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Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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*The Truth of Art*  
*A Reflection starting from Hegel and Adorno*

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to focus on how the dialectical opposition of *Wahrheit* and *Unwahrheit* can be studied, both in Hegel and in Adorno, within the specific field of aesthetics. This not only to shed light on the Hegelian premises of Adorno's aesthetics, but also to try to read Hegel's aesthetics through an unusual perspective, as the Adornian one, which at once accepts and reverses its paradigms. Core of the comparison is the question of truth, vital for both philosophers' dialectics, as it is articulated, in a deep and abiding connection with its dialectical opposite, the untruth, in the philosophical consideration of aesthetic phenomena. In the first part I deepen how truth and untruth of art are understood by the two authors; in the second part I consider art as a rational way of expressing truth and explore both authors' interpretation of the relation between the aesthetic and the conceptual (or between art and philosophy); finally, in the third part I discuss the bond between art and socio-historical dimension in order to take into account both authors' critical question on art's possibilities within the present world.

## **1. Introduction**

The aim of my paper is to focus on how the dialectical opposition of truth (in German *Wahrheit*) and untruth (in German *Unwahrheit*) can be studied in parallel and in dialogue in two authors that made dialectics the core of their philosophy, Hegel and Adorno, within the specific field of aesthetics. I find this kind of study very interesting and fruitful not only to shed light on the Hegelian premises of Adorno's aesthetic thinking, but also to try to read Hegel's aesthetics through an unusual perspective, as the Adornian one is, which somehow accepts but at the same time reverses its paradigms.

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Core of the comparison is, then, the question of truth (vital for both philosophers as well as for the influence of the first on the second) as it is articulated, through a deep and abiding connection with the untruth, in the philosophical consideration of art and in general of aesthetic phenomena. Of course it would be impossible to exhaust this topic here, but I would like to trace some outlines dividing this paper in three main points: firstly, I will focus on how truth and untruth of art are understood by Hegel and Adorno; secondly, I will focus on art as a rational way of expressing truth and its relation with the concept; finally, I would like to take into account the bond between art and socio-historical dimension and, always following the two authors, I would like to say something about the critical question of art's possibilities in the present world.

## **2. The Truth Content of Art**

When we approach the two philosophers' reflection on art, which is mainly developed by Hegel in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* and by Adorno in his posthumous work *Aesthetic Theory*, as a first step we need to understand what they intend by what they call the truth content of art. What does it mean that art has a truth content, or that its content is somehow true, or even that it is a particular way of expressing the truth?

In Hegel's perspective, namely within his mostly systematic philosophy, art is considered as a mode of expression of the Spirit. This means that, for Hegel, even though art has to do with the sensible aspect of reality and of our experience of it, it is nevertheless a rational form of knowledge of the truth. Hegel's lectures, in fact, make it very clear that art is far more than just bare appearance, that artistic productions are more than just material objects, that artistic phenomena and cultural practices are more than just irrational attitudes towards reality. Rather, art – both in general and in its particular manifestations – is a unique and rational way of expressing the truth, which is capable of reconcile a true spiritual content with an intuitive and sensible form.

Now, what seems to be problematic in Hegel's conception of art is a sort of more or less explicit primacy of the spiritual rational content over the sensible material form of art itself. In his treatment of art, in fact, seems to emerge the idea that only the spiritual content represents the truth content of art, while its material sensible form is just a transitory moment of the

unfolding of truth – which, as known, will be overcome by the representation of religion and finally by the concept of philosophy. Art is then a very particular way of expressing the truth, because, in it, this very truth content coexists with an element of untruth and, almost paradoxically, it is expressed precisely through this latter.

It is in this sense that we can say that the Hegelian perspective points out the intrinsically dialectical nature – as noted, almost paradoxical, but this is what makes it interesting – of art: art is always entangled in the dialectic between truth and untruth because what makes art art, so what makes art a true form of expression of the truth, is at the same time that “residue” of untruth which always remains present in it. Art, so to say, expresses the truth by means of the untruth.

This dialectical/paradoxical character of art becomes very interesting in the eyes of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, which relies on his idea of negative dialectics. As already mentioned, Adorno’s perspective is at once influenced by the Hegelian one and critical of it. For Adorno, in fact, the truth of art relies on a delicate balance between the two contrasting impulses of *ratio* and *mimesis*. The rational impulse strives for identity and tends to distort the natural, immediate, sensible aspect of things, and this is in some way inevitable even in the process of art, namely in the process through which things are transformed in artworks, in the rational operation through which reality is transposed into art in order to express its content of truth. The mimetic impulse, on the other hand, is an impulse that art draws from our primordial comportment in front of natural beauty (we cannot elaborate on this here, but let me just remind that the question of natural beauty is one of the main points of Adorno’s critique of Hegel’s aesthetics).

So, being based on the dialectical tension between *ratio* and *mimesis*, art is for Adorno a particular mode of expression, which is capable of expressing the truth always preserving the aesthetic element (in the original literal sense of the *aisthesis* as sensible, perceptual, material) of our experience of things. Adorno’s perspective, in other words, relies on the idea that the truth of art consists in its being expression of what his negative dialectics defines as the non-identical. The sensible material element of untruth, which in Hegel’s account caused the art to be transitory, for Adorno represents by contrast the truth of art itself, enclosed exactly in what cannot be subsumed under the rational concept by the categories of identity. In this sense, for Adorno, thanks to its dialectical character, art could even be a better way of expression of



truth than philosophy – or, as Adorno would say to explain the very meaning of his aesthetic theory, even theory, even philosophy, needs to be aesthetic, needs to have a sort of artistic moment.

### **3. Art as a *Rational* Way of Expressing Truth**

This leads us to the second point, that is art as a rational form of expressing the truth, in analogy or in contrast with the concept, which of course is the rational form of expressing truth *par excellence*. An important point of convergence between Hegel and Adorno is the fact that both understand art and philosophy as two different ways of expressing the same content of truth. However, while in Hegel there is a sort of hierarchy, according to which philosophy is, so to say, “truer” than art, because of that residue of untruth in art that we have considered above, for Adorno, instead, there is no hierarchy between the two, rather they are mutually complementary: as well as art is moved by a rational impulse along with the mimetic one, equally philosophy must always involve an aesthetic or artistic moment. What changes is rather the medium: the artistic material in one case, the abstract concept in the other.

For Hegel, in fact, even though art is an essential moment in the process of the unfolding of truth, philosophy will always remain the best way to grasp and to express the truth content of the Spirit, because, as known, in Hegel’s perspective its higher expression can only be the conceptual one. For Adorno, instead, philosophy does not represent an overcoming of art. Rather, precisely because the aesthetic language of art is a non-conceptual language, a para-linguistic form of expression that does not need to turn things into abstract concepts, that does not need to hypostatise experiences in identifying categories, art is for Adorno able to redeem as well as to communicate the nonidentical element of things and experiences that philosophy – and especially the Hegelian idealistic philosophy of identity – tries to liquidate and indeed to conceal through the affirmation of the concept, relegating it within the realm of untruth.

As we have seen at the beginning, both Hegel and Adorno take as starting point of their aesthetics the fact that art is not just an irrational manifestation or a response to a barely irrational impulse. On the contrary, art is the very first form in which the human being tries to express a truth content in a rational way, because thanks to art we try to elaborate things, to give them sense and to translate them into new forms (like artworks, but also like artistic or

more generically cultural practices) in order to make them understandable and communicable. In this sense art is rational.

At the same time, however, both Hegel and Adorno recognise as an essential premise of aesthetics the fact that art can never refrain from a natural non-conceptual moment, so that in art will always be present also a non-rational residue. And both Hegel and Adorno insist on the fact that this latter is, after all, what distinguishes art from other forms of knowledge and communication of the truth.

Nevertheless, even if Hegel and Adorno both conceive art as a rational way of expressing the truth, in the end they come up with two different and almost opposed conclusions. For Hegel the truth of art (art which, let us remind it, is nothing less than the first form of the Absolute Spirit) comes from a first and at least partial removal of the natural residue of untruth, being art a first rational move towards higher modalities of expressing the truth content of the Spirit. For Adorno, on the contrary, the truth of art lies in its capacity not of removing, but instead of preserving that natural residue and to express it in an aesthetic artistic form, thing that the conceptual philosophical language is instead unable to do.

#### **4. The Truth of Art in the socio-historical Reality**

In the light of what has been said so far, we see that the comparison between Hegel and Adorno, despite the fact that they lived more than a century apart, can be very fruitful for the topic of the relation between art and truth in the framework of dialectical thought. In fact, it tackles key concepts and can disclose problems that today as in the past – or maybe today even more than in the past – concern the ultimate meaning of art (or of what we can more generically call the aesthetic) in human's life and critically discuss its purpose in the present world. So, in the last part of my paper, I would like to consider the crucial role, acknowledged by both authors, that the socio-historical dimension of art plays in the philosophical reflection on it.

A point of analogy between Hegel and Adorno that I find remarkable is the fact that both feel the urgency to reflect on the possibilities of art within the historical reality of their time. For both, the aesthetics as philosophical reflection starts from the need of questioning art in a time that is perceived as an era of crisis. It then becomes important to understand which is or which could or should be the validity and the role of art in a social and cultural environment

that exhibits deep fractures, contradictions, divisions, difficult to resolve issues, and that therefore demands to rethink our paradigms of interpretation of reality and our modalities of expression of the truth.

Both Hegel and Adorno realise that the dissonances and disharmonies of the world are reflected in the dissonances and disharmonies of art, bringing to light, both at the social and at the aesthetic level, new problems and questions with which philosophy has to deal. For Hegel the break point occurs with the beginning of modernity, which, as known, opens up fractures that the ideal art, the art of beauty and harmony of the Greeks, is no longer able to thematise. For Adorno, to the wounds opened by modernity, and actually never healed, we must now even add the atrocities of the twentieth century. By both, in any case, the present is seen, so to say, as a “post-” era, namely as a time in which something broke forever and we need to understand how to cope with what comes after. The question is then what role can art play towards this break and especially within present society.

What emerges from Hegel’s aesthetics is that in the modern era art assumes a whole range of characters which are no longer ideal. This, more or less directly, informs us on the fact that in the modern world the truth content is to be found in a new dimension, out of the realm of the aesthetic, because now it can only be expressed through other spiritual modalities, it can only find a fulfilling configuration in an-aesthetic forms. In this sense, art does not really end or die, rather, once again, the truth of art lies dialectically in its untruth. For Adorno it’s somehow the contrary: the darker and absurd art of the present describes precisely the untruth (which for Adorno always means the lack of reconciliation) of the present reality, giving an exasperated image of its unsolved contradictions. In this way art let us see *ex negativo* the truth of a reconciled world, which for now has no effective reality and therefore no image.

In other words, for Hegel art is overcome by anaesthetic forms, which are necessary to design a reconciled world. In this post-ideal world art does not actually die, but rather keeps on existing as a sort of evidence of the difficulty of making this reconciled world effectively and concretely real. This, I think, is the validity (so to say, the truth) of art after its metaphorical end. For Adorno the only remaining way to hope for reconciliation is what he calls an aesthetic “comportment” (*Verhalten*), namely that kind of attitude towards things that finds its model in art. As said, the aesthetic comportment is the one that also philosophy should assume and this is precisely what makes theory an aesthetic theory.

The aesthetic comportment is then necessary to face reality today if we believe in the possibility of a future – and for now only utopian – reconciliation. In the present capitalistic world, those tensions, that already Hegel described as what makes the modern individual alienated and divided in itself, for Adorno does not find resolution neither in art, in which they rather reproduce, nor beyond art, as Hegel wished. But still, for Adorno, those tensions find in the aesthetic realm, if not reconciliation, at least an eye-opening expression.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the contrasts, in both Hegel and Adorno the connection of art with historical reality is essential for its truth or untruth, on one hand because of the role that the present plays in determining forms and contents of art, and on the other because of the function that art assumes and puts into practice in the present, being this function not only a function of expression of the truth, but also a cultural, political, social, philosophical, critical function according to the context and the perspective that we take into account.

Moreover, we can say that both Hegel and Adorno detect, during their philosophical reflection on the truth of art, the fact that some turning points occur in history, in the wake of which some kind of changes of paradigm are needed. These changes do not necessarily imply an actual disappearing/death/end of art, but rather they point out that some kind of fundamental metamorphosis is for art unavoidable to maintain its validity within the present world. Also, for both Hegel and Adorno it is exactly in this context of challenge and questioning of art that becomes urgent a philosophical reflection on it, namely aesthetics or aesthetic theory in the sense that we have clarified.

To conclude, we can say that art never really finishes in a radical sense, but rather transforms itself, changes its meanings, reconsiders its functions and its purpose in the world. Neither for Hegel nor for Adorno art ends at some point integrally or definitively, and this, after all, is probably the best proof of its everlasting relevance in life for the humankind, which, after all, is in some sense nothing other than its truth.

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