



## Art's Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics

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# *Art's Fateful Hour: Benjamin, Heidegger, Art and Politics*

Christopher P. Long

On October 16, 1935, Walter Benjamin wrote the following from Paris to his friend, Max Horkheimer: “. . . art's fateful hour has struck for us and I have captured its signature in a series of preliminary reflections entitled ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction.’ These reflections attempt to give the questions raised by art theory a truly contemporary form: and indeed from the inside, avoiding any *unmediated* reference to politics.”<sup>1</sup> Less than one month later, on November 13, 1935, Martin Heidegger gave a lecture to the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Gesellschaft* in Freiburg entitled “The Origin of the Work of Art.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Gerschom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, eds., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin: 1910-1940*, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994) 509. Benjamin's claim that 1935 marked “art's fateful hour” was more prescient than even he could have known, for during the fall of 1935, after Hitler's harsh indictment of modern art at the Nuremberg Party congress in September, Joseph Goebbels abandoned once and for all his affinity for promodernist art and adopted a more conservative and less tolerant stance toward modern art. This stance was in line with Hitler's position and served to solidify Goebbels's standing within the Nazi bureaucracy, which had been increasingly threatened by the conservative anti-modernist attitudes of Alfred Rosenberg. From the fall of 1935 on, no Nazi leader was more instrumental and energetically engaged in opposing the modern art movement than Goebbels: he banned art criticism in 1936, purged the works of Jewish artists from German museums and organized the infamous *Entartete Kunst Ausstellung*. For a good discussion of Goebbels's transformation during this time, see Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill & London: North Carolina UP, 1996) 47-58.

2. Martin Heidegger, “Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” *Heidegger Studies* 5 (1989): 5. The first edition of Heidegger's essay on the work of art, the only edition never given as a lecture, is reprinted here. Although I refer to this edition, I follow for the most part, the edition published in *Holzwege*: see note 11 below.

When read together, these two essays have much to teach us about philosophy, art and politics. In what follows, Benjamin's essay will be read as a response to Heidegger's, and Heidegger's essay will be interpreted by means of Benjamin's to expose the implicit political implications of Heidegger's essay and to suggest a more nuanced understanding of Benjamin's. To bring these two essays into relation with one another in this manner is not to suggest that either man was at the time aware of the other's essay on art. There is no evidence for this. Rather, it is to take advantage of a privileged hermeneutical perspective unavailable to the authors themselves in order to better understand the political implications of these two philosophical reflections on art.

The concept around which the relationship between these two essays comes most perspicuously into focus is that of the "aura" of the work of art developed by Benjamin. As will be seen, Benjamin's conception of the aura and its decay can be mapped onto Heidegger's conception of *aletheia* as the originary happening of truth in the work of art in order to elucidate the two authors' opposing impulses. In short, while Benjamin emphasizes the emancipatory dimensions of the decay of the aura and employs it against what he saw as the increasing aestheticization of politics by the forces of fascism, Heidegger attempts to reinvigorate the aura in order to secure the possibility of an authentic relation to the origin that would reestablish the spirit and power of the German people.

### ***Benjamin: The Decay of the Aura***

Traditionally, the authority of an original work of art is derived from its independent existence as a unique being. Such originals confront the viewer as something marvelous, beautiful, authoritative. Benjamin's fundamental insight in "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction" is that technical reproduction undermines this authority and frees the spectator from its mesmerizing influence. Unlike manual reproduction, which has in principle always been possible,<sup>3</sup> technical reproduction undermines the authority of the original in two ways. First,

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3. Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.2 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974) 474. Translated by Harry Zohn as "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969) 218. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to "The Work of Art" essay will be taken from the third German edition followed by the page number of the English translation based on this edition. They will be cited in the text as follows: (Benjamin 474/218). All translations from both Benjamin's and Heidegger's German are my own unless otherwise noted.

because technical reproduction is more independent of the original than is manual reproduction, which remains completely determined by its relation to the original, it is less constrained by the original. By means of enlargement, slow motion and other technical processes, Benjamin suggests that photography and cinematography – two important techniques at work in the age of technical reproduction – can bring out aspects of the original that escape the naked eye (Benjamin 476/220). Thus, the very process of technical reproduction calls the authority of the original into question by splitting it open and exposing to the viewer that which had remained hidden in its own, independent existence. Second, technical reproduction reduces the distance between the object and its viewer, for it can bring the copy of the original into situations inaccessible to the original itself. In short, “. . . it makes it possible for the original to come out and meet the viewer, whether it be in the form of the photograph or the phonograph record” (Benjamin 476-77/220-21). These two aspects of technical reproduction undermine the unique existence of the original and call into question its authenticity. Benjamin clarifies the meaning of “authenticity [*Echtheit*]” by showing how it is related to the authority of the object:

The authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is capable of being handed down from its origin, ranging from its material persistence to its historical testimony. Because this latter is founded on the former, in reproduction, where the material persistence has withdrawn itself from the human, so too does the historical testimony of the thing begin to waiver. What is represented as wavering is clearly this: the authority of the thing. (Benjamin 477/221)

What takes on increasing importance in this passage is the human dimension. The authority of the object begins to waiver as its material persistence withdraws itself from the human. This wavering does not merely mark a transformation of the object, but also a change in the perception of the subject. Benjamin took it for granted that such changes in perception correspond to important social transformations. This can be seen more clearly from the manner in which he develops the concept of the “aura” itself.

### ***The Aura Defined***

By offering a definition of the aura, Benjamin situates himself on the side of those forces contributing to its decay. This is because the concept of

the aura itself has an aura about it, one that seems to defy the logic of definition. By defining it, Benjamin intends to undermine the aura of the aura:

It is advisable to illustrate the concept of the aura which was suggested above with reference to historical objects by means of the concept of the aura of natural objects. We define this last as the unique appearance of a distance [*Ferne*], however close [*nah*] it may be. To follow, while resting on a summer afternoon, a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow over the resting one, is to breathe the aura of these mountains, this branch. (Benjamin 479/222-23)

It is significant that this definition does not refer to the work of art at all, but rather to the *experience* of the aura of natural objects. The emphasis on experience has an important heuristic function: although the aura at first seems to be a property of the object, it in fact only manifests itself in the *relation* between subject and object. By calling it a “unique appearance” and employing the relational terms of “distance” and “close,” Benjamin not only focuses attention on the relational dimension of the aura, but also determines the peculiar nature of this relation.

To begin with, the aura is a unique [*einmalig*] appearance. As an appearance, the aura is both subjective and objective, for the encounter between subject and object is the condition for the possibility of appearance. As unique, the aura is authoritative. Marleen Stoessel suggests that the quantitative characterization of the aura as “*einmalig*” is really a qualitative determination.<sup>4</sup> Benjamin captures this quality of unique presence with the figure of the shadow of the tree’s branch. The cast of the shadow upon the resting one renders the tree present in a new, more powerful way. In the Jewish mystic tradition, the tree is an important symbol for God’s presence in the world.<sup>5</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising to find it here in Benjamin’s account of the

4. Marleen Stoessel, *Aura: Das vergessene Menschliche* (Munich: Hanser, 1983) 47.

5. Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset, 1974) 112. This is not unlike what Martin Buber describes in *Ich und Du*: “It can however happen, if will and grace are joined, that while contemplating the tree I am drawn into relation with it and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has taken hold of me.” Martin Buber, “Ich und Du,” *Das dialogische Prinzip* (Gerlingen: Lambert Schneider, 1962) 11. Buber has also come to mind for Stoessel in reading this passage. She is correct to suggest that the example of the tree was probably only unconsciously adopted from Buber. She cites a passage from Buber’s book *Daniel* similar to the one cited here from *Ich und Du*. In this context, it is significant to note the complete absence of any personal pronoun in Benjamin’s definition of the aura. This is perhaps a further manifestation of the withdrawal of the human element, a point that is easily lost in Zohn’s translation.

aura; for the aura points beyond the moment of immediate presence, to something other, unique, authoritative.

This authoritative dimension of the aura is further developed by Benjamin's use of the spatial vocabulary of "distance." With the qualifying clause, "however close it may be," Benjamin immediately undermines the spatial meaning of distance and suggests instead a temporal determination.<sup>6</sup> Here, the mountain range takes on increased significance, for it is not the spatial distance that gives it its aura, but rather its temporal permanence, the fact that it signifies the long and (geologically) turbulent history of the earth. Again, the mountain range, like the tree, points beyond itself.

Benjamin argues that in the age of technical reproduction the uniqueness and permanence of the object is diminished. The impulse to diminish these two characteristics is a function of a particular kind of perception. Again, the subjective condition of the aura comes to the fore:

Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked [in images accessible to the naked eye] as are fleetingness and reproducibility [in technically reproduced images]. The prying of the object from out of its shell, the ruination [*Zertrümmerung*] of its aura, is the signature of a perception in which "the sense for the equality of things in the world" is so developed that it obtains it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. (Benjamin 479-80/223)<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin is here, as he is throughout the essay, unapologetic for this "ruination of the aura." This passage indicates part of the reason for this: the equalizing effect of the decay of the aura has a liberating function. Whereas auratic perception establishes an immediate hierarchy between subject and object by investing the object with a high level of independence and *authority*, the perception at work in technical reproduction undermines the authority of the object thereby liberating the subject from the object's mesmerizing power.

### ***From Cult to Exhibition Value***

According to Benjamin, this liberating function is particularly perspicuous in aesthetics where, with the development of new artistic technologies, most notably photography and cinematography, the "cult value" of the

6. Stoessel 45.

7. By employing the word "*Zertrümmerung*," ["shattering," "smashing," "reduction to ruins"] here, Benjamin comes as close as he does anywhere in the essay to arguing that the aura is *completely* destroyed in the age of technical reproduction. See note 42 below.

work of art increasingly gives way to its “exhibition value.” All auratic art is based in ritual. It has a quasi-religious dimension. This had already been suggested in the definition of the aura by the juxtaposition of distance and closeness, for, as Benjamin writes in a footnote: “Distance is the opposite of closeness. The essentially distant thing is the Unapproachable. Unapproachability is, in fact, a major quality of the cult image” (Benjamin 480/243). This unapproachability is what gives the object its authority. However, with the invention of photography in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the ritualistic dimension of the work of art is undermined; for photography uses its various techniques – of enlargement, cropping, depth of field – to approach the unapproachable, to “pry the object from its shell.” The full significance of this development is captured in the following passage:

From the photographic negative, for example, comes a plurality of possible prints. The question as to the authentic [*echten*] print makes no sense. The moment, however, when the measure of authenticity breaks down in artistic reproduction, the entire social function of art also is revolutionized. Its foundation on ritual is replaced by its foundation on another praxis: namely, politics. (Benjamin 481-82/224)

Although it is not immediately clear why the break down of the aura leads to politics, it is true that the question of authenticity must be rethought in the face of the techniques of photography. Benjamin begins this rethinking by emphasizing the increased importance of exhibition value. It is the social function of this exhibition value that gives technically reproduced art its political significance.

What is decisive for art in the age of technical reproduction is its accessibility to and appearance before the public – its exhibition value. The cult value of the work, however, does not immediately retreat in the face of the insurgence of exhibition value. Benjamin suggests that the prominence of the portrait in early photography signifies art’s retrenchment in ritual. Portraits of ancestors dead or absent mark the last refuge of cult value in photography. “In the fleeting expression of a human face the aura beckons from early photography for the last time” (Benjamin 485/226).<sup>8</sup>

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8. There is a certain melancholy to this passage. In his essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin suggests that the aura is manifest when the expectation that a person’s gaze will be returned is met (see 114 below). The aura of the work of art seems to be derived from this basic experience. So long as the human element is involved, however remotely, the aura is never fully destroyed.

The significance of Atget, whose photographs are completely emptied of any direct human content, can be understood in this context. Around 1900, Atget photographed deserted Paris streets and created pictures that were said to look like crime scenes. Benjamin suggests the significance of this development:

Where the human withdraws from photography, there for the first time the exhibition value shows its superiority over cult value. . . . With Atget, photographic pictures begin to become pieces of evidence in the process of history. This constitutes their hidden political significance. Free floating contemplation is no longer appropriate for them. They agitate [*beunruhigen*] the viewer; he feels that he must find a definite way to them. (Benjamin 485/226)

The dimension of agitation is important here, for in it lies the specifically political dimension Benjamin has been developing. Rather than being mesmerized by the authority of the work of art, the viewer of the photograph, and to an even greater extent of the modern sound film, is agitated, worried, and thus, thrown into a mode of self-reflection. This sort of heightened awareness is precisely what Benjamin sees as the positive political implication of the decay of the aura.

### ***The Shocked Collective Subject***

The modern sound film produces this sort of agitation even more than the photograph. The experience of the photograph remains similar to that of the painting and other auratic forms of art to the extent that it is fundamentally private. The paradigm of interaction between subject and object remains that of the viewer standing before and being absorbed by the work of art. This is not the case with the film, for the film is experienced collectively. Furthermore, according to Benjamin, the experience of this collective subject does not engender unthinking obedience, but rather an attitude of critique. This is the result of what Benjamin calls the “shock effect” of the film. Cinematography, with its ability to take on, change or penetrate any point of view at will, with its techniques of montage, slow-motion, close-ups and now, indeed with its access to computer generated imagery, has an almost unlimited ability to shock its viewers. This fact puts the viewer on guard, renders the collective subject more aware. Benjamin puts it this way:



The process of association of the one viewing these [moving] images is in fact immediately interrupted by their constant change. On this rests the shock effect of film which, like all shocks, should be absorbed by a heightened presence of mind. (Benjamin 503/238)<sup>9</sup>

For Benjamin, at the movies, the modern subject acquires the skills necessary to negotiate the trials of modern life. The social significance of the modern sound film lies in its ability to shock its audience and force them, collectively, to react. This reaction throws each individual subject back onto its own devices – although the experience is collective, the effect is individuating. Everyone becomes an expert and a critic, as Benjamin suggests (Benjamin 448/228). Finally, although the film fosters a heightened presence of mind, it also distracts its viewer. This is an important dimension of Benjamin's theory, for it distinguishes the mode of perception of the modern movie goer from the kind of perception endemic to the traditional museum visitor. Distraction is the opposite of concentration, which is the mode by which the traditional art work is perceived. For Benjamin, the paradigm example of art that is absorbed in the mode of distraction is architecture. "Buildings," Benjamin writes, "are received in a twofold way: through use and perception, or more strictly speaking: by touch and sight. There is no concept of such a reception if one understands it in terms of concentration as when a tourist stands before a famous building" (Benjamin 504-05/240). Rather, buildings are used without becoming present to the subject in a conscious way; they form

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9. With the advent of computers, the aura reaches an unprecedented level of decay. Films entirely generated by computer animation shock audiences in new ways and remove the aura of the actor further from the film. Furthermore, movies are now being digitally produced and will soon be distributed immediately to millions of viewers around the world via satellites feeding directly to digital projectors. Michel Marriott, "Digital Projectors Use Flashes of Light to Paint a Movie," *The New York Times on the Web* 27 May 1999. [<http://www.nytimes.com/library/tech/99/05/circuits/articles/27proj.html>]. With the internet, the aura enters a deeper level of decay and yet at the same time, the human element is not annihilated. Rather it resurfaces in chat rooms, discussion groups and perhaps most significantly for the present context with the internet's capacity to inform enormous populations about the political and social issues of the day and to provide a forum for critical response. Due to the internet's unparalleled capacity to undermine the aura of things, to dispense in-depth information to a wide population, and to allow that population to directly express itself, the potential for genuine critique has never been greater. However, it is also true that along with information, there is misinformation and a high level of commercialization on the internet. With this comes the danger of increased manipulation against which informed critique must always be vigilant. Just as the film can be used by the forces of fascism, so too can the internet. In this context, Benjamin's essay on art has much to teach us about the emerging cyberworld and the possibility of politics in it at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

part of the *habitual* existence of the modern person.

The formation of habits in a state of distraction is a function of the film as well. The authority of the collective subject is undermined in a decisive manner – the film does not permit the subject or the object to gather itself into a stable unity, it does not permit the one to have absolute power over the other. Thus, Benjamin writes: “With its shock effect, the film comes to meet this [distracted] reception halfway. The film not only drives out its cult value in that it puts the public in the position of critic, but also in that this critical position in the cinema does not require attention. The public is an examiner, but a distracted one” (Benjamin 505/240-41). Here, the full significance of the what Benjamin calls the decay [*Verfall*] of the aura comes into focus. On the one hand, it undermines the authority of the object, thus freeing the subject from its enchanting power. On the other hand, because the aura is only in decay, and is not completely destroyed,<sup>10</sup> the object still retains something of its power and thus does not allow the subject to assert its own absolute authority over it. Thus, there emerges a liberating play between the subject and object in which neither is able to dominate the other. Deauratized art not only establishes this liberating play, but also, because it habituates us to the uncertainty of this play, it assuages the very desire to dominate. The ability to exist in the midst of this sort of uncertainty and to take part in its powerful play is a great threat to all authoritarian politics.

### ***Heidegger: Reinvigorating the Aura***

Although Heidegger’s 1935 essay on art does not at first seem to be as explicitly motivated by political concerns as is Benjamin’s, it is no less political. This can be seen most perspicuously if Heidegger’s essay is re-read with Benjamin’s discussion of the decay of the aura in mind. To put the matter succinctly: whereas Benjamin develops the political significance of the decay of the aura by demystifying the art object and emancipating the subject from its authority, Heidegger enlists the work of art in a disturbing political campaign by interpreting it as the authentic site for the originary happening of the truth [*aletheia*] of the historical existence of a people. By interpreting the work of art in this manner, that is, in Benjamin’s terms, by reinvigorating the aura of the work of art, Heidegger renders aesthetics acutely political.

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10. See below 112ff.

Heidegger begins his essay by establishing the distinction between the being of the thing, the piece of equipment and the work of art.<sup>11</sup> The discussion is situated within a critique of three traditional interpretations of being that determine the western understanding of the true nature of the origin of the work of art. The most important of these interpretations in the present context is the Aristotelian analysis of the thing in terms of form and matter.<sup>12</sup> For Heidegger, the hylomorphic analysis already marks the determination of the thing in terms of equipment. He writes: “. . . matter and form as determinations of beings are most at home in the essential nature of equipment. This name signifies that which is produced specifically for employment and customary use. Matter and form are in no way original determinations of the thingness of the mere thing” (Heidegger 13/28).<sup>13</sup> Because the hylomorphic approach lends insight into the nature of equipment, Heidegger is able to employ it negatively in order to elucidate the similarities and differences between the being of equipment and that of the thing on the one hand, and the work of art on the other.

For Heidegger, equipment is oddly situated between the thing and the work and yet is somehow less than both – this odd situation gives the being of equipment a powerful heuristic function. Equipment, like the thing, is self-contained; it rests in itself when finished. Unlike the thing, however, equipment has not taken shape by itself; it requires the activity of the human hand to bring it into existence. This dependence upon

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11. Martin Heidegger, “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes,” *Holzwege* (Frankfurt/Main: Vittorio Klosterman, 1994) 6-12. Translated by Albert Hofstadter as “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 22-27. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to “The Origin” essay will be taken from this seventh edition of *Holzwege* followed by the page number of the English translation. They will be placed in the text as follows: (Heidegger 6-12/22-27).

12. The other two traditional interpretations of the thing are: 1) the thing as an underlying substance (*hypokeimenon*) with attributes, which is also Aristotelian in origin; 2) the thing as the unity of the manifold given by sensibility, which is, of course, the Kantian conception. Heidegger says of the first that it holds the thing too far from us, and of the second that it presses in to close (Heidegger 11/26).

13. This critique of the Aristotelian hylomorphic analysis is not limited to the work of art essay, but rather expresses one of Heidegger’s basic criticisms of the history of philosophy as determined by Plato and Aristotle. It can be found in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1988) 106-17, where the understanding of being in terms of form and matter is the result of an essential attitude of “productive comportment.” For a discussion of this dimension of Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle, see my essay “The Hegemony of Form and the Resistance of Matter,” *Graduate Faculty Journal of Philosophy* 21.2 (1999): 22ff.

the human renders the equipment more like the work. However, the work differs from equipment and is more like the thing insofar as it is self-sufficient. "Thus, the equipment is half thing," writes Heidegger, "because it is characterized by thingliness, and yet it is something more; simultaneously, it is half art work, and yet less, for it is without the self-sufficiency of the work of art" (Heidegger 14/29). The characteristic of self-sufficiency marks the affinity between the work of art and the thing: "Because of its self-sufficient presence [*selbstgenügsames Anwesen*] the work of art is more similar to the mere thing which grows from itself [*eigenwüchsigen*] and is self-contained" (Heidegger 14/29).<sup>14</sup> This characteristic of self-sufficiency corresponds to that dimension of the aura Benjamin had thematized as uniqueness and permanence.

### ***The Emergence of Distance: Van Gogh's Shoes***

Heidegger further solidifies the self-sufficiency and thus the authority of the work of art by means of a sort of philosophical legerdemain. Under the auspices of establishing a common pictorial representation of some equipment, Heidegger suggests that Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes be taken as an example. Implicitly employing the distinction between *Zuhandenheit* [readiness-to-hand] and *Vorhandenheit* [objective presence] he had established in *Sein und Zeit*,<sup>15</sup> Heidegger outlines the different modes of being in which the peasant shoes appear. They are *zuhanden* when the peasant woman wears them while working in the field. The less conscious she is of the shoes, the more they blend into the context of her environment. The shoes are reliable and useable; this

14. In his essay, "Das Ding," the thing is differentiated from the represented object precisely because it is "*Das Insichstehen . . . als etwas Selbständiges* [that which stands in itself as something independent]." Heidegger "Das Ding," *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1967) 38-39. "The Thing," *Poetry, Language, Thought* 167. It is significant in the present context that Heidegger begins "Das Ding" by discussing the shrinking of all distance in space and time with the modern developments of radio, television and film, where information is now immediately available and where ancient cultures are represented as if they existed at the present moment. Heidegger laments that this shrinking of distance brings no nearness. His response is clearly to re-invigorate the aura of the thing by emphasizing its independence in order to locate in the thingness of the thing the site for the gathering of the fourfold: earth, sky, divinities and mortals (Heidegger 45-46/173). By interpreting the genuine nature of the thing in this manner, Heidegger affirms its ritual value. Thus, in "Das Ding," as in the art essay, Heidegger responds to the decay of the aura in the age of technical reproduction by attempting to re-invigorate it, to re-establish its autonomous authority.

15. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 16th ed. (Niemeyer: Tübingen, 1986) 69ff. Hereafter cited in footnotes as *SZ* followed by the page number for this edition.

constitutes their *Zuhandenheit*. If, however, as in the painting, the shoes are recognized as just lying there unused, if the soles are seen to be worn down, the leather muddy and the laces untied, the shoes have become *vorhanden*, objectively present. As the equipment is used up and worn down it becomes unreliable, and this disintegration reveals another dimension of the being of the shoes. This phenomenon, which plays a large role throughout *Sein und Zeit* as well as in Benjamin's work, may be called the "heuristics of dysfunction" – in the breakdown of the object another dimension of its being is revealed.<sup>16</sup> Van Gogh's picture renders the shoes present in their dysfunction, thus revealing, according to Heidegger, that ". . . equipment in its genuine equipmental being comes from a more distant source. Matter and form and their distinction have a deeper origin" (Heidegger 20/35). The appearance of this distance happens in the painting. Heidegger writes: "This painting has spoken. In the proximity of the work we were suddenly somewhere other than where we *habitually* tend to be" (Heidegger 21/35).<sup>17</sup> The work of art "speaks;" it transports the viewer into unfamiliar territory; it reveals the distant and deeper origin of being. This completes the philosophical legerdemain mentioned above, for the painting was not, as Heidegger originally suggested, meant merely to establish a common pictorial representation of a pair of shoes. Heidegger himself finally explicitly admits to this manipulation:

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16. The heuristics of dysfunction is at the core of Heidegger's attempt to develop the meaning of being in terms of time in *Sein und Zeit*. Death is precisely that dysfunction which reveals the being of *Dasein* as time (cf. sections 50-53). The heuristics of dysfunction, besides clearly being an important dimension of Benjamin's essay on art, also plays a fundamental role in Benjamin's early work, "Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels," *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.1 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974). In English as, *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977). In the introduction, he writes of the emergence of the truth content of the work: "This content does not, however, become visible by being exposed, rather it proves itself far more in a process which one may metaphorically described as the burning up of the cover as it enters the realm of the ideas, that is, as an incineration of the work in which its form achieves the high point of its brilliance" (Benjamin 211/31). In the same work, the heuristics of dysfunction is at the heart of Benjamin's conception of critique, which he describes as the "mortification of the work" (Benjamin 357/182).

17. Italics are mine so as to call attention to a fundamental difference between Benjamin and Heidegger. As mentioned, Benjamin affirms the habituation of a heightened presence of mind in a state of distraction as a key element of the liberating function of the decay of the aura. This was clear in his treatment of architecture. Heidegger's interest is in breaking, not establishing, habits as a way of destroying the attitude of the "average everydayness" of "*das Man*" (*SZ* 126ff.). Here the work of art is said to aid in the breaking of such habits, with the result that the observer is better prepared to face the important decision posed by the work itself.

However, above all the work did not, as it may seem at first, serve merely to better visualize what a piece of equipment is. Rather, it is much more the case that the equipmental being of the equipment first genuinely comes to appearance through the work and exclusively in the work. . . . What happens here? What is at work in the work? Van Gogh's painting is the revelation [*Eröffnung*] of that which the equipment, a pair of peasant shoes, *is* in truth. This being steps out into the unconcealedness of its being. The unconcealedness of beings, the Greeks named *aletheia*. (Heidegger 21/36)

What is at work in the work is the happening of truth as *aletheia*; it is the revelation of the distant origin of being. What is at work in the work is precisely what Benjamin called the aura: the unique appearance of a distance, however close it may be.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Ritual Value Re-vitalized: God Does Not Flee***

It is not surprising that Heidegger appeals to the ruins of a Greek temple to elucidate the manner in which *aletheia* happens in the work of art; for the temple implicitly suggests precisely what Heidegger is attempting to establish: the ritual dimension of the work of art, its historical nature and its authority.<sup>19</sup> His description of the temple is intentionally dramatic so as to emphasize its aura. The temple is, for Heidegger, the site of the battle between what he calls "earth" and "world;" the terms by which he explicates the dynamic happening of *aletheia*. The "world," in this case is not the mere collection of things,

18. What I have called "a sort of philosophical legerdemain" is actually a highly sophisticated rhetorical maneuver by Heidegger, for it shows precisely what he is trying to say: that although the origin has been covered over – by traditional metaphysics, the prevalence of equipment in the age of technology, "average everyday" existence, etc. – it remains discernable to those who can see/think/hear it, that is, to those who can heed what the painting says (commands?).

19. The Greek temple is significant for two other reasons as well. First, it links the present essay back to the Greek origin, which for Heidegger is really the genuine origin of the historical existence of the German people as well as of genuine philosophy. Recall in this context, of course, Heidegger's famous claim "For along with German the Greek language is (in regard to its possibilities for thought) at once the most powerful and most spiritual of all languages." Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987) 57. This sort of assertion of the spiritual affinity between the German and the Greek was quite common in the rhetoric of the revolutionary right. See for example, Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1936) 470; *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971) 423. Second, Heidegger's attitude toward the temple is precisely the opposite of Benjamin's attitude toward buildings mentioned above. Where Heidegger encourages awe and fetishizes the aura of the structure, Benjamin encourages use and undermines the authority of the aura.

nor is it the framework that gives such a collection its unity.<sup>20</sup> Rather: “Wherever the essential decisions of our history are made, are taken over by us or abandoned, remain unrecognized or are rediscovered, there the world worlds. . . . Insofar as the world opens itself, all things receive their lingering and hastening, their distance [*Ferne*] and proximity [*Nähe*], their breadth and confinement” (Heidegger 31/44-45). The world is historical. It opens up the possibility for genuine decision, which will *either* be taken over *or* ignored. However, the world is not pure openness; it has a dimension of inaccessibility as well – it is dependent upon what Heidegger calls “the protective grace of the gods” which both grants and withholds (Heidegger 31/45). This twofold dimension of revealing and concealing is played out from the other direction with the term “earth.” Here “earth” does not name the clump of matter orbiting around the sun. Rather: “The earth is that which comes out and shelters. The earth is self-dependent, effortless and untiring. Upon and in the earth historical humans ground their dwelling in the world” (Heidegger 46/32). The dimension of closedness takes precedence here, but like the world, the earth is multi-dimensional. It is self-secluding, but in this seclusion, it shelters and protects that which comes into appearance. Earth and world must be thought together:

The world is the self-opening openness of the broad bands of the simple and essential decisions in the destiny of an historical people [*geschichtlichen Volkes*]. The earth is the self-dependent forthcoming of that which constantly secludes itself and in this way shelters. World and earth are essentially different from one another and yet they are never separated. The world grounds itself on the earth and the earth juts through the world. (Heidegger 35/49)

Heidegger does not allow this relation between earth and world to rest in an “empty unity of opposites.” Rather, the relationship is one of strife, and it is a battle of the highest importance. The work of art is the

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20. The following passage is a clear example of the aura of authority Heidegger gives the temple: “Standing there, the structure rests on rocky ground. This resting of the work draws out of the rock its cumbersome but spontaneous support. Standing there, the structure holds itself against the raging storm above it and thus makes the violence of the storm manifest for the first time. The brilliance and shine of the stones, although appearing only by the grace of the sun, yet first bring the light of day, the expanse of the sky, the gloom of the night into appearance. The temple’s sure towering makes the invisible space of the air visible. The unshakability of the work stands out against the surging of the sea and, by its repose, allows the raging of the ocean to appear” (Heidegger 28/42).

site of this battle and the temple is the clearest example of this: the temple stands out from the earth which protects it, it opens up a world; it signifies the world of the Greeks, their culture, their gods and its links to Germanic culture and society; it is, like the German economy and position in the world, in ruins, the earth has reasserted itself.<sup>21</sup> Heidegger claims that the ongoing battle between earth and world remains open in the work so long as “the god has not fled from it” (Heidegger 29/43).

From the perspective of Benjamin’s essay, Heidegger’s conception of the happening of truth in the work of art amounts to a reaffirmation the artwork’s origins in ritual. The revitalization of the ritual value of art is, however, not apolitical. To the contrary, it is the means by which the aura of the work of art is drafted for service in a very political campaign. Heidegger’s vocabulary of “battle [*Kampf*]” and “strife [*Streit*]” already indicates this; indeed, his appeal to Heraclitus’s fifty-third fragment makes it very clear: “War [*polemos*] is the father of all things, the king of all things. It proves that some are gods and others men; it makes some into slaves and others free.”<sup>22</sup> Throughout the discussion

21. See Heidegger 35/49. This caveat is common in Heidegger because he was always concerned not to have the dynamic happening of truth understood in terms of the Hegelian dialectic of *Aufhebung*. Cf. his essay on *physis* in Aristotle, Heidegger, *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt/Main: Vittorio Klosterman, 1976) 366-67. See also, my essay, “The Hegemony of Form and the Resistance of Matter,” 34ff. For Heidegger, the battle between earth and world is not dialectical because the immediate past is precisely *not* preserved, but rather annihilated. Further, the battle is a matter of *Geschick*, fate, which enjoins human sacrifice [*Opfer*], and which determines human action rather than being determined by it. Johannes Fritsche has made the difference between Hegelian dialectics and Heidegger’s conception of the destruction of tradition and fate clear in his book *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999) 154ff. Hereafter to be cited parenthetically in the footnotes as *JF*.

22. Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* I (Zürich: Weidmann, 1996) 162. Heidegger appeals to this on page 29/43. After paraphrasing it, Heidegger only gives the reference to the passage from Heraclitus without citing the text itself. Heidegger echoes a similar sentiment in his political speech, “The University in the new Reich,” with the use of the term “*Kampf*,” which mirrors Heraclitus’s “*polemos*”: “University study must again become a risk, not a refuge for the cowardly. Whoever cannot survive the battle [*Kampf*], lays where he lies. The new courage must accustom itself to steadiness, because the battle for the institutions where leaders are educated will last for a long time. It will be fought out of the forces of the new Reich which the chancellor of the people, Hitler, will bring to actuality. A hard race without the thought of itself must fight the battle, a race that lives from constant testing and for the goal to which it has committed itself. The battle determines the character of the teachers and leaders at the University.” Guido Schneeberger, *Nachlese zu Heidegger: Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Denken* (Bern: Buchdruckerei AG, Suhr, 1962) 145. An English translation can be found in Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge: MIT, 1993) 45.



of the battle between the earth and world, references are made to the “destiny of an historical people [*Geschick eines geschichtlichen Volkes*],”<sup>23</sup> “native ground [*heimatliche Grund*],”<sup>24</sup> to the “essential sacrifice [*wesentliche Opfer*],” and indeed, to the “founding of a political state [*staatgründende Tat*].”<sup>25</sup> What appears in one context as harmless metaphorical language is, in another, highly charged political rhetoric. It is important to keep in mind that Heidegger composed the first draft of this essay in Freiburg in 1935 and further presented, revised and developed it during the following year. At that time in Germany, the political significance of such language could not have been more perspicuous. Although couched in a philosophical context, it is the

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23. See Heidegger 35/49 (cited on 102 above). The term “*Geschick* [fate],” must be understood in relation to the verb “*schicken* [to send],” from which the words “*Schicksal* [destiny],” and “*Geschichte* [history]” are derived. The German understanding of *Geschick* during the inter-war period in Germany does not have the same connotations as it does to English speaking readers at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the 1920s and 1930s the term “*Geschick*” was a basic term of discourse of the political right and it signified that the actions of individuals as well as history itself is determined by *Geschick*. This sounds strange particularly to American ears because of the deeply ingrained American notion that individuals determine their own fate. But it is important not to read the tradition of American individualism into a text so deeply situated in the context in which it was written. For the particularities of the German notion of *Geschick* in the inter-war period, see *JF* 69-70, note 3, 268-69 and the admirably long footnote on 243-50.

24. See Heidegger 28/42.

25. These later two references, see Heidegger 49/62, comprise part of a list of ways truth establishes itself. One way is by setting itself into work, another is by means of the thinker’s questioning. By bringing the essential sacrifice, the founding of a political state, the questioning of the thinker and the happening of truth in the work of art together in one list, Heidegger clearly brings the political implications of his aesthetic theory into focus and further suggests the seamless relationship between his philosophy and his politics. The notion of sacrifice, *Opfer*, is also a highly charged polemical term of the revolutionary right. It was frequently used in reference to those heroes [*Helden*] who sacrificed their lives for the good of the people in World War I, *JF* 323-27. Heidegger himself is not afraid to use the term in his philosophical works, as here and as he does when, in 1943 in the afterward to his essay, “Was ist Metaphysik?” he writes: “Sacrifice [*Das Opfer*] is at home in the essence of the event as that by which being claims man for the truth of being.” Heidegger, *Wegmarken* 311. He employs the same notion of *Opfer* in his overtly political writings, as he does in his speech “The University in the National Socialist State,” when he writes: “We of today are in the process of fighting to bring about the new reality. We are merely a transition, a sacrifice [*Opfer*].” Hugo Ott, *Martin Heidegger: Unterwegs zu seiner Biographie* (Frankfurt & New York: Campus, 1988) 231. Such a sacrifice is never merely a *Handlung*, which is the name for the actions of everyday life that are always mediated by one’s concerns and the concerns of others; rather, the *Tat* is heroic, decisive, immediate. It is intimately linked to sacrifice; it is the deed performed at the moment of decision. For a discussion of the significance of the word *Tat* and how it differs from *Handlung*, see *JF* 322.

language of the revolutionary right, of Hitler and the National Socialist movement.<sup>26</sup> However, if any doubt remains that Heidegger's essay on the origin of the work of art is political at its core, it is removed by a consideration of the final discussion of art as poetry [*Dichtung*].

### **Art as Dichtung**

"All art," Heidegger writes, "as the letting happen of the arrival of the truth of beings is, as such, *in essence, poetry*" (Heidegger 59/72). Poetry, for Heidegger, is grounded in language, which itself is understood as more than mere communication. Language and poetry are broadly construed by Heidegger; they are understood as the ground of the specific arts, such as architecture, painting, sculpture and music. All works of art must be traced back to their origin in poetry and language (Heidegger 60/73). Heidegger develops his conception of poetry by means of the notion of "projective saying [*entwerfende Sagen*]":

Projective saying is poetry: the saying of the world and the earth, the saying of the realm of their battle and thus of the site of all nearness and distance [*Nähe und Ferne*] of the gods. Poetry is the saying of the unconcealedness of beings. Language at any particular time is the happening of this saying, in which a world historically arises for a people [*einem Volk*], and the earth is preserved as that which remains closed. Projective saying is that which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into the world. In such saying, the concepts of an historical people's essence, that is, of its belonging to world history, are preformed. (Heidegger 61-62/74)

Immediately, the use of "nearness" and "distance" suggests the affinity between what Heidegger thematizes as projective saying and what Benjamin defines as the aura. While Benjamin attempts to undermine the power of the aura, Heidegger here embraces and fosters it. Furthermore, this passage indicates the intimate relationship between the aura of the work of art, that is, to use Heideggerian vocabulary, its truth and the essence of an historical people. Heidegger determines this relationship by developing the notion of preservation which is only briefly

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26. The most thorough work I know on the relationship between Heidegger's philosophical vocabulary, particularly as it is developed in sections 72-77 of *Sein und Zeit* and the political rhetoric of the revolutionary right in Germany during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s is Fritsche's *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and Time*. Whatever one makes of all of Fritsche's specific arguments, after reading his book, it is no longer possible to be naïve about the particular vocabulary Heidegger chose to employ.

introduced in the above passage.

The shift from the traditional (Kantian) view in which the artist's creative genius is given pride of place to a position in which those who preserve the work of art predominate is concordant with a more general shift in Heidegger's thinking, namely, first, the "turn" away from the individual subject [*Dasein*] to the collective subject [*das Volk*], and then the twist away from the concept of subjectivity altogether.<sup>27</sup> In the essay on the work of art, Heidegger accomplishes the turn, although the twist is already intimated by his reticence to affirm the traditional dichotomy between subject and object.<sup>28</sup> The turn from individual to collective subject can be easily discerned in Heidegger's discussion of preservation.

As with Benjamin's conception of shock, Heidegger's notion of preservation is directed against the Kantian affirmation of the individual subject. Unlike Benjamin, who identifies an alienating and thus liberating function in the shock effect of technically reproduced art, Heidegger uses the notion of preserving to ground the identity of the collective subject in the authentic origin of the work of art. Heidegger does this brilliantly by mapping the ontological structure of *Dasein* as developed in *Sein und Zeit* onto the collective subjectivity of preservers.

Preserving, for Heidegger, removes the individual from its rote existence in the "everyday" and moves it into what is disclosed by the work (Heidegger 62/75). In so doing, the subject is enjoined to take an authentic position with respect to the work, that is, to preserve it. This, Heidegger calls, the "founding of truth," which has three dimensions corresponding to what was developed in *Sein und Zeit* as the three ecstasies of the temporality of *Dasein*: 1) founding as bestowing, corresponding to the historicity of *Dasein*, its thrownness; 2) founding as grounding, corresponding the ecstatic presence of *Dasein*; 3) founding

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27. Karl Löwith already recognized the turn from the individual to the collective subject in 1940, writing: "The leap in the existential analytic from death to Heidegger's Schlageter speech (*Freiburger Studentenzeitung*, 1 Jun. 1933) is merely a passage from a particular and individual *Dasein* to one that is general, no less particular by virtue of its generality – namely, one of the German *Dasein*." (Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, Elizabeth King, trans. [Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1994] 38.) The turning and twisting in Heidegger can be seen in the movement between three of Heidegger's writings respectively: from *Sein und Zeit* to *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* and then to the *Briefüber den Humanismus*. If one is convinced by Fritsche's interpretation of section 74 of *Sein und Zeit*, then what I am calling the turn, i.e., to the collective subject, is already accomplished there. It is not until after the war that the twisting begins in earnest.

28. Cf. Heidegger 65/77.

as beginning, corresponding to *Dasein*'s futurity, its projection.<sup>29</sup>

Heidegger develops the three dimensions of the founding of truth in the work of art with vocabulary borrowed from *Sein und Zeit*. In the first edition of the essay, the only edition never given as a lecture, this was understood primarily in terms of the "free gift,"<sup>30</sup> but in the later edition, emphasis is placed on the role of the preservers, *ein Volk*.

Rather, in the work, the truth is thrown toward the coming preservers, that is, to an historical group of people [*Menschentum*]. That which is thrown is never an arbitrary demand. The truly poetic projection is the opening of that into which *Dasein*, as historical, is always already thrown. This is the earth, and for an historical people [*Volk*], its earth [is] the self-closing ground on which it rests with all of that which it already is, though as yet still hidden from itself. It is, however, the world that prevails out of the relation of *Dasein* to the unconcealedness of being. For this reason, all that is given to human being in projection is drawn up out of the closed ground and expressly set up upon this ground. (Heidegger 63/75-76)

This passage already includes all three dimensions of the founding of truth, bestowing, grounding and beginning. Here earth and world are brought together to determine the being of an historical people, just as in *Sein und Zeit*, thrownness and projection are brought together to determine the temporality of the being of *Dasein*.<sup>31</sup> When focusing on the

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29. This conception of the "founding of truth" is one of the oldest parts of the essay. It has remained fundamentally unchanged from the first version: Heidegger, "Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," *Heidegger Studies* 5 (1989): 5-22. In the first version, however, the conception of the founding of truth is not linked as strongly to the notion of preservation, which is more developed in the edition published in *Holzwege*.

30. See Heidegger, "Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" (1989) 19ff. The notion of the "free gift" corresponds nicely to the German understanding of *Geschick*, see note 23 above.

31. Compare the essay on the origin of the work of art with section II.5 of *Sein und Zeit*, "Temporality and Historicity." Already in this section of *Sein und Zeit*, the Greek temple appears (*SZ* 378/*BT* 430). Here Heidegger also develops the authentic temporality of *Dasein* in terms of "vorlaufende Entschlossenheit," running ahead resoluteness (*SZ* 382/*BT* 434). Resolute running ahead names the manner in which past and future are unified in authentic *Dasein* just as the "founding of truth" names the authentic temporality of the being of an historical *Volk*. Here again the philosophical and the political are brought together in a disturbing manner. This move should not surprise anyone who has read Löwith's recollections of his last meeting with Heidegger in 1936: "... I was of the opinion that his partisanship for National Socialism lay in the essence of his philosophy. Heidegger agreed with me without reservation, and added that his concept of 'historicity' formed the basis of his political 'engagement.' He also left no doubt about his belief in Hitler" (Löwith 60). For an insightful interpretation of section 74 and its political significance, see *JF* chapters 1-2.

conception of founding as bestowing, Heidegger emphasizes the historical dimension of *das Volk*. Here the earth takes on increased importance, for it captures the dimension of thrownness. It is no accident that the first edition of the work of art essay ends with Heidegger emphasizing how vitally important it is for historical *Dasein* to remain in close proximity to its genuine "*Bodenständigkeit*" on the earth: "Such proximity guarantees a truly grounded historical *Dasein* as genuinely rooted in its native soil [*Bodenständigkeit*] on this earth."<sup>32</sup> So long as historical *Dasein* remains rooted in and heroically chooses to defend its native soil, the possibility that it can regain an authentic existence remains open.

The second dimension of the founding of truth is that of grounding. As the above passage suggests, the gift must be drawn up in projection and set upon this ground. This, however, is not something that just happens of itself, rather, it requires that the preservers relate themselves properly towards the happening of truth in the work. What Heidegger specifically has in mind can be gathered from the examples, mentioned earlier, of the other ways in which truth happens: in the "act that founds a political state," in "essential sacrifice," and in the "thinker's questioning."<sup>33</sup> All the various ways in which the "truth happens" enjoin the active engagement of a subject or group of subjects and this is no less the case with the happening of truth in the work of art. This is the ultimate impetus behind Heidegger's emphasis on the importance of the preservers, for it is the preservers, recognizing their destiny, who comport themselves in the proper manner towards the work of art and thus who are able to draw up the happening of truth and establish it on firm ground.<sup>34</sup>

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32. Heidegger, "Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerkes" (1989) 22. "*Bodenständigkeit*" was also a term used by the revolutionary right in their fight for "*Lebensraum*." It means being rooted in the soil. See *JF* 287 for a discussion of "*Bodenständigkeit*." Although the term itself does not make it into the editions of the essay Heidegger presented in public, the spirit of the word remains vitally clear at the end of the essay in the citation from Hölderlin, see 119 below.

33. See 103 above.

34. The structure of the argument is the same as the electoral appeal Heidegger published as rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933 to encourage support for Hitler's decision to leave the League of Nations: "This last decision reaches the outermost limit of our people's existence. And what is this limit? It consists in the most basic demand of all *Dasein* that it preserve and save its own essence. A barrier is thereby erected between what can be reasonably expected of a people and what cannot. By virtue of this basic law of honor a people preserves [*bewahrt*] the dignity and resoluteness of its essence" (Schneeberger 145). The meaning of "to preserve" [*bewahren*] throughout this speech is precisely the same as it is in the essay on art.

This grounding, however, requires a third dimension, namely, that of beginning. For Heidegger, genuine beginning is an “*Ursprung*,” a primordial leap, which, Heidegger stresses, is not primitive because it is fundamentally directed towards the future. Thus, bringing the discussion of the founding of truth and the entire essay to a crescendo, he writes:

Art lets truth leap out [*entspringen*]. Art, as founding preserving, springs [*erspringt*] the truth of beings in the work. To spring something, to bring something into being by the founding leap [*Sprung*] out of its essential origin [*Wesensherkunft*], this is the meaning of the word origin [*Ursprung*].

The origin [*Ursprung*] of the work of art, that is, the origin of both the creators and the preservers, which is to say of the historical *Dasein* of a people, is art. This is the case because art in its essence is an origin [*Ursprung*]: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical. (Heidegger, 65-66/77-78)

The full effect of Heidegger’s position comes quickly into focus here. Art is the site for the rejuvenation of the historical *Dasein* of the German people. The proper relation to art is no mere philosophical exercise in aesthetics, but rather a concrete, political challenge. Heidegger employs the rhetoric of a polished political speaker when he ends the essay:

Are we in our *Dasein* historically at the origin? Do we know, that is, do we respect [*achten*] the essence of the origin? Or do we, in our relation to art, only call on an informed acquaintance with the past?

For this either-or<sup>35</sup> and its decision, there is an unmistakable sign. Hölderlin, the poet, whose work stands before the Germans as a test to be withstood, named it when he said:

“With difficulty,/that which dwells near the origin, departs.” – “The Journey,” verses 18-19. (Heidegger 66/78)

These words leave little to the imagination as to what, precisely, Heidegger thought the relationship was between art and politics. The “we,” of course, is the authentic German *Volk*. Such a challenge to the

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35. Hitler’s rhetoric is rife with precisely such “either/or,” decisionistic formulations: “There is no making pacts with Jews; there can only be the hard: either – or” (Hitler, *Mein Kampf* 225; In English: *Mein Kampf* 206). See also 475/427 and “Germany will either be a world power or there will be no Germany” (742/654). Translations are Manheim’s.

German people, in 1935, could not have been more straightforward: Be on the right side of the either-or; defend and respect the hidden origin that fatefully gives us our position of privilege at this world-historical moment of decision. From beginning to end, Heidegger's strategy in the essay on art is to rejuvenate the aura of the work of art, that is, its mysterious relation to the forgotten authentic origin of the German people, in order to prepare the way for the self-assertion of the German *Volk* after the shame and devastation brought on by the Treaty of Versailles. It is, however, precisely this sort of response that Benjamin sought to attack in his own essay on art by undermining the authority of the aura.

### ***Heidegger and Benjamin: Art, Philosophy and Politics***

By interpreting Heidegger's essay through the lens of Benjamin's, we have not only gained insight into the political implications of Heidegger's vision of the relationship between art and politics, but we have also placed ourselves in a position to develop a more nuanced understanding of Benjamin's essay.

It has already been suggested that Heidegger's essay resonates with his earlier thinking, particularly *Sein und Zeit*, insofar as it retains the basic temporal structure of *Dasein* even as it moves to map it onto the historical *Dasein* of *das Volk*. There is, however, a deeper affinity as well, one that runs through almost everything Heidegger wrote – early, middle and late – that is, what may be called “originary metaphysics.”<sup>36</sup> Originary metaphysics should be distinguished from original metaphysics, for, to follow Reiner Schürmann's interpretation of Heidegger, “original” refers to the historical happening of the history of being while “originary” refers to the ahistorical event of the happening of being itself.<sup>37</sup> Heidegger never tired of trying to develop ways to think the originary. Yet, it must be admitted, that in the work of art essay at the very least, the originary was brought into relation with the original in a very disturbing manner. In this essay Heidegger's attempt to think the originary event of

36. Of course, Heidegger himself would prefer the name “originary thinking” because it reserves the name “metaphysics” for that which is to be destroyed. However, it is precisely because, as will be clear below, this “originary thinking” is not thinking at all, but rather, as Karl Löwith put it, an “art of enchantment” that I purposefully juxtapose the two terms – “originary” and “metaphysics” (Löwith 45). Heidegger would have had opposite reactions to these terms and so, by placing them next to one another, I intend to call into question both Heidegger's notion of “origin” as well as his conception of metaphysics.

37. Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger: On Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 131.

being itself is intimately linked to the concrete historico-political situation in which it was written. Here, the dangers endemic to “originary metaphysics” are clearly manifest. Its basic assumption is that there is a deep and hidden origin that gives meaning to everything that exists. Paul Tillich has called this the “myth of origin” and has suggested: “The consciousness oriented to the myth of origin is the root of all conservative and romantic thought in politics.”<sup>38</sup> The danger endemic to such a notion lies not only in its lack of determinacy, but also in its hypnotic effect. For a good story teller – and Heidegger, like most great philosophers, was quite an expert – can lull an unguarded listener into believing the myth of the origin as it is determined by the philosophico-political beliefs of the teller. Thus, what starts out innocuously enough as a consideration of the origin of the work of art, leads, with increasing urgency, to a sort of call-to-arms in which the listeners are challenged to heed the command of the origin and preserve and defend the land of their birth. Art can work this way, slyly and hypnotically, and so can philosophy and politics, if they are not held accountable by critical thinking. Herein, however, lies the importance of Benjamin’s conception of the shock effect of the work of art in the age of technical reproduction. This shock effect offers some defense against the hypnotic power of originary metaphysics. Indeed, just as the film shocks the spectator into a heightened presence of mind, Benjamin’s essay undermines the spell of Heidegger’s aura.<sup>39</sup> By juxtaposing Heidegger’s conception of the founding of truth with Benjamin’s affirmation of the decay of the aura, the hypnotic effect of Heidegger’s writing and strangely appealing vocabulary is broken and the disturbing political implications of his thinking comes clearly into focus.

### ***The Aura’s Verfall***

There is, however, something of a reciprocal relationship here, for Heidegger’s essay, both because it provides a concrete example of the sort of aestheticization of politics to which Benjamin was opposed and

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38. Paul Tillich, *Die sozialistische Entscheidung* (Berlin: Medusa Verlag Wölk, 1980) 3f.; *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 18.

39. According to Löwith, Heidegger augmented his aura as a great and different thinker by donning the unconventional dress described “as a kind of Black Forest farmer’s jacket with broad lapels and a semi-militaristic collar, and knee-length breeches, both made from dark brown cloth . . .” Löwith also suggest that the students must have been aware of his aura because they called him “the little magician from Messkirch” (Löwith 44-45).



because it reaffirms the aura to such an extent that the possibility of a complete destruction of the aura is called into question, lends insight into an aspect of Benjamin's essay that is often misunderstood. Even before its publication, the concept of the *Verfall* of the aura was misinterpreted. In March, 1936, from London, Adorno wrote a letter to Benjamin with his reaction to "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction." In this letter, Adorno famously suggests that the essay requires "*more dialectics.*"<sup>40</sup> The basic impulse underlying this suggestion is the valid concern that Benjamin's essay is naïve and romantic about the emancipatory power of deauratized art and about the immediate revolutionary response the masses would have to it. Adorno's point is that deauratized art lends itself just as well to the manipulative ends it was designed to undermine. Thus, according to Adorno, the negative moment was missing from the essay. Of course, the other aspect of Adorno's critique, as Richard Wolin points out, is that Benjamin does not recognize the *positive* moment endemic to radically autonomous art, which itself "undergoes a process of *self-rationalization* such that it divests itself of the aura and its accompanying retrograde attributes."<sup>41</sup> Taken abstractly, this critique seems valid enough. However, what Adorno failed to recognize was the concrete context against which Benjamin was writing. He was living in exile in Paris in 1935 where the autonomous art of the fascists required a concrete and indeed powerful response. Thus, while the positive dimensions of autonomous art were being undermined by fascist films and propaganda, the negative dimensions of Benjamin's position, its naïve romanticism and tenacious, one-sided emphasis on the aura's decay, can be explained, although not fully excused, by the need to emphasize the political potential of deauratized art as a response to the fascists' attempt to render politics aesthetic. Heidegger's essay helps bring this context into focus by offering a concrete example of how the aura of the work of art can be and was manipulated for authoritarian political purposes.

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40. Ronald Taylor, ed. & trans., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1977) 124.

41. See Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 194. In this case, Adorno clearly has in mind something like what he will later write about Schönberg's twelve-tone technique in *Philosophy of Modern Music*, namely that, by confining itself so rigidly to its self-imposed rules, it frees itself. "Twelve-tone technique is truly the fate of music. It enchains music by liberating it." See Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 1994) 67-68.

However, even if the concrete context in which Benjamin wrote the essay is taken into account, and even if it is granted that Benjamin was perhaps too idealistic about the response of the masses to deauratized art, the suggestion that Benjamin's position is too one sided and therefore dialectically closed remains grounded in a misconception – namely that by thematizing the “*Verfall*” of the aura, Benjamin is arguing for its complete destruction. This is where Heidegger's affirmation of the aura, and particularly its historical dimension can help us develop a more nuanced understanding of Benjamin's position, for Heidegger is correct to emphasize the historical nature of art, and Benjamin's conception of the *Verfall* of the aura does nothing to deny this.

Marleen Stoessel has keenly suggested that Benjamin never speaks of the “loss [*Verlust*]” of the aura, nor does he use other expressions of absolute destruction in relation to the aura that would lead one to believe that the process under consideration is closed and static.<sup>42</sup> Rather, when speaking about the aura, Benjamin most often uses words like “*Verfall*,” “*verkümmern* [decline, wither, or dwindle],” or “*ins Wanken geraten* [begin to totter, become shaky]” (Benjamin 477/221). These words are meant to retain a certain openness, to emphasize the dynamic nature of the process undergone by the aura in the age of technical reproduction. Thus, while it is true, as Rodolphe Gasché says, that the decay of the aura is “a liberating event, an event in which mankind becomes reborn – and Benjamin celebrates it without regret,”<sup>43</sup> it is not the case, as Gasché also seems to suggest, that

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42. See Stoessel 36. As mentioned above in note 7, Benjamin comes close to saying that the aura is “destroyed” when he used the word “*Zertrümmerung*” (479/223). In fact, Harry Zohn translates “*Zertrümmerung*” as “destroy,” thus giving the English reader the false impression that the aura is completely annihilated. But “*Zertrümmerung*” does not mean “destruction,” but rather “smashing,” “shattering,” or, indeed, “reduction to ruins.” For Benjamin, a “ruin” is never absolute annihilation. In *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, he writes: “Structure and detail are, in the end, always historically laden. It is the object of philosophical criticism to prove that the function of artistic form is the following: to make historical content, because it provides the basis of every important work of art, into a philosophical truth. This transformation of material content into truth content makes the *Verfall* in effectiveness, whereby the attraction of earlier stimuli diminishes decade by decade, into the basis of rebirth, in which all ephemeral beauty is completely stripped off, and the work stands in a ruin.” See Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* 358; *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama* 182.

43. Rodolphe Gasché, “Objective Diversions: On Some Kantian Themes in Benjamin's ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,’” *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds. (London: Routledge, 1994) 185.

the aura is entirely eliminated.<sup>44</sup> Benjamin's treatment of the decay of the aura must be understood in terms of the heuristics of dysfunction mentioned above<sup>45</sup> – in the breakdown of the aura, the political function of art reveals itself. But the condition for the possibility of this political function of art is in fact the resistance of the aura in the face of its complete annihilation. For it is the resistance of the aura along with the heightened capacity for critique that emerges as the aura seems to decay that holds the relationship between subject and object open and establishes the possibility for a politics directed against authoritarianism and domination. Thus, when Benjamin writes in his essay on Baudelaire the following: "But looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met . . . there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent,"<sup>46</sup> the experience at the heart of the concept of the aura is made clear. So too is its political and ethical significance, for the aura names the place of this autonomous response, a place where the aura and its decay are continually in play. Thus, unlike in Heidegger, where the response to the work of art is a matter of authentic preservation, in Benjamin, there is an autonomous response between subject and object that undermines the attempt of either to gain absolute authority. Whereas Heidegger affirms the authenticity and authority of the work of art, Benjamin sees in the age of technical reproduction the decay of the aura of authenticity that makes room for the autonomous response. This comes clearly into focus when Benjamin's essay is read against Heidegger's, indeed, as a response to him.

Thus, what Howard Caygill naïvely ascribes to Heidegger's conception of the double concealment at the end of his essay *Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition*, would much more justly be ascribed to Benjamin's conception of the decay of the aura, namely that "the condition of politics is not the neutral space where the past, present and future are gathered, but one in which the gathering dissembles itself,

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44. Gasché readily admits that it is difficult to argue that Benjamin could have endorsed the radical destruction of the aura, "especially when the elimination of the singular human being's aura is shown to be a function of his transformation into a mass being" (184). Nevertheless, Gasché's essay explicitly attempts to argue that "Benjamin must reject both the aura of art objects and the one attributed to the human being" (185).

45. See page 100 and note 16 above.

46. Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire," *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.2: 646; *Illuminations* 188. The translation is Zohn's.

never seeking or attaining authenticity. It is one in which the opposition of authentic presence and inauthentic absence is suspended, one in which the scene itself, or 'clearing', is not 'a rigid stage' but is itself negotiable and continually in play."<sup>47</sup> Caygill is naïve about the possibilities of using Heidegger's conception of the double concealedness of being for a non-authoritarian politics because he fails to recognize how forcefully Heidegger himself puts the never-fully-opened concealedness in the service of a disturbing *Blut und Boden* political agenda. On the other hand, Caygill's critique of Benjamin is that the conception of the decay of the aura says nothing positive that would suggest the direction of a new politics after the destruction of tradition.<sup>48</sup> However, when read as a response to the kind of political position presented in Heidegger's essay, Benjamin's essay may be seen in a new light. The discussion of the decay of the aura is precisely an attempt to render the conditions of politics negotiable and continually in play and to undermine the drive to domination that is so often characteristic of politics. But further, when read as a response to the concrete political conditions with which Benjamin himself was faced, conditions which, in philosophical language, Heidegger's essay clearly epitomizes, a further dimension of a new politics is made manifest, namely, the importance of open critique. By uncovering and undermining the mysterious shroud in which fascist politics was wrapped, Benjamin was able to level a damning critique of the political forces operating in Europe in the mid-1930s. It is one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century that more people did not see through the aura of fascism in the 1930s; but this failure also stands as one of the most important lessons the century has had to teach.

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47. Howard Caygill, "Benjamin, Heidegger and the Destruction of Tradition," *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience* 30.

48. Caygill 29.