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AGAINST NATURE—THE QUESTION OF
MIMESIS IN HEIDEGGER'S PHILOSOPHY OF
ART

In the classical theory, art was to derive its rules and existence by imitating the model provided by the forms of nature and also by being nature; thus nature appeared as what we would call the epistemological authority and ontological source of all art.¹ Since romanticism, modernity has rejected the classical concept of art and elevated art itself as the source – sometimes as the highest source – of truth and moral values. Even modern art, however, gains its authority only by appearing to be nature. I shall begin my paper by briefly discussing Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, the landmark for the modern notion of art, and try to show how the concepts both of nature and of mimesis enter into Kant's definition of art in spite of its normative demand for novelty and originality. Further on, I shall try to demonstrate how Heidegger's philosophy of art, like Kant's, is structured around a certain kind of mimesis despite its conceiving art as a genuine beginning, and how this un-thought "mimetology" effects Heidegger's thinking.

I

In the first part of *Critique of Judgement*, where Kant deals with the critique of the aesthetic judgement, his main emphasis is on the beauty of nature, and questions concerning art played a minor role. As is well known, Kant's sys-

¹ On the different conceptions of mimesis and imitation, see e.g. Mihai Spărișu, "Editor's Introduction", in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Volume I: *The Literary and Philosophical Debate*, ed. Mihai Spărișu (Philadelphia/Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1984), and Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture - Art - Society*, translated by Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

tematic interest was in the possibility of the judgement of taste, so that he did not construct a philosophy of art in the proper sense. Nevertheless, his definition of art as the free creation of a genius meant against all appearances the re-opening of the question of mimesis in an entirely new way.

Kant begins his discussion of art in the §43 of *Critique of Judgement* where he first distinguishes art in general (*Kunst*) from nature by claiming that art is doing, while nature acts or operates. After further distinctions between art and science, art and craft, Kant defines fine art (the translation of *die schöne Kunst*) as the art of the genius. By this definition art is characterised by notions of freedom, creativity, and originality. Originality implies that the works of a genius must be exemplary, in other words, not based on an established standard, but instead originating a rule or a norm which however cannot be conceptualised. This very modern demand for originality and novelty entails that the artist is not subordinated to the imitation of classic models; in fact, Kant states that there is a “complete opposition between genius and the *spirit of imitation*”.² The move from imitation to what I call mimesis is prepared by Kant’s subtle distinction between “imitation” and “following”: the genius does not imitate but follows the example of another genius.³ The ability to create is communicated between artists in a way which leads not to academic imitation, but in which free production inspires another, equally free production, and the circulation or the “economy” of inspiration, to borrow a concept by Derrida,⁴ is guaranteed through access to a common source. For a genius to follow another genius means to be inspired by the same source from which an exemplary creator drew his inspiration and to borrow from one’s predecessor simply the manner of proceeding. This source of creation, that is, nature, provides the principle by which the genius transcends the existing rules and thus distinguishes himself from a mere academic artist.

Kant started his definition of art by making the very traditional opposition between art in general and nature. However, when fine art is described as the art of genius, mimesis re-enters his theory along the concept of nature. According to Kant, since the ability to create something new cannot be learned, the genius as the original, productive talent must be a gift of nature, and the non-conceptual rules for free artistic creation are prescribed by nature itself.

² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by J. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), 169.

³ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁴ See Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis”, *Diacritics*, Vol. 11, June 1981.

It is the idea of nature prescribing the rules for art that lays the foundation for Kant's theory of mimesis. To clarify what is meant by mimesis here, we must make a distinction between it and imitation. Unlike imitation, mimesis is not based on similarity, so that the idea that nature determines rules for art does not imply that the artist should imitate nature. Obviously, the art Kant was familiar with was what we would call representative, but even in representative arts the artist does not simply copy nature. His imagination permits the creation of another nature, which surpasses the given.⁵ In Kant's theory mimesis is on a quite another level; it is not a matter of representation, resemblance or reproduction, instead mimesis takes place between two productions.⁶ In other words, it is not a work of art but the act of free artistic creation which has a mimetic relation to nature, not to the nature of modern science but to Aristotelian, creative or self-productive nature – the concept of which is of crucial importance also to Heidegger's theory as well, as we shall see below. Kant's idea of art as the art of genius thus leads to a paradox: the less art imitates existing nature, the more its free productivity resembles or rather mimics the self-creation of nature. Thus, the mimetic structure effaces Kant's original distinction between art and nature, and we enter into the circle of analogy where we should judge nature as if it were art and art as if it were nature.⁷

II

To begin the discussion of Heidegger, his philosophy of art in "The Origin of the Work of Art" does not operate with the Kantian notions of genius and nature. However, if "The Origin of the Work of Art" is read in the light of Heidegger's lecture course *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, it will be possible to find in Heidegger's philosophy of art traces of mimesis with a structure similar to that in Kant's theory.⁸ Although Heidegger's basic concern in *An Introduction*

⁵ Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 176.

⁶ Derrida, "Economimesis", 9.

⁷ Derrida's interpretation is that by granting art the status of nature Kant gives a ideological legitimisation to empirical cultural practices and the taste of his own epoch, and through a certain "heliocentric economy", that is, a system where authority emanates from a single source, even to the politics of Frederick the Great. *Ibid.*, 3, 11-12.

⁸ The similarity has been pointed out by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Sublime Truth", in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, ed. by Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 99-106. J.M. Bernstein has also interpreted Heidegger's theory of art in the light of Kant's idea of genius, without however indicating the relation to the problem of mimesis. See the chapter "The Genius of Being" in his *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

to *Metaphysics* was the meaning of what he called "Being" (*das Sein*) in its ontological difference to "a being" (*ein Seiende*), he simultaneously formulated a theory of art based on a reading of Sophocles's tragedy *Antigone*, as if the question concerning Being could not be dealt with without taking art into consideration. It is precisely this intertwining of the questions of Being and art which reveals that a fundamental "mimetology", as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has called the structure in question, is at work in Heidegger's thought.⁹

In *An Introduction to Metaphysics* Heidegger's point of departure for the theory of art is the first choral song of *Antigone*, the theme of which is the relation between man and nature. The extension of nature in the song was not restricted to mere nature as opposed to something else, but like *physis* of Heraclitus and Aristotle it covered everything that is and, what is more important, the way in which everything that is, is; in other words, the Being of beings. According to the song, man attempts to overrule nature by his skills and knowledge, which are designated by the *techne*, the word which also means art. Man himself is described as being *deinotaton*, the strangest of the strange; in German the word is *unheimlich*, which means also the 'uncanny'. Man is strange and uncanny, since in his ventures he turns even against nature or the "godly order" of things – Heidegger's translation for Sophocle's word *dike*, more commonly translated as 'justice' but which Heidegger understands as meaning the same as *physis*, that is, the basic structure of beings or "the Being of beings as a whole".¹⁰ The paradoxical feature in Heidegger's theory is that precisely by turning against nature man in a way imitates it, or rather enacts nature by mimicing it in art. Thus, behind the seemingly conflicting relation between man's *techne* and the overwhelming *physis* lies a deeper unity which is articulated by mimesis.

The idea that *techne* imitates *physis* had already been propounded by Aristotle: "Indeed, as a general proportion, the arts either, on the basis of Nature, carry things further than Nature can, or they imitate Nature."¹¹

⁹ It has been noted that Heidegger reinterprets and appropriates into his own thinking almost all the basic concepts of the Greek philosophy except mimesis. He explicitly rejects mimesis, since it presupposes the metaphysical distinction between sensible and non-sensible. See his commentary on Plato's theory of mimesis in his *Nietzsche*, Vol. I: *The Will to Power as Art*, translated by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). According to Lacoue-Labarthe, the straightforward rejection of mimesis turns it into an unconscious bias in Heidegger's own thinking. See especially "Typography", in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, edited by Christopher Fynsk (London: Harvard University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, translated by Ralph Mannheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 149-150, 166. Mannheim's term "essent" is replaced by "being".

¹¹ Aristotle, *The Physics*, translated by Philip H. Wicksteed and Francis M. Cornford (London: William Heineman, 1963), 199a.

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe sees Aristotle's *physis* as meaning a creative power. Nature is creative in itself, but is not self-sufficient. Therefore, *techne* is needed to compensate or supplement the incapacity in nature's powers to create and produce. The self-creativity of nature is accomplished by *techne*, which, nevertheless, is still defined as mimesis.¹²

Heidegger, for his part, carries through a phenomenological reconstruction of the Aristotelian notions of nature and art, without however calling their interdependent and supplementary relation mimetic. According to Heidegger's interpretation the original Greek notion of *physis*, the traces of which Aristotle's nature still bears, meant the Being of beings, that is, the way that beings appear, the way beings come into being. *Physis* is thus defined in terms of "emerging" and "appearing."¹³ On the other hand Heidegger interprets *techne* as a form of knowledge. It is not knowledge about particular beings or states of affairs, but rather knowledge which in traditional terms could be labelled transcendental or ontological. Heidegger's own term for this kind of ontological knowledge is "transcendence", which for him is the essence of *techne*. *Techne* is "the initial and persistent looking out beyond what is given at any time",¹⁴ in other words, it carries out the movement from beings to their Being. Heidegger claims that for the Greeks the privileged form of *techne* was art. A genuine work of art is a place of transcendence, in which the process of appearing is manifested: "It is through the work of art ... that everything else that appears and is to be found is first confirmed and made accessible, explicable, and understandable as being or not being".¹⁵ The work of art is therefore made a carrier of ontological knowledge or of truth and the mimetic relation between *physis* and *techne* is raised to a transcendental and ontological level.

In his earlier essay "On the Essence of Ground" Heidegger had defined transcendence as a "pro-ject". Human "being-there" (*Dasein*) forms and gives itself an original view of the world, a view which not grasped explicitly, and projects this paradigmatic form (*Vor-bild*) over beings, thereby making the beings accessible to itself.¹⁶ In *An Introduction to Metaphysics* human transcendence is made possible only because Being itself also has the characteristics of transcendence. *Physis* forms the paradigmatic form (*Vor-bild*) for beings by

¹² Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, 255-256.

¹³ *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 101-115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "On the Essence of Ground", in *Pathmarks*, edited by William McNeill, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 123.

giving “the datum its relative justification, its potential determinateness, and hence its limits”.¹⁷ This sketching of the outlines and limits for being by *physis* fulfils the definition of transcendence as a “pro-ject”. This is the most fundamental level at which mimesis operates in Heidegger’s thinking. It is *physis* or Being itself that by its transcendence pro-jects the field of being, while transcendence takes place only when man, as the strangest of the strange, effects it in a work of art.

From the idea of the phenomenological correlation between appearing and the apprehension of that appearing, the “doubled” and therefore mimetic intentionality, as Daniel Payot has called it,¹⁸ which is explored as the correlation between *physis* and *techne* in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, follows the necessity of art: it is through the work of art and the work of art only that beings appear in their being. The art work makes the appearing appear by bringing it to “stand” (*Stehen*) in some being. The work of art is paradoxically “Being that is” (*das seiende Sein*),¹⁹ as if it might somehow incorporate the ontological difference within itself by repeating the formless and still paradigmatic form of Being in a being which is inevitably limited by its own form. The relationship between a work of art and Being can be described as mimetic, although it is not based on similarity. The work accomplishes the process of appearing and emerging in some being, and what makes a work a work is not that it is created by man but precisely that it brings this emerging about. Being has no definite form; it is nothing before it is put into a work, and so does not precede the work. Accordingly the work does not reproduce a pre-existing Being but is the original enactment of appearing through and in which the truth of Being takes place. Art nevertheless remains mimetic, since its origin is in *physis*, which as overwhelming power both needs and uses man and his works to gain an enduring existence (*Stehen*) in some solid, actual being like a work of art.

What has been found disturbing in Heidegger’s reading of Antigone is that he interprets the being in terms of power, dominance and even violence.²⁰

¹⁷ *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 159.

¹⁸ Daniel Payot, *La Statue de Heidegger: Art, vérité, souveraineté* (Belfort: Circé, 1998), 34-35.

¹⁹ According to Mannheim’s translation “essent being”, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 159.

²⁰ In trying to “save” Heidegger, Michel Haar has suggested that Heidegger’s word *Gewalt* should not be translated as “violence” but rather as “power”. See his *The Song of the Earth: Heidegger and the Grounds of the History of Being*, translated by Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 106.

Thus *dike* or *physis* is not only the structure of being but also overwhelming power. Man, as *deinon*, is not only uncanny but also the one who violently turns against the overpowering structure, *dike*. Heidegger's phenomenological interpretation of *dike* and *physis* is thus complemented and even replaced by a Nietzschean ontology of forces. It is Being itself that forces man to turn against it, so that the inevitable violence of *techne* is nothing but the prolongation of the original violence of nature. *Techne* is not something that man controls or uses, it is man who, as a carrier of *techne*, is used by overpowering nature to reveal itself. *Techne*, and art as the privileged form of *techne*, is nothing but the movement of non-human forces turning against themselves, forces which have being only in and as their mutual conflict. This makes man, whose essence in transcendence, that is, in *techne*, a mere "in-cident" (*Zwischen-fall*) in the history of Being – by his being-there, man is nothing but the "breach" through which Being in its inner striving opens and comes into appearing.²¹

Thus, although Heidegger interprets *physis* in terms of emerging and growth, and *techne* as the accomplishment of *physis*, he does not naturalise art, but moves in the opposite direction. It is *physis* itself that is de-naturalised by its necessary and violent supplement, *techne*. If nature is accomplished by an event, in which it so to speak mimics itself, it is because nature is always differing in itself from itself, because there never was nature that was not always already doubled by art. So it is mimesis that, paradoxically, is the origin.

III

Compared to *An Introduction to Metaphysics* and its vocabulary of power and domination, "The Origin of the Work of Art" seems to display a fundamental change in Heidegger's conception of art. Instead of violent creation, his focus is on the work itself and its "preserves", that is, the community for whom the work lays foundations of its historical existence. Art is not thought of in relation to its counterpart, nature, but a trace of a conflict still remains in the work itself: the conflict of *techne* and *physis* is transposed into the strife between world and earth, which for Heidegger forms the basic structure of a work of art.

Heidegger's notions of world and earth could be characterised as mutually opposing forces of open and withdrawal. By Heidegger's circular description, a work of art like a Greek temple by being set up in a world sets up the

²¹ *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 162-164.

world, the Open. In more conventional terms, a work of art finds what could be called a historical life-world by opening up a horizon for a set of communally shared meanings, of which the religious ones were emblematic for Heidegger. The shared meanings are not explicitly stated in a system of beliefs, but form an indispensable background for meaningful human action. Heidegger's word for a way of life was the "being-there" (*Dasein*) of a historical people, of which his paradigmatic, or perhaps only example was the Greeks. Besides setting up the world and by being set up in a world, a work of art is made of or produced from a material which it in turn "sets forth", Heidegger taking the word *herstellen* in its literal meaning. So, by Heidegger description, a work of art sets forth earth, that is, the material the work is made of, but also organic and inorganic nature, and in the widest sense the native ground on which world is set up.²²

To return to the themes of nature and mimesis, it could be first remarked that by using the word earth to define the work of art, Heidegger comes very close to giving art the status of nature, since throughout his writings earth is almost always associated with organic notions such as roots and growth.²³ The impression is strengthened by the contrast Heidegger makes between art and science, as if he were trying to establish a certain distinction within *techne*, between an organic one and another which is more "technical" in the sense of artificiality. In the "Origin of the Work of Art" it is the modern science and technology underlying it which inherit the violent and destructive characteristics of *techne*, whereas art is privileged because of its pointedly non-violent features. Science tries to resolve the enigma of earth, represented by a stone and its heaviness, by penetrating into it, by breaking it into pieces and by translating its sensuous qualities into abstract symbols of mathematical physics. On the other hand it is art and art only that lets earth remain undisclosed and unexplained.²⁴

²² "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 41-47.

²³ See e.g. the essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 145-161.

²⁴ "The Origin of the Work of Art", 46-47. Heidegger repeated the art-technology dichotomy in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology" where both technology and art are presented as ways of revealing; that is, as forms of transcendence. Technology reveals nature by "challenging" it, by setting it up as a vast reserve of energy. Art, for its part, reveals the truth in the mode of bringing forth and making it shine. The relation between art and technology, however, remains an ambiguous one. While as forms of transcendence they are arrayed beside one another, they are not kinds that would fall under a generic concept. Heidegger also describes technology as an aberrant type which fails to correspond to the essence of *techne*, that is, transcendence; art being the one that once fulfilled this essence. In the end,

The question of mimesis in "The Origin of the work of Art" could be formulated in the following manner: does *physis* or earth, which is described as having "an inexhaustible variety of simple modes and shapes" and a capacity to delimit "everything present within its presence",²⁵ function as the founding authority for art, an authority the operation of which art repeats, and is art thereby more "natural" way of revealing than the other mode of *techne*, technology? Is the relation between art and earth a mimetic one?

Heidegger returns to the question of mimesis in the last section of the essay, in "Truth and art". After having already refuted the traditional view according to which the truth of a work of art is based on imitation and depiction of reality, and having chosen a Greek temple as one of the main examples of art-works, a work which "portrays nothing", Heidegger asks whether the origin of art is in nature. Was Albrecht Dürer right when he claimed that "For in truth, art lies hidden within nature; he who can wrest (*reissen*) it from her, has it?"²⁶ In other words does art, defined as the capacity to bring forth and limit things into their presence, the capacity to form the paradigmatic view, lie in nature or earth interpreted as the resource of "simple modes and shapes? Or does the work of art itself project the paradigmatic truth, the work whose essence Heidegger describes with all the meanings derived from the word *reissen*: tearing apart, drawing, marking in general, even writing.

The truth which takes place in a work of art is called strife, the strife between world and earth. The relation between world and earth can only be a strife since world is defined as the Open and earth for its part is not just inert matter but even in its passivity is an active force which strives to self-assert its own, self-concealing essence against the openness of world.²⁷ The truth as the strife between world and earth takes place only in a work of art, or, a work of art gives the strife its specific, historical configuration by its contour (*Umriss*) and figure (*Gestalt*). A work of art does not imitate or depict a pre-existing truth through its form or figure, but its *Gestalt* gathers in itself the reciprocal setting (*stellen*) of a work and the truth as strife or as "rift" (*Riss*). The strife is set forth in and as a work of art when a work of art is set forth in the strife. The same reciprocal and circular setting takes place between earth and the rift, which

Heidegger leaves open whether there ever was an art that fulfilled the essence of *techne*. See "The Question Concerning Technology" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 14-15, 27-28.

²⁵ "The Origin of the Work of Art", 47.

²⁶ Quoted in "The Origin of the Work of Art", 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

joins world and earth in their strife as a “differential unity”.²⁸ Rift is set back into earth and fixed as the figure of the work, and earth by its turn is set forth into world by the work.²⁹ The rift, which is the configuration of the strife of forces, of world and earth, is nothing in itself, it is nothing before it is fixed as the figure of a particular work. On the other hand the figure, the *Umriss* of the work is nothing but a trace of the rift, which for its part is nothing but the tracing of the strife between world and earth. To borrow a term from Derrida, the figure of the work is nothing but a trace of an already effaced trace. Unlike Dürer, Heidegger locates the rift, the capacity to draw limits on the side of *techne*. What Heidegger calls *techne* is in fact nothing but the movement of the rift, and it is as this rift, torn from nature, that art and mimesis precede nature. In other words, nothing precedes mimesis.

Does this mean that art begins and its truth arises out of nothing? According to Heidegger, yes; at least truth does not arise from beings or objects. But by saying this he forgets and leaves un-thought something else: the mechanical device, the technology within art – the drawing pen and the drawing-board of the artist by which the rift is first drawn and without which the movement of mimesis as the tracing of the truth could not even have begun.

²⁸ An expression used by Christopher Fynsk, who discusses the notion of “rift”, without however relating it to the question of mimesis, in his *Heidegger: Thought and Historicity*, expanded edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 144-148. John Sallis makes the connection explicit in *Echoes: After Heidegger*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 181-183.

²⁹ “The Origin of the Work of Art”, 63-64.