identify similar objects in all our perceptions. This led him to think that in the phenomenal world there are similarities that keep returning despite these constant changes: objects, acts or phenomena that apparently have the same properties. We can, Plato reasoned, form an idea of perfection even though the acts and objects we observe fall short of it. How is it then, Plato asked through Socrates, that we are able to imagine such perfect or absolute Forms at all, if they do not exist in the world we perceive? Apparently, Plato argued, we must assume that there is, next to the perceptible world, an ideal world, which contains the absolute Forms, of which the perceptible objects and/or acts are but imperfect manifestations or reflections. This world of Forms is the true, actual and authentic reality, for it is eternal and unchanging. And nature, made up of imperfect and variable manifestations, is therefore less real than the world of Forms.

2.2.1   Art as the "Imitation of the Imitation"

On the basis of this theory, Plato makes a comparison between the craftsman and the artist. The craftsman, he suggests, pictures a mental image of an ideal Form and uses it as a model to make a specific, perceptible, tangible and ready-to-use crafted product. Like nature, this crafted product is an appearance, an imperfect copy of an ideal Form. The artist, however, copies nature or a specific, crafted product, without knowing their inner workings. He does not really know how this natural object or this product is made. He just imitates the sensorial appearance of things. In doing so, he simply makes a copy of a copy, an imitation of an imitation. In *The Republic*, Plato therefore makes a three-step distinction between (a) the perfect Form of a bed, made by God, (b) a bed made by a carpenter and (c) the copy of a bed created by a painter. And so Plato has Glaucon ask Socrates: "Well, in that case", I said, 'you're using the term *representer* for someone who deals with things which are, in fact, two generations away from reality, aren't you? (Plato, 2008, 348). Plato also categorized the activities of craftsmen according to what we now classify as the "fine arts". The crucial distinction for him was not between craftsmanship and fine art, but between *productive* and *imitative* "arts". And it is because the imitative arts do not produce anything or do not contribute anything to the world, that they are useless, frivolous and reprehensible. And so in the tenth book of *The Republic*, he criticizes these frivolities, employing the mirror metaphor. What to think, he asks, of a craftsman who can "produce" all plants and animals, himself included, the earth, the sky, the gods and the heavenly bodies? Is this not testimony to a miraculous virtuosity? It is, however, a virtuosity based on little or nothing. Take a mirror and turn it in all directions.

In this manner you would be able to "produce" the sun, the stars, the earth, yourself, all the animals, plants and things in a split second. What a poet or a painter therefore does is simply "create" imitations or copies, just as a mirror reflects things, "mirrors" them.

In the eyes of Plato, the "production" of artists was not only useless and frivolous, but also extremely *unrealistic*. When painters or sculptors imitate a person, they merely supply us with an *image* of that person. The image of a person belongs to another order than that of a real human being. In spite of the similarities, the image has other properties. Plato was acutely aware of the illusionary nature of the image. And so he distinguished two important aspects of "mimesis", or imitation: first, the artist creates an image of the sensibly perceptible reality, and second, this image is unreal! And from this viewpoint, Plato once again contrasts the craftsman with the artist, the "productive" with the "imitative" arts. While craftsmen produce things, artists only create images and phantasms that are unreal.

2.2.2   The Unity of the True, the Beautiful and the Good

If we are to gain a thorough understanding of Plato's skeptical attitude towards art, we must first consider his idealistic point of departure. The previous section explained how important the world of Ideas or Forms is to Plato's approach. This is his philosophical starting point and has enormous consequences for his conception of beauty. The world of Ideas does not only stand for perfection, for actual reality, but also for truth, which, to Plato, is the yardstick of beauty. In other words: that which is true, is beautiful. The highest beauty is not to be found in physical or spiritual beauty, but in the pure Form or Idea. Only the pure Idea of beauty is true beauty. All other forms of beauty are merely beautiful to the extent that they resemble – or are an imitation of – this pure Idea of beauty. Only the Idea of beauty is eternal and true. As Plato so meaningfully puts it, as soon as someone beholds this Idea of beauty, gold, diamonds or the most beautiful boys, they fade to nothing!

A secondary aspect of Plato's thinking to be taken into account to understand his negative attitude towards art is his moralistic point of view. Most Greeks assumed that beautiful things were also necessarily good. Plato turned this reasoning upside down: for him, moral goodness was primordial and it was because it aroused our admiration that it was also seen as beautiful. In other words, that which is good is beautiful. This equation of goodness and beauty explains why Plato considered imitation by artists not only untrue, but also morally reprehensible.

2.2.3   Condemnation of Art as Mimesis

These two starting points, the idealistic and the moralistic, make clear which criteria Plato used to judge art. Art had to be truthful on the one hand and morally enriching on the other. This was precisely what Plato found lacking in the art of his time. The

illusionism in painting irritated him to no end, because he felt it was untruthful and aimed at deceitful appearance, based on proportions that may have appeared to be beautiful but which in fact were not. Plato attached great importance to accurate proportions, objective regularity, and harmony. With his mathematical conception of beauty, he was in fact a successor of the Pythagoreans. It is a misconception that Plato did not like art. He was a great admirer of the archaic art of the early Greeks and particularly of Egyptian art. He hardly had a kind word to say, however, for the art of his day. He found the great tragedies that were popular during his lifetime not only unrealistic but morally reprehensible and dangerous. Here too he maintained the concept of mimesis, since he assumed that the tragedies, and the passion and cruelty exhibited in them, would spur the ignorant masses to *imitation*. Because, on the one hand, art presented a false image of reality, and on the other – indeed, simultaneously – it undermined morality, he allotted but a minor role to art in his ideal republic. Art corrupts morality because it acts on the emotions and provokes them, while in the ideal republic man should be led only by reason. In Plato's utopia of the ideal republic, art, art as mimesis, must make room for philosophy, since only the latter can reveal wisdom and truth, and therefore pure beauty and goodness.

Plato's standpoint, in a nutshell, comes down to the following. On the basis of his theory of the Ideal Forms, he argues that there is an important distinction between craftsmen and artists. Craftsmen imitate true reality, while artists merely copy existing crafted products or natural phenomena. Works of art are therefore nothing more than imitations of imitations or copies of copies, and the artist is nothing more than an imitator of imitations and as such he is less honorable than the craftsman. The true, the beautiful and the good form a unity. This leads to a severe condemnation of art as mimesis. Because it is untrue, art is condemned as mere appearance and as morally reprehensible. Only philosophy leads to pure beauty and goodness.

2.3   The Imitation Theory: From Idealism to Realism

The Platonic worldview does, however, leave room for art to be evaluated not merely as an imitation of an imitation and, therefore, as inferior to craftsmanship, as Plato himself did. In the works of the Neo-Platonist Plotinos we already encounter the proposition that art does not so much imitate the sensibly perceptible, phenomenal world, but rather *directly* imitates the pure Form or Idea. Here, a work of art is at least on an equal footing with the products made by craftsmen or natural phenomena themselves. Apart from that, Plotinos generally remains faithful to Plato's ideas, emphasizing that an artwork's beauty lies in the Form or the Idea, which the artist expresses through the raw material. The artist is able to do this, not because he has hands and eyes, but because the world of Ideal Forms provides him with the pure idea of Art and Beauty, which drifts as an ideal in his mind's eye during the creative process. The realization of this ideal, however, is always inadequate: the work of art, like Plato's crafted product, is merely an imperfect reflection of the pure idea. The Idea of Art and Beauty invariably exceeds the artwork itself, because it loses its original unity and purity through its association with matter.

In an even less strict version of Plato's mimesis theory, the idea of beauty is seen merely as an ideal image or guide for the creative process. Many Renaissance artists believed that, when painting or sculpting, they were guided or inspired by an ideal image rather than by particular perceptible phenomena. A well-known example of this is a statement made by Raphael in a letter to Castiglioni in 1516: "In order to paint a beautiful woman I would have to see many beautiful women, and this on the condition that you would help me make a choice; yet because there are so few beautiful women and so few judicious experts, I will make use of a certain idea which arises in me." Michelangelo and da Vinci too were guided through the creative process by similar, more abstract ideal images of beauty.

Against the mimesis theory the imitation theory (in the strict sense) no longer suggests that art should be guided by ideal images of beauty. Its only requirement is that art renders the concrete, sensibly perceptible reality as faithfully as possible. As I said in my introduction, this has marked a definitive separation between the imitation theory proper and the original mimesis theory, as it was upheld by Plato as well as by Plotinos, and which was firmly embedded in *idealism*. I have already discussed how important Plato's idealistic starting point was. While this starting point may not necessarily imply that art must be an imitation of an imitation, it does lead almost inevitably to the conclusion that the imitation will be imperfect and inadequate. The world of Ideal Forms is so pure and perfect that any imitation is a hopeless task per se. Sense perception itself is impure and suspect from the very start: it is seen as a futile illusion – indeed, as a delusion that distracts us from true reality, which is embodied by the world of Ideal Forms or Ideas. At most, it can awaken memories of the Ideal World, but sense perception itself is always a dim and impure reflection of that world, which, in idealism, represents truth or actual reality. In other words, in idealism the model of the imitation is inimitable because of its abstract purity, eluding any attempt at perfect imitation.

However, once the idealistic presupposition is abandoned and only that which appears to our senses is seen as reality proper, we find ourselves at *realism*. The imitation theory in the strict sense of the word assumes this kind of a realistic stand-point. In fact, it assumes much more, because it presupposes that in art *an exact* imitation or copy of (a portion of) concrete reality is possible – indeed, even necessary. The relationship between the work of art and perceptible reality is extremely clear-cut here, as if an *absolute correspondence* or *parallelism* exists between them.

The imitation theory has known his heyday in the eighteenth century, thanks to the French author Charles Batteux. In his *The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*, published in 1747, he was the first to classify the "fine arts" on one and the same principle, namely imitation. To him not only painting and sculpture, but also dance, music and poetry were imitative and therefore to be considered as the 'fine arts'. Some of his arguments now appear completely outdated, as he defined, for instance, dance as "the imitation of beautiful nature conveyed through attitudes" and music and poetry as the "the imitation of beautiful nature conveyed" respectively "through sounds and through measured discourse". Anyhow, we are still widely using his notion of "fine arts". The imitation theory, surely in its disguise of *philosophical realism*, was still very popular during the nineteenth century, which witnessed, among other things, the rise of *classical realism* as an art movement

(in painting, literature and so on) in art history. And even in the first half of the twentieth century, after the breakthrough of abstract painting and a number of art movements which no longer aimed at an exact copy of the sensibly perceptible world, imitation theory, or, better still, philosophical realism was still one of the most popular theories espoused within the relatively new field of film theory.

Anyhow, until to-day the imitation theory lost a lot of its credentials, not in the least because (1) it is almost self-evident that music, dance, poetry, to name but of few examples of Batteux, are *in essential* not imitative, and (2) that modern art movements, especially after the rise of photography, more and more departed form the old ideal of imitation. This does not, however, invalidate that an important amount of visual art is still actually involved in painting some realist picture of the world. Within recent visual and popular culture, from soap series to computer games, the old aim of realizing a reliable picture of our surrounding world has even regained enormous popularity. So, one must not underestimate the influence of the imitation theory. Historically, the discovery of perspective during the Renaissance, for example, was accompanied by the view that this new technique would enable the painter to imitate or reproduce the world as we perceive it. I already suggested that the discovery of respectively photography and film too raised great expectations in the realm of imitation. And recently the steady perfection of digital illusion also has reanimated the fascination for imitation. Yet, also within philosophy of art the imitation theory has become increasingly discredited.

2.3.1   A First Fundamental Criticism of the Imitation Theory: Ernst Gombrich

In his famous *Art and Illusion*, Ernst Gombrich, influenced as he is by Kant and Wittgenstein, asks, "Does a painter paint what he sees?", as mimetic theories would have it, "or does he see what he paints?" Gombrich, who strongly adheres to the latter view, argues that even when the explicit goal of art is imitation, the process of depiction or representation is always dependent on the artist's preconceptions. Through a series of interesting examples, he shows that every artist begins with a model, a vocabulary or "conceptual schema", through which he models his images. Without a set of stereotypes or categories, the visual artist would never succeed in classifying the mirage of impressions he is confronted with and organize his perception into an experience that is orderly, structured and recognizable. The history of art displays a succession of ever-changing styles and stereotypes. Art, according to Gombrich, tells us little about reality and therefore all the more about the different ways artists, in particular visual artists, have approached or envisioned reality.

The examples that Gombrich uses to substantiate his argument are often quite relevant. Dürer's famous woodcut of a rhinoceros, for instance (see Fig. 2.1), created with a fair amount of imagination, served as a model or stereotype and obstructed a more authentic imitation (see Fig. 2.2) for centuries. This semi-invented creature, conjured up on a woodcut in 1515, functioned as a model for all
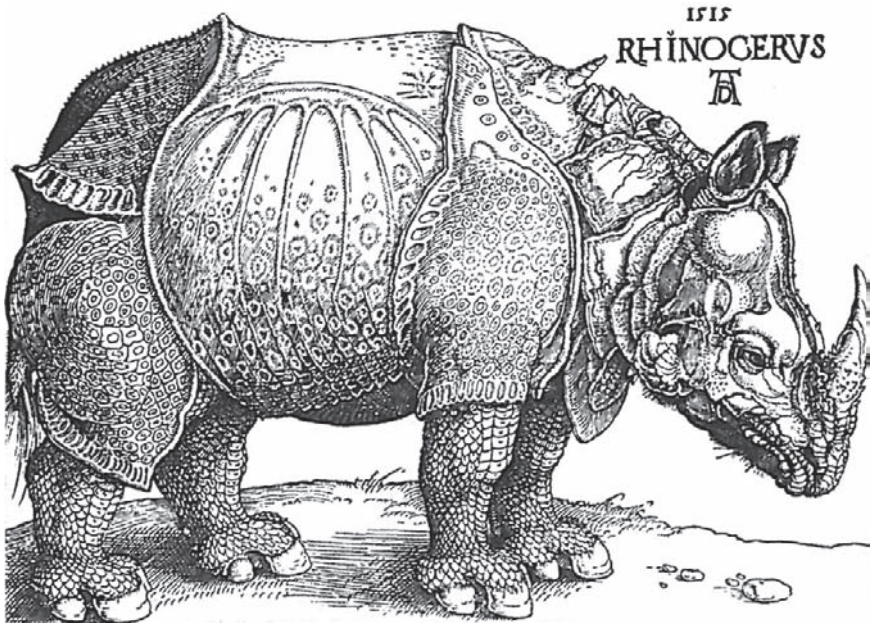
Fig. 2.1 Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*, 1515. Woodcut, 24.8 × 31.7 cm. The Trustees British Museum, London.
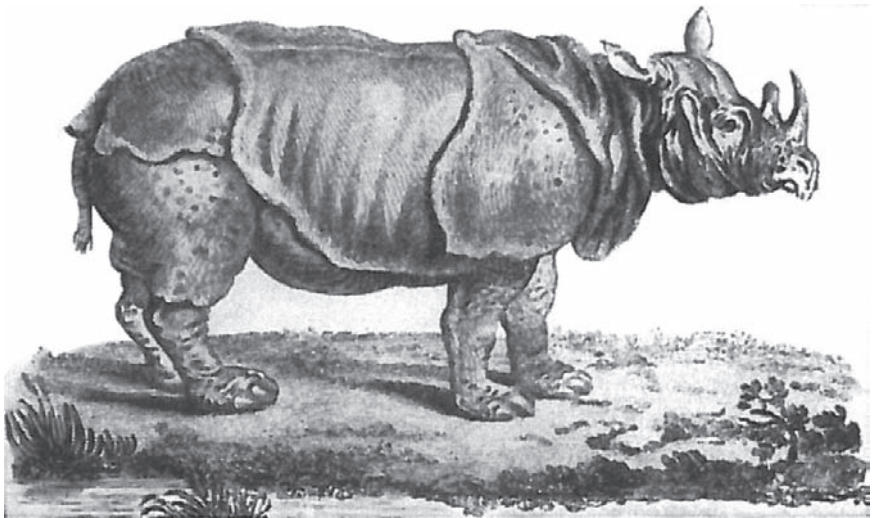
Fig. 2.2 Heath, *African Rhinoceros*, 1789. Engraving.

Fig. 2.3 Chiang Yee, *Cows in Derwentwater*, 1936. Pencil and ink. The Fell and Rock Climbing Club of the English Lake District, Kendal, Westmoreland.

future representations of the rhinoceros, even in works of natural history, until far into the eighteenth century. A similarly striking example is the two views of a land-scape in Derwentwater, one painted by an anonymous English painter of the Romantic period (see Fig. 2.3), the other by the Chinese painter Chiang Yee in 1936 (see Fig. 2.4). The Chinese painter attempts to show us the English landscape "through Chinese eyes". Yet, Gombrich argues, "We see how the relatively rigid vocabulary of the Chinese tradition acts as a selective screen which admits only the features for which schemata exist. The artist will be attracted by motifs that can be rendered in his idiom… The style, like the medium, creates a mental set, which makes the artist look for certain aspects in the scene around him that he can render. Painting is an activity, and the artist will therefore tend to see what he paints rather than to paint what he sees" (Gombrich, 1961, 84–85).

Gombrich's conclusion goes without saying. According to him, all art is basically "conceptual"! Every representation, even the most realistic, is influenced by the conceptual schema, by the vocabulary, by the preconceptions that a painter has about painting, by the tradition in which he was raised, the technique he has acquired. The observer too will only understand a realistic painting and see it as a successful imita-tion if he is familiar with the conceptual schema employed. The relationship, there-fore, between a painting and perceptible reality is never virginal, but is instead a question of shared views, of conventions. Only for the technique of perspective does Gombrich make an exception: he strongly objects (op. cit., 254) to the notion that perspective is only a convention that does not represent the world as it appears: "One

Fig. 2.4 Anonymous English painter, *Derwentwater in the direction of Borrowdale*, 1826. Lithography. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

cannot insist enough that the art of perspective aims at a correct equation: it wants the image to appear like the object and the object like the image" (ibid., 257).

2.3.2 A Second Fundamental Criticism of the Imitation Theory: Nelson Goodman

Even more radical is Nelson Goodman's criticism in *Languages of Art*, in which he attempts to pull out the imitation theory by its roots. He specifically targets Gombrich's faith of the truthfulness of perspective. According to Goodman, even the so-called "science of perspective" does not lead to an accurate representation of nature: there is no "normal" or "reliable perspective" available, which, seen from all angles, could reproduce reality and its three-dimensionality objectively. How someone sees an object in perspective depends on someone's vision, the light, his position in relation to the object, etc. In short, perspective is variable. The ideal of true mimesis fails because the so-called object to be copied is itself not one object, but a whole series of objects, an infinite series even because the constantly changing and potential points of view are theoretically infinite. There is no naked perception: "Nothing is seen nakedly or naked" (Goodman, 1968, 8).

Like Gombrich, Goodman too refers to Kant: "The Kantian dictum echoes here: the innocent eye is blind and the virgin mind empty" (Goodman, 1968, 8). The problem is that representation is traditionally equated with *resemblance*. But, Goodman argues, representation is always and everywhere of a symbolic nature. On close

examination, any sign can symbolize anything else. A serious misconception is the widespread notion that a picture is more realistic the more it creates a successful *illusion* and in doing so increases the chances that an observer will confuse it with reality. The "touchstone" of realism is not the possible confusion between a work of art and reality, for such confusion is not dependent upon resemblance, but upon the extent to which the manner of *representation* or *depiction* is stereotyped, and both the labels and their usages have become generally accepted. "Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture or person at a given time. [It] is a matter not of any constant or absolute relationship between a picture and its object but of a relationship between the system of representation employed in the picture and the standard system" (ibid., 37–38). In short, realism is not a question of imitation, of illusion, but of convention and tradition. Realism, says Goodman in a somewhat sobering conclusion, is simply a "matter of habit" (ibid., 38).

2.4   A Short Philosophical Interlude

The key words here are: imitation, resemblance, illusion, representation, copy, reflection, depiction, reproduction, correspondence, realism. We are here touching an enormous field of philosophical reflection, ranging from the so-called resemblance theory, the illusion theory, the picture theory to the conventionalist theory and more recently the neo-naturalist theory of pictorial representation. Some of these theories, such the picture theory of Susanne Langer, the reflection theory of Georg Lukács, and the theory of representation (Chapter 11) will be discussed at length in respectively Chapters 5, 8 and 11. Suffice to say here that while imitation implies representation, representation does not necessarily imply imitation. This is due to a crucial distinction between imitation theory and many rival theories of representation. The imitation theory presupposes a perfect copy or illusion of the extern world, which is *direct, unconditional and immediate*. This would explain why pictures, such as the picture of a human face, are recognized across different times and cultures in an immediate way, i.e. without being dependant on the previous acquaintance with specific, culture-bound conventions or codes. Almost all rival theories of representation do however reject such a virgin conception of perception and presuppose in one way or the other that all pictorial representation is *indirect*, *conditional* and *mediated* and thus dependent on a previous knowledge or acquaintance of specific codes or conventions. This explains the radical critique of Nelson Goodman, who is one of the chief representatives of the conventionalist theory of pictorial representation. To-day most philosophers of art do agree that pictorial representation is mediated by codes, symbols or conventions. Nevertheless the easy way pictures are recognized and appropriated across generations and cultures – one has only to think of the cave paintings of Lascaux or the rapidly spreading visual culture on the internet – remains a challenge for any conventionalist theory of pictorial representation. The recently defended neo-naturalist theory of pictorial representation accuses the conventionalist theory that it does not explain

why we experience certain pictures as more "realistic" or more "lifelike" than others. So according to this theory pictorial comprehension is not a simple matter of applying codes or conventions. Noël Carroll emphasizes that, in contrast with the illusion theory, this theory does not presuppose deception but *recognition* in the viewer. It is thus not a version of the traditional illusion theory: "Instead, we may call it a *neo-naturalist theory of pictorial representation* in honor of its reliance upon the idea that pictures trigger certain natural capacities" (Carroll, 1999). I personally doubt if "successive breakthroughs in realism can be said to discover more and more effective ways of triggering our natural recognitional capacities", because what we understand by "realism", by "more effective ways" and by "our (!) natural recognitional capacities" is, after all, extremely culture-bound and presupposes a host of codes and conventions. In a very specific sense the pictorial endeavor of Alberto Giacometti embodies and exemplifies the impossibility of a naked, natural, pictorial representation freed from any convention whatsoever.

2.5   The Artist's Studio: Giacometti and the Struggle with "Mimesis"

Criticism of the imitation theory is not limited to philosophy of art; it can also be found as a theme in art itself. The famous painting of a pipe accompanied by the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" ("This is not a pipe") is a good example of this (see Fig. 2.5). Its didacticism proves highly functional here, for it is exactly the sort of image that, because of its resemblance, pulls our leg, and can thus be characterized as a *trompe-l'oeil* (literally: deceiver of the eye, commonly translated as "optical illusion"). The painting is an ironic witticism by the Belgian surrealist René Magritte, warning observers (and artists, for that matter) not to be deceived by optical illusion,

Fig. 2.5   René Magritte, *The Treason of Images* (Ceci n'est pas une pipe). 1928/29. Oil on canvas, 64,5 x 94 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. © c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008. (*see Color Plates*)

not to mistake the representation for the real object. What Magritte suggests here is that artists invariably create realities that are autonomous and follow their own rules. This notion of autonomy, as we shall see, is central to formalism and modernism.

In this sense, it is quite remarkable that a modern visual artist such as Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966), who himself witnessed and participated in schools of art like cubism and surrealism, should have spent his life struggling with the issue of imitation, the resemblance between works of art and perceptible reality, the accurate representation of what he saw with the naked eye. The leitmotiv in his work is therefore the unremitting pursuit of absolute resemblance and, simultaneously, the confrontation with its constant elusion. One could even say that it was precisely this never-ending pursuit, or rather, the return of the mimetic longing that had characterized him since youth, that led Giacometti to find his indisputably original dilemma and style.

A discouraged Giacometti had already turned his back on working from nature in 1925. His return to the old problem of mimesis was, however, one of coincidence. In works like *Têtes cubistes* (Cubist Heads) from 1934, he still approached the human skull in a purely constructivist manner; the accompanying search for the formal principles according to which the human head is composed, drove him to revert to the use of models in 1935. As he explained in a letter of 1948 to Pierre Matisse: "And then there was the desire to realize compositions with figures. In order to do this, I had to (quickly, I thought; in passing) do one or two studies from nature, just enough to understand the construction of a head, of a complete figure. And so, in 1935, I took a model. This study would (I thought) comprise about a fortnight, after which I wanted to realize my compositions" (Giacometti, 1990, 43). But from 1935 to 1940, he worked with models day in day out, often the same models that he attempted to represent over and over. What was originally planned as a short interlude grew into a life's work that would fascinate him until his death in 1966.

2.5.1 Imitation of the Imitation

As a living example of the problem of imitation, Giacometti is even more interesting because even at a young age he copied works of art, an activity that would continue for the rest of his life. He copied paintings and sculptures incessantly, often inspired by reproductions he happened to have on hand. Whenever he had the chance, he imitated the cave drawings of Lascaux, a reproduction from the New Hebrides, sculptures by Egyptian masters, works by Tintoretto, Giotto, Cimabue, Cézanne and Matisse. With these *imitations of imitations*, he attempted incessantly to immerse himself in the art of the past. And his criterion was invariably the *resemblance* to reality. But copying, moreover, was also a way of committing works of art from the past to memory, of comparing them with each other and of discovering *why* they so clearly resemble reality. Pictorial imitation also changes our view of objects itself. We see the world differently after Cézanne. Giacometti can by no means be suspected of naïveté. Through the countless copies he made, he knew better than anyone that one never sees things virginally, that a style, concept or convention always colors them. One sees everything through a screen. "Today, all
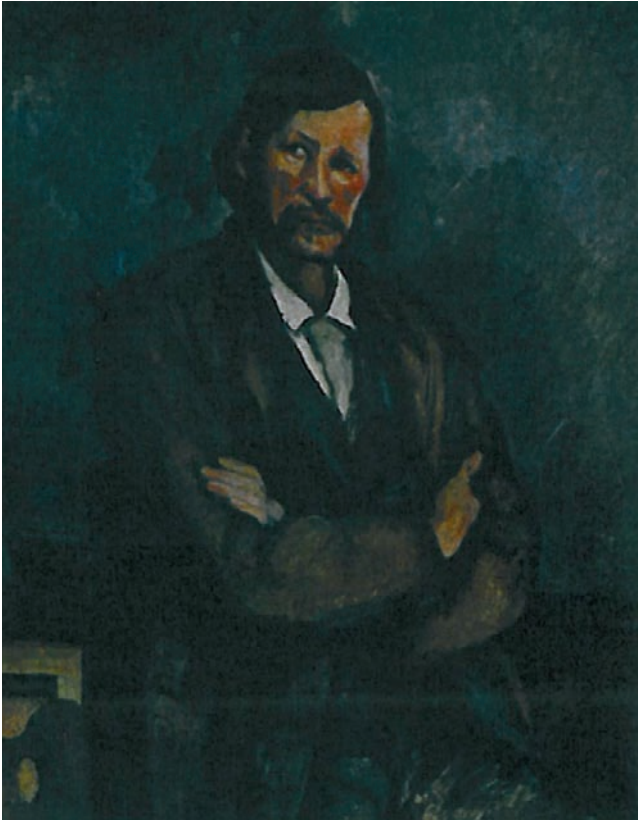
Fig. 2.6 Paul Cézanne, *Man with Crossed Arms*, ca. 1899. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 × 28 5/8 inches (92 × 72.7 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 54.1387. (*see Color Plates*)

painters who want to paint a landscape see it with the eyes of an impressionist," because "the last valuable pictorial vision of the external world is impressionism" (Giacometti, 1990, 265). Like Gombrich and Goodman, he understood the great extent to which conventions of style are responsible for the fact that when a painter represents reality he recreates the object in a unique way. Referring to Cézanne's *Man with Crossed Arms* (see Fig. 2.6) he says the more a painting pretends to represent reality, the more he is struck by elements which at first glance do not resemble the signs themselves of a particular object or thing, but which may in fact lead him to recreate the original seeing of that thing (Giacometti, 1990, 69).

2.5.2   Optical Illusion

Giacometti understood better than anyone that a painting must not be confused with reality, that there is always a question of an *optical illusion*, a *trompe-l'oeil*. The reality of the painting is the canvas. And he draws a comparison between language

and the art of painting. The signs of language are merely signs of what they are not. In painting it is precisely the same. The signs, all of the painting's elements, also refer to a reality outside the painting, a reality the painting nevertheless wants to imitate as perfectly as possible. Imitation always means that there is a distinction, a difference, between the work of art and reality. Arguing, as Mondrian does, that the tableau is an object in and of itself, is, in the eyes of Giacometti, reverting to optical illusion. A painting by Mondrian is not an object in and of itself, but bears the stamp of Mondrian's genius.

2.5.3   The Perfect Representation of Seeing

Giacometti's views on imitation were anything but naïve. Still he was deeply committed to rendering reality in an exact way, a commitment that matched the unusual task he had set for himself, namely to tell others what he *actually* saw, to give himself a better account of what he saw. In 1920, on the evening he discovered Giotto in Padua, he was struck by the sight of a few young girls in the city whom he noticed in passing. This group of girls seemed monumental to him, their movements seemed permeated by a magical force, paling the masterpieces he so diligently copied. Only a perfect representation could, he thought, equal this absolute intensity of perception. Yet he waited until 1935 before giving form to this conviction in his own art. Reality was but a pretext for creating works of art, and art itself but a means for conveying what he saw. And in certain respects, in order to achieve this, he had to leave the entire history of art behind him. He had the impression that too many familiar sculptures, too many possible patterns, stood between him and the model in front of him. Giacometti was convinced that existing representations of views, trees or any other sensorially perceptible scenes whatsoever were entirely different from what he *actually* saw. There was something in his perception that he searched for in vain in the paintings and sculptures of the past. He began to take an increasingly unfiltered view of the world around, without the maze of references implied in all earlier art, so that the known became unknown, the absolute unveiled. The purpose of his art became to see *nakedly*, as it were, although he was well aware of the impossibility to achieve this… "I know," he explained, "that it is impossible for me to model, paint or draw a head, for example, as I see it and nevertheless this is the only thing I try to do!" (op. cit., 84).

   To gain a better insight into Giacometti's aims, we should ascertain the role of perception in his works. In an interview with Georges Charbonnier, he attempted to explain what were at once the originality and the difficulty in attempting to represent perception exactly. Charbonnier asked whether a statue had to be of a certain size. Giacometti then made a comparison between two methods of working. One method was to design a sculpture in one's mind, in advance, as almost all modern sculptors do. The statue is formed in the imagination and gradually takes on a material shape, the size determined by the momentary intuitive necessity of the object. Its realization is simply material labor which, Giacometti stresses, is no problem at

Fig. 2.7 *Giacometti painting Annette*, 1954. Foto: Sabine Weiss, Paris. © Alberto Giacometti, Giacometti Painting Annette, 1954, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2009.

all, not for him in any case. But, he said, if I want to represent an object that *I cannot form in my thoughts and that belongs to external reality*, a woman, for example, and if I want to represent that woman as I see her, then the problem of size is completely different, because *I do not know what I am going to do* (see Figs. 2.7 and 2.8). I can see and feel that which I see, but I have no idea with what means I could realize the object. It is not at all unthinkable that I will make a mistake in size. Two inches too short or too tall is enough for the representation to fail completely.

And this very impossibility of representational accuracy developed into a true obsession in Giacometti's work and remained closely linked to the problem of the act of seeing. One could say that he had an extremely sophisticated and philosophically defensible understanding of perception. Time and time again he emphasized that our perception is necessarily selective and one-sided, and that our creations give witness to what we observe and in this way reflect the different angles and positions from which we look at reality. So far no problem. However, once Giacometti set to work, trailing all his mimetic longings and striving toward a perfect representation of what he saw, he found himself facing an impossible task. It was as if he had lost all ground, with nothing left to hold on to. On the one hand it

Fig. 2.8 Alberto Giacometti, Portrait
D'Annette, 1964. Oil on canvas, 65 × 54.5 cm.
Galerie Maeght, Paris. © Alberto Giacometti,
Portret d'Annette, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam
2008.

was impossible to grasp a figure in its entirety. He had the feeling that he was much
too close to the model. On the other hand, each concentration on detail, a heel or a
nose, took away all hope of ever achieving a whole. When working on a particular
detail, the tip of a nose for instance, he would feel lost. One could spend one's
entire life working on this without ever achieving a single result. Or, as Giacometti
described it in a letter to Pierre Matisse: "The form disintegrates, it is then like
grains which move over a black and deep emptiness, the distance between one
nostril and the other is like the Sahara, with no limits, nothing to hold on to, every-
thing escapes" (ibid., 39).

And indeed, Giacometti began to associate the impossibility of accurate represen-
tation more and more with distance. Eye to eye with his model, he discovered the
unbridgeable distance that separated them. He discovered more and more that the

duration of the distance must be embodied in the modeling of the figure itself if he wanted at least to account to himself the absolute reality of his observing position in relation to the model. The distance between the model and himself very quickly became an essential element in the work of the sculptor: it even became a new theme in Giacometti's work. Indeed, swaying back and forth between the irrevocable infiniteness of detail and the impossibility of gaining insight into the whole, the later Giacometti finds a means for coming to terms with this that may be considered unique in the history of sculpture. By pushing the model back in his field of vision, not only do the details fade, but the size of the model is also diminished, and the whole becomes "surveyable". "In order to see the whole, the model had to keep moving back. The further away it was, the smaller the head became," says Giacometti (La Marche-Vadel, 1984, 78). By means of this method, inspired by his will to represent what he saw, by embodying the entire problem of the impossibility of representation *in the representation itself*, he created a new convention, a new method of representation and, at the same time, his own unique style (see Fig. 2.9).
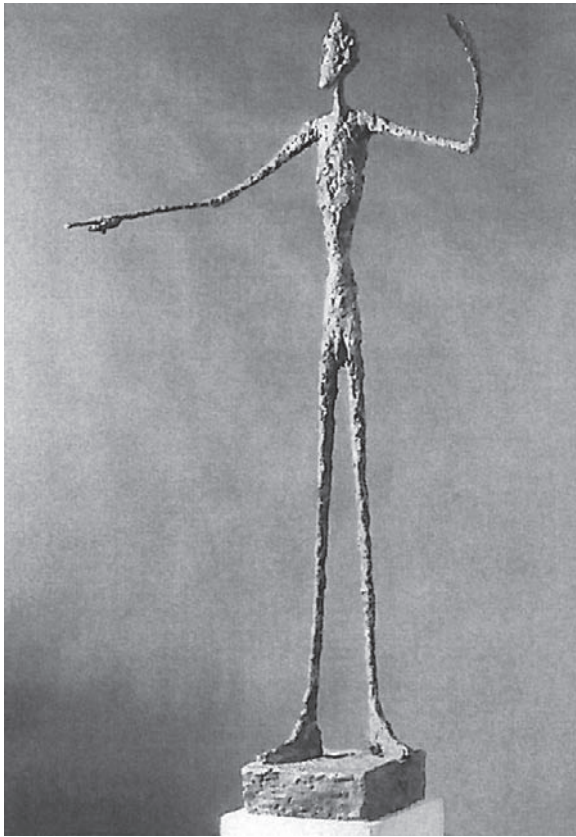
Fig. 2.9 Alberto Giacometti, *Man Pointing*, 1947. Bronze, 178 x 95 x 52 cm, Tate Gallery Liverpool. © Alberto Giacometti, Man pointing c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008.

Giacometti's work is interesting because on the one hand, it embodies a paradox which could easily be seen as a confirmation of the criticism against the imitation theory (and the neo-naturalist theory) discussed above, and yet, on the other hand, it refers to the complexity of perception, or the enigma of perception, as described from a phenomenological perspective by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This phenomenological perspective will be introduced and discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

Further Reading

Classical sources on the theory of mimesis:

Plato (428-348 BC), *The republic*, translated by Robin Waterfield, Oxford/New York: in Oxford University Press, 2008. (Originally published in 1994).
Aristotle, *On poetics*, translated by Seth Benardete and Michael Davis, South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2002.

Classical source on the theory of imitation:

Charles Batteux, *Les beaux-arts réduits à un même principe* (The fine arts reduced to one single principle), Paris, in Aux Amateurs de livres, 1989 (Originally published in 1746).

Classical source on realism in film theory:

Andrè Bazin, *What is cinema?*, essays selected and translated by Hugh Gray; foreword by Jean Renoir; new foreword by Dudley Andrew, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004 (Originally published in English in 1967, in French 1958).

Classical sources on criticism of the theory of imitation:

Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: a study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, New York: Bollingen Foundation, Pantheon Books, 1961. Latest edition: London, Phaidon, 1968.
Nelson Goodman, *Languages of art: an approach to a theory of symbols*, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968. Chapter one contains his radical and well-known defense of *conventionalism*.

For interesting defenses of the neo-naturalist theory of pictorial representation:

Flint Schier, *Deeper into pictures: an essay on pictorial representation,* Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
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Works on Recommended works on the theory of mimesis:

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In the text on Giacometti I refer to two French Publications:

Alberto Giacometti, *Écrits* (in English: *Writings*), presented by Michel Leiris and Jacques Dupin, Paris: Hermann, 1990.

Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, *Alberto Giacometti*, Paris: Nouvelles Éditions Françaises, 1984.

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David Sylvester, *Looking at Giacometti*, New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1996.

Laurie Wilson, Alberto Giacometti: myth, magic and the man, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

For Goethe's reflection on Roos, see:

Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann, Cambridge, MA and New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1998.

Chapter 3
Expression Theories

3.1 Introduction

In his posthumously published diary, the well-known Italian writer Cesare Pavese notes, "It is an interesting idea that in art feeling is the *purely mimetic part*, the accurate description of the silence of the sea" (Pavese, 1980, translated from the Dutch edition). It would seem that Pavese is poking fun at the conventional definition of "mimesis"; here the concept does not merely mean the representation of external reality but also, and especially, the portrayal of an emotional state of mind, the artist's *inner* reality, his dreams, emotions and obsessions. In this sense all art is of course mimetic, even abstract painting, music or lyric poetry.

Pavese's statement, however, is not entirely nonsensical. As we have already seen, Plotinus interpreted "mimesis" in such a way that the work of art is seen as the ever-imperfect imitation of the pure Form or Idea which is present in the mind of the artist from the very start. We also noted that many Renaissance artists were inspired by a notion of ideal beauty which served as a guideline or a model during the creative process. These less radical versions of the "mimesis" theory move towards the idea that the true work of art is located somewhere in the artist's mind, and that the task of the artist is to give shape to this pure idea or form in his work of art. The emphasis here is no longer on the imitation or reproduction of supersensible (Plato) or sensible reality, but on the representation of an idea previously formed in the mind of the artist. Ultimately, it would seem that it *is* a matter of representing the artist's *inner* reality. And perhaps, or rather, undoubtedly, Pavese wishes to point this out to us by means of his seemingly enigmatic statement.

There is yet another way to make some sense of Pavese's statement. In the previous chapter we emphasized how much sensible perception confronts us with an irreducible subjective dimension. This implies that each perception, each "seeing", is also partly determined by or embedded in the *observer's* horizon of experience, the observer in this case being either the artist who perceives "reality" or the spectator who beholds the work of art. This subjective dimension already held a very prominent place in impressionism, although here too a "representation" of nature or reality was aimed at. With his statement, Pavese goes a step further than impressionism. From his point of view, the reference to the sea functions at most as an aid or a pretext for

evoking the subjective experience of silence. By speaking of an "accurate description of silence", Pavese carries the mimetic illusion to the extreme. He clearly wants to convince us that in "mimesis" only the subjective dimension is truly "pure" or "essential." In his view, "mimesis" is actually about subjective coloring, and not about the representation of the sensibly perceptible world that surrounds us. This shifts the emphasis once again to the *inner* reality of the artist.

Both of the above arguments strike at the very heart of the "mimesis" theory, since they no longer interpret the work of art as an "imitation" or "representation" of the sensible world around us. It seems at least that this characteristic has ceased to be quintessential. In fact, Pavese uses the "mimesis" concept only in a figurative sense. The concept merely functions as a metaphor for the argument that what essentially matters is the emotional state of mind, and that such an emotional state of mind consists of as many nuances as those found in a landscape or a mural: its description must be just as "accurate", as precise and detailed. Meanwhile, the focus has shifted from the object to the *subject* of representation, from the outside world to artist's inner world. The relationship between artwork and reality is no longer central, but rather the relationship between artwork and artist.

The latter point of view is linked to a fairly common theory of art which says that the artist's task is not so much to imitate nature or reality as to *express* emotions. One of the reasons we appreciate art is indeed rooted in the artist's capacity of the artist to convey his inner world and, in doing so, to arouse emotions and move us aesthetically. To many of us, the value of art depends on its emotional appeal and capacity to arouse feelings of enthusiasm or even ecstasy, rather than on the technical mastery of the artist, the faithfulness of its representation, or the perfection of its form. A merely formal imitation of nature often leaves us cold, no matter how much it may affirm the artist's technical skill. We are probably all familiar with the problem of musical recitals that are performed with virtuosity and yet do not in the least succeed in expressing the emotional tension and depth that the composer put into the music. In such cases, the performance fails to convey the full value of the composition because technical skill is not put at the service of the composer's original inspiration, emotional tension and existential commitment.

It is interesting to note that we adopt the *artist's point of view* even in our aesthetic judgment. We focus on the creative process, on that which the artist intended to express, the content or the spirit of the artwork. The reality portrayed or the formal characteristics of the artwork are hardly considered at all. At the same time, however, the work of art is also judged in terms of its emotional appeal, and, more specifically, whether or not it is successful in conveying the artist's original intention. So, not only the artist's point of view, but also the *beholder's or audience's point of view* is accounted for in the aesthetic appreciation. It is not only the relationship between artist and artwork that is fundamental here, but also the relationship between the artist and his audience.

Theories in philosophy of art that emphasize this expressive dimension are often called *expression theories*. Whereas early expression theories particularly stressed the audience's side of expression, more recent views emphasize art as the self-expression of the artist. In other words, the former focus on the *arousal* of emotions *in the audience*, and the latter, on the *expression* of emotions *by the artist*.

3.2   Art as the Arousal of Emotion: Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910)

Tolstoy's view on art conformed to the common belief that the specific task of art is to stir up our emotions. We can find this view eloquently expressed in Hegel, who refers, in characteristic style, to "(...) the common opinion that it is the task and aim of art to bring in contact with our sense, our feeling, our inspiration, *all* that finds a place in the mind of man. Art, it is thought, should realize in us that familiar saying 'Homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto'. Its aim is therefore placed in arousing and animating the slumbering emotions, inclinations, and passions; in filling the *heart*, in forcing the human being, whether cultured or uncultured, to feel the whole range of what man's soul in its inmost and secret corners has power to experience and to create, and all that is able to move and to stir the human breast in its depths and in its manifold aspects and possibilities; to present as a delight to emotion and to perception all that the mind possesses of real and lofty in its thought and in the Idea - all the splendour of the noble, the eternal, and the true (...)" (Hegel, 2004, 51).

Hegel's striking description of this view of art follows a line of thought that goes back to ancient times. As we saw in the previous chapter, Aristotle believed that one of the most important functions of Greek tragedy was to generate or rouse emotions among the general public. In this respect, his notion of the term "catharsis" leaves little to be desired in the way of clarity. Elaborating on this theme in *What is Art?*, Tolstoy defended the proposition that art is the "infection" of emotion. The first criterion for Tolstoy is that art is purely and solely a matter of emotion. Just as language expresses ideas, art expresses emotion. In his theory, Tolstoy makes a comparison between art and science. Science, he says, belongs to the domain of rational knowledge, logical argumentation, while art expresses and makes under-stood that which escapes the form of an argument. Truths considered important for society at any given moment, are studied by real science. Art, on the other hand, transfers these truths from the realm of knowledge to the realm of feeling" (Tolstoy, 1995, 157). Art has nothing to do with knowledge or intellect, but is about emotion and intuition.

Tolstoy's second criterion is that the artist has the responsibility of "infecting" his audience with the same feelings he himself undergoes. This is the crux of Tolstoy's view of art. And with it, he makes a plea for the *democratizing* of art. His appeal to emotion is, at the same time, a criticism of the sophistication and intellectualized character of modern art. Tolstoy took a dim view of the fact that modern art had become a luxury article for an elite and deplored the alienation of modern art in relation to the masses. This social dimension in his view of art drove Tolstoy to emphasize precisely those emotions which could be understood by broader layers of the population, like brotherly love, and not emotions which he considered typical of modern art, like sexual desire, pride, *Weltschmerz*. For Tolstoy, it comes down to emotions that are simple, natural and still unspoiled. In this respect Tolstoy is a descendant of Rousseau. Or, as Arnold Hauser puts it: "Tolstoy's rejection of the highly developed and refined art of the present, and his fondness for the primitive, 'universally human' forms of artistic expression, is a symptom of the

Rousseauism with which he plays off the village against the town and identifies the social question with that of the peasantry" (Hauser, 1999, 155).

This social commitment leads us to a third, important characteristic of Tolstoy's view of art, namely its *ethical* dimension. Through the infection of feelings, art should contribute to the moral elevation of the people, to the oppression of violence. It is here that Tolstoy, who had converted to Christianity, speaks as an apostle of love and ascribes to art the mission of "infecting" the audience with feelings of brotherly love and solidarity.

3.3   Objections to Tolstoy's Theory

Tolstoy's first criterion, namely that art is solely a matter of feeling, is without doubt unsustainable. Tolstoy even goes so far as to propose that no schooling whatsoever is required for art. This is a gross underestimation of the technical demands that come into play for many branches of art. Moreover, Tolstoy overlooks the important role played by intellect, both in the creating and in the contemplating of art. Art is obviously not science, but just as science cannot do without intuition, so is knowledge indispensable for the creation and understanding of art. Without any knowledge of art history it is impossible for anybody to even evaluate an artwork properly, or, for artists, to fully account for their own activity. Moreover, the creative process often cannot take place without a certain abstraction and detachment from the original feelings. An overwhelming "infection" of emotion often stands in the way of the creative process. Usually it is only after the powerful feelings have yielded to tranquility that artists are able to express them through a work of art.

Tolstoy's second criterion for judging art is the extent to which the artist is able to infect his audience with feelings. The arousal of feeling is undoubtedly an important function of art in general, but to maintain this function as the one and only true criterion is very one-sided and aesthetically unsatisfactory. We can quite easily imagine expressions of art that succeed perfectly in bringing about the "infection" of feeling in a large audience, and which yet strike us as aesthetically unjustified. The metaphor of contagiousness would appear to condemn the artist to the role of hypnotist and the reception of art to mass hysteria. Some modern rock concerts, as Anne Sheppard points out (Sheppard, 1987, 21), fit Tolstoy's criterion of infection perfectly. The question is, however, whether these rock concerts can be said to be aesthetically valuable simply because they stir up great masses of people.

Tolstoy's third criterion is an ethical one. What he is concerned with is not the expression or arousal of just any kind of feeling, but of feelings which lead to the moral elevation of the people. This is a noble task for art, but it has the disadvantage that works of art are no longer judged on their aesthetic merits, but on their *moral* merits. By using moral criteria to make aesthetic judgements, Tolstoy commits the fallacy of mixing up two distinct categories. Although he sometimes does base his judgment of what he considers *good* art on aesthetic criteria or norms, he mostly does so on ethical criteria. Moreover, both his moral and aesthetic judgments are

normative, and thus involve statements about what would be most desirable rather than what is actually the case, which only adds to the confusion.

This brings us to a final, more general objection to Tolstoy's theory, namely that its application leads to judgments which are arbitrary to the point of being untenable. The extremely strict moral norms which Tolstoy upheld led him to reject almost all art from the very beginning of art history until his own time! Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Dante, Tasso, Milton, Shakespeare, Raphael, Michelangelo, Bach, Beethoven are all, according to Tolstoy, "artificial reputations called to life by critics" (Tolstoy, 1995, 201–202). Even his own literary works no longer found favor in his eyes. And his condemnation of Shakespeare created bad blood among many contemporaries. The application of his artistic standard constantly seems to be morally inspired, arbitrary and even incomprehensible. Or, as Arnold Hauser expresses it: "…it is inconceivable that a man who created such artistically exacting works as *Anna Karenina* and *The Death of Ivan Ilych* accepted without reservations out of the whole of modern literature, apart from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, only Schiller's *Robbers*, Hugo's *Misérables*, Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, Dostoevsky's *Memoirs from Underground* and George Eliot's *Adam Bede*" (Hauser, 1999, 109).

3.4   Art as the Self-expression of the Artist: The Croce–Collingwood Theory

A view of expression that explicitly departs from the artist's standpoint was first developed into a systematic philosophy of art by the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (1866–1952) in his *Estetica*, published in 1902. Croce believed that the human spirit is the only reality that manifests itself in, and through, history. This idealistic starting point is revealed in Croce's expression theory, as we shall see. Croce's theory, however, does not stand alone. In his *Principles of Art*, published in 1937, Robin George Collingwood (1889–1943) developed an expression theory that corresponds to Croce's in many respects. Because of the conspicuous similarities, the two are often jointly referred to as the *Croce–Collingwood theory* of art (*CC theory*, for short).

3.4.1   Philosophy of History

Croce and Collingwood also reflected on history and, as philosophers of history, defended similar standpoints. These standpoints are, in certain respects, extremely illuminating for their aesthetic views, and we shall therefore briefly consider them. As far as Croce is concerned, what matters most in history is that the historian concentrates on the historical event in its unique individuality. Croce sees this "uniqueness" as a characteristic that distinguishes historical events from physical events. A consequence of this characteristic is that any attempt to classify or

generalize historical events is fundamentally wrong. In order to comprehend or to know the uniqueness of a historical event or character, a certain gift is required, which Croce calls *intuition*. This intuitive capacity enables the historian to "re-enact" past experience. And, Croce emphasizes, intuition is an *immediate* understanding of that which is unique in the events or characters, without the intervention of concepts, observations, etc. It is an *immediate* spiritual contact, so that the unique needs no further explanation. Indeed, the unique simply *is* that with which we are immediately familiar. In order to grasp the individual and unique character of his subject, the historian must relive the historical event or historical character *in his own mind or spirit*.

This spiritual dimension of intuition is extremely important. Croce is not concerned with the externalities of an historical action, but with its "spirit", the inside, the inner motive. Each action, of course, exemplifies both facets, because without external manifestation, without material form, the inside would remain abstract, intangible: it would never become concrete; it would never become this *particular* action or that *individual* deed. But exactly that which determines the individual and unique character of an action is ultimately of a spiritual nature. In other words, to acquire intuitive knowledge the historian will have to fathom the inner motives of the action he is studying, identifying with it and, as it were, make it *present* again in his mind. This "presentism", as it has been called, is no metaphor, but should be taken literally. Hence Croce's statement, as famous as it is infamous, that "all history is modern history".

Collingwood, in his philosophy of history, also presupposes that each event has an outside as well as an inside. By outside he means everything that can be described in terms of bodies and their movements. The inside, on the other hand, is that which can only be characterized in terms of thought. In a manner somewhat similar to Croce's, Collingwood argues, on the one hand, that each action is the unity of an event's outside and inside, yet on the other hand, that the historian must not forget that his principal task is to transport himself mentally into the historical action in order to discover what the actor actually thought. Collingwood's primary concern is not the external aspects of the historical action, but its inner side, which, according to him, is made up of thought processes. Making use of his imagination, the historian must place himself in the act to such a degree that he can trace the original thought processes; recreate them, so to speak. Here too, all metaphors should be taken literally. This explains, among other things, Collingwood's famous statement that "all history is the history of thought" (Collingwood, 1993, 215). It also makes clear why Collingwood characterizes all history as "…the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's own mind" or simply as "the 're-creating' of past experience" (see Collingwood, 1993, 275 and 282, respectively).

3.4.2   Philosophy of Art: The CC Theory

From the preceding observations it appears that both Croce and Collingwood adhere to a sort of "inside-outside" theory that has far-reaching implications for their philosophy of art. A first fundamental assertion of the CC theory about art is

that the work of art is located in the artist's spirit or mind. The essence of art is the *expression* of intuition (Croce) or imagination (Collingwood). A second fundamental assertion is that this expression does not need to be externalized in the form of an artwork. In other words: the work of art already exists as expression in the artist's mind and must not be identified with the material object in which it may later be externalized. A third fundamental assertion is that the true work of art is only accessible to an audience to the extent in which the observer re-experiences (Croce) or re-creates (Collingwood) the artist's original expression.

3.4.3 Art as Self-expression

The first assertion is not so easy to understand. It is clear that Croce and Collingwood do *not* presuppose that the artist *expresses* his emotions through a tangible work of art. This common understanding of expression is completely foreign to them. For both of them, expression, like intuition or imagination, belongs to the inside, to the inner or mental reality of the artist. Croce even maintains that there is no distinction whatsoever between intuition and expression, that the two are completely identical. We only possess intuition to the extent that we are able to express it. How can we, asks Croce, have an intuition of a geometric figure without also possessing an exact image of it, allowing us to draw the figure immediately onto a piece of paper or a blackboard? When we express feelings or impressions, we do not *first* have the intuition and *then* express these feelings or impressions *afterwards*: intuition and expression occur *simultaneously*.

Croce places particular emphasis on the identical nature of intuition and expression, because any misunderstanding will lead to gross misconceptions, also about art. It is widely believed, for example that anybody is capable of imagining what a painter or sculptor portrays, the only difference between them and us supposedly being that painters or sculptors know *how* to paint these images or sculpt them in stone while we harbor them, unexpressed, in our souls. Along the same line of thought, it is assumed that anybody could have imagined Raphael's Madonna and that Raphael is different only because his technical mastery enabled him to commit the Madonna to canvas. Nothing, however, says Croce, could be further from the truth. What distinguishes Raphael was not his technical mastery but his imagination, his vision, his intuition, *and it is these qualities that explain why he also knew how to portray the Madonna*. To underscore this view, Croce refers to Michelangelo, who once said: "One paints with the brain, not the hands" (Croce, 1992, 10).

Collingwood too strongly emphasizes that the creation of art takes place in the artist's mind and that imagination does not precede expression. Collingwood therefore characterizes art as "*imaginative expression*". In everyday life emotions are expressed continually, but on the whole these expressions are fundamentally different from the "imaginative expression" which is embodied in art. During the sensations and observations we experience from day to day we often express emotions unconsciously. If we are embarrassed our face turns red. We can turn red with anger or break out in a cold sweat. In each of these cases emotions are coupled with physical

symptoms that are unconscious and involuntary: they escape every conscious control. Collingwood calls this "psychic expression". Actually, we are conscious of experiencing an emotion but are unable to express this emotion consciously. We are, as it were, overwhelmed by the emotion and feel helpless. As soon as we express this emotion consciously, however, we take part in self-expression. Thanks to language we can talk about it and we experience a certain relief or liberation. We appeal here to the power of imagination of our listeners, to their ability to empathize and identify with our emotional state of mind. Artists creating a poem, a piece of music or a painting also give "imaginative expression" to their emotions and invite us to experience these emotions by means of *our own* imagination.

Much like Croce, Collingwood argues that imagination and expression take place simultaneously. The artist expresses himself in and through the imagination. The artist does not *start* from a particular image in order to find the best means of expression. Nor does he design, by means of his imagination, any preconceived plan to express himself. These are all characteristics that refer to craftsmanship rather than to the way a work of art comes into being. The work of art as self-expression, complete with all its characteristic qualities, is present in the artist's imagination from the very start. Imagination *is* expression, so that the true work of art already exists in the mind of the artist.

3.4.4   The Work of Art as a Purely Mental Product

Croce and Collingwood's assumption that the work of art already exists in the artist's mind naturally has far-reaching implications. For instance, a second fundamental assertion of the CC Theory is that the true artwork must not be identified with its possible materialization. It is *possible* for a work of art to be externalized, but, as both thinkers maintain, this is by no means *necessary*. Croce's classic example is how Leonardo da Vinci drove the prior of the Convent of Saint Mary of the Graces to desperation by staring at the wall on which he was going to paint "The Last Supper" for days, without ever showing any intention of actually painting anything (Fig. 3.1). As far as Croce is concerned, this is irrefutable proof that Leonardo had intuited the painting completely in his mind long before applying a single stroke of paint. In this respect the technical realization of the work of art is incidental. The work already exists in the mind of the artist, not as an emotion or impression, i.e. not as content, but as an expression in which the content has already been fashioned by the *form*. The aesthetic fact, says Croce, is form and nothing but form. This implies that the work of art, *in all its formal characteristics*, already *exists* in the *mind* of the artist. The external realization of the work of art in no way adds to this and is of minor importance, and ultimately of no importance at all!

Collingwood too takes great pains to warn us that a work of art must not in any way be confused with its external manifestation. A piece of music is not a series of audible sounds. As a "work of art" in the true sense, a piece of music is nothing audible at all, but something that only exists in a musician's head. This is made apparent by the mere fact that a composer creates the entire piece of music in his
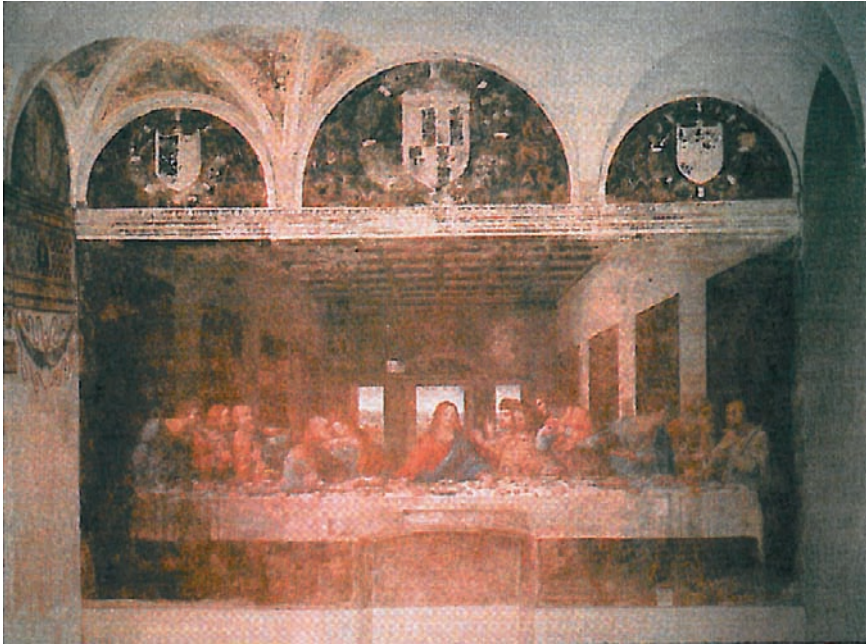
Fig. 3.1 Leonardo Da Vinci. *The Last Supper*, ca. 1495–1498. Wall painting, mixed techniques, 460 × 880 cm. Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milaan. (*see Color Plates*)

imagination beforehand: the score and the musical performance are merely aids to trace the original expression in the imagination. What is actually played is merely an approach, a performance, always open for improvement, of the "imaginative expression" which originally took place in the composer's mind. What matters in music is the original imagination and not its audible performance.

3.4.5 Art as "Recreation" or "Re-experience"

Collingwood's view on music also implies that the true work of art is only accessible to the audience insofar as they succeed in recreating this original imagination. This is a third fundamental assertion of the CC Theory. Expression theories always contain a well-defined view on the reception of art as well. Since what matters to the listeners of a piece of music is the re-creation of the original expression through their imagination, any distinction between the composer and the listeners, between the performer and the audience, ceases to exist. The piece of music exists only in the minds of both the composer and the listener and both of them complete, improve and purify what they actually hear. This leads to the paradox that the music that is enjoyed as a work of art is never heard perceptibly or "actually". The true work of art, thanks to the imagination, inspires us to express our *own* emotions. When someone reads and understands a poem, he does not merely understand the poet's expression of the latter's emotions, but expresses emotions of his own through the poet's words,

which have thus become his own words. As Coleridge put it, "we know a man for a poet by the fact that he makes us poets. We know that he is expressing his emotions by the fact that he is enabling us to express ours" (Collingwood, 1993, 118). The reader is therefore just as much an artist as the poet. Collingwood continues, "The poet is not singular either in his having that emotion or in his power of expressing it; he is singular in his ability to take the initiative in expressing what we all feel and all can express" (Collingwood, 1993, 119). If this were not the case, the audience would not be able to *re-create* the true work of art.

In his characteristic manner, Croce also argues that an observer must experience the artist's original intuition or expression for himself. The judging of a work of art, he argues, therefore amounts to reproducing the work of art in oneself. Judging a work of art, criticizing it, appreciating its beauty, is basically the same thing as creating a work of art. The only difference lies in the different circumstances, since it is a question of aesthetic production in the one case, and a question of reproduction in the other. The activity that judges is often called *taste*, while the creative or productive activity is called *genius*. And so, Croce continues, taste and genius are essentially identical! This common identity of taste and genius is of utmost importance:

> To judge Dante we must raise ourselves to his level; in point of fact, as we perfectly well know, we are not Dante and he is not us; but in the moment of contemplation and judgment, our spirit is wholly one with that of the poet, and in that moment we and he are one. Only in this identity lies the possibility that our lesser souls might resonate with those of the great, and grow with them in the universality of the spirit (Croce, 1992, 134).

3.5   Objections to the Croce–Collingwood Theory

The CC theory certainly supports the common view of art as the expression of emotions. Many artists, when questioned about their work, will even go to a great deal of trouble to explain what they are attempting to express and often put themselves out to convey their original intentions. However, few artists will contend that the true work of art only exists in their minds, as Croce and Collingwood maintain. Their radical view springs directly from the idealism that inspires their art philosophy. This idealist premise implies that mental processes are much more "real" than sensible reality. Once we are prepared to accept this point of departure, Croce and Collingwood's philosophy of art is not quite as paradoxical as it seems at first glance. Still, the CC theory has aroused a great deal of criticism.

3.5.1   *Untenability of the Central Assertion*

A first fundamental point of criticism is that *there is no single reason to assume that the true work of art is located in the mind of the artist*. This argument, according to Richard Wollheim, is only conclusive if we should decide that works of art could

never be externalized, while the CC theory maintains that they do not need to be. Croce thinks of the artist at work as somebody talking to himself, thinking to himself, and moulding the work of art in the smithy of his mind, but without being in any way compelled to externalize his creation. This comparison, however, does not hold water. The person thinking to himself has already acquired a medium, namely a language, which he is using only internally. So, even though we talk to ourselves, we can always use language externally if called upon to do so. The implications of the CC theory, however, go much further. By maintaining that the work of art already exists in the mind of the artist, the theory gives license to those who pretend they have a work of art in their mind but never provide any proof for it. In these cases, rather than artists restricting the medium of their thoughts to a purely internal use, we are faced with individuals apparently lacking any medium of thought altogether.

3.5.2   Neglect of the Medium

This leads us to a second fundamental objection, namely that *the CC theory wrongly ignores the significance of the medium*. According to this objection, works of art cannot be taken to be independent of the means needed for their materialization. In the CC theory, however, artworks *are* viewed as separate from these means, at least in a concrete and tangible sense. Anyhow, this alleged independence of the used medium seems only somewhat plausible in some art forms and not in others. Some literary and musical works of art, for example, are likely to be formed previously in the artist's mind. A poem or an aria can be entirely ripened in the mind of the artist before it is written down. Indeed, there are novelists who claim they conceive their entire works, down to the smallest detail, before committing a single word to paper. While such a purely "mental" existence can be seen as a prerequisite for the poem, the aria, or the novel in question, these works of art cannot be identified with it: they do not *really exist* until they are embodied. Moreover, it may later appear that that which was formed in the mind was no more than a concept, a rough draft or a model. This will always be the case in the visual arts, because here, more than in other art forms, the work of art is intrinsically medium-bound. Mental images are seldom so specified that they anticipate *every* detail of the technical realization. The inherent unpredictability of the medium forces the painter or sculptor to solve unforeseen technical details during the creative process, to make adjustments needed for a more adequate realization of the initial intuition, etc. Many artists, writers and musicians included, will confirm that their initial intuition is often quite vague and that the work of art only gradually takes shape *in* and *through* the confrontation with the medium. The finished work often barely corresponds to the original mental image they had in mind.

In defense of Croce and Collingwood, it is argued that the theory is not concerned with the "physical medium", but the "conceived medium", that is, the thought of the physical medium in the artist's mind (Hospers, 1956). Because intuition or imagination is identical to expression, the artist can anticipate all facets of externalization, no matter how medium-bound, in his mind. This line of reasoning is also applied to the

performing arts. An example is the story of the hotel owner who was thrilled to hear that a famous violinist, someone he admired greatly, was going to spend a night in his hotel before a performance. This would give the hotelier the unique opportunity to secretly listen to the violinist rehearsing in his room. But the hotel owner's hopes were disappointed. He stood outside the room the whole night, but no matter how hard he pressed his ear to the door, he couldn't hear a single note. In the morning, he asked the violinist why he hadn't rehearsed the night before. "I hope you did not become ill," he said with a look of concern. The violinist, looking the picture of health, assured him that he *had* been preparing his performance quite intensely the night before, lying on his bed with the score in his hands. He had played the entire performance over and over in his head and had actually made quite a lot of progress! This anecdote could be adduced to support the CC theory. Yet even this story does not refute the objections raised above. Here too, the "primacy of the mental experience over the physical artifact" (Wollheim, 1977, 127) is not at all self-evident. The intuition or the imagination of the violinist actually presupposes the experience with the physical medium. Or, as Wollheim puts it: "…there could not be Crocian 'intuitions' unless there were, first, physical works of art" (Wollheim, 1977, 128).

3.5.3   Impossibility of Ascertaining the Original Intuition

A third fundamental criticism of the CC Theory concerns the assertion that the true work of art is only accessible to an audience to the extent in which the audience re-experiences or re-creates the original "intuition" or "imagination". *The problem is that we can never fully ascertain what that original intuition was*, not even when we have a tangible work of art at our disposal. Collingwood himself admits that a spectator can only achieve an "empirical" and "relative" assurance (Collingwood, 1979, 251 and 309) with regard to the artist's "imaginative expression". But there is more. Not only does the re-creation of expression remains but an ideal that can be realized only in part, but the artwork may also reveal aspects to us that were not consciously intended by the artist. Moreover, while a work of art will always allow *different intuitions*, there are insufficient criteria available to discern which intuition is the correct one, i.e. that intuition which seamlessly corresponds with the artist's original self-expression. There are extremely divergent interpretations of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. We can never know what Beethoven's original emotion or expression was by listening to the music over and over. Not only does the re-creation of the artist's intuition from its expression necessarily remain an ideal that can be realized only in part, the artwork itself may reveal aspects that were not deliberately intended by the artist. Moreover, any work of art may be traced back to *a variety of possible intuitions*, and the criteria available to the critic are insufficient to establish which of them corresponds exactly with the artist's original intent. There are extremely divergent interpretations of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. We can listen to the music over and over again, but we will never know Beethoven's original emotion or expression. As Anne Sheppard said, it goes without saying that

"Beethoven's Ninth is not identical with any one copy of the score or any one recording". Nor is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* "identical with any one copy of the text. Recognition of this fact, however, does not afford sufficient reason for saying that Beethoven's Ninth was really in his mind and is re-created by experienced listeners or that in learning to appreciate *The Waste Land*, we are learning to reproduce in ourselves precisely what went on in Eliot's mind when he wrote it" (Sheppard, 1987, 26).

3.6   Short Hermeneutic Interlude: The Complexity of Interpretation

In the previous chapter, we saw how complex sense perception is. This is no less the case with the interpretation of works of art. Philosophical reflection about interpretation is called *hermeneutics*. The theories of Croce and Collingwood belong in fact to hermeneutics, since they comprise a detailed view on the interpretation of artworks. Both Croce and Collingwood assume that the interpretation of art means that the spectator identifies with the artist, just as the historian must identify with historical characters. More specifically, they assert that a correct interpretation consists in tracing the artist's original emotion. This is why they speak in terms of "re-experiencing" and "re-creating". As we have seen, this is, in fact, impossible.

This does not mean, however, that the interpretation of works of art would not benefit from a thorough knowledge of the circumstances of their gestation, the artists' character, their life experiences and how these characteristics influenced their art, their contacts with other artists, their training and attitudes toward contemporary schools of art, in short, the spirit of their times (*Zeitgeist*). Critics and performing artists often immerse themselves in historical and biographical literature to gain a better understanding of an artwork's setting and ensure a better grasp of the work itself. Some critics and performing artists are famous for their thorough knowledge and understanding of the life world (*Lebenswelt*) in which a work of art originated. Their familiarity with the subject is believed to add to their critique or performance, although not everybody agrees with this. Formalists, for instance, see no benefit in such an approach, for reasons that will be discussed in the following chapter.

The weak point of the CC theory is that it does not explain why works of art continue to generate different and new interpretations. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), this can be attributed to the fact that traditional hermeneutics, to which the CC theory belongs, assumes it provides a method that essentially allows everybody to reach the same interpretation. And here, according to Gadamer, two errors of reasoning are made. Firstly, traditional hermeneutics wrongly presupposes that there is a clear division between knowledge and reality, between interpretation and the work of art itself. The work is seen as a separate reality, its interpretation amounting to nothing more than the discovery or reconstruction of the artist's actual standpoint or original intent. The second error ensues from the first and concerns the assumption that the interpretation can be considered

to be completely independent of the interpreter's individuality. So long as the correct method is followed, so the argument goes, it must be possible for anybody to reach the "correct" interpretation.

According to Gadamer, there is no strict division between knowledge and reality. The language we use, the knowledge we possess, the meanings we assign, all of this is an integral part of the reality surrounding us. Since reality is already pregnant with meaning and interpretation, it would be nonsense to apply such a radical division. Interpretation or "understanding" is therefore absorbed into reality, in that which we experience or see, so that there is no distinction between objective reality and subjective experience. Hermeneutics is not a "method" for acquiring knowledge of a reality that is outside of us. It is not a method at all, but a way of *being*. It is a category of our human condition, our experience, and our existence.

It follows from the above that the hermeneutic experience is inseparably linked to the personality and individuality of the interpreter. Interpretation is always embedded in what Gadamer calls the interpreter's "horizon of experience". This has far-reaching consequences for the interpretation of an artwork, for not only does it involve the artist's original intent, it also involves the spectator's horizon of experience as well. The work of art is therefore experienced as something that has already been interpreted, which only has meaning to the extent that the spectator can relate the artwork to his own attitude toward life, his preconceptions, the tradition to which he belongs, in short, his own horizon of experience. According to Gadamer, understanding is never exclusively concentrated on the artist, but rather concerns a "fusion" of the artist's horizon of experience on the one side with the spectator's on the other.

The artist's own horizon of experience is extremely rich with meanings. The artwork therefore brings with it the entire "flux of meaning" from which it originates. Part of this is the artist's original intent, which itself can be seen as the first interpretation of the artwork. Gadamer calls this first interpretation of the artwork, and all those to follow, its *Wirkungsgeschichte* (literally "history of effects", mostly translated as "effective history", sometimes as "history of interpretations" or even "reception history"). The artist's original intuition or interpretation is merely the beginning of a long chain. What's interesting is not this original intention, assuming it could still be determined. Quite possibly, the artist cannot or could not completely fathom this himself. More relevant questions are: what does the work of art still mean to us, what can we do with it, how does it enrich us? The aim of the hermeneutic interpretation is not the (possibly futile) search for the original emotion, the original self-expression, but the evaluation of the work of art as part of an ongoing history of its interpretations.

Gadamer's elaboration of hermeneutics certainly illuminates the complexity of interpretation. The cultural meaning of a work of art tends to increase with the number of its interpretations. And we have at our disposal an entire gamut of interpretations for all significant works of art, which, in turn, allow new generations to recognize in them or project onto them the preoccupations of their own time. It is a credit to Gadamer that he makes us aware of the fact that the ever-changing and historically determined points of view, from which artworks are continuously and diversely interpreted, can be explained by the nature of the hermeneutic experience

itself. The interpretation of the work is necessarily co-determined by its history of reception. This historical embeddedness is an integral part of hermeneutic interpretation. We owe it to hermeneutics that, as Hans-Georg Gadamer would put it, "we are absorbed into the cultural heritage of a specific artwork".

3.7   The Artist's Studio: Joseph Kosuth as a Contemporary Exponent of the CC Theory

One might be inclined to associate expression theories with expressionism, given the fact that expressionism, as an artistic movement, placed such great emphasis on not only the expressive, but also the spiritual dimension of art. In 1912, during expressionism's first heyday, Vasily Kandinsky published his now world-famous essay *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*), in which the importance of the artist's inner world, his soul's experience and his self-expression are emphasized time and again. Many of Kandinsky's statements could effortlessly be cited as proof that his view of art was similar to Croce and Collingwood's. After only one page, as he attempts to explain our inner resemblance with the "primitives", he writes: "Just like us, those pure artists wanted to capture in their works the inner essence of things, which of itself brought about a rejection of the external, the accidental" (Kandinsky, 1982, 128). And a bit further, we read: "Understanding entails the spectator's familiarity with the standpoint of the artist" (Kandinsky, 1982, 131). Over and over he stresses the artist's desire and obligation to give form to his inner world. Here, the medium appears to be completely subordinate to the artist's original "intuition" or "emotion": "Schönberg's music leads us into a new realm, where musical experiences are no longer acoustic, but purely spiritual. Here begins the 'music of the future' " (Kandinsky, 1982, 49). These quotes must be music to the ears of proponents of expression theories.

And yet Kandinsky pays too much attention to the *form*, to the *artistic means* with which the artist expresses his soul's experiences for his theory to be labeled as illustrative of the expression theory. The implications of the CC theory are in fact too radical for Kandinsky. Nowhere does he claim that the true work of art is located in its entirety in the mind of the artist and as such would not need to be externalized in order to be considered complete. On the contrary. Following a passionate plea for the revaluation of artistic content, the soul of art, he nonetheless points to the importance of the "how" versus the "what": "This 'What' is that content which only art can contain, *and to which only art can give clear expression through the means available to it*" (Kandinsky, 1982, 138, italics added). In view of his focus on the *synthesis* of form and content, I will return to Kandinsky later.

A view of art that somewhat approximates the *radical* implications of the CC theory is not easy to find among artists themselves. The closest kinship is undoubtedly to be found in *conceptual art*, and specifically in the artistic vision of one of its

pre-eminent exponents, Joseph Kosuth. First and foremost, Kosuth argues that the work of art exists as soon as it appears as an idea in the artist's mind. Kosuth actually goes one step further, for in his view, thinking about art is itself already a work of art! The artwork, therefore, does not need to be externalized. In fact, externalization is not an issue at all. Moreover, Kosuth sees the interpretation of an artwork solely in terms of the artist's original intent. It is remarkable how much these standpoints have in common with the three fundamental assertions which, as we have seen, constitute the core of the CC theory.

Of course, Kosuth's ideas originated in a "horizon of experience" entirely of its own, so that the standpoints cited here are by no means seamlessly in line with Croce and Collingwood's ideas, and cover a slightly different scope. Kosuth certainly has different reasons for emphasizing the work of art as an idea than Croce and Collingwood, who, as we saw, arrived at this starting point from their idealistic philosophy and the primacy of the idea assumed within it. Kosuth's intellectual context was totally different. In 1967, at the time his public career began, Kosuth was struck by the fact that well-known artists like Pollock (see Fig. 3.2), De Kooning and Rothko, who dominated the New York scene at the time, did not have a say in the interpretation of their works. They left interpretation entirely up to authoritative critics like Clement Greenberg. Kosuth could not accept that these artists should relinquish interpretation, for this amounted to acknowledging that they themselves did not know what they were doing. This was unforgivable in his eyes: he saw it as a lack of moral responsibility and artistic integrity. And so Kosuth argued in various articles (especially in his notorious "Art after Philosophy", which appeared in *Studio International* in 1969) that art was essentially about self-reflection. Kosuth thought through this thesis so consistently, that thinking about the essence of art became the essence of works of art itself!

Fig. 3.2 Jackson Pollock, *Autumn Rythm*, 1950. Canvas, 267 × 526 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (George A. Hearn Fund 1957). © Jackson Pollock, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008. (*see Color Plates*)

3.7.1   The Essence of Art Is the Idea

In a completely different way than Croce and Collingwood's, Kosuth, referring to Wittgenstein and the corpus of contemporary analytical philosophy, argues that the essence of art is the idea, not representation or form. Each reference to external reality, each perception of the world around us, is determined by our conceptual outlook. Aesthetic considerations about formal beauty are a matter of taste, of decoration, but do not concern the essence of art. What does concern the essence of art are new ideas that *add* something to our conception of art, that redefine them, so to speak. It is not the form but the *content* that is – or at least should be – decisive. The "value" of individual artists depends *solely* on their ideas about art and the degree to which these ideas have produced new insights into the essence and the function of art.

Intuition, imagination, and the artist's mind are central, just as in the CC theory. But Kosuth is not so much concerned with expression as with *reflection*. And for this reason he also rejects Pollock's notion of "self-expression", as this kind of supremely individual, subjective emotion is only useful for those who dealt with Pollock personally. As such it is not relevant to the *artistic quality* of the artwork. Only the inventiveness of the artist, the fact that he changes, enriches or broadens our *concept* of art, determines artistic quality. In Kosuth's eyes, Marcel Duchamp was living proof of this. With his first *ready-made*, Duchamp redefined the essence of art. The avantgarde movements before him, up to and including cubism, were preoccupied with form. Although they tried out new things, they nevertheless all spoke the same language. Thanks to Duchamp, the language of art was thoroughly changed: no longer was it the form, but the content, the "what", that took front stage. This change from "appearance" to "conception" marked the beginning of true "modern" art. It also heralded conceptual art. After Duchamp, all art became essentially conceptual.

Even if one disagrees completely with this glorification of Marcel Duchamp, the example makes very clear *how* Kosuth sees the artwork as something that *only* exists in the artist's mind, and why, for him, it is always 'conceptual' in nature. The work of art is only valuable in so far as it comments on art itself and embodies a new viewpoint on art's essence and function. His conviction that the artist's intention has absolute validity makes Kosuth subscribe to Don Judd's provocative statement: "If someone says his work is art, it's art".

3.7.2   External Manifestation Is Unimportant

The above would seem to give free rein to the artist to do as he likes, but Kosuth's intention is to safeguard art against any interference that does not belong to the context of art itself. The totality of art, in whichever form, has to concern itself with the way it defines itself, in short, the idea, the artist's self-reflection, the way the nature of art changes with his work. Everything centers on the originality of the idea and not on the physical or visual characteristics of the artwork. So, just as in the CC theory, the work of art may in no way be confused with its external manifestation. The

medium itself is unimportant. The value of a cubist painting does not lie in the specific manner of painting, in the way colors or forms are fashioned or take shape. These concrete properties are of secondary importance or even of no importance at all. Actual works of art are scarcely more than historical curiosities. Why else, Kosuth wonders somewhat provocatively, are Cézanne and Van Gogh's pallets exhibited as proudly as their paintings in the Louvre's *Jeu de Paume* wing? The answer is that, as far as art is concerned, the concrete paintings of Van Gogh have no more value than his pallet. They are of equal importance for collectors. What matters are not Cézanne or Van Gogh's paintings but the idea behind them and the fact that this idea, this redefinition of art, continues to be influential and has changed art's essence.

3.7.3   Dialogue Between the Artist and His Audience

The third fundamental assertion of the CC theory – that the work of art is only accessible to an audience to the extent in which the audience re-experiences or recreates the artist's original expression or imagination – can also be found in Kosuth's view of art, albeit in a slightly different perspective. The great emphasis he lays on the artist's intention, on the fact that the artist needs to explain and justify his work philosophically, is aimed to ensure that the spectator gains a better understanding of the artist's standpoint. In all art, but most certainly in contemporary art, information about the artistic concept, and about the artist's underlying intentions as well as his ideas, is indispensable for an audience's appreciation and understanding of the artwork. Conceptual art strives toward a dialogue between artist and audience. Kosuth's view of this is increasingly hermeneutic. In "The Artist as Anthropologist", an article which appeared in 1975, he increasingly stressed that in art, just as in anthropology, the understanding of others is determined by our ability to open ourselves up to others, to identify with them. He points out the importance of establishing a mutual understanding between artists and non-artists, a collective awareness creating new meaning. The artist is the inventor of meaning: "The work of art," Kosuth writes, "is essentially a play within the meaning system of art" (Kosuth, 1991, 249).

   To understand this play, however, the audience must not become fixated on fragments, on parts of the whole. Referring to Richard E. Palmer, among others, Kosuth reiterates that we cannot and may not avoid the "hermeneutic circle". We understand the meaning of an individual word by considering it in the context of the sentence as a whole. Inversely, the meaning of a sentence as a whole is totally dependent on the meaning of the individual words. In the same way, an individual concept derives its meaning from the context or horizon in which it appears; and yet the horizon is made up of exactly the same elements from which it derives its meaning. Through this constant interaction between part and whole, where the one gives meaning to the other, understanding is circular. Because meaning originates within this "circle", it is called the hermeneutic circle. The meaning is not static but rather historical: it is a continuous relationship of the whole to the parts, which we see from a given standpoint, at a given time, for a given combination of parts.

Meaning is not something that exists above or outside of history, but is part of a hermeneutic circle, which is always historically defined.

Applied to art, this means, according to Kosuth, that we can never re-create the artist's original idea if we concentrate on a part of the whole, the shape of a cube or a box, as exhibited by an artist like Donald Judd, for instance (see Fig. 3.3). All the physical attributes of a contemporary artwork are irrelevant to the underlying artistic concept when they are viewed individually. The concept must be seen in its entirety. Simply viewing and judging individual works is like reading parts of a definition. We have to view the individual artworks as statements that function within the wider framework of the artist's complete oeuvre. Only when we discover what function the complete oeuvre fulfills within the artist's concept of art – which only exists as an idea in his mind – only then can we understand the *meaning* of individual works. Each attempt to grasp only a part of the whole deprives the language of art of its *true* meaning. An audience is only capable of "understanding" art if it is informed about the whole. Art is the "whole" and not the "part". And the "whole" only exists conceptually, in the idea, the artist's philosophy of art!

In spite of the unavoidable differences in accent, Kosuth's theory of art can be seen as a contemporary illustration of the CC theory. An important difference is that, in sharp contrast with the almost purely philosophical context of idealism and neo-Hegelianism in which Croce and Collingwood vented their theories, Kosuth is firmly embedded in the historical and art-world context of New York in the late 1960s. Yet, as we will see in Chapter 8, conceptual art has a pedigree stretching back as far as Plato and reaching its first apotheosis in Hegel, who declared, already
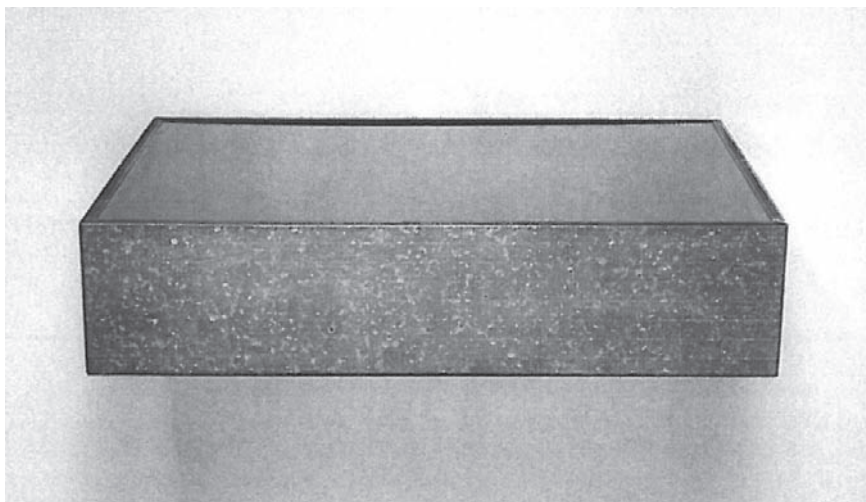
Fig. 3.3   Donald Judd, *Untitled*, 1965. Galvanized iron with acrylic on plexiglass, 15,2 × 68,6 × 61 cm. The Dorothy and Herbert Vogel Collection, Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, Patrons Permanent Fund and Gift of Dorothy and Herbert Vogel. Foto: Philip A. Charles. Art © Judd Foundation. Licensed by VAGA, NY, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008.

at the beginning of the eighteenth century, that art had found its final destiny in philosophy. From this angle it is no coincidence that, as we will see, Arthur Danto, confronted with conceptual art in the 1980s, relied on Hegel to proclaim, once more, the end of art. But a much more obvious, easily demonstrable and crucial common trait of the CC theory and Kosuth's vision is their neglect of the medium, the materiality of the work of art, and its purely formal characteristics. The next chapter will be devoted precisely to those approaches within the philosophy of art that consider the pure form of the work of art to be its quintessence.

3.7.4   Appendix

3.7.4.1   Quotes from Kosuth's Work

Quotes from

Editorial in 27 Parts (Kosuth, 1991, 7–9)

Bruce Nauman

"Art should raise questions."

Marcel Duchamp

"In France there is an old saying, 'stupid like a painter'. The painter was considered stupid. I wanted to be intelligent. I had to have the idea of inventing. It is nothing to do what your father did. It is nothing to be another Cézanne. In my visual period there is a little of that stupidity. All my work in the period before the *Nude* was visual painting. Then I came to the idea. I thought the idealic formulation a way to get away from influences."

Don Judd

"'Non-art', 'anti-art', 'non-art art' and 'anti-art art' are useless. If someone says his work is art, it's art."

Carl Andre

"Art is what we do. Culture is what is done to us."

Quotes from

Information 2 (Kosuth, 1991, 57–71)

Ludwig Wittgenstein

"Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same."

Austrian Proverb

"Der Zuschauer schafft mit." (The spectator likewise creates).

3.7.4.2   A Short Commentary on Joseph Kosuth, Passagen-Werk (Documenta–Flânerie), 1992

Passagen-Werk, a work by Joseph Kosuth (born Toledo, 1945), was exhibited in the Neue Galerie, at Documenta IX (Kassel, Germany, 13 June–20 September 1992).

It was distributed along two galleries, one above the other, comprising the entire length of the museum. The work consisted of statues and sculptures from earlier periods which Kosuth had covered with shrouds imprinted with quotes in German from philosophers and artists, with the English translation underneath.

There was, however, an important difference between the two galleries. The lower gallery was painted entirely in black with the exception of the quotes. These were printed in white letters and stood out in sharp contrast to the black background (the "black hall"). The floor above, conversely, was painted entirely in white and the quotes there were displayed in black letters against a white background (the "white hall"). There was, therefore, a black-white contrast in the entire work, just as in the double swan, which served as the exhibit's emblem.

The title "Passagen-Werk" refers to a book of the same title by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). Benjamin's "Passagenwerk" (English translation: *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin, 2002) was comprised almost entirely of quotes. He saw this life's work as a *completely objective book*, set free from its author. This book of quotations was Benjamin's expression of his ideal of the perfect book, serving merely as a pretext for each reader to write his or her own story or text, based on what he or she has read or experienced.

Benjamin's Arcades Project necessitates another form of reading as the reader is forced to contribute to its final creation. The reader is invited to "stroll" (*flâner* in French, hence: *flânerie*) through the quotes Benjamin had copied from others or from himself (self-quotations!), just as Baudelaire strolled through the Paris of his day, in order to "edit" the quotes into a whole.

In his work, Kosuth gathered a series of family resemblances into a language game centered on "Passage". A language game, by the way, is a concept from the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein indicating linguistic practices governed by certain rules and conventions that cannot be covered by a law but that nevertheless show a series of overlapping features. So the language game around the word 'passage' show both similarities and shades of meaning, to wit:

1. *Passage* in the sense of the "act of passing", "to pass by" and "strolling".

   - In his youth, Benjamin translated Baudelaire's poem, "A Une Passante". The woman in the poem is portrayed as something out of reach. As passersby, man and woman can only cross each other's paths "in a flash", in passing, the passion is as ephemeral as their passing. In the same way, the philosophical quotes we pass move us as they flash by, only to recede beyond our reach again.
   - The second chapter in Benjamin's work on Baudelaire is entitled "Der Flâneur". For Baudelaire, strolling through the city was refreshing, an act in which the ego lost itself and was invigorated by "un bain de multitude" (a bath in the crowd).
   - Passing, strolling, here in Kosuth's Passagen-Werk, even more than in Benjamin's book, is a physical necessity! The spectator saunters among the quotes as Baudelaire did in his beloved Paris.

2. *Passage*, in the sense of a "portion of a written work", a "paragraph" or "quote".

   - Kosuth's work is clearly inspired by the underlying intention of Benjamin's book, because here too the spectators or passers-by are expected to create their

own texts from the quotes. The artist only supplies a draft. The passers-by are the ultimate architects of the artwork: they accomplish it themselves.

- We live in a culture in which quotes are more and more prevalent. Benjamin's work was ahead of its time as far as the idea of "intertextuality" is concerned (see Chapter 11). In Kosuth's Passagen-Werk, the passerby strolls through an intertextual space!

3. *Passage* in the sense of an arcade, "a glassed-in shopping street, usually connecting main streets".

- Walter Benjamin wrote a great deal about glass architecture. His main source of inspiration was *The Gray Cloth, Paul Scheerbart's novel on Glass architecture (Scheerbart, 2001), Originally published in German in 1913.* The first quote in *The Arcades Project* is a definition of "Passage" from the *Guide illustrée de Paris* (1852). From this work, it appears that by 1800 more and more "passages" were being replaced by "galleries", i.e. "long, roofed promenades extending along the inside or outside of a building and supported by arches or columns. In German, as in English, "Gallery" can mean the above as well as "a room, series of rooms, wide corridor or building devoted to the exhibition of works of art". In Kosuth's Passagen-Werk both of these definitions are united in the exhibition building itself, called: the *Neue Galerie*.
- Many of the shrouded sculptures had the appearance of columns. Hidden from view, they acquired a halo of mystery and magic. According to Benjamin, works of art were once the objects of cults, and were often shrouded for lengthy periods of time. Once a work of art is conferred the status of art, he said, it loses its original aura (see Chapter 8). Did Kosuth, by covering the sculptures with a shroud, aim to restore their cultic power and original aura?

Further Reading

For the quotation of Cesare Pavese, see:

Cesare Pavese, *This Business of Living*, London: Quartet Books, 1980.

Hegel's statement on expression in art:

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory lectures on aesthetics*, London/New York: Penguin Books, 2004.

Classical source of the expression theory:

Lev Tolstoy, *What is art?* London/New York: Penguin Books, 1995.

Criticism on Tolstoy in the work of Arnold Hauser:

Arnold Hauser, *The social history of art*, *Vol. IV: Naturalism, impressionism, the film age,* With an intro-
duction by Jonathan Harris, London/New York: Routledge, 1999 (Originally published in 1951).

Classical sources of the Croce-Collingwood theory:

Benedetto Croce, *The aesthetic as the science of expression and of the linguistic in general. Part
1. Theory (Aesthetic as the science of expression & of the linguistic)*, Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1992 (New translation by Colin Lyas, superseding the earlier, defective trans-
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Chapter 4
Formalism

4.1 Introduction

We have so far discussed two influential philosophical theories of art that, in addition to having a long-standing tradition in the history of philosophy, are deeply rooted in the public and popular debate about art. As a rule, daily discussions about art are still centered on the aspects of *representation* and *self-expression*, despite the turbulent development of modern art in the twentieth century and growing doubts about the usefulness of both these concepts. In modern art, and more specifically in modernism, the role of *formal* experiment is of overriding importance. One need only think of Cubism, Fauvism and numerous other movements in painting. Technical experimentation also caused a modernistic breakthrough in music, particularly through the work of Arnold Schönberg and his discovery of so-called *dodecaphony*, or the 12-tone system. Because of its great emphasis on form and technique, modernism is often characterized as formalistic.

What should we understand by the term "formalism"? To answer this question, it would be wise to begin by highlighting an essential difference between formalism and the two previous theories. We have seen that, from a very specific point of view, the mimesis and the expression theories, however different they may look at face value, share an essential feature. They both imitate something *outside* the realm of art itself and consequently they are judged by *external* or *extrinsic* standards. While imitation theories compare works of art with a sensorially perceptible reality, expression theories assess them exclusively based on emotional and/or moral criteria, or an original Idea, an original "intuition" or "imagination" in the artist's mind. In both cases, the artwork, and even art in general, is not considered on its own merits, but invariably tested according to extra-artistic, external, extrinsic criteria. In the eyes of a formalist, such criteria completely miss the point when it comes to judging works of art.

Formalism accepts nothing but purely artistic standards for assessing works of art, which it considers to be independent, irreducible, autonomous phenomena to be judged on their own merits, i.e. their *intrinsic* value. To formalists, only internal, intrinsic criteria are relevant. Art must therefore no longer be judged by standards that are foreign to it, such as the subject matter of the artwork, its historical context,

the artist's emotion or intention or art's compliance to a moral, religious or ideological ideal. The only correct standards concern the *form* of the artwork, not the content or substance. This view implies that the art critic is entitled to judge artworks exclusively on their formal properties and merits.

Like mimetic and expressionist theories, formalism has its roots in antiquity. Aristotle's *Poetics* contains an extensive discussion of the formal and stylistic characteristics of tragedy and the epic, which is relevant to literary criticism and theory even today. Considering Aristotle's enormous influence on medieval philosophy, it should therefore come as no surprise that formalistic viewpoints were quite prominent in medieval aesthetics. Beauty was considered to be dependent upon such qualities as proportion and harmony. In early medieval musical aesthetics, *to* name just one example, Boethius used the theoretical principle of *proportio* developed by Pythagoras (See: Eco, 2002, Section 4.2).

The history of formalism can also be traced to Immanuel Kant and the distinctions he made in his *Critique of Judgment* between "free" and "dependent" beauty. He held that free beauty could only be attributed to an object according to its formal properties, without considering its function or purpose. As we will see in Chapter 6, Kant's aesthetics has much in common with formalism but still incorporates a much wider variety of theories. Moreover, formalism in Kant is linked to the aesthetic experience as such: the sense of beauty of objects or natural phenomena also belongs to this experience. Kant does acknowledge, however, that there is a distinction between the experience of beauty in nature and in art. Here he clearly anticipates the thesis of the *autonomy of art*. This thesis and the exclusive focus on the formal properties of an artwork are characteristic of classical formalism as it first appeared in the nineteenth century.

In this chapter, I will take Eduard Hanslick's plea for formalism in the philosophy of music as a starting point. Hanslick (1825–1904) was one of the first truly influential "formalists". He had already developed a formal theory of music in the middle of the nineteenth century, which was considered revolutionary in his days. That this early manifestation of formalism should occur in the world of music is, as I shall emphasize, hardly coincidental.

Whereas classical music offered a congenial home to Hanslick's formalism, painting required a minor revolution for critics to advocate formalist ideas. The decisive breakthrough in the formalist approach to painting came with Clive Bell and Roger Fry's theory of the *significant form*. Although neither Hanslick nor Bell and Fry were philosophers, but rather art critics, their theories nevertheless belong to the established agenda of philosophy of art, and therefore call for a thorough discussion.

The influence of formalism in the twentieth century has been invaluable, not only in modern art, as I already indicated, but also in art criticism as well as in various scientific approaches to art. *New Criticism* was a trend in literary criticism that had a great deal of influence in the English-speaking world and beyond, thanks to T.S. Eliot and others. Here too, references to external reality, historical context, the intention of the author or biographical facts were set aside and considered to be irrelevant. Consequently, literary criticism focused almost exclusively on the formal analysis of the literary work. Formalism in literary criticism and theory was already

propagated at the beginning of the twentieth century by so-called *Russian Formalism*. Because the influence of Russian Formalism did not manifest itself fully until the 1950s and 1960s, with the rise of French structuralism, I shall return to this in Chapter 10, which is devoted to structuralism and semiotics.

4.2   Eduard Hanslick on Beauty in Music

In 1854, the well-known Viennese musicologist and music critic Eduard Hanslick published *The Beautiful in Music*, which became famous if only for the one statement: "The essence of music is *sound and motion*" (Hanslick, 1974, 67). (The German original is much more sophisticated: "*Tönend bewegte Formen sind einzig und allein Inhalt und Gegenstand der Musik*", which, rendered literally in English, would be: "*The forms moved by sounds are simply and solely the content and object of Music*". Or as Susanne Langer translated it: "*The content of music is nothing but dynamic sound-patterns*", (Langer, 1976, 225.) This single phrase earned Hanslick the reputation of being the first formalist of the purest kind, even though it referred only to musical aesthetics.

That formalism should so clearly have manifested itself within musical aesthetics at such an early time is, in retrospect, readily accepted by many philosophers of art. Many agree with the famous statement that music is the most *gegenstandslose* (literally: the most object-less or nonrepresentational) of the arts. Compared to the other arts, music seems less suited to the representation of anything real, being too abstract and ethereal. In music, therefore, form dominates. Or, as Susanne Langer puts it:

> Music…is pre-eminently non-representative even in its classical productions, its highest attainments. It exhibits pure form not as an embellishment, but as its very essence; we can take it in its flower – for instance, German music from Bach to Beethoven – and have practically nothing but tonal structures before us: no scene, no object, no fact. That is a great aid to our chosen preoccupation with form (Langer, 1976, 209).

There is of course music that refers explicitly to "reality", such as programmatic music, i.e. music with a title, dealing with a subject matter – quite often even an entire history or myth – where the music is supposed to represent the theme, sometimes in extreme detail. What, however, is the link between a work of music and its "program"? This link, upon closer inspection, seems rather arbitrary, because our association between what we hear and any subject or story is determined *by the title* and perhaps by the background information about the work, but not by the melody proper. If the same group of notes, the same melodic structure, were accompanied by a completely different title or receive a completely different programmatic setting, then the same work of music might – indeed, certainly would – evoke completely different associations in our imagination. If this is the case, what then would be the "mimetic" value of the music? How should one imagine the link between a "work of music" and surrounding "reality"?

With his highly polemic essay on musical aesthetics, Hanslick waged war not only against the "mimetic" view of music, but also against "…those aesthetic

enthusiasts who, though assuming to teach the musician, in reality only dilate upon their tinkling opium-dreams" (Hanslick, 1974, 11). Hanslick specifically aimed his attack at the romantic aesthetics of Daniel Schubart, who defended his own views with the statement that "beauty is expression, and expression is 'unburdening'". Seen in the context of music history, Schubart represented the musical expression theory of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, while Hanslick's aesthetics is rooted in the classicist thesis that beauty is self-contained, something complete in itself.

4.2.1   Central Idea

It is exactly this self-sufficiency of the *musically* beautiful that led Hanslick to his idea that music is an entirely autonomous and unique art form, which can thus be characterized as *sui generis*. This central idea inspired Hanslick to make a "contribution to the revisal of musical aesthetics", as is indicated by the subtitle of his major work. He radically rejected the music of Richard Wagner, which was causing quite a commotion at the time. More particularly, he criticized Wagner's pursuit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("the total work of art"), in which opera was seen as a "total event" merging different art forms into a "total concept". Hanslick was suspicious of Wagner's undertaking, condemning it as overly theatrical. Contrary to Wagner, he defended music as an absolute, *pure* art form, that is, an art form liberated from all that is alien to it, such as "nature", "reality", morality, feeling or "ideas". In the eyes of Hanslick, music does *not* refer to anything else, as language or painting do. Music is neither representation nor expression, but an autonomous creation which follows its own laws. This notion of autonomy, undoubtedly the theme proper and very core of Hanslick's musical aesthetics, involves a number of key assertions that further explain his "formalism".

4.2.2   Form and Content Are Identical

His first key assertion is that there is *no distinction* between *form* and *content* in music, because "substance and form, the subject and its working out, the image and the realized conception are mysteriously blended in one indecomposable whole" (Hanslick, 1974, 166). Music is distinguished from all other art forms precisely because it can treat "substance" only in one form, while the other arts can do so in many. In literature, for example, the story of William Tell can be told in the form of a novel, a drama or a ballad. In each of these cases the *substance* or *content* remains the same: the same story is told in different ways. This is not possible in music, because "in music, no distinction can be made between substance and form, as it has no form independently of the substance" (ibid., 167). Very concretely, this means that from a purely esthetical point of view, only the primary elements in music, the musical sounds and the forms created by their movement, such as melody,

harmony, rhythm and instrumentation, are relevant and are, as it were, music's only subject matter! Everything else is aesthetically irrelevant, not pertinent.

Hanslick repeats over and over and in every manner possible that the classical distinction between form and substance cannot be applied to music. A musical composition is not a form, it is not a bottle filled with content – champagne, for instance – because, as Hanslick argues, not without irony: "Musical 'champagne'… has the peculiarity of developing *with* the bottle" (ibid., 74). To make his case, Hanslick takes the arabesque as an example. The arabesque, he says, is composed for its own sake, for the sake of the unlimited possibilities for pure musical ornamentation, and is entirely independent of any "content" that is not purely musical. In the arabesque, musical forms are pre-eminently "free"; they are, in other words, determined only by the necessity of the elements themselves and not by a cognitive or emotional content brought in "from without". For Hanslick, the beautiful in music always presupposes this "freedom" whereby artistic imagination goes hand in hand with the formal laws governing musical forms. In the arabesque, music comments only on itself.

4.2.3   Music Is Not Expression

His second key assertion is that *music cannot express specific feelings*. In order to determine the intrinsic value of music, therefore, any reference to a composer's emotion, or to the emotional effect that a piece of music arouses in us, is theoretically suspect. Hanslick does not deny that music concerns feelings – on the contrary. But he sees the original emotion at most as a stimulus for the creative process: the emotion itself, however, does not "compose". The only thing responsible for this is the composer's unique, musically trained talent. In fact, the composer should ideally observe a certain detachment from his original emotion; otherwise he will hardly be capable of 'embodying his emotions in musical forms'. This embodiment is a purely musical matter, which necessarily surpasses the *specific*, *subjective*, *emotional stimulus*. This also explains why Hanslick emphatically argues that music is not capable of arousing *specific* emotions in the listener. Music may awaken all sorts of emotions, but these emotions are different for each listener. Certain compositions may provoke a wide range of varied, even opposed, feelings, but who is to say which listener is better in tune with the composer's original emotion? So, while emotion is undeniably significant both during and after the creation of a musical work – to the composer and the listener, respectively – it is irrelevant from an aesthetical point of view.

Hanslick applies this same line of reasoning to musical *interpretation*. The performance of music is just as intensely emotional as its composition. However, the emotional component of the interpretation does not, strictly speaking, belong to the piece of music itself. In the end, the only thing that matters is the "musical form", i.e. the musical notation or the tonal structure. It is also an illusion to believe that the performer is capable of "re-creating" the original emotion. The performer's

mind always remains separated from the artist's. Each interpretation has a different emotional color. It is impossible to determine which emotional approach best corresponds to the composer's intention. There is no criterion whatsoever that guarantees the accuracy of performance apart from the musical notation itself, the pure musical form.

With this radical criticism of the romantic aesthetics of his day, Hanslick was ahead of his time in anticipating the objections to the expression theory we discussed earlier, which were only fully developed half a century later. And yet, even from a purely aesthetic standpoint, Hanslick does attribute an important role to *emotion*. Music undeniably contains feeling. This feeling, however, is embodied *in* and *through* musical forms, and is not imposed upon them from without. Emotion is inseparably linked to the "pure observation" of musical forms. While music cannot express *definite*, *specific* feelings, it is intensely emotionally charged and moves us to ecstasy. This is because the *musical forms* themselves, the audible changes in tempo, the melodic structure, etc., embody a movement that resembles what Hanslick calls the "dynamic properties" of emotion which are part of general moods. So one could say that there is a certain parallelism between the two, an analogy, which explains why music arouses emotions in us. However, Hanslick is quite cautious here: nothing 'substantial' is in fact added to music. Nor can we safely say that music expresses or represents *general* feelings, such as love, hate or anger. Music is *not* the expression of emotions, even though its forms impassion us! Our passion will intensify the more we listen to music for its own sake, detached from every reference to definite, actual emotions. In other words, although music is not expression, it is imbued with expressiveness.

4.2.4 Music Is Not Mimesis

In fact, Hanslick does not only claim that music is not expression. His third key assertion is that music is not imitation either. To illustrate this, he refers to the character of Orestes in Gluck's opera *Iphigenia*. The way Orestes fulfills his duty of extracting vengeance, is struck with madness and finally falls in love with Hermione, all of this is not only supposedly expressed by the music, but also represented by it. How are we to imagine such a musical representation? As punishment for the murder of Aegisthus and his mother Clytemnestra, Orestes is driven mad by the avenging deities. According to the story, the deities, called Furies, are hideous, with snakes for hair and armed with torches. Hanslick's point is that something of this nature can be represented by a painter, or perhaps by means of the theatrical performance accompanying an opera, but not by music. A painter or an actor can easily represent the rage, the despair, the amazement on Orestes' face and in his gestures. How though, must a composer "represent" Orestes' horrible torment? This is an impossible task: "The composer is unable to represent Orestes either in one way or another; in fact, *he cannot represent him at all*" (ibid., 164).

4.2.5 The Language of Music Is Autonomous

Why is music incapable of expression or imitation? This question leads us to the fourth key assertion, namely that *music is a language all of its own, entirely contingent upon nothing but its own forms and properties*. Music is like the Serpent in Goethe's *The Tale* (Das Märchen): perfect in its own ring. The language of music is that of sevenths, major and minor keys, basses, etc., in other words, in musical forms which might just as well be expressing the wrath of the avenging deities as the despair of Orestes, or an Orestes being pursued by hares just as well as one being pursued by Furies. In short, these forms can mean whatever one likes, because the links between the music and what it is supposed to be referring to are completely random or arbitrary.

The peculiar nature of musical language can in fact only be understood if we keep in mind that musical forms are of an *autonomous* nature, i.e. irreducible to other artistic forms. These forms can not be converted into concepts or images. Nor can they be expressed in spoken language. As Steve Martin allegedly said, "Talking about music is like dancing about architecture". We cannot speak about music in words, although we can hear it mentally and even understand it. And this is the added value of a purely musical language; although it neither represents nor expresses *something specific*, music voices the unspeakable. Music possesses this very unique property thanks to its pure form. As a rule, Hanslick is skeptical of all musical genres that distract us from purely musical language and in which music is practiced for anything but its own sake.

4.2.6 From an Aesthetic Point of View, Only Instrumental Music Is Important

The above explains why Hanslick, finally, claims that *only purely instrumental music embodies the true and authentic language of music*. It is *the* model for all music, as it is music in its "purest form". Music set to words, with titles, programmatic music, opera and "table music" distracts us from the formal properties, which should be at the center of our focus. Hanslick does *not* say that these musical genres should not be practiced; he merely argues that the judgment of a musical work of art should be based only on its *purely aesthetic – i.e*. its formal musical – merits.

4.3 Objections to Hanslick's Theory

Eduard Hanslick developed a new concept of music that measured up to the spectacular advances made in classical music during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And while he had ties with romanticism and was himself not a philosopher, he *was* greatly influenced by Robert Zimmerman (1824–1898),

a philosopher who, in turn, embraced the formalistic aesthetics of Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776–1841). The main idea that music is only sonorous form, without significant content or expression except for the sound it produces, stems from Herbart. As an eminent music critic Hanslick defended "formalism" in order to pave the way for well-founded *criticism* in music. And yet Hanslick's influence on the *philosophy* of music has also been far-reaching. This does not, however, imply that his concept is immune to certain critical objections.

4.3.1 Argument in Favor of Autonomy Unsustainable

The first objection to Hanslick's theory relates to *the way* he substantiates the *autonomy of music*. Over and over again this autonomy is contrasted with other arts in which, contrary to music, content and form are said to be distinguishable from one another. But is this a convincing argument? Does the story of William Tell actually have the same content when told in the form of a novel or a poem, respectively? Will not the respective formal requirements of prose and poetry substantially affect the story? Hanslick's claim seems difficult to defend even *within the realm of literature*, let alone if it is applied to all art forms but music. Everyone knows how different a novel can be from its filmed version. Indeed, the formal requirements of the cinema are likely to produce a different artwork. And, as said, ultimately the differences will not be purely formal, but also substantial. Even if Hanslick were right in claiming that music is the only art form which that can neither represent nor express anything specific, except that which is already contained in its form, his argument for the autonomy of music still remains tenuous. He takes only the specificity of the musical medium into consideration, *without accounting for the peculiar*, *formal nature* of other art media. The difference here is at most a gradual, and not a fundamental one.

4.3.2 Underestimation of the Symbolic Nature of Music

This brings us to the second objection, in line with the preceding one, namely that Hanslick indeed underestimates the extent to which each artistic medium creates a "language" that is *symbolic* in nature. He uncritically assumes that the visual arts are mimetic. But as Gombrich and Goodman have pointed out (see Chapter 2), even the visual arts do not simply depict "reality", but rather make use of a visual "language" that can only be understood symbolically. In this respect, the same "depiction", the same pictorial form, can be symbolic of different things, by a change of title for instance. An untitled poem can be symbolic for a multitude of different things, as can an abstract painting without a title. From this point of view, then, there is again no fundamental difference between other art forms and music. The latter constitutes a "language" which, just as any other "language" of art, is of a

"symbolic" nature, or at any rate can be. Hanslick thus grossly underestimated the symbolic nature of music.

4.3.3   Musical Expression Unclear

The third objection, linked closely to the second, is that Hanslick does not explain *why* and *how* music can be expressive. Now, the question of whether music can be expressive at all is quite controversial. Hanslickian ideas were also expressed by prominent composers of the twentieth century. Well-known is the following radical statement from Stravinsky's *An Autobiography* (1975, 53): "(For) I consider that music, because of its unique nature, does not have the power to express anything, whether it is a feeling, a state of mind, a psychological mood or a natural phenomenon. Expression has never been an inherent property of music." In the same manner, Paul Hindemith, claimed that: "Music cannot express the composer's feelings" (Hindemith, 1952, 35). And even an eminent philosopher such as Karl Popper wrote: "The expressionist theory of art is empty (Popper, 1976, 67)!" Seen in retrospect, Hanslick does seem to have brilliantly anticipated a belief that is still current among composers and philosophers. Still, one could wonder whether the attention for the symbolic nature of music might not for that very reason be able to provide us with some insight into the *way* music can express emotions, can have meaning or content, regardless of how different it may be from common speech. I will return to this in the following chapter, more particularly in my discussion of Susanne Langer's symbol theory. In this theory, Langer argues that the expression theory can only be successfully reconciled with formalism through an adequate theory of the symbol. First, however, we will focus on formalism as it was formulated and defended by Clive Bell and Roger Fry with regard to the visual arts.

4.4   Clive Bell and Roger Fry on "Significant Form"

Around the turn of the twentieth century, i.e. about 50 years after the publication of Hanslick's major work, Clive Bell (1881–1956) and Roger Fry (1866–1934), two eminent *art critics* in the UK, championed a completely new approach to painting. Their new views were not only reflected in their collective propaganda for so-called French Post-Impressionist painting, and specifically for the role of Paul Cézanne in this, *but also* in their criticism, which became more and more formalistically oriented. Their extensive attempts toward a theoretical justification of their art criticism also resulted in a fundamental contribution to the philosophy of art.

Roger Fry's work is undoubtedly more important in the field of art criticism, while Clive Bell's achievements are predominantly contained in his aesthetic writings. In any case, it was Roger Fry who organized an exhibition entitled "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" in the Grafton Galleries in 1910. With this controversial exhibition

of works by Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, Derain, de Vlaminck and others, Fry confronted the British audience with new trends in French painting which he called "Post-Impressionist". The term "Post-Impressionism" was therefore coined by Fry and became common usage due to the *succès de scandale* of this first exhibition in England. Yet the term was quite inclusive, as was made clear by the Post-Impressionist exhibition of 1912, in which paintings by English artists like Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell, Wyndham Lewis and Eric Gill were shown alongside new works by Braque and Picasso.

In those years, Post-Impressionism in England had indeed grown into a cult, perhaps somewhat comparable to the cult around postmodernism we have witnessed over the past decades. Anything that was at all new and different was labeled "Post-Impressionist": not only the sculptures by Eric Gill and Epstein, or D. H. Lawrence's first novel, *The White Peacock*, but also Nijinsky's 1913 performance in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (*Sacré du Printemps*), as well as the latest trends in poetry. According to Virginia Woolf, who together with Bell formed part of the much talked-about *Bloomsbury Group*, it was a new "Post-Impressionist era". All traditional values, she argued, were open to question. Nowhere was this more evident than in the world of the arts. As art critics, Bell and Fry saw it as their lifework to defend and propagate the new era in painting.

4.4.1   Central Idea

The central idea for both Fry and Bell is that, aesthetically, only "significant form" should be considered the "essence" of art. Does this mean that we must set aside all feelings? On the contrary. Works of art arouse an extremely emotional, nearly religious experience. Art transports us to a world of aesthetic exaltation that transcends daily life. And because this feeling is always *similar*, there must be something in the *nature* of every true work of art that induces this extraordinary aesthetic rapture. There must, therefore, be a quality, common to all works of art, which is responsible for this unique emotion. This quality is the "significant form". Or, as Bell writes: "What quality is common to Santa Sophia, and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Pierro della Francesca, and Cézanne? Only one answer seems possible - significant form" (Bell, 1987, 8). The assessment of art comes down to this significant form. All other criteria are irrelevant. Only significant form can explain the *very peculiar nature* of the aesthetic experience. It embodies the autonomy of the artwork.

4.4.2   Art Is Not Imitation

From the principal idea it follows, firstly, that, *from a purely aesthetic viewpoint, imitation is irrelevant*. The similarity between the visual artwork and "reality" is

entirely unimportant. Bell and Fry do not, of course, mean to say that paintings do not depict anything. Their model, after all, was Paul Cézanne, a figurative painter. In their eyes, even a realistic painting was in principle capable of realizing "significant form". But representation or imitation offers no guarantee of a "good" or aesthetically valid painting. Put differently: an accurate, even perfect representation *by no means ensures* the emergence of a "significant form" that enthralls us. If a realistic painting *is* able to move us to such a degree, then it is *in spite of* rather than *thanks to* the imitation. It is not the similarity with reality that enthralls us but the unique pictorial design.

Roger Fry illustrated this argument with Corot's *View of Honfleur* (See Fig. 4.1), a classic example of realism in painting. Fry compares Corot's canvas to the way music is created. He emphasizes how the simple appearances Corot perceived produced "mysteriously perfect chords of color in which every note gets a new meaning and resonance" (Fry, 1926, 10). Characteristic of Corot is the plastic unity of space, filled entirely with air and light. Harmony is achieved thanks to the subtle, minor and unconscious adjustments to common, external objects, so inconspicuous that some observers do not even notice them. Their "How similar to Honfleur!", however, is based on a terrible misunderstanding. The resemblance to "reality" is totally irrelevant for the mood that the painting arouses – a mood "as detached from any actual experience as that of the purest music". "In short," according to Fry, "Corot creates here an entirely spiritual reality" (Fry, 1926, 10).

Fig. 4.1 Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, *Honfleur: Calvary*, c. 1830. Oil on wood, 11 3/4 × 16 1/8 inches, 30 × 42 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, N-Y. (*see Color Plates*)

4.4.3   Art Is Not Self-expression

Here we touch on a very special question, that is, to what degree can "significant form" be seen as the expression of the visual artist's emotion or even state of mind? The great emphasis on the aesthetic emotion and the exalted spirituality that an artwork arouses in us makes it tempting to see this theory, however formalistically it may present itself, as a variation of the expression theory. Both Fry and Bell agree with Tolstoy that the primary function of art is to convey feelings, rather than produce "beauty". But all comparisons end here. Both authors reject the educational function of art as Tolstoy saw it. The idea that art is essentially self-expression finds equally little favor in their eyes. That is why they argue that *art is not the expression of the artist's state of mind*. The artist's intent, the unique feelings that may have awakened the creative urge are, from a purely aesthetic point of view, irrelevant.

This second assertion, which is also closely linked to the notion of autonomy we encountered in Hanslick, seems quite surprising at first glance, considering that Bell and Fry are quite emphatic about the role of emotion. However, in their eyes, it is not a matter of the artist's *specific emotion*. Everything, as I have already touched upon, centers on the aesthetic emotion aroused by the work of art *in the observer*. This emotion, moreover, need not bear any direct relationship to the specific emotions experienced by the artist. What *is conveyed is the aesthetic ecstasy itself*, which, however, is inseparably linked to the significant form. So even works of art that are not readily associated with an artist's specific emotion, and that are not truly linked to a specific theme, can still quite effectively induce this unique aesthetic experience in the observer.

To judge any artwork in terms of the artist's "original emotion" is what Clive Bell refers to as the '*pathetic fallacy*'. If there is anything at all that is expressed by art, then it is the expression of a deep and universal emotion, which, at least in principle, is common to *all* eras and people and which is therefore not unique to a specific artist or a particular age. This explains why artworks from a distant past or even from cultures entirely different from ours are still able to move us. Art expresses nothing specific, temporary or local. Art is able to move us deeply and mysteriously because it adds to our emotional experience something that does not come "from life" but from "pure form". The unique, aesthetic emotion that art awakens in us, is independent of time and place": it is universal, of all times and all cultures.

This idea also served as a guideline in art criticism. In his treatment of Raphael's *Transfiguration*, Fry, too, argues that the aesthetic experience is independent of both time and place, saying that it may not be based on literary or philosophical motives. Of course, the *Transfiguration* (See Fig. 4.2) appeals to both mind and emotion. Those who are familiar with the gospels will know that two different events are portrayed in the painting. Above, we can see a depiction of Christ's transfiguration and below, a representation of the apostles' unsuccessful attempt
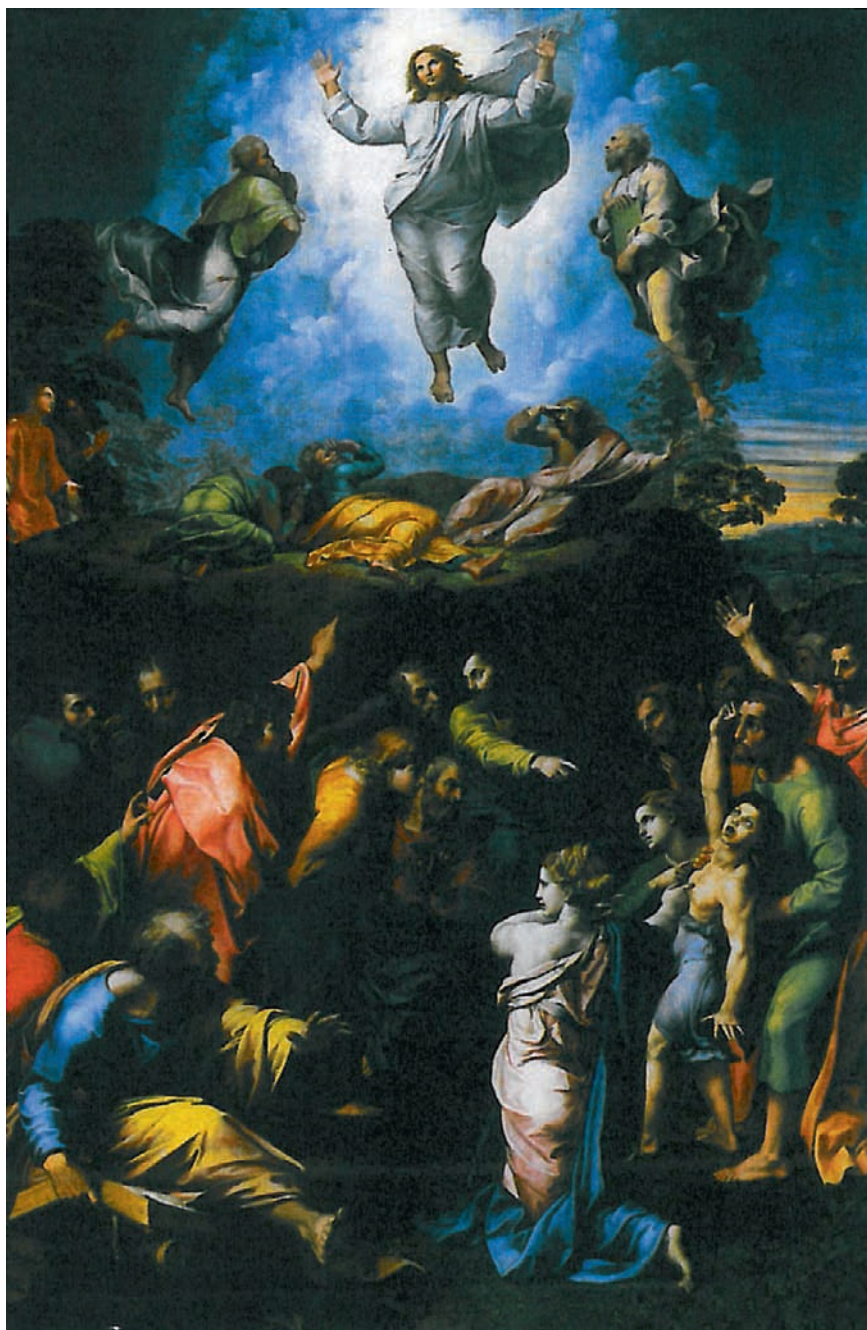
Fig. 4.2 Raphael, *Transfiguration*, 1517. Oil on wood, 460 × 280 cm., Pinacotea Vaticana, Vatican City. (*see Color Plates*)

during Christ's absence to heal a boy gone mad. This double representation pro-
vokes all sorts of associations and feelings. Goethe writes:

> *It is remarkable that any one has ever ventured to query the essential unity of such a com-*
> *position. How can the upper part be separated from the lower? The two form one whole.*
> *Below the suffering and the needy, above the powerful and helpful - mutually dependent,*
> *mutually illustrative* (J. W. Goethe; Quoted in R. Fry, 1957, 296–297).

In Fry's view, Goethe's criticism interferes with the true aesthetic experience. The
figures in the lower part of the painting, by the way, do not at all resemble the poor
and unrefined farmers and fishermen we know from the gospels. They look far too
noble. But this is beside the point. In order to elucidate his standpoint, Fry imagines
an observer, exceptionally sensitive to form but absolutely ignorant of the gospels.
Such a pagan yet extremely refined spectator will be enchanted by the painting's
beauty of form, the extraordinary visionary power uniting many complex spatial
dimensions into one whole, the delicate balance of many lines and their various
directions. He will, Fry argues, immediately intuit that the "division into two parts
is only apparent," and that both parts, "are coordinated by a quite peculiar power of
grasping the possible correlations" (cf. Fry, 1957, 298). He will almost certainly be
excited and moved, but his emotions will have nothing to do with the feelings we
find in Goethe. When Goethe became deeply moved by the wondrous unity of
Raphael's *Transfiguration*, his explanation wrongly took *the form of a literary and
philosophical reflection*. This interferes with the pure observation of the significant
form, which is precisely what enthralled the pagan spectator! Only significant form
can bring about the peculiar emotion in us that we call aesthetic experience.

4.4.4   Art Expresses the Unspeakable

Yet the question of whether even this "universal" emotion is not in some way an
expression of something remains quite intriguing. In other words, is not *something,
i.e. some content*, expressed through this pure form? Put yet another way, what
makes the pure forms meaningful, significant? Why does Clive Bell emphasize that
the emotion provoked by a butterfly or a flower is not comparable to the way we
are moved by a cathedral or a painting? Where does this distinction come from?
Why are pictorial forms meaningful and natural forms not? The answers given by
Bell and Fry to these questions remained sometimes clouded in mist, and some-
times went off in different directions. Yet no matter how divergent and evasive the
occasional views by Bell and Fry may have been, they all come down to this: *art
expresses the unspeakable*. While form and content are identical aesthetically, art
does help us reach a "higher reality". This explains why aesthetic emotion is related
to the religious, and even mystical, experience.

Bell argues, on the one hand, that form and content are inseparably bound
together. Since only the experience of *pure form* is important, the artwork can
never be seen as a means of conveying an end, such as a content, for instance.
The form must speak for itself: *in all its purity*, form *is* the content. We do not

first have the form, on which we subsequently impart a meaning, its significance. The form is an end in itself and only meaningful as such. On the other hand, Bell does feel there is a need to also unveil the emotional basis of the aesthetic experience. He finds that art apparently *does* convey *something* to us, an ultimate reality that underlies the pure form. The artist is even taken to be somebody with the unique ability to capture this "higher reality", and "only in a pure form can a sense of it be expressed" (Bell, 1987, 57). Thanks to art, Bell continues, "we become aware of its essential reality, of the God in everything, of the universal in the particular, of the all-pervading rhythm" (ibid., 69). Art refers to the unnameable and unspeakable that shines behind the world of appearances. It brings us into contact with a metaphysical or supernatural reality, which awes us into reverential silence.

4.5 Objections to the Bell–Fry Theory

Bell and Fry's theory of significant form is akin to the modern view that art is about the *purely artistic*, which, moreover, is quite often associated with the formal, technical or stylistic properties of an artwork. In the practice of art criticism this implies a fundamental suspicion of "realistic" and "expressive" criteria. Bell and Fry's art-historical excursions speak volumes in this respect. It is well known how important Bell considered archaic Greek and Byzantine art. As far as he was concerned, the emergence of the Gothic cathedral heralded a decline that was to last for centuries: here already, theatricality is more important than form. The feelings that the Gothic cathedral awaken in us, the sense of mystery and power, belong, he felt, more to the realm of melodrama than to significant form. Roger Fry condemned the entire Italian renaissance (with the exception of a few illustrious painters, such as Piero della Francesca, Fra Angelico, Ucello and Mantegna, who very consciously occupied themselves with the formal and technical pursuit of perspective), because of its exaggerated concentration on the representation of what he scornfully called "psychological" or "dramatic" affairs, with literary associations distracting from "significant form". Bell and Fry so immensely admired Cézanne precisely because he rediscovered the ability to create pure, significant form.

However one-sided Bell's and, to a lesser degree, Fry's art-historical excursions were, their emphasis on the purely formal did stimulate an openness and enthusiasm for "primitive art", which had already been rediscovered by Post-Impressionist painters themselves. How could a twentieth century West European be aesthetically enraptured by African sculpture if not through the experience of significant form? The fact, Bell argued that we know nothing about the social, religious or magical backgrounds of these sculptures and yet are moved aesthetically by them, only goes to prove that the essence of art is "significant form". The latter concept functioned as a magic term for many years, leading to an increasing irritation among skeptical art critics and art philosophers, who put forward numerous objections against it.

4.5.1 Circular Reasoning

The first objection is that *Bell and Fry are guilty of circular reasoning*. How could
we convince Clive Bell that there are works of art that do not exhibit significant
form? One could argue that Frith's *Paddington Station* (See Fig. 4.3) is a work of
art that, because of its perfect representation, displays no significant form, and that
it is perfectly possible to find works of art that elude Bell's definition. Bell's answer
is easily guessed; he declared explicitly that *Paddington Station* is *not* a work of art
because it does not exhibit significant form: the painting goes hardly any further
than pure representation. "Works of art exhibit significant form" would appear to
be an empirical assertion, but is in fact a statement based upon a circular argument.
The circularity consists in the following: Bell argues, on one hand, that art is sig-
nificant form and, on the other hand, that that which is not significant form is not
art. A work of art either exhibits significant form or is not a true work of art.
Significant is something that provokes a distinctive, aesthetic emotion, and we
experience that same emotion in the presence of significant form. This circularity
has the annoying consequence that Bell and Fry's principal idea confirms itself:
it is no more than a tautology and therefore in fact irrefutable!

4.5.2 Ambiguity Concerning Representation

The second objection concerns the argument that any judgment in terms of repre-
sentation is, from a purely aesthetic point of view, irrelevant. It might come as a
surprise that admirers of Cézanne should maintain such a radical rejection of the
representative element. After all, the forms in a painting by Cézanne always refer
to something that is outside of the painting, to an extra-pictorial context. It seems

Fig. 4.3 William Powell Frith, *The Railway Station*, 1862. Oil on canvas, 38 × 80 cm. Collection
of Royal Holloway, London University. (*see Color Plates*)

difficult, if not impossible, to see only forms – lines and colors – in figurative paintings, without also interpreting them as forms *of* something. Even if we agree that the painting in its entirety and *as such* is not an imitation of reality, we still see the painting's pictorial elements *as a representation*, because they arouse in us the awareness of an extra-pictorial, physical reality, to which the painting is supposed to refer. Roger Fry appears to have understood this, when he said of the *Portrait de Mme Cézanne* (see Fig. 4.4): "It belongs to a world of spiritual values incommensurate with but parallel with the actual world" (Fry; Quoted in Fishman, 128). The fact that Bell too was inconsistent on this point is also revealing. He admits that while canvases are two-dimensional, they only provoke an aesthetic experience *when they are seen as three-dimensional*. He is forced to accept three-dimensional space as an exception to the rule. One cannot reconcile this concession with the key concept, the belief in the artwork's complete autonomy, where significant form is seen as freed from any representative content. By admitting that aesthetics cannot get around the psychology of spatial perception, Bell introduces an external element that is, in fact, incompatible with his theory of significant form.

Fig. 4.4   Paul Cézanne, *Portrait de Madame Cézanne*, 1885–1887. Oil on canvas. 92,6 × 72,9 cm. The Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania. (*see Color Plates*)

4.5.3   *Underestimation of the Emotional and Intellectual Context*

The third objection concerns the radical rejection of any judgment in terms of the artist's expression, specific feelings, intentions, and, even, ideas. Perhaps Bell and Fry underestimate the importance of the context in which works of art are created. Their claim that a work of art is autonomous and therefore cannot be judged properly except in terms of its intrinsic properties is undoubtedly justified. Be that as it may, the knowledge of the artist's underlying motives can be extremely relevant to such a judgment. Fry and Bell themselves regularly refer to the intentions and biographical circumstances of Cézanne. They emphasize, for instance, how the French painter suddenly had a flash of inspiration while contemplating the landscape in Aix-en-Provence, which made it clear to him that the landscape could be "seen" as an end in itself. The Mount Saint-Victoire (see Fig. 4.5), often painted by Cèzanne, seems to be an illustrious example of this kind of experience. Did they not, through their writings, actually create an intellectual climate in England that would enable the art audience, after much resistance, to see paintings by Cézanne as "significant"? Can we rule out the possibility that an anthropological study might have us seeing "primitive art" differently than Bell did in his day? Does not much modern art become significant only for those observers who are somehow familiar the underlying motives of artists, so that they finally value works to which they were initially absolutely indifferent?

Fig. 4.5 Paul Cézanne, *Mount Saint-Victoire*, 1902–1904. Oil on canvas, 69,8 × 89,5 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia (collection George W. Elkins). (*see Color Plates*)

4.5.4   Ambiguity Concerning Expression

It would seem that Bell and Fry have a great deal of trouble knowing exactly what to do with the precise scope of expressive elements. And this may well be the reason why their argument concerning emotion is so inconclusive. The idea of the unique, aesthetic emotion is perhaps one of the weakest links in Bell's formalism. And so the fourth objection is that, despite the ubiquitous concept of autonomy, *formalism is ultimately based on metaphysical grounds*. There is nothing wrong with such grounds per se. Moreover, there is something to be said for associating art with the unspeakable, with that which common language cannot put into words. As we have seen, Bell explicitly assumes that aesthetic emotion is indefinable and unique, i.e. that it cannot be explained with concepts but can only be felt or recognized. This intuitive principle is a wink in the direction of the expression theory. And yet it does not basically undermine the concept of autonomy. What, though, must we think when, time and again, the significance of form appears to be based on a "higher" reality? Is this not an extrinsic criterion? Are we now to believe that some "content" is conveyed in and through a work of art after all? Is the work of art only a *significant* form to the extent that it expresses a divine idea? Is this not simply the expression theory of Croce and Collingwood in disguise? Not really, because much unlike Croce and Collingwood, Bell and Fry do not disregard the medium. Indeed, they grant absolute priority to form over content.

4.5.5   Identity of Form and Content Untenable

And thus the fifth and final objection thrusts itself upon us with regard to the age-old problem of "form and content". Indeed, *in Bell and Fry's formalism, form and content are wrongly identified with one another, and moreover, all content is wrongly reduced to form*. This is in fact the fundamental, philosophical guideline upon which both the key concept and the open rejection of representative and expressive criteria are based. Aesthetics (they argue) is not concerned with the "what" of the painting, but the "how", not the "content", but the "form". Their advice is: "Do not pay attention to the content, to the sensible elements that make up the painting – lines, space, light, shadow and color – but to the formal relationships between these elements, the form of the whole, in short, the significant form." This nearly Pythagorean view leads to an enormous paradox, because while the elements of the painting can be representative and expressive, the whole, as form, refers only to itself. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts, but at the same time loses all content. The flawed basis of this argument is revealed the moment we consider the *symbolic* nature of significant form, for then we see that this form also speaks a language that in theory refers to something beyond itself and that has a *meaning* which transcends the form proper.

   This is exactly what happens when Bell and Fry claim that art expresses the unspeakable.

   Both Bell and Fry disliked all art that arises from uncommonly intense emotion and which therefore results in ill considered, spontaneous design. This is the reason they rejected Van Gogh's oeuvre. They were convinced that in his case plastic perfection was forced to give way to a penchant for extreme expression. Fry even goes so far as to portray Van Gogh as an illustrator rather than a plastic artist, a remarkable man rather than a remarkable artist. With Fry, the rejection of all "expressionist art" was accompanied by an intellectualistic approach to art, which he embraced in Cézanne. In this regard, he endorsed Michelangelo's statement that "good painting is ultimately music and a melody which can only be appreciated by the mind". Clive Bell, likewise, rejected all "expressionist art", but in his case, this does not imply an intellectualistic stance at all. On the contrary, he criticizes symbolism, since "symbols" stem from the intellect and not emotion; they should therefore be considered "dead matter" and incompatible with the artwork perceived as an organic whole. Bell's notion of "symbol" is still very closely linked to its iconographic meaning. He simply has no room for the broader concept of "symbolic form" in his aesthetics. In order to accommodate this important shortcoming, some philosophers of art have attempted to enrich formalism with symbolism. The next chapter will look into this in detail, but let us first take a look in the artist's studio to consider a concrete example of the way formalism influenced art itself.

4.6   The Artist's Studio: Paul van Ostaijen and Formalism in Poetry

Characteristic of formalism is the central idea that *every* art form, and not simply all art, is autonomous. This means that no art form can be reduced to any other art form. And indeed, we have already seen how much Hanslick contrasts "pure" music with literature, why he sees an unbridgeable gap between "music" and "word". Bell and Fry also reject any "literary" interpretation of the pictorial arts, in the name of autonomy. They are much more accommodating, however, with regard to music; music can sometimes even function as a model for formalism in painting, because in music the form is purer and more abstract than in any other art form. This attitude of indulgence towards music is significant, to put it mildly. It is a concession we also find in champions of "pure lyricism", who, like the Flemish poet Paul van Ostaijen, ended up writing poetry in which the sound value and resonance predominated.

   It is indeed interesting to see how close Paul van Ostaijen came to classical formalism. He was not only an excellent poet who broke new ground, but also an extremely talented and well-read essayist. In his capacity as a critic, he also showed considerable interest in the visual arts and art theory. He unfolded his poetic credentials in various theoretical essays that quickly established his reputation as the pre-eminent spokesman of "pure lyricism". During the Great War, he and another Flemish poet, Wies Moens, preached the spirit of community, unity and brotherhood.

After the war had ended, however, he was quick to become the most radical opponent of the poetry cultivated by Moens and the group associated with *Ruimte ('Space')*, a journal which, according to van Ostaijen, "overindulged in extra-lyrical grandiloquence". Critics have characterized this change as a transition from a so-called "humanitarian" or "romantic" expressionism (1916–1918) to a "classicist" or "organic" expressionism (1918–1928). During this second period, van Ostaijen lived in a turbulent and artistically inspiring Berlin.

4.6.1   Concept of Autonomy

Regardless of what the above labels may mean, the fact is that van Ostaijen, who dreamed of becoming a "Professor of Lyricism", lashed out mercilessly at a concept of poetry that, completely in line with Tolstoy's view, concentrated so much on the moral elevation of the people and personal creed that any interest in the poem itself was lost. In his essay "Wies Moens and I", van Ostaijen therefore urgently claimed the autonomy of poems: "…I want poems to appear as free organisms, disengaged from the creator" (Van Ostaijen, 1979, 144, my translation). This fundamental conviction became at the same time a breaking point with his former ally, because while Moens heeds the poet's personal testimony, van Ostaijen now regards the perfection of the poem as the only remaining criterion for its aesthetic evaluation.

So just as the representatives of classical formalism, van Ostaijen radically criticizes any mimetic illusion and any aesthetics in terms of expression. Any evaluation of poetry should be wholly dissociated from the poet's life and personal pathos. At most, specific feelings can trigger off a poem, they can function as immediate causes but they are, as such, not the real essence or subject of the poem. As Van Ostaijen puts it: "For me, the sensibility of the subjective experience is valid, not *an sich*, but only as primary matter for the poem which is to take shape" (ibid., 146). *An sich*, in itself, the subjective or personal experience is only a formless mass, raw material, which, only after being processed, can be poured into a form that is poetically justifiable. As long as personal pathos dominates, we find ourselves facing nothing but rash adolescent lyricism, which may sweep listeners off their feet, but which at the same time distracts them from what is truly important, namely the purity of the poem, its formal perfection. From an aesthetical point of view, the poet's tribulations, his biographical circumstances, his highly personal tragedy, all of this is irrelevant and beside the point. Everything depends on *the way* the poet transforms his tribulations, his joy or whatever feeling he may be expressing, into a *poetic form*. Very minor or petty feelings can give rise to well-wrought poems just as easily as the greatest passions can. What is important is neither the immediate cause nor the poet himself, but the poem. In the same vein, van Ostaijen denounces all "ideological" poetry, because its ethics always overshadows pure lyricism. Here too one forgets the dictionary definition of a poet: "One who writes (good) poems or verses"!

4.6.2 Unity of Form and Content

Van Ostaijen's unusual emphasis on the unity of form and content is a second, striking similarity with classical formalism. On this point, he is just as radical as Hanslick. His aim is a poem without content, because only in such poverty can lyrical poetry became pure, i.e. untainted by anything that is beside the question, anything that does not contribute to the perfect form. This explains why he declares, defiantly: "…if I write poems, it is because I trust that I have nothing, absolutely nothing, to say" (Van Ostaijen, 1982, 137). Van Ostaijen here means to say that the poem must be judged, not on substantial but on formal grounds. The alpha and omega of poetry is not the message, but the lyrical expression or form itself.

TWILIGHT

Now time is of Californian gold;
The dying sun gathers
Her strength for a far journey,

The last of that day, earthbound.
The sun has there as a last resort
Her fatal death pangs' golden splendor
Collected in a glass tramdoor.

This poem illustrates the "humanitarian expressionism" of Van Ostaijen's first period.

RECITATIVE
For Gaston Burssens

Under the moon the long river slides by
Above the long river the moon mournfully slides
Under the moon on the long river the canoe slides to the sea

By tall reedbeds
by low meadows
the canoe slides to the sea

with the sliding moon the canoe slides to the sea
Companions then to the sea the canoe the moon and the man
Why do the moon and the man two together slide submissively to the sea

Recitative *is probably the best-known example of Van Ostaijen's "pure lyricism".*

4.6.3 Embedded in the Metaphysical

The above examples show that the poet's central concern should be the material of the poem, the word. Is the sense of a word the most important, or its sound value? It

makes little difference, because it is, above all, a matter of the *resonance of the word in the subconscious*. When sense and sound value are unified, Van Ostaijen speaks of the "full sonority of the word", which he understands to mean: "as in painting, the vibration of interacting values, the imponderable that lies in the tension between two words, a tension which, without being represented by any particular sign, produces nonetheless the essential vibration" (1982, ibid., 133). Just as with Bell and Fry, this view assumes an exceptional, aesthetic emotion that is not brought about by content but by an inventive transformation of the medium itself, in this case, the word. According to van Ostaijen, poetry, as all art, is "sensitized material". It comes down to making the material more sensitive; in other words, to have the word speak a new language, to expose its unsuspected, subconscious emotional value. That is what it is essentially about. The poet must bring to the surface the subconscious resonance of the word by exploring it in its naked expressiveness. Words must be applied to the poem in such a way that they evoke mutual actions and reactions. The poem must make us sensitive to the "affinities" between the words themselves: "It is the word, and not the sentence in its cerebral consecutiveness and ambiance, which is capable of making the transcendent audible to us" (1982, 134).

It should be clear by now that the transcendent here refers to the mystical, the ecstatic, the supernatural – the metaphysical. This too is very closely related to classical formalism, as van Ostaijen's emphasis on the formal, the identification of form with content, is supported by nostalgia for an ultimate reality, a mystical desire for the ineffable, which we also encountered with Bell and Fry. What the poem must communicate is not the object of ecstasy, but the ecstatic rapture itself. The rapture is itself the one and only theme of poetry. Poetry is therefore the lowest stage of ecstasy: "Like ecstasy, poetry has in fact nothing to communicate, other than the expression of this being-overwhelmed-by-the-ineffable" (1982, 132). The conclusion, in the same spirit, reads:

"Poetry is not: thought, mind, pretty sentences, is neither doctoral nor dada. It is a game with words anchored in the metaphysical" (1979, 179, my translation).

Further Reading

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For translations of Paul van Ostaijen, see:

Paul Van Ostaijen, *Feasts of fear and agony*, translated by H. van Ameyden, New York: New Directions, 1976.

Paul Van Ostaijen, *The first book of Schmoll and Other Poems, Selected Poems 1920-1928*, Amsterdam: Bridges Books, 1982. (With a foreword by E.M. Beekman, introduced by G. Borgers, translated by T. Hermans, J.S. Holmes and P. Nijmeijer. This publication ends with an important essay by Paul van Ostaijen, translated by T. Hermans and P. Vincent. Some of the quotations refer to this edition).

All other quotations refer to the following Dutch-edition anthology:

Paul van Ostaijen, *Music-Hall: een programma vol charlestons, grotesken, polonaises en dressu-urnummers van Paul van Ostaijen*, Amsterdam: Bert Bakker/Daamen, 1979 (compiled and introduced by Gerrit Borgers).

More information about van Ostaijen can be found in:

Francis Bulhof (ed.), *Nijhoff, Van Ostaijen, De Stijl: modernism in the Netherlands and Belgium in the first quarter of the 20th century: six essays*, The Hague: Nijhoff, 1976.

Chapter 5
Art as a Synthesis of Form and Expression

5.1 Introduction

As we have seen, it is typical of formalism ultimately to assume that the "pure form" is supported by something metaphysical or supernatural after all. Apparently, even the most radical formalists cannot escape the fact that "pure form" does express something in one way or another, and therefore exhibits content, however intangible this may be. As I have already indicated, this can undoubtedly be attributed to the fact that the "pure" or "significant" form, to which Hanslick, Bell and Fry constantly refer, embodies a "language", and because of this alone is of a *symbolic* nature. Very concretely, this means that forms in art are always symbolic of something else, even – and this is a fascinating thought – when the forms in question are very "pure" or "elementary", as is the case in music and abstract painting.

The great challenge, which is revealed by the fundamental paradox of formalism, is to find an answer to the question: how would it be possible to see art as form, without, at the same time, neglecting the content, the expression? A similar formulation of the problem arises from the opposite point of view, the expression theory. Here the question is: how can we consider art as expression, and at the same time acknowledge the importance of composition, the medium, the style or technique? In both cases, that of formalism *and* that of the expression theory, the one-sidedness obliges us to look for an idea about art in which justice is done to form *and* expression equally.

This search will resolutely lead us away from the realm of art criticism, which was very central in the previous chapter. The attempt to link form with expression has been predominantly carried out by philosophers and artists, albeit in extremely divergent manners and from very different points of view. I will focus here on Friedrich Nietzsche, Susanne Langer and Wassily Kandinsky.

Nietzsche's most important works were written in the 1870s and 1880s. And yet he was ahead of the expression theory, which was only first argued systematically a few decades later in the works of Tolstoy and Croce. This is because he considered art very clearly from the artist's point of view. Moreover, he placed an uncommon emphasis on the state of mind that accompanies the creation of art. He was skeptical of German Romanticism, which glorified the "*Sturm und Drang*" (Storm and Stress) movement at the end of the eighteenth century. Indeed, he distrusted any narrow identification of

art with a spontaneous discharge of emotional energy. Formalistic ideas, specifically the famous "*l'art pour l'art*" (art for art's sake), which gained ground in the course of the nineteenth century, found little favor in his eyes either. Nietzsche's slogan was not "art for art's sake" but "art for life's sake". His critical attitude, with regard to both romantic aesthetics of feeling *and* formalism, inspired him to steer a middle course in his thought about art, to advocate a synthesis between form and emotion, between what, already in his first work, he called the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*. Our discussion here will focus predominantly on this aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy, without disregarding the broader context and internal evolution of his oeuvre. This perspective also enables us to understand his later blatant condemnation of Wagner. It is interesting to note that Nietzsche, just as Hanslick, finally became an anti-Wagnerian.

The synthesis between the Apollinian and the Dionysian in Nietzsche's philosophy of art appears ultimately to have a metaphysical basis. We find a quite different approach in Susanne Langer, whose argument is based first and foremost on philosophy of language. By then, Langer's ideas developed half a century after Nietzsche had committed his to paper. It would have been impossible for Nietzsche to foresee or anticipate the turbulent development of philosophy of language that was to take place during the first half of the twentieth century, regardless of the modernity and timeless relevance of his work. Also, Nietzsche had no access to any detailed Theory of Symbols, because it had not yet been worked out in his time. Langer's philosophy of art, on the other hand, would be inconceivable without the Theory of Symbols of Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945), more specifically his three-volume main work, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, published in the 1920s. In her first major work, *Philosophy in a New Key* (1976, orig. publ. in 1942), Langer fused these influences, which she felt set the new tone in philosophy, into a unique synthesis of her own. This work contained an analysis of music, which became the starting point for the more comprehensive philosophy of art that she developed in her second major work, *Feeling and Form* (1953). In this book, Langer defends a view of art that regards art as the creation of forms that are symbolic of human emotion.

Susanne Langer is considered a major exponent of the Theory of Symbols or "symbolism" in the philosophy of art. On the other hand, the Russian-born visual artist Wassily Kandinsky has gone down in art history as an important representative of Expressionism and one of the very first protagonists of abstract painting. Even before the First World War he promoted a concept of art similar to Nietzsche's and Langer's, but in his own peculiar manner in which inner necessity, along with the form, was the cornerstone of the artwork. The final section of this chapter is therefore devoted to his early theory of art.

5.2   Friedrich Nietzsche

The expression theory developed by Croce and Collingwood focuses on the expression of a specific emotion or idea molded in the artist's brain. According to Nietzsche, however, the creation of art is not rooted primordially in a conscious process of ideas

and concepts, but in the unconscious life of the soul. The conscious idea is not central, nor is intuition, but rather emotion *as such*, as an irrational driving force, a dark primal will. It is in this primal, inexhaustible force that originates the artist's creative urge. In other words, his view centers on the deeper emotional layers of creativity, the primal irrational drive, which Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) already regarded as the true foundation of all reality. It is this as yet unstructured passion that Nietzsche called the Dionysian, which, in his very first work, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1967, orig. publ. in German in 1869), he distinguished from the Apollinian.

This "unstructured" character of passion is immensely important. On this point, too, Nietzsche differs widely from the expression theory. According to the expression theory, all formal characteristics of an artwork are immediately contained in the idea or intuition, in short, in the artist's self-expression, as we saw in Chapter 3. With Nietzsche, this is by no means the case. The artist's emotion is one thing, the composition another. The Dionysian embodies the chaotic, all-destructive, ecstatic rapture: it is the primal source of creation, still formless. Apollinian measure and harmony thus have to curb and give shape to uncontrolled Dionysian rapture. Without this Apollinian form-giving power, the artist cannot mold the overwhelming inspiration, the immense rapture of the Dionysian in a work of art. Art is therefore a synthesis of emotion and form.

Much unlike Hanslick, Nietzsche identifies in *The Birth of Tragedy* music with the Dionysian. Music is thus *not* equated with form but something that form cannot capture or restrain: the melody streaming as a unity, which arouses in us feelings of mysticism, of ecstasy and even of "sensuality". This explains Nietzsche's initial adoration of Richard Wagner, to whom he dedicated his first work – at least in the first edition. His later abhorrence of Wagner's work points to Nietzsche's subsequent internal evolution.

Indeed, whereas in his earlier work Nietzsche particularly emphasized the *contrast* or *duality* between the Dionysian and Apollinian, he later increasingly stressed the *unity* of the two concepts. From the beginning, Nietzsche had in fact presented this unity as an ideal, but in his later work the Dionysian gradually shifted in meaning. In the following sections I will discuss Nietzsche's development in greater detail.

5.2.1   Duality

In his first work, Nietzsche refers to two Greek gods, Apollo and Dionysus, on which he based and inspired his basic concepts of the *Apollinian* and the *Dionysian*. Apollo is the god of all expressive capacities and at the same time the god of prophecy. He embodies the aspect of Greek genius, so much admired by Winckelmann and Goethe: the capacity for harmonic beauty and self-knowledge, principles that also serve as a model for the formation of one's own character. The Apollinian is the form-giving force, the art of representation, which reached its height in Greek sculpture. By contrast, Dionysus, the god of wine and intoxication, symbolizes drunken frenzy, which destroys all forms and rules. He embodies the pre-Hellenic

"titanic" and "barbaric", the primal anguish and the ecstatic tone of delirium and excessiveness, which is seen as a threat to harmony.

Both concepts are viewed by Nietzsche as impulses belonging to separate art worlds. The Apollinian is the world of the dream, the Dionysian, the world of rapture. Both artistic forces as such spring from nature herself, *regardless of any artist's intervention*. On the one hand, we meet the illusionary world of the dream, Apollinian beauty, in which perfection transcends the individual. On the other hand, we are confronted with a reality that is replete with rapture and disregards the individual, striving to destroy it and to assimilate it into a mystical experience of unity. These primal forms of nature can, according to Nietzsche, be imitated by any artist (mimesis!). This explains why he contrasts the Apollinian artist of dreams with the Dionysian artist of rapture.

5.2.2   Mutual Necessity

Although Nietzsche continuously stresses this contrast, the basic proposition in his first work is nonetheless that the Apollinian and the Dionysian should ideally be united. To illustrate this, he refers to Raphael's *Transfiguration*, a painting that already caught our attention in Chapter 4 (see Fig. 4.2 in 4.4.3). Nietzsche's interpretation of the painting is by no means formalistic and could, even more so than Goethe's, be characterized as "philosophical". In the bottom half he sees the possessed boys, the desperate bearers, the disciples distraught with fear – the reflection of eternal primal anguish – in short, the Dionysian. Because it concerns a depiction, an imitation or mimesis, Nietzsche refers also to this lower level in terms of "appearance". In the upper half, a New World of appearances lightens up like a vision, invisible to those imprisoned in Dionysian reality. It is here that we are witness to Christ's transfiguration, a magnificent dream of pure glory and free of all anguish – in short, the Apollinian state. Because this dream level is a representation, an Apollinian *illusion*, which makes the trials and tribulations of life bearable, Nietzsche refers to it as the "appearance of appearance". In any case, Nietzsche enthusiastically praises both Raphael and Christ in a manner that would have sent Fry into fits of despair. The painting, Nietzsche holds, is evidence of the *highest* artistic symbolism and illustrates how much the Apollinian dream and Dionysian anguish are mutually dependent.

5.2.3   Greek Tragedy

It is precisely the insight into this mutual necessity, the pursuit of a reconciliation between the Apollinian and the Dionysian, which, according to Nietzsche, led to an important breakthrough in Greek culture: the birth of Greek tragedy. Here, ultimately the Dionysian chorus is released in an Apollinian dream world of symbolic

representations. In this manner, the terrifying is symbolically expressed through music and words, the allegory of the body, dance, and the mask. However, Nietzsche argues, the moment the youngest of the three great tragic poets, Euripides, targeted bourgeois mediocrity and the cheerful optimism of the slaves, no longer took mythological characters seriously and allowed reason to prevail over the tragic, the Greek tragedy loses its original power. With Euripides, not only the spirit of the myth, but also that of music, was ruined. At the same time, the spell was broken, so that both Dionysian rapture and Apollinian illusion were lost. This is where the *theoretical man* enters the stage – the man who, through his critical mentality and skepticism, undermines the original force of the tragedy. Wagner, on the other hand, is glorified by the young Nietzsche as the man whose music is responsible for the rebirth of this original force of the Greek tragedy!

5.2.4 Anti-formalistic

It is remarkable to what degree Nietzsche protects this feeling of rapture from every concept of art that would fail to appreciate it or suppress it. Ecstasy is defended because it enforces the will to life, as something that inspires the individual to heroism and supreme optimism, even in the light of fate. This explains why Nietzsche vehemently attacks "*l'art pour l'art*", art for art's sake, a principle that, as we have seen, is very closely linked to formalism. The yardstick to measure art is not art itself but its invigorating effect, its capacity to strengthen our will to life: "Art is the great stimulant to life: how could one conceive of it as purposeless, aimless, *l'art pour l'art?*" (Nietzsche, 1998, IX, 24). Nietzsche's relentless criticism of his mentor Schopenhauer, who saw the aim of art as "freeing oneself from the will", and the greatest value of tragedy as "fostering a mood of resignation", is highly significant. Such ideas are only explicable in terms of the pessimistic philosophy of life, which was so characteristic of Schopenhauer. By no means, however, do they fulfill the condition and inner urge of the true tragedian, whose aim it is to impart the victory over horror. Those who seek out suffering and embrace it, those who seek out fate and cherish it, show greatness, and return from the battle strengthened, with an indestructible "Dionysian faith". It is this idea that Nietzsche constantly repeats or evokes with the catchphrase "*amor fati*" (literally: "love of fate").

5.2.5 Anti-romantic

While Nietzsche stands up for the state of rapture, as we have seen, he distrusts it the moment it impedes any manner of controlling, measuring or molding. This is clearly expressed in his contrasting opinion of Goethe and Rousseau. He infinitely admired Goethe for his embodiment of classical harmony and measure, the perfection

of form. On the other hand, he harbored a deep-rooted distrust of Rousseau's concept of the return to nature. This, he held, would inevitably be accompanied by surrender to dark forces, which lead to revolutions and destroy states. Nietzsche recognized the danger of unbridled rapture. This can only lead to chaos unless it is controlled, transformed and *stylized* by Apollo's intervention. For Nietzsche, Rousseau represents the ever-present danger of abysmal, "Dionysian" madness. Art should not be about returning to nature: it is nature that must be transformed, cultivated, transfigured.

5.2.6   The Dionysian as Synthesis

In his earlier work, the tension between rapture and form is consistently linked to the duality between the Dionysian and the Apollinian. In his later work however, Nietzsche sings the praises of Dionysus as his only god, his own god. He no longer speaks of rapture and dream as two separate principles, but sees rapture alone as the exclusive, glorifying aesthetic condition. This would appear to be very inconsistent with his earlier views, and yet this is not completely the case. The later Nietzsche no longer views the Dionysian as formless passion, but as controlled, mature passion, no more the plaything of dark forces. It has been pointed out that what Nietzsche later calls the Dionysian often embodies the synthesis of what he once called the Apollinian and the Dionysian, respectively. The same holds for the "will to power", which, as an all-encompassing basic principle, also unifies these earlier antipodes. Anyhow, both the young and later Nietzsche sees art as a synthesis of "feeling" and "form":

> Artists are *not* men of *great* passion, whatever they like to tell us and themselves as well…. One does not *get over* a passion by representing it; rather, it is over *when* one is able to represent it (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 1967, 814).

In order to express their most inner feelings artists have first to surpass them. The act of representing does not establish this transformation, but always presupposes it.

5.2.7   Wagner Critique

The above conveys a barely concealed criticism of the Romantic, which Nietzsche would later explicitly distinguish from the Dionysian. Time and again he refers to Goethe's famous statement from his conversations with Eckermann (April 2, 1829): "I call the classic *healthy*, the romantic *sickly*" (Eckermann, 1930, 305). Nietzsche exposes both Schopenhauer and Wagner increasingly as representatives of a Romantic pessimism. Especially Wagner became his main target here. Wagner, whom the young and eager Nietzsche had expected to herald a new era in European music, became Nietzsche's prototype of the lack of form and melody in music.

Wagner makes music subservient to drama, which degenerated into the art of the lie, of the pose, of decadence. As a fanatic of expression, using music only as a means for enchantment, aiming at effect, a music not of tones but of gestures, Wagner is denounced as the "Cagliostro of modernity", the impostor of modernity. His one-time friend had become his mortal enemy. At times, Nietzsche goes very far indeed, when his criticism no longer seems reasonable, as in the following quote: "I despise everyone who does not experience Parsifal as an attempted assasination of basic ethics" (Nietzsche contra Wagner, 1964). Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner has the look of patricide and is therefore not always in good taste. However, more important than his sometimes overly biased criticism of Wagner are the aesthetic principles upon which Nietzsche based his work.

5.3   Langer's Symbol Theory

In Nietzsche's work one already finds repeated references to the symbolic character of art. In Raphael's *Transfiguration*, Nietzsche saw a double symbolism, one which referred to both the Dionysian and the Apollinian. This "portrayal" is only comprehensible to those familiar with the biblical context of the painting. Perhaps it would be better to speak of a representation rather than portrayal. Symbolic representations are universal in art. Not only in the most primitive art, where they exhibit a close relationship to myth and ritual, but also in most "modern" art, where an artist is often seen as original to the degree that he has created a new world of symbols.

   In any case, Nietzsche heavily emphasizes the importance of this symbolic creativity. In his view, the Dionysian unleashes symbolic forces in the depths of our soul that give voice to *what has never been experienced before*. As far as Nietzsche is concerned, these symbolic forces are found predominantly in music and dance, which he considers "the most Dionysian" among the arts. This does not alter the fact, however, that here too, the *expression* of these symbolic forces cannot take place directly, but only indirectly, thanks to a symbolic *form*. Apollinian creation of form is therefore indispensable and is, as it were, a symbol of the symbol, hence Nietzsche's "appearance of appearance". In any case, here already the synthesis of feeling and form is implicitly associated with the use of symbols. In Susanne Langer's theory of symbolism, however, this insight is much more explicitly worked out, so much so that it forms the cornerstone of her philosophy of art.

5.3.1   Critique of the Imitation Theory

We already touched on the importance of the symbol in Chapter 2, not coincidentally in our discussion of the severe critique of the imitation theory by Nelson Goodman, who, along with Susanne Langer, is one of the most important exponents

of the so-called "symbol theory". This theory condemns every form of naïve realism. On her part, Susanne Langer severely criticizes the superficial faith in "factual evidence". Ultimately, she argues, "seeing is believing", because even a scientific observation is almost entirely *indirect*. That which is "immediately" observable must be "read", "translated" and "interpreted" in order to count as a "physical fact". In fact, our immediate sensory impressions are always primarily symbols. They are always a sign *of* something else and only speak a language to the degree to which they can be *interpreted. As such* and *in themselves* they mean absolutely nothing.

The insight that no observation is virginal, but is always determined by conceptual schemata was by no means new when *Philosophy in a New Key* appeared in 1942. As we saw in Chapter 2, both Gombrich and Goodman explicitly or implicitly referred to Kant in their criticism and in the following chapter we will see how Kant advanced this fundamental discovery as early as in the eighteenth century. Also Susanne Langer's argument that the use of symbols, and of language in general, distinguishes human beings from animals, was hardly new at all. The fact that because of this, human beings, in sharp contrast to animals, cannot only *indicate* things, but can *represent* them, was generally accepted long before Susanne Langer. New and refreshing, however, was the way she argued, referring to the symbol theory, that art too embodies a symbolic form.

5.3.2   The Symbolic Character of Language

The first thing Langer does is to attempt to clarify the meaning of the concept "symbol". The *indirect* nature of sense perception is already implied in her criticism of the imitation theory. This indirectness likewise elucidates the essential characteristic as well as the function of symbols i.e. their "mediating role." The fact that human beings have the power of using symbols makes us "lords of the earth". This power is already expressed in thought, as symbols allow us to conceive of what is not immediately present. Here too lies the origin of all speech, which also, Langer holds, is only possible thanks to the use of symbols. This calls for further explanation.

Langer elucidates the origin of speech by means of the distinction between "signal", "sign" and "symbol". If a dog hears the sound of a gong each time he is fed, this sound will, after some time, cause the dog to expect dinner. Here, the sound of the gong is a *signal* for dinner. It has therefore a designating function. Human beings, on the other hand, do not merely use "signs" to *indicate* things, but also to *represent* them! Most of the words we use are not signs in the sense of signals, but are used to talk about things or to think about them, and not to direct our senses toward them. They remind us of things instead of "announcing" them. They can even refer to things that *might* happen. They make us "think of" or "refer to" things that are not present. 'Signs' used in this capacity embody no *signals* of things, but *symbols*. While signals announce things, symbols allow us to represent things.

Langer in fact applies this argument to *all* sign systems, not only verbal language. In this sense, she is already practicing semiotics, a subject I shall return to extensively in Chapter 10. Her point of departure, however, is the philosophy of language. This is quite clear from her discussion of the *relationship* between sign and reality. She departs from a particular notion about our normal use of language. Normally we combine different symbols into one complex whole, one complex symbol, a statement, respecting the rules of grammar. These mutual relationships between words (or signs) have been identified as the field of syntax. However, when we consider the relationship between a statement and "reality", when we ask ourselves what a statement indicates, we find ourselves in the field of semantics. Elaborating on the early Wittgenstein, Langer argues that a statement or a *proposition* is a picture of a structure, which belongs to an extralinguistic reality, a state of affairs outside the realm of language. There is consequently a *similarity* or *correspondence* between the *structure* of a statement and the *structure* of the state of affairs to which the statement refers. Rather than a copy, the statement offers a reference to reality on the basis of a structural or formal relationship between language and reality. This is the reason of Langer's tenacious opposition to the imitation theory. Against the theory of imitation, she postulates the picture theory.

5.3.3 The Picture Theory

If one were to apply the above to drawing or painting then the drawing or picture would essentially be a symbol and not an imitation of the thing it represents. This implies that the *structure* or the *form* of the drawing exhibits a certain, albeit minimal, relationship to the structure or form of that which is represented, to such a degree that we *recognize* the latter in the drawing. This relationship or correspondence may be very elementary, schematic or rudimentary. Langer gives the example of a drawing of a rabbit. Two minor changes (shorter ears, longer tail) suffice for all respondents to immediately recognize it as a representation of a cat! The representation can of course be extremely detailed, as in the case of a "realistic" painting, but it can also be extremely abstract, as in the case of a diagram that only "pictures" the mutual relationships between the parts. In this sense, the diagram is merely a "picture" of a form.

The question that arises is: how far can we go in the direction of the formal, the abstract? How schematic may a representation become, without losing the quality of being a representation *of* something? Where does the boundary lie? This problem can be put another way. Langer has us consider a photograph, a painting, a pencil sketch, an architectural design and a builder's diagram of the facade of the same house. With a little attention, she continues, we will recognize the same house in each representation. Why? she asks. Her answer is that, for as different as the representations may look, "each one of the very different images expresses *the same relation of parts*" (Langer, 1976, 71. My italics), in such a way that they correspond

with the fundamental pattern of the facade *qua* structure or form. Langer calls this fundamental pattern the *concept* of the facade. The different representations symbolize the same facade because they embody the same concept. This concept is a particular form that can be represented in very different ways.

Although Langer stresses the *random* character of symbols, she also emphasizes the importance of the formal relationship between language and reality. In principle, all things can be symbols of anything else. This is a question of convention. The words we use in natural languages normally have *no necessary* relationship *at all* with that to which they refer. This explains why different words can refer to the same thing, according to the language used. Thus the Dutch "kat", the English "cat" and the French "chat" are different words with the same meaning, and they possess this characteristic by virtue of convention. Once we have such conventions at our disposal, however, our statements themselves are no longer random. The use of language presupposes that we keep to certain agreements. A statement like "there is only one cat breed" is false, because the statement simply does not correspond with reality. Actually, what we should say here is that the form or the structure of the statement does not correspond with the form or structure of reality.

The symbolic character of language is therefore closely linked to the conventions upon which the use of language is based. If, by means of convention, we determine who Brutus and Caesar were, then the statement "Brutus killed Caesar" is either true or false. The statement is not a copy of reality but consists of symbols that have been determined arbitrarily or by convention; but the statement itself, as a complex symbol, has a formal structure that either does or does not correspond with the formal structure of historical reality. When I claim that "Brutus bore Caesar" I am not adhering to convention, because a man cannot be pregnant and give birth to a child. If I say, "Brutus did everything in his power to prevent Caesar's murder," the formal structure of my statement does not correspond with that of historical reality. In other words, the statement embodies a concept – in this case a rescue operation – but as the concept did not take place, the statement is a false one.

Although Susanne Langer owes a great deal to the philosophy of language defended by the early Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, she nevertheless strongly opposes the implications that he and many of his followers drew from it, namely that only statements which represent states of affairs in reality are meaningful. All *other* statements, metaphysical, ethical or aesthetic statements, were exiled to the realm of the unsayable, the mystical, the *meaning*less. This explains Wittgenstein's famous statement: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence". Many philosophers, especially those inclined to positivism, have, in the footsteps of the *Tractatus*, limited philosophy and logic to the language of *discursive* thinking, which consists only of rationally ordered and empirically verifiable facts. Only what Langer called *discursive* symbolism was taken seriously. The whole realm of *intuitive* symbolism – the world of intuition, emotion and expression – was set aside for purportedly adding nothing to our *knowledge* about reality.

5.3.4 Intuitive Symbolism

In this way, according to Langer, the domain of "intuition", "deeper meaning", "artistic truth" and "insight" was unjustly excluded. This domain is all too often identified with nonsense, mysticism and irrationalism, with that which has no fixed form and is therefore impossible to communicate. Nothing, however, is further from the truth. Just like discursive symbolism, intuitive symbolism adds something to our *knowledge*. Rational and empirical knowledge do not have the exclusive rights to symbolization. Intuition too has its own *particular symbolic forms*. Even at the level of perception one can see that visual forms – lines, colors, proportions, etc. – lend themselves to expression, even though these visual forms are not discursive by nature. Therefore an "expressive form" of the senses exists, an "expressive form" of musical tones, colors, and so forth. These forms use their own symbols to express "emotions" and "intuitions", which generate authentic meaning *and* knowledge. Just as the discursive, the intuitive is also *a form of thinking* and therefore of a *cognitive* nature. It continuously enriches our knowledge of reality.

To illustrate the added value of intuitive symbolism, Langer refers, in *Philosophy in a New Key*, not only to ritual or myth, but also and foremost to music. In verbal language, by far the most important medium of discursive forms, reference to reality and rational thought is central. In music, however, it is emotion, the way we intuitively experience reality. We all know how poor and inadequate verbal language sometimes is in expressing our emotional state. Music, in contrast, is extremely well suited to express that which we cannot put into words. Word and music have essentially different functions, despite the fact that they are often coupled to one other in song. This is because spoken language is more discursive and music more intuitive. Seen from a purely formal point of view, however, they correspond to the same logic, for they both embody symbolic forms.

5.3.5 Objections to the Expression Theory

It is precisely because Languor associates intuition with a particular symbolic language in which it can be expressed, that she initially argued that *music always assumes a combination of feeling and form*. It explains why she cannot accept the expressive theory as such. Her principal objection is that music cannot express definite emotions, an objection we have already voiced with regard to the expression theory. "If it [music] has an emotional content, it 'has' it in the same sense that language 'has' its conceptual content – *symbolically*" (Langer, 1976, 218). Music is the expression of feelings, not, however, in the sense of "self-expression", but because the composer expresses *his knowledge of human emotion in general*, and not such-and-such particular emotion. Music is neither self-expression nor the passion, the fear or love of *this or that* individual. It interprets feelings that are so universal that we can identify with them, not because we have "experienced" them, but because our capacity for sympathy enables us to grasp them and understand

them. In this sense, music can have us experiencing or discovering emotions that
we did not know before.

A secondary objection to the expression theory is that it does not recognize the
fact that musical expression is always a matter of *giving form to* emotions. A com-
poser conveys the subtlest nuances of feeling, inexpressible in common language,
not in spite of but *because* he creates a formal musical structure which symbolizes
these nuances. Empirical research has demonstrated that certain aspects of the
"inner life" that the general moods and forms of human feelings bear a close formal
and logical resemblance to the musical patterns of movement and rest, of tension
and release, and so forth. And yet there is something very strange about this, for
musical sounds have no fixed "dictionary meaning" as verbal language does. Music
has all the aspects of a true symbolism, except one: the existence of a fixed meaning
Yet this is by no means a weakness, but rather the strength of music. While music
is clearly a symbolic form, it is so in a unique, somewhat intangible way.
"Articulation is its life, but not assertion; expressiveness, not expression" (Langer,
1976, 240). This looks in perfect agreement with Hanslick's formalism (see Section
4.2.5 and especially Section 4.2.3).

5.3.6   *Art Is the Creation of Forms Symbolic of Human Feeling*

And yet, Langer is far from being an advocate of Hanslick's formalism. Though
Hanslick likewise accepted the formal correspondence between music and human
feelings (see Section 4.2.3) he could or would not show *how music can be expres-
sive*. In the eyes of Susanne Langer, Hanslick failed to recognize that pure musical
forms can at the same time embody *symbolic* forms and can *thereby* refer to something
other than the music itself. In contradistinction to Hanslick Langer *does* explain
how music can be expressive.

In *Feeling and Form* (1953), in which Langer attempted to extend the initial
theory of music to a general philosophy of art, she emphasized, in sharp opposition
to formalism, that form and content in art are *not* identical. Artistic forms are not
empty abstractions but most certainly do have a content. The form itself is imme-
diately given in its perception and yet transcends itself: it is "semblance", while it
appears to be charged with reality. In fact, the symbolic charge is present in the
whole artwork, because each part of it is permeated by the idea that the artist wishes
to convey. This vital charge, this omnipresent expressiveness, the underlying sensi-
bility, are symbolically expressed in the form. In this sense, art is the creation of
forms symbolic of human emotion.

5.4   A Few Critical Comments on Nietzsche and Langer

It would be going too far to assume that neither Nietzsche's nor Langer's argument
for a synthesis of form and expression are open to criticism. Nietzsche's distinction
between the Apollinian and the Dionysian is not always clear. At times, both concepts

appear as primitive drives, which belong to nature itself. This would mean that, by definition and simultaneously, both are present as dark powers in the unconscious, instinctive life. Sometimes only the Dionysian seems to be a primal drive, which, through a tempering of passion, is restrained by the Apollinian. Here, the Apollonian is manifested more as an artistic and cultural formal principle that is to ensure that the natural impulse is steered in the right direction. In short, it is not always clear what place and status the Apollinian occupies. Is it a component of nature or the unconscious, like the Dionysian, or rather a result of culture and conscious form-giving? This is not very clear.

Even more questionable is the fact that the distinction between both principles is rather rough and very general, so that it is seldom truly applicable in a well-considered assessment of individual works of art. This may be attributed to the fact that, unlike Kant before him, Nietzsche simply did not look at art from the observer's point of view. Nietzsche's contribution to the philosophy of art lies rather in his extraordinarily in-depth views of the origin of the creative urge. His firm beliefs and unsurpassed style of writing, his unusual existential commitment to what is at stake in art, has aroused passion and recognition in many modern artists. No single philosopher has had as much influence on artists as Nietzsche. His very life and inspiration have been the theme of artistic works, like Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faust*.

Langer's philosophy of art is likewise subject to criticism. Her conception of form remains particularly puzzling. Although she opposes all metaphysics, her forms still seem to resemble abstractions *from* reality that embody their *own* reality. She starts from a "uniformity" or "correspondence" between forms in reality *and* forms in symbolic representation. She defines this formal similarity with the notion of "concept". Do these "concepts" only exist in our mind or are they derived from reality? This is not made very clear. And what is worse: the obvious conclusion that can be drawn from both alternatives is that the "concept" is not an idea, but a fixed standard. And what is the *difference* between form and concept? Langer seems to suggest that the concept is broader and can be expressed in *different* symbolic forms. This would imply that the form can be translated from one medium to another. However, the question immediately arises how to reconcile this with the idea that each medium and composition uses other symbols to embody the unity, even to such a degree that the smallest change in detail can affect the whole? If each medium possesses its own specific logic, how then can the *same concept* be expressed in different media or art forms without the "concept" itself changing? The fact is that Langer assumes that a painting is a "world of appearances" or an "illusion", something she therefore refers to as a "virtual object". Here the form is abstracted from reality to such a degree that it loses all common meaning. It is stripped of all practical and other irrelevant functions, so that it can acquire a new meaning: "Art is expressive through and through – every line, every sound, every gesture; and therefore it is a hundred per cent symbolic" (Langer, 1953, 59). It is pure "semblance". But when in this case the form coincides *completely* with the feeling, to such a degree that it symbolizes emotion in all aspects, how can one still speak of a "concept," of which this one particular symbolic form is *only one* of the possible embodiments, which could, if desired, be *expressed* in another medium? How can the art form still be considered identical in shape with a real form? Has the "original form" not been "*symbolically transformed*"

(one of Langer's favorite expressions) to such a degree that any thought in terms of formal similarity is wholly irrelevant?

This has brought us to a line of reasoning that is paradoxical in Langer's thinking, but which at the same time shows the strength of her central idea, i.e. that art is both expression and form, or better yet: *at once* expression and form. Or as Henri Matisse puts it: "Expression, to my way of thinking, does not consist of the passion mirrored upon a human face or betrayed by a violent gesture. The whole arrangement of my picture is expressive. The place occupied by the figures or objects, the empty spaces around them, the proportions – everything plays a part." Or, as Langer herself writes:

> A work of art must carry in itself its complete significance and impose it upon the beholder even before he can identify the subject matter. When I see the Giotto frescoes at Padua I do not trouble to recognize which scene of the life of Christ I have before me but I perceive instantly the sentiment which radiates from it and which is instinct in the composition in every line and color. The title will only serve to confirm my impression (Both quoted in Langer, 1953, 83).

Here too, just as in formalism, form and content seem ultimately to come together. The only difference is that Langer's theory of symbolism recognizes that artistic form is an *expression* which is *symbolic of* human feelings or emotion. The form is, as it were, permeated by its expressivity, it literally expresses what the artist knows about the form and structure of feeling. In formalism, on the other hand, form ultimately refers only to itself.

5.5   The Artist's Studio: Kandinsky on Art as Synthesis of Form and Expression

The concept of art discussed here typically aims at a synthesis of form and expression, balancing between formalism and the expression theory. This is most pointedly the case in Langer's philosophy of art. An artist who argued a similar synthesis is Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944).

Kandinsky enjoys a great reputation, not only as a painter and graphic artist, but also as an art theorist. Following his studies in law and economics at the University of Moscow, he eventually decided on a career as a visual artist at the age of 30. From 1903 to 1908 he traveled to Tunis, Italy, France and Berlin. In 1908 he settled in Munich. Here, partly through the influence of the works of Rembrandt and the French Impressionists, a definite turning point took place in his work. In this period, from 1908 to 1910, Kandinsky produced works in which he increasingly removed himself from outward appearances and figurative painting (see Figs. 5.1, 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4). In 1910 he produced his first series of abstract watercolors. Kandinsky was one of the first artists to achieve this breakthrough into abstraction, which he also attempted to justify theoretically. This led to the theoretical essay entitled *On the Spiritual in Art*, which was not published until 2 years later, in 1912. In that year, he and Franz Marc established *Der Blaue Reiter*, the second important "school" of

Fig. 5.1 Wassily Kandinsky, *Painting with Houses*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 97 × 133 cm. Stedelijk Museum, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008. (*see Color Plates*)
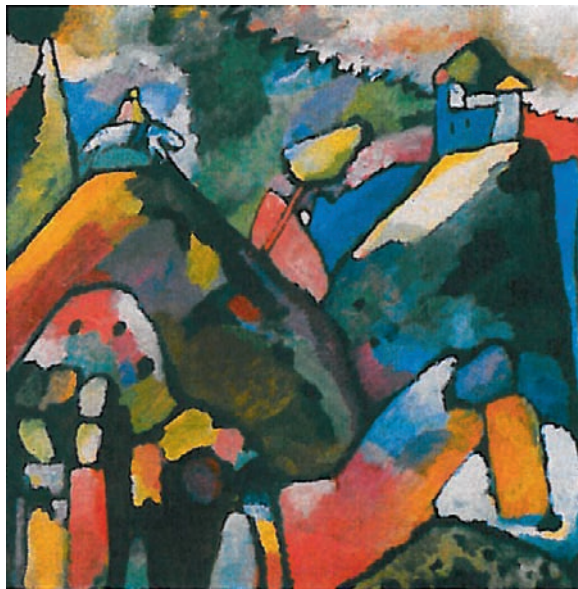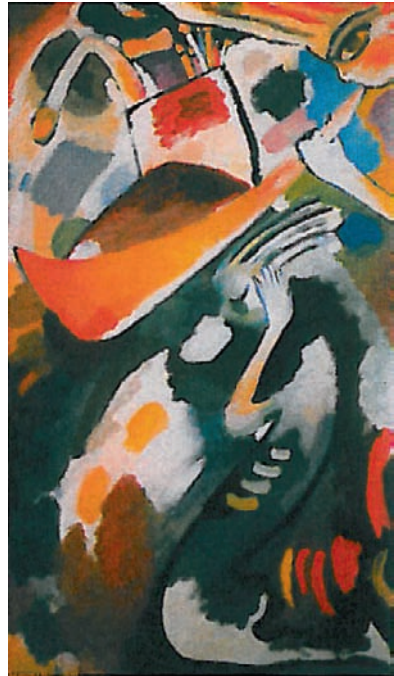

Fig. 5.2 Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation 9*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 110 × 110 cm. State Gallery Stuttgart. (*see Color Plates*)

Fig. 5.3 Wassily Kandinsky, *The Last Judgement*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 125 × 73 cm. Joseph H. Hazen, New York. c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008. (*see Color Plates*)

German expressionist painting – the first being *Die Brücke*. This "school" or "movement" was of enormous importance to the development of Expressionism.

However, Kandinsky would move increasingly away from Expressionism in his later career. Various influences had a role in this. His introduction to Malevich's Suprematism and Tatlin's Constructivism during a stay in Moscow (1914–1921) left a lasting impression. Kandinsky's teaching post at the famous *Bauhaus* in Weimar and Dessau, where functionalism reigned supreme, also left its marks. Because of these influences, the expressive element in his work became increasingly superseded by a preference for the formal, the purely geometrically ordered composition. Form ultimately gained absolute control in his work.

Characteristic of the initial abstract period, however, is that the synthesis of form and emotion was still central. Although every work of art must be achieved by *purely artistic means*, it must be rooted in the artist's *inner world*. This is the basic principle underlying his essay *On the Spiritual in Art*. It was the first essay by an artist on abstract art and as such is considered a milestone in the history of modern art.

In any case, this essay is very illustrative of the theory of art discussed here. First of all, Kandinsky is very skeptical of the imitation theory. From this point of view, he criticizes the contemporary spectator as someone always looking for recognition in a portrayed reality:
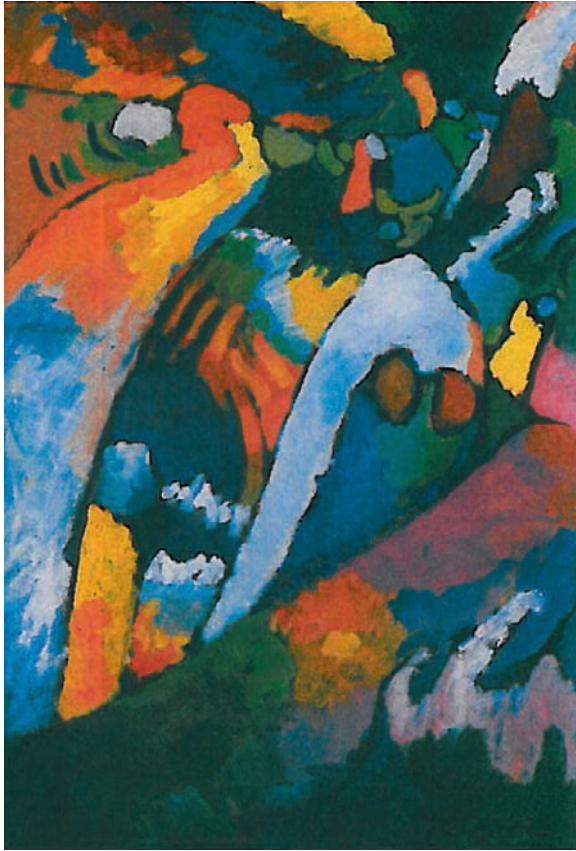
Fig. 5.4 Wassily Kandinsky, *Improvisation* 7, 1910. Oil on canvas, 131 × 87 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moskou. c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008. (*see Color Plates*)

> What he seeks in a work of art is either the pure imitation of nature, serving practical ends (such as portraiture in the normal sense of the word, and the like), or an imitation of nature that comprises a specific interpretation ("Impressionist" painting), or, ultimately, a particular *state of mind clothed in the forms of nature* (which one calls "mood") (Kandinsky, 1982, 129).

Although imitation may strike a resonant chord in the spectator, as in the third case cited above, it does not do justice to the possibilities of art. Moreover, nature has its own language, which cannot be imitated. Every musical representation of a chicken coop, for instance, will be destined to failure. No imitation is feasible, nor is it necessary, for that matter. Art is *not* a matter of the outward imitation of nature. Art has, on the one hand, its own *autonomous language*, which follows (or should follow) its own *formal laws*. On the other hand, art's mission is not to simply imitate nature, but to represent its inner sound or color, in short its *mood*. Not the depicted object itself is important but its emotional or symbolic value: that which

it awakens or evokes in us. Even a portrait is meaningless if it does not speak to us. Hence, art is a synthesis of form and feeling.

5.5.1 Pure Art

It is remarkable that Kandinsky also departs from a formalistic standpoint here. He argues, entirely in the spirit of formalism, in favor of an autonomous art that applies only the means that are inherently its own. For this reason, he passionately defends "pure painting" using only *purely pictorial means*, such as color and form. The unique character of art is form, not content. This form is visible in the art of any nation, any time or culture. It is linked neither to time nor to space: in short, the form of pure art is eternal. The content or narrative of art is of no importance, since it distracts us from pure form. In order not to inhibit the pure effect of color "…neither form, movement, color, nor the objects borrowed from nature (real or unreal) must produce any external or externally associated narrative effect" (ibid., 204).

The medium of art is its true resource and it is only insofar as the artist treats the medium as an end-in-itself that he or she is capable of arousing in us a particular aesthetic emotion. Here Kandinsky refers to the poetry of one of the chief representatives of symbolism in literature, Maurice Maeterlinck. In the latter's work the word is an end-in-itself, the word *as such*, not its meaning. Its actual meaning is in fact not important at all, what counts is the pure sound of the word, which, therefore, arouses in us a "supernatural" vibration. Because the pure materiality of poetry – the word – has become inner sound, the poet speaks directly to our soul. With this, Kandinsky anticipates van Ostaijen's defense of "pure lyricism".

There is yet another aspect of Kandinsky's formalism that deserves notice. Kandinsky's high esteem of the pure materiality of the word, of the *sound*, which no longer requires any reference to outward reality, explains why Kandinsky considered music – the most "object-less" art form – as the model for the "pure painting". He looks on with envy at "…how naturally and easily such goals can be attained in music, the least material of the arts today" (ibid., 154). Nowhere is the language of music contingent on outward forms, while painting is still (in 1912) "almost entirely dependent…upon forms borrowed from nature" (ibid., 155). Following the model of music the art of painting must be freed from any concrete object, any outward form. The painting must become an abstract construction in which color and form move the observer, as does sound in music. Pure painting at its best is abstract painting, in which the affinity with music has become a matter of fact. Referring to this affinity, Goethe suggested that painting had yet to acquire its *basso continuo*. Inspired by this, and just as formalistically inspired, Kandinsky attempts to show that painting, like music, is based on its own laws of harmony. A major part of his essay is devoted to a theory of colors, which is intended to reveal these laws. Here too the laws of form and color must lead to an art in the abstract sense, which will achieve the purely pictorial *composition*.

5.5.2   Critique of Formalism

Up to this point one could categorize Kandinsky as a true and genuine formalist. Still, he is very skeptical of particular trends in formalism. He is, for example, quite disapproving of *l'art pour l'art*: "This annihilation of those inner sounds that are the life of the colors, this dissipation of the artist's powers, is 'art for art's sake' " (ibid., 130). Such art is quickly used and abused for materialist purposes. It easily pours out the contents, the message, the "what" of the artwork. What remains is merely the "how", composition without expression, without artistic content, without the soul of art. Kandinsky absolutely rebukes the beauty of color and form as an end in itself, because it inevitably results in what he contemptuously calls "soul-less art". This explains why, in addition to a formalistic standpoint, Kandinsky introduces elements of the expression theory.

5.5.3   Inner Necessity

For Kandinsky, expression, feeling, message, or what he calls the *spiritual character* of art, is just as important, if not more so, than form. Kandinsky repeats time and again, and in every possible way, that art must be created out of an "inner necessity". The "principle of inner necessity" is his most commonly used expression and almost constitutes a leitmotiv in his views of art. Without inner necessity, without pure artistic compassion and inspiration, true and pure art is not possible. This "inner necessity" is the foundation of all art, including painting, no matter how abstract it may be. Indeed, the more abstract the art, the purer the "inner necessity" becomes manifest, since it is no longer dependent on a reference to outward reality.

Kandinsky, as we have seen, describes this inner necessity in every possible manner. At times it represents "emotion", at others "inner sound", "inner or spiritual life", "spiritual force", "inner conviction", "self-expression", and so on. Kandinsky sometimes comes very close to the expression theory, as in the following contemplation on the abandonment of the plane in the art of painting:

An attempt was made to constitute the picture upon an ideal plane, which thus had to be in front of the material surface of the canvas. In this way, composition with flat triangles became composition with triangles that had turned plastic, three-dimensional, i.e., pyramids (so-called "Cubism") (ibid., 195).

At times he is reminiscent of Tolstoy, as when he argues that the work of art has to bring about a "sympathetic vibration" within the inner self of the spectator. If this is not achieved, the link between art and the soul is numbed, as in the case of *l'art pour l'art*. The following, characteristic description is also very much Tolstoyan: "The artist is the hand that purposefully sets the human soul vibrating by pressing this or that key" (ibid., 165). This view of art as the "purposeful touching of the human soul" is accompanied by an exalted conception of the artist's task, or better yet, his mission. The artist's responsibility is no small matter. In an era in which the foundations of religion, science and morality have been shaken, particularly under

Nietzsche's influence, the artist's task, as Schumann put it, is "to shine light into the depths of the human heart" (quoted in ibid., 130). He is the person best suited to interpret the spiritual shift and renewal and, with a prophetic force, to guide the way toward a higher and renewed spirituality. Kandinsky sees the artist, just like Van Gogh, as a "visionary" who, inspired by mysterious forces and defying ridicule and hate, shows the way toward a better future, toward a spiritual awakening from vulgar materialism.

This much is certain: for Kandinsky, expression, the content, or the message of the artwork is the most decisive factor: "The artist must have something to say, for his task is not the mastery of form, but the suitability of that form to its content" (ibid., 213). The "principle of inner necessity" is the alpha and omega of art and as a result also determines the form. It is not the form which determines the content, but the "inner voice of the soul" that tells the artist which form he needs. And this is not a question of theory, but of feeling, intuition. This extraordinary emphasis on expression is not, however, achieved at the cost of form or the medium. It is a matter of continuous interaction, it is in and through the association with the medium that the artist intuitively senses that one form is wrong and another is the only right one. The artist, in his search for self-expression, is afforded the greatest possible freedom. Any form may serve as his means of expression, all means are justified as long as they are internally necessary. Emotion is his only guide and counsel. What is artistically right, correct and just can only be determined intuitively. In this sense, theory in art can never precede practice, for the "only right thing" is never discovered by theory, but "unveiled" by emotion and embodied in the artwork: "Since art affects the emotions, it can only exert its effect by means of the emotions" (ibid., 176).

Despite his quest for a grammar for the art of painting, for the laws for an as of yet undiscovered harmony of colors, despite his defense of the purely pictorial, abstract composition, Kandinsky always stressed that form must be rooted in and express the artist's inner necessity. It is in this sense that Kandinsky makes his plea for a synthesis of form and expression.

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Chapter 6
Aesthetic Judgment: The Legacy of Kant

6.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters we have been introduced to four classical theories of art. In spite of their mutual differences these theories nevertheless have one characteristic in common. They tell us how we should consider or define art. Time and again they assume that the own point of view reveals the essence of art in an unproblematic way. The theories give us a decisive answer to the fundamental question "what, actually, is art?". This also explains why they are so exclusive. They identify art respectively with "imitation", "expression", and "form" and/or "a synthesis of form and expression", without leaving any room for nuance or ambiguity.

The theories previously discussed can also be considered as providing us with a well-defined norm art should meet. These theories thus have very specific normative implications. We have already seen how each of these theories has served certain artists as a guideline in their artistic quest, but their normative implications, however, reach much further. On close inspection, these theories offer us *different criteria* for judging individual works of art. In this respect, they are relevant for the critical appraisal of artworks, especially within art criticism.

If we were to take a close look at art reviews, we would see that art works or art performances are judged respectively by "mimetic", "expressive" and/or "formal" criteria. In some art critics we would easily recognize a proponent of one of the classical theories; in most cases, however, we would undoubtedly find a combination of "mimetic", "expressive" and "formal" criteria. In order to lay bare the common element in all these judgments, we need to shift our focus from the question "what is (the essence of) art?" to the question "what is the characteristic of such a judgment about art?", or even more broadly: "what distinguishes aesthetic judgments from other judgments?" This question was raised systematically for the first time by Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

6.1.1 The Priority of the Aesthetic Judgment

What does Kant mean by "aesthetic judgment"? Why does it play such a central role and how does he distinguish this from other kinds of judgment? To Kant, the "aesthetic

judgment" covered not only art but also nature and everyday experiences. In his days, the philosophy of art was still a branch of a more broadly conceived philosophical aesthetics that studied all kinds of aesthetical experiences. From this perspective, to say that Raphael's *Transfiguration* is beautiful is not fundamentally different from appreciating the grace of a swan or the lovely design of a vase. They are all spontaneous expressions of an aesthetic experience through an "aesthetic judgment".

What made Kant so innovative, was his focus on aesthetic *judgment* instead of the experience of the beautiful itself. The fact that the aesthetic judgment is so central to Kant's theory has to do with the *sorts of questions* he introduced. All things considered, Kant's approach, while embedded in a typical eighteenth century discussion on beauty and the sublime, seems extremely modern, because it embodies a *systematic thinking about the aesthetic judgment*. Kant makes no judgments about beauty in nature and art, but studies how these judgments operate, the presuppositions upon which they are built, which logical characteristics they display. This quest is not founded on an empirical study or on a description of the aesthetic experience. Kant in fact criticized contemporary writers on the beautiful and the sublime for wrongly establishing their theories on psychological and physiological findings; the only thing that counts, so Kant argues, is to unveil what makes aesthetic judgments possible, not to describe or study them empirically!

It is on these grounds that Kant made a distinction between aesthetic judgment and other types of judgments. This can be clarified by means of a concrete example. A group of people in a botanical garden discovers a flower that fascinates them all. Different sorts of judgments are possible with regard to this flower. "This flower is a violet" is an empirical judgment because it is a statement that is either true or false. After some investigation, it might appear that the flower isn't a violet, but a lilac. Kant, however, is not concerned with the truth or falsehood of such a judgment, but with what is presupposed by such a judgment. "This flower should be protected from pollution", on the other hand, is not an empirical judgment, but a moral judgment. We could never prove a judgment like this empirically. In this judgment we base ourselves on a moral norm and are implying that everyone ought to accept it as a rule of conduct. Here too, Kant is only interested in what is presupposed and makes this moral judgment possible in the first place. He would even ask if we were really dealing here with a moral judgment. Time and again it is the form and not the content of the judgment that is the central concern. "This flower is beautiful", finally, is neither empirical nor moral, but is an aesthetic judgment. Here too, Kant is not concerned with the aesthetic judgment itself, i.e. in its content. He rather tries to figure out on which grounds we can distinguish an aesthetic judgment from an empirical or moral judgment.

6.1.2   Critical Philosophy

And so these three sorts of judgments are, in a nutshell, the subject of Kant's three major works. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant examines empirical judgments, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* moral judgments and in the

Critique of Judgment, at least in the first part of this work, aesthetic judgments. Because of these three works Kant is considered the founder of critical philosophy. The word "critical" here has a very specific meaning. It refers to the philosophical method that forms the basis of the three major Critiques, the so-called "transcendental method".

No matter what sort of judgment Kant examines, no matter which realm of experience he addresses, Kant always gets his teeth into the question: how is it possible that we have an empirical, moral or aesthetic experience at all? He systematically reflects on that which is always presupposed and not explicitly mentioned but which makes the experience possible in the first place. He always attempts to expose that which is presupposed prior to all experience and yet remains unconscious. Or, in Kant's own – and more exact – wording: the philosopher must elucidate the conditions that are given a priori, i.e. those conditions that we need not examine to know if they are true. Or, as Kant himself puts it, more precisely: the philosopher must elucidate the conditions that are given a priori – i.e. those conditions which we need not to examine in order to know whether or not they are true. It is precisely this kind of systematic and critical preliminary investigation that Kant called "transcendental philosophy". Since philosophy does not make judgments but merely unveils the conditions of possibility, it is always an inquiry in the second degree. Applied to art criticism for example, philosophy would be a critical reflection on the sorts of critical judgments expressed by art critics. It is therefore a critique of the critique. It is in this sense that Kant's philosophy is called critical.

Throughout his three major critical works Kant rigorously applies this method to judgments that are commonly used in respectively the realms of knowledge, morality and art. His transcendental inquiry is aimed at defining the boundaries of these three realms of experience. He constantly attempts to determine the unique nature of knowledge, morality and art by exposing their a priori conditions or presuppositions. However technical and comprehensive it may be, Kant's path of thought in the three major critical works can be concentrated into three fundamental questions: What can I know? What must I do? What may I hope for?

6.1.3   Relevance and Current Interest

Only recently the importance of Kant's esthetics has been widely recognized. There has always been a tendency to regard the *Critique of Judgment*, to which his aesthetics belongs, as a less important appendix, a sort of epilogue to his critical philosophy.

Though Kant obviously intended this work as the apotheosis of his critical oeuvre, it was predominantly the first two Critiques, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (First published in German in 1781) and the *Critique of Practical Reason* (First published in 1788 in German), which received the greatest appreciation and would thoroughly alter the course or future of Western philoso phy. Apparently, many writers assumed that – as far as significance and scope were concerned – the third

Critique would never be able to compete with the first two. Some illustrious contemporaries, like Schiller and Goethe, were exceptions to the rule: they praised the third critique without reserve. Influential philosophers during the Romantic era and throughout the nineteenth century, however, tore Kant's aesthetics to pieces. Nietzsche's merciless critique of Kant's aesthetics speaks volumes in this respect. Only Kant's theory on artistic genius was met with some approval.

In any case, only fairly recently one is inclined to view the third Critique not as an appendix, but rather as a magnificent synthesis of Kant's critical philosophy. Because of this his aesthetics is now, more than ever, due for a renaissance. The secret of this revival or perhaps even better, late recognition, is not merely the result of better insight into the unity that underlies the three Critiques. Undoubtedly, the current context of Western art is also responsible for this. For quite some time, art, and especially fine arts, is characterized by a profound crisis. Because all opportunities for creative innovation have run dry, the discourse on art finds itself in a crisis of legitimacy. The discourse that for decades served to justify avant-garde movements has become meaningless and exhausted. It has lost its resilience to invent new ways or add anything new. To reflect on and clarify this crisis of legitimization, we should reconsider how we relate to art, how we speak about it and how we judge it. Today's increased uncertainty and hesitation about questions like "what is art" and "what could or should art be" has rekindled interest in Kant's original ideas on aesthetic judgment.

6.1.4   Kant on the Faculty of Judgment: The Position and Function of the Critique of Judgment

The systematic unity of Kant's critical philosophy is so great that it is impossible to grasp his aesthetics without having some idea of the broader context, the architectonic structure, in which it is embedded. As I have already emphasized, aesthetics represents only one, albeit an important, part of the third Critique, a work that is increasingly seen as a synthesis of Kant's critical philosophy. And this was Kant's explicit intention, for he wrote the third Critique, the *Critique of Judgment*, in order to somewhat bridge the enormous gap between the first two Critiques, to bring them to a synthesis. In this regard, he considered aesthetics an indispensable link, without which his critical philosophy would have remained incomplete.

Therefore, in order to gain some insight into the underlying motives of Kant's aesthetics, in order to not miss the point of his argument, we need to imagine the problems facing Kant after he had finished his first two critiques. We should, in other words, first form a clear picture of the position and function that the third Critique occupies within the broader framework of Kant's critical philosophy. Only then we will be able to see Kant's philosophical aesthetics in its proper context and to understand fully its scope.

6.2   Sense Perception: The *Critique of Pure Reason*

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant takes up a problem that has proven to be of the greatest importance for the "mimesis" issue, namely the relationship between our knowledge and physical reality. Here Kant asks the question how is it possible that we have sense perceptions at all. He puts forward this transcendental question because he wants to gain insight into that which makes scientific knowledge possible. The model of scientific empirical knowledge that he had in mind was Newtonian physics. We assume that scientific knowledge is based on empirical observation. But, Kant wonders, is our experience, or more specifically our perception, as passive as all that? Does our mind merely serve as a recording device during perception, simply copying or imitating "reality"? Or does our mind add something to the sense impressions that it receives from the outside world?

6.2.1   Transcendental Aesthetic

In the first part of this Critique, which he calls the "Transcendental Aesthetic", Kant analyzes sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*) as "the faculty of intuition" (*Anschauung*), which allows us to obtain sense impressions in order to intuit individual objects. This immediate intuition (Anschauung) arouses all sorts of sensations (*Empfindungen*) in us. If I intuit a piece of sculpture, I can experience its form and color thanks to my sense of sight and even my sense of touch. Perhaps I not only see or feel, but also smell, the material the sculpture is made of. These sensations would, however, be chaotic if not for the order and structure we assign to them. From this perspective, I never see the sculpture as such because between the sculpture and myself there is not only the sense impression but also the way I actively structure the latter. After all, my perception of the sculpture is always located in space and time. I thus always shape my sensations according to the ordering principles of space and time. That which in myself produces this ordering, however, cannot itself originate from the sensation. It is, as it were, added to it by my understanding. What I perceive, therefore, is never the sculpture itself, but the sculpture as it has already been mediated by my sense impression. This impression too has already been ordered by the structure of my sensibility, by space and time.

Because the sculpture arouses sensations in me, I know it "exists", that it is "really there", independent of my perception and the representation I make of it. However, my perception is not founded on the sculpture as such, but on how it appears to me. Reality as such, what Kant calls the "thing in itself", remains unknown to us. Hence Kant's famous statement: "The thing in itself cannot be known" ("Das Ding an sich ist ein Unbekanntes"). What is behind the appearance, or the "phenomenon", has been called by Kant the "noumenon". From an empirical standpoint, I can say nothing of any use about the supersensible, noumenal world to which the "thing in itself" belongs. It is beyond my grasp.

Only the phenomenal world, the world as it appears to me, is the object of sense perception, of objective knowledge.

To sum up, we could say that in every sense perception both space and time are given a priori: without space and time perception is impossible, and Kant therefore calls them the *a priori forms* of sensibility, of sensible knowledge. Both forms are no property of things, but of the perceiving subject, more particularly of its faculty of understanding. The thing-in-itself, the noumenon, I cannot know.

6.2.2   Transcendental Logic

In a following step in his analysis of sense perception Kant holds that in addition to the a priori forms of time and space, concepts and ideas too are presupposed. In the second part of this Critique, which Kant calls the "Transcendental Logic", these a priori concepts and ideas are linked respectively to understanding and reason. This part is thus divided into two sections, the 'transcendental analytic' and the 'transcendental dialectic'.

6.2.3   Transcendental Analytic

In the transcendental analytic Kant analyses *understanding* as the "faculty of concepts". The importance of our understanding in the ordering of sense impressions is already evident at the level of sensibility. Therefore, according to Kant, it is necessary to examine how understanding applies concepts to the raw material offered to us by our sense impressions and links these concepts to judgments. Perception not only consists of representations (i.e. perceived appearances) in space and time, but these representations have to be subsumed under logical categories according to understanding. It should be emphasized that the logical categories, just as the a priori forms of sensibility, enable us to know reality as it appears to us. The logical categories too are given a priori.

An example of a logical category is the concept of causality. Thanks to this concept it is possible for us to establish that the impact of a billiard cue against a ball causes the ball to move. This causal principle cannot be derived from the sense impressions or the perception itself: it makes this perception possible in the first place. The causal principle issues from understanding, is prior to perception itself, for it is universal and necessary for all experience. In this manner understanding structures sense impressions and imposes its logical forms (among them causality) upon them. Just as in the case of time and space, logical categories too are not properties of things in themselves: they are only applicable to things as they appear to us.

To sum up, we could say that according to Kant sense perception is only possible thanks to a priori forms of intuition, particularly space and time, and the logical categories of understanding, specifically concepts. Hence Kant's conclusion:

"thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind". This twofold analysis of perception was revolutionary. As we saw in Chapter 2, both Gombrich and Goodman are indebted to Kant for their critique of the imitation theory. Only here does the reference to Kant appear to its full extent.

6.2.4   Transcendental Dialectic

Next to sensibility and understanding, Kant ultimately addresses reason in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which he defines as the "faculty of ideas". Kant maintains two meanings of the word reason, *Vernunft*. On one hand, "reason" (in the broad sense) stands for all of our mental faculties, i.e. the entire make up of the human mind, which is the object of the entire critical philosophy. This broad meaning of the term is referred to in the titles of the first two Critiques. On the other hand, reason (in the strict sense) indicates something that is above and beyond sensibility and understanding and nevertheless lends a higher coherence to our knowledge. It is this second, more strict, definition of "reason" that is at issue here. In the following I shall indicate it with Reason (with a capital "R"!) or *Vernunft*.

   The realm of *Vernunft* is something that is not sensibly perceptible. It also does not belong to the logical categories of understanding. In other words, it is no part of the phenomenal world, but of the noumenal world, of the supersensible. One can neither demonstrate nor prove it empirically and, seen from a purely logical point of view, it is also not a necessary presupposition of empirical knowledge, in the sense that the logical categories of understanding are. This means that, in the final analysis, science must not presuppose Reason: for it is possible without Reason. And yet Reason fulfills a profound need, as it embodies the pursuit of a higher coherence, of the perfect unity of our knowledge. Confronted with the enormous diversity of phenomena and representations, we are inclined to see the existence of the soul, of the world, and God as an *idea* that underlies the subject, the object and thought itself as an unconditional unity. While empirical knowledge invites us, as it were, to assume these ideas, moral judgment obliges us to believe in them. According to Kant, moral duty is only meaningful if we assume that some sort of settlement will take place in the hereafter. The second Critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, is, as a matter of fact, devoted entirely to Reason and what Kant calls here the *ideas*.

6.3   Kant on Moral Conduct: The *Critique of Practical Reason*

The second Critique is devoted to "practical" Reason. By 'practical' Kant means 'whatever relates to action' or 'the act of carrying out an act'. In that respect it is the opposite of 'theoretical reason', or 'whatever relates to perception and empirical knowledge'. In the Second critique, Kant indeed, as I already suggested, further

elaborated on the transcendental dialectic from his first Critique. The subject not only acts in the spatial–temporal field (what Kant refers to as the phenomenal level) but it is also being that is conscious of itself as a '*thing in itself*' (what Kant refers to as the noumenal level). It is not through understanding, but through Reason or the *Vernunft* that a subject experiences in itself a moral sense. Also with respect to practical Reason, Kant lays bare, by way of a transcendental analysis, the a priori principles that make practical action possible in the first place

More specifically Kant tries to unveil in his Second Critique the peculiar nature of moral conduct. Indeed, not all practical principles are of an ethical nature. First and foremost, Kant distinguishes between *maxims* and *practical laws. Maxims* are purely subjective. If I resolve not to drink alcohol, for example, then this can be seen as a rule of conduct that applies only to me. The fact that those around me continue to drink alcohol is of no consequence whatsoever. *Practical laws*, on the contrary, are practical principles that are valid for *every* human being. Moreover, practical laws carry with them a sense of obligation, since they basically mean to say: "This is how you *ought to* act." It is for this reason that Kant refers to these laws as *imperatives*. Even an imperative, however, is not always of an ethical nature. An imperative can also be either conditionally or unconditionally valid. *Hypothetical imperatives* are only conditionally valid. For example, the practical law "If you want to live a long life, you must live healthily." applies to everyone, but only *on the condition* that one wants to live a long life. While the obligation applies to everyone in general, it is at the same time also hypothetical, since it stipulates a condition. *Categorical imperatives*, on the other hand, are always unconditionally valid. In this sense, the moral law: "Thou shall not kill." is universally valid. It is not subject to any condition, and it implies an absolute obligation.

According to Kant, it is only this absolute obligation, or categorical imperative, that serves as the *a priori principle* for our moral conduct or behavior. Only the categorical imperative is able to justify a universal moral law. The concern here is thus not an act of understanding or logic, serving to unite the means with the end, as is the case with maxims and hypothetical imperatives, but rather, is strictly concerned with the "ought", and nothing more. The categorical imperative, or moral law, does not depend on any specific content or specific object towards which the will should direct itself. The categorical imperative is not materially, but rather formally, determined. Hence, Kant comes to his own founding principle of practical Reason: "Act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a *universal law of nature*". Such a law, precisely thanks to its formal character, can be applied to *any* subject matter whatsoever. I only need to ask myself if my own rule of conduct could also be demanded of all human beings, without exception.

One important aspect is that moral conduct falls outside the phenomenal world of appearances, the natural world and its lawfulness. Categorical imperatives, on the contrary, belong to the noumenal world, which is supernatural. On this level, man is a free being, who assumes by his free will his moral assignment. The notions of ethical obligation or moral law only make sense when used in terms of a free being, who is able to acknowledge or assume his responsibility. Thus seen, moral obligation presupposes *freedom*.

6.4   Function of the Third Critique

After he had finished the first two Critiques, Kant was confronted with the problem of an apparently unbridgeable gap between theoretical and practical reason, between the understanding and Reason or *Vernunft*, between appearance and the thing in itself, between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between objective knowledge and moral action, between science and morality. Apparently human beings are deeply divided: on the one hand, they are knowing beings dependent on understanding and the laws of nature, and, on the other hand, they are acting beings determined by the laws of reason and the freedom entailed by them. Kant wondered if this gap was bridgeable. Does some common ground exist between both worlds? Is it possible to mediate between nature and freedom? This is the central viewpoint from which Kant prepared and elaborated his third Critique, the *Critique of Judgment*. This Critique was evidently intended to fill a gap.

Already in his first Critique Kant touched upon this gap. Take, for instance, that I see how the impact of a billiard cue against a ball causes the ball to move. How do I know that the impact of the billiard cue is the cause, and that the movement of the ball is the effect of this? I know this, according to Kant, because my understanding has at its disposal the concept or logical category of causality. How do I know, however, that a particular event can be subsumed under the general concept of causality? Both questions suggest that I need feeling as well as imagination to establish an association between my logical categories and my sensorial impressions. Both feeling and imagination build a bridge, as it were, between sensibility and understanding. And as understanding is here guided by them, they cannot themselves stem from understanding itself. In addition, therefore, to understanding (first Critique) and Reason (second Critique) a higher faculty of knowledge must exist, which tells us which logical categories or concepts are applicable to the inchoate mass of sense impressions that overwhelm us. It must be a power that allows understanding to hit its mark each time. Kant called this power the faculty of judgment (*Urteilskraft*). And it was this faculty or power of judgment that became the central theme of the third Critique that also explains the title, the *Critique of Judgment*.

In the third Critique Kant focuses on a specific sort of faculty of judgment. In order to elucidate this he makes a distinction between a *determinant* and a *reflective* faculty of judgment. If the universal (i.e. a rule, principle or law) is given and we only have to subsume the particular under it, then the judgment is determinant. The determinant faculty of judgment belongs to understanding, which enables us to correctly apply the logical categories, which in turn are given a priori. If, however, the particular is given and it comes down to having to find the universal rule or law to which it belongs, then the judgment is reflective. Here we are confronted with a quest for universal laws or rules that are given neither a priori nor by means of experience itself (a posteriori). The third Critique is precisely about reflective judgments. As we shall see in the following section, the judgment of taste, central to Kant's aesthetics, is an example of a reflective judgment. Why is it that feeling and imagination play such a great part in the faculty of judgment? It is precisely thanks to feeling and imagination that we relate an object – or more precisely, the intuition of an object – to a standard

which we ourselves create and which gives rise to a reflective judgment. Hence Kant
argues that the faculty of judgment presupposes a mental faculty that embodies feeling.
In addition to the faculty of knowledge and the faculty of desire, which are presup-
posed by understanding and Reason respectively, the determining ground of the
faculty of judgment is the feeling of pleasure and/or displeasure. All representations
we have, even thought processes, we also experience from the point of view of pleasure
and displeasure, comfort and discomfort, that which we find agreeable or disagreeable.
We experience pleasure or comfort each time we satisfy a need. Each time we are
denied satisfaction, we experience displeasure or discomfort.

   Is it possible to unveil the conditions of possibility, the a priori principles of feeling?

   If the third Critique, as is indicated by the title, wishes to be a critique of the
faculty of judgment, then the a priori principles of this faculty must also be exposed.
It is here that Kant introduces the concept of *purposiveness*. After all, a statement
about an emotional experience is always purposive: the imagined object is seen as
a purpose. While feeling is completely subjective in most cases of pleasure and
displeasure, of comfort and discomfort, Kant undertakes a transcendental analysis
in this Critique of two realms, the a priori conditions of which he believes he can
expose, viz. the principles of beauty and the principles of organic life. And the first
part of the third Critique is therefore devoted to the aesthetic power of judgment,
while the second part is devoted to the teleological power of judgment.

   To conclude, I would like to note the following. In the Transcendental Aesthetic,
Kant uses the term "aesthetics" in its original meaning, the study of perception, as
Baumgarten did before him. In the third Critique, however, he also maintains the
term in the modern sense of the word, as the study of beauty. When Kant writes
about aesthetic judgment, the modern definition of the word is always intended.
To avoid any misunderstanding, when the noun "aesthetics" is used, Kant always
means the study of perception, while the adjective "aesthetic" always indicates the
modern meaning.

6.5   Kant on Beauty: Toward a *Critique of the Judgment of Taste*

In his critique of aesthetic judgment Kant unfolds the distinguishing characteristics
of the judgment of taste, which he elucidates in four fundamental propositions, or
moments, as he calls them. The first moment concerns the *disinterestedness* of the
judgment of taste, and in particular the famous thesis that the beautiful is the subject
of "disinterested satisfaction". In the second moment he argues that the experience
of the beautiful takes place not only without interest, but also without concepts. The
judgment of taste is not a matter of the understanding, but of feeling. In his third
moment Kant strives to prove that while the experience of the beautiful has no
purpose, the Beautiful is still experienced as something "purposive". Beauty has
nothing to do with content, but with form, which is defined and elucidated as
"purposiveness without purpose". In a fourth and final moment, he argues that the judgment
of taste presupposes that everyone necessarily ought to agree that the aesthetic

object is beautiful. His argument runs that the Beautiful, therefore, is an object of necessary satisfaction. Although the judgment of taste is subjective, it is founded on the expectation that we all dispose of a similar basic feeling or "common sense". Every single one of these moments or propositions has exerted an enormous influence on the further development of aesthetics and the philosophy of art. I shall therefore treat and examine them separately.

6.5.1   Disinterested Satisfaction

The first proposition, very precisely, is the following: "Taste is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The object of such satisfaction is called *beautiful*" (Kant, 1951 , 45). If I find an object beautiful, this aesthetic experience must not be dependent on whether or not I possess the object or work of art. The possession of the object or artwork is not important here, but rather the degree to which the mere presentation of it arouses my satisfaction. If I have any interest in the object or work of art, then I am partial and my judgment of taste becomes clouded and is no longer a pure judgment of taste. The judgment of taste is completely disinterested because it leaves its object untouched.

 In order to clarify the disinterestedness of the judgment of taste, Kant compares it to another form of satisfaction, which is linked with interest. The satisfaction we find in the "pleasant" is not disinterested. When something is "pleasant" to me, the experience of pleasure is only possible if I can use or consume the agreeable object; if not, it will not give me the gratification I aim at. I may have an aesthetic experience upon merely seeing a plate of nouvelle cuisine food, but as soon as I prepare to eat the meal, then it is in my best interest to consume it. In an experience of the "pleasant", I am never impartial with regard to the object, because it will always be my intention to enjoy it, to make use of it. I would not buy an expensive car only to admire it aesthetically once I get it home. This is because the object is central to the experience of the pleasant. In the aesthetic experience, on the other hand, the subject forms the focal point, for here it is a matter of a mere contemplation, leaving the object or artwork as it is. The experience of the beautiful, therefore, presupposes a certain detachment with regard to the object.

6.5.2   Not Understanding but Feeling Is Important

In the second moment, Kant continues his analysis of the particular character of the judgment of taste: "The beautiful is that *which pleases universally without [requiring] a concept*" (ibid., 54; my italics). Because the aesthetic experience is disinterested, I will leave my personal interests aside in my judgment of beauty. And yet I do

presuppose that my personal taste cannot be limited to myself. When something strikes me as beautiful, I don't usually say, "I think that this is beautiful" but, "This *is* beautiful". I don't normally say, "I believe that this concert is excellent." but, "This *is* an excellent concert". So I talk about beauty as if it were a characteristic of the object and as if the judgment imposes itself as evidence. In other words, I assume that every right-minded person ought to come to the same conclusion. Yet, Kant argues, we are not guided here by the object itself or by concepts, because it is a matter of a subjective judgment for everyone, which is not rooted in understanding, but in feeling. Thus the intended agreement about the judgment is anchored, for everyone, in a subjective feeling. Kant speaks here, therefore, of "subjective universal validity".

In order to clarify the above, Kant once again contrasts the beautiful with the pleasant. In terms of the agreeable, the well-known axiom holds true: There can be no disputing about taste (*De gustibus non est disputandum*). Some find the color violet soft and lovely; others think it is dead and faded. Some prefer the sound of the oboe, while others delight in harp music. Some people like apple sauce, while others can't stand it. I can't expect that what tastes good to me should also taste good to someone else. It would be absurd to try and persuade somebody of the pleasantness of a stroll through the streets of Paris if the person you are trying to convince has an outspoken dislike of cities. However, as soon as I consider something to be aesthetically beautiful, then I demand that others agree. I may even blame those who don't for having no "taste" or "aesthetic sensibility". A critic expects everyone to follow his or her judgment, and does not simply make a judgment for him- or herself, but for everyone. In the judgment of taste, therefore, it is presupposed a priori that others ought to agree. If this were not the case, Kant reasons, then it would be useless to speak of "taste" from an aesthetic point of view. Moreover, aesthetic judgments would be impossible. One sees here how much Kant attempted to clarify the conditions of possibility of the aesthetic judgment.

It is important to note that Kant does not say that the judgment of beauty presupposes the actual agreement of others. It is merely a matter of inciting others to share the same judgment, or, better yet, the same aesthetic experience upon which it is based. The aesthetic experience itself, however, always refers to a singular object. For this reason too, the judgment of taste is always a singular judgment, like "this rose is beautiful". As soon as we claim that "All roses are beautiful," we are making a universal, logical judgment, which, while based on various aesthetic experiences, no longer requires one to be aesthetically moved by a *singular* rose. This singular, specific nature of aesthetical experience is not unimportant, for it also implies that the aesthetical judgment cannot be derived from definite concepts or (universal) rules that tell me how I can incite others to consent with my judgment. Again, intellectual arguments are useless here. The judgment of taste thus not only refers to a subjective experience, but also to a *singular* experience, the aesthetic emotion aroused at seeing or hearing *this* or *that* object or artwork. It is never a matter of roses in general, never Bach in general, but this singular rose, this St. Matthew Passion.

6.5.3   Purposiveness Without Purpose

If, however, I ask myself how *this* singular rose, *this* Matthäus-Passion, moves me aesthetically, then apparently I need to turn to the form of the object or work of art to find an answer. Thus Kant states in his third proposition: "Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, so far as this is perceived in it without any presentation of a purpose" (ibid., 73). This must seem like a very strange statement for someone not familiar with Kant. What does Kant mean by this?

What Kant actually means is perhaps best illustrated with a concrete example. If I see an antelope, I can experience the harmonious interplay of its limbs as something that keeps the antelope out of its predators' clutches: I do not judge the antelope's anatomical build as something coincidental, but rather as something extremely functional, purposive, a means to an end of self-preservation. I experience the antelope's form here as purposive because it satisfies a goal. If, however, I see the antelope's gait as the epitome of gracefulness, then I admire the animal's form not because of the function it fulfills, but because of the form itself. The animal's form is the object of a purely aesthetic experience. I experience the form of the antelope here as purposeful, not because it serves a purpose, but because it is beautiful in itself. This explains Kant's description of the Beautiful as "purposive without a purpose".

However, this example does not sufficiently explain why Kant speaks of purposiveness in both cases. We would not be spontaneously inclined to speak of purposiveness in the second case. Doesn't purposiveness always imply a relation between a means and an end? According to Kant, however, we need no such idea in order to see something as purposive. This is the case in the first example: here, the antelope's form is seen as a means to preserve the race of antelopes. In the second example, the purpose itself is unknown, or entirely unimportant. I could even appreciate the antelope aesthetically without knowing that it is an antelope. All that is important is my subjective feeling. In the first example, everything centers on the purposiveness of the perceived *object*, or the organism itself, hence *objective* purposiveness. The only thing that matters in the second case the perceived object matches my subjective feeling, hence *subjective* purposiveness.

Now, characteristic of objective purposiveness is that it allows my *understanding* to judge nature as something that is not simply *purposive* by chance: I assume that everything has been created according to plan. While I cannot really prove this, I assume that everything has been created on purpose, otherwise I would never speak about the harmony of nature. There is an invisible hand everywhere, which makes the *form* of an object in such a way that it is a means to an *end*, a means to realize its natural destiny or disposition. Thus the form, to speak with Aristotle, is the organism's final cause. The faculty of judgment presupposes a final purpose here, which demands a purposive or teleological approach. Hence: "teleological faculty of judgment".

Characteristic of subjective purposiveness, on the contrary, is that it allows my feeling to judge or experience an object as something that is not random, and in which the means justify the end to such a degree that the object's form itself brings about a feeling of satisfaction in me. This is because the object's form corresponds

with something in me, my aesthetic feeling. Contrary to objective purposiveness, the end is completely unimportant here and can even be unknown to me: I experience the object as beautiful because the mere form of the purposefulness provides me with satisfaction or aesthetic pleasure. It is in this sense that Kant speaks of "purposiveness without purpose". Kant makes a rigid distinction on the basis of this between the teleological judgment on one hand, and the aesthetic judgment or pure judgment of taste on the other.

What, though, is the relevance of this distinction for aesthetics or the philosophy of art? Well, it would appear that Kant has discovered an essential characteristic of our aesthetic experience, in spite of (or perhaps thanks to) the fact that he has taken such a long detour. Precisely by comparing the judgment of taste to the teleological judgment, he has exposed the eminent importance of form for our aesthetic experience. And Kant indeed emphasizes that the pure judgment of taste, in contrast to teleological judgment, does not concern content, but form: subjective purposiveness is at once a formal purpose. This formal aspect has nothing to do with any agreeable sensation whatsoever that may be coupled with the aesthetic experience. The fact that certain colors or tones are pleasing to us is not relevant; the only thing that matters is the formal composition because only the latter constitutes the actual object of a pure judgment of taste. Here, Kant shows himself as a precursor of formalism, because, according to him, only the pure form (unaffected by emotions, concepts, etcetera) determines the experience of the beautiful.

Kant also clearly anticipated formalism with his distinction between *free* and *dependent* beauty. Free beauty does not presuppose any concept about the beautiful, it is neither rational nor about any content. Hence Kant describes beauty in the second moment as that which is without concepts and in the third moment as that which is without the presentation of a purpose, which, in his way of thinking, comes down to the same thing. Free beauty speaks for itself: the object is unimportant, means nothing in itself. That is why Kant counts so-called musical fantasies (music without a theme), and more so even all music not set to words as free beauty. If I think a flower is beautiful then I do not need a botanist's detailed explanation of it, I don't need to know anything about the flower, not even its name: just as in music, only the pure form is important.

In free beauty we do not presuppose any concept of the purpose the perceived object should serve. In dependent beauty, on the other hand, such a concept is presupposed, making it *dependent* on the logical categories of understanding. Kant even goes so far as to claim that the concept or the image of a purpose restricts the freedom of the imagination, which should ideally be free in the perception of pure form. In other words: if the judgment of taste is limited by understanding, it is no longer a free and pure judgment of taste. Rational judgments are essentially different from judgments of taste: in the former one is guided by what one thinks, and in the latter by imagination and feeling. And Kant's significant conclusion is:

> By means of this distinction we can settle many disputes about beauty between judges of taste, by showing that the one speaking of free, the other of dependent beauty –that the first is making a pure, the other an applied, judgment of taste (ibid., 67–68).

If the pure judgment of taste presupposes no concepts and therefore no objective rule of taste exists, on what grounds can we then achieve agreement? Apparently we maintain a standard in our judgments of beauty. If we assume that this standard does not spring from concepts, where then does it come from? How is it possible for us to entertain an image of beauty and to have a representation of an ideal of beauty to which we compare singular objects and works of art? Hence we must, so Kant argues, dispose of an archetype of beauty, against which we can measure a singular object or artwork. This archetype of taste cannot be a concrete example because it is presupposed in the judgment of all concrete examples. According to Kant this archetype, this highest, never-realized model, the prototype of beauty is a mere idea that must stem from ourselves, that we all must generate within ourselves. This idea, which does not belong to understanding, but to Reason, is a product of our faculty of imagination. It is thanks to our imagination that we can form an idea of perfect beauty, and though it will never be realized by a concrete object or work of art, it will nevertheless continue to serve as a guideline or universal norm for aesthetic judgment. This aesthetic *idea*, as Kant calls it, only becomes an *ideal* of beauty once we have imagined a concrete example that, according to us, approaches the archetype.

This above argument is not surprising given the contrast Kant makes between understanding and Reason or Vernunft. It is Reason, as the faculty of ideas, which not only lends a higher coherence to nature and morality, but also to art. Reason strives for perfect unity, the unconditional. Just as morality implies the idea of God, so aesthetic judgment implies the idea of perfect beauty. Without the idea of ideal beauty no unity would underlie our aesthetic judgments.

Although Kant does not say this in so many words, the preceding argument has far-reaching implications for artistic creativity. The idea that perfect beauty is never fully realized is the driving force behind the creation of art. Every artwork can be seen as an attempt to realize the ideal of beauty. The impossibility of its attainment explains why artists will always keep striving for this ideal, and why those of them that come closest to the ideal of perfect beauty will invariably experience a sense of frustration, impotence and even failure. And Kant illuminates yet another aspect of artistic creativity here. Kant constantly emphasizes that the judgment of taste does not presuppose an objective rule derived from reason, and that it is without concept; and yet one meets the standard of the aesthetic idea, the ideal of beauty, founded on the faculty of imagination. This too explains why, after repeated versions of a work of art, artists suddenly have the feeling that the final version is the only right one, without being able to explain logically *why this is so*. We could, therefore, speak of an indeterminate ideal, *unexplainable with concepts*, that animates the artist in the creative process. Elsewhere, Kant calls this the *free lawfulness* of imagination.

6.5.4   *"Common Sense"*

It is precisely this elusive, inner necessity that is central in the fourth and final moment: "The beautiful is that which without any concept is cognized as the object

of a *necessary satisfaction*" (ibid., 77). We already know that the aesthetic judgment strives after everyone's agreement. If we think something is beautiful, we expect everybody to agree. We can justify this necessity neither by theoretical nor by moral arguments. The aesthetic judgment is neither a logical judgment nor a moral judgment: it is founded neither on empirical nor on moral laws. The necessity can only be called *exemplary*, or, as Kant explains: "a necessity of the assent of all to a judgment which is regarded as the example of a universal rule that we cannot state" (ibid., 85). Once again we see that in the judgment of taste the claim to universality is never objective, but always subjective. But how is it possible, Kant asks, that so many *subjective* reactions apparently agree or can agree, to such an extent that we even solicit this agreement in an aesthetic judgment? A principle must exist which feeds our expectation that others will agree, otherwise the idea of the necessity of our judgment of taste would not occur to us at all. Here Kant refers to "common sense" (*sensus communis*). This "common sense" should not be confused with the usual meaning of it, i.e. a consensus of sound judgment (*communis opinio*), which always judges according to concepts or logical categories. On the contrary *sensus communis* is not based on reasoning but judges according to feeling, a feeling shared by everyone!

In order to illustrate this "common sense" as an a priori principle of the judgment of taste, Kant elaborates on an idea that runs through the entire *Critique of Judgment*. Kant argues that "common sense" arises from the "free play of our cognitive powers". We have already seen that in perception understanding is guided by imagination. However, if we concentrate, as we do in an aesthetic judgment, on the mental state we find ourselves in, then it is a matter of the attunement of our cognitive powers, i.e. understanding and imagination. It is then a question of how imagination allows understanding to acquire objective knowledge through sense perception, i.e. a question of the *inner*, *subjective* relationship between imagination and understanding which is presupposed in every perception or representation. And the only way this attunement can be determined is by "feeling", which is manifests itself par excellence in aesthetic feeling. The fact that we can communicate this feeling in a judgment of taste presupposes that we all, in principle, can have the same aesthetic experience and therefore that we must dispose of a "common sense".

While the above is undoubtedly debatable, it does explain why Kant finds the pure form so important in the aesthetic experience. The object itself cannot cause the inner, subjective relationship between imagination and understanding, but only the way we experience the object as being purposive. For this reason, only formal purposiveness can evoke the aesthetic feeling present in all of us and thus refers to a common sense. This explains, moreover, why I can experience an ingenious machine (objective purposiveness) aesthetically as well (subjective purposiveness). The Belgian artist Panamarenko took advantage of this fact when he created very ingenious machines as artworks, which serve no further purpose. Kant speaks of the free play between imagination and understanding because the aesthetic experience is not bound by concepts or by a well-defined end. It is for this reason that the mere perception of purposiveness (purposiveness without purpose) pleases us aesthetically. When Panamarenko designs an ingenious airplane he is not inhibited by the

Fig. 6.1 Panamarenko, *Donderwolk* (Thundercloud) 1970–1971. Inox, aluminium, rubber canvas, felt, leather and perspex, 300 × 500 × 500 cm. Courtesy Deweer Art Gallery, Otegem. Photo: Gerald Van Rafelghem. (*see Color Plates*)

machine's function in the air. He allows his imagination to run free and we are able to appreciate his artwork to the extent that its formal beauty appeals to our aesthetic sense (See Fig. 6.1).

6.6   Kant on the Sublime and Artistic Genius

In addition to the focus on beauty in his critique of the aesthetic judgment, Kant also pays attention to the sublime. In addition to the beautiful, Kant's critique of aesthetic judgment addresses the sublime, in clear anticipation of Romanticism. The Romantic movement was characterized by a major shift from the beautiful to the sublime, epitomized by Caspar David Friedrich's famous painting *The Monk by the Sea* (1809–1810, see Fig. 6.2). Kant's attention for the creative genius, too, harbingered Romanticism, although, as we will see, he does not confer a divine status on the artistic prodigy.

There are, from a transcendental point of view, important similarities between the merely beautiful and the sublime. The sublime too is presupposed as disinterested, without concept, universally valid, purposive without purpose and necessary.

Fig. 6.2 Caspar David Friedrich, *Monk By the Sea*, 1808–1810. Oil on canvas, 110 × 171,5 cm. National Gallery Berlin. (*see Color Plates*)

The same basic characteristics, the same conditions of possibility or a priori principles hold in both cases. And yet there are considerable differences.

A first distinction concerns the formal aspect. While the beautiful has a limited form, the sublime is often characterized by formlessness and boundlessness. This inspired Kant to replace "understanding", which plays a central role alongside imagination in aesthetic judgment, with "Reason" in his assessment of the sublime. Strictly speaking, this isn't quite correct, for, as we have already seen, the aesthetic judgment also presupposes Reason, because it implies the idea of perfect beauty. Here Kant seems to be somewhat the prisoner of his own system of thinking.

There is, however, an important reason for Kant to associate Reason with the sublime. This leads us to a second distinction, which has to do with the nature of aesthetic experience itself. We experience the beautiful in peaceful contemplation; it gives us a certain *joie de vivre*, and the imagination's character is playful here. The sublime, on the other hand, overwhelms us; it is breathtaking, paralyzing us at first sight. Only at second sight does it fill us with an unbridled vitality. In the sublime, deadly earnest, fear, or frantic joy predominates. Emotionally, it is less neutral than the experience of beauty: it makes us surpass ourselves and brings us in contact with the metaphysical, the supersensible. This is why Kant associates the sublime with Reason. While beauty belongs to the world of appearances, the sensible or phenomenal world, the sublime brings us closer to the world of ideas, the supersensible or noumenal world.

The third and most important distinction between the merely beautiful and the sublime is a direct result of the second distinction. Because of its purposiveness of form, beauty is predetermined for our faculty of judgment because it allows our imagination to see how beautifully all the elements of a natural object or work of art are attuned. The sublime, on the other hand, through its formlessness, is not at all purposive as far as its form is concerned. It seems even to resist every possible judgment, every representation and all imagination. It goes above our imaginative powers, as it were. But the more it eludes our imaginative powers, the more sublimely it is experienced! The sublime confronts us with a borderline experience, for which no sensory form exists or is given per definition. And yet the sublime is sensibly represented, albeit inadequately and indirectly. One could even say that the sublime is aroused in us thanks to this imperfect representation of that which cannot be seen. This is because we complete the experience of the boundless, the infinite, the chaos, with ideas of Reason which come from within us and which lend a higher coherence or purposiveness, a meaning, to the sensory appearance. A stormy sea is only experienced as sublime once the mind has associated it with ideas that confer upon it a higher purposiveness or meaning.

What does this "higher purposiveness", this "meaning" that is brought about by our Reason in the experience of the sublime, consist of? The ideas of Reason – the soul, immortality, God – cannot be represented sensibly nor expressed by concepts. They can, however, be represented indirectly by analogy; they can, in other words, be symbolized. Only when the stormy sea is granted a symbolic charge does it become the object of the sublime. The same can be said of a death experience, the terrifying nature of which raises the question of the meaning of life itself. Because the ideas refer to the supersensible, the sublime for Kant is, more than the merely beautiful, a foreshadowing of a bliss, a mystical witnessing of God. It would appear that Kant is supporting a variation of the "mimesis" theory here, because the ideas of Reason are of a supersensible nature and the sensible forms merely inadequate "imitations" of them. There is indeed a certain kinship with Plato, something I shall return to later. One would not, however, be doing justice to Kant, if one considered him a proponent of the "mimesis" theory.

Up to this point, Kant has made no distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in nature and in art. In his further analysis of aesthetic judgment, however, he remarks that art is not simply the imitation of nature because it presupposes the intervention of a creative human being. Nature can move us in many ways, but it is not as a willful creation, that resulted in a work of art. Although art may appear to resemble nature and, like nature, embodies a purposive form, it is a product of free creativity, which is characterized by autonomous design. This implies that it cannot simply be imitation, for it obeys its own autonomous "laws" and its own conditions of possibility.

It is here that Kant brings up the creative force of artistic genius. Although artistic genius lies at the root of the autonomy and the free lawfulness of art (see Section 6.5), Kant does not place it on a pedestal. A genius is no divine being, but is described as "the innate mental predisposition (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art" (ibid., 150). Genius is the fruit of a harmonious relationship between innate talents. It is simply a favourable disposition, which can be

developed, but not learned or imitated. Genius leads to the finding of one's own rules and forms, the mechanism of which cannot be ascertained, not even by the artist himself. It is the foundation of originality, although it is inimitable.

Once again Kant stresses the mediating function of art, this time from the perspective of creative genius. Genius is the talent that combines the faculties of imagination and the understanding. Imagination is free to the extent that it breaks through the confined limitations of understanding, or, better yet: that it brings something into being in which understanding is involved but for which no concept has yet been found. He also emphasizes to what degree genius bridges the gap between imagination and Reason. Thanks to imagination, the soul creates aesthetic ideas. Once again we see the distinction between concept (Understanding) and aesthetic idea (Reason). It is the latter, according to Kant, that inspires imagination in the genius. This brings about a "(...) representation of the imagination which occasions much thought, without however any definite thought, i.e. any concept, being capable of being adequate to it (...)" (ibid., 157). The inexhaustibility of the soul lies in the fact that it creates something that cannot be expressed or made clear by a perfect language or a rational argument. It is, however, certainly a matter of concepts, but concepts that are indefinite, not yet completely made explicit, concepts of a supersensible ideal, imagined by the genius in a sensible representation, no matter how inadequate it may be.

6.7   Kant as Synthesis and Axis

The reason I have treated Kant so extensively in concluding the classical theories on the essence of art should be clear by now. His analysis of aesthetic judgment incorporates all the points of view we have considered up to this point. While the emphasis undoubtedly lies on the relationship between the observer and the artwork or the aesthetic object, Kant also deals with the form of the artwork itself as well as the relationship between artist and artwork. Compared with the theories of art already discussed in preceding chapters Kant's work reads as an impressive synthesis.

It should in any case be clear how that Kant's view of perception has been used as lever for the rigorous critique of the imitation theory. We have seen how indebted Gombrich and Goodman are to Kant's analysis in this respect. There are also conspicuous similarities between Kant and expression theories. Similar to the CC theory, Kant sees the work of art as the expression of an idea that has taken root in the artist's soul (rather than in the brain) thanks to imagination. Kant's views also correspond with the CC theory insofar the aesthetic idea is identified with an ideal of beauty which serves as a guideline for the realization of a concrete artwork, an ideal which inspires us as we perceive or create a singular work of art. There are, however, at least two important differences with the CC theory. First, in Kant's aesthetics there remains a tension between idea and reality, between, on the one

hand, the ideal and, on the other hand, the singular, tangible work of art! Moreover Kant is not indifferent to the medium, as he considers the sensible appearance of the artwork indispensable. For him it is always meaningful to ask how purposive the applied form of expression is, i.e. to what extent the sensible fulfills the aesthetic idea.

As far as a sensibly perceptible work of art is concerned, Kant is not interested in every sensible attribute, but in the pure form. Anticipating formalism, only form for form's sake is important, without regard for function, purpose or content. The purposiveness of the expressive form is judged only on purely formal grounds. The rest is in fact irrelevant. Hence the characterization of the beautiful as "disinterested pleasure" and "purposiveness without purpose". And yet Kant can be distinguished from classical formalism because he explains (1) why the pure form is anchored in the metaphysical and supersensible, (2) why the aesthetic experience cannot be expressed with words and (3) why the work of art can have symbolic value. With these further steps he anticipates both Nietzsche as well as Langer's symbolic theory.

The fact that Kant's aesthetics reads as a synthesis of classical theories is the more remarkable if we consider that his views date back more than two centuries. This also explains the tremendous influence that Kant has had on the philosophy of art or aesthetics up to this day. The perduring and lively interest in his work is surely due to his introduction of a systematic meta-analysis of the aesthetic judgment. It is no coincidence that Kant, precisely thanks to the transcendental analysis, eventually succeeded in tracking and synthesizing all the classical standpoints and their interrelationships. It is in this sense that Kant's aesthetics stands in the philosophy of art as a turning point of lasting relevance.

6.8   Objections to Kant

It goes without saying that Kant's approach has often been subjected to heavy criticism. Many objections, however, hardly take into account the extraordinary richness and complexity of his aesthetics. A first fundamental objection is *that Kant wrongly equates the aesthetic judgment of natural objects with the aesthetic judgment of works of art*. According to Wollheim an aesthetic judgment such as "This rose is beautiful" is not comparable to the aesthetic judgments we express with regard to art. There is a difference of day and night between the two. The aesthetic experience of a rose in daily life is entirely different from the experience of the same rose in art. Thus Kant wrongly asserts that the aesthetic experience of art is rooted in daily life. In aesthetics, according to Wollheim, only our experiences with, and judgments on, art should serve as our starting point. And yet this argument is not entirely justifiable. As we have seen, Kant indeed does make a distinction between our aesthetic judgments of natural objects and artworks, respectively. He emphasizes that works of art, as opposed to natural objects, are intentionally created and that they are the work of the

creative genius and as such express aesthetic ideas. And it is on the basis of these arguments that he asserts that the work of art is autonomous.

A second fundamental objection is *that Kant wrongly equates the aesthetic experience with the experience of the Beautiful*. According to Nelson Goodman, the Ugly can also arouse an aesthetic experience in us. We consider works of art such as Grünewald's *Crucifixion*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Goya's *Witches Sabbath* to be aesthetically valuable, even though they are "ugly", or in any case not beautiful. This is an interesting objection, as the subject of much modern art is the ugly and the hideous. One need only think of Francis Bacon's significant oeuvre. And yet, here too one could ask oneself whether the counter-argument holds water. The fact that a work of art has the Ugly as its subject does not mean that the work of art itself is necessarily ugly. Kant himself points to the fact that the representation of ugly objects can itself be experienced as beautiful. We must not confuse the beauty of a representation with that which is being represented. There are beautiful representations of ugly things just as there are ugly representations of beautiful things!

In any case, the representations given in Goodman's examples can be experienced as beautiful, at least in the Kantian sense. As we have seen, according to Kant the beautiful is connected with the perception of a certain form of an object, which he describes as "purposive without purpose". The purposiveness is present if the object brings about the attunement of our imagination and understanding. Goodman's counter-argument would apply only if we could prove that this cannot be achieved if the artwork is "ugly". But then, is not an ugly artwork aesthetically valuable precisely because of its purposive representation of the ugly? This could also explain why we can experience a representation of beautiful things as ugly, i.e. not purposive. There is in fact another counter-argument. If we consider that in Kant's view objects can also be experienced as "sublime", the beautiful is not the only aesthetic quality artworks can have. Is not the "ugly" to which Goodman refers often a very good example of the sublime as Kant sees it? Is it not the Dionysian – of which Nietzsche writes and which through Apollonian form-giving design will in any case lead to a form – which, as Kant put it, is "purposive without purpose" and which will arouse our aesthetic appreciation first?

A third fundamental objection has to do precisely with this idea of "purposiveness without purpose", the disinterested and formalistic character of Kant's aesthetics. The objection is that Kant, through the exclusive emphasis on disinterestedness and the pure form, distances himself from the every-day aesthetic experience. According to Pierre Bourdieu, Kant's aesthetics forms the basis for a "bourgeois" aesthetics that gives absolute priority to the formal experiment in art and cultivates it as the epitome of good taste. This, Bourdieu holds, is diametrically opposed to "popular", more common and proletarian aesthetics, in which works of art are judged in terms of their content, the reference to reality and the way they give expression to emotion. It would appear, on the basis of questionnaires, that the aesthetic experience of the lower classes is based not so much on "form for form's sake" but very much on the representative and expressive properties of a work of art. In lower classes, "art for art's sake" is seen as a waste and an unnecessary luxury.

One could ask oneself if Bourdieu isn't painting a rather one-sided picture of Kant's aesthetics here. Kant is blamed, namely, for the fact that the formal experiment in art forbids the direct aesthetic experience of beauty in the world, a beautiful child, a beautiful young girl, a beautiful animal or a beautiful landscape (Bourdieu, 1979, 44). It is precisely because Kant had an eye for this, however, that he was thoroughly criticized by Wollheim in the name of the autonomy of art! Moreover, Bourdieu plays the "barbaric taste" of the lower classes out against "bourgeois taste". Popular taste, Bourdieu holds, only accepts representation, no matter how perfect it may be, if the portrayed object is worth being represented. It must be a reality that is worth being immortalized. This, Bourdieu continues, is the point of departure for what Kant's aesthetics refer to as "barbaric taste". According to Bourdieu therefore, the autonomy of art, for which Kant's aesthetics forms the classical model, is ultimately class-related. The middle class bases itself on Kant's aesthetics in order to distinguish itself from the other, lower classes. It saddens him that "popular aesthetics" and "popular culture" has not yet found systematic spokesmen in the philosophy of art. Yet, as we shall see in Chapter 8, Lukàcs most certainly attempted to elucidate "popular" aesthetics systematically. This attempt follows from the radical criticism expressed by Proudhon, who lashed out strongly a century ago against petit-bourgeois aesthetics, which according to him wrongly alienated art from social life because of its "art for art's sake". Bourdieu indeed refers explicitly to Proudhon's criticism. This criticism leads us to a fifth and final fundamental objection, which has remained standing to the present, namely that Kant, in his analysis of the aesthetic judgment, wrongly ignores the historical and social context in which the aesthetic experience, the creation and the reception of art, take place. The following two chapters will be devoted to this problem.

Further Reading

Good and concise introductions to Kant are:

Stephan Körner, *Kant*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982 (Originally published by Penguin Books in 1955).
Karl Ameriks, *Interpreting Kant´s critiques*, Oxford: Clarendon; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

For a translation of Kant's third critique, see:

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of judgement*, translated and introduced by John Henry Bernard, New York/London, Haffner Press, 1951.
Recent edition of this translation: Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2005.
For another quite recent and good translation, see;
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the power of judgement*, translated/edited by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

For a translations of Kant's first two critiques:

Immanuel kant, *Critique of pure reason*, translated/edited by Paul Guyer and Alan W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
Immanuel Kant, *Practical philosophy*, translated/edited by Mary Gregor, with an introduction by Alan W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. (Includes the *Groundwork*, *Critique of practical reason* and "What is Enlightenment?")

On Kant's third critique and the unique introduction to the third critique by Kant:

Immanuel Kant, *First introduction to the critique of judgment,* translated by James Haden, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965.
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Paul Guyer, *Kant and the claims of taste*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 (Originally published by Harvard University Press, 1979).
Herman Parret (ed.), *Kant's Ästhetik/Kant's aesthetics/L'esthétique de Kant,* Berlin: in Walter De Gruyter, 1998.
Rodolphe Gasché, *The idea of form: rethinking Kant's aesthetics*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.

On Kant and the sublime:

Paul Crowther, *The Kantian sublime: from morality to art*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: in Oxford University Press, 1989.
Jean François Lyotard, *Lessons on the analytic of the sublime: Kant's critique of judgement*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994.

For objections to Kant see:

Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the problem of metaphysics*, translated by James S. Churchill and a
    foreword by Thomas Langan, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1962.
Nelson Goodman, *Languages of art*, Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968 (especially p.242 and
    further).
Richard Wollheim, *Art and its objects*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,
    1980 (especially section 22 and 23).
Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, translated by Richard
    Nice, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Chapter 7
'The End of Art': The Contemporary Interest in Hegel

7.1 Introduction

In an interview the celebrated French composer and conductor Pierre Boulez summed up his own vision of art as follows:

> One can no longer write stupid music. To me, composing remains an intellectual activity, not a spontaneous one. There can be no doubt about this: a pen is required. Those who say that no thought is needed, that simply writing is sufficient, are talking nonsense. This attitude will only produce boring, oversimplified music that is not really important.

With this, Boulez meant to say that the contemporary composer has to justify himself theoretically. And in his additional comments, it is clear to see how much this theoretical justification determines one's position with regard to the history of music:

> You have a responsibility to your predecessors. You should no longer write stupid music sixty years after Schönberg wrote Erwartung ("Expectation"). You cannot stay at an inferior level. Those who are not aware of this should not find fault with Schönberg but with themselves. And they should question the necessity of Schönberg's work. This is not a matter of progress, but an elementary moral attitude: I cannot do less than my predecessors.

Thus, the criterion used to judge music is inventiveness:

> If the invention is valuable and able to convey something, then I say yes. The greatest according to this criterion are Schönberg, Stravinsky, Bartok, and so forth, followed by Prokofiev or Hindemith. The latter are very praiseworthy, but are not of the same caliber as the others. It's the same in literature: compared with Dostoevsky, all other novelists are just not as interesting. In the literature of this century, you have Proust, Kafka and Joyce – and then the rest.

From this historical and intellectual perspective, inventiveness remains the key word:

> What makes Mozart more interesting than his contemporaries? His extraordinary inventiveness. Bach is simply better than Telemann. A confusion of values should not exist. It's just the same when you go to the Rijksmuseum (National Museum) in Amsterdam. The whole of the seventeenth century is there to behold (…) and Rembrandt too. Of course Rembrandt was only the tip of the iceberg; of course his social circumstances were also necessary - all that life, all that creative activity, all that controversy. But in the end there are few really great creative minds, a few of less importance, and many of very little importance.

Inventiveness must also include the use of new technology:

> *The possibility for mass production turned the manufacture of brass instruments upside down in the nineteenth century. So now that electronics exist, you can't say: 'We won't touch it, that's just used to make washing machines. That would be silly''.*

<div align="right">(Flemish newspaper De Morgen (The Morning), 17 September 1993, pp. 17–18, my translation)</div>

What is striking about Boulez's statement is the importance he attaches to theoretical justification and historical consciousness. The growing significance of these issues in recent art history inspired the American art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto to finally fall back on the philosophy of Hegel. Hegel's thought on art seems to be more relevant nowadays than ever before, in particular his thesis on 'the end of art'. For Boulez, however, the end of art is not yet an issue, since he still believes in continual renewal, an historical development as a result of the *inventiveness* of the contemporary artist. Danto on the other hand, definitively rejects any belief in innovation. As an art critic in the New York art world, he witnessed daily the extent to which the market value of an artwork was wholly determined by inventiveness and innovation. However, so Danto argues, the bewildering succession of artistic movements has finally eroded the idea of a steady evolution. In the end, this ceaseless renewal, fueled by and exploited by the art market, appears to be no more than an illusion. In this century of unrestrained inventiveness, innovation has reached an absolute limit, a point of no return, a dead end. The history of art is definitively over. Today, says Danto, we live in the era of post-historical art in which the 'end of art' Hegel spoke of has finally become inevitable.

The relevance of Hegel's philosophy of art in today's age would therefore seem to be a *fait accompli*. Like Boulez, Hegel emphasizes the importance of historical consciousness and theoretical justification for the development of art. First and foremost, the modern artist needs to orient him or herself historically. Each creation of art is necessarily preceded by an historical consciousness, through which the artist becomes conscious of earlier art forms and styles. At the same time, the modern artist no longer expresses himself in terms of sensory but rather in reflective, conceptual terms. New techniques and materials may serve as a fixed point for new experiments in this process. This vision of the 'mission' of the modern artist must be music to Boulez's ears.

Hegel's vision is very significant. After all, like no other philosopher before him, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831) has given philosophy of art a thoroughly *historical* dimension. Furthermore, he brought the theme of the relation between art and theory to center stage like no other before him. The interesting consequence of this is that philosophy becomes highly relevant to the practice of art itself. This relevance became that much greater when Hegel came to the conclusion that in Post-Greek, primarily Christian (or what Hegel called 'romantic art') art entered a decline, in which art became more and more invaded by religion and philosophy. This would finally lead to Hegel's so-called thesis on the 'end of art', which simply implies that in our post-romantic era art no longer embodies the supreme authority, but is superseded by reflective thought. With the 'end of art' appears the reflective, ironic artist on the scene of world history, an idea which has

been embraced and further elaborated by Arthur Danto with respect to recent and contemporary art. Though Danto regularly and explicitly refers to Hegel, in many if not in all his texts Hegel's philosophy has remained somewhat shrouded in mystery. The real grounds upon which Hegel based his famous thesis are rarely explained. In this chapter we will therefore take a look behind the philosophical scenes and, as a starting point, immerse ourselves in Hegel's own way of thinking.

It is no coincidence that Hegel emphasized historical awareness as well as theoretical reflections in his philosophy of art. In his philosophical system, the contradiction and subsequent reconciliation between opposites is the driving force behind every development or progress. Hegel universally applied this principle, which he called the *dialectical* method. It is this dialectical method, or *dialectic*, which is at the root of his historical mode of thought and his continuous interest in history, especially in the history of art. Alongside dialectic, Hegel's *idealism* is crucial for his thought. To Hegel, 'actual reality' is of a 'spiritual' or 'ideal' nature. The whole world history is interpreted by Hegel as the process through which the 'spirit becomes self-conscious': a process that is ultimately established *in* and *through* philosophy.

It is the way in which Hegel interprets both the dialectic and this process of becoming self-conscious that determines the place and function of art within his system (see Section 7.2). It also explains why Hegel describes art as the 'sensuous semblance of the idea' (Section 7.3). Moreover, it explains why from Hegel's point of view the so-called Romantic art form was superior to the Symbolic and the Classical art forms (Section 7.4). And why art history, as well as art, finds its fulfillment within its philosophy. It is precisely because art no longer represents the highest level in the self-consciousness of the spirit, that Hegel proclaimed the 'the end of art' (Section 7.5).

Only after exploring Hegel's philosophy, shall I discuss why Danto, in the wake of Hegel, supports the 'end of art' thesis in the context of relatively recent developments within the art world (Section 7.6), discussing during a 'short studio visit' one of his favourite examples, i.e. *Fountain* of Marcel Duchamp (Section 7.7). I will conclude this chapter with some thorough critical reflections on Hegel's and especially Danto's vision on art (Section 7.8).

7.2   The Place and Function of Art in Hegel's Philosophy: The Absolute Spirit

I have already highlighted the extent to which the dialectic explains why Hegel's way of thinking is so thoroughly historical. But what did Hegel mean by dialectic? Hegel's dialectic is often summarized as being a way of thinking in which thesis turns into synthesis through antithesis. However, this requires some clarification. Firstly, as a rule Hegel does not refer to antithesis, but to contradiction, negation, 'otherness', alienation. Secondly, he usually speaks of 'sublation' (*Aufhebung*), not synthesis. By sublation Hegel means not only a 'negating' of opposites, in the sense that the contradiction is cancelled out, but also a 'lifting up' or an 'elevation'

(sublation etymologically means not only 'to take away, annul', but also 'to lift up'), through which those opposites become reconciled in a higher entity. Thirdly, dialectic not only refers to a way of reasoning, but it is also supposed to reveal the way 'reality' *actually* develops and unfolds.

In his Logic (*Science of Logic*), Hegel provided an elementary example of the dialectic. Let us assume that our starting point is the notion of 'being'. What is the absolute negation of 'being'? This would be 'not-being' or nothingness. In 'nothingness' being is thought in its absolute otherness, alienated, as it were, from itself. Now, is it possible to conceive of a notion in which the opposition between 'being' and 'not-being' is not only *negated*, but also *preserved* (reconciled, we would say) through *elevating* it at a higher level? According to Hegel this notion is 'to become', a notion which includes both 'being' and 'not-being', which nevertheless refers to a higher level of coherence, which in turn also implies development. This development is inherent in 'reality', so that there is no difference between the idea and the world.

7.2.1 The Spirit Becoming Self-conscious

This explains why Hegel identifies 'reality' with the Spirit or Idea. From a dialectical point of view 'reality' is seen as a process in which the spirit becomes increasingly aware of itself through a series of oppositions. This also explains why he speaks of the 'spirit becoming self-conscious'. In this process he makes a distinction between the Subjective, Objective and Absolute Spirit. To the Subjective Spirit belongs the human individual who becomes *conscious* of his spirit. Here, the spirit is 'for itself' (*für sich*) because it can think about itself. It is at this level that mankind differs from animals, since animals do not possess this level of consciousness. Since man is able to be *self-conscious*, it is also at the same time capable of *being a subject*, in which the spirit is with itself.

7.2.2 The Objective Spirit

Nevertheless, according to Hegel, the Subjective Spirit is the lowest step in the process of 'becoming self-conscious', because her consciousness is still purely internal and abstract. Further development is only possible through dialectic. What then, is the negation or the Absolute opposite of the subject? This is the object in which the subject embodies its 'otherness' and is alienated from itself. In this way the Subjective Spirit is externalized into 'objective' spiritual artifacts which also exist separately from individual consciousness. Here, the spirit is no longer 'for-itself' but '*in*-itself' (*an sich*), because it has embodied (literally: *objectified*) itself in an objective order that exceeds all individual consciousness. The most important areas, in which this occurs, according to Hegel, are the family, civil society, state and history. These are the concrete, tangible, objective forms of expression of the spirit, such as those that have been developed and can be retraced through history. Historical development is seen by Hegel as rational and necessary: it is the embodiment of dialectic.

Thus, the Objective Spirit expresses the necessary progress of history. All actions in the past – the establishment of institutions and the waging of wars – are seen by Hegel in terms of the dialectical self-development of the spirit. Nothing is coincidental; everything contributes to this unfolding development. The individuals themselves, however, *are* coincidental. The 'Objective Spirit' exceeds the interests of individual people. Even if these individuals act out of self-interest, their actions only matter in as far as they contribute to necessary developments. Individuals often act when they should know better, but these actions may still serve the common good, and the interests of history and progress. And so according to Hegel, individuals are no more than tools of the spirit. They cannot therefore calculate the consequences of their actions. What is more, from this viewpoint they are essentially expendable. Or to be more specific: from Hegel's point of view, Napoleon's actions were historically necessary, though he himself did not realize what he was setting in motion. However, if Napoleon had not existed, another individual would have appeared who would have acted in exactly the same way. This is what Hegel calls the 'cunning of reason' (*List der Vernunft*). Reason makes use of individuals in order to realize its dialectical development in history. The individuals do nothing more than fulfilling the necessary development of world history.

One should not underestimate the importance of the Objective Spirit, particularly in philosophy of art and culture, for the Objective Spirit includes artistic creation. Artists too are tools of the spirit of the age, expressing what is historically necessary. They create what has been prepared and imposed upon them by the spirit of the age, irrespective of who they are. And so artists too, as individuals, are essentially expendable. This explains why in the same era, various artists develop a similar style independently of each other. Here Hegel proffers an explanation of the origin of art movements, which in his view are historically necessary, and to which end Reason uses individual artists to bring them to a point of artistic expression. Had Michelangelo not existed, then another artist would have accomplished the same mission to give form to the Renaissance.

The workings of the 'Objective Spirit' may be clarified in yet another way. Each work of art that is both important and historically necessary is, as it were, stolen from the artist. As soon as it belongs to a culture, as soon as it belongs to the 'Objective Spirit', the work of art begins to live a life of its own, over which the artist holds absolutely no sway. This is a profound thought, since it explains why works of art may become culturally significant in a way the artist may never have intended or anticipated! Once again, the historical and cultural meaning of the work of art exceeds the individual interests and intentions of the artist.

7.2.3   The Absolute Spirit

In the realm of the 'Objective Spirit', artistic creation and works of art belong to an objective order in which the spirit externalizes itself. Here art is still in-itself. However, as soon as art becomes the subject of philosophical reflection it functions

as an instrument of the higher self-realization of the spirit, which Hegel invariably called the Absolute Spirit. Here, art becomes in-*and*-for-itself from the moment it is part and parcel of the Absolute Spirit. This demands some explanation. In the Absolute Spirit, the spirit returns to itself, but this time enriched by externalization, the 'being-in-itself', the objectification. The opposition between Subjective and Objective Spirit is now reconciled at a higher level, for in the Absolute Spirit, the spirit is 'in-*and*-for-itself'. And this explains why Hegel assigns art, religion and philosophy to the realm of the Absolute Sprit.

7.2.4   Art as the Lowest Level of the Absolute Spirit

No matter how high an opinion Hegel has of the final place and function of art, it still only represents the lowest level of the Absolute Spirit. This is because in art the reconciliation between subject and object, between inwardness and outward-ness, between abstraction and tangibility, is still dominated by external sensibility, by intuition. The second level is religion, since here the reconciliation is partly sensuous and partly rational, it already takes place at the level of the inner presence, or the symbolic representation (what Hegel calls *Vorstellung*). The highest form in which the Spirit becomes conscious of itself however, is philosophy. In philosophy, the Spirit fully returns to itself, since only now does it become pure self-compre-hension. Art and religion do not have the necessary self-understanding at their disposal; this only occurs in philosophy. Philosophy transforms sense perception (art), representation and inner feeling (religion) into the pure form of self-understanding, the absolute content or idea, the absolute truth. The Spirit has fully returned to itself!

7.3   Hegel's Aesthetics: Art as the Sensuous Semblance of the Idea

The positioning of art within the domain of the Absolute Spirit explains why, in his aesthetics, Hegel describes art as 'the sensuous semblance of the idea' (*das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee*). What does this famous definition of Hegel's mean? Firstly, just like Kant, he wanted to emphasize that the task of the artist consists of making truth perceptible in a sensible (or sensorial) form. Alongside religion and philosophy, the task of art is to express the divine, the deepest interests of mankind, truth. However, what is distinctive about art is that it expresses the divine in a specific, *sensuous* way. In sharp contrast to religion and philosophy it is almost exclusively embedded in the natural appearance of the world. It is, as a rule, much closer than religion and philosophy to the ways the world appears to our senses.

7.3.1   Art as Necessary Semblance

Secondly, 'semblance' (*Schein*) reminds us that is indispensable for art to appear. The German word *scheinen* (semblance) not only means to *shine or* to appear but also to seem or to appear to be (henceforth appearance, even illusion). As such 'semblance' is not necessarily to be considered as something fatally wrong. For, as Hegel stresses,

> (…) appearance or show, however, is essential to existence. Truth could not be, did it not appear and reveal itself (…) (Hegel, 1993, 10).

Art is pre-eminently the domain in which truth shows itself, presents itself as a semblance of the sensible. The sensible semblance of an artwork is, however, less illusory than other sensible manifestations. It distinguishes itself from the way in which the external world or nature appears to us. In the latter case sensibility has to do with the immediate availability of things, so that they can be the object of satisfying needs (compare with Kant's notion of the 'pleasant'). In art, the sensible is not an object of desire but is already permeated by the ideal. Yet the sensibility of the artwork is still distinguishable from the ideal, since it has to give a concrete and tangible form to the idea. Hence, Hegel says:

> (…) the work of art occupies the mean between what is immediately sensuous and ideal thought. The work of art is not yet pure thought, but despite its sensuousness it is no longer mere material existence, like stones, plants and organic life. The sensuous in the work of art is itself an ideal sensuous, but since it is not the ideality of thought, it is also still there externally as a thing (Hegel, 1993, 43/127).

7.3.2   Art as the Intuition of the Idea

The above quotation shows just how omnipresent dialectical thought is in Hegel's work. As the Subjective Spirit had to alienate and objectify itself in its opposite, the Objective Spirit, so too, on the level of the Absolute Spirit, must truth, or the idea – which is part of philosophy – alienate and objectify itself in its opposite, the sensible. This is why, in the third place, Hegel emphasizes the fact that art is the sensuous semblance of the *idea*. The main task of art is to show the idea, the truth, the true reality of the spirit as it is thought in philosophy. Art reveals the idea in a sensible way; it makes the latter 'shine', as it were, in such a way that its sensible form strikes a chord with the spirit.

7.3.3   The Difference Between the Beauty
of Nature and the Beauty of Art

As a consequence of the above interpretation Hegel draws a sharp distinction between nature and art. This is his fourth point. The true object of aesthetics is *not* the beauty of nature, but the beauty of art. And this is why Hegel considers aesthetics

to be a real philosophy of art. Here Hegel turns away from mimesis. As soon as art tries to imitate nature, it becomes despicable. Nature is truly unrivalled in this area – which is not such a problem since, after all, art's purpose is not to imitate nature. The beauty of natural objects is of a totally different category from the experience of beauty that works of art arouse in us. The beauty of natural objects is self-sufficient: the glistening of a Himalayan glacier is beautiful, even if we have never had the opportunity to admire this beauty ourselves. The beauty of nature is independent of our perception: it is a beauty that speaks to and for itself and has the properties of a soliloquy. The nature of beauty in art, on the other hand, is that of a dialogue:

> The work of art has not such a naive self-centred being, but is essentially a question, an address to the responsive heart, an appeal to affections and to minds (Hegel, 1993, 78).

The work of art is the product of a spiritual and purposeful activity through which the artist expresses something that appeals to us, not because it imitates nature but because it accomplishes a sensible representation of a specific idea. The essence of the work of art is not the imitation or representation of nature, but the presentation of an idea: it is the manifestation of the idea itself. On should not misunderstand Hegel. It is not forbidden for artists to reproduce nature but, the moment an artist depicts a Himalayan glacier, the sensible form should embody a spiritual content, an idea. As long as we overestimate the importance of a *resemblance* to nature we ignore that art should actually accomplish the sublation of the opposition between nature and the idea, object and subject, form and content. Nature should not be denied – on the contrary, it should be included in the idea in such a way that the sensible form is reconciled with the spiritual content.

7.3.4   Criticizing Kant

It is precisely for the sake of this omnipresent dialectical outlook that Hegel, in the fifth place, attaches such importance to *comprehension, thinking* and *knowledge* in art. On this crucial point, Hegel definitely departs from Kant. We have seen to what extent Kant argued that the aesthetic experience has a mediating function between sensibility and understanding, between understanding and Reason, between the phenomenal and the noumenal, between the outward appearance and inward idea. According to Hegel – who agrees with Kant on many counts – Kant only speaks of 'mediation' and never of the reconciliation of opposites. The judgment of taste oscillates between opposite worlds, but does not really establish a true reconciliation between them.

Indeed, according to Hegel Kant's analysis still suffers from a gap between the subject and object. The 'mediation' between the opposite worlds is rooted in subjective feeling, in the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, which is the mental faculty underlying the faculty of judgment. From Hegel's point of view, the 'mediation' is therefore not complete, not sufficiently dialectical. Again and again, mediation is founded in the subject to the disadvantage of the object. When, for example, Kant

maintains in the second moment of his analysis of the judgment of taste (see Section 6.5.2) that the 'beautiful' is that which pleases universally without (requiring) a concept, then the mediation between the subjective and the universal takes place *non-objectively*. It is therefore only an apparent bridging between subject and object. Indeed, in the eyes of Kant, I pass judgment on beauty *as if* it were a quality of the object, expecting only approval from others, since I assume that the same subjective appreciation is shared by all. The 'subjective universality' of the judgment of taste is not founded upon the object, but *solely upon subjective feeling*. Similar problems arise in the third and fourth moments of the judgment of taste. According to Hegel, Kant's 'mediation' as seen in the concepts 'purposiveness without purpose' and 'necessity' – which are presupposed in the judgment of taste – clearly show this inclination towards the subjective side. Here, true reconciliation of object and subject remains elusive.

That Hegel attaches so much importance to the reconciliation of object and subject may be explained by the fact that he locates art in the domain of the Absolute Spirit. In fact Kant and Hegel speak different languages. Similar notions, in their respective systems of thought, have different meanings and functions. According to Kant, for instance, *ideas* are part of the supersensory, noumenal world, the world of 'things-in-themselves', which is inaccessible to *concepts* of understanding. Concepts and a priori forms of understanding are only applicable to the world of phenomena: they are presupposed by science, by empirical knowledge. In fact, for Kant, ideas and concepts do refer to completely different worlds, different orders.

For Hegel, on the contrary, *ideas* and *concepts* are both part of the Absolute Spirit in which the reconciliation of object and subject is actually effected: they are presupposed by philosophy, which for Hegel is the embodiment of the highest form of science. It is precisely the task of philosophy to bring the reality behind the phenomena – the true, spiritual reality – to a state of self-consciousness. The big difference between Hegel and Kant is not only that Hegel understands the phenomenal reality as a *necessary manifestation* of the spiritual world through which the spirit becomes objective, but also that he sees the work of art as an *appearance* which actually shows the *concrete unity* of the objective and subjective spirit. The appearance thus becomes the embodiment of what otherwise (in philosophy) could only be *conceptually* formulated.

This explains why Hegel lodges such fundamental complaints against Kant's incomplete mediation which always inclines towards the subject-side. This explains likewise why he wants to offer an objective counterweight to Kant's formal analysis, emphasizing not only the form but also, and foremost, the *content* of the work of art. Not only the form is at issue here, but also the content – the idea that is embodied by the work of art.

Hegel's main objection to Kant's analysis of the judgment of taste is that the work of art has no longer anything to do with knowledge or comprehension. Repeatedly, particularly in the second moment of the judgment of taste – but elsewhere too – Kant emphasizes the fact that aesthetic judgment does not presuppose comprehension, understanding, content or knowledge. To free, independent beauty, only pure form is decisive. For Hegel this proves once again that Kant's vision is

profoundly undialectical and why, among other things, he wrongly separates the aesthetic experience from philosophical insight. Hegel does not deny that we can experience beauty without comprehension and knowledge having to play some part in it. But to grasp the full significance of a work of art, we need to discover, through thought, what *idea* it actually embodies. This is also the task of philosophy of art, and more specifically, of the philosopher of art: to make explicit what art gives us to think about, to make fully aware the ideas that are embodied by art.

7.4   Hegel on the History of Art

The description of art as the 'sensuous semblance of the idea' led Hegel to a systematic reflection on the history of art. Here we also we encounter a fundamental difference with Kant's aesthetics. As we have seen, Kant concentrates on the conditions of possibility presupposed in *all* aesthetic judgments. Taking for granted that these conditions of possibility must be valid *whenever* and *wherever*, Kant disregarded the entire history of art. In Hegel's system of thought, this would be impossible. I have already briefly touched upon the extent to which dialectic is interwoven with an historical dimension. This also means that aesthetics cannot and should not ignore the history of art.

As a consequence Hegel, starting from his famous definition of art, has interpreted the history of art as a *dialectical* development in which the relation between the sensuous appearance and the idea, between external form and spiritual content, predominates. Through an extensive historical reconstruction, he thus tried to demonstrate that art has always been determined by the relationship between form and content. More particularly he set out to show that a development had taken place in which the *opposition* between the sensible and the ideal was to an increasing degree sublated and reconciled at a higher level. From this perspective Hegel distinguished – in his extremely self-willed way – between a triad of historical *art forms* which he understood as being three stages through which art developed to increasingly higher levels. It is, as emphasized earlier, time and again the interplay between sensible appearance and idea, which is at stake in dialectical development. The starting point is *Symbolic* art, in which the outward 'appearance' rules over the idea, while the intermediate stage, *Classical* art, already allows for a balance, a perfect reconciliation between the two. Still, it is only in *Romantic* art that Hegel sees the final destination, because here, in contrast to Classical art, the reconciliation is not brought about in the sensible form, but *in and through the idea*. This calls for an explanation.

7.4.1   *Symbolic Art*

An outstanding example of Symbolic art, in Hegel's opinion, is the art of ancient Egypt, the architecture of the pyramids, its obelisks and temples. The pyramids in particular prove the extent to which the external form is ill fitted to the idea. For, he

argues, the immeasurable form of the pyramid conceals the intimate privacy of the king's tomb, in which the mummy, treasures, sacrifices and sarcophagi reveal the actual circumstances surrounding the building. However, the primal feeling of the pyramid, its sensuous form, is mysterious and symbolic – at odds with the idea it is supposed to embody. The sensible form prevents a more suitable appearance of the idea: the pyramid conceals the idea that hides within it. The abundance of forms in all Eastern art, as well as in traditional African and in ancient Inca art, betrays the fact that the form does not succeed in adequately expressing the true meaning. Indeed, the outward appearance overwhelms here the idea, the structure is bathed in sensuality, an excessive and sometimes monstrous symbolism which confuses us. For all the opulence, the idea remains *confused*, *vague*, *indefinite* or *abstract* and imagination searches in vain for the authentic representation that may reduce the gap between appearance and idea.

7.4.2   Classical Art

In Greco-Roman art, on the other hand, and especially in classical sculpture (which is why Hegel speaks of *Classical* art), a perfect balance can be found between external form and idea. In the famous sculptures of Classical Antiquity, such as Myron's *Discus Thrower* or the *Venus de Milo*, the idea has crystallized into a human form in such a way that the idea and the form are in perfect harmony. Hegel points out that the idea in these cases is no longer *indefinite or abstract* – properties that always cause the harmony between the idea and the form to be imperfect, as is the case in symbolic art. In Classical art the content is already a *concrete idea*, causing the sensible form to be spiritualized to the extent that it is freed of all that is super-fluous and accidental in purely sensible reality; freed of the stampeding sensuality of Symbolic art. In Classical art the human figure appears mitigated, cleansed of the mysterious and symbolic and thus literally embodying the perfect reconciliation between idea and sensible appearance. While the symbolic in all its excess – as in Nietzsche's 'Dionysian' and Kant's 'sublime' – cannot find an adequate form, Classical art excels – as do Nietzsche's 'Apollinian' and Kant's 'beautiful' – in the pure beauty of form which ensues from the intuition of the ideal of perfect beauty. Therefore Classical art, according to Hegel, has reached its ultimate point in the *sensible rendering* or *sensualization* (*Versinnlichung*) of art.

7.4.3   Romantic Art

In many ways, Classical art answers to Hegel's definition of art as the 'sensible semblance of the idea'. The limitations of Classical art are therefore relevant to the classification of art within the domain of the Absolute Spirit. In order to understand why Romantic art, according to Hegel, represents an even higher level, it must be viewed in the light of the process of the 'Spirit becoming self-conscious', where art

exceeds itself and becomes ever more akin to philosophy. Indeed, an intrinsic limitation of Classical art is the fact that as a *concrete* idea, its subject is the spirit in a *sensibly* concrete form. The reconciliation of subject and object, of idea and appearance, still takes place in the intuition, in outward appearance, more particularly in the human figure in which the unity is still *in-itself*.

In Classical art, according to Hegel:

> (…) the concrete import is potentially, but not explicitly, the unity of the human and divine nature; a unity which, just because it is purely *immediate* and *not explicit* is capable of adequate manifestation in an immediate and sensuous mode (Hegel, 1993, 86).

In Myron's *Discus Thrower*, the reconciliation of form and content is made *immediately concrete in the human figure*. Because of this immediacy, because of the dependency on the sensible form and because the idea is still caught within the concrete-spiritual, the spirit has not yet a conscious comprehension of unity. This is why Hegel characterizes unity as still 'in-itself'. As soon as one becomes *conscious* of this unity being in-itself, one is no longer tied to sensible representation. This is where Romantic art comes in.

There is yet another way to characterize the difference between Classical and Romantic art. In both of these, the reconciliation of the object and subject, form and content, the appearance and the idea, is the central issue. However, where Classical art achieves this reconciliation in sensuality, Romantic art realizes it in spirit. Or: where Classical art embodies a high point in the sensible representation or sensualization of art, Romantic art is a high point in the spiritualization of art. It is thanks to this advancing process of spiritualization that Romantic art, in sharp contrast to Classical art:

1. Does not have as its object any concrete idea or individual, specific spirit, but instead the *Absolute* Spirit
2. Is not tied to sensible representation but realizes reconciliation only through a self-conscious *spiritual* knowing and thus realizes it in a purely spiritual or inward manner
3. Exceeds itself, but only in its own domain and in the form of art itself.

7.4.4   *Historical Division of Different Arts*

The historical division, described above, embodies the increasing predominance of the idea above the sensible form. This inspired Hegel to ascribe specific art forms to respectively Symbolic, Classical and Romantic art. The external art of *architecture*, for instance, is considered to be representative of Symbolic art and the objective art of *sculpture* of Classical art, whereas painting, music and poetry are classified under Romantic art. It is of little consequence *how* Hegel justifies and explains this division, since the criteria he uses are now quite obviously outdated and obsolete. However, it does remain significant that *poetry* represents the ultimate art form for Hegel. In the light of the increasing spiritualization process, of the ever increasing emphasis

on spiritual imagination to the detriment of sensible representation, it can be of no surprise that Hegel regarded poetry, especially that of the German Romantic Movement, as the highest form of artistic expression. In this, Hegel not only endorses the idolization of Goethe and an enthusiasm for Novalis and Hölderlin so typical of his generation, but also stresses that in poetry, even more so than in painting and music, art has finally freed itself of external appearances and, as a result, has imperceptibly merged with philosophy, or what he calls "the prose of thought".

Or, as Hegel characteristically summarized it:

> *Poetry is the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature, and which is not tied to find its realization in external sensuous matter, but expatiates exclusively in the inner space and inner time of the ideas and feelings. Yet just in this its highest phase art ends by transcending itself, inasmuch as it abandons the medium of a harmonious embodiment of mind in sensuous form, and passes from the poetry of imagination into the prose of thought* (Hegel, 1993, 96).

7.5   'The End of Art'

The idea that in the Romantic art form, art merges together with philosophy, is precisely what lies at the heart of Hegel's notable and much-debated thesis on the 'end of art'. It seemed obvious to Hegel that in modern times, thought and reflection have surpassed the fine arts. The times when truth could be *solely* expressed in an artistic manner, and the need for a philosophy of art did not yet exist are, according to Hegel, definitively over:

> We are above the level at which works of art can be venerated as divine, and actually worshipped (…) (Hegel, 1993, 12).

Art no longer fulfils our spiritual needs, as it once did. And so Hegel says:

> The beautiful days of Greek art, and the golden times of the later middle ages are gone by (Hegel, 1993, 12).

In modern times, the creative artist cannot escape the omnipresent reflection, interpretation and judgment of art; instead he is now obliged to philosophically justify his work of art! Because art is now no longer self-explanatory, it invites us to take part in thoughtful contemplation and justification. It is in this sense that Hegel argues for more attention to be paid to the philosophy of art.

> In all these respects, art is (…) on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past (Hegel, 1993, 13).

Notice that Hegel never asserts that art ceases to exist or that it has definitively ended. The "end of art" occurs in Romanticism through the spiritual identification of art with the God of Christianity, a God which resists adequate expression in sensuous forms. *Religion* embodies a higher form, though in the modern era, both religion and art give way to *thought*. Art and religion thus no longer are the highest level to be reached in the actualization of the truth. This honor now went to philosophy. The loss of the earlier axiom that art was the highest expression of truth not

only results in art being more and more infected by modern philosophy, but it also implies that truly *new* art is now no longer conceivable. Modern, post-Romantic artists are doomed, as it were, to fall back upon the entire stock of art history without ever being able to conceive or instigate a new art movement themselves. There is nothing left for them to do, except creating new variations on old themes. Everything has already been invented: the artist is a parasite of the past; only philosophy is capable of inspiring art to greater self-consciousness.

Hegel's thesis on the end of art can be seen as the logical consequence of his system of thought. As we have seen, art represents the lowest level in the domain of the Absolute Spirit. This is mainly due to the fact that the reconciliation of object and subject in art is a matter of outward appearance, of sensible representation. Because of its form, art is not only limited to a specific content or concrete idea, but it remains marked by a not-knowing, an imperfect self-understanding. Because the final goal is not a particular idea, but the *Absolute Idea* and the *complete self-consciousness* of the spirit – which can only be achieved through philosophical thought – art had to end in the *philosophy of art*. Ironically, this means the end of art – at least in the sense Hegel understood it. Only when art is exceeded does it realize ultimate truth. Or, to put in another way: only by freeing itself from sensible intuition and becoming spiritual imagination, does art exceed the level of appearance and come closer to the essence, the truth that can only be born of philosophical understanding. If you follow Hegel's system of thought, this is a logical argument. 'Logical, but absurd nonetheless!' was the response elicited from Benedetto Croce.

7.5.1   Skepticism with Regard to Hegel's Thesis

That Croce, as well as many others, regarded Hegel's thesis as futile does not appear to be a coincidence. Around the turn of the century, it looked as if Hegel had been thoroughly wrong from an art-historical point of view. Following Romanticism, the nineteenth century produced a succession of important art movements such as Realism, Naturalism and Impressionism. Within these movements literature and painting underwent a development that was in no way inferior to that of Romanticism. Only music remained mainly romantically inspired until the end of the nineteenth century. There was, at the time, hardly any sign of the 'end of art', as seen and predicted by Hegel. The new art movements did more than revert to the past and did not simply draw upon the lucky dip of earlier art forms. Hegel's diagnosis stating that new art would no longer be possible after Romanticism, was flagrantly contradicted by the further development of art in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the post-Romantic artist took little notice of philosophy. Art did not in the least fuse neatly with philosophy. On the contrary, Realism, Naturalism and even Impressionism were very much anti-intellectual and oriented towards the phenomenal. They were certainly not inclined to allow philosophical reflection to take precedence over the concrete work of art.

   The skepticism surrounding Hegel's thesis seemed to validate the profound distrust of empirical art historians who, even in Hegel's own time, lodged objections to the rather over speculative way the latter dealt with art history. Even though Hegel had, for his day, an exceptional knowledge of art history – a knowledge he fully exploited for the benefit of his philosophy of art – empirical art historians thought his historical reconstruction by far too abstract. The historical facts were all too often manipulated in order to fit the straitjacket of his philosophical system, something which outraged many an empirically minded art historian. Not to mention the rather overly Eurocentric, even German-oriented view of history that underlay Hegel's art-historical reconstruction. That the whole of historical development worldwide was to culminate in the poetry of German Romanticism, and to find its final destination in the philosophy of Hegel himself, might seem, to an objective and levelheaded observer, somewhat over the top. And with hindsight – and given the consequential, far-reaching influence of so-called 'primitive' and non-Western art on the evolution of art in the twentieth century and beyond – Hegel's Eurocentrism also appears to have long been superseded. One wonders how Hegel would have assessed someone like Miró, who was influenced by non-Western art, unless – very predictably – as a post-Romantic artist who, in the absence of a new idea, haphazardly helped himself to earlier forms of expression.

7.6   Danto in the Wake of Hegel: The End of Art

Arthur Danto gradually embraced Hegel's thesis. While carefully watching the art world of his day he first recognized the increasing role philosophy of art played in the justification of new art movements. In his first article on the subject in 1964, entitled '*The Art World*', he attempted to demonstrate the importance of theory in the way innovation was *institutionally accepted*. His case in point was Andy Warhol's *Brillo boxes*, which had been exhibited earlier that year in the *Stable Gallery* (see Fig. 7.1). In particular, Danto wondered why these handmade plywood sculptures had been accepted as works of art while the real manufactured cardboard Brillo boxes, which they strongly resembled, were not.

7.6.1   The Importance of Philosophy of Art

It was clear, at least according to Danto, that the *external differences* between an ordinary Brillo box and a representation of it by Andy Warhol could not explain the difference between art and reality. In the final analysis, what creates the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art that accurately represents a Brillo box, Danto argues, is a theory of art. Because of this theory, the representation is recognized as a work of art by the art world and is no longer identified with the ordinary mass object. Without the theory, people would not be inclined to regard Warhol's representation as

a work of art. The presumption is that people are already somewhat acquainted with the theory behind it and are also aware of the recent history of New York painting. Fifty years before, Warhol's *Brillo boxes* would never have been accepted as art. The world has to be ready for certain things – the art world no less than the real world. The role of theory, of philosophy of art – today as much as in the past – is to make the art world and art conceivable. It would never have occurred to the painters of Lascaux that what they were creating on the walls of their caves was *art*, for they had no artistic consciousness, no philosophy of art at their disposal.

When Danto presented his 1964 article to New York artists, they were not receptive at all. In 1964, artists appeared to be dismissive about the proposition that only philosophy of art made it possible for the art world to accept a work of art. However, by the 1970s things were very different. In an exhibition of conceptual art held at the New York *Cultural Center*, Danto saw a table displaying books by analytical philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Carnap, Ayer, Reichenbach, Tarski and Russell. "It could have been my desk", said Danto. It appeared there had been a small revolution in artistic consciousness. It was as if philosophy was now part of the art world itself.

7.6.2   The Importance of Historical Consciousness

In order to explain the difference between works of art and the real things they sometimes resemble exactly, Danto increasingly acknowledged the importance of history. In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Danto, 1984) he argued that our tendency to accept or dismiss something as a work of art is determined by historical consciousness. Whether or not we accept something as a work of art depends on the historical succession it belongs to, its historical setting. As a result of this, history – particularly history of art – is an extremely important factor in our decision to define something as art or not. The familiar image of the art critic who – unaware of art history – is mesmerized by an artwork, is superseded once and for all. There is no timeless enchantment; historical circumstances have become part of the essence of art to such an extent that even completely identical objects, yet dating from different historical periods can turn out to be totally different works of art, differing in structure and meaning, each demanding different reactions and interpretations. The *Mona Lisa* appearing in an art video or a fragment of Bach quoted in a postmodern composition no longer retains their original meaning: they become merged with another structure that gives them another dimension, which also calls for another interpretation. In short, history being inseparably linked to interpretation, is also part of the essence of art: works of art indeed are the fruit of the historical interpretations that define them.

Danto's fascination with Hegel's philosophy is hardly surprising when considering the dual recognition of the importance of the philosophy *and* history of art. Hegel's view that the modern artist cannot do without philosophical reflection clearly becomes pivotal since the turn of the century, when Modernism became the dominant mood. Even in early Modernism the belief in artistic progress was permeated by

theory. Each work of art and every trend in art was the result of a move on the chessboard of theory. There were two important moves. One move consisted of denying that the essence of art was to represent reality. This led to abstract art and an aesthetic formalism that remained characteristic of Modernism. The other move implied the preservation of the criterion of representation, but now it was emphasized that it was art's task to reproduce a higher, spiritual reality. Both these moves were united in Kandinsky's essay discussed earlier in this book. It was a time during which the artistic manifesto came to the fore, a time during which the ever-increasing need for a philosophical justification of artistic renewal and practice became decisive.

In Danto's view, the ever increasing need for philosophy is closely related to the striving toward innovation, to the incessant pursuit of novelty that marked the avant-garde movement at the beginning of this century. To add weight to this proposition, Danto refers to:

> (…) the dazzling succession of art movements in our century: Fauvism, the Cubisms, Futurism, Vorticism, Synchronism, Abstractionism, Surrealism, Dada, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop, Op, Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Conceptualism, Photo-Realism, Abstract Realism, Neo-Expressionism - simply to list some of the more familiar ones. Fauvism lasted about two years, and there was a time when a whole period of art history seemed destined to endure about five months, or half a season. Creativity at that time seemed more to consist in making a period than in making a work (Danto, 1986, 108).

The entire art world demanded of each artist: Make an 'art-historical period!' As soon as an innovation was institutionally accepted and thereby placed on a pedestal, success was guaranteed. As soon as one or several artists were identified with this kind of new artistic trends, they were assured of a secure financial future, since the sole aim of many museums and art dealers was to acquire at least one example of any celebrated art-historical period.

In some ways, artists are the prisoners of these institutional mechanisms:

> As innovative an artist as De Kooning was never especially allowed to evolve, and De Chirico, who understood these mechanisms exactly, painted De Chiricos throughout his life, since that's what the market wanted. Who would want an Utrillo that looked like Mondrian, or a Marie Laurencin that looked like Grace Hartigan, or a Modigliani like Franz Kline? (Danto, 1986, 109).

These institutional mechanisms are dictated by the needs of the art market, which in turn runs on the illusion of never-ending renewal and innovation. Yet each new period or art movement is tributary to a theory that is responsible for making the art world and the art market's recognition acceptable.

Danto already sees the relation between innovation and theory appearing in Modernism. Because of the urge toward innovation, so characteristic of Modernism, theoretical reflection became increasingly important. The more art became aware of its own identity the greater became the necessity to clarify and theoretically justify this identity. The continuous craving for innovation was expressed through the question 'what is art?' being raised over and over again. Boundaries were continuously pushed back. The very moment, however, the limits of art itself were at stake, art, so Danto argues, could only advance philosophically. Progress was still

possible, brilliant progress even, but it was a progress in art thanks to philosophy. It was the kind of progress that was accompanied by an ever-increasing understanding of art. At the same time, history ended as soon as the self-consciousness, or, even better, the self-understanding of art had been accomplished. Art ends with the rise of its own philosophy. It is in this sense that Danto, following Hegel, speaks of the 'end of art'.

According to Danto, today we are witnessing what he calls the 'post-historical period of art': the history of art has come to an end. There is no longer any real historical development. Of course art will continue to be produced, but the works of art no longer have any historical meaning. They no longer show any development or progress. The contemporary relevance of Hegel's thesis on the end of art can also be felt in the art world itself, since it has lost every sense of historical direction and looks in vain for something to hold on: there is much doubt about the future of art. This does not appear to be a passing condition, rather it is the future of art. What is still created and produced makes little difference, because the notion of art is internally exhausted. Our institutions – museums, galleries, collectors, art magazines, and so forth – exist by the grace of a meaningful, even promising future. As I specified earlier, there is great commercial interest in whatever presents itself as a future art movement. But, Danto wonders, imagine that it has all really ended, that a point has already been reached beyond which there is change *without development* and that artists can only combine and re-combine known forms. Imagine that, historically speaking, art is no longer capable of continuing to amaze or surprise us. It would seem Hegel was right, that art – in its highest vocation – has ceased to exist.

Again, it is hardly surprising that Danto sees the post-historical condition of art reflected in current postmodernism, strongly characterized as it is by pluralism and relativism. It no longer really matters what the artist does. When one direction is as good as the next, there is no longer a direction, no historical destination. With postmodernism we have reached a period in art that is so absolute in its freedom that art can mean many different things. There is no longer one guiding concept, and this leaves art without a historical mission. And so Danto sees the institutions of the art world that are founded on this historical dimension, vanishing in the future. Following Hegel, Danto expects that the only answer to this radical diagnosis lies in philosophy. Art's historical importance lies in the fact that, with hindsight, it facilitates and necessitates philosophy of art: its final destination lies in the philosophy of art.

Conceptual artists saw to it that thoughts, or concepts, and sometimes philosophy took the place of *objets d'art*, in the end leaving only the theory behind, so that ultimately only the theory survived! Art objects have made way for contemplation on art. Here, the only object left to art is its theoretical self-reflection or its self-understanding! Artists themselves have paved the way for philosophy and the moment has arrived to finally hand over the task to philosophers. It is useless to look any further for *historical* development. In a very specific way the history of art has ceased to exist. As soon as philosophy defines what art is and means, nothing is left to be done. Philosophy of art, for which art has prepared us, needs to be thought through. And I am, adds Danto boldly, merely the prophet of this philosophy of art.

Fig. 7.1 Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box*, 1964. Silkscreen on painted wood, 17 1/8 × 17 1/8 × 14 inches, 43,2 × 43,2 cm. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the visual Arts, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008. (*see Color Plates*)

7.7   The Artist's Studio: Marcel Duchamp and "The End of Art"

According to Danto, Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968) was the first to introduce art philosophy to the art world. As early as 1912, when Duchamp offered his *Nude Descending the Stairs* (see Fig. 7.2) to the *Salon des Indépendants* (*Salon of Independent Artists*), he was faced with the choice of either to withdraw the painting or to change its name. Duchamp withdrew himself the painting. But it was the exhibition of the painting in the Armory Show in New York that caused scandal. This happened in 1913, the year in which Duchamp created his first *ready made*, namely a bicycle fork with front wheel mounted upside-down on a wooden stool (see Fig. 7.3). Already in 1912, when he exhibited during a Cubist exhibition at the Dalmau Gallery in Barcelona his *Nude Descending the Stairs*, Duchamp had already caused scandal. The time hardly seemed ripe for his vision of art. This became even more evident when, in New York in 1917, he offered a work to the *Society of Independent Artists* (see Fig. 7.4) that was promptly rejected. The work, *Fountain*, was a urinal signed 'R. Mutt'.

So, what then is the meaning of this – still – controversial artwork? According to Danto its meaning lies in the question it puts. Why should this urinal be regarded as a work of art while something else that resembles it exactly, namely every urinal of the same make, is regarded as just a piece of plumbing, an ordinary utility object designed for men's private needs? Danto forgets, incidentally, that there *is* a difference – Duchamp's urinal was not only signed, but also put upside down. In any

Fig. 7.2 Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912. Oil on canvas, (57 7/8 × 35 1/8 inches, 147,5 × 89 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art. © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ ADAGP, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008. (*see Color Plates*)

case, he regards Duchamp's 'work of art' as a stroke of genius, rather than an ingenious hoax. The genius lies in the way Duchamp raised the issue of the essence of art. Rather than simply proposing the question; 'What is art?' Duchamp rather asked: 'Why is something a work of art whiles something that resembles it exactly, is *not*?' The way Duchamp raised this question *in the form of an artwork* has genuine philosophical content. Though any object could have been used to raise the question, it seemed there was nothing so incompatible with prevailing tastes and artistic conventions as a urinal, drawing attention to the fact that art is a matter of definition or theory.

Fig. 7.3 Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, ready made *Bicycle Wheel*, diameter 64,8 cm, mounted on a stool, 60, 2 cm. Copyright Succession Duchamp/ ADAGP, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2009.
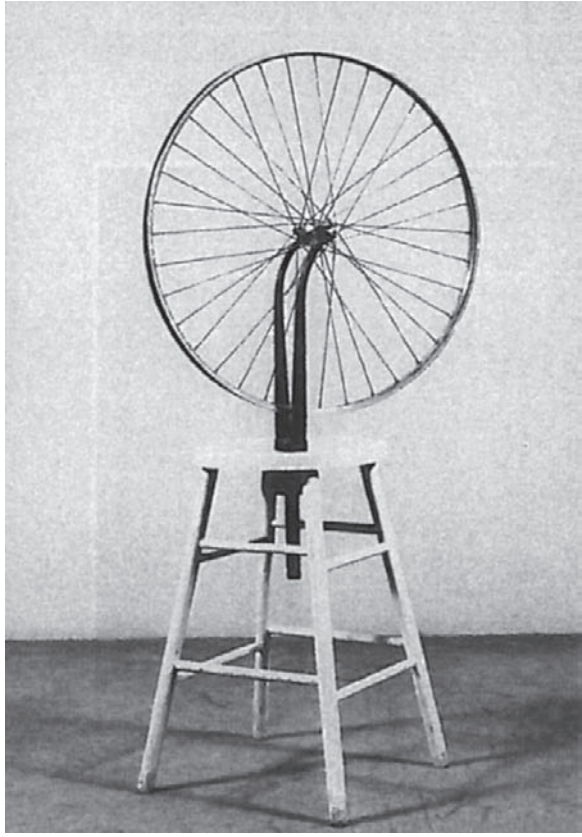
Fig. 7.4 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917 October 1964, Milan. One of the eight replica, each 36 x 48 x 61 cm. Under artist's supervision from Stieglitz's photo of the original. Inscribed exterior top rim, in black paint, "Marcel Duchamp 1964". On back rim: "R. Mutt / 1917". Smaller copper plate to back: "Marcel Duchamp 1964 1/8-8/8", "FOUNTAIN / 1917 / EDITION GALERIE SCHWARZ, MILAN" 2 replicas to artist and publisher, 2 more for museum exhibition. © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ ADAGP, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2010. (*see Color Plates*)

Although Duchamp's urinal was a stroke of genius, the work of art was still in agreement with historical developments. It was historically possible and even necessary, at a time when no one knew what art was any longer, even though it was clear that the old answers were no longer appropriate. Danto finds in Duchamp's work the acknowledgement of Hegel's thesis on the end of art, because *within art, Fountain* poses the question about the *essence* of art; *Fountain* implies that art has already become philosophy since the work of art itself raises the question 'What is art?', making art the object of self-reflection. As soon as art internalizes its own historical development, as soon as it becomes aware of its history so that historical consciousness becomes part of its being, it unavoidably merges with philosophy. When this happens, as in the work of Duchamp, 'the end of art' – in a particular sense – becomes a fact. As of that moment, art finds its spiritual fulfillment in the philosophy of art.

7.8 Critical Reflections

With his thesis on the end of art Danto has undoubtly laid bare a fundamental issue which is extremely up-to-date and still haunts the contemporary art world. However, on closer inspection the arguments of both Hegel and Danto appear to be fatally flawed. Let me summarize, for the sake of synthesis, a number of critical reflections which seem to impose themselves with respect to the above argument.

A first critical reflection concerns Hegel and runs as follows. I already pointed out that, though Hegel's thesis can be seen as the logical consequence of his system of thought, it is at variance with his very definition of art. *His argument is thus in a way wholly circular and utterly ironic: it is only valid on the assumption that finally art has to be identified with pure thought, which necessarily entails its disappearance in the sense Hegel himself previously had defined art*. This flaw in Hegel's argument is mainly due to his fully-fledged idealism, rather than to his dialectic. In the final analysis his idealism compels him to identify art *solely* with content or pure thought, a conception of art which later has been celebrated, as we have seen in the third chapter, by conceptual art in the 1960s and 1970s, but which is extremely one-sided and wholly untenable as a theory of art. On purely dialectical grounds classical art seem to meet all the requirements for a reconciliation of form and content, subject and object, in terms of Hegel's very definition of art. It is Hegel's idealism which finally forces him to make an exclusive choice for art as an idea or pure thought. The untenable consequence for the theory of art is that all sensuousness is withdrawn form the concept of art, all materiality, all form and sensuous intuition. What remains is a pure skeleton of art. Hegel seemed to forget that even the romantic poets he admired were utterly skilled and revolutionized the language of poetry, its sensuousness and its style. In fact Hegel anticipated the so-called expression theory of art and is ultimately subject to the severe drawbacks of this theory.

A second critical reflection concerns one of Danto's main arguments in favour of the end of art. Indeed, Danto's *thesis on the 'end of art' is simply the obverse of the idea of constant progress, so typical for modern art and, more particularly, for modernism: it belongs to the same logic and continues to identify the nature of art with renewal and incessant improvement*. Consequently, the moment art does not show any improvement, the thought that art itself might have come to an end appears inevitable and self-evident. The lack of definite breakthroughs and the absence of dominant movements in recent and contemporary art, art's inability to renew itself radically and to pursuit the constant redefinition of art, once so typical for modernism, suggest the idea that the history of art has come to an end. History, however, is here equated with a never ending progress. If the history of art is no longer seen as such, the thesis crumbles down. One could also conclude that the end of art only implies here "the end of art's having a teleological history – as the end of a necessary agony", as one of Danto's critics has remarked" (see Rollins, 1993, 119). So it would be better to speak of the end of a *specific* idea of art. And the thesis thus only applies to the *end of a certain kind of art*!

But even here one is confronted – and this is my third critical remark – with a *bizarre ambivalence in Danto's work with respect to the future of art*. On the one side he highlights that "art after the end of art" will enjoy a greater freedom, that it will be less dogmatic and less bloody earnest, that it will allow the artist to finally devote himself to joy, play, self-expression and happiness. The end of art is not the end of art as such but only the end of a particular narrative. Or, as one critical observer summarized it, "It is by no means the end but rather the real beginning of individual creativity" (Rollins, 1993, 121). On the other hand Danto proffers, in a Hegelian fashion, that because the history of art has come to an end, art itself no longer really matters. And art, so he argues time and again, disappears altogether into its own reflection, its own philosophy. This ambivalence may be due, as Noël Carroll has shown convincingly, to a particular mixture of historicism and essentialism within Danto's own philosophy of art (Rollins, 1993, 89).

This leads me to a fourth critical remark. As art disappears into philosophy, *art objects and indeed concrete works of art no longer matter*. In that respect Danto's concept of art is very similar to the so-called expression theory of art, something which has already been noticed by Noël Carroll (Rollins, 1993, 87–88). And so Danto's theory confronts us with some of the drawbacks of this theory, we already discussed in Chapter 3. The most serious drawback certainly is that Danto's theory likewise completely identifies the work of art with its content or pure idea. This implies not only an unwarranted neglect of the importance of the medium but also a correlative overestimation of the conceptual and cognitive element in art. More particularly it grossly underestimates the importance of visual properties in works of art.

It is only on this presupposition that the distinction between art and philosophy can be blurred. But is has the inherent danger to reduce art to a sort of intellectual *Spielerei* and a great deal of cynicism, as if the fate of art is only matter of playing on the chessboard of theory! It wrongly assumes that 'theory' and/or 'philosophy' makes the art work wholly transparent and univocally definable. This wholly

corresponds to the Hegelian paradigm or line of thought about art. It wrongly fails, I think, to take into account one of central tenets of the Kantian paradigm or line of thought about art, namely that the aesthetical experience of art is not a matter of concepts and that the art object strongly resists any conceptual transparency. Though art may be theory-bound and conceptually determined it can thus not be simply identified with pure thought, with a pure idea.

It is Daniel Herwitz who in his lucid *Making Theory/Constructing Art. On the Authority of the Avant-Garde* (Herwitz, 1993) made this point very clearly. He points out, among other things, that Danto tends to disregard the visual differences between Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* and the Brillo boxes to be found in the super market. Warhol's boxes are not made of cardboard, but of plywood. They have a much bigger size, they are closed, empty, painted and treated with silk wood. Why Warhol has put so much effort in making his Brillo Boxes so different, Herwitz asks quite ironically? The visual differences really do matter. The *Brillo Boxes* look useless, playful, and even absurd: they resemble and do not resemble the original Brillo boxes. Warhol is playing a game with similarities and differences, flirting with mimesis and mass production in an utterly ambivalent and parodical way. This game is played with visual means, not with theoretical concepts. In the final analysis the *Brillo boxes* are radically ambivalent and indeterminate. Warhol celebrates the new depthlessness: he presents icons without a deeper meaning, which nevertheless strongly resist any straightforward interpretation. Warhol was utterly indifferent towards theory: he was anything but a philosopher, as Danto would wish.

From this criticism on the purely conceptual vision on art and its underlying idealism it ensues that – and this is my fifth critical reflection – *that art cannot be abstracted nor from its formal properties, its being embedded in a particular medium, nor from its institutional framework*. Indeed, Danto argued that the genius of Duchamp consisted of raising the question "What is art?" *in* and *through* a work of art. In the same vein Kosuth wrote: "The work of art is essentially a play within the meaning system of art" (Kosuth, 1991, 249). No doubt the conceptual intention is here extremely important, but it is no sufficient condition of being art. Moreover, in many artworks it is not so much the conceptual but the expressive intention, which is at stake. However, in order for a conceptual statement or a specific self-expression to become an art work it has ultimately, firstly, to acquire some formal manifestation, and, secondly, to be presented to an art public. In order for a philosophical book to become a work of art it has to be included an art exhibition, to be presented within some institutional framework. If not, it remains just a philosophical book. These two additional conditions are *necessary*, albeit no sufficient conditions on their behalf. This means, for instance, that the simple presentation of an object within an institutional context does not make it on this sole condition a work of art, as Robert Stecker has argued convincingly in a severe criticism of Dickie's institutional theory of art (Stecker, 1986). Only the three conditions mentioned, the expressive and/or conceptual, formal and institutional requirement do constitute *together* a sufficient condition for an object to be a work of art.

Further Reading

For the major source for Hegel's philosophy of art, see:

Georg Wilhelm Hegel, *The philosophy of fine art*, 4 Vol., translated with notes by F.P.B. Osmaston, New York: Hacker Art Books, 1975 (Originally published in 1920).
Georg Wilhelm Hegel, *Aesthetics: lectures on fine art*, Oxford, 1975.

For the more famous, widely read and often separately published introductory lectures to his masterwork on aesthetics, see:

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory lectures on aesthetics*, translated by Bernard Bosanquet, edited with an Introduction and commentary by Michael Inwood, London/New York: Penguin Books, 1993. More recent edition: 2004.
The translation of Bosanquet was originally published as *The Introduction to Hegel's philosophy of fine arts* in 1886.

Another English translation of the introductory lectures is:

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's introduction to aesthetics: being the introduction to the Berlin aesthetics lectures of the 1820s*, translated by T.M. Knox, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

For relevant selections of Hegel's aesthetics, including the introductory lectures, see:

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel, on the arts: selections from G.W.F. Hegel's aesthetics, or the philosophy of fine art*, abridged translated with an introduction by Henry Paolucci, Smyrna: Ungar Pub. Co, 2001 (Originally published in 1979).

A very recent and accessible introduction to Hegel's work is:

Paul Strathern, *The essential Hegel*, London: Virgin Books, 2003.

On Hegelian aesthetics in general, see:

Jack Kaminsky, *Hegel on art. An interpretation of Hegel's aesthetics*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1962.
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Eva Geulen, *The end of art: readings in a rumour after Hegel, Stanford* , CA: Stanford University Press, 2006. This study is not confined to Hegel but also includes the aftermath of the idea of the end of art in respectively the work of Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, Adorno and Heidegger.

For Hegel and post-structuralism, see:

Stuart Barnett (Ed.), *Hegel after Derrida*, London/New York: Routledge, 1998.

Bruce. Baugh, *French Hegel: from surrealism to postmodernism*, London/New York: Routledge, 2003.

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For Danto's references to Hegel's thesis see:

'The end of art', in: Berel Lang (ed.), *The death of art*, New York: Haven Publishers, 1984. Reprinted in: *The philosophical disenfranchisement of art*, New York and Chichester, West Sussex, Columbia University Press, 1986 (81–115).

'Approaching the End of Art', in: Arthur C. Danto, *The state of the art*, New York: Prentice Hall, 1987 (202–218).

'Narratives of the End of Art', printed first in *Grand Street*, 8 (Spring 1989) 166–181 and reprinted in Arthur C. Danto, *Encounters and reflections: art in the historical present*, New York: University of California Press, 1997.

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Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo box: the visual Arts in post-historical perspective,* New York/ Berkeley, CA, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1992.

Arthur C. Danto, *Embodied meanings: critical essays & aesthetic meditations,* New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994.

Arthur C. Danto, *After the end of art: contemporary art and the pale of history*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Arthur C. Danto, *The wake of art: criticism, philosophy, and the end of taste: essays*, London/New York, Routledge; Australia: G+B Arts Int'l, 1998.

About Danto's views on the art world, see:

Arthur C. Danto, 'The Artworld', *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, No. 19, 1964 (571–584). Classical article which finally led to the so-called *Institutional theory of art* (George Dickie, Howard Becker), which is quite alien to Danto's own convictions.

Arthur C. Danto, *The transfiguration of the commonplace: a philosophy of art*, Cambridge, MA/ London: Harvard University Press, 1981.

'Reflections on the innocent Eye, the Art World revisited, Comedies of Similarity', in Arthur C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: the visual arts in post-historical perspective(* see above*),* 1992 (33–54).

Arthur C. Danto, *The Madonna of the future: essays in a pluralistic art world*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000.

For critical comments on Danto's thesis about the end of art, see:

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Daniel A. Herwitz, *Making theory/constructing art: on the authority of the avant-garde*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993. An excellent book!

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Stecker, Robert, 'The End of an Institutional Definition of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1986 (124–132).

On Danto in reference to Heidegger, Derrida and Adorno see:

Michael Kelly, *Iconoclasm in aesthetics*, Cambridge, UK/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Chapter 8
Art and Society: A Neomarxist Perspective

8.1 Introduction

In his erudite and penetrating *Painting and Experience in Fifteen Century Italy*, Michael Baxandall writes:

> A fifteen-century painting is the deposit of a social relationship. On one side there was a painter who made the picture, or at least supervised its making. On the other side there was somebody else who asked him to make it, provided funds for him to make it and, after he had made it, reckoned on using it some way or other. Both parties worked within institutions and conventions – commercial, religious, perceptual, in the widest sense social – that were different from ours and influenced the forms of what they together made (Baxandall, 1988, 1).

Baxandall's historical sketch highlights that in the fifteenth century paintings were made to order. Ready-made paintings hardly existed except for those of the Madonna for example that were made by mediocre painters. It was common for a customer to order a custom-designed painting, an altarpiece, or a fresco from a painter. Mostly this led to a legal contract between the customer and the artist.

In the fifteenth-century there was indeed a flourishing art trade in which the nature of art works was greatly determined by the aspirations of well-to-do patrons. Painters and other artists such as musicians and playwrights worked on commission and were only able to create their art by the grace of maecenatism and commissions. This view of art as a craft would remain predominant until the eighteenth century. Much has changed since then. During the Romantic period, the concept of artist as genius came into being; the artist became increasingly regarded as a creative individual who alone decided on the subject and the formal qualities of his art. Art became autonomous. The artist often achieved autonomy at the cost of social isolation, an alienation from the social reality that surrounded him. At the same time, however, art entered into commercial transactions. Though many autonomous artists severely resisted to the capitalist exploitation, their masterpieces were finally absorbed by the market. The art market followed its own course entirely according to its capitalistic logic. The connection between artist and buyer became increasingly anonymous and impersonal. In the last few decades, there has been a rapidly expanding cultural industry that is vastly different from the art trade of the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Or, as Baxandall phrases it:

> We buy our pictures ready-made now; this need not be a matter of our having more respect for the artist's individual talent than fifteenth-century people like Giovanni Rucellai did, so much as of our living in a different sort of commercial society. The pattern of the picture trade tends to assimilate to that of more substantial manufacturers: post-romantic is also post-Industrial Revolution, and most of us now buy our furniture ready-made too (Baxandall, 1988, 3).

The foregoing illustrates that art has always been embedded in well-determined social and economic relations. It is thanks to neomarxist authors that the important issue of the social function of art has been put on the aesthetical agenda. This is not a coincidence. After all, Marxism itself is founded on a philosophical interpretation of history and reality in which the influence of economic and social factors – the so-called infrastructure – on phenomena in the so-called superstructure, such as science, law, religion, and the arts are emphasized time and again. Marx and Engels themselves did not write very much on art. Although they did reflect on art occasionally, they did not find the time to develop a systematic philosophy of art in line with their Marxist point of view. They never went beyond random observations on art. Marx is known to have long considered writing a book on Honoré de Balzac whom he greatly admired. But, unfortunately, he never realized this project. Still, it is no wonder that Marx had such high esteem for Balzac. According to Marx Balzac presented in his novels a mirror of bourgeois society that was not only remarkably true to fact, but also utterly ironic. The realistic representation of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by an undertone of social criticism. Balzac exposed the facts of the petit bourgeois: he pointed out that the bourgeoisie as a class was doomed to decline.

It is above all Georg Lukàcs who, in 1918, after making a radical turn towards Marxism at age of 34, would reveal himself as the long awaited "Marx of aesthetics". Until his death in 1971, Lukács worked tirelessly on a project dealing with Marxist aesthetics. He actually wrote the aesthetics that Marx might have written had he found the time and the inspiration. In effect, Lukács was the first to systematically put historical materialism into aesthetic perspective. Without Lukács' pioneering work, the writings of other Marxist authors, most notably Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, would not have been possible. Although Marxism has lost much of its influence over the past 20 years, Adorno's work is still very much alive in contemporary aesthetics. His *Aesthetic Theory* is commonly regarded as a milestone in modern aesthetics. Walter Benjamin's work is also recently experiencing an unusual revival. Lukács' works, however, have faded somewhat into obscurity although there has lately been a renewed interest in his aesthetics. Still, his absence from many publications and anthologies on the philosophy of art is conspicuous. Apparently, many Western authors feel that Lukács' aesthetics are outmoded and have been surpassed by the historical circumstances. Lukács has been regarded the foremost aesthetician of the Eastern block for decades, but with the fall of the Berlin wall and the dismantlement of communism, the fate of his enormous oeuvre, which is invariably associated with the theory of "socialist realism", seems sealed.

Still, this standard interpretation is founded on an historical misconception. It is a caricature that ranks Lukács' work with the official state-socialist party ideology

that ultimately meant the deathblow for artistic freedom in the Eastern block. In that respect the mere fact that Lukács continually found himself in trouble with party ideologists is quite revealing. This does not, however, prevent that Lukács' Marxist viewpoints on aesthetics were quite dogmatic, which explains why his work soon became controversial and provoked a lot of protest from Western Marxist circles. This was evidenced largely in the so-called "expressionism versus realism debate" to which a separate paragraph in this chapter is devoted.

Nevertheless both Lukács and his Western Neomarxist counterparts ask the same question, namely to what extent capitalism has changed the social and economic function of art and culture. This issue is common to all Neomarxist aesthetics in spite of the fact that the proposed solutions from various authors greatly differ. It is impossible to imagine contemporary aesthetics without this basic issue, even though this issue is also dealt with within sociology and even economics of art. Without this issue it would not be possible to enrich the historical dimension, which Hegel contributed to philosophy of art, with a social and economic dimension that shows how art and culture relate to the concrete, social–historical and economic context and development.

How important the contributions of Neomarxist writers to aesthetics may have been, their writings have often provoked a fierce resistance from interested readers. Most works wallow in Marxist phraseology that easily leads to irritation and tiring reading. To-day the ideological commitment of these authors appears to be somewhat outdated, to say the least. In addition, authors like Lukács and Adorno proceed in a very normative way. Lukács, for example, condemned the entire modernism and the avant-garde as decadent art, while Adorno had no feeling whatsoever for important, contemporary art forms such as jazz music. This explains why many readers and philosophers of art are inclined to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Still, Neomarxist insights time and again turn up in current aesthetics even among authors who are not in favor of historical materialism.

8.2 Georg Lukács' Defense of Classical Realism

Lukács' starting point is the aesthetics of Hegel for which he had great admiration. He favors Hegel over Kant in particular since the latter completely excluded the social and historical role of art from his analysis of aesthetic judgment. From a Marxist point of view, this is unthinkable. Kant speaks indeed of an isolated art observer who stands outside society and history. This is because Kant considers the object of the aesthetic experience only from a formal point of view. Consequently, matters of content fall outside the scope of his aesthetics. Lukács, therefore, does not favor Kant's formalism. In effect, it is the reason why Kant's aesthetics are of no use to a Marxist analysis.

There are at least three reasons why Lukács prefers Hegel. First, Hegel has enriched aesthetics with a fundamental historical awareness. As we have seen in the previous chapter, aesthetics, according to Hegel, is intimately interwoven with a

dialectic vision of the development of art. To him, the history of art is, in a sense, the touchstone of his theory on art. Second, Hegel does not restrict himself to the individual art observer. On the contrary, the dialectic development of art belongs to the objective historical reality, which exceeds the concrete art observer and also the individual artist for that matter. Third, in the dialectical process of art there is an ongoing interaction between form and content; finally, the content even completely overrules the form. Could one be further removed from Kant than that?

Still, Lukács makes a few fundamental objections against Hegel's aesthetics, the most significant being the full-fledged idealism of Hegel's system. His *Weltans-chauung* leads to world history being regarded as the self-consciousness of the spirit. The fact that objective reality ultimately dissolves in spiritual self-awareness obviously cannot be reconciled with historical materialism. To a Marxist such as Lukács, the identification of the subject with the object is nothing but pure mysticism. In short, the breaking point for Lukács is not dialectics nor the historical line of approach that lies at the root of it; rather, it is the omnipresent primacy of the spirit in Hegel's philosophy.

Lukács' suggested alternative is to replace idealism with materialism. Hegel does adhere to an historical viewpoint, but he completely disregards the social–economical point of view. In order to avoid this in his own philosophy, Lukács underlines the eminent importance of the *theory of reflection*. According to this theory, art is considered a reflection of the social–economical reality. This is very similar to the base-superstructure theory. Referring to Stalin's articles on linguistics, Lukács emphasizes that the superstructure is not a direct reflection of the economic production, but that it is always mediated by the relations of productions or social classes. Incidentally, the infrastructure not only consists of the means of production (raw materials, climate, geographical situation, technique, and the labor experience of the people), but also of the relations of production or social classes.

8.2.1   Alienation

The application of the reflection theory on the social function of art in capitalism brings Lukács to a critical diagnosis of modern bourgeois society. According to Lukács, the main characteristic of such a society is the ever-pervasive *alienation*. This is caused by the fact that in a bourgeois society human relations are no longer personal; rather, they have become objectified. This objectification, or *reification*, is a key concept in Lukács aesthetics. The keynote is the objectification of labor as Marx described it. It is the process by which the capitalistic production method progressively alienates the worker from the objects that he produces. His labor becomes more abstract and increasingly separated from himself. He no longer has any control over the end product to which he contributes through his work. His subjectivity becomes completely objectified in the product of his labor; it becomes absorbed by the object, literally turned into an object. The alienation process permeates the entire modern, bourgeois society. The individual increasingly depends

on impersonal, dead institutions that are entirely based in an intricate network of objectified processes that become more and more complex. No matter how impenetrable and senseless, these processes operate under their own overpowering system of logic. As in work done for wages, the work of art also takes on a separate, objective life of its own within the realm of art where it becomes more and more alienated from the original individual artist and his intentions.

8.2.2   Fetishism of Commodities

Another key concept that is directly connected with alienation and objectification is the *fetishism of commodities*. Objectification is the direct result of the precedence of exchange value over use value in capitalism. Since use value has disappeared, the wage earner no longer has, unlike the craftsman before him, control over the product of his labor. Also exchange value permeates the whole of modern bourgeois society. Because all subjectivity is embodied in capitalist exchange relations, the work of art is also reduced to a commodity. It becomes assimilated into the general circulation of goods and is only respected for its exchange value. The work of art is then literally alienated from its true meaning, from its spiritual content, from the original inspiration of the artist. All the magic is gone. Only the idolatrous veneration for its exchange value remains. This explains why Lukács speaks of the fetishism of commodities.

   Although his diagnosis of the social function of art in the modern, bourgeois society is quite gloomy, Lukàcs is far from being a cultural pessimist. The future of art is with socialism and is a matter of political and social commitment. In the preface to the republication of his *Theory of the Novel* in which he criticizes his former Utopianism, Lukàcs denounces the acquiescence of some Western Marxist scholars such as Adorno. They have unjustifiably retreated into the "Grand Hotel Abyss", as Lukàcs puts it, "a nicely outfitted hotel at the edge of the abyss, the void, the senselessness. And the daily glance of the abyss between contentedly enjoyed dinners or art productions can only increase the pleasure in this refined comfort" (Lukàcs, 1962, 16). Lukàcs considered his life's duty as an aesthetician to bring art out of its oppressive devaluation and alienation that he felt were so characteristic of capitalism. This striving for a Marxist aesthetics that would reassign a truly social task and destiny to art became particularly apparent in his passionate defense of classical realism.

8.2.3   Defense of Classical Realism

The starting-point of Lukàcs realism theory is derived from the theory of reflection that is elaborated here in a characteristic way. Lukács assumes a structural relationship between social reality and literary forms – particularly the forms in which the novel

becomes established. According to Lukács, the work of art is inextricably interwoven with society as a whole, i.e., with the "social structure", or as he usually phrases it, the "social totality". The work of art does not directly reflect this totality, but indirectly. It is from this angle that Lukács attempts to establish the relationship between the structure of the bourgeois society (the social totality) and the structure of the realistic novel; hence, the notion of "structural kinship". The model he prefers is so-called classical realism that reached its high point between the revolution of 1848 and the Commune of 1870, the rise and fall of the bourgeoisie. Proceeding in a very normative way, Lukács then proclaims that classical realism is the only valuable artistic model for the socialist society.

The choice of classical realism is inspired by the socialist struggle for emancipation. It is Lukács own personal version of "socialist realism". Only classical realism can be considered capable of overcoming the alienation that is so characteristic of capitalism. Only classical realism can deliver mankind from reification and the fetishism of commodities, undo the fading of subjectivity into capitalist exchange relations and reverse the degeneration to mere commodity, to mere object or *thing*. (The original German term for objectification, or reification, is Ver*ding*lichung.) Unlike the production of commodities, which takes place independently of the interests and the will of the subject, the work of art is still closely connected to the subjective qualities of the artist. The artist remains in control of his work because he is not yet a prisoner of the division of labor inherent to capitalism. The work of art exists by its own merit; it cannot therefore be reduced to a mere commodity that has only an exchange value. Because of this, the work of art enables the freedom and self-realization of the individual.

Classical realism presents a model for overcoming alienation and enhancing the self-realization of the individual in the form and structure of the realistic novel. This is strongly emphasized by Lukács. Realistic novels are not a passive reflection of the bourgeois society. They are not mere descriptions; rather, they are stories in which the narrative elements are used in order to expose the capitalistic nature of the bourgeois society. It is from this perspective that Lukács rejects naturalism and sharply contrasts it with classical realism.

8.2.4 Realism Versus Naturalism

Expanding on the contrast between classical realism and naturalism, Lukács refers to the description of a theater in the naturalistic novel, *Nana*, by Émile Zola (1840–1902) and in the realistic novel, *Lost Illusions*, by Honoré de Balzac (1799–1850). On the surface, there appears to be many similarities. Zola's novel opens with an account of a world premiere that is a deciding factor in Nana's ensuing career. A similar event takes place in Balzac's novel where the premiere represents a turning point in the career of Lucien de Rubenprès transforming him from a misunderstood poet into a successful, but unscrupulous journalist.

At close look there are, however, some important differences. As usual, Zola is very exhaustive and meticulous. First, the theater is described from the perspective of the audience: the view of the theater from the auditorium, the foyer, and the boxes, and everything that takes place from these angles is described with astounding literary skill. However, Zola doesn't stop there. In order to complete the picture, he devotes another chapter of his book to the description of the theater as seen from the stage. Now, the changing of the side wings, the wardrobes, etc., during the performance and the intermissions become the object of the same detailed depiction. And if this isn't enough, yet a third chapter rounds out the scene by painstakingly yet skillfully bringing the rehearsal of a play into the limelight.

One looks in vain in Balzac for such an objective, factual and detailed description. The theater, the performance etc… only function here as a background for the inner human drama: Lucien's career breakthrough, Coralie's success as an actress, the blossoming of their passionate love, the future conflicts between Lucien and his former circle of friends from D'Arthez, the dispute with his current patron, Lousteau, his revenge against Madame de Bargeton, and so on. Lukács points out that Balzac uses the description of the theater only as a pretext to expose the capitalistic alienation. What is actually represented is the fate of the theater in capitalist times: the ubiquitous and intricate dependence of the theater on capital, the close ties between theatrical art and journalism, which in its turn is deeply embedded in capitalism; the objectified nature of human relationships in the theater world where stage actresses need to stoop to open or covert prostitution.

These social issues are apparent in Zola's works as well. However, they are described solely as social facts, as neutral effects ensuing from ongoing events. Zola's theater hall director constantly repeats: "Don't say theater, say brothel." Contrarily, Balzac silently exposes and lays bare the way theater becomes part and parcel of capitalist prostitution. The drama of the main characters is at once the drama of the institution with which they cooperate, the circumstances in which they live, the stage on which they fight their battles, the themes in which the social relationships are expressed and mediated.

This example shows that Lukács condemns naturalism because it is still devoted to the immediate representation of reality, the immediacy of the object. Realism goes further: it does not restrict itself to a simple description of the bourgeois society; rather, it exposes the patterns that lie beneath the surface. Zola is exhaustive in delivering an abundance of mostly superfluous facts about the theater, but he fails to touch its *essence*. In Lukács' eyes, he is too objective, too focused on *appearance*. Zola lacks the critical distance and abstraction needed to penetrate to the essence. Balzac, on the other hand, relates theater life and the experiences of his characters to their hidden causes by which they are objectively determined. These hidden causes are rooted in capitalism. However, it is the social relationships that connect the theater world and the actions of the characters to the objective reality. These relationships fulfill a mediating role. And though they remain invisible to the characters themselves and even to the reader, they should nevertheless be concretely embedded in the story: their essence should shine throughout all its segments.

8.2.5   Condemnation of Modernism

The defense of realism can only be understood by bearing in mind Lukács' reliance on a style of argumentation that is thoroughly dialectical. From a dialectical standpoint naturalism fails to establish a unity between subject and object, or between spirit and sensuousness, essence and appearance. In Lukács' eyes, it all remains too *objectivistic*, too much grafted on the sensuous representation and outward appearance. For this reason, naturalism is unmediated and non-dialectical. Equally unmediated and non-dialectical according to Lukács is expressionism and all avant-garde art, i.e. all modernism, which he emphatically condemned. His main objection was that the balance is here offset in the other direction. Expressionism and all avant-garde art still sticks to the immediacy of the torn reality and the alienated subject. They are too focused on the inner self; they are too *subjectivistic*. And because of this, the outward reality is overcome by the desire to discover the "essence" of reality, the consequences of which are a break from daily reality, an abstract and utopian escapism that does not expose the capitalistic alienation, but only enhances it.

8.3   Objections Against Lukács: The Expressionism and Realism Debate

The objections against expressionism that are explained above were also at the basis of an article Lukács published in 1934, '*Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline*' (See Lukács, 1980). In the article, Lukács launched an all-out attack on this important art movement that by then was already on its way back. The article became the center of a controversy that has become known as an "Expressionism Debate". It is one of the best know debates in Marxist aesthetics, and Lukács' criticism was indeed extraordinarily sharp. He labeled expressionism the exponent of the Wilhelmian Reich, which had proven to be incapable of withstanding the imperialism of those times. Although expressionism had objected to the First World War, it remained politically powerless due to its "abstract pacifism" and its "ideology of escapism". The revolt of expressionism was not effective because it was characterized by a penchant for abstract mysticism. Expressionism, he argued, is founded in an irrational mythology, and its creative style leans towards an emotional, rhetorical revolt full of hot air, a bombastic pseudo-activism!

Lukács' political judgment was devastating. Expressionism was cast aside since all the content of their works reveal "the forlorn perplexity of the petty-bourgeois caught in the wheels of capitalism" or "the impotent protest of the petty bourgeois against the kicks and blows of captalism". Expressionism, as Lukács put it, was no more than a hopeless exercise in shadow-boxing and "a pseudo-critical, misleadingly abstract, mythicizing form of imperialist pseudo-opposition"! A sharper ideological judgment is hardly conceivable. The final suggestion that expressionism, which had openly spoken out against fascism, would subconsciously anticipate Nazism was really too much.

Naturally, the article did not go unnoticed. Both supporters and antagonists of expressionism became involved in this Marxist internecine dispute, which was published in *Das Wort*, a German literary magazine that served at that time as the platform for antifascist writers and critics. It is, of course, impossible to discuss here the entire controversy at length. The dispute, however, was and still is of considerable significance for modern aesthetics in general, and for Marxist aesthetics in particular. Since expressionism was considered the first German version of modern art, the dispute soon concentrated on the question of whether *modernism* or *realism* should serve as a model for all further thinking about art, for all subsequent aesthetics. This fundamental question explains why the debate was as fiercely fought as it was.

The arguments were very often politically motivated. It became clear that Lukács could find no favor among Western Marxists because of his dogmatic reasoning. At the same time, he was given a warning from communist party-ideologists from the Eastern block, as was indicated earlier. The reason was that Lukács' philosophy on art originated from two opposite visions on realism that were impossible to reconcile ideologically. The one source was the utopia of socialist realism that aimed at making art accessible to everyone, a "folk art" in the true sense of the term. The other source was the bourgeois utopia of a grand realism that was not entirely free from a certain aristocratic nostalgia. The result was that Lukács was imprisoned between two walls of misunderstanding. Despite much self-criticism, his work remained the breeding ground for distrust for party-ideologists who detected a remnant of a bourgeois ideology in Lukács' defense of the "grand realism", which they were trying very hard to eradicate! Although he frequently distanced himself in the name of "grand realism" from every form of "socialistic realism" that was used as an instrument of party propaganda, and despite his being a dissident in the Eastern block certainly after Stalin's death in 1953 when he devoted himself to the "liquidation of Stalinism in literature", his work remained a target of criticism among Western Neomarxists. While party-ideologists accused him of "revisionism", Western Neomarxists reproached him for his "dogmatism".

8.3.1   Brecht Contra Lukács

The best-known contribution to the expressionism debate undoubtedly comes from Ernst Bloch who, in 1938, thoroughly criticized the views of his old friend Lukács. Bloch points out that Lukács was hardly familiar with expressionism; he makes no mention of any of the many important expressionist painters (Marc, Klee, Kokoschka, Nolde, Kandinsky, Gross, Dix, and Chagall) while their equivalent in music (Arnold Schönberg) also remains undiscussed. This is even more surprising because of the intimate friendship between painters and writers in German expressionism. Moreover, the expressionist paintings were much more characteristic of the movement than expressionist literature. But even with respect to literature alone, much can be said against Lukács' selection. It is a very limited selection and

it is hardly representative. Important authors such as Georg Trakl, Georg Heym, and Else Lasker-Schüler are nowhere to be found; Franz Werfel's early work is listed only for the fact that it includes some pacifistic poetry. Complete unknown poets are quoted as soon as they appear to even vaguely fall into the category of "abstract pacifism" (a category, incidentally, that also includes such important authors as Herman Hesse and Stefan Zweig).

Bloch's further arguments show many similarities with the lesser-known intervention of one the most influential artists of the Weimar period, Bertolt Brecht. Therefore, I will further restrict myself to Brecht's intervention. Inspired by Marx, Brecht for the most part made the same basic assumptions as Lukács. Still, he had the feeling that Lukács' aesthetics, despite its many valuable insights, was on the wrong track. This fundamental disagreement prompted Brecht to put his objections against Lukács' realism theory on paper. This he did in 1938 during his exile in the Danish town Svendborg. The expressionism debate in *Das Wort* had by that time reached its high point. Brecht's notes did not, however, appear in the magazine; they were never even published during his lifetime. The reasons for this remain unclear. Did the editorial board in Moscow refuse his notes? It seems more probable that Brecht himself decided against publication. It appears from his conversations with Walter Benjamin that he was fearful of the influential position of Lukács, whose literary theory had been widely accepted by the authorities of the German communist emigration. And also Moscow, where Lukács had been staying since 1933, sustained his literary theory. Another possibility is that Brecht refrained from publishing for strategic reasons: it did not seem advisable to undermine the unity of the People's Front by infighting at a time when fascism was at its most powerful.

Still, the bearing of Brecht's criticism was very great. It is also closely connected to his ideas on the theater, which resulted in a truly Marxist-inspired theater. First of all, says Brecht, Lukács' realism theory is based on an enormous contradiction: how can one declare the works of the great realists of the nineteenth century, who essentially had a bourgeois nature, to be the standard for proletarian or socialist writers of the twentieth century? Balzac and Tolstoy's novels were inextricably connected to a bourgeois society that by now had undeniably been superseded. Does it make much sense then to be a Marxist and to defend the classical bourgeois novel as an aesthetic model for a socialistic society in which precisely opposite class interests are at work? This is incompatible with Marxism and with Lukács' own reflection theory. Furthermore, Lukács neglects the fact that the social reality of capitalism had undergone some radical changes during the twentieth century even to such an extent that the new social relations are completely at odds with those that are portrayed in the bourgeois novel. This has some important consequences to the technique of the novel. Hence, Brecht's comment:

> A remarkable nostalgia towards the idyllic is expressed in Lukács' regret over breaking open Balzac's classical bourgeois narration by writers such as Dos Passos. He does not see and he refuses to see that the modern author cannot use the same narrative that served Balzac to romanticize the competition in post-Napoleontic France (Brecht, 1967, Part II, 317. Own translation).

The historical "insensitivity" above is not only non-Marxist in Brecht's view, but also formalistic. His second objection to Lukács' realism theory indeed concerns its formalistic nature. This is quite surprising. After all, was it not Lukács himself who accused modernism of being formalistic because of its use of fragmented techniques such as *interior monologue* and montage? The attempt to derive literary criteria purely from earlier literary traditions, without taking into account the historical changes of the social basis, is regarded by Brecht as a manifestation of an equally unforgivable as timeless formalism! At the same time, Brecht puts forth a third objection in emphasizing the very narrow and rather limited view of literature on which the realism theory is based. Lukács almost exclusively based himself on the novel, at the expense of poetry and theater. "What about realism in lyricism, what about drama?" Brecht wonders.

Perhaps the most far-reaching differences between both opponents become apparent in their divergent attitudes with regard to experimentation and the social function of art. Brecht's fourth objection concerns the literary techniques Lukács defends in his realism theory. These narrative techniques are fossils from an ancient past. They are not fertilized by reality: the status of the production forces. Unlike Lukács, Brecht passionately defends the need for experimental modernization in art. The artist should have as much freedom as possible even when he fails. Inner dialogue, montage, and a mixing of genres are all both permissible and productive, as long as they are done in a truthful manner. Lukács' fear that technical innovations would alienate works of art from the general public was based on a grave misconception, according to Brecht. His own experiences as a playwright had shown him that the general public is anything but driven away by bold, experimental daring on stage. The immense success of his *Three Penny Opera* had obviously served to strengthen Brecht's conviction.

A fifth and final objection concerns, as I've already highlighted, the social function of art. All of Brecht's previous objections already point toward the lack a true, dialectical approach in his opponent's realism. In the end, both authors apply dialectic in different ways to the work of art. In Lukács' case, as we have seen, the dialectical vision leads to an enclosed work of art, in which the opposition between the essence and the appearance of reality is reconciled in a harmonious unity. Brecht, on the other hand, wanted to bring the contradictions in capitalism to the forefront, both literally and figuratively. Works of art should call to attention that in capitalism essence and appearance are torn to pieces. The contradictions should be made visible to the spectator, which is impossible if he surrenders to the artwork without critical distance and becomes the prisoner of a mimetic illusion, the way Lukács would have it. Being a playwright and stage director, Brecht therefore replaced, both in theory and practice, a theater art that lived on illusion and identification with one that aimed to alienate the spectator.

8.3.2   Adorno Contra Lukács

At a much later time, Adorno, too, crossed swords with Lukács' apologia of realism. It was the publication of Lukács' book *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*,

which appeared in German in 1958 (English: Lukács, 1962) that induced Adorno to attack Lukacs' work. Partly due to his involvement in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, during which he took office as Minister of Culture in the short-lived coalition government lead by Imre Nagy, Lukács was silenced for some time. Consequently, the book appeared only in the West. Despite the difficult position Lukács – already 75 years old by this time – found himself in, and despite the fact that he denounced the crimes of the Stalin regime in that book, Adorno took an irreconcilable stance, both as spokesman of Western Marxism as well as *éminence grise* of the Frankfurt School. The review article, meaningfully entitled *Reconciliation under Duress* (Adorno, 1977), corresponded to the general drift of the argument we encountered in the two preceding critiques of both Bloch and Brecht. At the same the review already contained the seeds of *Aesthetic Theory*, the unfinished magnum opus that was originally published in 1970, a year after Adorno's death, by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (English: Adorno, 1984).

First, it should be noted that Adorno had great admiration for the writings of the young Lukács. In his eyes, *The Theory of the Novel* "…had a brilliance and profundity of conception which was quite extraordinary at the time, so much so that it set a standard for philosophical aesthetics which has been retained ever since". Because of his "conversion" to communism, however, Lukács retracted these works and condemned them as utopian. According to Adorno, Lukács' self-denunciation resulted in intellectual suicide. His judgment on the later Lukács is therefore devastating:

> He took the crudest criticisms from the Party hierarchy to heart, twisting Hegelian motifs and turning them against himself; and for decades on end he laboured in a series of book and essays to adapt his obviously unimpaired talents to the unrelieved sterility of Soviet claptrap, which in the meantime had degraded the philosophy it proclaimed to the level of a mere instrument in the service of its rule (Adorno, 1977, 151).

According to Adorno, Lukács' intellectual suicide became most apparent in his *Destruction of Reason* (Lukács, 1962/1963), in which he swept the floor with all irrational movements in modern Western philosophy. Nietzsche and Freud are among those whom he labels as reactionary and fascist. In doing so, he neglected the fact that these thinkers passed profound criticism on the objectification that had already occupied the young Lukács in his diagnosis of the Western culture. Adorno regards this book by Lukács as the model for the destruction of Lukács' own reason. Or, as he puts it most pressingly: "Under the mantle of an ostensibly radical critique of society he surreptitiously reintroduced the most threadbare clichés of the very conformism which that social criticism had once attacked" (Adorno, 1977, 152).

The first, theoretical gap that yawns between Adorno and Lukács concerns the one-sided nature of the reflection theory. Lukács sometimes commented so subtly on the relation between understructure and superstructure that he would fall into disfavor with party ideologists. Nevertheless, in the eyes of Adorno he continually lapses into the vulgar Marxism Adorno despised so much. Too often, Lukács thinks of the concrete contents of a work of art as a "pure reflection of the objective reality". To Adorno, speaking in terms of "reflection" is altogether wrong. It suggests a far too direct connection between understructure and superstructure. It doesn't take

into account the countless "mediations" that connect the work of art to the social reality. The reflection theory is too simplistic, too linear and not dialectical enough.

A second, theoretical gap concerns the fact that Lukács underestimates the importance of form. For example, he claims that style, form, and means of expression are immensely overrated in modern art. We already saw that, in Lukács' eyes, avant-garde experiments with form are merely expressions of inordinate subjectivism, which in turn lead the subject to lose control over the objective world. He then fails to recognize the way in which form gives shape to the objective world, especially with regard to modern works of art. Form fulfills an objective function here, which is decisive for the contents of the work of art as well.

A third, theoretical gap stems from the fact that Lukács persistently refuses to acknowledge the central role to which literary technique is entitled. This follows naturally from the criticism on the reflection theory. Lukács, in his interpretation of the infrastructure-superstructure model, regards art exclusively as a phenomenon of the superstructure that ultimately may be determined by the production forces, but that is still mediated by the production relations or social classes that determine the work of art. When Lukács even remotely considers production forces, it is always to ask the question of how these production forces, as components or building blocks of the basis, have an indirect effect on art. He then forgets that artistic technique, like technique in the production of materials, develops according to a logic of its own. He remains blind to the fact that art itself is *a form of production* that is embedded in the historical development of its own production forces, and therefore is determined by the state of its technique. Lukács denies the eminent importance of technique to the artist's creative activity.

A fourth, theoretical gap bears, as might be expected, on Lukács' entire theory of realism. Adorno's chief objection concerns the non-dialectical and dogmatic nature of realism. Adorno considers this a "reconciliation under duress". The opposition between object and subject, as well as the objective contradictions in society are resolved in a false harmony in realism. Especially in his defense of socialist realism, Lukács mistakenly assumes that the reconciliation has been realized in the socialist society. As such, he proves himself a prisoner of the prescribed Soviet ideology. "But," Adorno argues, "the cleavage, the antagonism persists, and it is a sheer lie to assert that it has been 'overcome', as they call it, in the states of the Eastern bloc" (Adorno, 1977, 176). In contrast, in his defense of modernism, Adorno will emphasize that the modern work of art embodies social oppositions more than it resolves them and therefore relates critically to social reality.

8.4 Adorno's Defense of Modernism

Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) belonged to the first generation of the *Frankfurt School*. He was of Jewish descent on his father's side, which made it imperative for him to leave Germany in the 1930s; he went first to England and then on to

America. He returned to Frankfurt in 1950. It was at this time when the full extent
of the Holocaust was first realized, and this became a theme that ran throughout his
philosophy. Almost all of Adorno's texts are imbued with the question of how it had
been possible for the ideals of the Enlightenment – that is, the ideals of reason,
progress, and emancipation – to so completely degenerate into their absolute oppo-
sites. The modernization and rationalization of the modern world apparently did not
lead to the expected liberation; rather, it gave way to oppression and manipulation.
The how and the why of this fatal development is central to Adorno's *Dialectics of
Enlightenment* and his *Negative Dialectics*. He also focuses on the paradoxical
nature of modernity in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Additionally, these works evidence the
intense commitment to contemporary artistic developments that are usually attrib-
uted to modernism. In stark contrast to Lukács, Adorno deemed himself a defender
of modernism, and the defense of modernism lies at the heart of Adorno's aesthet-
ics, uniting all other themes and ideas about art.

Adorno's basic criticisms of Lukács' works are fueled by his outspoken preference
for modernism. As such, they can serve as a basis for discussing Adorno's influential
aesthetics, something, however, easier said than done. Adorno agreed with his elder
companion in spirit, Walter Benjamin, that modernity could only be explained in
terms of very concrete and specific phenomena. Both believed that the modern era
could not be revealed by any global or systematic theories: modern reality was far too
complex and multi-faceted for this. Their texts reflect the impossibility of any system-
atic thought. Their essay-like and tentative nature makes them difficult to understand
for the unprepared reader. The *Aesthetic Theory*, for example, does not allow for an
easy summary because of its unfinished nature – it is, after all, a work in progress –
but also because of its general objective. Adorno refuses to define his concepts
because he believes they specify themselves in relation to one another. Philosophy
cannot operate in a straightforward manner, as does mathematics. The parts not only
form the whole; the whole also forms the parts. It is impossible to understand each
part on its own. And, vice versa, the whole can only come alive through the individual
parts or elements. In philosophy, according to Adorno, on cannot simply start from a
beginning and then proceed in a logical and systematic manner.

It then follows, as Adorno explained in a letter, that one should not expect a
discourse to unfold in the usual order in *Aesthetic Theory*… "The book must, so to
speak, be written in equally weighted, paratactical parts that are arranged around a
midpoint that they express through their constellation" (Adorno, 1977, 364). It is
because of this method of philosophy that *Aesthetic Theory* does not allow for an
easy synopsis. It seems impossible to deduce a common thread from this text,
which is one of the most densely written works in all of Western philosophy.

8.4.1 Relative Autonomy of the Work of Art

A good guideline to still succeed in tracking down this thread would be to consider
the basic points of critique Adorno expressed where Lukács was concerned.

According to Adorno, the fact that Lukács ultimately considers the artwork as a reflection of reality is due to his disregard for the autonomy of art. The first key point of Adorno's aesthetics, one that immediately follows from his critique of the reflection theory, proclaims that art shows a double nature: on the one hand, it is autonomous; on the other hand, it represents a social fact. Lukács fails to see that the artist appropriates the objective world in accordance with the laws of aesthetic form. These formal laws embody the autonomy of the work of art, for which Lukács, being the anti-formalist that he is, has insufficient regard. However, formalism and the autonomy of the work of art are relative. The work of art can only bring about a *relative* autonomy, since artworks respond to issues that are coming from the outside world and are thus related to the social context. Still, the work of art is no simple reflection of reality. The social determinateness of art does not manifest itself in any reflection of social totality: it neither directly follows from the forces and/or relations of production, nor is it a derivation of the social commitment that is expressed within the themes addressed by art. To Adorno, the social commitment is always indirectly present in a mediated form because art translates the unresolved oppositions of the social reality into problems of form that are inherent in art. The connection between art and society is not located in any concrete content of the work of art, but in its aesthetic form. The connection is not one of content, but of form.

Anyway, Adorno relates the relative autonomy of art not only to the form of the work of art, but also to its technique. Like form, technique also performs a mediating function between society and art. In art, no less than in society, the state of the forces of production needs to be considered. Since the technique an artist finds in the works of his predecessors always is the product of an historical development, the relatedness between art and society can and must also be apparent in the struggle with technique. Again, Adorno assumes that technique, like form, reflects a formal connection with society as a whole, rather than one of content. He states, for example, that the technical development of art responds to the advancing rationalization and reification of society as a whole. The artist's "material", i.e., the concrete materials with which he works, the available techniques that influence artistic creation, are all socially determined and infiltrate the artwork itself. Here, too, the relation is not one of content, but one of form; it is not external, but internal, since also here the autonomy of the artistic "material" is decisive. Although the "material" of art and the state of its technique are inextricably connected to society as a whole, art gives shape to that relation entirely on its own terms. It is in this sense that Adorno describes works of art as "the self-unconscious historiography of their epoch". This view is only tenable if the autonomy of art is considered relative.

8.4.2 Modern Art as Critique

This first key point shows the extent to which Adorno values the autonomy of art. This pivotal idea lies, without doubt, at the heart of his fundamental disagreement

with Lukács, because it is in the name of the autonomy of art that Adorno rejects realism and defends modernism. This brings us to the second key point of Adorno's aesthetics: that art should fulfill a *critical* function. Lukács' realism assumes an identity between subject and object, which is responsible for the 'reconciliation under duress' and also explains the servitude of art to the existing social system. As a result, art loses its critical function, as it is indeed the case in "socialist realism". In the latter its social function becomes eroded; it only serves to confirm the exist-ing order. This is the fatal consequence of the reflection theory. However, as soon as the autonomy of art preponderates, art can be assigned the social function to which it is entitled. The autonomous nature of art does not stand in the way of its critical quality, as Lukács suggests, rather, it warrants it. It is precisely because works of art gain independence with regard to objective reality that they develop a critical potential.

In autonomous art, which is the model for modernism, this critical potential becomes possible thanks to the experience that Adorno terms the "non-identical". In stark contrast to Lukács, Adorno strongly believes that the dialectical method should not presuppose the Hegelian identity of object and subject, since that would only lead art to adapt to and confirm the existing social order. Instead, modernism is characterized by the experience of the "non-identical", the experience of duality, the chaotic, the dissonant, the inhumane; modern art then gives rise to the divided nature of modern reality. The discord between subject and object is not resolved in a false harmony, as is proposed in realism, but rather is made visible in and through the work of art, and as a result the function of art becomes eminently critical.

The major difference with Lukács is that Adorno regards modern art as the only way out of the pernicious consequences of modernization. He agrees with Lukács that modernization exerts homogenizing and banalizing effects, and that commodity fetishism and reification prevents any authentic experience. However, Adorno sees no good in a return to classical realism, which he sees as a thing of the past. Neither does he believe "socialist realism" as a way out since it has the same leveling effect as modernization. Following Walter Benjamin, he does speak of a "crisis of the experience" in that modern society cuts off the possibility of any authentic experi-ence and any thorough communication. But there is no use in denying these facts. Art is modern in the sense that it does not withdraw from this crisis of the experience. Hence, Adorno's appropriation of Rimbaud's maxim: "Il faut être absolument moderne." (*"One must be absolutely modern."*). There is no alternative other than to accept the modern predicament. But it is exactly in modern art that Adorno perceives a possible counterbalance. He thinks of modern art as one of the last frontiers where one can still have an authentic experience. In the same sense, it also resists the prevailing historical tendencies, not however, by ignoring the existing reality, but by expressing it in such a way that modernity can be criticized from within.

The way in which modern art gives shape to that criticism is closely connected to its autonomy and the experience of the "non-identical". The contradictions inher-ent to social reality, the alienation, the discord between subject and object are not sublated in some reconciliated unity. The autonomous work of art does not present a positive image of reality, let alone a positive image of what might be a utopian,

ideal reality. Art can only be critical by representing a negative image of reality. It is only critical to the extent that it shows the negative sides of modernity. In the works of Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and Arnold Schönberg, for example, we are confronted with a steadfast refusal to reconcile. Their works of art are successful not because they refer to a false harmony or utopia, but because they negatively express the idea of harmony and embody alienation in a pure and uncompromising way in their formal structure. Only in this manner can the artwork keep the belief in a utopia alive. So, in the final analysis, art *does* refer to a harmony, but one that can only be attained in a negative way. The dissonance in the formal structure of art is the key to liberation. This paradox of modern art is shown by the fact that it embodies a "negative utopia".

According to Adorno this "negative utopia" is achieved in the work of Arnold Schönberg (see Fig. 8.1). Through his invention of a new technique, the so-called 12-tone system, or dodecaphony, his musical form mediates successfully between art and modern society. The 12-tone scale is the only thematic material the composer has at his disposal. Schönberg's refusal to compromise with the unresolved dissonances of modern society is here translated into a strict form, which anyhow leaves

Fig. 8.1 Arnold Schönberg, Suite, op. 25 (menuet). Taken from: Marcel Boerenboom, *Handboek van de muziekgeschiedenis* (Handbook of the history of music, Antwerp/Kok, 1985, vol. 4, p. 29.

open an almost indeterminate number of possibilities. Schönberg could restrain from the external constraints of capitalist relations by consistently withdrawing himself into the logic of the musical form itself. The dissonances of society are not expressed in any theme or content, but in the musical form and technique itself.

8.5   Walter Benjamin on the Technical Reproducibility of Art

Like Adorno, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) belonged to the Frankfurt school (see Fig. 8.2). He, too, aimed for a Marxist aesthetics. One of his best-known contributions in this area was *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1969, originally published in German in 1936). In this epoch-making essay, Benjamin investigated the extent to which artistic production had fundamentally changed at a time when the technical reproducibility of art, especially thanks to the rise of photography and film, had reached a height never seen before.

Fig. 8.2 Walter Benjamin, 1938. Photo: Giséle Freund.

Benjamin was primarily interested in the way these new developments had changed the nature and the function of a work of art. His essay is still extremely relevant because Benjamin was the first to analyze cultural industry, which at that time was still in its infancy.

Benjamin begins with establishing the fact that works of art have always been reproduced, for example, by students in order to learn their craft, by masters to distribute their works, and finally by third parties in pursuit of profit. History gives many examples of technical reproduction as well: the ancient Greeks were familiar with founding and stamping; woodcarving, printing; copper engraving and etching were later introduced, followed by lithography in the nineteenth century. The latter heralded a whole new era because it enabled the graphic arts industry to market its products both in mass production, as well as in forms that could be changed on a daily basis.

The invention of lithography, however, was to be surpassed a few decades later. Photography and film opened another era during the turn of the century. Craftsmanship, which was still central to lithography, made room for a new technical device, in which the eye peering through the lens now replaced the artistic creation of the hand. It made any work of art reproducible, even if only through a photographic print. Moreover, new artistic procedures developed into art forms that took their own place among the other more traditional art forms. For this reason, Benjamin's essay focuses not only on photography, but even more so also on the analysis of cinematography.

8.5.1   The Aura Concept

The revolution of the technical reproducibility of the work of art implies a fundamental change in its *nature*, which Benjamin describes as the loss of "aura". The technical reproduction aims to transpose the original work of art into situations that would be out of reach for the original itself. Or, as Benjamin explains:

> Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art, the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room (Benjamin, 1969, 220–221).

But even in the most perfect reproduction, one thing is missing: the 'here and now' of the work of art, its unique existence in the place where it is located. At the same time, the original loses all *authority*. Since the material permanence of the original no longer matters in its reproductions, the historic testimony to its authenticity and originality also becomes lost. The entire realm of authenticity removes itself from technical reproducibility. The technique of reproduction disengages the original work from its traditional reach. Since the technique does not reproduce the original, but rather only multiplies copies of it, the work of art loses its unique existence. I would add that what the observer actually sees is not even a copy of the original, but rather, to paraphrase Plato, "an imitation of an imitation". It is not the original cinematographic recording that the moviegoer sees, but rather the *projection* of that recording on the screen!

In his concept of "aura," Benjamin does not only include the 'here and now' of the artwork and the importance of its authenticity and originality, but also the awe and reverence that go along with it. For that reason, he describes "aura" as a "unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be". No matter how close and tangible, the appearance of an authentic work of art is, in essence, distant and unapproachable. This inaccessibility has to do with the way in which it is embedded in tradition, and finds its expression in cult. Here again, Benjamin sees a loss of aura. In the beginning, the work of art would originate in the service of a ritual: first, a magical ritual, and later on, a religious one. Though the cult value of the work of art became secularized at that time, the Renaissance's irreverent cult of beauty was able to preserve it. And during the three centuries in which this profane veneration of beauty dominated, the authenticity of the artwork enabled its viewer or collector to take part in its cult-like power.

The authentic work of art is therefore closely tied with its cult value and with its ritual purpose. It is only since the onset of technical reproducibility that the work of art is freed from its dependence on the ritual. The ensuing loss of aura is accompanied by a profound change in sensory perception; furthermore, Benjamin believes, it is socially determined. First of all, modern audiences have a passionate desire to bring the work of art "closer" to them and to the space they inhabit. This is why works of art are multiplied on a large scale, and, as a result, are deprived of their unique nature, marking the end of an era in art. The work of art is no longer rooted in ritual; it has instead become rooted in politics, thus leading to the final disenchantment of art.

8.5.2 *Disenchantment*

Benjamin assigns various attributes to the process of disenchantment. The first attribute is the *exhibition* value of the work of art, which increasingly drives out its cult value. In earlier times, works of art were often hidden: certain Madonna statues were covered throughout the year, and in medieval cathedrals, some sculptures and ceiling paintings remained invisible to the observer from the ground floor. As a result, the work of art took on certain inaccessibility, an unfathomable and mysterious quality: in short, its entire cult value. While the technical reproduction of a work of art increases its possibilities to be exhibited, it comes at the cost of robbing the work of its magical power. Initially, it was in photography that the cult value of art was replaced by its exhibition value, albeit not without resistance. In early photography, the portrait was still the main object: "The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuse for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face" (Benjamin, 1969, 226). Increasingly, however, the human figure is removed from photography, and in its place, the exhibition value predominates. No longer is there any room for mystery or elusiveness. Captions appear in newspapers and magazines that give the viewer distinct guidelines on how the image should be seen. Nothing is left to chance: all secrecy fades. And the ways of seeing that are imposed in motion pictures become even more precise and compulsory, because the interpretation of each individual image seems prescribed by the succession of all preceding images.

   A second attribute of the disenchantment process is the disappearance of the
autonomous art of which Adorno thought so highly. Not only does the loss of aura
rob the artwork of its cult value, but of its autonomy as well. Film greatly accelerates
this development. In no other art form is the technical reproducibility based on the
production technique so developed as it is in cinematography. This (re-)production
technique not only makes mass distribution of film possible, but the mass distribution
is itself in fact, a prerequisite. After all, the production of a film is so costly that it
can only be financially sustained as a mass product. For that reason, filmmakers no
longer enjoy the independence and freedom that is so characteristic of the autonomous
artist. They need to adapt to the market mechanism, where supply and demand are
dictated by the preferences and desires of the masses. They have become an integral
part of a film industry in which economic interests predominate over the artistic
autonomy of the individual artist.
   A third attribute of the disenchantment process is the fact that artistic performance
of the actor is greatly affected by the equipment used for filmmaking; acting itself
becomes literally disenchanted. Due to camera movements and montage the production
is no longer in the hands of the artists (actors) but falls completely under the supervision
of experts who make all decisions concerning what will be shown, often without
consulting the actor. Furthermore, the film actor is no longer able to adapt his
performance to the responses of the audience, as is the case with stage acting. In other
words, though the film actor puts his entire living self into his performance, he does
this at the expense of his aura, which is related to the here and now. The aura is
preserved when *Macbeth* is performed before a live audience. Characteristic of a film
studio recording, however, is that the entire performance takes place not before a live
audience, but instead before a host of film recording apparatus. The aura that envelops
the theater performer disappears. The actor's estrangement before the recording
equipment is of the same nature as man's estrangement before his own image in the
mirror, the only difference being that in film, it is not the actor, but other experts, who
have his mirror image at their disposal and can manipulate it at will.
   Benjamin thus concludes that the loss of aura is accompanied by a sense of
alienation on the actor's part. Benjamin puts remarkable emphasis on the nature of
this alienation. In fact, so he argues, the actor's mirror image is transferred to an
audience, a consumer market, that at the moment of shooting is just as elusive as
any industrial-manufactured product. And like industrial labor, the performance
becomes alienated from the end product. Much in the same way as the industrial
worker loses all control as well over the production means as over the final
commodity, so the actor loses his grip on the production conditions and the final
film product that goes to market. Like the labor of the wage earner, the actor's
performance becomes reduced to a simple commodity. His personality becomes
completely irrelevant; the only thing that matters is the extent to which his acting
performance can be marketed. His aura completely disappears into the commodity
value of his performance. This seems to contradict the personality cult that is at the
basis of stardom, but again, this is only a seeming contradiction. The film world
responds to the waning aura by creating an artificial personality outside the studio:
"The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves
not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phoney spell

of a commodity" (Benjamin, 1969, 231). As long as film capital sets the tone, film will remain an outstanding example of commodity fetishism.

8.5.3   Revolutionary Potential

Notwithstanding his critical attitude, Benjamin does acknowledge the revolutionary potential of cinematographic art especially in the area of perception. He explains this by respectively comparing a painter and a magician to a cameraman and a surgeon. A magician maintains a natural distance between himself and his patient: on the one hand he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, on the other hand he also increases it because of his inaccessible and mysterious authority. The surgeon does exactly the opposite: he reduces the distance between him and his patient by penetrating into the patient's body, but at the decisive moment he avoids any real contact with the patient as human being. Magician and surgeon relate to each other in the same way as the painter and the cameraman. The painter maintains a natural distance from reality, whereas the cameraman delves deeply into its web. Whereas the painter provides a total image, the cameraman provides an image that consists "of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law". In this respect film has unquestionably enriched our perception. According to Benjamin, it has enabled further exploration of our perception because it presents us with a much more accurate image of situations at hand.

   Benjamin compares this quality of film to psychoanalysis, which has also sharpened our perceptions. Psychoanalysis has made us aware that a slip of the tongue can be profoundly meaningful. It has shown us a deeper perspective; it has both "isolated and made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception". Similarly it is thanks to its greater and more precise penetration of the web of reality that filmed behavior can be isolated and analyzed more thoroughly. Such devices as close up and slow motion present details, movements, and automatisms that would otherwise remain invisible. The physical world revealed by the camera is not the same as that seen by the naked eye. It may, for example, show that a running horse at some point does not touch the ground, a fact that is not seen by the naked eye. Benjamin concludes that the cross-fertilization between technique and art holds a revolutionary promise for the future. In the same way that psychoanalysis unveils unconscious impulses, the camera reveals what is optically unconscious:

> The act of reaching for a lighter or a spoon is familiar routine, yet we hardly know what really goes on between hand and metal, not to mention how this fluctuates with our moods. Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, it extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions (Benjamin, 1969, 237).

A second revolutionary potential, in addition to the further exploration of perception, is a political one. Film is not destined – or perhaps, doomed – to confirm capitalist alienation. It has the potential to rise above it, and can also be used to revolutionary

ends. It can be used as a means to awaken a political awareness within the masses. As he witnessed the rise of fascism in the 1930s, Benjamin came to realize that film could also be *abused* for political ends. Its apparatus is perfectly suited for propaganda in both a positive as well as in a negative way. In fascism, film was used to celebrate the cult leader with whom the masses could identify without being urged to denounce social inequality. Fascism, says Benjamin, inevitably leads to an aestheticization of political life. "The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values" (Benjamin, 1969, 241).

   All attempts to aestheticize politics culminate in one result: war. Only war is able to initiate mass movements while maintaining relations of ownership. Since the existing relations of ownership prevent the natural utilization of the forces of production the increase in energy resources, technical means, and labor experience ultimately leads to an unnatural use of the latter in war. Benjamin states that in fascism human self-alienation has reached such a degree that its own self-destruction can be experienced as an aesthetic pleasure, while communism, as Benjamin so firmly concludes, responds by politicizing art.

8.6   Adorno Contra Benjamin and the Culture Industry

Adorno has made objections to Benjamin several times and in various places. Before its final publication in early 1936 the manuscript of the essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, was already critically commented by Adorno in a letter he wrote to Walter Benjamin on March 18 of that same year. In this letter Adorno criticizes the way Benjamin transfers the concept of magical aura to the 'autonomous work of art' and flatly ascribes to the latter a counter-revolutionary function. According to Adorno, Benjamin makes it sound as though only autonomous works of art are characterized by aura. The increased reproducibility and accompanying loss of aura would then result in the disappearance of autonomous works of art. Adorno, however, does not see any opposition at all between the progress of technique and autonomous art. On the contrary: rather than having art adapt to the existing order, technical reproducibility may well be the condition that allows for the freedom of autonomous artists. His main objection to Benjamin is that he underestimates the technicality of the autonomous work of art while overestimating the technicality of dependent art.

   Adorno also criticizes Benjamin's concept of aura in his *Aesthetic Theory*. According to Adorno, Benjamin not only describes the "here and now" of the work of art, "…it is whatever goes beyond its factual giveness, its content; one cannot abolish it and still want art. Even demystified artworks are more than what is literally the case" (Adorno, 1984, 45). Adorno believes the "exhibition value" that is supposed to be replacing the "cult value" is an image of the exchange process. In *Ohne Leitbild*, Adorno emphasizes that many of the concepts used by Benjamin in

his approach to cinematography are intimately related to the commodity nature against which his very theory battles. It becomes clear here how closely Adorno's objections to Benjamin's essay are connected to his staunch rejection of the culture industry. As much as he recognizes the potential film has, he perceives its capitalistic exploitation as an obstacle. Film is and will always be art for the masses that is manipulated by the market and answers to the taste of the masses, which in turn are controlled by the ruling powers. Adorno adds that film has been so wonderfully successful in "transforming subjects so indistinguishably into social functions, that those wholly encompassed, no longer aware of any conflict, enjoy their dehumanization as something human, as the joy of warmth. The total interconnectedness of the culture industry, omitting nothing, is one with total social delusion" (Adorno, 1984, 206). Adorno attributes this to the audience's inability for critical self-reflection and to the lack of autonomy on the part of the filmmaker.

Further Reading

On marxistic aesthetics in general:

Fredric Jameson (ed.), *Aesthetics and politics*, London, Verso, 1980
(Originally published by New Left Books in 1977).

This is a remarkable reader on debates between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno about expressionism and realism. Fredric Jameson has provided the different debates with excellent introductions, both historical and theoretical. He also concludes this concise anthology with a series of reflections in which the Marxist debates are put in a proper perspective. This reader is highly to be recommended from a didactical point of view.

See for a much more extensive, but also a very useful anthology:

Maynard Solomon (ed.), *Marxism and art. Essays classic and contemporary*, Detroit, MI.: Wayne
    State University Press, 1979 (Originally published in 1973).

Some of the many introductions to the field of Marxist aesthetics which are recommendable:

Dave Laing, *The Marxist theory of art*, Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press; Boulder, Colorado:
    Westview Press, 1986 (Originally published in 1978).
Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and modernism: an historical study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and
    Adorno*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984 (Originally published in 1982).
Pauline Johnson, *Marxist aesthetics: the foundations within everyday life for an emancipated
    consciousness*, London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.
Andrew. Benjamin, *Problems of modernity*: Adorno and Benjamin, London and New York:
    Routledge, 1991 (Originally published in 1989).

Clint Burnham, *The Jamesonian unconscious: the aesthetics of Marxist theory*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.

Tony Bennett, *Formalism and marxism*, London/New York: Routledge, 2003 (Originally published by Methuen in 1979).

More spefically on literature:

Raymond Williams, *Marxism and literature*, Oxford, in Oxford University Press, 1977.

Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and literary critism*, with a new introduction by the author, Berkeley, CA, Routledge, 2002 (Originally published in 1976).

Francis Mulhern (ed.), *Contemporary Marxist literary criticism*, London/New York, in Longman, 1992.

Lukács' writing which is relevant for this chapter:

Georg Lukács, *The meaning of contemporary realism*, London: Merlin Press, 1963.

Georg Lukács, *Realism in our time: literature and the class struggle*, New York, in Harper and Row, 1971.

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Chapter 9
The Phenomenological Perspective

9.1 Introduction

In discussing Giacometti's struggle with perception in the first part of this book, I referred to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961). No other philosopher has devoted as much attention to the complexity of perception as Merleau-Ponty. His main work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, which was published in 1945 and brought him instant fame, is entirely devoted to this subject matter. As the title of the book indicates, Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception is carried out in a phenomenological perspective. Since Merleau-Ponty was closely related to French existentialism, his approach is sometimes termed "existential phenomenology".

The most important predecessor of French existentialism is undoubtedly Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), who is considered one of the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century. Heidegger's reputation is largely due to his main work, *Being and Time*, which appeared in 1927 and is regarded a milestone. Heidegger's influence on French existentialism, and in particular on Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), can not be overestimated. But there is more. His impact on French thinking of difference (in particular that of Derrida and Lyotard, which will be the focus of our attention later in this third part) is considerable. So Heidegger's work is still very much alive today, despite its style of writing, which is generally deemed antiquated.

The interest for current thinking of difference is not the only reason why I now touch upon Heidegger. Even though the works of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are quite distinct, they have both been influenced by phenomenology. What interests us here is the phenomenological perspective that serves, as it were, like a bridge between the classic and modern viewpoints that we encountered in Parts I and II and poststructuralism or the thinking of difference, that will constitute the main body of this Part III.

Characteristic of the phenomenological perspective is the attention for the artwork as it presents itself in experience. Phenomenology stands for a philosophical method in which the essence of art is no longer predetermined. After all, one of the big drawbacks of the classic and modern theories we discussed earlier, is that the work of art itself disappears behind the concept that is proposed. It dissolves into

the concept; it no longer offers resistance; it loses its materiality, its palpable presence. Perhaps Adorno, who gave a great deal of thought to the influence of technique on art, is the exception that confirms the rule. Indeed, even in formalism where the work of art comes first and foremost, it is not the material aspect, but the *pure form* of the work of art to which exclusive rights are assigned. Even in the Kantian approach, the dichotomy of matter and form is upheld; the aesthetic experience concerns pure form alone, and not its material appearance! To Kant, for example, the object of the aesthetic judgment is not the material appearance of a color, but rather its formal quality as "isochronous vibrations of the ether". Actually, from a phenomenological viewpoint, this is impossible. What counts above all is the original experience of the artwork, that is, the artwork as a "phenomenon" that presents itself to our consciousness *immediately* (without the interference of any presupposition). The original, unfiltered, and prereflexive experience is not exclusive to the subject as Kant believed; rather it creates an openness to the materiality of the artwork, its material appearance, and palpable presence.

Undoubtedly, the attention in phenomenology for the materiality of the work of art anticipates poststructuralism. Indeed, Lyotard's first book was an introduction to phenomenology. But there are great differences between phenomenology and poststructuralism. Presumably the most important one is that the return of phenomenology to an original, immediate experience of things is still regarded by poststructuralism as a metaphysics of presence, a thinking in terms of origin, which is no longer considered legitimate. One of Derrida's first works, *The Voice and the Phenomenon*, concerns a radical critique of thinking in terms of presence and according to him, the works of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the founder of phenomenology, still echo this. To Derrida, Husserl's works still embody an age-old metaphysical tradition that he exposes as *logocentric* and subjects to a thorough deconstruction. I will return to this later on.

The foregoing already shows that the attention to the *original* experience of the work of art is a derivative of a common phenomenological viewpoint formulated by Husserl. According to Husserl, the alpha and omega of phenomenology is the return "to the things themselves" (*zu den Sachen selbst*). Husserl's well-known phrase sets the tone for *any* phenomenological approach however different it may be from others in its elaboration. Incidentally, this does not concern things as they are, but rather, things as they appear, i.e., *phenomena*, insofar as they appear in and to my consciousness. Hence, the name "phenomenology". According to Husserl, such a return to things themselves, to phenomena, can only take place through a *universal reduction*, which Husserl also terms "phenomenological *epochè*". In Greek this word means "suspension", "to put in brackets". We need to bracket all of our presuppositions, prejudices, assumptions, and self-evident truths, according to Husserl, because only then will we be able to experience things as they really are in the way they present themselves to our consciousness. The only thing that counts is the consciousness of the phenomena. Husserl calls this consciousness "*transcendental consciousness*".

The quest for such an immediate, pre-given contact with things themselves precedes all conceptualization: it is pre-conceptual and pre-reflexive and it requires us

to put aside all philosophical presuppositions. After all, traditional philosophy blurs our view of things as well. Thus, Husserl deems the original experience as a way of *schauen*, "seeing", or "immediate intuition", that presents things in their original self-evidence, their absolute virginity, and absolute presence.

Three important comments need to be made with regard to this "seeing". First, it always presupposes an intentional act, i.e. a directedness towards an object. It is thanks to the intentional act that perception is first possible. Transcendental consciousness is thus always intentional: only through consciousness and its intentionality can things become meaningful phenomena. In other words, it is consciousness that constitutes the phenomena, and not the other way around. This is the reason why Husserl's phenomenology is often regarded a philosophy of consciousness.

Second, "seeing" presupposes a subject, not an empirical subject or a tangible or ordinary subject, but what Husserl calls a "*transcendental subject or ego*". Also the transcendental subject is rooted in consciousness, i.e. in self-consciousness. This also explains why it is sometimes held incorrectly against Husserl that he maintains a solipsism, where only ("solus") the self ("ipse") or the self-consciousness is real; in other words, where self-consciousness is the basis of all reality!

Furthermore – and this is the third comment – Husserl's "seeing" is not so much concerned with a special or unique thing, but ultimately with the essence, or "eidos" of things. In addition to the phenomenological reduction, Husserl speaks of an *eidetic reduction*. Through such an eidetic reduction, one uses imagination to apply changes to the unique object in order to investigate what changes affect the essence of the unique object. Using his method of free variation – a kind of thought experiment – Husserl progresses from the unique object to the type of objects to which the unique object belongs. In other words, he attempts to bring the characteristics of the object to light without which the type of objects can no longer be thought of as the same objects. Ultimately, this concerns the *Wesensschau*, the "seeing or intuition of the essence" or fundamental nature of the object.

The above is indicative of Husserl's influence on the thinking of both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, though both authors depart in their own distinct ways from Husserl's phenomenology. A case in point is Husserls *Wesensschau*. Although both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty were still looking for the essence of art – a quest that continues to keep them in the tradition of some of the classical and modern theories that we have seen earlier – it is precisely the phenomenological road that leads to a notion of essence that starkly contrasts that of Husserl's. They do not think of essence as something transparent and univocal in the way Husserl presented it; rather, they speak of an unfathomability and ambivalence of essence (and of truth) that already announces the philosophy of difference. Heidegger, as we will see later, consistently regards truth as "unconcealment", as something which is only to a certain extent "unconcealed" and therefore also partly hidden: truth reveals itself because it hides itself and while it hides itself. Similarly, Merlau-Ponty presupposes the invisible within the visible: the visible indirectly reveals the invisible. Thus, the philosophy of the essence as a philosophy of transparent presence and identity is no longer sustained as was the case with Husserl. There is always a matter of unfathomability, of absence that cannot be completely fixated or instituted. In this sense,

Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty decidedly move away from Husserl and anticipate the criticism of self-present truth that is central to the philosophy of difference.

Heidegger and Merlau-Ponty's attention for the unfathomability of essence is joined with an interest in the material quality of the work of art. The emphasis on the thing-like quality of the work of art (Heidegger) and the bodily nature of perception (Merleau-Ponty) seems a reaction against Husserl's tendency of searching the essence of things in an increasing abstraction that leaves the thing-like quality and bodily nature far behind. Moreover, this unusual marriage between the unfathomability and materiality offers a philosophical explanation or a foundation for the inexpressible nature of the aesthetic experience. The inexpressible was left unexplained in formalism: it appeared out of the blue, so to speak, as a *deus ex machina*. Pure form, which was supposed to remain completely empty and without content, gave way to a metaphysical experience that lent an inexpressible aura to the work of art lighting up in the pure form. It is precisely because Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty look at the work of art from the point of view of its unfathomable materiality that they are able to establish and explain its indefinable and unspeakable nature through the material appearance that comprises the work of art, i.e., the material appearance from which it illuminates and hides its secrets simultaneously. In this way, they are able to give shape to the *enigma of art* that was left completely unexplored in formalism.

Both Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's works are actually early yet persistent attempts to unriddle the "language of art". This "language" is at first a "language" embedded in the materiality of the tangible medium, that is, a language that precedes all verbal language, i.e., one that is "pre-lingual". However, by exploring the medium and investigating the way in which the work of art as a thing and/or body speaks to the subject, they anticipate semiotics and even poststructuralism in many ways. Moreover, both authors seem to become slowly aware that verbal or natural language might be the medium *par excellence* of all art. Both philosophers have taken the road to language. This "linguistic turn" that bears its unique marks in both authors' works precedes the important role that natural language – written language in particular – will play in the philosophy of difference.

Despite these similarities, however, there is still a world of difference between Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. They each have their own distinct tone of speech, their own expressive power and philosophical style, despite the fact that both tend to prefer a poetic rather than an analytical line of reasoning. Heidegger's tone is related to the mythical primal speech of Hölderlin while Merleau-Ponty's style of writing is permeated with the typical French *esprit de finesse* that has its roots in the French novel. Additionally, there are considerable differences with regard to both authors' philosophical positions, which will be addressed as we go along in this chapter beginning with Heidegger (Section 9.2) and followed by Merleau-Ponty (Section 9.3). In discussing both authors, we will make use of two essays that are regarded as fundamental texts in the literature of aesthetics: Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, and Merleau-Ponty's unsurpassed *Eye and Mind*.

The Origin of the Work of Art came about in the 1930s in the form of three lectures, but was published sometime around 1950. Gadamer described the essay as a "philosophical sensation"; it most certainly has had an extraordinary impact on

aesthetics in later years. In this text Heidegger's broader philosophical perspective crystallizes into a tenacious and profound quest for the origin of the work of art that Heidegger approaches from its material and thing-like quality. Heidegger's extremely complex way of disentangling the origin, essence, and truth about the work of art ultimately leads to the thesis that all art is in fact poetry. As such, his thesis can be seen as a result of his fascination with Hölderlin's poetry and might even be influenced by Hegel's idea that all art is the product of poetic imagination, broadly understood.

While Heidegger's essay can be read as a somewhat independent text, this is not the case with Merleau-Ponty's *Eye and Mind*. In this essay, which was written shortly before Merleau-Ponty's sudden death and first published in book form in 1964, his entire philosophy culminates in a compact, subtle and far-reaching attempt to clarify the essence of perception in art – the art of painting in particular. The magic of seeing, the secret science on which pictorial art is based, is particularly central to this essay. Still, the essay remains fairly incomprehensible to people who are not familiar with Merleau-Ponty's other works and aesthetic texts. For this reason, his broader phenomenology will be considered in discussing this basic essay on aesthetics. Finally, the section on the artist's studio will be devoted to Cézanne (Section 9.4) on whom Merleau-Ponty wrote an important essay at an early stage, that anticipates his later philosophy of art while it also makes it more concrete and clear.

9.2   Heidegger and the Origin of the Work of Art

In his *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger instantly places the movement of his thought in ontological perspective. His concept of "origin" is "that from where and through which a thing is, what it is, and how it is". Therefore, the question as to the origin of the work of art immediately leads to questioning the source of its nature, which, in its turn, refers to *Being*.

The emphasis on Being is not in the least coincidental. In *Being and Time*, his main work, Heidegger had already argued that since ancient times, Western philosophy has been characterized by an oblivion of Being (*Seinsvergessenheit*): all the time, the question was about the being of beings, not about the "Being of the beings". The basis of all beings was sought in a being whether this was the "Unmoved Mover" (Aristotle), the "Absolute Spirit" (Hegel), or simply God or the Subject. Heidegger calls this type of ontology *onto-theology*. In his return to the roots of Greek thought, especially pre-Socratic thought, Heidegger again wants to ask questions about the Being of the beings. He calls the distinction between beings and Being the *ontological difference*. In contrast to the onto-theology, attention to the Being of the beings as the forgotten basis of metaphysics he terms *fundamental ontology*. His *Being and Time*, regarded by many as a milestone of modern philosophy, is devoted entirely to the elaboration of fundamental ontology.

Heidegger's essay is very systematic and clearly composed and at the same embedded in a typical Heideggerian argumentation. In all respects, Heidegger is a

self-willed philosopher who finds his way as his thoughts develop and who does not shun new words; in fact, he invents a whole new language that comes very close to poetic powers of expression. The road his mind takes, the quest itself, is often more important than the result or the answer. The philosopher is constantly 'on the road' like someone who wanders through the woods trying to find his way or the way out. In that respect, it is very significant that "The Origin" first appeared in a book entitled *Holzwege*. The old German word, *Holzweg*, literally means 'wood path' or 'trail'. Heidegger says that the word refers to overgrown paths that become lost somewhere in the middle of nowhere in the untrodden ('im Unbegangenen'). Incidentally, the German expression "auf dem Holzweg sein" means to be 'off the beaten track' (the English title!), to err, or to lose one's way. They are roads that lead nowhere and for that very reason evoke what has not been thought or questioned before.

This wandering way of thinking through labyrinths, which is reminiscent of Nietzsche, leads to a line of argument that is circular rather than linear. Ariadne's thread is picked up again and again; thinking is constantly resumed. As a result, Heidegger's philosophy becomes difficult to summarize. One needs to stray from the straight and narrow, so to speak, and follow him on his cul-de-sacs to unexpectedly stumble on subtle and often far-reaching insights. Or, as Nietzsche explains in his "Epilogue" to *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, the labyrinthical thinker rises up as a different person after having lost himself "with more questions than before – in particular with the will to ask more, deeper, sterner, harder, maliciously, quietly than has ever been asked before on this earth" (see Nietzsche 1964).

Still, it is possible to distinguish a number of steps in Heidegger's essay that allow us to find our way in his reflections on art. The essay consists of the following five steps: an introduction, three sections, and an epilogue. The *Introduction* points out that the question of the origin and/or the essence of the work of art constitutes a circular argument. Here, Heidegger gives a foretaste by interpreting the work of art as an allegory. In the first section entitled *The Thing and the Work*, he addresses the *specific* distinctions between a thing, equipment, and a work. This line of thinking, which starts off with a long discussion on the thing-like quality of the thing, ultimately leads to an insight into the essence of the work that simultaneously unravels the essence of the work of art. The second section, *The Work and Truth*, further discloses the essence of the work (of art) in terms of a struggle between world and earth. The third section, *Truth and Art*, examines art as a way of "setting the truth to work". The *Afterword* tackles the problem of Hegel's aesthetics, especially his thesis on "the end of art", and argues that beauty cannot be distinguished from truth.

9.2.1   Circular Course

Heidegger begins his *Introduction* by stating that questioning the origin of the artwork leads to a circular course. The question of what makes a work of art what it is, is answered by pointing to the artist's activity. The next question then, is what makes the artist that what he is? He is an artist because of his work. In other words, while

the artist is the origin of the work, the work is in turn the origin of the artist. But perhaps a way out of this circular course can be found when we consider that both artist and work of art are what they are because of that to which they owe their name, i.e., art. Art then becomes the origin of both artist and work of art. But when we ask what art is, the concept "art" seems to resemble an empty box, which sends us back to the works of art and the artists who give flesh and blood to the realm of "art".

An analytical philosopher would probably become quite nervous or even desperate when confronted with such a circular argument. After all, common sense and logic require that circular thinking be avoided. But to Heidegger, this kind of circular thinking becomes interesting because it promises new perspectives. We should not avoid circular reasoning or try to break in it using artificial means. Such an intervention would only lead to enforcing a definition of art at a point when we don't even know if such a thing as "art" exists. Such a definition runs ahead of things. Instead, suggests Heidegger, we should look for the essence of art where it actually prevails, i.e., in the work of art itself. Art is present in the work of art, it "presences" in the work of art, as Heidegger puts it.

But even if I take the work of art as my starting point and try to determine the essence of art by comparing certain works of art at hand, how will I know that these are indeed works of art when I do not know in advance what art is? Should I then begin with a definition of art after all in order to find which works match that definition? Such a definition, however, is in turn dependent on what we consider as works of art *beforehand* and *as such*. In other words, neither the selection nor the description of works of art nor the choice for any definition offers a solution.

There is no other way except to complete the circular course of reason. Heidegger does not think of this as a necessary evil or an admission of weakness, but rather as an expression of power. Only when a philosopher embarks on such a path does he show that he is truly a philosopher and that he participates in the "feast of thinking". Thus, he reconfirms the labyrinthic and circular nature of proper thinking. "Not only is the main step from work to art, like the step from art to work, a circle; every individual step we try to attempt circles within this circle" (p. 3).

Heidegger's starting point is not just the work of art, but also the conclusion that all works of art possess a thingly quality. Heidegger assumes the materiality of the work of art as the basis for his explorations, e.g., tone in music, sound in poetry, color in painting, and so on. At the same time, he is aware that the materiality of the work of art signifies something; it is *allegory*. Through its materiality the work of art brings something else into conjunction with the thing. "*Symballein*" from the Greek means "to bring something in conjunction with". The work of art is a symbol.

Allegory and symbol have traditionally been used to characterize works of art. Heidegger, however, does not want to lose touch with the materiality that enables the establishment of allegory and symbol, i.e., the thing-like quality of the work, the basis onto which everything else including the true nature of the work of art is grafted. After all, is it not the thing-like quality of the work of art that is the artist's exclusive privilege? Heidegger returns incidentally to the etymological meaning of the word "art", that being "craft", "skillfulness", or "to create"!

9.2.2   Oblivion of the Thing

Heidegger is thus first of all in search of the thing insofar as it is a thing, i.e., the pure thing, the thing as such. Only when we know what the mere thing is, are we able to see in what respect the work is distinguished from the thing. Asking what the thing actually is, seems, at first sight, completely unnecessary. The thing is so familiar to us that we do not suspect anything problematic about it. Nothing is, however, further from the truth: it appears to be extremely difficult to arrive at a representation of the thing as thing. So, in Western philosophy one is confronted with a ubiquitous oblivion of the thing, in which philosophers continuously lost sight of the thing as such!

To illustrate this, Heidegger discusses three conceptions of the thing that have been developed during the course of Western philosophy and are now widely accepted. They are the thing as (1) "carrier of properties", the thing as (2) "unit of multiple perceptions", and the thing as (3) "formed matter".

The first conception, *the thing as bearer of properties*, conceives of the thing as a substance, a substrate, around which the properties or characteristics of the thing have gathered. In Greek, substrate ('*to hypokeimenon*') is considered the core of things, i.e., that, which has always been there and that is the ground of everything. Hence, the substrate is seen as *carrier* ('*ta symbebèkota*') of properties that are inextricably connected to it and that always appear together with it. For example, a granite block never appears as a simple substrate, but always endowed with the same properties: it is hard, heavy, extended, massive, formless, rough, colored, etc.

The original Greek interpretation only deals with the structure of the thing itself. It expresses a basic experience that concerns the Being of the beings, or, in this case, the Being of things in their presence. In later Roman-Latin philosophy something remarkable happened, says Heidegger. The translation of the Greek *hypokeimenon* into *subjectum*, and of *symbebèkos* into *accidens*, is anything but harmless. These translations move away from the fundamental experience of things to the mere verbalisation of things! The Latin version is an elementary proposition or statement, where a subject ascribes properties to the thing by means of a predicate. To what extent does this syntax answer to the structure of the thing? Is this not a case of oblivion of the thing? Are not both the structure of the thing and the sentence structure descendants from a common and more original source? At any rate, Heidegger rejects this conception of the thing because it does not only apply to the pure thing but to any being. This way, we will never grasp the thingliness of the thing as such, i.e., the essence of the thing that distinguishes it from other beings!

This first conception of the thing already indicates how difficult it is to trace the thing as such. It seems we got so used to things that we stopped wondering about them. We have lost our original wonder over things, so that things do not confront us anymore with their strangeness. They no longer surprise or astound us as must have been the case at one point in the history of mankind. On the contrary, it is as if we assault and violate things with our concepts and discourses. How can we avoid such an assault? How can we free ourselves from this violence, and remove

the conceptual grid that separates us from the things? How can we approach things in such a way that they appear to us as they actually are?

The second conception of the thing, *the thing as unit of multiple sensations*, wants to give room to the things and take hold of them as they *immediately* present themselves to our senses and sensation. This notion fits in with the original meaning of *aisthèsis*, i.e., sensation, a direct, aesthetic experience of things. But, asks Heidegger, do we actually experience the things as a flood of sensations, for example, as separate sounds and noises? When we hear a storm go by, we do not *at first* hear a flood of sensations and *then* the storm, rather, we *immediately* hear the storm howling in the chimney. We hear a door being shut in a house, never just the sound of it. The things themselves are much closer to us than the sensations. Better yet, if we would only focus on sensations, then they would stand in the way of our experience of the thing. Heidegger's idea may also be expressed as follows: someone who only listens to the quality of a sound recording no longer listens to the music; he removes himself away from the thing as he listens to it.

While the first conception of the thing removes the thing from us, the second conception puts us to close to it. In both cases, the thing disappears from our field of vision. The third conception of the thing, *the thing as formed matter*, which is as old as the two previous notions, attempts to compensate for the exaggerations of the other two. It aims for a synthesis. That which constitutes the steady and pithy character of things (*hypokeimenon*!) as well as their ability to raise sensations (*aisthēsis*!) is the materiality of the thing. The determination of the thing as matter (*hylè*) already takes the form (*morphè*) into account. Here, the thing appears immediately as "formed matter", i.e., as a synthesis of matter and form.

None of the prevailing conceptions of the thing seems more convincing than the notion of the thing as "formed matter". In philosophy, the distinction between matter and form seems prevalent. Heidegger even emphasizes that it is the conceptual framework par excellence of all theories of art and aesthetics! Was it necessary to take this long detour to arrive at such an obvious conclusion? Still, our detour shows us that we should also look critically at the third conception of the thing, because it does not enable us either to distinguish the pure thing from other beings. "Form and content are the commonplace concepts under which anything and everything can be subsumed" (p. 9).

Heidegger's last comment is somewhat surprising. In passing and without explanation, he suddenly puts the conceptual pair form-matter on a par with form-content. Nothing seems to justify this, not even the immediate continuation of his argument that again focuses on the form-matter structure. Would this be a mistake, a printing error, a blind spot? Heidegger implicitly states that matter and content are exchangeable variables. But… are form and content according to the third conception of the thing, not in need of matter in order to express themselves? Or does Heidegger mean to say that the third notion implies a tendency to forget about the materiality of the thing itself, because it is always identified with content and disappears behind it?

According to Heidegger, the oblivion of the thing in the third conception is indeed the consequence of the fact that one assumes matter to be *in the service* of form. Form determines as it were which matter should be used. In order to make a

table, I need matter that is at least hard enough. If I want to make a shoe, I need matter that is both supple and sturdy. These are all examples of "things" that are fabricated and made by human hands. The thing as formed matter is constantly included in the perspective of what is at hand, and can be used by the subject, in short, what may be of use as equipment or tool. Because the thing is conceived here as *equipment (Zeug)*, the pure thing once again disappears behind the horizon. Again, we meet up with the oblivion of the thing!

At this point, Heidegger's text takes an important turn. The tool, he postulates, takes up a middle position between the actual thing and the work of art. The tool, for example a pair of shoes, is a thing but it is not a pure thing, because it serves a certain purpose. It is not a work of art but it is still a work, because it is made by human hands. And because it serves something, it lacks the self-satisfaction that is characteristic of both the actual thing and the actual work. The pure thing is then different from the work because it is not made by human hands.

Still, it is not because of the middle position of the tool that the form-matter structure was thought to be the fundamental structure of each being. This ubiquitous conception was further reinforced by the biblical belief that all being has been created, that is, made by God. In that sense, each being is a tool in Gods hands, "formed matter"; nature itself is also regarded from this perspective. After religion no longer dominated philosophy, this conception of the thing remained prevalent and self-evident, even in Kant's transcendental philosophy.

Heidegger already argued the oblivion of the thing in *Being and Time*, but there it was raised within the context of the analysis of Dasein ("*Being there*", roughly "human being"). The *Dasein* shapes itself an *Umwelt*, an "environment". The *Dasein* shapes itself a world, in which the "environment" is seen as an equipment, a tool, as a semantic field that lends coherence to all that which is at hand. The "environment" is constantly considered by the *Dasein* as something with a function, a "because of". However, the "because of" in which the world as *Umwelt* is founded, is conceived here one-sidedly from the point of view of a subject that shapes meaning. As a result, the world does not present itself in the *Umwelt* in its original essence, disallowing an encounter with nature as such. In the world as *Umwelt*, a forest becomes a place for timber extraction, a mountain becomes a rock quarry pit, a river becomes a source of water power, and the wind, finally, becomes "wind for the sails". Forest, mountain, river, and wind are no longer experienced in their inexhaustible differentness and strangeness. Hence, in what Heidegger terms the *Umweltliche* (*the* "environmentallness"), we may speak again of the oblivion of the thing.

9.2.3 Van Gogh's Shoes

Our discussion of the three prevalent conceptions of the thing indicates how difficult it is to trace the thing as such. Time and again the pure thing withdraws from our conceptions. It is constantly assailed, removed away, dissolved in shrouds. One wonders if it would be easier just to let the thing be what it is. Apparently, it is not

that easy. On the contrary, it seems a most difficult task. The pure thing is so inconspicuous that it persistently withdraws from our attention and our thinking. Would not its tendency to withdraw, to rest within itself, would not this strangeness and seclusion comprise the essence of the thing? If this is the case, then we should not force the road to the thingly character of the thing, and refrain from violently taking hold of it.

It is for this reason that Heidegger aims to unveil the equipmentality of the equipment before anything else. Perhaps, it is no coincidence that in Western philosophy the equipment became the model of choice for the thing. This being, the equipment, is very close to man because he fabricates it himself. Heidegger takes the hint and pursues the equipmentality of the thing by not heaping everything together under the denominator of the equipment as has been done in Western philosophy, but rather to trace its distinction between the thingliness of the thing, the workly character of the work.

Heidegger refers to a painting by Van Gogh that depicts a pair of peasant shoes (see Fig. 9.1). In a famous and lyrical passage, Heidegger describes the painting in such a way as to evoke the thingly character of the thing:

> From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. The leather is sticky with the dampness and grease of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. The shoes are pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth* and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself (pp. 33–34).

Fig. 9.1   Vincent van Gogh, *A Pair of Boots*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 30 × 41 cm. Museum of Art, Baltimore. Copyright Baltimore Museum of Art: Cone Collection. (*see Color Plates*)

Based on this vocation, Heidegger first permeates the essence of the equipment. The equipment is characterized by its serviceability, but that in turn is founded on reliability (*Verlässlichkeit*). It is thanks to this reliability that the peasant woman is in contact with "the silent call of the earth". It is thanks to the reliability of the equipment that the peasant women is able to rely on her shoes without having to give it any thought or attention, her world is secured; the equipment belongs to the earth. The essence of the equipment, the being of the equipment, the equipmentality character of the equipment is situated in reliability; its servitude is founded therein.

In the meantime, the work kept its end up. Thanks to the work of art, Van Gogh's painting, we have traced the equipment-like character of the equipment. By doing so, we have found the essence of the work of art as well. The painting signaled what the footgear essentially *is*. Here, truth means what the Greeks termed *alètheia*, literally, "unconcealment", i.e., the unhiddenness of its being. The painting presents to us an equipment in the unconcealment of the Being. It shows us that art allows truth to set itself to work. For that reason, Heidegger describes the essence of art as "setting the truth to work".

9.2.4   Battle Between World and Earth

How does truth come about in a work of art? And how does the work of art unveil both the equipment-like character of the equipment and the workly character of the work? In other words, how is truth *set to work* in the work of art? Here, Heidegger refers to a Greek temple and demonstrates the essence of the work of art as a battle between *world* and *earth*.

The temple is situated as an edifice in a rocky valley full of chasms and crevices. On the one hand, it harbors and hides the figure of God; on the other hand and simultaneously, it lets God come forward into the domain through the open arcade. The domain is regarded as a sacred place and is therefore secluded. When God asserts his own presence, a "world" lights up in his reflection. God is present in and through the temple by standing out in the seclusion of the sacred ground, in which a historical people may mirror its destiny.

However, the temple construction built on rocky soil not only opens up a "world" but also places it back on "earth" at the same time. It is not the sunlight that enables us to see the temple, but the light of the day, the vastness of the sky, the darkness of the night. The environment only comes to light because of the temple and its magnificent stonework. It is through the stonework that "…the tree and the grass, the eagle and the bull, the snake and the cricket gain contrast and appear as that which they are" (p. 33).

The temple thus sets up a world, but by doing so, it also presents the earth to us; it lets things be what they are. It shows the earth as that in which the world unveils itself, but at the same time secludes itself, folds back, retracts, and veils. It shows the earth as that in which the world unfolds and at the same time covers up. Indeed, it shows the earth as that in which the world *darkens* and through its darkening,

lights up, unfolds, opens, and declares itself. It is for that reason that Heidegger emphasizes that the temple rests on rocky soil and brings out "the *darkness* of its unhewn and unforced bearing" from the rock. The "darkness" of its being anchored in the earth enables the temple to withstand the storm and enables it to *show* the violence of the storm. The being, the environment, and all things appear as they really are because the earth takes back and holds everything that arises. Heidegger therefore writes in his self-willed and somewhat enigmatic style: "…in that which rises, the earth be's as that which holds".

The way in which the world relates to earth demands some explanation. While the world is identified with an unfolding and lighting up, the earth is associated with a folding back and a hiding. Still, this does not just concern an opposition between world and earth, since both belong together, are inextricably connected, and depend on each other. The world is never present without the earth: its lighting up takes place through and is based in hiding. Earth is never just earth: it never just hides; rather, as hiding, it is that which reveals itself in the openness of the world, which it holds! The world is anchored in earth; earth extends itself in and through the world. World and earth, at once for and against each other, form a "battle" that only happens insofar as truth takes place as the *archetypical battle between lighting up and hiding*.

Finally, the work of art sets this battle alight. The work of art literally deploys truth. It not only brings about a world, but also establishes earth. According to Heidegger, both functions are essential characteristics of the work; they embody the workly character of the work of art. Heidegger emphasizes that the work is not only in complete peace with itself, but also that this peace includes movement as well; indeed, an extreme emotion. In its resting on earth, the world tries to elevate and rise above earth. As that which opens, it disallows all that is secluded. The earth, as that which holds, in turn tends to annex the world and keep it hidden. Still, there is reciprocity in this battle, a mutual dependency. Earth cannot do without the openness of the world if it wants to appear as that which encloses. The world cannot rid itself of the earth if it wants to establish itself as realm for any essential destiny. The work of art consists of this archetypical battle between world and earth, between lighting up and hiding. In fighting this battle, truth comes about!

9.2.5   The Inscrutability of the Thing as Such

What about the thing as such, the thingly character of the thing that Heidegger so desperately pursued at the start of his essay? Again, the work of art has put us on the right track, unexpectedly and in passing, as it were. The example of the temple showed that things only appear in the way they are through the temple. The beings, the environment, the things only showed themselves in the way they really are by folding back into themselves; therefore, they were never "lost" or "used up" in the openness of the world. The temple kept the earth in the openness of the world, but left the earth as earth, i.e., as that which unfolds everything, but that holds and retains itself in its inexhaustibility.

It is exactly in this inexhaustibility of the earth that we arrive at the essence of the thing, the thing as such. The pure thing is that which, like earth, only shows itself insofar as it is hidden and retreats. It is that which shows itself on the grounds of its hiding: *it is unhidden and hidden at the same time*. The thing as such therefore offers resistance to the openness, to the usability. The thing as such is that which, just like earth, essentially secludes, closes, and shuts off. The things are what they really are when they, like earth, are "forced to be nothing else" and freed from their serviceability as equipment. Things indeed only appear as pure "matter" in their quality of being equipment, and they disappear in their usability. The iron disappears in the anvil, wood disappears in the modular kitchen, and brick disappears in the house. Things only exist as "material" and only in the service of the "equipment". The pure thing is not there *because* of something different; it stands and rests, like earth, in itself. The things, in the way they really are, are therefore not merely present, but absent and insubstantial at the same time: like earth, they draw back in their inscrutability.

9.2.6 Art and Truth Art as Dichtung

We should not forget that the truth about the things was conveyed to us through the work of art. It is the knowing about the workly character of the work that put us on the track of the thingly character of the thing. This is not without meaning because in philosophy, as we saw earlier, the prevalent conceptions of the thing always violated the pure thing. It is only in the work of art where we meet things the way they really are, i.e., forced to be nothing else. The work of art gives shape to the truth; it "uses" the earth without wasting or abusing it as "material"; indeed, it allows it to come to itself. Therefore, the work of art allows things to be what they are. It snatches them from their familiar and daily usability, allowing them to appear as that which is not-familiar, and not-daily – the absolute unknown, the inscrutable.

It is precisely because of this inscrutability, this unspeakable character that Heidegger manages to relate the truth of art to poetry in a meaningful way. The truth of the being, the battle between world and earth, and between lighting and hiding takes place insofar as it is *poeticized*. All art, therefore, is "*Dichtung*", poetry. Thanks to poetry and language, the being is first brought to light as being. Where language is missing, for example, in the being of a stone, a plant, or an animal, there can be no openness of the being. Only through language, which names the being, can the being appear in its unhiddenness. Poetic expressiveness calls the being *from* its Being *to* its Being. This calling, 'saying' or saga (*Sage*) is that which gives shape to both the sayable and unsayable as such. Furthermore – and this sounds very German: "Such saying stamps the concepts of the essence of a historical people, that is to say, of its role in the history of the world".

Language is not regarded here as a means of communication, or as something that we simply use to make ourselves heard, but as the medium par excellence in

which poetry, and therefore, the essence of art, has a history. Poetry is not just verse, but the essence of all art because in all other arts, for instance in painting and sculpture, the clearing (*Lichtung*) of the being already imperceptibly takes place in and through language. There is only openness in these arts through naming and saying. They are separate forms of poetry. Still, poetry itself remains the original form of *Dichtung* to Heidegger because it stands closest to the founding origin, the creative source of art.

Here, the deployment of truth in art takes on an explicit historical dimension. Art being "poetical" means that it is "founding", "establishing". It embodies the "establishment" of truth. Establishing is understood in three distinct meanings here: as endowing, as founding, and as the starting of something. Establishment, however, is always based in a way of preserving. Despite the fact that the establishment as superabundance and endowment subverts whatever is familiar and accepted, it is based in that in which the human existence as historical entity is already thrown. This is why Heidegger conceives of the establishment that is called "creating" (*schöpfend*) as "scooping up (*schöpfen*) water from the well" rather than as the genius achievement of a sovereign subject in the way modern subjectivism would have it. Similarly, he recognizes in the act of seeing the establishment as the starting of something. It has the immediacy of what we call a start, a commencement, but the immediacy must be prepared long before; at the same time, it includes, through hiding, the future as well!

To Heidegger, the German romantic poet Hölderlin embodies the commencing character of art most of all. It is not without reason that Heidegger refers to Hölderlin at the end of his essay when he wonders whether art can still be an origin to us or merely an empty shell. Hölderlin points to the way out poetically as follows:

> *Schwer verlässt*
> *Was nähe dem Ursprung wohnet, den Ort*
> *Leaving with difficulty*
> *That which resides near the origin, the place* (From: "*Wanderung* [The Journey], own translation")

It is hard not to underestimate the importance of Hölderlin's works for the crystallization and development of Heidegger's philosophy and aesthetics. Although Heidegger does not discuss Hölderlin any further in the essay, to him his poetry refers to the truth in its origin, in the way it was apparent in Greek tragedies. The nearness of the divine is forever lost. The gods have escaped, but Hölderlin's poetry anticipates a new revelation of the divine. In a time when Nietzsche declares the death of God, Hölderlin nonetheless shows truth as that which is sacred. Hölderlin's time is not only that of ungodliness, but also of the hope that Germania will once be the country of another divine day. The time of the poet, says Heidegger in his lecture, *Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry*, is the time of the gods who have fled and the god who is coming (Heidegger, 2002, p. 64).

One can hardly avoid suspicion realizing that Heidegger gave this lecture in 1936, at a time when National Socialism already ruled Germany. But the significance of Hölderlin to Heidegger's thinking may also be explained from and following *The Origin of the Work of Art*. One of the leitmotivs in Heidegger's lecture from

1936 is the last verse from the poem, *Andenken* (Remembrance), which reads as follows: *Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter* ("However, what remains is founded by the poets"). This persistent and enduring founding and establishing is done in poetry, which essentially, in its quality of being the "proto-language" of an historical people, first enables language itself. "Endurance" is founded in language. Poets name the gods; the essence of the things, the truth, and the being itself is evoked through them. The essence of poetry belongs to the borderline between heaven and earth, between the signs of the gods and the voice of the people. The poet is bound to the signs of the gods; he stands *in between* these signs and the sages in which a people can recognize its destiny. The poet is thrown into this borderline to proclaim on behalf of his people the truth that makes the world become world, history to become history, and the being to become Being.

It is no surprise that in Heidegger's epilogue of his essay on the origin of the work of art he fiercely resists an aesthetic notion according to which the experience of art is the be-all and end-all. An isolated aesthetic concept is not capable of understanding the essence of art. To Heidegger, beauty appears in conjunction with truth. He speaks of "a remarkable going together of beauty and truth". It explains why he has more sympathy for Hegel than for Kant. Confronted, however, with Hegel's verdict on the end of art, Heidegger poses the key question of whether or not "… art is still an essential and necessary method to let the truth happen that is decisive for our historical existence" (p. 68). Until then, Hegel's verdict will be in force. To answer Heidegger's question, however, we first need to contemplate the essence of art. In his essay on the origin of art, Heidegger embarks on that quest.

9.3   Merleau-Ponty on Perception in Art

Merleau-Ponty's views on perception in art are embedded in the broader outlines of his phenomenology. Similar to Husserl, his point of departure is the subject. However, Merleau-Ponty has another view on the subject, which has far-reaching consequences for his philosophical understanding of perception in general. This can best be illustrated as follows. In explaining the nature of phenomenology, Husserl refers to Descartes' methodic doubt, which led to the famous maxim, "I think, therefore I am" (Latin: *Ego cogito ergo sum*) that started modern philosophy. According to Descartes, I may doubt everything, except the fact that I am *able to doubt at all, and in doing so, I think*! So, it is only through thinking that I can acquire certainty about my own self, and, consequently, about the world's existence.

Husserl fundamentally disagrees with this assumption. The thinking subject does not precede the world; from the start, it is already related to the world. Consciousness always implies an object; one is conscious *of something*. It is intentional, rather than being empty; hence, it is always directed at the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, however, Husserl is still caught up too much in the Cartesian *cogito*. Husserl's *ego* remains too abstract, and is entirely dependent on a self-consciousness that assumes that the world only exists for the self. Husserl tends too much towards *solipsism*, a

philosophy of consciousness, and a transcendental idealism that is still rooted in Cartesian dualism.

9.3.1   The Subject as Body

In order to find a basis for the subject in the world, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that consciousness is rooted in the body. He plainly speaks about the "body-subject" (*corps-sujet*). There is not *first* consciousness, and *then* the body; before any and all consciousness our body is already situated in the world. In this pre-conscious, original experience, the subject is already intertwined with the object. Subject and object are inextricably connected in a primordial unity that comes with our body. Our body situates us in the world; it enables me to see the other, and to be seen by the other. It establishes a relation between myself and the world, and between myself and others. Therefore, it is also the source of intersubjectivity, and immediate communication.

Merleau-Ponty has expressed this primordial unity in various, often poetic ways. He emphasizes that the body belongs neither to a strictly material nor to a spiritual order. It is part of both. My body is not opposed to my consciousness; rather, it is its semi-obscure origin. He wants to pervade the deeper, hidden unity, the "wild being" (*l'être sauvage*) that precedes and is presupposed by the duality between subject and object that precedes it. It locates this unity in the "body-subject" itself because the body is both subject *and* object. In addition, it is located in the dialogue between the "body-subject" and the world, where the body is absorbed into a "tissue of being" (*un tissu d'être*), or "flesh of the world" (*la chair du monde*) that permeates everything. While embodying the original connection between object and subject, seer and object of seeing, self and world, this tissue cannot be directly seen itself!

In addition, Merleau-Ponty finds himself confronted with a fundamental difficulty. How will he get through to this primordial unity when it is not directly accessible? He criticizes science for its constructed models that have alienated us from the primordial unity. He is convinced that objective knowledge is unable to capture Being in its original experience. As soon as we look consciously, as soon as we speak, think, or write, we are already replacing our original experience of the world by an objectification that leads to an opposition between subject and object. Nor can philosophy escape this dilemma and dualization. We can only conceive of the primordial unity through objectification, but it is precisely the objectification that alienates and removes us from it. Therefore, we need to realize that all speaking and writing represents a translation of the primordial unity, and try to maintain a metaphysical awareness of the primordial unity, since it is in fact unspeakable and untranslatable!

This is where the "body-subject" becomes of crucial importance, not in the least for philosophy itself. Philosophy, as a thinking process, may stay in touch with the primordial unity when it originates and comes to itself within the tangible dialogue between

body-subject and world. Thought is always conceived here as embodied thought that takes shape when coming into contact with the flesh of the world. From the twilight of the original experience, the thought shows us that consciousness is rooted in the body, and vice versa that the body is likewise always emb-edded in something spiritual. The primordial unity between body and mind expresses itself mainly in perception as a sensual-mental process in which the pre-conscious, pre-reflexive connection with the world comes to light. This explains why perception – seeing in particular – plays such an important role in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

9.3.2 The Primacy of Seeing

In his last, unfinished work, *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes meaningfully: "to be sure, our world is principally and essentially visual; one would not make a world out of scents and sounds" (p. 83). To Merleau-Ponty, our world is above all visual. The primacy of seeing is a leading theme in his entire body of works. It explains why his philosophy is a phenomenology of *visual* perception, and why he attached so much importance to painting. Only through painting can we confront ourselves with the paradoxes of seeing and the secret science that is the basis of not only the visible but also the invisible.

According to Merleau-Ponty, visual perception is at the root of everything we experience, know and are. Truth, that is to say the invisible, is rooted in seeing, in visual perception, the visible. This implies that perception and seeing precede all thinking and speaking. Here, we meet the dark, primal ground where body and world intertwine, and "embodied thought" originates. My body is not an instrument that I use to see or feel. I *am* my body and my body sees and feels by itself. My body is not in space, but it consists of space, and it belongs to it. Its organs are not instruments, but all instruments are extensions of its organs. The way in which the world appears to me is a visual fact. Through seeing, we appropriate the world. Thus both, 'seeing' and the 'world', are always simultaneously situated, particular, palpable, nearby and far away, limited and infinite, subjective and objective. Or to express the latter otherwise: I can appropriate things remotely, by looking at them while leaving them where they are. My point of view is always fixated and specific; however, this does not prevent that space originates. I always see things in space, in a visual field. We call this field the world. The world is not there because of our consciousness; it appears the moment we see. It surrounds me, it extends in all directions, and it is essentially infinite.

Merleau-Ponty places a great deal of emphasis on the freedom of action that we have to explore this visual field. No matter how much our seeing is situated and based in the flesh of the world, we still enjoy a great deal of freedom. Thanks to the movement of our body and our eyes, we can feel and explore the visual field in ever-changing ways. This "exploring" way of seeing is infinite in principle, but there is always a matter of depth. We see things from a distance, at a depth. This

depth is primordial, and it is because of depth that things can appear to us at all. The basic feature of the visual field is not height or breadth; these can only manifest themselves when I experience depth. And as such, depth is the original dimension of seeing.

9.3.3   Original Unity

As a phenomenologist, Merleau-Ponty wants to penetrate into the original unity, which precedes the division between subject and object, and between body and mind. Although I only see things from a distance and see them no longer when I come too close (Giacometti!), still the object being seen is connected to our vision, which is only possible because it is already situated in our visual field. The world mirrors itself in the seer who in turn mirrors himself in the world. Both events take place simultaneously; they constitute each other at the same moment, during the same 'blink of an *eye*'! It is therefore very difficult, impossible even, to distinguish or disentangle seeing from being seen. It may explain Zen master Tozan's words: "As you look into the mirror, your body and its reflection look at each other. You are not the reflection; the reflection is you." Or, as Novalis once wrote: "In this state of illusion, it is not so much the subject that observes the object; rather, it is the other way around: the objects observe themselves in the subject." Cézanne speaks in the same manner, and goes even a bit further when he says, "The landscape thinks itself in me, and I am its consciousness". Here we meet an original density that Merleau-Ponty usually calls the "density of being". The density of being explains why there is no clear distinction between the visible and invisible, between body and mind, between the observing eye and the mind's eye. On the one hand, there is a certain consciousness in seeing that is the cradle of thinking and speaking. On the other hand, there is a great deal of seeing in thinking; after all, a thinker (especially when he is supposed to have the power to foretell the future) is often called a "seer". In the original experience, there is no mind/body duality. Both are still inextricably connected as two sides of the same coin, or as Siamese twins that are neither viable nor imaginable without each other!

The original experience of color responds to the same density of being, i.e., to the same density of the flesh of the world. When we isolate color as being a property of a painting or a scene, we already move away from our primordial and original experience. The colors already exist before we notice, name, or analyze them. In their immediate appearance, they lend "color" to the entire painting or scene; the latter are immediately permeated by it, so that the colors immediately determine the tonality and atmospheric charge of the entire visual field. The color belongs to the texture of what is observed. The brown ochre dominating an autumn scene, or the beige, grayish brown permeating the painting of a nursery is not a separate property of the observation but makes up an essential and integral part of it. The brown is not the same brown in these two examples; it is not even brown as such; rather, it is an atmospheric brown

that permeates and lights up the entire perceptual field in a unique way. The color belongs to the texture of the scene or the painting; better yet, it *is* that texture.

9.3.4 The Magic of Seeing

To Merleau-Ponty, a painting is not an imitation or mere depiction of the world. A painter does not imitate reality; instead, he distills a kind of quintessence from reality, and creates a new world and a new visibility from it. There is a connection with reality but not in the sense that the imitation theory would have it. The painting does not relate to reality, as does a depiction to the original. The painter does not refer to reality, but recreates and transforms it. He lends a visual existence to that which retracts itself from common seeing. The art of painting visualizes the fundamental properties of things and designs a world of its own, which establishes, as it were, a second visualization, or "the visual in the second power".

In his essay, *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty takes a lot of trouble to both evoke and explain this second visualization. These attempts set the tone of the essay and explain its enigmatic title. The art of painting is not about seeing in the common sense of the word. Because the body is absorbed in the texture of the world, and since it is at once seeing and visible, looking at things and looking at itself, the observer and the observed, there is the possibility of an internal view. Here, an enigma, a secret, a 'magic of seeing' takes place. Or, in Merleau-Ponty's own somewhat mysterious phrasing: "Since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow take place in them; their manifest visibility must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility. 'Nature is on the inside', says Cézanne" (p. 296). Perception implies a consciousness of how things appear and how they are born. A painter does not imitate things; rather, he attempts to represent that which is invisible and enables things to be what they are. He represents the spirit of things, their intangibility, their mysteriousness and their absolute presence that is at the same time an absence. In this way a visibility 'in the second power' originates, a second visualization, a embodied essence or icon of common seeing.

Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that this second visualization, this "magic of seeing" is not an admission of weakness, optical illusion, or even a different thing. After all, we do not look at the painting as though it were a thing; rather, our eyes wander around it, and we are more inclined to look *according to* or *with* the painting, than actually *see* it! The painting does not imitate the world, rather it shows the fundamental traits of things. It prompts us to look differently at the world, in such a way that it teaches us something about the act of seeing itself. A painting may achieve this by strictly visual means. The world of the painting is a visual world, it is nothing but visual, an almost insane world that stirs a delirium because everything can potentially be taken up into the visual field and be "devoured". However, such a seeing that devours everything will ultimately rise above the purely "visual data". The reason is that the art of painting literally shows us that the distinction between body and mind, subject and object, visible and invisible does not make sense.

9.3.5   *The Autonomy of the Painting*

The painting creates a world of its own through the magic of seeing. However, it is autonomous for other reasons as well. It creates a new spatiality that cannot be reduced to the spatiality of ordinary seeing. In ordinary seeing, the field of vision remains out of range; it can never be *completely* overseen. Indeed, I perceive an object exactly because everything else fades away into the field of vision that surrounds me. In the painting, however, everything can be overseen. There is no field of vision in the painting that escapes my attention, and that, as in ordinary seeing, surrounds me as the viewer. The actual field is located outside the painting. The field of the painting is the space where it is exhibited, e.g., a studio or a museum. The framed painting becomes a figure in a broader field of vision in which I, the viewer, find myself and move about. Merleau-Ponty states that this field of vision is relevant to the painting itself. The painting only shows up well when it is adequately framed and exhibited in a proper surrounding. Its framing is therefore primordial, and explains the spatial autonomy of the painting. Moreover, a distinction between figure and field can usually also be seen within the painting itself, but such a distinction is of a different order, because here both figure and field are perceived, simultaneously and in reality.

The issue of framing will be extensively addressed during our discussion of Derrida's aesthetics, which largely concerns the deconstruction of the frame, or the "parergon" as Derrida terms it. In fact, Derrida seriously questions the autonomy of the painting, starting with its alleged spatial autonomy, and including the idea of autonomy in aesthetics. To Merleau-Ponty, however, the autonomy is a fundamental notion. The "visual in the second power" that is embodied by the painting responds to its own laws and bears the mark of a creative expression. It implies that the painting will not represent *all* elements of common perception, but only those aspects that are required for the artist's creative design.

9.3.6   *Creative Expression*

According to the expression theory of Croce and Collingwood (see Chapter 3), expression is identified with the idea that the artist has in mind; the realization or materialization of the idea is of no importance. Their assumption grossly underestimates the importance of the medium and of the resistance that it offers. In conceptual art, the creative expression becomes totally absorbed in the idea or the concept, so much so that the essence of art is reduced to the mere conception of an idea or concept. Such is the case with Duchamp, and no less with Kosuth. In a much more moderated but common version of these ideas, expression is simply seen as a derivative of the concept. First, there is the concept; then comes the realization or execution. Thus, expression is considered a necessary, albeit unproblematic realization of a pre-existing design that is furthermore expected to assume a tangible form. The importance of the medium is recognized; however, it remains a tractable instrument or means to realize the concept. The medium is purely instrumental, and offers no resistance. The materiality of the work of art is a transparent fact.

Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty continue to struggle with the medium. Heidegger's struggle, as we have seen, is symbolized by the "battle between world and earth", which is a key leitmotiv within his aesthetics. Merleau-Ponty's struggle with the medium is closely connected to the idea of creative expression. The artist remains unsatisfied with the culture as it has been delivered or conveyed to him. He always challenges traditional culture right from the start and establishes it anew; he speaks as though he is the first human to ever speak, he paints as though no one has ever painted before him! From this angle, expression can never be a simple translation of a pre-existing concept, since those concepts stand in the way of tracing the unspoken or the never-before-painted. The "conception" cannot precede the "execution". There is nothing before the expression but a vague fever; it is only the finished and conceived work of art that shows us whether something has been achieved that has never been before.

A work of art is not a success because it renders the culture that is delivered to the artist. A successful work of art has the extraordinary ability to appropriate the culture in a way that has not been done before. Metaphorically speaking, it brings about a rebirth of the given culture. The painter does not start from the visible world because it is not his aim to represent this world. Nor does he depart from an idea or a preconceived notion that he then afterwards represents or expresses. There is no suggestion of mimesis whatsoever. The painter is not outside the visible; rather, he belongs to it from the inside. He allows things to be reborn. He shows how the thing becomes a thing, and how the world becomes a world.

Creative expression not only accounts for the autonomy of the work of art but also for the importance of the medium and the materiality of the work of art. No matter how much the painting is rooted in the visible world, it is, above all, "auto-figurative". "…It is a spectacle of something only by being a 'spectacle of nothing', by breaking the 'skin of things (…)'" (p. 312). Expression is something that takes place in the medium itself without it being imposed from the outside; it is generated in and through the medium. Or, as Merleau-Ponty wrote, "Apollinaire said that in a poem there are phrases which do not appear to have been *created*, which seem to have *formed themselves*. And Henri Michaux said that sometimes Klee's colors seem to have been born slowly upon the canvas, to have emanated from some primordial ground, 'exhaled at the right place' like a patina or a mold'". And, Merleau-Ponty expressively adds, "Art is not a construction, artifice, meticulous relationship to a space and a world existing outside. It is truly the 'inarticulate cry', as Hermes Trismegistus said, 'which seemed to be the voice of the light'" (pp. 312–313).

9.3.7 Truth and the Art of Painting

The unarticulated voice of the light is only possible because light does not act through contact, as Descartes believed. He thought that we "see with our hands", as blind people do. As has been emphasized before, Merleau-Ponty believes that seeing is something that implies distance. It explains why his *Eye and Mind* lashes out so vehemently against the Cartesian model that puts seeing on a par with touching, so that visual observation is explained in purely mechanical terms. In this model the

enigma of seeing disappears; it becomes just as transparent as thinking itself. Moreover, the act and the event of seeing also disappear. It loses its corporality and materiality. The magic of *true* seeing however is supported by a Truth, in which both its own obscurity as well as our clarifications are founded.

Again, it is the art of painting that embodies this truth, and that brings it to light. Seeing becomes a gesture when the painter "thinks in (terms of) paintings" as Cézanne would have put it. This kind of "visual thinking" is not a conscious act; rather, it presupposes an open approach to the materiality of the canvas. It is not a conscious process, as can be seen in a filmed slow motion recording of Matisse's method of painting. The film was a revelation to Matisse himself. It showed Matisse trying out different hand movements, as though his hands danced across the canvas, hesitating, as it were, to apply the right brush stroke. Matisse did what the canvas demanded of him, without knowing exactly how he did it. In *Eye and Mind,* Merleau-Ponty is after such secret codes that determine how depth, color, form, line, movement, contour, and physiognomy are shaped in painting. It is this "secret science of painting" that was already mentioned by Da Vinci that Merleau-Ponty tries to distinguish in modern painting. It is the moment when Cézanne shows depth without the use of perspective, because color creates its own texture; the moment when Klee "makes a line dream" in a way no one before him was ever able to, "not by making the invisible visible but, rather, by making the visible invisible" as Klee himself put it.

To Merleau-Ponty, truth in painting is closely connected to creative expression and the "visual to the second power". Once the painter begins, anything that has already been applied to the canvas demands a very specific continuation, specific depth, color, and line. A grim logic seems to be at work that is as forceful as the syntax of language or the logic of thinking. Expression follows its own laws that govern the painter through his tiniest hand movements, and guides him intuitively. He does not imitate objective reality but rather the world as he sees it. To express it, he may make use of deformations, as, for example, in the case of Giacometti. Truth, then, is not based on similarity with objects but on coherence of the work with itself, which nevertheless emerges from the struggle to visualize the seen.

Such a truth is separated neither from reality nor from history. The painter does not create *ex nihilo*, but is predetermined in his creative expression by the visual world itself, by his own history as a painter, and by the history of painting itself. However, this visual and historical consciousness condenses itself in the painter's activity of the moment, and takes on the nature of an "eternal present", or a "temporary eternity". His activity takes place in a "now", in which he unconsciously compresses and comprises the past.

9.3.8   *Language and the Art of Painting*

Autonomy and truth in painting are only possible because painting embodies a language of its own. It is a language that creates meaning from material elements that themselves are without meaning. Color and line mean nothing on their own; they take on meaning through the artist's creative expression, and the painting's

own coherence. The painting continuously reminds us the way in which the artist gives shape to his raw material. This material density consequently causes us to first focus on the *means* of expression themselves. Sense and meaning only emerge in and through the painting's materiality. The color green embodies no fixed meaning; it only acquires meaning through the artist's creative design.

A greater difference to verbal language is hardly imaginable. In verbal language, we use words that already have a fixed meaning. Verbal language is transparent, and makes us forget about the materiality of the word sign. Words immediately signify; they are transparent, they have no texture or body that would alienate us from the signified. Words enable us to evoke things and make them present, while words *themselves* seem to be hardly anything at all. This alleged immateriality of words is also the reason for their extraordinary power.

Merleau-Ponty argues, however, that individual words have no fixed meaning either. They only take on meaning in a context, a broader horizon that constantly changes. There is no one-to-one relationship between word and thing. Language does not express any pre-existing, ideal meaning. It is language itself, i.e. speech and writing, which gives meaning to things by establishing coherent relationships between signs. Language is autonomous; it does not imitate things. It converts and transforms things into meaning by virtue of its own self-organizing ability. Meaning should not be considered as something that resides outside language. What precedes language and what resides outside of it is only made comprehensible by language itself. The comprehensiveness comes to being through language, or rather, through the inner coherence of the signs it uses.

If verbal language is approached this way, it becomes comparable to the language of painting. "Creative speech" brings about new meaning, establishes new relations, and gives rise to new associations, much in the way the language of painting evolves. It is a kind of speech in which the materiality of the word is made visible because the commonly accepted meaning of the word is "suspended" in such a way that the language signs begin to lead the same 'vague' lives as do colors and lines. Words are freed from their standard meaning in order to make room for new meaning.

Merleau-Ponty's view on verbal language not only anticipates semiotics, which he had already become acquainted with through De Saussure. It also announces poststructuralism, in which the recognition of the autonomy and the materiality of language, sign, and sign system led to a thorough criticism of representation, the philosophical implications of which reach much further than in Merleau-Ponty's work.

9.4   The Artist's Studio: Paul Cézanne's Doubt

Much more than Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty refers to modern painters. Paul Cézanne, especially, occupies a prominent place in his phenomenological approach to painting. His first text about painting, *Cézanne's Doubt*, published as early as in 1948, is entirely devoted to Cézanne. This text is the beginning of a life-long

fascination with Cézanne, lasting until his very last work about painting and perception, *Eye and Mind*. To Merleau-Ponty, Cézanne embodies exactly what he himself aims for in his phenomenology of perception and painting. This aim was an uncompromising quest for primordial seeing, for perceiving things themselves, and for the primordial unity between mind and body that has not yet been affected by the intervention of analytical thought, which is always dualistic. However, Cézanne was a painter. He did not imitate, but painted "the visual to the second power," in which he literally painted the 'coming into existence' of objects in our perception. This objective, however, placed extremely high demands on him, required unrestrained efforts, and an almost boundless devotion. Throughout his life, Cézanne lived and worked "on the edge", assuming all inner conflicts inherent to such a task.

The title, *Cézanne's Doubt*, refers to those inner conflicts of Cézanne, who was torn by doubt even at the age of 67, a few months before his death. He despaired at the question of whether he would ever achieve his objective. He still painted from nature and felt that he made hardly any progress. More particularly, he wondered whether his new method of painting was not related to an eye condition, and, therefore, based on a physical handicap rather than on a flash of genius!

Cézanne's objective developed quite slowly. His first canvases, from before 1870, are painted dreams that centered on imagination and sentiment. It was only after he was introduced to impressionism, and especially to Pissaro's works, that he no longer thought of painting as an incarnation of a dream world dominated by a baroque display of emotions, but rather as a precise study of nature captured by small, parallel brush strokes and patient stripes.

9.4.1   Beyond Impressionism

Impressionists strived to represent the exact way in which things present themselves to us during the moment of perception, that is, without sharp contours but, rather, imbedded in light and sky. To achieve this goal, or so they thought, the colors black, earth and ochre were to be removed: only the seven colors that make up the prism could produce this effect. Impressionists were mainly committed to atmospheric impressions. They were not only interested in objects themselves or in their distinct colors, but also – and above all – in the contrasts that change the local colors in nature. Moreover, through a kind of aftereffect, colors evoke complementary colors that stimulate each other. In order to paint grass as it is observed in dim light from inside a house, more is required than just green. The impressionist painter also needs the complementary red to make the green vibrate. Such vibration was not accomplished by mixing colors but by applying them parallel to one another. The result was a painting that did not match nature on each given point; rather, it represented the general *impression* of objects on our observation through the interaction of independent parts and colors. Hence, the name "impressionism".

Nevertheless, Cézanne distanced himself from impressionism fairly soon. His objection to impressionism was that it failed to represent the weight of objects by

letting them dissolve behind their atmospheric display. Cézanne wanted to restore the density of objects on the canvas. To accomplish this, he not only used a different palette of colors, but also abandoned the method of applying colors independently. Instead, he applied composite colors in a gradual way, most intensely in the center of objects but weaker as the object merged into its surroundings. As a result, his objects acquired an aura and density of their own. Cézanne still shared the primacy of color over drawing with the impressionists, so that his objects lack sharp contours. However, the same technique takes on a different meaning, a different goal, with Cézanne. Objects no longer disappear in the atmospheric charge of the overall image; rather, they light up furtively, from inside, leaving an impression of solidity and materiality. In contrast to the impressionists, he makes warm colors vibrate by using blue. Because of his alternative approach and objective, Cézanne is seen as a representative of *post-impressionism*.

9.4.2 Original Experience

Cézanne's contemporaries were very skeptical. Émile Bernard felt that Cézanne's project embodied an enormous paradox. After all, Cézanne wants to evoke things the way our immediate observation captures them without clearly defining them. He tries to lend them their own density without framing their colors between lines. His aim is to represent reality but he rejects traditional means such as the composition of the perspective and the canvas. Bernard called this "Cézanne's suicide". The contradiction between objective and means would explain the strange deformations of objects that appear on Cézanne's paintings from 1870 to 1880. For example, the desk in the portrait of Gustave Geffroy (Fig. 9.2) is shown at the bottom of the painting, disobeying all laws of perspective. By abandoning the composition, Cézanne would have surrendered the painting to the chaos that our immediate perception holds. When we allow perception to guide us instead of reason, things will lose substance. They will merely circle like mad and will continuously suggest illusions, just like the illusion of movement when we move our head a little. Bernard concludes that Cézanne has immersed the art of painting into ignorance and darkness.

But Cézanne never denied the importance of reason. On the contrary, his interviews with Bernard evidence his refusal to choose between reason and sensibility, or between order and chaos, nature and composition, etc. His objective is rather to unite and surpass such oppositions. In fact, Merleau-Ponty argues, Cézanne's interviewers force him to speak in exactly those dichotomies that he wants to overcome. There is no duality between body and mind for Cézanne. Not only does he imitate perception, he also interprets it. After all, the painter is not to be taken as an imbecile. However, such interpretation should not be alienated from seeing. It should enable the creation of a primordial world by applying brush strokes on the canvas, thus showing how things become things, and how a face becomes a face, freed from any conscious intervention, just like we see in photography and science. His painting is not brutal; rather, it attempts to approach the mystery of the original experience

Fig. 9.2   Paul Cézanne, *Portrait of Gustave Geffroy*, 1895. Oil on canvas, (5/8 × 35 inches, 116 × 82 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris (collection Mr. and Miss Rene Lecomte). (*see Color Plates*)

of seeing, where body and mind are still inextricably connected to each other. Cézanne presents nature in its progression, and as it takes on the shapes on which our scientific knowledge is based.

9.4.3   Phenomenology of the Painting

Cézanne then shows us perspective the way we experience it in our immediate observation. He shows us perspective in the process of formation, which is not the same as the geometric or photographic perspective, which are only constructs. In our natural visual perception, things in close proximity appear small while things that are further away appear larger, more so than they do on a photographed picture. The same goes for an approaching train on a movie screen: it seems to become bigger much sooner than in our normal visual perception. When it is said that we see a circle from the side as an ellipse, we are actually asked to look at it the way a

photo camera does; what we see is a form that emerges from an ellipse without actually *being* an ellipse! On a painting of Mme. Cézanne, the frieze of the carpet that appears along both sides of her figure does not follow a straight line. The same happens when we see a line that is interrupted for a long time: it falls apart in disproportionate parts. Earlier, we discussed Gustave Geffroy's desk that is located on the bottom of the painting, ignoring the laws of perspective. Merleau-Ponty, however, argues that when our eyes wander over a large surface, the images that our retina receives come from constantly varying angles, as a result of which the total surface acquires a curvature. He admits that when Cézanne captures such deformations on the canvas, it would almost seem that the spontaneous movement freezes, with the result that the deformations become stacked in our perception and tend towards a geometric perspective. But, the ordered composition of the canvas makes us forget about the deformations themselves and focus our attention on the entire painting. The deformations help us to see a thing as it *appears*, just as it does in our perception, coagulating and taking on shape. Cézanne does not present the finished perspective to us, but perspective as it progresses, and establishes itself in our original perception.

Cézanne applies the same method in his use of color. A pink color on a gray piece of paper lends a green reflection to the background. A classical painter will paint the background gray, relying on the canvas, like the actual scene, to bring about the desired contrast. Following the impressionists, however, Cézanne applies a green shade to the gray background to achieve a contrast that is just as lively as the contrast of things in reality. This technique then constitutes another deformation, at least at first sight. Each independent color is misrepresented, unreal, including the green shade on the background. Together, however, these deformations cause the contrast to *appear*, showing its progression in the same way as it takes place in our original perception. It is not through imitation but, rather, through *transformation*, the "visual to the second power" that the primordial world of seeing is set forth on Cézanne's canvas!

Another geometric feature that is not part of our actual visual experience is the contour of things, i.e., the outlines that distinguish objects from each other. By outlining the circumference of an apple by a sharp line, the contour becomes an object in its own right while it actually dissolves as soon as we see how the surface of the apple disappears in the depth. However, when no contour is painted at all, things lose their identity. On the other hand, things lose their depth and their inexhaustible reality when only a single contour is painted. To overcome this dilemma, Cézanne follows the distension of the object by modulating color and by applying *several* contours in, for example, blue. Our vision, going back and forth between the contours, ultimately focuses on a contour that is born between them, just like it happens in our perception. Here, too, the "visual to the second power" makes the original visualization happen on the canvas. It does not present the onset of the contour as a geometric construct but as a visual experience, and as a process during which contour and depth are born together.

His persistent desire to realize the visual experience on the canvas explains why Cézanne does not give precedence to line above color. Lines do not precede color

but are the product of colors. This is the only way that the original density of the world can be expressed. Lines are marked out while the painting takes place. The bigger the harmony between the colors, the better the lines present and outline themselves. Cézanne *does not suggest* with the colors the tactile sensations that are aroused by form and depth. There is simply no distinction between seeing and feeling in the original experience. We even "see the scent", as Cézanne once said. It is all brought about by color. Color contains and comprises the entire materiality of seeing. Therefore, each brush stroke should answer to an endless number of conditions, which is why sometimes Cézanne would meditate for an hour before he applied a brush stroke. According to him, each brush stroke should contain it all: the atmosphere, the light, the object, the plan, the character, the lines, and the style.

9.4.4   Creative Expression

It is clear that Cézanne not only wants to represent the density of the world through the primacy of the color, but also the original unity of body and mind. When painting a human face, he knows that he can make the model look at us the way one actually looks by using stripes of blue and auburn. He knows that he can make a mouth look sad or give a smile to a cheek by mixing green and red. In our original perception, we see the other as "body subject", i.e., we immediately see a person's state of mind in his or her glance. Body and mind cannot be distinguished then. Through the primacy of colors that brings forth a physically present face, Cézanne tries to evoke the original unity of body and mind. Creative expression takes place in and through the medium of color.

    This immediately makes clear that Cézanne does not start from a pre-existing idea or design that is then expressed in the painting. Cézanne often referred to a passage from a Balzac novel, *Peau de Chagrin* that reads, "a sheet, white as a layer of fresh snow, onto which the covers rise symmetrically, crowned by small, blond bread rolls". During his entire childhood, Cézanne wanted to paint this gastronomic scene the way Balzac described it. It was only after years that he came to understand that it was not possible to represent this magnificent scene separately. It sufficed to paint the covers and the bread rolls from nature, to balance and refine them on the canvas in such a way that the fresh snow, the crowning effect, and the whole vibrating scene would rise up from the paint on their own accord. Here again, creative expression takes shape in and through the medium itself.

9.4.5   Truth and the Art of Painting

It is interesting to explore the extent to which Cézanne responds to Heidegger's vision on the inscrutability of the thing, on the battle between "earth" and "world", and on truth. Cézanne appears to be on the same quest for the inscrutability of

things. By making physical objects emerge from the paint, from "earth", he confronts us with a strange "world". We are used to the familiarity of things as long as they show their usefulness as tools, as Heidegger emphasized. Cézanne deprives them of this familiarity that, again according to Heidegger, blocks our view of the objects themselves. Cézanne confronts us with the original strangeness of things, something that Heidegger was so desperately after in his essay. He shows us that a primordial strangeness and inscrutability hides behind the familiar and tailored usefulness of things, behind the "equipmenty" character of the thing. He offers us a world without any familiarity or human intervention, where the thing truly becomes a thing. It is a world where spontaneous human expressions are excluded, and where we are met with an abyss that is anything but comfortable. This strange, primordial, somewhat threatening and self-isolated presence of things was also met in Heidegger's meditations on the origin of the work of art.

Moreover, Cézanne embodies Heidegger's battle between earth and world. As we have seen, Cézanne, like no one before him, attempted to extract the strangeness of things from color, the quintessential medium of painting. With Cézanne, the battle between earth and world has become a battle between first-hand original seeing and color. He wants to evoke the visual world by the visual to the second power. It leads to an ongoing struggle with the medium, and with the material properties of painting, while it is also a struggle to express the visual as such. This, too, involves lighting up and hiding at the same time. The visual world lights up in color, but the painting is also the place where seeing takes place, and emerges from its dark birth ground. The color as medium covers up and unfolds, hides and reveals the truth of seeing at the same time. On Cézanne's canvasses, Heidegger's truth as unconcealment actually manifests itself. Perhaps, Cézanne's paintings are a better illustration of Heidegger's aesthetics than Van Gogh's works, because the latter always entice an expressive interpretation that tends to block again our view of things. In fact, that is the way Heidegger discusses *Van Gogh's Shoes*: very expressive and hermeneutic, with the result that he moves away from the 'thingly' character of the shoes, and from their primordial strangeness. The shoes become too familiar, too functional, too human.

Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes the inscrutability of the thing, of seeing and perception in Cezanne's works. He, too, points out that the inexhaustible nature of things is often threatening to us. After having seen some of Cézanne's paintings, and then moving on to see the works of other painters, one often feels a certain relaxation. Cézanne leads us to the root of things, and offers us the truth of the way things appear or emerge. The entire shield of familiarity and instrumental interest is broken, with the result that things become strange, inexhaustible, unfathomable, intangible, and unspeakable. A veiling and unveiling take place at the same time; harboring a certain threat, and making us suspect a nearby abyss. However, the same inscrutability also allows the revelation of the actual truth of things. In doing so, Cézanne is a seer, a magician who spent his life developing a secret science that sometimes brought him insights of genius, while at other times, pure desperation and self-torture.

Further Reading

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Good introductions into the work of Merleau-Ponty are:

John F. Bannan, *The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty,* New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967.
Samual B. Mallin, *Merleau-Ponty's philosophy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979.
Monika Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, a guide and commentary*, Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1989.

For a useful comprehensive Reader of Merleau-Ponty's writings, which also contains 'Eye and Mind' and 'Cezanne's Doubt', see:

M. Merleau-Ponty, *Basic writings*, edited by Thomas Baldwin, London/New York, Routledge, 2003.

See for the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's work for contemporary perspectives:

Thomas Busch and Shaun Gallagher (Eds.), Merleau-Ponty, hermeneutics and postmodernism, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992.
Patrick Burke and Jan van der Veken (Eds.), Merleau-Ponty in contemporary perspectives, Dordrecht/Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993.
Véronique M. Fóti (Ed.), Merleau-Ponty: difference, materiality, painting, Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996.
Jack Reynolds, Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: intertwining embodiment and alterity, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004.

Chapter 10
The Modern Version of Formalism: The Semiotic Point of View

10.1 Introduction

In Chapter 4, I suggested that formalism tends to view art as a language. Semiotics has developed out of classical formalism: it can thus be considered a modern version of classical formalism. Though in the true sense of the word semiotics is a method rather than a philosophy of art, it has important implications for the latter. Because of the presuppositions and fundamental concepts of semiotics, it can be regarded both as a continuation and as a further elaboration of classical formalism. It considers the work of art to be completely autonomous and, as a rule, disregards the social and historical context, which reminds one of classical formalism. The fact that the context is only considered when it manifests itself within the work of art is yet another similarity. On the other hand, more so than in classical formalism, *formal analysis* is at the heart of semiotics, which is also more inclusive because it can be said to apply not only to artistic but to all cultural phenomena. And semiotics regards art and culture not so much as a language, but rather as a sign system.

The term 'semiotics' is derived from the Greek 'semeion'. Semiotics literally means 'theory of signs'. This branch of science is devoted to the study of signs as they are produced and interpreted in the most diverse ways. In daily life, we constantly emit signs: each gesture that we make, each grimace, slip of the tongue, or smile are signs for others to interpret, while each traffic sign is a symbol that we are supposed to understand. As far back as Ancient times and also in the Middle Ages, a great deal of thought was given to signs. The works of the Stoics, of Augustine, and of William of Ockham – to name but a few – contain valuable reflections on the nature of signs. However, only during the present century has a systematic study of signs emerged, which has come to be called semiotics.

Semiotics has gradually developed into a separate discipline. It was Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), an American philosopher and one of the chief representatives of philosophical pragmatism, who was the first to elaborate a general theory of signs. Around the turn of the century, he had already written down a series

of wide-ranging and penetrating insights in the field of semiotics but presumably because of the unsystematic and fragmented character of his notes, Peirce's influence did not become manifest until the 1960s. It was only then that the value of Peirce's contribution to semiotics was widely recognised and received the attention it deserves.

In the meantime, the need for a closer research of this new branch of science had become felt in other fields as well. This development was closely related to the rise of modern linguistics of which the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) is considered to be the founding father. De Saussure was strongly opposed to the historical approach to language, so characteristic of the nineteenth century. He defined this approach as 'diachronic'. In contradistinction, he introduced the 'synchronic' approach to language. Distinctive of the synchronic approach is the idea that language is a structured system, which enables systematic and formal analysis. In this way, Saussure paved the way for the structural and synchronic study of language, which was to become the model par excellence of modern linguistics. Disregarding the historical development of language altogether, the synchronic approach is thoroughly formalistic. With his strong emphasis on the structure of language, Saussure also laid the foundation for later structuralism. This will be discussed in further detail below.

Though his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) was entirely devoted to linguistics, Saussure also anticipated semiotics. The preface not only suggested that language should be studied as a system of signs, but also pointed out that linguistic signs were not the only signs. Saussure considered linguistics a subdivision of a general theory of signs, which he named 'semiology'. Although he did not work out such a semiological system himself, it was by following his line of reasoning – and wholly unaware of Peirce's earlier impetus – that, during the 1950s, French scholars finally made a start on 'semiology'.

Peirce and Saussure lay at the root of two mainstreams of current semiotics. Initially, the name used to denote the field was indicative of the mainstream to which a researcher belonged. Those who were influenced by Peirce consistently spoke of 'semiotics'; those who relied on Saussure referred, without exception, to 'semiology'. For some time now, the term 'semiology' has become outmoded. As a result, nowadays 'semiotics' is commonly used as the only term, comprising both mainstreams. Yet there is still a substantial difference between the two: whereas Peircean-inspired semiotics is closely related to *philosophical pragmatism* and *logic*, Saussurian-based semiotics is akin to modern linguistics. Some authors, such as Umberto Eco, have borrowed elements from both mainstreams to bring them together in an original synthesis.

However interesting this may be, a joint discussion would seem unwise. The two approaches have little in common and presuppose a totally different conceptual apparatus. For didactic reasons, I will therefore focus on the Saussurian mainstream. An additional reason for this self-imposed restriction is the fact that a full understanding of the authors discussed in the last chapter can only be achieved by reference to the Saussurian mainstream. My reasons are purely didactic and do not in any way detract from the contribution to semiotics by the Peircean school of thought.

Now, what is the subject matter of semiotics as a field of research? According to the Dutch semiotician Aart van Zoest semiotic research is concerned with: 'interpretative behavior, with reference (this stands for that), with signs (their way of existence, their function, their relation to other signs, their use, their emergence, and disappearance and what not' (van Zoest, 1978, 16). Because semiotics also includes non-verbal signs, it covers a theoretically infinite number of fields. In the past few decades, this already resulted in a stunning, almost imperialist development of semiotics. Time and again, new and still virgin fields of application were unveiled or explored. Nowadays, there are semiotics of architecture, film, theater, music, social interaction, psychology, mass media, painting, and animal language (the so-called "zoosemiotics"). And if we may believe Umberto Eco, we are witnessing only the promising beginning of a semiotics of taste, of olfactory signs and tactile communication, of gestures, attitudes, and movements (the so-called kinesics and proxemics), of myths, models of mentality, and family systems (the so-called semiotics of cultural codes). The *semiotics of visual communication* deals with such diverse phenomena as traffic signs, colors, graphic representations, clothing, visual art, advertisement, comic strips, paper money, playing cards, choreographic notation, film, geographic maps and so on (Eco, 1976, 9–14).

This remarkable variety has its pros and cons. One advantage is the universal character of the semiotic method: it allows us to analyze cultural phenomena, which had always been out of reach. Incorporating almost everything into the field of semiotics would, however, imply the very real danger of affecting the overall coherence. A boundless, extremely complicated, and obscure conceptual framework usually reinforces such a lack of coherence. A great deal of semiotic research is characterized by an excessive use of ill-defined concepts. As a result, many readers and scholars lose heart and quit at an early stage. This is regrettable because semiotics can provide valuable insights.

As said, for the sake of clarity, I will restrict myself to the – very influential – Saussurian mainstream. Its influence was and still is closely connected with the unusual appeal exerted by French structuralism, which in the 1950s and 1960s yielded major results in anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss), psychiatry (Jacques Lacan), and literary theory (Roland Barthes). French structuralism was greatly indebted to Russian Formalism (1915) and Prague structuralism (1926), which had worked out Saussure's structuralist approach in the field of linguistics and literary theory many years before. This rich development of structuralism is reflected throughout present-day Saussurian semiotics.

For a proper understanding of Saussurian semiotics, it is necessary to realize that it has borrowed many concepts from structuralism. The following section therefore discusses some of the more fundamental concepts in an attempt to make semiotics more readily accessible. Section 10.3 intends to provide in-depth understanding by examining more closely the so-called connotative semiotics of Roland Barthes as it has been applied to contemporary, cultural phenomena, and systematically unfolded in his *Mythologies* (Barthes, 2000). The fourth and final section highlights Eric de Kuyper's analysis of classical Hollywood cinema from a semiotic, Barthesian point of view.

10.2   Fundamental Concepts of Semiotics

10.2.1   Distinction Between Langue and Parole

A first fundamental analytic distinction going back to De Saussure is that between *langue* and *parole*. According to Saussure, the linguistic event (*langage*) consists, on the one hand, of the linguistic system (*la langue*) and, on the other hand, of individual speech (*la parole*). Only the linguistic system as such, *la langue*, is the object of linguistics because it focuses on the formal aspects of language insofar as it embodies a system. Linguistics thus concerns the *formal structure* of language, and the whole of conventions, rules and laws which underlie speech. It does not concern speech as such. Its subjects are neither individual speech nor the external context, the socio-cultural or historical background. Modern linguistics is restricted to the internal structure of language, which is conceived of as a formal system.

Applied to semiotics, this means that our analysis will also focus on the internal structure of the sign system concerned – be it a story, a traffic sign, a myth or a fairy-tale. The historical, sociological or psychological factors (i.e., the external context) will be considered only insofar as they can be traced back within the sign system.

The above distinction can also be presented in another way. After all, linguistics describes not the genesis or development of language (diachronic study) but its constant structure (synchronic study). This structure cannot be revealed through an analysis of speech or, as it has been called, *performance*, because all speech or performance presupposes in the individual speaker a conscious or unconscious acquaintance with the linguistic system, its conventions and rules – in short: a specific *competence*. Linguistics is about this competence, which underlies individual speech. In a similar way, semiotic analysis focuses not on the use of signs but on the underlying structure, the system or competence that enables the producing and interpreting of signs. It always concerns the deep structure, not the superficial differences between individual users.

10.2.2   Distinction Between Signifiant and Signifié

A second fundamental distinction made by Saussure is the opposition between *signifiant* (signifier) and *signifié* signified. The *signifiant* stands for the linguistic *form* as such, the acoustic image that is the vehicle of meaning, but still devoid of meaning or signification. The signifier is the bare substratum and material manifestation. As such, the signifier is empty, meaningless, mere envelope. The *signifié* refers to the content, the meaning. It is not until we add *signifié* to the signifier, i.e. content to the form, meaning to the material manifestation, that a 'sign' (*signe*) is established. The sign always consists of the two elements – signifier and signified. Analytically, it is very important to be mindful of this distinction between signifier ('Sa' for *signifiant*) and signified ('Sé' for *signifié*).

The following example illustrates the distinction. The word 'state' first of all consists of the signifier 'state', which comprises various letters in a specific order. This is the material manifestation, the pure form. To this signifier, one can attribute a meaning ('signified'), for instance, 'condition', as in the sentence 'The state of the highways is alarming'. Together, the signifier (Sa) and signified (Sé) constitute the word-sign 'state'. Each sign is associated with a separate signifier and signified. In this case, the letter *s* in the word-sign 'state' is only a part of the signifier or form (Sa) and is not itself a sign. However, in the word 'swords' the final letter *s* constitutes a separate sign that consists of a signifier (Sa), *s*, and a signified (Sé), plural; that is, the letter literally signifies 'plural'.

The relation between signifier and signified, between *signifiant* (Sa) and *signifié* (Sé), is arbitrary. This explains why one and the same signifier can be linked to several 'signifieds' (Sé's). The signifier 'state' can take on other meanings aside from 'condition', such as 'nation', 'kingdom' and so on, according to the respective signifieds. Conversely, several signifiers (Sa's) can take on the same meaning, e.g. 'cheese', 'Käse', 'fromage' and 'formaggio'! It should be borne in mind that Sa and Sé have to do with different levels of analysis.

Despite their arbitrary nature, we are able to understand word-signs because they are based on conventions or agreements which presuppose a competence in or familiarity with the language in question. For instance, if we do not know French, if we are not familiar with it and are not competent in the language at all, we will not understand that the word 'fromage' means the same as the English word 'cheese'. In that case, we only perceive its pure form or signifier, the letters f-r-o-m-a-g-e. Even if we can reproduce the pure acoustic image of the word, we will still fail to understand what we are pronouncing. If we were to decide as a group that the word 'fromage' means 'dumb misery', the word would function as a word-sign enabling communication. We would then be able to 'decode' the meaning of the word. The arbitrary nature of the relation between signifier and signified allows for an astounding degree of creativity. All codes, including the secret codes used during the war by the Resistance, are possible only because the relation between Sa and Sé is essentially arbitrary. In natural languages, such as English or French, these relations are largely fixed. We use dictionaries to find out the meaning of words that we do not know, i.e. words for which we have no competency. But to adopt new words into our language is always a matter of agreement, of mutual arrangement, and of new conventions.

10.2.3 *Distinction Between Denotation and Connotation*

A third fundamental analytical distinction is that between 'denotation' and 'connotation'. A sign consisting of a signifier (Sa) and a signified (Sé) always refers to something else, for example, to something that happens or exists in reality. This is called the manifest meaning or content of the sign. This 'first meaning' constitutes the denotative level of the sign. In the case of connotation, a 'second meaning' or a whole series

of secondary meanings are added to it. This is called the latent or hidden meaning and is often the true meaning or content of the sign. In the second case – the denotative sign – signifier and signified (Sa and Sé) are entirely reduced to a signifier that acquires a new signified or meaning.

Schematically, this appears as follows:

Sa	Sé	Connotation
Sé	Sa	Denotation

A concrete example will serve to clarify this. The word-sign 'fox' consists of a signifier (Sa: the acoustic image formed by the letters) as well as a signified (Sé: the content). Together, they refer to the mammal of a reddish-brown or gray color with a bushy tail and vertically split pupil with which we are all familiar. This is the manifest meaning of the word-sign 'fox'. In the sentence 'Foxes live in holes and go out hunting separately' we are on the denotative level of the word-sign. The fox is known for its keen sense, its cleverness and its thievish nature. This makes it possible to add other meanings, such as 'craftiness' and 'slyness' to the signifier. In all these cases, the denotative sign 'fox' becomes itself a signifier to which a second meaning, the connotation, is attached. The word 'fox' then acquires a specific secondary meaning or figurative signification. This is the latent meaning or content of the word-sign 'fox'. In the sentence 'Our landlord is a sly old fox', the word-sign fox obviously does not refer to the mammal but is suggestive of the sly, crafty and deceitful nature of the landlord.

The connotation can also be applied to an action. If I want to 'signify' my love with a bouquet of roses, I will have to go beyond the denotative level. A bouquet consists of a mental image (signifier – Sa) and the content (signified – Sé). Both refer to the bouquet of roses. This is the manifest meaning or denotative level of the sign. In order to become a token of my love, the denotative sign in turn has to become a signifier (Sa) onto which a 'second meaning' can be grafted, i.e. the meaning that these roses signify my love. Only then will the bouquet of roses be a token of my love. Or, as Roland Barthes put it: 'It is as true to say that on the plane of experience I cannot dissociate the roses from the message they carry, as to say that on the plane of analysis I cannot confuse the roses as signifier with the roses as sign: the signifier is empty, the sign is full, it is a meaning' (Sontag, 2000, 98).

10.2.4   Distinction Between Manifest and Immanent

A semiotic or structural analysis does not take place on the manifest but on the immanent level, which is self-contained and not immediately perceptible. The immanent level is the level of the underlying system, the deeper structure. On the manifest level (the text or the image), we can see the result of the combination between

signifier (Sa) and signified (Sé), which together constitute the sign. However, the constituent parts of the sign and their mutual relations remain mostly hidden, unobserved. The perceptible facts on the manifest level are structured according to a number of principles not immediately given. At the root of the perceptible facts (the texts or images) lies an underlying structure that is itself not observable. In chess, for example, the rules that are applied and the possible combinations are not readily perceptible. Nevertheless, they determine the chess game: chess players must be familiar with them; they have to possess the specific competence required for playing chess. This competence is located on the immanent level.

In many texts and other sign systems, the common rules are not as clear as in chess. By and large, semioticians are confronted with sign systems that require them to determine their hidden rules. They can be compared to people watching a chess game without being acquainted with the rules of play. These rules will have to be determined by means of structural analysis, which can only be achieved in a roundabout way. Therefore, semiotic inquirers generally begin by constructing a model that serves to map the expected deeper principles. This is anything but easy. A simple object like a fairy-tale, for instance, often appears to be based on ingenious and complicated rules and principles. Usually, the narrator of the fairy-tale uncon-sciously applies these principles. The same holds for the film narrative, widely studied by semiotic scientists seeking through analysis to expose the hidden narrative structures that are often, if not always, *unconsciously* applied by filmmakers. Understandably, such an analysis cannot be realized with absolute certainty but often reaches no further than a rather subjective interpretation that is open to further inquiry. It is nevertheless an important characteristic of structural analysis that researchers are convinced that the underlying structures they discover are as real as – or even more real than – what is actually observed, i.e. the manifest content, the text or the image as such. They see the texts or images as manifestations of a deeper reality. This conviction applies to the whole of structuralism. Lévi-Strauss, studying primitive cultures, believed that, by unveiling underlying kinship or mythical structures, he exposed another sort of reality that determined their manifest contents. The immanent level is invariably assumed not only to be located on another plane than the observable facts, but also to really belong to another sort of reality. Evidently, this belief has far-reaching philosophical implications that have aroused sharp criticism from later post-structuralists (see next chapter).

10.3   Roland Barthes on Mythology

With the newly gained understanding of some fundamental concepts in semiotics, we are now sufficiently prepared to take a closer look at Barthes' semiotic analysis. Roland Barthes (1915–1980) is one of the most influential representatives of French structuralism. In his *Mythologies*, a work first published in 1957, he proposed a critical and formal analysis of social myths prevailing at the time. The first part of this work contains a full range of playful and penetrating evocations of myths as

they presented themselves in everyday French society, varying from 'The Face of Garbo' to 'The Last Happy Writer'. Earlier, Barthes had published parts of these pieces in a well-known weekly. These brilliantly written sketches provide a trenchantly critical portrayal of his era. In the second part of this work, he undertook an attempt to elucidate systematically the semiotic method he had applied in his analyses of myths in the first part.

10.3.1   The Myth as Speech

Barthes starts with the thesis that myth is a type of *speech*: it is a system of communication, a message, a way of signifying, a form. It is this form to which semiotic analysis is basically directed. The object of the message, the content, does not define the myth itself but its presentation: the myth is formally defined, not substantially.

The semiotic analysis is therefore a *formal* analysis: mythical speech is embedded in a material substrate, which is already worked on in view of an adequate communication. Because all tools of the myth, whether pictorial or written, presuppose a signifying consciousness, it can be discussed *regardless of its materiality*.

The material substrate is not unimportant, however: pictures are more penetrating than writing; they transfer meaning instantaneously, without analyzing or dispersing it. Pictures have a direct appeal. But this is no fundamental distinction, since just like writing, as soon as they mean something, pictures demand a *lexis*, a reading.

By language, discourse, speech Barthes understands each signifying unit or structure, either verbal or visual: a photograph can be as much a form of speech as a newspaper article. Even objects can become speech if they signify or symbolize something (see the above example about the posy of roses). According to Barthes, from this it follows that, even though we treat mythical speech as language, we nevertheless go beyond the limits of linguistics per se and enter the realm of semiotics.

10.3.2   The Myth as Semiotic System

Typical of semiotics is its formal approach, because it studies the sign system without considering any thematic issues. In semiotics it all comes down to the way signs operate. The central question is: 'How is the sign system put together?'. This implies that mythology, being a formal analysis, is a part of semiotics. On the other hand, when studied for its thematic and/or historical aspects, mythology is a part or branch of ideology. Barthes emphasizes time and again the *formal* nature of semiotics: '(…) one cannot therefore say too often that semiology can have its unity only at the level of forms, not contents; its field is limited, it knows only one operation: reading or deciphering' (Sontag, 2000, 99). This requires researchers to display certain asceticism, devoting them to a painstakingly detailed analysis. Semiotic analysis presupposes that the myth embodies a *system*. As the previous section explained, such analysis seeks to bring *the immanent*, non-explicit rules to the surface.

A myth is not simply a system, however, but a system of a peculiar nature. It arises from a pre-existing semiotic chain: it is a semiotic system *in the second degree*. What is a sign in the first degree becomes a simple signifier in the second degree. The tools of mythical speech (writing, photography, painting, posters, rites, objects, and so on) are reduced to pure *signifiers* as soon as the myth incorporates them for its own purposes: for the myth, these tools are no more than raw materials. The cunning of the myth is thus that it uses – or abuses – an original sign to signify something (completely) different. Or, to put it in the more technical terms of the preceding section: the first semiotic level, the *denotative level* (signifier and signified), is reduced at the second level, the *connotative level,* to a pure signifier! At the same time, the myth adds a second meaning, or rather: it *creates* a whole new meaning, feeding on the first like a parasite, leaving it bereft and eroded. In fact, this structure of the myth implies the distinction between denotation and connotation we already discussed.

Roland Bathes also adds a parallel distinction: the distinction between what he calls the 'object-language' and the 'meta-language'. The former refers to the denotative level, concerning speech in the first degree, which is about an object. Meta-language is the language of myth, involving speech in the second degree, which makes use of the object-language to signify something (completely) different. Meta-language does not apply to the object itself, but rather to its added symbolic value.

To illustrate this distinction, Bathes gives the example of a photograph on the cover of the well-known French weekly *Paris-Match* showing a young black soldier saluting, eyes uplifted and fixed on the French tricolor. The image as such, according to Bathes, simply depicts a specific situation. This is the denotative level: a black soldier saluting the French tricolor. However, anybody seeing the cover would immediately recognize the true purport of the image: the greatness of the French Empire, to which all subjects, regardless of skin color, pay tribute. At the time of its publication, the photograph also suggested that there was nothing wrong with colonialism, which had been severely criticized. Here, the denotative level, the original meaning, becomes a pure signifier, to which a 'second meaning' is added, namely the greatness and unity of the French Empire and the soldiers' readiness to serve it.

In the preceding section we saw that the signifier corresponds to the pure form, and the signified to the content. In the first degree, i.e. on the denotative level, the representation as such is the vehicle of a particular meaning and content (black soldier saluting French flag). In the second degree, however, on the connotative level or on the level of myth, form and content, signifier and signified, in short: the sign, is reduced to a form to which another meaning is endowed. At this point, to explain the ambiguity of the myth, Barthes introduces the notion of *concept* representing the nature of the relation between content and form. In the first system, the concept is the sign, as usual. In the second system, however, the myth (and this is in fact what makes it peculiar), the concept is not the sign but the signifying, the signification. This is due to the fact that in the myth the signifier already consists of signs: like a parasite, it feeds on the simple reference function characteristic of the first degree. This explains why Barthes emphasizes that the myth works two ways: on the one side, it points out, on the other side it makes us understand something and imposes a specific point of view. This is nothing but connotation.

10.3.3   The Form and the Concept

What about the myth? How does form relate to concept? In a discourse that is at times difficult to follow, Barthes seeks to elucidate or to stress that:

1. The form or the signifier of the myth does not abolish the content, but impoverishes it so it can be signified (read: used, manipulated) all the better by the concept.
2. The concept invests a specific knowledge of reality, a whole new interpretation, in the form or the signifier.
3. The concept has an open character: it embodies not an abstract, purified essence, but an extremely vague, unstable and nebulous condensation, so that the form or signifier can easily be made functional within the mythical system.
4. The concept is quantitatively much poorer than the form or signifier, but qualitatively much richer: to the quantitative abundance of forms corresponds a small number of concepts (the concept 'French imperialism' can be attached to vast quantities of signifiers).
5. The form of the signifier can be tiny (a word, a gesture, even a disregard) and nevertheless functional for the concept, which is imbued with an extremely rich history. For this last aspect Barthes refers to the work of Freud, in which a slip of the tongue or *Fehlleistung* can refer to a huge concept.

All the above aspects point to the enormous diverse and creative potential of myth development. Barthes assumes that myths are relatively few in number but number-less in their potential manifestations. The reason for this is the arbitrariness of the relation between content and form, or, as we put it in the foregoing section, the relation between signified and signifier. Moreover, he points out that mythical concepts are subject to continuous historical change: they can arise, transform, fade away and disappear altogether. This is fully in line with the arbitrary relation between content and form. While mythical concepts may have been long outmoded, the original form onto which they were grafted may still lead a tenacious existence. For example, the concept of "French imperialism' no longer exists, but the French tricolor is still there in all its glory. The emergence of new concepts is closely linked with the social-cultural transformation of society as a whole. What really matters to the mythologist is to pinpoint time and again the exact concept and to reveal how it works in cultural phenomena by means of semiotic analysis.

10.3.4   The Myth as Stolen Language

It follows from the above that the relation between the concept of the myth (second level) and the original meaning (first level) is one of *deformation*. The signifier has two faces: one that is full, the original content (the story of the black soldier), and another that is empty, the form (black soldier saluting French tricolor). What the concept distorts is the original meaning or content (Sé, signifié, signified): the concept

(French imperialism) literally deforms or distorts the original content, but does not abolish it: the myth hides nothing, but creates a new content.

Because it all comes down to the concept, mythical speech is determined by its intent rather than its letter. In some sense the intention is frozen, objectified: the myth naturalizes the concept, presents it as a matter of course. The myth is no longer recognized as such, but experienced as self-evident, as the most natural state of affairs, as an established fact. This is due to the above-mentioned ambiguity of mythical speech: it presents itself both as a notification and as a statement of fact at the same time! The saluting black man in the example is neither a model/symbol nor an alibi with respect to French imperialism: he is the very presence of French imperialism. In a similar way, the very existence of concentration camps as a historical fact is simply denied by neo-fascists. In this case too the myth is presented as indisputable.

All this implies that nothing is safe from the myth. The concept can graft itself onto whatever form. The myth can develop its two-degree scheme from any meaning whatsoever and even from meaninglessness. I may be confronted with a situation or a series of objects that are in such a disorderly and scattered state that I cannot make any sense of it. I cannot give it any meaning. Its form is not rooted in anything analogous, does not allow for any reference, and consequently cannot be deformed or made instrumental by myth. The form can, however, always be made to signify disorder itself: it can thus attach a meaning to the absurd and make a myth out of it. Surrealism frequently made use of this possibility.

That nothing is safe from myth also has to do with the nature of language. Language really invites myth-making; it seldom offers a univocal, undistortable, unalienable content. Language requires continuous interpretation. Mostly it leaves open a whole spectrum of points of view, as a result of which it can easily be adjusted and made extremely functional. The more a language resists the myth, the more it sticks to a precise meaning, the more it will be subjected, manipulated or distorted. Literature is a good example of this. Writing itself is a signifier to a literary myth, because though it starts from a form that is already full of meaning, it adds to this the concept of literature. Everywhere the connotation 'this is about literature' appears. A new meaning is thus injected into the text. This can be compared with the institutional theory about art: as soon as an object is placed in a museum, a signified is added to it, namely that it concerns a work of art.

The omnipresence of myth is not its only salient feature. As soon as the myth has become established, it is characteristically hard to invalidate it. A myth is difficult to resist, unless it is caught by another myth. 'Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth?' Barthes argues, not without irony (Sontag, 2000, 123). To establish this, one only has to take the myth as a starting point for a third semiotic chain or level, whereby its meaning is reduced to a signifier or form for a second myth. In this way the first myth loses its self-evident character and is robbed of its own connotation. It is unmasked, as it were, because its artificial nature is revealed by the second myth. A well-known example is the scene from *The Great Dictator* where Charlie Chaplin, face to face with a globe, ironizes and debunks the Hitler myth. This is only possible because Chaplin, in his imitation of Hitler, embodies a new myth.

10.3.5   The Myth as Depoliticized Speech

Barthes points out that the synchronic analysis of myth is justified because our society is still a bourgeois society. There is no proletarian culture, art or morals because everything exists by the grace of the bourgeoisie. Even the avant-garde, which fights bourgeois mentality, is dependent on the bourgeoisie for its recognition as a form of art. Although bourgeois society embodies a historical and particular era, bourgeois ideology claims eternal, universal and unchangeable status. This follows from bourgeois ideology, which *naturalizes*, just like the myth, the historical and accidental, presenting it as a matter of fact, as something that has always been and will remain forever so. Reality is placed outside history and is represented as self-evident, eternal and unchangeable.

Reality is freed not only from history but also from politics. After all, in bourgeois society, myth is a depoliticized speech. It does not deny things. It purifies them, makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal foundation, gives them a clarity that needs no explanation because they embody a statement of fact. When I state French imperialism as a fact, without explaining it, I come very close to finding it natural, self-evident, which reassures me.

The extent to which reality is politicized also appears from the fact that the left opposition in bourgeois society quickly transforms into a myth. As soon as revolution becomes 'leftist', it is also presented as self-evident, as inescapable, as something that is historically unavoidable, as an indisputable fact. Here, revolutionary language is as it were the mirror image of bourgeois ideology: it has developed into myth, the only difference being that the myth of the 'left' is much poorer and more one-sided than the myth of the 'right'. The left opposition has only one speech, about emancipation. Bourgeois ideology, on the contrary, has a mythology that is less linear and spreads in a rich, polymorphous, flexible and elusive way.

10.3.6   The Mythologist as Outsider

The Frankfurt School regarded criticism of ideology as a means to achieve emancipation. Barthes does not consider mythology to offer a similar tool. Mythologists also debunk the myth of the 'left'. They are outsiders and their speech is a meta-language that sets nothing in motion. At best, one could speak of an unveiling, and even then, the question arises, for whom?

Mythologists are deemed to live in theoretical alienation, because their ties with the world are ironical: 'To decipher the Tour de France or the "good French wine" is to cut oneself off from those who are entertained or warmed up by it' (Sontag, 2000, 147). Therefore, mythologists suffer from a split consciousness: '(…) wine is objectively good, and *at the same time*, the goodness of wine is a myth: here is the aporia' (Sontag, 2000, 148). The tragic of mythologists is inescapable. They continuously waver between myth and its unmasking, being cut off from life. However, if they leave the myth intact then they are doomed to live in a false consciousness.

10.4   The Artist's Studio: Narrative Structures in Classical Hollywood Cinema

An important part of semiotics is devoted to a structural analysis of the narrative. This subdivision is commonly called *narratology*. Narratology studies a specific sign system, i.e. a certain type of *discourse*, namely the narrative. It should be noted that narratology is not restricted to literary narrative but also covers the film narrative. Indeed, in addition to literary narratology, also film narratology has become quite extensive. It is now an important subdivision of film semiotics. That is why I will discuss the book of Eric de Kuyper on narrative structures in classical Hollywood cinema, a book which has been published in Dutch.

It is hardly a coincidence that film has developed into one of the most favorite study objects of semiotics. Some film scenes have acquired the odor of immortality. Who is not familiar with the fragment from the film *Casablanca* (1942, by Michael Curtiz) showing the heroin Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) in the casino of Rick (Humphrey Bogart), asking the pianist Sam to play and sing 'As Time Goes By'. 'Play it, Sam!' is an almost mythical sentence, evoking the memories of their Parisian romance. (De Kuyper wrongly cites 'Play it again, Sam!'). To a whole generation, this scene represented romantic, tragic and at the same time impossible love (see Fig. 10.1). Other Hollywood films of those days, including *Gone with the wind* (Victor Fleming,

Fig. 10.1   Still from *Casablanca*, Michael Curtiz, 1942.

1939) or the films by Georges Cukor, such as *Gaslight* (1944) and *A star is born* (1954), have the same aura of immortality. As a consequence, it is not surprising that Eric de Kuyper, himself a film maker and film theorist, should have ventured to undertake an analysis of the love story in classical Hollywood film.

The gradually increasing interest in classical Hollywood cinema as an object of semiotic inquiry proves that the scientific world too became more and more aware that it embodies a unique cultural phenomenon. However, this sort of film has all the characteristics of cultural industry, so much distrusted by Adorno. Not only is it an example of a mass product, highly subject to the commercial interests of the film industry, but undoubtedly it also functions as a part of the world of entertainment, clearly aiming to distract the masses by temporarily distracting them from reality. Moreover, classical Hollywood film is imbued with bourgeois ideology and particularly suitable for giving shape to social myths. One can hardly think of a medium that invites its audience more emphatically to collective identification or that has more means at its disposal to introduce, via the picture, icons and concepts that fulfill a mythical function. Nevertheless, narrative analysis not only aims at laying bare and even at unmasking the myths inherent in the classical Hollywood film, but also presupposes the ingenuity of this kind of film, arguing that it is worthwhile to unveil the deeper narrative structures that give us insight into the semiotic system underlying this type of film. Eric de Kuyper's study convincingly shows that a thorough inquiry into the Hollywood film can bring to light a number of unsuspected aspects that would otherwise remain concealed even for the most attentive viewer.

10.4.1   Social Determinateness

One major premise in De Kuyper's analysis is that narrative structures are largely determined by social relations. The strategies applied in the narrative cannot be detached from the social–cultural norms that are effective in a certain society. Not everything can or may be said or showed. For classical Hollywood film the restrictions were rigorously circumscribed and even established in the so-called *Hays Code*, prescribing what filmmakers could say or show. The code contained very detailed prescriptions, for example prohibiting any sexual allusions, so that one rule was not to use king-sized beds under any circumstance but two twin beds instead!

Until the 1950s, American film directors very strictly adhered to these requirements. However, perhaps more important than these explicit prohibitions were the unconscious forms of self-censorship that characterized the film directors of the time. Conscious and unconscious censorship does not impair the film narrative. On the contrary, De Kuyper argues, the film narrative derives its strength from these restrictions: the variations are almost inexhaustible because there are so many possibilities to avoid the law. Moreover, there is always the safeguard that everything will be adjusted or re-adjusted in time. It is precisely this continuous balancing between the inevitable restriction and the accidental exception that fulfills the

viewer with an insatiable delight. In this respect film pleasure can be compared with sexual pleasure, in which repetition and variation, process and development are always known beforehand and are nevertheless experienced time and again as something new and different.

10.4.2   Structural Analysis

Also in his structural analysis of the love story, De Kuyper shows us something of this insatiable desire. With Roland Barthes and Sigmund Freud for his main guides, he attempts to unveil the most important film structures that support the cinematic love story. It is remarkable that any violation of the norm should have to be justified, or rather, perhaps, weakened or neutralized in one way or another. One important norm in the classical love story is that solitude is inadmissible. This explains why the 'couple structure' is the key to this type of story. A single status must be made plausible. In the love story, this is solved through association with love and sacrifice. Single characters decide 'to abandon their amorous pursuits out of love', a choice imbued with the Christian idea of self-sacrifice. This provides for an acceptable way-out, considering the genre's implicit rejection of single-hood. The single status should be the result of a love-inspired decision, not of free will or preference.

The narrative strategy is thus to explain away any violation of the norm by adducing other norms. According to De Kuyper, this logic is also used in other narrative structures. In other words, gender politics is predetermined to a high degree. Another example of this is that the woman should never act explicitly, never take the initiative. If she is active at all, she must display particular male characteristics (for example, as a career woman), or appear on a closer look to be manipulated by the man ('You made me love you/it was never my intention, no…'). Conversely, a man in love will be 'feminized'. This female setoff makes his behavior acceptable. The whole narrative strategy aims to cover up the weakened virility using other norms that *are* acceptable.

De Kuyper's comments on Hollywood's approach to characters' gaze serve as a further illustration of this mechanism of suppression. It makes clear to what extent classical Hollywood film is caught in a patriarchal system. Female characters do not function as objects for the audience to look at directly. They can only be seen through the male character's eyes. Whenever she does the looking, she does not really 'see' the man before her, because she is literally and figuratively blind to him, whereas he is watching her with an all-seeing eye. Although omnipresent, men are mere 'shadows', while women are portrayed as passive objects of male observation. The male character's looking is active, but he remains hidden himself, out of reach. Please note that all this refers to a deeper narrative structure. It is true that male characters are themselves also looked at (by female and other personae, as well as by the spectators). 'But', De Kuyper argues, 'to make this possible and not showing it anyhow explicitly a whole imagination and representation strategy has to be

applied. The way this takes form is much more complicated and twisting than it is the case with women' (De Kuyper, 1984, 44).

To illustrate this, De Kuyper refers to a compartment sequence from *Leave her to Heaven* (J. Stahl, 1945). The scene shows the female main character, Ellen (Gene Tierney), looking as if by chance at Rick (Cornel Wilde). While she is reading a novel, she dozes off so that her book slips to the ground. Rick picks it up and meets Ellen's eyes. Nervously, he reaches for a cigarette, lightens it so clumsily that he almost burns his fingers. He becomes comical, because as a man he is not used to being exposed so emphatically. But the narrative strategy skillfully resolves this violation of the norm. Even though Ellen keeps looking at him a long time, even though Rick is convinced of her staring at him, she is nevertheless shown to not really 'see' the man sitting before her. At the end of the sequence, she says quite frankly: 'I'm sorry. I was staring at you… You look so much like my father'. In this way, her otherwise indiscrete and inadmissible staring is extenuated. She stared at him but did not look at him: she only saw her father in him. Eventually, this misunderstanding proves to be fatal for the story, when it later turns out that Rick is unable to fulfill his double role of father-husband. In a very specific way, Ellen pays an unusual price for her way of looking. Or, as De Kuyper concludes: 'Ellen's gaze is mortal, not only for her environment, but also for herself. This gaze does not only make impotent (indirectly the subject matter of the film), but is also deadly' (De Kuyper, 1984, 41).

Another important pillar of the classical filmic love story is the avoidance of any explicit depiction of sex. De Kuyper considers this avoidance very functional, because it strengthens and sublimates the romanticism of the love story. As he convincingly shows discussing a more recent remake of *A Star is Born* (Frank Pierson, 1976), some stories fail to work when the female gaze and the female body can no longer be fit into the framework of traditional relationships.

10.4.3   Time and Space

In *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933), Greta Garbo says: 'I have been memorizing this room. In the future, in my memory, I shall live a great deal in this room'. In the classical filmic love story one is confronted with the blurring of time: present, past and future are inextricably entangled into one another. The filmmaker manipulates time and makes frequent use of flashbacks. Skipping their first acquaintance and subsequent encounters, *Casablanca* shows us Rick and Elsa straightaway in a situation of perfect togetherness, driving down Champs Elysées in an open car, looking euphoric. Another recurrent element in Hollywood cinema that adds to the time-blurring effect is the use of sequences referring to the future events. All in all, the love story balances between memory and actual encounter, between timelessness and specific time.

The same occurs on the level of space experience. The first encounter between the two main characters, their first time together, is continuously

retraced in space or re-staged. This spatial specification transforms one specific love spot into a spot of constant reference. In *Casablanca* this specific location is 'La Belle Aurore', the Parisian bar where the love between Rick and Ellen has its spatial reference point. Contrary to this specificity, there is also spatial blurring. In addition to timelessness, the song *As Time Goes By* suggests the transcending of space itself. So the love between Rick and Ellen finally exceeds both time and space.

10.4.4   Evaluation

In his *Filmische Hartstochten* ('Filmic Passions'), De Kuyper very explicitly draws on the work of Roland Barthes. Like Barthes' writings, this book is written in an extremely casual style and somewhat off the cuff. This has resulted in many penetrating and intriguing reflections. Moreover, De Kuyper's analysis does not confuse the reader with an endless and impenetrable array of high-brow concepts, contrary to what unfortunately is all too often the case with semiotic analyses. Being highly involved with concrete film material, his analysis affords a penetrating view of the procedure of classical Hollywood directors: it is as if we are re-enacting the intentions lurking behind the scenario, the camera work, the shots and montage. De Kuyper paints a very concrete picture, however much the narrative structures are unveiled only very indirectly, however much they may only have been operative in the film directors' subconsciousness.

   Nevertheless, De Kuyper's study also reveals the drawbacks of structural analysis. The price that is paid for the loose and associative style is a lack of systematic treatment. This explains why the book is not easily readable. Like Adorno or Benjamin, De Kuyper's composition is concentric. The central themes are elucidated from constantly changing perspectives. That is why, on closing the book, the reader is left with the impression of a mosaic, sometimes even of a puzzle that needs filling in or resolving. Another drawback of the structuralist approach is that, *as a method*, it is very dependent on the interpretive skills of the researcher. In his discussion of the 'Play it, Sam!' scene from Casablanca, De Kuyper remarks: 'This (relative) activity of the object presupposes a (relative) passivity of the subject. The male love subject has something feminine, as Barthes has pointed out' (De Kuyper, 1984, 31). In this and many other examples, one can hardly escape the impression that, rather than the hidden narrative structure, it is the researcher's preconceived idea itself that is at stake! Interpretation in structuralism often pretends to explain everything, so that it has actually explained hardly anything at all. However scientific they may look, more often than not the interpretations are so subjective that they can neither be corroborated nor refuted by the evidence provided. However, in De Kuyper, this weakness is greatly compensated by the originality of his vision and his respect for the classical Hollywood film as a cultural phenomenon.

Further Reading

Interesting introductions into semiotics:

Umberto Eco, *A theory of semiotics*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976. (This standard work combines both the Saussurian and the Peircean mainstreams. For the uninitiated reader, however, this book is difficult reading. Only suitable for further reading.)

Marcel Danesi and Donato Santeramo (Eds.), *Introducing semiotics: an anthology of readings*, Toronto: Canadian Scholar Press, 1992.

Marcel Danesi, *Of cigarettes, high heels and other meaningful things: an introduction into semiotics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. (Originally published by St. Martin's Press in 1998).

Paul Cobley, *Introducing semiotics*, Illustrated by Litza Jansz, edited by Richard Appignanesi, New York: Totem Books, 1999.

Paul Cobley (Ed.), *The Routledge companian to semiotics and linguistics*, London/New York: Routledge, 2001.

The Dutch introduction referred to, is:

Aart van Zoest, *Semiotiek*, Baarn, Ambo, 1978.

Some important sources of the two mainstreams:

Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in general linguistics*, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986.

James Hoopes (Ed.), *Peirce on signs: writings on semiotic*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of Carolina Press, 1991.

Interesting anthology in the field of semiotics:

Marshall Blonsky (Ed.), *On signs, A semiotic reader*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, Oxford, 1985. (Very comprehensive and many-sided reader, richly illustrated and provided with an interesting and critical introduction by M. Blonsky. Didactically very useful.)

On the relation between semiotics and structuralism:

Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and semiotics*, London/New York: Routledge, 2003 (Originally published in 1977).

Readers on Roland Barthes' work:

Susan Sontag (Ed.), *A Roland Barthes reader*, London: Vintage, 2000 (Originally published in 1982). (With an insightful introduction by Susan Sontag, this is surely the best reader available in English. It contains a fine and relevant collection of Barthes' writings over a period of three decades).

Roland Barthes, *The semiotic challenge*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994 (Originally published in 1988). Important English anthology of the semiotic writings of Barthes.

The most important semiotic writings of Roland Barthes:

Roland Barthes, *Writing degree zero*, London, Cape, 1967; Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.
Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, London: Vintage, 2000 (Originally published in 1972).
Roland Barthes, *Elements of semiology*, London: J. Cape, 1967; New York: Hill and Wang, 1968.
Roland Barthes, *Pleasure of the text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1975; London: J. Cape, 1976.

Recommended reference works on film semiotics:

Bill Nichols, *Movies and methods*, Vol. I, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1976. (In particular the section on 'structuralism-semiology' [469–628]. An excellent collection of important theoretical articles.)
Peter Wollen, *Sign and meaning in the cinema*, London: British Film Institute, 1997 (Originally published in 1969).
Christian Metz, *Film language: a semiotics of cinema*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1991 (Originally published in 1974).
Robert Stam, Robert Burgoyne, and Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, *New vocabularies in film semiotics: structuralism, post-structuralism and beyond*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992.
Warren Buckland, *The cognitive semiotics of film*, Cambridge, UK and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Applied semiotic film analyses:

Eric de Kuyper, *Filmische Hartstochten* [Filmic Passions], Weesp: Wereldvenster and Antwerp: Standaard, 1984.
Bill Nichols, *Movies and methods*, Vol. II, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985. (In particular, part 4 on 'structuralist semiotics' (sic) and part 5 on 'psycho-analytic semiotics' [391 to 621]. Interesting series of applied semiotic film analyses).

Chapter 11
The Post-structuralist Perspective

11.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapters, we have repeatedly used the term 'modernism' and occasionally the term 'postmodernism'. We have also referred to 'structuralism', occasionally to 'post-structuralism', and in particular to the 'thinking of difference'. In this introduction, I will first elucidate the term 'postmodernism'. Next, it will become clear that 'poststructuralism', which is used as an overall term for 'postmodern thinking', has not only brought forth the 'thinking of difference' (Lyotard and Derrida), but also a 'thinking of indifference' (Baudrillard and Jameson). This internal development will also be reflected throughout the chapter.

So what does 'postmodernism' mean? Hegel's description of post-romantic art looks suspiciously like the present understanding of postmodernism. This is an interesting observation. And though his thesis on the end of art is mainly related to modernism, Danto emphasized that artists in the period of "art after the end of art" could try out virtually everything, reminding us of the new freedom which was so characteristic for the postmodern condition. In the above neo-Marxist discussions, we were confronted in particular with the contrast between realism and modernism. Whereas Lukács wanted to return to the realism that preceded modernism, Adorno turned into a staunch defender of modernism. Even though Adorno did not write about postmodernism as such – the term was not yet in use – his strong resistance against the culture industry and mass culture indicates that he would not have had much faith in postmodernism. In any case, it was not until after his death in 1971 that postmodernism was firmly established.

Over the past 2 or 3 decades, the term 'postmodernism' has indeed steadily gained ground. It was especially due to Charles Jencks' book, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, which appeared in 1977, that a movement was set in motion that is still palpable in contemporary art. In his now classical treatise, Jencks revolted against the omnipotence of modernism in architecture, which was strongly marked by functionalism. He observed that the new architecture spoke a new language, which he described as 'postmodern'. It was particularly this protest against an all-encompassing, compulsive modernism that spread like wildfire to almost all other art forms. Not only in architecture, but also in literature, visual arts,

music, theatre, film, dancing, and photography postmodern trends suddenly or gradually evolved. New forms of art, such as video art, were already immediately considered to be manifestations of postmodernism. This tendency explains the omnipresence of 'postmodernism' in the art world.

However, 'postmodernism' was not restricted to the art world. Postmodern discourse also permeated many fields of scientific study and had a strong impact on the entire cultural climate. In philosophy, social sciences, and even in theology and natural sciences, the terms 'postmodernism' and 'postmodern' became increasingly fashionable. Increasingly these terms were used to indicate a profound change in Western culture, a virtually inextricable mesh of very different and often seemingly contradictory tendencies, which were arbitrarily lumped together. At any rate, people increasingly spoke of the 'culture of postmodernism'.

Given this all-encompassing presence, it was obvious that the notions of 'postmodernism' and 'postmodern' could hardly be ignored in philosophy of art. These concepts, however, had quickly acquired a miserable reputation. After all, in the mass media the 'postmodern' had been degraded to a concept that could mean just about anything, a passe-partout bearing all the characteristics of an empty cliché. It was fashionable to drop the word 'postmodern' wherever you were: it suggested that you were on top of the latest trends. This trendy talk and the blatant inflationary use of the term hardly concealed the pervasive deep-seated conceptual confusion that it entailed. The more the term 'postmodern' was watered down into no more than an infuriating catchword, the more difficult it became to imagine anything that would not be considered 'postmodern', unless accompanied by a clear definition. Or, as the *Modern-Day Dictionary of Received Ideas* expressed it: 'This word has no meaning; use it as often as possible'. It is no wonder that many researchers and even artists regard the term with a certain degree of suspicion. At any rate, it is very difficult to give a clear description of 'postmodernism'.

A lot of conceptual confusion could be avoided if it could be made clear that the term 'postmodern' is used in various contexts for somewhat different purposes.

In a *sociological and macro-historical* context, 'postmodern society' refers to a new type of society that would fundamentally differ from modern society. The use of the word more or less implies a clean break between the era of *modernity* and that of *post-modernity*. This is the first usage. On the other hand, on the *level of science and philosophy*, 'postmodernism' stands for another mode of knowledge, another type of knowledge. This is the second usage. Lastly, in the *world of art and culture* and consequently in the study of art, 'postmodernism' is conceived as a new movement or trend. Here, the use of the word implies a radical rupture between *modernism* and *postmodernism*. On the level of culture, 'postmodernism' appears in a broader sense as the 'culture of post-modernity'. This is the third usage.

There is a family resemblance between the three uses in that they all imply an opposition between *modern* and *postmodern*. This also explains why they are used indiscriminately in contemporary discourse. And yet each usage acquires another dimension, a more specific meaning, as it is used in a different context. Thus it

always concerns a specific opposition between pairs of concepts, entailing a different connotation. Actually, they designate different phenomena. Or, to put it in semiotic terms: no other connotation, but rather another denotation, comes into play. In the scheme, below you will find a graphic representation of this:

Context	Modern	Postmodern
Sociology	Modernity	Postmodernity
Philosophy & science	Modern knowledge	Postmodern knowledge
Art & culture	Modernism	Postmodernism

In this closing chapter, we will explore these three uses. The second section will be devoted to the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, who starts off his well-known essay, *La Condition Postmoderne* with precisely the opposition between modernity and post-modernity. He also studies the changes this postmodern condition provokes in the fields of science and especially philosophy. Hence, the subtitle *Rapport Sur Le Savoir* (A Report on Knowledge). Lyotard's book led to a philosophical controversy, the so-called 'postmodernism debate' in which, in addition to Lyotard, in particular Habermas and Rorty, have played leading roles. The later work of Lyotard is characterized by a 'Kantian turn', which has ultimately led to an aesthetics of the sublime in which avant-garde art is legitimated in a philosophical way.

In Lyotard, we already find a criticism of structuralism and an aesthetic perspective on postmodernism. He is considered, together with Jacques Derrida and Jean Baudrillard, to be one of the leading figures in French post-structuralism. Typical of French post-structuralism is the critique of truth, reference and representation, the primacy of the signifier and the fragmentation or death of the subject. According to Lyotard and Derrida, this leads to a 'thinking of difference' in which the dispute or the differend (*le différend*) and differance (*la différance*) stand at the center. In the work of Baudrillard, however, this becomes a 'thinking of indifference' in which everything is leveled by a neo-capitalist exchange value, and it therefore loses its authentic meaning. In Derrida's work, one searches in vain for such a sociological reading, but his omnipresent notions such as 'intertextuality' and 'deconstruction' have exerted a great influence on the philosophy of art, art criticism, and even avant-garde artists (see third section).

Because of this 'sociological' reading, we also find the three uses of the term 'postmodern' in the work of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard will be discussed extensively in the fourth section below. In the fifth and last section, we will return to the opposition between modernism and post-modernism. Here, we arrive back in the artist's studio. In particular, we will investigate to what extent the video clip as a postmodern art form reveals the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' (Jameson) and how it can be analyzed and elucidated using Baudrillard's insights. In this last section, the three uses are shown in relation so that their mutual coherence is clarified.

11.2   Lyotard on the Postmodern Condition

If there is a bible for postmodernism, next to the above-mentioned book by Jencks on architecture, it certainly is the essay by Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, which originally appeared in French in 1979. Actually, the *Conseils des Universités* (Council of Universities) of the government of Québec commissioned Lyotard to write a report on 'the knowledge in the highest developed countries'.

11.2.1   Modernity Versus Post-modernity

Lyotard's point of departure is the fact that we are presently confronted with a new type of society. This implies a rupture that would have as far reaching consequences the contrast between traditional or pre-industrial and modern or industrial type of society. Indeed, in modern sociology and the history of society one finds a commonly used notion of modernity in which the breakthrough of the modern era is associated with the rise of industrialization and capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century. In the late 1970s society was more and more referred to as the post-industrial society, following the usage by such well-known sociologists as Alain Touraine and Daniel Bell. However, highly influenced by American sociologists and art critics, Lyotard called the condition in which the most highly developed societies found themselves *postmodern*.

   For Lyotard, the postmodern condition is, in sharp contrast to modern society, no longer characterized by industrialization, but by computerization. The postmodern condition shows an ever more extensive and far-reaching impact by technology, computerization, and information technology. We are presently living in de midst of an information society. It is not the ownership of the means of production, but the ownership of, or better yet, the access to information, which is decisive. Those who have a monopoly on data banks are the ones who are really in power. The whole social network is characterized by the primacy of knowledge. Knowledge itself has developed in the last several decades into the most important force of production. Knowledge has been assimilated into the circulation of goods and has itself become a commodity. The main issue is a worldwide competition for power in which the conquest of colonial territories, raw materials, or cheap labor no longer plays a central role. Nation-states and multinationals are now competitors in the control of information.

11.2.2   Legitimization Crisis

The new postmodern condition obviously has far-reaching consequences for the entire Western culture. Lyotard emphasizes very strongly that the playing rules for science, politics, and the arts have definitively changed. In science, one seriously

doubts if it is possible to base our knowledge of reality on indisputable truths. Within politics all ideologies have lost credibility: time and again our crude interests turn out to be more powerful than the ideals to which politicians pay lip service. Within the arts (painting, music, literature, or architecture), all coherence appears to be lost: no single style prevails, as was the case during the Renaissance or Romanticism. In art also, one hardly finds any unity or certainty. There is only a big jumble of vastly diverse styles in which any attempt to identify a dominant movement is in vain. We are living, as Habermas would say, in an 'era of obscurity'.

Lyotard does not leave it at the simple observation that postmodern society is obscure. On the contrary, in his *The Postmodern Condition*, he tries to explain the deeper causes of this obscurity, and more importantly, the implications of the new situation for knowledge itself. To fully understand Lyotard's essay, one must realize that according to him, not only science but also and especially philosophy is at stake. After all, science always justifies its rules of play by a discourse on its own status, which cannot but be philosophical. As philosophy is a discourse about the discourse in science, it is called meta-discourse. Only in this way can philosophy justify or, to use a more technical term, *legitimate* scientific knowledge. Starting from this presupposition, Lyotard maintains that an important shift has taken place regarding knowledge. The nature of knowledge as well as the way knowledge is justified, the nature of the legitimization, has drastically changed due to the rise of the postmodern information society. Because the essay is focused on this dramatic change, it can be considered a report on knowledge. Lyotard's approach is thus epistemological in that he is concerned with the *theoretical* clarification of the way *knowledge* works.

The most important hypothesis of the essay is that there is a fundamental distinction between the nature and the legitimating of modern versus postmodern knowledge. Whereas modern knowledge was based on meta-narratives, postmodern knowledge has decisively undermined the faith in meta-narratives. Typical of the meta-narrative in modern knowledge is that it provided a universal explanation of all reality and history. A striking example is Hegel's system, as previously discussed, in which all history – past, present, and future – is explained as the dialectical unfolding and self-consciousness of the Spirit. Another typical example is the also previously discussed Marxism, in which all history is dominated by the emancipation of the proletariat. Liberalism is also, according to Lyotard, a modern meta-narrative. In the modern meta-narrative, history is always conceived of as something that is heading for a final destination: it implies the promise that mankind will someday be liberated. The underlying faith in progress has its roots in the lofty norms and universal ideals of the enlightenment, which demonstrated great confidence in the potential of Reason.

In the meantime, this faith in the universal ideals of the enlightenment, in the unlimited possibilities of Reason, seems to have been superseded by the facts. The catastrophic events of the twentieth century have completely undermined all faith in rational control and liberation, in all universal scientific, political, or moral principles. The ideals of the Enlightenment do not appear to safeguard a Promised Land after all. On the contrary, it is as if consciously striving for the ideals has

instigated a long series of catastrophic events that characterize the last century: the First World War, Stalinist terror, the Second World War, the Holocaust, the Berlin wall, the Hungarian Uprising, the Prague Spring, and so forth. With 'Auschwitz', History definitively lost its rationality. This has led to a widespread distrust of the ideals of the Enlightenment upon which the meta-narrative of the Modern Era was founded. This is probably the deeper cause of the crisis of philosophy and the ensuing crisis of legitimization.

We can conclude that the postmodern condition is typified by a 'crisis' in philosophy in which its former legitimating role is no longer self-evident. This explains why serious doubt has been cast on the rules of play that prevail in the sciences, politics, and the arts. As philosophy looses its status as an Archimedean point, and the sense of an all-inclusive foundation dissolves, the sciences, the social and political-juridical structures, and the arts that appeal to it for justification find themselves in a crisis of legitimization.

11.2.3   Modern Versus Postmodern Modes of Knowledge

The above elucidation of the legitimization crisis clearly points out the central role of the distinction between modern and postmodern modes of knowledge in Lyotard's essay. In a further elaboration of his essay, Lyotard clarifies this distinction from different perspectives, and yet he simultaneously criticizes the claim to legitimacy in a modern mode of knowledge. For Lyotard, there is no way back to modern knowledge: for him, such a path is a dead end. And yet he does not deplore the legitimization crisis: on the contrary, he seeks out crisis and obscurity. Starting from this new situation of postmodern knowledge, he tries to provide a new direction for philosophy.

Lyotard already anticipated this new direction in his former work. In it, he reluctantly came to a fundamental critique of metaphysics and truth. A modern mode of knowledge appeals to the truth, which presupposes that there is a correspondence between words and things, between the linguistic, or sign system, and reality. After his Marxist period, Lyotard became more and more convinced that there is no truth without its counterpart, that falsehood is essentially a constituting part of truth, and that it cannot be separated from truth. As an example, in his *Libidinal Economics* (originally published in 1974), he claims that 'Evil' serves as a counterweight to the 'white terror of truth'. Following this train of thought he resisted the truth claims from structuralism and Marxism as well. In structuralism, one started from the idea that denotation was univocal, which made it possible to refer to something that is necessarily "a" and thus not "not a"! Lyotard found the semiotic criteria to establish this reference highly suspect. According to him, this leads to sheer terror of theoretical truth. In the same way, in his view it is utterly suspect to speak in terms of historical truth as is common to Marxism. This leads to a terror of the committed, theoretical–political standpoint. Also here there is no firm criterion at our disposal. We cannot opt for one political standpoint over

another because we have no criteria with which to make a distinction. Even though the late Lyotard called this work a 'desperate book' there is a liberation and definitive departure from the meta-narrative in both the scientific and in the political sense.

It is this opposition to the modern meta-narrative that runs as a leitmotiv throughout his work. More and more Lyotard protested against the universal claims of modern philosophy. As a meta-language, it becomes an all-inclusive, binding meta-discourse, the language of those in power, which appropriates the right to establish the truth and the sense of history. In the postmodern condition, this is no longer possible. In a modern mode of knowledge, only one language game is deemed acceptable, namely that of denotative statements in which one asserts what is true or what is false. The whole scientific mode of knowledge in modern discourse rests on this concept of truth. After all, each denotative statement, such as 'The University is suffering a loss', can be confirmed or refuted. This has led to a superiority of the denotative, scientific language game, which condemns all other language games as unscientific, primitive, underdeveloped, and belonging to the realm of tales, fables, myths, and legends. However, in the wake of modern philosophy of language, Lyotard defends a postmodern mode of knowledge as a narrative form of knowledge in which the plurality of language games is fully acknowledged. Apart from denotative statements, he claims the legitimacy of a number of other sorts of statements. Here he refers to performative statements ('I declare the university open'), prescriptive statements ('Give the university financial power'), narrative statements ('Yesterday I went to the library') and statements that express a question, a promise, and so on.

The picture sketched by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* implies that postmodern society crumbles into a multitude of language games. Lyotard sees this diversity as irreducible to some kind of unity. Because of this, a postmodern mode of knowledge is much richer than modern knowledge. Truth criteria are the sole base of modern, scientific knowledge. However, in addition to this, a postmodern mode of knowledge also uses criteria such as efficiency, justice, and happiness, beauty of sound and color and so on.

In any case, the language games must rest on an implicit or explicit agreement among the 'players' because without rules and conventions one cannot play a language game. In modern knowledge, however, only one language game is played and isolated from all other possible language games. Only one language game is presupposed in which recollection and the demand for legitimization stands at the center. On the contrary, in a postmodern mode of knowledge, the subject is composed of different competencies, in which neither recollection nor the demand for legitimization plays a vital role. The nature of the social fabric is such that each individual is made to rely upon his or her own resources. Yet the self is not isolated, but rather assimilated into a web of relationships that is ever more complex and mobile. The self always finds itself in 'nodes' of communication circuits however small they may be. It finds itself posted where messages of a diverse nature pass by. The postmodern mode of knowledge is characterized by a dynamic that is alien to the modern mode of knowledge: each statement is a 'move' in a language game. Language games are not about truth, but about winning. Talking is combat. Each

'move' provokes a 'countermove' so that struggle and diversity reign supreme. In contrast to the modern mode of knowledge, the goal is not to make 'legitimate' moves, which are fixed in advance, but to think out 'unexpected' moves. Not consensus, but disagreement; *dissensus* is the aim.

11.2.4   *Lyotard and the Kantian Turn in Postmodern Thinking*

The leitmotif in Lyotard's earlier philosophy is, as we have already seen, his crusade against what he called the 'white terror of truth'. To escape from this terror, Lyotard vehemently denied that it is possible to maintain an unambiguous criterion for truth. X means "a" as well as "b". Each truth conceals falsehood; each falsehood conceals truth. The question of truth is thus, both on the theoretical as well as the social level, entirely undecidable.

The later Lyotard, however, is convinced that when person A thinks x means "a" and person B thinks that x means "b", it comes down to a profound dispute over the 'true' meaning of x that is not purely theoretical, but also socially relevant. We must, so he argues, make a decision; we must determine who is right, because justice is at stake. We cannot simply pass off the disagreement as undecidable. But how can we make a decision without falling into the criterial, rationalist terror against which the later Lyotard is on guard?

This question, which Lyotard already brought up in *Just gaming (Lyotard, 1985)*, underlies the Kantian turn, which, from then on, will animate and influence his thinking. Because, so he argues in *Au Juste*, A and B must recognize that they pass a judgment and that the dispute is not about the truth either of x, but about the legitimacy of their respective judgments. Thus the dispute does not imply an ontological, but rather a transcendental-philosophical question: how to judge judgments. In doing so, Lyotard immediately embarks on a Kantian course.

The major reasons for this remarkable Kantian turn as they occur in *The Differend* (originally published in 1983) and *Enthusiasm (Lyotard, 2009)* are twofold. First of all, Lyotard sees Kant's works dating back from two centuries ago as a lever to overturn Hegel and Marx's philosophies of history – the most important 'meta-narratives' – without falling into a complete nihilism, which was so characteristic of his earlier period. More particularly, Lyotard asks why the meta-narratives of Hegel and Marx are so totalitarian. To answer this question he points out that both in Hegel and Marx idea and reality are conceived of as identical, an essentialist standpoint that immediately leads to dogmatism. In Kant, however, the idea, or better still, Reason, is not simply equated with reality. On the contrary, there is room for play, a built-in margin allowing for a certain tension between objective reality and moral freedom, which finds its apotheosis in the reflective faculty of judgment, which is rooted in the subject. This explains why Lyotard reverts to the third critique, the Critique of Judgment, and the so-called fourth critique, the historical-political writings of Kant!

A second major reason has to do with Lyotard's resistance to the defenders of consensus, which in his eyes implies a reign of terror. His main targets are the 'free consensus' of Richard Rorty, which he rejects to be 'conversational imperialism', as well as the 'rational, power-free (*Herschaftsfreie*) consensus' of Jürgen Habermas, which he considers to be hopelessly outmoded and too simplistic. In both concepts, Lyotard sees the continued effect of Enlightenment ideals, which can no longer be met by philosophy. More particularly, so he argues, as he already did in *The Postmodern Condition*, that the project of the Enlightenment is negated by the historical facts of the last century. Auschwitz is the symbol of the bankruptcy of the all-too-high expectations, which were put into the liberating role of reason. After Auschwitz, the final purpose of history becomes suspect, as had the meta-narrative of consensus, the dogmatism of the discourse of unity that in its rational enforceability always implies terror. Discourses and faculties are no longer homogeneous and based in 'truth': they are heterogeneous and incommensurable; that is, mutually immeasurable and mutually incomparable. And so, Lyotard asks himself how, given this radical heterogeneity, is a critical judgment possible that does not degenerate into rationalistic terror?

This sets the stage for Lyotard's search for new resources in Kantian philosophy. Starting from his own critical position and confronted with its nearly insurmountable implications, Lyotard found above all in Kant's work the much needed instruments and inspiration for thinking through and further justifying his own philosophical viewpoints. A first important resource appeared to be Kant's concept of *sensus communis* (see also Section 6.5.4). In the beginning Lyotard opposed consensus to dissensus, or paralogics. But this did not appease his wish to bridge the undecidability of the dispute, at least to a certain degree. However in Kant's concept of *sensus communis* he found an instrument that did not necessarily end in rational terror. After all, in it one does not presuppose the binding arguments of intellectual understanding and yet 'understanding' is possible on the basis of a common feeling, a "common sense", which is rooted in Reason. On the basis of this feeling, one can 'explain' one's position in a dispute without 'solving' it or rationally enforcing it.

This leads to a second Kantian concept, that of the faculty of judgment. In *The Differend* (originally published in 1983), Lyotard refers to the image of the archipelago. The various discursive genres are compared to islands and the faculty of judgment to an admiral who travels back and forth between the different islands to show what he has 'discovered' and that could serve for each particular island as a useful 'as-if-intuition' to substantiate this expedition. The 'intervention power' possesses no object: it possesses no island of its own, but it demands an environment, the sea, the Archipelago, the most important sea being the Aegean Sea, as it was called in earlier times. The metaphor of the archipelago symbolizes a meeting place by which competing islands of discourse can be localized and relativized so that their specific domains of validity are made visible. Because of this, the plurality of language games and discourse genre are recognized without falling victim to the violence of hegemony or the terror of truth.

Henceforth, following in Kant's footsteps, Lyotard plainly opts for the reflective faculty of judgment as a bridge between the different faculties (Kant) and the different discourse genres (Lyotard). The critical judgment of the philosopher is more reflective than determinant, sooner aesthetic than teleological, sublime rather than beautiful. It is not restricted by a given location or discourse genre, but rather extends itself over the whole 'archipelago'. It is not guided beforehand by a theoretical or a practical notion of purposiveness, not even by any realistic notion such as in teleological judgment. The reflective faculty of judgment is of an aesthetic nature. It is related to the integrity of the whole, the parts of which *only* attain a harmonious equilibrium *due to conflict*. Hence it is not a judgment of beauty, but a judgment that refers to the experience of the sublime. It is not the harmony between the faculties of knowledge but precisely the opposite: it is the incommensurability of imagination and (intellectual) understanding that is the central issue. The circumstances in which understanding is possible have nothing to do with understanding, but with feeling, with a "common sense", which is as such unspeakable and unpresentable: it concerns a representation that is as such unrepresentable, the reproduction of what as such cannot be reproduced.

11.2.5   Towards an Aesthetics of the Sublime: Art as "Presenting the Unpresentable"

It is hardly surprising that in his theory of art Lyotard subsequently sought alliance with Kant's notion of the sublime, a third Kantian concept prominent in Lyotard's later thinking. For Lyotard, the sublime is closely linked to the postmodern moment within modern art, albeit in a rather specific way. In fact, so he argues, all modern aesthetics is already sublime in one way or another. Yet, there is a crucial distinction between the modern and postmodern moment. The modern moment that he associates with Proust and de Chirico (see Fig. 11.1), for example, is *nostalgic*. It is steeped in nostalgia, because here the unpresentable is evoked or represented solely as a lack of content, which due to its recognizable and unproblematic form remains for the reader or spectator an object of consolation and pleasure. However, the emotions associated with it are as such *not* sublime because the sublime is always a matter of an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: pleasure because Reason exceeds each representation due to our faculty for ideas; pain because each representation or sensuousness falls short of being adequate or purposive.

Lyotard discusses the postmodern moment that he associates with the works of Cézanne, Delaunay, Duchamp, Mondriaan, and Barnett Newman (see Fig. 11.2) in terms of Kant's notion of the sublime (see also Section 6.4). The postmodern moment is that which denies itself the consolation or comfort of beautiful forms, allowing us to collectively share the nostalgia of the unattainable. It is that which looks for ways of presentation, not to enjoy them, but to give the spectator the feeling that something unthinkable, unpresentable is at hand. The postmodern is that which is silenced in modernism. It is more original and more radical: the actual

Fig. 11.1 Giorgio de Chirico, *The Nostalgia of the Infinite*, *1912–13?* (dated on painting 1911). Oil on canvas, 140 × 184 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Copyright ARS. (*see Color Plates*)

avant-garde, so to speak. As a consequence postmodernism does not come *after* modernism, but actually precedes it. Or better still: it is its perpetual birth!

Lyotard does not argue in favor of an aesthetics *of* the sublime, for this still comprises an attempt to show the unpresentable and to repose in the beautiful forms: thus an aesthetics that has already recuperated and suppressed that which lies 'beyond the beautiful' by aestheticizing the form. He argues, on the contrary, for a *negative aesthetics*, which, due to a 'negative presentation', draws one's attention to that which falls outside the realm of presentation.

Fig. 11.2 Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*, 1950–1951. Oil on canvas, 7'11 2/8 × 17'9 ¼ inches, 242 × 542 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York (Gift from Mr and Mrs Ben Heller). © Barnett Newman, Vir Heroicus Sublimis, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008. (*see Color Plates*)

In art there are two ways to cope with the presentation of the unpresentable. The first way, which Lyotard calls *nostalgic* and *melancholic*, emphasizes the incapacity of presentation, but continues to dwell within the nostalgia for presentation and presence, the cult of sensuous purposiveness or formal beauty. This is the modern moment. The second mode, which Lyotard calls *novatio*, emphasizes the incapacity of presentation or *Darstellung*, but does not search for consolation: it seeks refuge in the faculty of Reason, or *Vernunft*, and thus not in intellectual understanding but in a supersensible purposiveness. Because of this, it emphasizes only the invention of new rules and new forms in the pictorial, artistic, or philosophical game. It does not seek pleasure or forced harmony as is found in the first way; on the contrary, it makes visible the abyss between the presentable and the thinkable, between the realm of intuition (*Anschauung*) and the realm of Reason. And because it no longer strives for an adequate form, the new rules are not so much concerned with the unpresentable as such, but with the 'unpresentability of the unpresentable'.

This explains why, according to Lyotard, the avant-garde always brings up the question 'what is painting?'. All sorts of conventions, such as perspective, the canvas, the frame, the museum, and the signature are put into question. Here, painting first and foremost becomes a philosophical question, which time and again urges one to break through the common conventions. It points out that the visual field both conceals and needs the invisible and that it thus not only relates to the eye but also to the mind, as we have seen in some sections on Merleau-Ponty (see for example Sections 9.3.2 and 9.3.7). The public did not understand that it could take a year, as in the case of Malevich, to make a white square, i.e. to create nothing, because this was conceived of as the only possible form of the unpresentable. What is, however, important is the inquiry into the invisible, the supersensible that first makes possible the visible or the representation, but keeps itself out of reach and withdraws itself from any presentability.

The actual avant-garde, or the postmodern moment, is thus not controlled by a consensus of taste, but is devoted to the plastic experiment. Or, along the lines of Kant, not the beautiful, but the sublime is the issue. When a painter represents the unpresentable, the representation is itself tortured: it is 'formless', 'unlimited', 'negative', and 'indirect'. The artist cannot represent the absolute, but can show that the absolute *does* exist because of the 'negative representation' or what Kant has called the 'abstract'.

With this vision of the role of the sublime in the avant-garde and postmodernism, Lyotard emphatically resists the sort of 'postmodernism' that celebrates the playful and superficial exterior of our mass culture. Here the new depthlessness is preached in which anything goes, because everything is an object of an aesthetic experience, even the simplest consumer goods. Everything is absorbed into an all-embracing cultural industry in which there is no room for autonomous art. But these aestheti-cizations of everyday life show a new 'taste' vehemently criticized by Lyotard because artists shirk their responsibility, that of the immanent-sublime, which alludes to the unpresentable. In that sense, Lyotard is not only a successor of Kant, but also of Adorno.

After all, in faithful elaboration of Adorno's aesthetics, Lyotard staunchly defends, avant-garde art, or the 'artistic experiment', and the autonomy of art often associated with it. This vision decisively removes him from Baudrillard's aesthetic vision (Section 11.4.4), and that of Charles Jencks who increasingly embraced in architecture a 'new synthesis', which he labeled 'free style classi-cism'. Given this affinity with Adorno, Lyotard's vision undoubtedly fits into an emancipatory 'meta-narrative' on the triumph of the avant-garde, the permanent breakthrough 'beyond the beautiful' that time and again redefines art. We are confronted with a meta-narrative that is entirely rooted in modernism and even remains indebted to the ideals of enlightenment, which are criticized so ruthlessly by Lyotard elsewhere.

11.2.6   Objections to Lyotard

The work of Lyotard discussed in the above sections raises many objections. A first fundamental objection is *that the use of the basic concepts 'modern' and 'postmodern' has not been well thought-out*. In *The Postmodern Condition*, the opposition between the terms refers first of all to the distinction between the era of modernity and the era of postmodernity. The same opposition is also used to refer to the difference between modern and postmodern modes of knowledge. Lyotard repeatedly suggests that there is a parallel evolution and that knowledge changes along with the social-historical conditions. He thus starts from a tacit Marxist presupposition in which science and philosophy are seen as a superstructure that is determined by the economic infrastructure.

This can hardly be reconciled with the fact that elsewhere Lyotard makes an exception for art. Whereas in *The Postmodern Condition* a well-determined

periodization is applied, Lyotard does not conceive of art in the same sense. The periodization is no longer used. In art, the postmodern precedes the modern. Suddenly all chronology is abandoned. Postmodernism in art is not an era, not even an art movement, but a 'state of mind', which does not so much appear after modernism, but was already there before modernism even was born. Lyotard states that 'A work is only modern, if it was previously postmodern'. Rather surprising is that Lyotard later confided to J.L. Thébaud in *Magazine Litéraire* that he had launched the word 'postmodern' as a witticism.

A second fundamental objection is *that Lyotard's analysis of the postmodern condition is self-contradictory*. Does not the concept of a postmodern condition in turn presuppose a master narrative, a totalizing perspective that gives insight into the transition from one era to the other? Does not the concept of the 'postmodern' itself suppose a meta-narrative, just the sort of discourse that Lyotard so emphatically rejects? Can Lyotard reject, on the one hand, all universal norms and on the other still claim that the plurality of language games is a universal characteristic of postmodern knowledge? How can he, on the one hand, demand that all language games have equal rights to recognition, and on the other hand, repeatedly emphasize the dichotomy between modern and postmodern modes of knowledge?

A third possible fundamental objection is *that Lyotard mistakenly contends that the ideals of enlightenment are superseded*. This criticism from Habermas aroused a deep controversy, which became widely known as the postmodernism debate. According to Habermas, the project of the Enlightenment is an unfulfilled project. He reveals himself as a defender of modernity. In opposition to Lyotard, he speaks in the name of emancipation. Against dissensus, he affirms consensus, which is built upon rational dialogue about values and norms.

The third objection is interesting, but does not necessarily imply that Lyotard would be wrong. From the Enlightenment, Habermas tries to rescue the notions of truth, justice, and freedom. The discussion, which also includes a contribution by the American philosopher Rorty, very quickly acquired a political-philosophical dimension. Whereas Habermas speaks in the name of emancipation, Lyotard warns about the dangers of claiming exclusively 'in the name of'. In striving for emancipation, Lyotard argues, only one type of freedom is recognized at the cost of other kinds of freedom. This striving goes hand in hand with terror and violence. This is in stark contrast to the conviction of Habermas who believes in non-violent conflict resolution based on reason, and perceives in this a progress towards democracy. On this point Lyotard feels more tragic and pessimistic. This is also one of the most important differences between Rorty and Lyotard, who are otherwise in agreement on many points. For Rorty, 'liberal democracy' is untouchable. He believes in conversation, persuasion, free consensus, and tolerance. Lyotard is highly skeptical about this. Is conversation and persuasion not always highly inhibited, imperialistic, and determined by power? Is not all democracy necessarily despotic, including 'liberal' democracy? Concerning this debate, which is well documented, the final words certainly have not yet been said.

11.3 Critique of Representation: Jacques Derrida

In postmodern discourse, the notions of intertextuality, deconstruction, logocentrism, and displacement are widely used. Therefore it seems appropriate to clarify these concepts here. They are anyhow indispensable for an adequate understanding of post-structuralism. More particularly these concepts are able to clarify the new way within postmodern discourse of looking at language and the language of art. Moreover these notions also play a significant role in the criticism of representation, which forms the core of post-structuralism.

11.3.1 Intertextuality

The concept of 'intertextuality' already emerges within semiotics. One already finds the notion in the work of Roland Barthes and later in the writings of Michael Riffaterre and Julia Kristeva. What does 'intertextuality' actually mean? The concept has two primary meanings. First, it refers to the importance of earlier texts. A text only has meaning in relation to earlier texts. The reader is, as it were, trained by a multitude of earlier texts: he or she will only understand a text because earlier texts have established a code that makes it possible to 'decode' the text, to unveil the meaning of it. Someone with no experience whatsoever in modern poetry will not understand a poem by E.E. Cummings. Only after making oneself familiar with the code of modern poetry will the poem acquire a meaning; only then will it really 'speak'.

In the first meaning, intertextuality allows a text to signify something. In the second meaning, the concept is radicalized. Here, intertextuality implies that texts no longer refer to reality, but *only* to other texts. Each poem only consists of words that refer to other words, and these still to other words again, and so on. Each poem refers to other poems and the latter then to other poems again, and so on. Poetry acquires meaning because of other poems, and not because of the fact that it refers to an extra-linguistic reality.

This second meaning is of great importance to understanding the main issue of postmodernism. After all, in post-structuralism semiotics is radicalized. The term 'deconstruction' was created by Jacques Derrida. In a paper submitted to a 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins University entitled 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', Derrida introduced the term 'deconstruction'. This article lies at the root of the rise and the widespread use of 'literary' deconstruction in American literary criticism and comparative literature. In spite of its institutional success and the omnipresence of the term in a number of fields and in the art world itself, Derrida distanced himself rather quickly from every common use of the term 'deconstruction'. In a letter to a Japanese friend, he wrote that each assertion such as 'deconstruction is X' or 'deconstruction is not X' completely misses the mark! Derrida deplored the fact that the term had become a license for arbitrary interpretation and even fashionable gibberish.

11.3.2   Deconstruction

How could we shed some light on what Derrida himself actually presupposes when he used the term 'deconstruction'? Any explanation should start with the second meaning of intertextuality. Each text is, according to him, written in the margin of other pre-existing texts. Each text is always grafted onto older texts, without which it would neither have existed, nor be understood. Questions that arise from this point of view are: Where exactly does the text begin, and where does it end? Is the first sentence really the beginning and the last really the end? What can be made of the foreword and epilogue, the contents and the footnotes? What can be made of what is being referred to? Of utmost importance is the margin, the white space on the edge of the page and between the lines and the words. One is confronted with a peculiar paradox: that which actually has no meaning – after all, nothing is there! – renders meaning to what is there. From this perspective, the unsaid, the unthought, the forgotten, and the excluded make each text what it is. The silences and blind spots are constitutive of the text. In any case, so Derrida argues, these silences, these lacunae in the discourse, the demarcations ('This is beyond the scope of our discourse'), the internal contradictions, the hesitations, the promises, and allusions are all unavoidable for the economy of the text. After all, it is impossible to say everything.

The only goal of deconstruction is to trace everything that is in the margin, and not to criticize the text or to expose its inaccuracies. Deconstruction is not a criticism of a specific text, though it implies a general critique of mimesis or representation, as we shall see. It is also not directed at unveiling the deeper sense of the text, as is the case in a hermeneutic approach. It is instead of a therapeutic nature. It traces the aporias, blind spots, or moments of self-contradiction whereby a text involuntarily betrays the tension between what it wants to say manifestly and what it nonetheless is bound to betray. It all comes down to revealing the tension between what the text literally says, the rhetoric, and what it does not say and yet what is very significant, its logic. This demands an alert and patient reading, with heightened attention to specific differences from a logical point of view.

11.3.3   Logocentrism

In Derrida's approach, deconstruction implies a radical critique of representation. We use signs to refer to something that is not present. The sign is always a means, a substitute for something else. In this sense, it is considered literally as *re-presentation*: it renders something absent present again. In the spoken word, we have the illusion that the absent is indeed immediately present. For this reason, according to Derrida, voice and speech predominate in our culture. Because the spoken word, the logos, stands at the center, Derrida speaks of a logocentrism. The voice, or 'to hear oneself speaking', awakens in us the illusion that there is neither delay nor distance where the absent is concerned. I immediately understand what I am saying and what I mean to say. In the spoken word, we presuppose that language is transparent. Here,

the order of the signified, the *signifié* prevails. The meaning is seen as an interior and spiritual good that is given beforehand. It is meaningful in itself.

In the spoken word, we tend to forget the materiality of the sign. However, the sign is also a supplement, an addition to, a filling of a lack. This manifests itself in writing. In the written word, the order of the signifier, the *signifiant* rules. Here the exterior and palpable manifestation of the sign predominates: the bodily supplement. Because of logocentrism, we are deeply suspicious of the written word. Writing is deemed to be dangerous, because the writer in principle loses every control over the text. Even after his dead, readers still use and misuse his written words. The written word was therefore already seen by Plato as the prodigal son who goes his own way straying from the father or the origin, or more concretely, from the original intention of the author. One can cite at will from a written text and, in this way, violate the original meaning.

11.3.4   Displacement

Derrida now postulates that the bodily supplement, the signifier, is the original. He pits the hegemony of the signified against the hegemony of the signifier. Nothing precedes the delay. The delay is itself original. This has far-reaching consequences for representation. It is no longer a matter of a difference between the absent reality, and the (supplementary) representation. Any true reality disappears. What remains is the unending chain of signifiers in which the signified is not given in advance, but rather produced by the differences between the signifiers. The signified itself is never present in flesh and blood. It is a trace, without an actual origin or a final destination. It is a trace that one follows endlessly without ever arriving at a final destination. One always arrives on the scene too late to meet the signified itself. It is always already delayed or postponed by the presence of a supplementary difference. A new signifier is always needed in order to produce and reproduce the signified of a signifier. Each supplement substitutes for other supplements. In principle this substitution process has neither a beginning nor an end. There is an infinite deferral, a continuous displacement at play.

11.3.5   Critique of Mimesis

In *The Double Session*, Derrida tries to pin down his critique of representation and the idea of displacement using two texts. One text is a piece from Plato's *Philebus*, and the other is a text from Mallarmé, entitled *Mimique*. Plato's text is an illustration of logocentrism. In fact the dialogue is about mimesis. The actual, authentic truth is the world of Ideas. The spoken word belongs to the world of phenomena: it is, to be sure, an imperfect imitation of the ideal form, but not as tainted as writing, which is frowned on as a mere imitation of an imitation. The written word, just as

the artwork in *The Republic*, belongs to the third step removed from true reality (see Chapter 2). The following is a schematic representation:

Ideal World	Perceptible World	Art
Ideas forms	Phenomena	Artifacts works of art
	Spoken word	Writing
Authentic truth	Imperfect imitation	Imitation of imitation

Mallarmé's text is based on the third edition of a pamphlet by Beissier about a mime performance performed 5 years previously. What, Derrida wonders, is the mimetic truth here? What is the referent here? In the pamphlet to which Mallarmé refers, the original performance is already absent. The original performance has been irrevocably lost. The only thing we have left is a play of texts reacting to one another. Mallarmé's text is part of an endless chain of 'supplementary' meanings. The truth, the original mime performance, remains concealed behind the play of mimetic inscriptions. Derrida's example is well-chosen because the original mime performance is itself already an imitation of something real. *Mime* is always already a form of *mimesis*!

In fact, Derrida criticizes two standard conceptions of mimesis. The first is the Platonic doctrine of the inner revelation. Here mimesis refers to a higher, metaphysical reality, the world of ideal Forms, which can only be known through reason. The best approach to this world is Plato's model of the spoken word (see Section 11.3.3!). The second standard conception is the imitation theory that starts with a correspondence between language and reality. According to Derrida, Mallarmé contests this last conception in his text. The problem, however, is that our usage is imbued with mimetic presuppositions. It is the task of deconstruction to show that this conception is ill-founded.

Derrida is a difficult thinker because his philosophical texts are subject to a continuous displacement. Many readers are unable to cope with this. Repeatedly any fixed meaning seems to escape one's grasp. The postponement is, as it were, cultivated indefinitely. In any case, Derrida's viewpoint is very radical and raises many questions. Nevertheless, an important part of the contemporary avant-garde recognizes the importance of deconstruction in, for example, painting. Many live by the words of Braque: 'I do not believe in objects, but in relations between them'. Many formal experiments in painting do illustrate a critique of representation: they try to breach the common meaning of the image. The formal experiment is not directed at similarity, but at differences.

11.3.6   The Thinking of Difference

Derrida's work is also about differences, about thinking difference. In opposition to the hegemony of spoken language so characteristic of logocentrism, he already developed the notion of 'différance' in a 1968 paper presented to the *Société*

française de philosophie. In French, the distinction between 'différence' (the common word for 'difference') and 'différance' (a word invented by Derrida) is not audible in spoken language. With this, Derrida wants to show that there are differences that elude the spoken language and are only observable and tangibly present in written language. From this, it also becomes clear that writing is not a mimesis or imitation of the spoken language, as posed in logocentrism, but that it has a density, a materiality of its own. Writing is not a transparent translation of the voice or speech, but introduces a supplementary difference of its own.

We can express the foregoing by stating that the notion of 'différence' presents us with a *graphic* difference that is not phonetic. It concerns a voiceless and mute difference, a silence coming to the surface in and by the system of phonetic writing. It is a difference that is only manifest *within* this system, and yet at the same time exposes the limits of the phonetic system. Indeed, the graphic sign 'différance' shows that there is no writing that is purely and absolutely phonetic. It reminds us of the fact that phonetic writing can only function because of non-phonetic signs such as punctuation marks. The graphic sign shows us that the difference that makes the audibility of phonemes possible is itself inaudible! In that sense, 'différance' operates as a deconstruction of phonetic language: it enables us to see the silence, the blind spot, which enables speech in the first place.

In the notion of 'différance', the entire theme of thinking of difference comes together. Erik Oger has pointed out that Derrida arrived at the word-(de)construction 'différ*a*nce' by starting with the infinitive 'différer'. The Frence verb 'différer' has in common with the Latin *differre* that it has no fixed meaning. The first meaning of 'différer' is 'to differ, to be different, to be at variance, to be dissimilar, to be non-identical'. This differing or even the word '*difference*' can in turn be conceived as:

1. 'Variety, diversity, heterogeneity, alterity' (In French: différen*t*) and
2. 'Conflict, dispute, disagreement' (In French: différen*d*) (Oger, 2005, 80)

We have already seen in Lyotard these two dimensions of the first meaning, namely to differ in the sense of 'being different', and 'having a difference or dispute'. The second dimension is sometimes even translated as the *differend*! (See Lyotard, J.F., *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, 1988) As we have already seen, Lyotard's thinking of difference indeed strongly emphasizes both connotations of 'difference'. On the one hand, he refers to 'being different', for example, in his continual emphasis of the 'heterogeneity or incommensurability of discourses'. On the other hand, he refers to the theme implied by that heterogeneity, namely that of 'having dissimilar opinions or dispute'. For the latter, Lyotard sought a solution in the Kantian notion of *sensus communis*, which lies beyond what he called the 'terror of the truth'.

The second meaning of 'différer' is '*to defer*, to postpone, to put off to a future time, to delay, to temporize'; this second meaning, as we have seen, is extremely important for Derrida. Because 'différance' is derived in analogy with other already existing words from the present participle (*participe présent*), it indicates a movement or an activity, a shade of meaning that can hardly be found in the usual substantive. With this, the emphasis is placed on the continual deferral of meaning,

the continual postponement (shifting or displacement) and the continuous production of new differences on the level of the signifier (see Section 11.3.3).

Yet caution is required here. Derrida emphasizes that 'différance' embodies neither a word, nor a concept. The graphic 'sign' belongs neither to perceptible nor to theoretical thinking. The graphic sign resists the age-old binary opposition between the perceptible and the intelligible, i.e., between that which can be perceived through the senses and that which can only be known by reason. Différance likewise introduces a movement, a difference that belongs neither to the voice nor to writing: it opens a strange space that is located somewhere between the spoken and the written language, or somewhere even beyond the familiar opposition or unity between both!

Here it becomes evident to what extent Derrida relies on Heidegger. In the introduction to Chapter 9, I have pointed out to what extent Heidegger anticipates the thinking of difference. Différance, just as Being for Heidegger, embodies 'something' that makes the present-being possible, but is itself never present as such. As soon as Derrida writes about the Being of différance, he crosses out the word 'Being', just as Heidegger did. Just as with Heidegger's truth, différance is 'something' that reveals itself through disappearing, or disappears while appearing. Différance has neither an existence nor an essence. It can be subsumed under no category of being whatsoever: it is neither simply present nor absent! Hence it also does not display a theological nature: it does not refer to an unspeakable way of being that removes itself from finite categories in order to be 'saved' or subsequently confirmed as a supreme being. Derrida anyhow rejects so-called 'negative theology' in which the unsayable refers negatively to a higher, elusive, godlike being.

This is due to the fact that différance serves neither an end nor a deeper being, but presupposes a thinking that is purely strategic and adventurous. It is a strategy that vehemently resists the 'thinking of presence' within metaphysics as well as the 'thinking of absence', which is inextricably bound to it. It is a strategic thinking that unfolds itself in a space that cannot be pinpointed, in which all familiar binary oppositions disappear the moment they appear within the discourse. Very important here is the delay. The graphic sign is not a detour to representing the thing, but is itself the 'origin', an 'origin', that is in fact no origin at all, because it is displaced time and again as it is assimilated into a chain of signifiers that 'is' in principle never-ending. Différance is in perfect agreement with what we described earlier as 'displacement': here, too, reigns the 'primacy of the signifier' as it is called in post-structuralism.

This strategic, 'anti-metaphysical' thinking also explains why Derrida rejects the 'self-consciousness' of Husserl. After all Husserl sees 'self-consciousness' as a sovereign act that would precede all speech or all signs: hence a primordial truth that would be fully 'self-present' and transparent. The original phenomenology that goes back 'to things themselves' is still, according to Derrida, a classical example of the 'thinking of presence', of metaphysics, of logocentrism.

Yet Derrida unavoidably speaks the language of metaphysics, albeit only strategically, as the deconstruction of a metaphysics that can only take place from within, not from a 'truth' that would be somewhere outside the intertextual space of meta-

physics. This also explains why Derrida conceives of deconstruction as notes or comments in the margins of other philosophical texts. Hence, one of Derrida's known works is quite aptly entitled *Margins of Philosophy*. These notes in the margins are determined by the pre-existing texts: they thus behave primarily as *parasites*. As I already emphasized, these notes, these deconstructive readings, focus on the peripheral and seemingly unimportant elements of the text, the hesitations, the blind spots, the hidden or excluded meanings. In particular, deconstruction destabilizes the *binary oppositions* upon which metaphysics is constructed: it 'liberates' another way of thinking. According to Derrida, Nietzsche, as well as Freud, Levinas, and Heidegger have in one way or another anticipated this thinking of the Other or Otherness. This thinking always concerns the two dimensions of 'difference' discussed earlier: difference as otherness, as alterity, which implies spatialization, and difference as delay, as postponement, which embodies temporization.

At the end of Derrida's conference on différance, the influence of Heidegger remains palpable, in particular in his well-known text *Anaximander's Saying* (Heidegger, 2002). Here, Derrida comments in the margins of Heidegger's comments on the fragment by Anaximander. In this meditation about the oblivion-of-Being, Heidegger sees the 'ontological difference', the distinction between Being and beings as a trace that very quickly disappears in the history of Being. The search for the oblivion-of-Being soon appears to be in vain: the earlier trace is veiled, obscured, silenced, deleted. If we assume, as does Derrida, that difference itself is something other than simple absence or presence, one has to conceive of the oblivion of the difference between Being and beings as the disappearance of a trace of a trace. One can, however, retrace the deletion of the earlier trace in the metaphysical text as soon as the presence appears in its being-present. After all, in the metaphysical text, the presence becomes a sign of a sign, a trace of a trace! It is a trace that conceals the deletion of the earlier trace and at the same time reveals it: the earlier trace is simultaneously absent and present. For this reason, the other of metaphysics cannot appear as such in the text. Hence, Heidegger writes to the point: 'Lichtung des Unterschiedes kann deshalb auch nicht bedeuten, dass der Unterschied als Unterschied erscheint' ('Illumination of the difference, therefore, cannot mean that the difference appears as the difference' (Heidegger, 2002, 275). Because différance resists presence, indeed even destabilizes it, and makes all 'thinking of presence' problematic, it cannot appear as such: it therefore has neither an essence nor a being.

Besides, Derrida argues, it also has no name. As a name, différance still belongs to metaphysics, and surely when it is limited to 'the difference between Being and beings'. We have to liberate ourselves from the nostalgia for the name: it is better to affirm, as Nietzsche did, 'in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance' the impossibility of the name. In Heidegger's search for a wholly unique name that would give expression to Being, he still speaks the language of metaphysics. But Heidegger is aware that it is a daring enterprise that can only be established through language: 'Nevertheless such daring is not impossible since Being speaks always and everywhere throughout language'. The secret bond between speaking and presence, to which Heidegger alludes, represents for Derrida still a heritage from logocentrism.

11.3.7   *Derrida and Art: The Parergon*

In his philosophical writings on art, Derrida also put deconstructive reading into practice. A prime example of this can be found in his 'Parergon' essay that features as the first essay in *The Truth in Painting* (1987). Besides this first essay, which mainly revolves around a deconstructive reading of Kant's aesthetics, this book includes two other essays. One essay is devoted to the work of Valerio Adami and Gérard Titus-Carmel. The book closes with an extensive discussion of the painting 'Old Shoes with Laces', in which Derrida goes into great detail on the controversy between Heidegger and the art historian Meyer Schapiro. The latter contended that Heidegger wrongly attributed the peasant's shoes in the painting to a farmer's wife; the shoes in fact represented van Gogh's own shoes.

The title, *The Truth in Painting*, was borrowed from the opening lines of a letter Cézanne wrote on October 23, 1905 to Émile Bernard, in which he proclaimed in closing: 'I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you'. First cited by the philosopher and art critic Hubert Damish, Derrida derived his title 'The Truth in Painting' from this line. In the previously discussed 'The Doubt of Cézanne', Merleau-Ponty also quotes an excerpt from the same letter, albeit from the opening lines, in which Cézanne describes his mental confusion that overwhelmed him during an intense Provencal heat wave. This was followed by more mild weather conditions, enabling improved sight and clearer thinking. But there is a great difference between the way Merleau-Ponty and Derrida interpret Cézanne's writing on painting. For Merleau-Ponty, the truth lies in the way Cézanne 'thinks in painting' and effectively shows on canvas how the perceptible world unfolds. On the contrary, Derrida sees Cézanne's words themselves on the truth in painting as a 'speech act', a promise that belongs to writing and therefore embodies a supplement, a delay. Whereas Merleau-Ponty relates Cézanne's statements to his act of painting, his pictorial gesture, Derrida positions the lofty remark on the truth in painting within the framework of a *discourse on painting*. Cézanne's expression refers to THE truth in painting, precisely the sort of truth-thinking that is also common in the philosophy of art. This thinking is not about the truth of painting as a representation of reality, but about the very *essence* of painting. What Cézanne promises is a discourse that will shed light on what is at stake in the true art of painting, what distinguishes true painting from inauthentic painting and all other fields of art.

It is precisely that sort of demarcation in the discourse on painting and art in general that Derrida subjects to deconstruction in 'Parergon'. The literal translation of the Greek 'parergon' is 'beside' (para) the 'work' (ergon). As with the contemporary term, 'paramedic' it is presupposed that the parergon does not belong to the work proper and is therefore of secondary importance. The Greek word 'parergon' is thus commonly translated as a 'side issue', a 'matter of secondary importance', an 'inessential', a 'side effect', an accessory, and so on. These meanings explain why 'parergon' has also taken on the meanings 'ornament' and 'frame'. In Greek philosophy, 'parergon' acquired a negative connotation, that of 'what is less important, less essential'. Derrida sees in this a manifestation of logocentrism that has a long

tradition in Western metaphysics. The 'parergon' is always distrusted and rejected because it defiles the essence or truth: it is not intrinsic and thus must be kept separate from the real work or the actual truth. As Derrida describes, it is a 'hors-d'oeuvre', a starter, or a bonus that does not belong to the proper work or the main course of logos.

In 'Parergon', Derrida undertakes two important steps: first, he writes about the 'frame' of the philosophy of art; he then elaborates on the frame of the painting itself. Derrida's text is regularly interrupted by a blank space of about eight lines, which is presented in the form of a frame. With this, Derrida apparently wants to make clear that he writes a '*discours sur le cadre*', a discourse about (*sur* in the figurative sense) and on (*sur* in the literal sense) the frame. Moreover, he shows how his own discourse 'frames', enwraps, and at the same time, as is true of all discourse, acquires meaning through what is NOT said: the blank spaces, the white between the lines, the omissions, the silences. His discourse is not simply written about and on the frame; it is located in a preexisting intertextual space, namely the discourse on painting. Derrida deconstructs this discourse not from the outside, but from within: he causes the discourse to reveal its own shortcomings, its own lacunae, and its own insurmountable contradictions and paradoxes!

Classical discourse on painting, in particular, the philosophy of art, is always a discourse on framing. It is always trying to frame, to demarcate, to delimit the domain of art or aesthetic experience. There is always the attempt to define the essence of art in order to make a sharp distinction between art and non-art. All the preceding chapters of this book amply illustrate this tendency. So one is hardly surprised by Derrida's contention that the writings on art that he considers to be the most important all try to free or purge the concept of art from all inessentials. It is always about the essence or the origin, or better still, the truth of art: a one-sided, naked, and unchangeable truth that reveals and unveils itself in and throughout the history of art.

In fact, classical discourse is always about framing the frame. The frame of art is literally framed in turn by philosophy: philosophy of art is therefore a meta-discourse that enwraps, overwhelms, and conclusively secures the true meaning of art. Here, one meets a kind of violence, a straitjacket, a form of exclusion. The discourse seems therefore immune to all kind of rejections or corrections, as anything that falls outside of the strict definition is already disqualified beforehand. What does not agree with the postulated definition or predetermined essence is excluded as inessential and irrelevant. Moreover, art becomes a derivative of the philosophical system as such, as we have seen with Hegel: art as the necessary step in the dialectical unfolding and becoming self-conscious of the Absolute Spirit. Or, as with Heidegger: art as an instrument to put the truth as unconcealment into practice. Time and again, the philosophy of art draws art into a circular reasoning, but is therefore itself caught in a circle as Heidegger observed in the opening passages of his essay already discussed in the preceding chapter. However, as Derrida poses the question, when one circle must encircle another ad infinitum, would there not be a dizzying encircling in which the center itself or the essence is faced with an insurmountable abyss? It is clear that Derrida is heading for what he, following André

Gide, calls a 'mise en abyme', a sort of *regressus ad infinitum* in which philosophical encircling catches a glimpse of its own framing, of its own ultimate incapacity, its own encircling abyss.

It is this deconstruction of framing the frame that Derrida applies most emphatically to the *Critique of Judgment*, in which Kant attempted, as we have seen, to bridge the abyss between the first and second critique. All of Kant's transcendental philosophy centers around demarcation, framing, in which Kant repeatedly applies binary oppositions in order to distinguish between, for example, an empirical judgment (the first critique) and a moral judgment (the second critique). But also the domain of the faculty of judgment is set apart by the distinction between determinant and reflective judgment. Within the latter, the aesthetic judgment is neatly isolated from teleological judgment. Kant constantly frames the whole apparatus of the human mind by continual distinctions: time and again, one essential *a priori* is distinguished from the other. Kant's *a prioris* always function as demarcation lines that justify the binary oppositions of the concepts through a meta-discourse.

This is also clear from Kant's discussion of the *a prioris* of the judgment of taste in the first part of the Critique of Judgment. In each of these *a prioris*, Kant tries to free the judgment of taste from the inessential, the accidental: he therefore focuses on the pure judgment of taste that may not be obscured by things that, according to Kant, have nothing to do with the judgment of taste as such. Kant continually tries to set apart the domain of the aesthetic: he tries to keep the intrinsic characteristics and to remove or to disqualify the extrinsic elements. Thus in the first a priori, the Beautiful is distinguished from the Pleasant on the basis of the binary opposition between disinterest and interest, between disinterested satisfaction and pleasure. In the second a priori, the judgment of beauty is distinguished from the judgment of knowledge on the basis of the opposition between feeling and understanding. And in the third a priori, the Beautiful is the demarcation between subject and object, between subjective purposiveness and objective purposiveness, between form and content! Finally in the fourth a priori, something peculiar happens: here Kant argues that in spite of the fact that our judgment of taste is purely subjective, we nevertheless assume that everyone ought to give their approval. He also argues that such a 'subjective universality' is only plausible if we assume that everyone disposes of a similar basic feeling about life, a common sense, a *sensus communis*. We must, Kant argues, assume this sensus communis though we cannot demonstrate it; in any case, he writes we will not at this moment investigate this matter. Here we see how Kant's system leads to a circular reasoning: the moment we assume this 'a priori' of the sensus communis, the correspondence between the different judgments of taste is in a certain sense unavoidable even if this correspondence is purely subjective and normative; thus, a 'subjective universality'!

In this first step, the deconstruction of Kant's aesthetics as philosophical frame, Derrida shows how Kant purifies the judgment of taste to such an extent that nothing is left but a skeleton of the aesthetic experience. Through the strict separation of subject and object, of form and matter, there remains an aesthetic experience that is bereft of all emotion, all incitement to lust, all corporeality, and all materiality. This

leads to Kant's peculiar vision that with respect to painting, only the design and not the color can be the object of the experience of beauty. The experience of color belongs to sensuous stimulation, to the Pleasant, to matter, and NOT to the pure form: color therefore obscures the purity of the judgment of taste! Likewise peculiar but meaningful is Kant's conviction that in music only the composition and not the sound endows the listener with an intrinsic experience of beauty and thus a pure judgment of taste.

We are now approaching the artwork itself. The second step in Derrida's deconstruction of Kant's aesthetics is, as already stipulated, wholly focused on the frame of the artwork. It is here that Derrida takes a close look at the examples given by Kant in order to show that the demarcations applied are not suitable. In his zeal to elucidate the purity of the judgment of taste Kant writes:

> Even what we call "ornaments" (parerga), i.e., those things which do not belong to the complete representation of the object internally as elements, but only externally as complements, and which augment the satisfaction of taste, do so only by their form; as, for example, the frames of pictures or the draperies of statues or the colonnades of palaces. But if the ornament does not consist itself in beautiful form, and if it is used as a golden frame is used, merely to recommend the painting by its charm, it is then called finery and injures genuine beauty (Critique of Judgment, § 14).

The first examples of ornaments or parerga on which Derrida makes short comments are the 'draperies on the statues'. The drapery is apparently seen not only as an ornament, but also as something that veils the work of art proper, for example, the representation of human nudity. The drapery belongs neither to the representation as such nor to the artwork proper: it is supplied afterwards; it is an alien element that clouds the intrinsic beauty. Only the sculpture itself may and can be the object of a 'pure' judgment of taste. The drapery is placed outside of the artwork. But, Derrida wonders, where does the drapery begin and end? What about draperies that are absolutely transparent? Derrida is referring to the *Lucretia* of Cranach, a painting in which Lucretia wears only a light band of a transparent veil (see Fig. 11.3). Where is the ornament, the parergon here? Can one speak from an inside and an outside that can be separated in an absolute sense? Is the female nude the essence, with everything else incidental, such as the dagger with which Lucretia points to herself with her right hand, where the sharp tip touching the skin beneath her breasts seems to almost pierce it? Where does the dagger end and where does the female nude begin? The parergon even touches the body, which is essentially what the artwork is about. What about the necklace Lucretia wears? Is this likewise something that, because of its charm, injures the proper experience of beauty? Or do the drapery, the dagger, and the necklace point out that the representation of Lucretia, the representation of a female nude shows an internal, intrinsic lack that is entirely filled in or compensated by the ornaments? If this is so, then ornaments are certainly not external supplements, but constitute an essential component of the representation and thus the artwork.

The second example of ornaments or parerga that Derrida examines, the 'colonnades of palaces', is even more problematic. Here we have to do with a parergon that is added to a work (ergon), which does not itself represent anything

Fig. 11.3 Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Lucretia*, 1533. Oil on wood, 37,3 × 27,9 cm. bpk / Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin. Foto: Jörg P. Anders. (*see Color Plates*)

and even already is an addition to nature! In the previous example, the human body could still function as a mimetic unity that differed essentially from all periphery supplements or ornaments. In the strict sense, however, a building does not represent anything, and it is even much more difficult then to speak of an inside or an outside. Moreover, it is often very difficult to say whether an environment is natural or artificial, and if the latter, it embodies an ergon or a parergon. In the final analysis, no environment can ever be a parergon in a Kantian sense. The environment, whether natural or artificial, can never be an ornament! This due to the fact that the environment is never arbitrary but constitutive of the building: here the so-called outside is certainly not an ornament, but a necessary supplement, without which the building would display a lack or a void. In any case, a building divorced from its own specific environment would no longer be the same building! Thus, the outside, the surrounding, belongs as much to the work as the actual building itself; in other words, the parergon is just as essential, just as constitutive to the actual work itself! The ergon needs the parergon and hence the binary

opposition between the two, upon which Kant built his whole argument, collapses like a house of cards.

Similarly, Derrida finally deconstructs the third example of ornaments, or parerga, which, by the way, is the example with which Kant himself started in his elucidation, i.e., the 'frame of a painting'. At first sight, Kant appears to be right. It is so common to hear that the frame must be circumspect, that it may not be too present or eccentric, that it may not divert us from the painting itself. The demand for a discreet frame is even a classic theme in art history, something that remains relatively unexplored by Derrida. It is noteworthy that reproductions of masterpieces are mostly, indeed almost always, printed without the frame as if they were not even framed at all! But artists also traditionally pay tribute to the ideal of the discreet frame. Degas is known to have referred to the frame as the 'pimp of painting': '…it enhances it (i.e. painting), but it must never shine at the painting's expense' (Brunette and Wills, 1994, 120). Kant's example lies along the same lines of this classical theme. The 'golden frame' that does not contribute to the beautiful form also outshines the painting and therefore injures real beauty. It allows the incidental to overshadow the main issue, and thus results in obscuring the pure judgment of taste.

But things are not so simple. Very often it is said that the frame has to be functional, that it serves a facilitating role. We should take this as a warning, because apparently the frame nevertheless has an influence on the work! As is the case with the draperies on the statues or the surroundings of buildings, the frame is co-constitutive of the work itself, in this case, the painting. But there is more, much more. Derrida observes that the frames or parerga indeed have a thickness, a surface, that according to Kant not only separates them from the inside, the painting proper, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung, from the museum of which the wall is a part, and finally, from the entire historical, economic, and political framework in which the painting acquires it own signature.

The frame displays the parergon as an 'in-between space' with an outside and an inside border, an internal and an external boundary. It appears therefore as a figure on an ambiguous background. As soon as the painting itself functions as a background, the frame merges into the wall, the museum, and the general context. In this case the logic of the internal border is at play. However, as soon as the wall and the general context function as a backdrop, the frame disappears into the painting. There is always a figure on a background, a frame that stands out. However, it is precisely the frame, according to the classic demand for a discreet frame, that may not stand out, may not show itself; it must disappear, efface itself, and melt away 'at the moment it deploys its greatest energy' (Derrida, 1987, 61), the moment it is most determining for the painting itself!

It is here that the frame, the parergon, becomes a metaphor of a différance that excludes any univocality. The frame is simultaneously both inside and outside. It is just as well inside as outside. It hangs around somewhere in the twilight between the inside and the outside; it is has no exact location. Or, in other words, the frame is at the same time present *and* absent. It is present *as well as* absent. It appears because it disappears, and it disappears while appearing and because it appears. Through all this, binary oppositions upon which Kant has constructed his analysis of the judgment of taste, the oppositions of inside and outside, intrinsic and extrinsic, essential and

incidental, pure and impure, proper and improper, subject and object, form and matter, and so on, crumble (the abyss!). In this way, the logic of the parergon deconstructs the binary thinking that is so characteristic of logocentrism, the thinking in terms of presence that dominates and penetrates our age-old metaphysical tradition.

At the same time, the logic of the parergon also allows us to see that the supplement possesses its own density that is reminiscent of the 'primacy of the signifier'. This density appears most often in paintings that display a passe-partout. The passe-partout is a neutral, mostly white surface that is applied between the frame and the painting in order to allow the painting to stand out better. Derrida calls his introduction to his *Truth in Painting*, 'Passe-partout'. Here he writes about the delay, the promise expressed by Cézanne in his letter to Émile Bernard in which he states that he would reveal to him the truth in painting. The marginalia that Derrida writes with respect to Cézanne's phrase are placed in the neutral, white space of the passe-partout, a place that is no place at all, a 'placeless place'. It is in this undefined space that Derrida argues there is no art without frame, and yet at the same time the frame, in all its meanings, is characterized by an endless displacement. It is impossible to say precisely where the painting begins or ends. It is impossible to give an exact definition of what art essentially is, of what the exact distinction between art and non-art is. Here, with 'a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance' the thinking of difference affirms its own paradox: the impossibility of an essence or a fixed identity likewise undermines the possibility of a difference that would be univocal. And vice versa. Ad infinitum! The thinking of difference is a thinking of the 'undecidability', the 'unlimited' (apeiron), the 'ambiguity' (the radically ambiguous), and therefore breaks through the frontiers of existing frames of thought. It introduces a new way of thinking in which the thesis and the antithesis mutually and endlessly penetrate and displace each other.

11.4 Jean Baudrillard on the World as Simulacrum

Whereas Lyotard highlights information society and autonomous art, Baudrillard focuses more on consumer society and mass culture. But they have nevertheless some significant points in common. Similarly to Lyotard, Baudrillard supposes that an important shift in the social field has taken place the last decades. Though he seldom if ever used the word 'postmodern', Baudrillard did regularly refer to the 'death of modernity'. This indicates that in his work too there is a periodization, in which one can distinguish a chronological sequence from a modern to a "postmodern" era. In Baudrillard too this is linked with a profound change in philosophy and the status of knowledge. More than in Lyotard, however, this epistemological turn is elaborated in terms of semiotics. Moreover, Baudrillard's critique of current semiotics can also be conceived as a critique of structuralism. This explains why Baudrillard is often positioned next to Lyotard and Derrida under the general heading of French post-structuralism.

In a variety of ways the critique of structuralism in each of these authors leads to a rejection of the idea that language or any sign system corresponds to a fixed

standard in reality. In Lyotard we have seen how he doubts the possibility of denotation: we do not dispose of semiotic criteria to justify a clear-cut reference to reality. One of the central tenets of Derrida's philosophy is, as we have seen, the multi-faceted critique of representation. And, as we will see, the critique of representation is likewise omnipresent in Baudrillard's thought: it leads to a diagnosis of our time, characterized as an era of 'collective delusion', of illusion, or, as he words it more technically, of the 'simulacrum'. Moreover Baudrillard's analysis is extremely relevant for the philosophy of art and more particularly for postmodernism in art, because it comprises a critique of mass culture and the culture industry, phenomena which have acquired an important place within the art world during the last decades.

11.4.1 Modernity Versus Post-modernity

As I already stipulated, Baudrillard also posits that we are now confronted with a new type of society, presupposing a transition from the modern to the postmodern era. According to him the era of modernity is dominated by production and industrial capitalism. Industrialization was not only accompanied by the rise and expansion of mechanization and technology, but also with an *explosion* of commodity circulation, of exchange value and of market relations. On the social level this process led to the increasing differentiation in all areas of life, resulting in social fragmentation and alienation.

Post-modernity, on the contrary, is linked with consumption and neo-capitalism. In consumer society everyday life has undergone drastic change. Not only do new phenomena of consumption arise, such as drugstores and advertising, but all social interaction is also imbued with and determined by the manipulation of commodities and messages. Henceforth, commodity circulation becomes so radical that everything is reduced to commodities. Consumption leads to a total homogenization and leveling of everyday life. It causes a process of de-differentiation. This seems quite paradoxical because, at the first glance, consumption entails differentiation on the social level. But, so Baudrillard argues, this differentiation is at the price of a full integration of everyone in consumption society. Whoever distinguishes himself from his neighbor, owning a flashier car and a more beautiful mansion, is just as absorbed in the logic of consumerism as his neighbor.

Another characteristic of post-modernity that sharply contrasts with modernity is the all-pervading influence of mass media, most notably, television. Besides being a consumer society, postmodern society is also a media society. In both types society we are confronted with a similar form of alienation. In consumption no longer the interaction with other people but the interaction with objects has pride of place. Commodity fetishism manifests itself in the worship of goods. The 'object' of consumption is even not enjoyed in terms of the object itself, but because of the social prestige that accompanies it. In the same sense television is no longer a medium that leads to real communication. Also here the images and the information

are consumed as such: the masses are condemned to silence, because the sounds
and images cannot be questioned. And, just as advertising manipulates information,
deluding us with an 'illusionary world', television filters information: it conjures up
a sham world on the screen, in which social reality is *simulated* rather than repre-
sented. The bombardment of signs launched by mass media to the public keeps up
the illusion that something is happening and that the facts are objective. However,
Baudrillard argues, meaning is in fact no longer produced: only the medium itself
is the message. It is thanks to the brutal succession of visual and acoustic signs that
the medium holds the mindless spectator spellbound in an illusion that no longer is
related to social reality. In this sense television embodies a collective delusion of
the senses and the object par excellence of consumption. It allows presenting for
instance the Gulf War as a spectacle, without urging the public in any way to shoul-
der a certain responsibility or even thinking that it would be capable of doing so.

11.4.2   *The Primacy of the Signifier*

For Baudrillardthe supposed correspondence between consumer and mass culture
leads to a radicalization of semiotics. Already in his *For a Critique of the Political
Economy of the Signs* (Baudrillard, 1981 [orig. publ. 1972]) he laid the semiotic
foundation on which his later theory rests. He starts by posing a parallel between the
commodity and, the sign. According to Baudrillard there is a formal resemblance
between the two: while the commodity consists of use value (VU, abbreviation for
valeur d'usage) and exchange value (VE, abbreviation for *valeur d'échange*) the sign
is composed of the *signifié* (Sé) and the *signifiant* (Sa). Essentially he not only argues
that, as is usual in capitalism, use value (VU) is completely suppressed by exchange
value (VE), but that at the same time the *signifié* (Sé) is overshadowed by the *signifiant*
(Sa). It concerns a formal equivalence that is skillfully exploited by ideology.

Schematically represented this formal equivalence looks as follows:

Sa Vé

– = –

Sé Vu

The ideology is already completely available in the formal manipulation. It is
wholly present in the relation between VU and VE, i.e., in the logic of commodity,
as well as in the relation between Sé and Sa, i.e., in the internal logic of the sign.
Ideology thus needs no content. It is simply and solely embodied in the form. It
nevertheless presents itself as autonomous, as content, as representation of
consciousness. But this is only a cunning trick of the code, by which the form is
continuously veiled by the content.

We are here not far removed from Roland Barthes' mythology, provided that
ideology produces here no new meanings but rather erodes *all* meaning. As all
commodities lose their use value because they are totally absorbed by their
exchange value, so all signs, being robbed of their signified, completely coincide
with their signifier and are thus no longer connected to a fixed meaning, hence

becoming interchangeable. On the basis of this formal equivalence Baudrillard is able to assert that the logic of the commodity resides in the heart of the sign itself: the abstract equivalence of Sé and Sa is reminiscent of the way in which the concrete object to be used is expressed in money! In a similar way he asserts that the structure of the sign resides in the heart of the commodity itself. Thanks to the equivalence of use value and exchange value each commodity is reduced to its pure form, which reminds us of the way in which the sign is reduced to a signifier. After all the commodity functions not as a specific object, that refers to a possible usage, but signifies the logic of the generalized exchange system itself, by which it is disconnected from its true meaning as an object to be used.

Baudrillard's semiotic analysis implies that the logic of the commodity and the logic of the sign are ultimately equivalents. In neo-capitalism commodities are immediately produced as sign, as signifier (Sa), whereas signs (i.e. culture) are immediately produced as commodity, as exchange value (VE). Each commodity and each sign becomes polyvalent. Over the course of time a painting by Van Gogh can stand for different exchange values. As soon as the painting is reduced to a signifier it can signify different meanings: it can, for example, be used in an advertisement to signify good taste. This provokes a rupture with the transparency of the sign: its meaning is no longer transparent and unequivocal.

Another far-reaching consequence of Baudrillard's analysis is that there is no longer a correspondence between the sign and the referent (i.e. reality). Normally the sign consists of, on the one hand, a signifier (Sa), the form or the material substrate, and, on the other hand, a signified (Sé) *and* a referent (Rft), respectively the 'content' and the 'reference to reality'. Roland Barthes still presupposed that, as far as denotation is concerned, the sign refers to reality. According to Baudrillard however this is no longer possible, because the logic of the signifier (Sa) excludes an unequivocal designation of or reference to reality. Meaning (Sé) as well as reference (Rft) is governed by one and the same form, which is nothing else than the one belonging to the signifier (Sa). The signifier uses or misuses at will the involved meaning or reference. It uses both as an alibi to veil itself, but a fixed meaning or reference is here definitely left out of the picture. Van Gogh's painting has no true meaning and no true reference any more. The signifier has plenty of room for maneuvering. Even if one refers to the original content of the picture, then it is still to throw dust in the eyes of the beholder so that he or she does not notice that the authentic content is used for other objectives!

11.4.3   The Logic of the Simulacrum

It is on the basis of this semiotic analysis that Baudrillard declares that one is confronted with a loss of all original meaning or authentic content. The separation between sign and reality is a fait accompli. Not only is the economy no longer based on some 'authentic value', but the sign itself is no longer rooted in a correspondence between the words and the things. By virtue of this 'disconnection', the

sign starts to lead a life of its own. The sign system no longer represents reality, but produces, just like a computer, models, in which reality is simulated in diverse ways. Reality disappears in nothingness and makes room for its simulation, for the pictures we make of it, or rather, which are presented to us by the mass media. In this way the sign system creates an own 'virtual image' or illusion, that is no longer a derivative of reality, but a substitute for it. Simulation has become our only reality. It is in this sense that Baudrillard conceives of our current culture as a culture of simulation. It is from this perspective that he asserts that we are now living in the era of the simulacrum, of the 'sham performance' or the illusion.

According to Baudrillard the current predominance of the simulacrum corresponds to a historical development. A first stage was heralded by the classical era (the period from the Renaissance till the beginning of the Industrial Revolution). Here *imitation* played the main part. The original was here still the object of an imitation, aiming to capture the 'originality' and the 'unique character' of the object. However, because the imitation could replace the original the first rupture between sign and reality occurred. A second stage happened during the industrial era, which was devoted to *production*: here the mirror image was no longer the aim, but starting from an original sign object a pure series of signs was produced that was directed at re-production. This is the era of the 'mechanical reproducibility', which Benjamin wrote about. No longer was the originality, the unique, but equivalence the criterion. Because of this the sign was removed one step further from reality. In the third stage, however, that of *simulation*, the umbilical cord between sign and reality is severed. Here an unending multiplication of signs via models emerges, in which no longer the resemblance to the original is fundamental, but instead the differences between the signs. What we observe, the represented or depicted, no longer has any mimetic function: as such it no longer refers to the original reality. The reference to reality irrevocably fades into the background.

The era of the simulacrum goes along with what Baudrillard calls the 'implosion of meaning'. Earlier meaning referred to a depth, a hidden dimension and an unseen foundation that had to be unveiled gradually. The secret, the distance, the power of the invisible is gone. The forms of manifestation themselves are the only reality and they depthless, no longer referring to a hidden meaning. In the era of the simulacrum the universe is disenchanted: everything becomes visible, transparent, resulting in the loss of all secret meaning, the loss of all power of illusion and the enchantment of the original. Baudrillard first of all associates the concept of obscenity with this development. The obscene consists of all that comes absolutely near, a close-up, in which all secrecy is abandoned. In pornography all sensuality, all pleasure, all symbolic veiling and all seduction are undermined by the hyper-visible, the all too near. Porn stars and erotic models are faceless, their nudity is totally objective: they are stripped of their masks and of all magic. This obscenity envelops all aspects of our culture: the absolute nearness of the observed is omnipresent, because there is also pornography of communication, whereby the screen penetrates everything and makes everything hyper-visible. This makes everything even more real than real: the virtual image no longer allows room for the hidden, for a deeper sense or truth. That explains why Baudrillard also speaks of hyperreality. Our whole culture is dominated by hyperreality: everything is continuously filmed, filtered, shown or

discussed, so that all secrecy is lost. The entire universe becomes a control screen, from which escape is no longer possible.

The logic of the simulacrum manifests itself in still another way. Because of the 'implosion' of meaning that it entails, our culture is filled with signifiers, in which an endless series of *differences* is produced, by which each form of identity, also that of the subject, gets lost. This explains why Baudrillard considers any conception of an autonomous subject to be obsolete. Postmodern culture is thus characterized by a fragmentation of the subject, an idea that also returns in the work of Lyotard and Derrida in various shades of meaning. However, in sharp contrast to Lyotard and Derrida, in Baudrillard's rendition the 'implosion of meaning' in postmodern culture leads to an absolute leveling, an all-encompassing indifference, which can be only resisted by 'fatal strategies', such as seduction.

11.4.4   Baudrillard: Aesthetic Vision

As a matter-of-course Baudrillard's aesthetic vision is closely linked with his more general diagnosis of our culture. Through the parallel between exchange value and signifier the artwork becomes an object among objects, a pure object or signifier, a commodity among commodities. The artwork is reduced to an absolute commodity, at the same time its original, true and symbolical value and meaning is lost. This is the reason why in the political economy of the sign the auction appears as the ideological climax, in which economic exchange value and the loss of meaning go hand in hand. During the auction Van Gogh's painting *The Sunflowers* is completely robbed of its real aesthetic meaning or function. The aesthetic meaning functions purely as an alibi for the financial incentives of investment. The authentic, original value of the painting is used by the exchange activity for something else and is destroyed by this. After all, it is not important which object is the object of consumption: only the exchange value counts. It does not concern any longer this or that painting by Van Gogh, no longer what the painting truly means, or the aesthetic pleasure it would be able to provoke in the buyer. The painting still has only a meaning insofar as it represents capital, so that it totally disappears into its exchange value. The buyer could have just as well invested the capital in some rare precious stone. Probably he has not done this because he expects that the exchange value of the Van Gogh painting will rise in the future to unknown heights. This whole process, in which the authentic value of the artwork is absorbed by trade, is what Baudrillard calls 'aesthetic indifference'.

11.5   Jameson in the Wake of Baudrillard

In the work of Baudrillard the contrast between modernism and postmodernism has remained somewhat unspecified. It is Fredric Jameson, who, starting from Baudrillard's valuable insights, has worked out and clarified more closely the

distinction between modernism and postmodernism. More emphatically than Lyotard and Baudrillard he has drawn inspiration from Marxism. However much these French authors rejected Marxism, they still seem to owe tribute to the Marxist base-superstructure theory. Both authors do indeed mention a new type of society that emerges after the Industrial Era, with a corresponding new mode of knowledge, a new philosophy and a whole range of cultural phenomena. Only Lyotard makes an exception for postmodernism in the arts, as we have seen.

The Marxist inspiration is openly present in the work of Fredric Jameson. He indeed combines elements from the Frankfurt School (in particular Adorno and Walter Benjamin) with the achievements of French poststructuralism (especially Baudrillard). Jameson refers in particular to Marxism to elucidate the opposition between the Modern and the Postmodern Era.

11.5.1   Stages of Development

Jameson starts from the general thesis that the three developmental stages of capitalism, as they were distinguished by Ernest Mandel (Mandel, 1978), each correspond in turn with a dominant cultural movement. So *market capitalism* would correspond to *realism*, *monopoly capitalism* to *modernism* and *late capitalism to postmodernism*. We thus live, according to Jameson, in a new type of society that he, by the way, not only refers to as late capitalism, but also in other terms, such as *multinational capitalism*, *world capitalism* and *media capitalism*. With his favorite term 'late capitalism' he preferably refers to the existence of a global capitalist system that would differ fundamentally from then older imperialism, which hardly entailed more than the rivalry between colonial superpowers. Therefore late capitalism no longer corresponds to the laws of classical capitalism, such as the primacy of industrial production and the omnipresence of class struggle. Yet it is not always easy to figure out how Jameson characterizes late capitalism. Besides new forms of transnational labor, he mentions, among other things, as typical characteristics: a new international division of labor; staggering new dynamics in international banking and the stock exchange (the enormous debt of the Second and Third World countries included); new forms of interaction between media, informatization and automation; the shift of production to advanced Third World countries; as well as the already familiar social consequences, such as the crisis of traditional labor; the rise of the yuppies; and the restoration of run-down residential areas on a global scale.

However, in deliberate distinction from other authors, he emphasizes that it is *not* about an *entirely new* type of society. Indeed, his Mandelian starting point implies that postmodernity as an era does not embody a totally new order, but only a development within capitalism itself. More than other authors, he highlights the continuity with the past. This entails that one should hardly be surprised that traces of former cultural manifestations, such as realism and modernism, continue to exert a certain influence.

11.5.2   *Postmodernism Versus Modernism*

Yet Jameson sees postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism. With this he confirms the usual opposition between modernism and postmodernism that has become fashionable in the world of art and culture during the last decades. 'Postmodernism' is nearly always understood as a reaction against, a rupture with or a radicalization of 'modernism'. In its most strict meaning 'modernism' refers to a many-sided conception of art that originated in the avant-garde movements, which manifested themselves in the beginning of the twentieth century and which remained long time dominant. The basic features of modernism can be circumscribed as follows: an esthetical self-awareness and a stylistic purism or formalism; the defense of the autonomy of art and the principle of 'l'art pour l'art'; a rejection of the narrative structure in favour of the 'stream of consciousness', simultaneity and montage; a rejection of 'realism' in favour of the paradoxical, ambiguous and uncertain nature of subjective reality; emphasis on the alienation and the demise of the integrated personality, and so on.

Postmodernism arose as artists and critics living in New York during the 1960s protested against the institutionalization of modernism in the museum and in art education. This protest against so-called *high modernism* slowly led to a concept of postmodernism that was considered to be something in sharp contrast to it. As a consequence, one can easily presume its basic features: the fading away of the boundary between art and daily life and of the distinction between, on the one hand, 'high, autonomous art' and, on the other hand, 'mass culture and popular culture'; a stylistic impurity geared towards eclecticism and a deliberate mingling of styles; a preference for parody, pastiche, playfulness and the superficial 'surface' of culture; the decline of originality and the cult of genius; the idea that art is based on chance and repetition or imitation, and so forth.

As the cultural logic of late capitalism, postmodernism is accompanied by a profound transformation of Western culture. On this cultural level we are confronted, according to Jameson, with an unseen expansion of scale. More and more areas of 'reality' are absorbed into the cultural sphere, so that one could speak of an all-embracing 'aesthetization of reality' (Walter Benjamin). But at the same time culture is more and more incorporated into the sphere of commodities and the circulation of goods. In postmodernism 'culture' itself is turned into a product, a commodity, a market. Also the attitude towards the omnipresent process of commercialization has changed dramatically. Modernism is devoted to a critique of all commodification of art, its reification, its fetishism of goods – a critique which was accompanied by a defense of 'autonomous art' (see Adorno!). Postmodernism, on the contrary, starts from the very idea that the process of commercialization has generated a cultural industry that has led to new forms of art and culture, which do have their own raison d'être and have to be studied closely. This, by the way, does not imply that the cultural industry does not warrant any form of criticism. Jameson uses the insights of Baudrillard not only to elucidate postmodernism, but also – to a certain extent – to criticize and even to unmask it.

11.5.3   The Fading Boundary Between High and Low Art

With the emphasis on justifying mass culture the trend is set towards what Jameson considers as the first fundamental feature of postmodernism, namely *the erasing of the old (essentially modernist) boundary between autonomous art and so-called mass culture*. The critique from Adorno of the cultural industry and his lack of understanding (incomprehension) for mass culture really seems obsolete (superseded). Also his notion of relative autonomy of art no longer seems tenable. However, Jameson points out that the disappearance of relative autonomy by no means implies that art and culture have died or put to an end. On the contrary, we witness, as already emphasized, an enormous expansion of cultural sphere, in which culture not only permeates all social interaction and daily life, but also simultaneously circulates as a commodity in the pervasive all-embracing cultural industry. This had led to a re-evaluation and even a discovery of mass culture. This explains the fascination of postmodernism for the whole corrupt landscape of schlock and kitsch, TV-series and Reader's Digest-culture, advertising and motels, the grade-B-Hollywood film. This also explains the interest in the so-called para-literature, in which next to the horror novel and the love story, popular biography, detective story and science fiction solicit the public's favor. From the omnipresence of culture, the growing influence of cultural industry and mass media it follows that we are finally bombarded more and more by 'images'. Because of this our relation to reality, so Jameson concludes with a wink at the work of Baudrillard, has been transformed in a fundamental way.

11.5.4   The New Depthlessness

This last point leads Jameson to a second fundamental feature of postmodernism, i.e. the *new depthlessness* that is manifest in contemporary 'theory' and philosophy as well as in a whole new visual culture or the culture of the simulacrum. In modernism one still departed from the idea that culture could exert influence on 'nature' and that, in other words, the 'reality' or the 'referent' (that to which language refers) could be changed by culture or art. This explains why art was still ascribed a critical, social function. Postmodernism begins as soon as this illusion breaks down and 'nature' or 'reality' loses all fixed foundation. On a philosophical level this has been expressed in the radical critique of representation. On a cultural level culture becomes a second 'nature' and the distinction between culture and nature completely disappears. What remains, is a continuous flow of images, a visual culture, in which 'reality' is replaced by a permanent sham, without real content, meaning or reference. It is in this sense that Jameson speaks, following the footsteps of Baudrillard, about a loss of depth and meaning, a new sort of superficiality, a hypervisibility and a hyperreality.

In order to illustrate this undermining of reference, this impoverishment of meaning Jameson makes a comparison between Van Gogh's *A pair of Peasant Shoes* and Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* (see Fig. 11.4). Without entering

Fig. 11.4 Andy Warhol, *Diamond Dust Shoes*, 1980. Acryl, silkscreen and diamond powder, 177, 8 × 228, 6 cm. The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2008. (*see Color Plates*)

into detail we can conclude that according to his argument Van Gogh's painting still presents a content, a signified, whereas this is a lot more problematic in the case of Warhol's photographic negative. Van Gogh's peasant shoes still refer to the whole extra-linguistic reality of peasant misery, the former rural poverty, the entire elementary world of exhausting peasant labor reduced to its most brutal, threatened, and primitive state. In sharp contrast, the content or reference in Warhol's artwork can hardly be said to speak for itself. After all, we are confronted with no more than an arbitrary collection of dead objects hanging next to each other on a canvas, removed from the their possible living context, a pile of shoes that could be understood as signs of a whole range of different situations. Therefore, there is no possibility, as in the case of Van Gogh's painting, to give a hermeneutic interpretation in which this pile of shoes could be identified with a specific 'reality'. Indeed, we could just as well 'interpret' this pile of shoes as referring to 'Auschwitz', to a dancing party, a ball, the world of the jet set, to fashion or a random glamour magazine. If one could decipher any meaning, then it is not so much the specific reference to a particular situation, but rather the general reference to the theme of commodification itself. It is from this point of view that the huge Cola Cola billboards or the Campbell's soup cans in the work of Warhol focus our attention on the commodity fetishism, which is considered so characteristic of late capitalism. If Warhol's artwork makes something clear, then it is not by its content, but by its very form. Its ways of appearing teach us that the world of the objects, and thus the artwork too, has become an illusion that only refers to itself and, as such, no longer means anything outside the logic of the simulacrum.

11.5.5 The Waning of Emotion

The importance of Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum also appears from the third feature of postmodernism, which consists of the *waning of emotion*. Notions such as anxiety and alienation (and the experiences to which they correspond, as expressed in *The Scream* by Edvard Munch) no longer seem characteristic for postmodernism. Warhol's preferred human subjects, the stars – such as Marilyn Monroe – are themselves reduced to a commodity and their tragic dimension is completely overshadowed by the simulacrum. The experiences with drugs and schizophrenia so characteristic of postmodernism seem to have little in common with either the hysteria or neurosis from the time of Freud or with cultivated experiences of radical isolation, spleen, loneliness and Van Gogh-like madness that ruled the period of high modernism. According to Jameson, there is a shift in cultural pathology, in which the alienation of the subject is replaced by its fragmentation. Sometimes, especially within the artistic domain, authors refer, following Barthes' death of the author, to the 'death of the subject'. This explains why in postmodern art genius and originality have made way for an unabashed lust for imitation, a ubiquitous eclecticism and the frequently applied pastiche. It is as if postmodern art looks like an 'imitation of an imitation', to speak with Plato, provided that there is no longer a reference to a supernatural reality. Rather, 'imitation of imitation' is embodied by the simulacrum that no longer refers to anything and stands for the form of the reification itself, which Jameson deems characteristic of the circulation of goods.

11.5.6 The Era of the Simulacrum

We live in a culture in which the virtual image emerges as the carrier of the reification. This leads to a fourth fundamental feature, i.e. that postmodernism is the *era of the simulacrum*. Jameson emphasizes time and again that precisely the logic of the simulacrum, which entails the transformation of older realities into television images, does more then simply repeat the cultural logic of late capitalism: it bolsters and intensifies it. At the same time an enormous problem of interpretation emerges. Indeed, the 'total flow' of images no longer allows any room for a classical hermeneutic interpretation. In fact things get even worse: the images no longer refer to the 'reality', they have become 'virtual images' (simulacra) that follow one another in a quick tempo and only refer to each other. The images have become texts that only refer to other texts and as such can only be understood in their intertextuality. The videotext is a good example of this. The video is the most striking new medium that clearly demands another kind of reading, another kind of interpretation, a new kind of hermeneutics. Hence, the video is the preeminent postmodern art form.

The three uses of the terms modern and postmodern, as found in the discussed authors, are mapped in the three diagrams below. First of all there is the distinction

between modernity and postmodernity in sociology and history, then the distinction between modern and postmodern modes of knowledge in philosophy and finally the distinction between modernism and postmodernism.

PREMODERNITY	MODERNITY	POSTMODERNITY	AUTHORS
Pre-industrial society	Industrial society	Post-industrial society	Daniel Bell Alain Touraine
Ibid.	Industrialization	Information society	J.F. Lyotard
Ibid.	Industrial capitalism	Consumer society	J. Baudrillard
Market capitalism	Monopoly capitalism	Late capitalism	F. Jameson
Commercial capitalism	Modern capitalism	Neo-capitalism	Standard terms

MODERN MODE OF KNOWLEDGE	POSTMODERN MODE OF KNOWLEDGE	AUTHORS
Metanarrative = philosophy as legitimation	End of metanarrative = crisis of legitimation	Lyotard
Universal ideals of enlightenment end goal = liberation	End of belief in the ideals of enlightenment; end goal = suspect	Lyotard
Truth as only norm; reference	– Plurality of language games – End of representation – Logic of the simulacrum	Lyotard Derrida Baudrillard
Subject as foundation	– Fragmentation of the subject – Death of the author	Lyotard Baudrillard Derrida

MODERNISM	POSTMODERNISM
Separation between high and low art	Boundary between high art and mass culture fades away
Autonomy of art = critical-social function	Autonomy disappears: all-embracing cultural industry
Stylistic purity, formalism and functionalism	Stylistic impurity, eclecticism and historicism
Emphasis on authenticity	Reality as sham performance, loss of depth and meaning
Emphasis on anxiety and alienation of the subject; cult of genius, originality	Emphasis on schizophrenia and fragmentation of the subject; art as imitation and parody

11.6   The Artist's Studio: The Video Clip as Postmodern Art

A first postmodern feature of the video, especially when transmitted by a television channel such as MTV, is to bring about a mechanical depersonalization or dispersion of the subject. The total flow of images and videos that is transmitted every 24 h bans, as it were, all recollection, so that memory and 'critical distance' become

impossible. Ann Kaplan, the first to effectuate a comprehensive inquiry into MTV, underlines how much the programming of the network brings about a kind of hypnosis in the watcher. The repetitive broadcasting of extremely short (four minutes or less) video texts induces in us a feeling of excitement, full of expectation. Time and again the hope is aroused that the following video will give us an absolute kick or the highest rapture, so that we are continually seduced to consume short videos, ad infinitum. Very often watching television goes along with a 'dispersing' or 'fragmenting' of our attention. This 'dispersing' spectator experience brought about by a constant alternation of texts is pushed to the extreme by MTV, as the longest text displayed is a 4 min long video.

A second postmodern feature of the video clip is that it has *no traditional narrative structure*. With respect to video art, Jameson therefore speaks of a polysemic process, in which a great number of messages are launched from all sides. Polysemy indeed entails 'having several meanings'. A videotext thus has multiple meanings at the same time, so that it cannot be analyzed by dividing it into small pieces or elements which themselves often are laden with meaning or presuppose a whole story. Because these elements appear in a constant flow on the video screen they acquire a different meaning from their original one. Because of the quick succession and even simultaneity of the most heterogeneous elements, the original meanings are put into another perspective: by the ceaseless interaction the already existing narrative structures are absorbed in other narrative structures. The casual citing of a Beethoven sonata, while as different cartoon figures walk from ever changing, rising and descending elevators, naturally changes the original meaning of this music. In the video text *AlienNATION*, produced by the School of the Art Institute in Chicago (Rankus a.o., 1979) and discussed by Jameson, a stream of images appear, including glamour models, computer print outs, illustrations from diverse handbooks, summer lightning and a reclining, apparently hypnotized woman, and then a curious Magritte-hat that sinks slowly into Lake Michigan (see Fig. 11.5). The story of surrealist painting is incorporated here in another story, another dimension, just as the many fragments from daily life in Chicago.

Ann Kaplan also underlines that the MTV-videos do not display any traditional narrative structure. Often they cite fragments from classical Hollywood films, such as in Elton John's *Heartache All Over*, in which love scenes borrowed from old films, even from the period of the silent movie, are reused. Often, so she emphasizes, MTV-videos are self-reflective. A case in point is *Easy Lover* (Phil Collins, made in collaboration with Phil Bailey), which is about the making of the rock video itself. We are introduced to the difficulties of filming. In the foreground, we see a large 35 mm camera, with the video monitor retransmitting the frame back to the cameraman. In the background we see Collins and Bailey practicing their song, and afterwards how they were made-up and dressed before the actual filming, how they take a lunch break between the sessions, and so on. This is one of the many examples of how the traditional narrative code is broken down in video clips.

A third postmodern feature of the video clip, in particularly in its MTV-presentation, is the arousal of an *eternal*, *undifferentiated now*, in which all sense of time and all historical consciousness is lost. The MTV-consumer lives as it were in
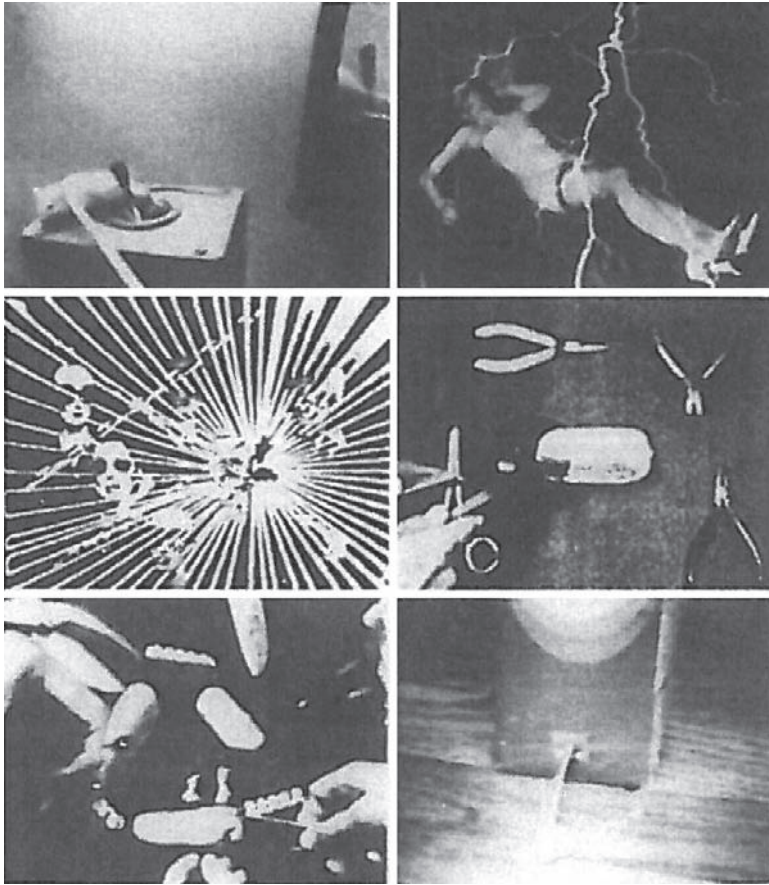
Fig. 11.5   E. Rankus, J. Manning and B. Latham, *AlienNATION*, 1979. School of Art Institute.

an eternal now, a condition that is compared by Jameson, following Lacan and Baudrillard, with schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is seen here as a consequence of a disturbed use of language, more specifically, the refusal to enter the area of the symbolic. This results in an over-fixation on the now and the pure material form of the word, the pure signifier, removed from all sense and meaning. In a similar way, the pure materiality of images reigns over the total flow of videotexts to such an extent that the spectator no longer associates any meaning with the image as such. Instead, the viewer remains fixed in a sort of schizophrenic trance on the signifier, on the pure material or exterior manifestation of the image, on its pure materiality. This places the spectator in an illusory, timeless continuum, in which there no room left, either for any meaning, any historical consciousness or for the identity of the self. This feature explains why it is impossible for someone watching MTV to recount what he or she has seen. It also explains why the whole history of pop music is condensed, leveled and eroded into a continuous 'now'. The teenage public digests all types of

pop randomly, without knowing anything about the historical conditions in which these types came into being. Even on a musical level, the dispersion is complete.

From the foregoing it becomes clear why Jameson and others see in video the pre-eminently postmodern art form. No other art form or medium corresponds to the cultural logic of late capitalism as well as the videotext, because it embodies (1) the fundamental materiality of contemporary culture, or, in other words, the primacy of the signifier; and (2) the utmost consequences of commercialization and consumer culture. Jameson never tires of underlining that the video is unique because, unlike other media, it is dominated by its machinery and the spectator is deprived of his or her identity, reduced to quasi-material equipment registering the mechanically progressing succession or total flow of images. Perhaps still more significant is the fact that the videotext in its MTV-version, more than for any other medium, carries objectification or reification to its extremes. MTV transmits nothing but advertising segments, be it pop videos (publicity for companies), commercials (publicity for advertisers such as Nike, Coca Cola, etc.…) or the promotion of MTV itself. Everything has become commodity, advertising, and this is the incarnate objectification of culture. It no longer concerns ideas or values but the 'look' that will sell the best. Ann Kaplan deplores that in this way the original artistic ambitions and aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) intentions, which often have led to remarkable achievements, are devaluated. As soon as the MTV personnel transmit the video, it is sold as a commodity to the viewer. From this moment on it is no longer in the hands either of the producers or of the artists themselves. Of course the question is to what extent the latter do not anticipate the demand and expectations of the MTV-audience, which in any case does not consist only of teenagers.

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Chapter 12
Epilogue

The study of aesthetics is like an inner voyage, an exploration into the foundations of what we consider art. In this book we have become acquainted with very diverse approaches towards art. The relevance of the different theories is heavily dependent on the formulation of the problem concerned. For example, reflections on the question of 'What is art?' almost naturally lead to the classical theories from Part I, in one form or another. These classical viewpoints offer well-developed ideas about the essence of art, which, for all their limitations, makes them relevant to any discussion of art, if only to criticize them. Again, where the searchlight is turned on the historical and social dimensions of art, one can hardly ignore the theories discussed in Part II. Finally, if one wishes to explore the way art speaks a language, and how this language needs to be conceived and studied, a dialogue with structuralism and post-structuralism will impose itself. In each of these situations, the relevance or use of the theories that are being considered will be greatly dependent on the questions that we formulate concerning art-related issues.

However, we do not have to adopt such a neutral and relative attitude. From this book it is obvious that all theories show certain weaknesses or suggest fundamental objections. The systematic comparison between the different approaches invites further discussion, leading towards a more synthetic perspective. Therefore, I will not go over the objections again but rather, by way of epilogue and conclusion, clarify their mutual coherence. Of course, in doing so, I am speaking wholly on my own account, since such a synthesis also implies a personal stand.

12.1 Mimesis

However different the art theories we have discussed may be, the concept of *mimesis* runs like a thread through the whole book. In a strict sense, mimesis means imitation, and more particularly the imitation of the sensibly perceptible reality. It is this conception that was at the center of the imitation theory. But we have seen that mimesis can have a much broader meaning. It is this broader meaning that runs straight through the

different parts of this book. In this sense, mimesis is omnipresent. In the expression theory, mimesis can be identified with the portrayal or depiction of emotions and/or ideas. And however much classical formalism resisted any representation in terms of a specific reality or a particular emotion, it still presupposed that the artwork brings us in contact with a higher, ultimate reality. The artwork thus finally appeared to be firmly embedded in the metaphysical and as such it remains of a mimetic nature: it is a representation of a reality that we cannot put into words and that is brought to light thanks to the artistic form. It is the task of the artist to unveil this reality through the artwork. Only then will it evoke in us a particular aesthetical emotion.

It is noteworthy that these three parallel notions of mimesis return in Part II. The realism of the imitation theory finds its counterpart in the realism of Lukács. For Lukács, the artwork is in essence a reflection or imitation of social reality. Despite his well-balanced views, he met with severe criticism from other Marxists on this matter. The idealism of the expression theory as formulated by Croce and Collingwood finds its equivalent in Hegel's vision on art. For Hegel, art is the "sensuous semblance of the Idea", so that it is a representation or depiction of the Absolute Spirit. This vision is also essentially mimetic, however much Hegel may have opposed the imitation theory.

Tellingly, as soon as the mimetic function of art crumbles, Hegel envisages the 'decline of art'. Does not Hegel, through his Absolute Spirit, express that which in formalism is called "metaphysics"? And, finally, is not Adorno's aesthetical theory closely related to formalism as well? Here too the pure form is a central tenet, to such an extent that Adorno likewise emphasizes the autonomy of art. In Adorno, however, the pure form is not a vehicle of a metaphysical reality. It mediates – or rather, it embodies the mediation – between social reality and the artwork. The antagonisms and oppositions from social reality are translated into and through the form of the artwork. Here too art is, albeit indirectly, of a mimetic nature. The artistic form and/or technique 'translates'' the social contradictions: it represents them in an oblique manner; it portrays them in a 'negative utopia'.

The key to the theory of mimesis is in fact to be found in the conception of art as a sign system. Langer's symbol theory conceives of any sign system, including language, as a representation of reality, emphasizing that such representation is not to be taken literally. Instead, the structure of the sign system refers to the structure of reality, of that which is represented. The *structural* correspondence between any sign system, including language, and reality is also widely accepted in structuralism and early semiotics. Here too the sign system and/or the language, and hence the artwork, are assumed to refer to a reality, albeit often in a symbolic and indirect way. And here too the conception basically remains mimetic: the "language" of art is held to refer to a reality that falls outside art.

In the classical concept of mimesis, however broadly it is interpreted, resemblance or similarity consistently takes centre stage. This similarity is indicated in countless ways: imitation, copying, depiction, representation, portrayal, transfiguration, and so on. Further considerations of the relations between language and reality in post-structuralism finally led to a severe criticism of *all f*orms of representation. This explains why Lyotard rejects denotation, why Derrida opts for deconstruction

and why Baudrillard sees our 'reality' as a simulacrum. All thinking about language and art that refers to something else than language and art as a sign system is at stake here. But however much poststructuralist thinkers reject any idea of representation or truth, however much they tend to replace any idea of resemblance with difference, however much they tend to transform the idea of a self-present truth by a constant displacement and/or postponement of signifiers, they nevertheless refer in the last analysis to mimetic issues. Ultimately Lyotard sees the mimetic value of art in the presentation of the unpresentable. Derrida not only sees the eternal delay of meaning as the groundless ground of all language, but ultimately contends that all language presupposes *la différance*, which appears to be something unnamable "that unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitution". And Baudrillard looks finally like a plain metaphysicist when he refers to simulation as the ultimate reality.

12.2   The Kantian Turn

Maybe we simply cannot live without metaphysics. In this perspective it is surely wrong to identify postmodern thinking with a complete loss of orientation, a sheer relativism or even a kind of nihilism, as has often been done. From this point of view it is interesting to observe that the later Lyotard appeals to Kant to find a way out of his former nihilist stand. We have indeed seen how Lyotard in his earlier writings rejects all criteria of truth, arguing that something can mean both "a" and "not-a" at the same time. According to this view, if a person A thinks that "a" means "x" and a person B claims that "x" means "b", a final decision is impossible. The later Lyotard, however, assumes, that in vital questions, we must make a *decision*. We must conclude who is right because the entire domain of justice is at stake here. However, how can we make a decision without falling back on conceptual understanding, without falling back on, what Lyotard calls, the 'white terrror of truth', rationalistic terror? It is here that the Kantian turn takes place within postmodern thought. According to Lyotard, A and B have to realize that they each make a judgment and that the dispute is not about the *truth* of x, but about the legitimacy of their respective *judgments*. The question is not about which of the opposing claims corresponds with reality but about the transcendental-philosophical issue of how to judge judging?

It is from this perspective that Lyotard turns to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, more in particular, and most decidedly, reflective judgment. Remember: this reflective judgment occurs when a particular case is given, while the universal rule still has to be found. Reflective judgment is a judgment on the basis of feeling, taste and imagination, for which no concept yet exists. It presupposes a 'sensus communis'. This allows for a shared feeling before any interference whatsoever of the intellect. This makes it possible to arrive at a 'subjective universality' between disputing parties without solving or deciding on rational grounds. In this specific sense aesthetic judgment and especially *sensus communis* can serve as an alternative for rational

consensus (Habermas) and even inspire new models of mutual understanding across political parties, divided nations and different cultures. As such *sensus communis* seems to be an interesting tool for the establishment of intercultural aesthetics.

12.3   The End of Art? The Kantian Versus the Hegelian Paradigm

A particular well-documented dilemma with respect to the aesthetical judgment is the opposition between the Kantian and the Hegelian line of thought. In the Kantian paradigm art is basically identified with feeling, but that which cannot be put into words or concepts. In the Hegelian paradigm, rooted in the vision of Plato, art is ultimately identified with the idea, its content, its concept. In Chapter 7 we saw how this Hegelian, basically conceptual vision on art led to the thesis on the "End of art", a thesis which has been recently reformulated by Arthur Danto. It was precisely on the basis of the Kantian paradigm that we severely criticized the arguments put forward by Hegel and especially by Danto. Let me add here, by way of conclusion, two further critical points, which could point to the future of art and its philosophy.

First, the purely conceptual vantage point of Danto implies a neglect of the materiality of the work of art, its body so to say. More generally *Danto has no consideration whatsoever for the important development of productive forces, of technical means, which do, sooner or later, determine the fate of art*. Danto's approach leads to a sheer underestimation of the role of technique, more particularly of the new digital media which enrich the production, distribution and reception of contemporary art, creating new art forms and possibilities hitherto unthought-of. The infiltration of virtual reality, of interactive systems and so on into the domain of art, even if they are explored just for fun, are already yielding other kinds of artistic creativity, or other kinds of esthetical experience. Not only in citing or sampling, in combining and recombining the styles of the past, but also in opening up new spaces between the existing media, art itself may become indeterminate, ungraspable and indefinable for any essentialist or conceptual approach.

This leads me to a second point, namely, that the function of art altogether escapes from the purely philosophical *telos* and confront us with the sublime. This implies that the form of the work of art is, as a rule, not only inadequate but also at variance with conceptual thought: it is, as it were, pre- or infraconceptual. Art may be after all before or beneath interpretation. This confirms Kant's category of reflective judgment, a judgment of aesthetical experience for which we have, for the time being, no available concepts. Even Danto speaks of the "inner light" which radiates from great paintings. In confronting us with the sublime, art exceeds understanding and calls for a negative aesthetics, in which the presentation of that which is unpresentable is at stake (Lyotard). In that sense the sublime will always incite artists to (re)present that which exceeds the power of understanding, that for which one has not yet found a concept. In this sense, artists are the 'antennae of the human

species'. In this specific art is always ahead of philosophy. Reflections on art and understanding only come afterwards, when philosophy – like the owl of Minerva – spreads its wings with the silent falling of the dusk.

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