

ON THE THEORY OF TRUTH IN ART: FROM HEIDEGGER TO GADAMER

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of truth in art through a dialogue between the later Heidegger's philosophy and Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. Heidegger understands art as "the setting-itself-to-work of truth," where truth is not propositional correctness but the dynamic interplay of revealing and concealing. His interpretation of Van Gogh's painting of shoes exemplifies this view, yet it was criticized by Meyer Schapiro for projecting a fictional peasant world onto the artwork. This critique raises a fundamental question: does Heidegger's theory collapse into subjective interpretation?

The article argues that this problem can be clarified through Gadamer's notion of understanding as a hermeneutic event. Drawing on the ideas of play and the fusion of horizons, it shows that interpretation is neither purely subjective nor strictly objective. Even when factually mistaken, an interpretation may still disclose ontological truth by allowing the being of the artwork to emerge. Truth in art thus appears not as fixed content, but as an event realized through interpretation.

Keywords: Heidegger, Gadamer, truth in art, hermeneutics, aesthetic experience

1. Preface: the question of truth in art

In 1935, Martin Heidegger delivered a lecture in Freiburg on the *Being* of the artwork. At the end of the following year, this lecture was expanded into a series of three talks given in Frankfurt. Heidegger later revised and compiled these talks into an article titled *The Origin of the Work of Art* (*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*), to which he also added a brief *Epilogue*. Both the article and the epilogue were included in his 1950 book *Off the Beaten Track* (*Holzwege*)¹. In 1956, Heidegger wrote an additional *Addendum* to clarify several frequently misunderstood concepts in the article. However, this appendix was not officially published until 1960, when *The Origin of the Work of Art* was released as a separate edition. The main text remained unchanged, but a new *Introduction* by his student Hans-Georg Gadamer was appended to help illuminate some of the key arguments. Incidentally, that same year, Gadamer published his magnum opus *Truth and Method* (*Wahrheit und Methode*), in which his reflections on the essence of art strongly resonate with Heidegger's account in *The Origin of the Work of Art*.

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¹ Heidegger, Martin. *GA5: Holzwege*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1997. (English translation: *Off the Beaten Track*. Ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Essentially, Heidegger approaches the question of the essence of art from a perspective that modern aesthetics has largely forgotten: the question of truth. This article centers on this issue. First, I will briefly introduce Heidegger's conception of truth in relation to art, supplemented by Gadamer's critique of subjectivist aesthetics. Secondly, I will examine Heidegger's famous interpretation of a painting by Van Gogh—an interpretation that has sparked considerable controversy—highlighting the interpretive challenges it presents. Finally, I will offer a possible way to address these difficulties, drawing on the resources of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.

2. Theory of truth in art: Heidegger and Gadamer on the essence of art

According to Heidegger, in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, the essence of art is, as he puts it, “the setting-itself-to-work of the truth of the entity” (*das Sich-ins-Werk-Setzen der Wahrheit des Seienden*). Now, this definition is brief and to the point, but it does require some unpacking.

Heidegger is still drawing here on the Greek word *aletheia*, as he did in *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*), to explain what he means by “truth” (*Wahrheit*). In this context, truth doesn't mean propositional truth (*Wahrheit des Satzes*) — that is, the correctness of a statement in relation to a fact. It's not about the agreement of our thoughts with a present-at-hand object, as in traditional epistemology. Instead, truth here means **un-concealment** (*Un-Verborgenheit*) — namely, the revealing of something that was hidden. So, Heidegger talks about “the truth of Being” (*Wahrheit des Seins*) and means the way an entity's Being becomes revealed — the entity is not just lying there as a static object, but shows what it is in a dynamic process (while also partially withdrawing itself). And in order to highlight this dynamic, he even goes so far as to say that the essence of truth is also “non-truth” (*Un-Wahrheit*). Why? Because as soon as an entity reveals its Being, it also begins to recede back into concealment. That's part of its nature.

Now, this movement of revealing and concealing at the same time is something Heidegger believes art can help us grasp. In this sense, we might rephrase his definition of the essence of art like this: **art is what allows the self-concealing Being of entities to become visible through the artwork**. And that means, importantly, that a work of art is not simply a representation of a fixed, present-at-hand thing. For Heidegger, art is not about imitation — it's not about copying a physical object accurately. Instead, it's about disclosing the Being of what truly is. The Being revealed in this way is not some abstract concept, not a general “species” or category. It is something concreter that speaks to us through the artwork. And that's why Heidegger says a man-made thing can only be called a **true work of art** if it discloses Being. Otherwise, it's just merely a tool or a piece of craftsmanship—something ready to hand and useful, perhaps, but not something as a work-being (*Werksein*).

As a *work-being*, a true artwork should possess two fundamental characteristics. These two traits are closely related but also, in a sense, opposed to each other. Heidegger calls them the “**setting up of a world**” (*Aufstellen einer Welt*) and the “**setting**

forth of earth” (*Herstellen der Erde*). Now, what does Heidegger mean by *world* in this context? He’s not talking about the universe or our physical environment. Rather, *world* refers to a particular state of **openness** (*Offenheit*) — an open place where things unfold with human historical-cultural horizons. The *world* carries everything that is disclosed through the work of art — all the relations, the meanings, the significance of the entity shown in the artwork. On the other hand, *earth* refers to something quite different — it’s about **closedness** (*Verschlossenheit*) or what Heidegger calls a state of **self-ignorance** (*Sich-nicht-kennen*). Earth is the withdrawn part of Being that always resists full disclosure. It’s the mysterious depth that remains hidden even as the artwork shows something. Heidegger uses this pair — *world* and *earth* — to explain how entities as a whole are both **revealed and concealed** at the same time in a work of art. There’s a constant tension here. The *world* emerges *from* the earth and tries to articulate everything from the earth — it doesn’t want anything to remain hidden. And yet, the *earth*, while it supports the world from beneath, resists being fully disclosed — it draws eagerly the world back into hiddenness. This tension — Heidegger calls it **conflict** (*Streit*) — between the self-revealing *world* and the self-concealing *earth*, is the very manifestation of the **essence of truth**.

Now, Heidegger says this conflict is something we encounter every day on an ontic level — that is, in our everyday dealings with things ready to hand. But we rarely grasp it **ontologically**, as a fundamental structure of Being itself. And this is precisely where art plays a special role. In the artwork, this conflict becomes clearly **visible**. So, when a work of art *sets forth* the earth and *sets up* a world, it lets audience encounter the Being of what in it presents. At that very moment, the artwork isn’t merely a tool to show us something — it **becomes** what Heidegger calls a *work-being*. And it realizes itself only by holding open this tension between concealment and disclosure.

In the “*Epilogue*” to *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger explicitly identifies Hegel as the main target of his critique. He cites three key statements from Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*), using them to sum up what has become known as Hegel’s famous “thesis of the end of art” (*These vom Ende der Kunst*). According to Heidegger, **art is for Hegel no longer a primary and necessary way in which truth occurs**. And the reason lies in Hegel’s adherence to the **traditional conception of truth** — that is, the propositional truth. In this regard, truth is understood by Hegel as the correctness of a statement, as something that belongs strictly to the realm of cognition — or, in modern terms, to science. Since art belongs to the realm of the beautiful or the good, and not to that of cognitive knowledge, it cannot, from this perspective, deliver any objective truth. Instead, it is merely a medium for *subjective lived experience* (*Erlebnis*). As a result, Hegel sees art as something that no longer participates in truth in any essential way. And this, Heidegger suggests, is the true meaning of the “end of art.” It doesn’t mean that artworks are no longer being made, or that we no longer encounter them. On the contrary, artworks still confront us and we still experience them. But they no longer function as they once did.

They no longer open up a world in which truth happens. Instead, now art belongs to the realm of private feeling and aesthetic taste. In short, **art dies in the hands of subjective experience**. That, for Heidegger, is the ultimate consequence of Hegel's position — and the fate of art in the modern age.

Gadamer does not fully agree with Heidegger's interpretation of Hegel's thesis of the end of art. In Gadamer's view, what Hegel actually meant was something more modest — more like the “outdatedness of art” (*Vergangenheit der Kunst*), not its complete termination. But this difference didn't prevent Gadamer from recognizing the deeper insight behind Heidegger's critique. What Heidegger saw — and what Gadamer affirms — is that **the modern aesthetic model for understanding art is rooted in a metaphysical tradition** where the human faculties of cognition, emotion, and will are treated as fundamentally separate. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer calls this modern approach of aesthetics as the “**subjectivization of aesthetics**”, and traces it primarily back to Kant. In the *Critique of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilkraft*), Kant famously defines aesthetic taste (*Geschmack*) both as “**pleasure without interest**” (*Wohlgefallen ohne Interesse*) — i.e., pleasure that is not tied to any practical utility — and also as “**pleasure without a concept**” (*Wohlgefallen ohne Begriff*). Kant argues that judgments of aesthetic taste, even though they are based in subjective experience, still make a **universal claim**, and what is at stake here is “*subjective universality*” (*subjektive Allgemeinheit*). This means that even though aesthetic judgments aren't based on concepts, they still expect agreement. We expect others to see what we see as beautiful. What we experience in a work of art — whether it is the artist's genius or the viewer's taste — cannot be reduced to the application of concepts, rules, or standards. The “beautiful” is no longer defined by the cognitive property of an object. Rather, it must **prove itself through something subjective** — through the feeling of pleasure that arises when **imagination and understanding** are in free harmony. So, when we encounter the beauty of nature or art, what we experience is not knowledge, but a **judgment of taste**, formed through the *free play* of our mental faculties. And although such judgments are not cognitive in the strict sense, **they are not arbitrary either**. There is a universal claim embedded in them. And it is precisely this claim that forms the **basis of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere** in modern thought.

Gadamer points out that, the interpretation of art has come to be mastered by a relatively new philosophical discipline — **aesthetics** — and this modern discipline, in turn, is defined by the idea of **aesthetic lived experience**. This form of experience is seen as having no direct connection to either knowledge or morality. In this view, something is considered a work of art **not because of its objective properties**, but because it evokes in us a certain **subjective feeling**, something hidden deep within us and hard to explain in concepts. This is what is referred to as “*aesthetic experience*”. According to this **modern aesthetic model**, all artistic creation begins from the

subjective experience of the artist. The artist gives form to a material, shaping it into a **symbolic medium** that conveys and represents that original experience. Then, when another person — the audience — encounters the artwork, the hope is that **this same experience will be reawakened** in them, guided by the form of the artwork. In this way, art becomes a kind of communication of inner feeling between two subjects, mediated by a physical object. This conception of art, especially prominent in the 19th century with the rise of **irrationalism and the cult of artistic genius**, eventually became the **dominant modern view of art in the West**. Gadamer refers to this as **“lived-experiential art”** (*Erlebniskunst*) — and he criticizes it sharply, because the artwork is reduced to a kind of **“experience stimulator”** — an external object whose only function is to trigger a certain emotional or psychological state in us. But if that’s all that art is, then we lose any clear standard for distinguishing between **art and non-art**. Any man-made object might count as art — or might not — depending entirely on whether we happen to have the same aesthetic experience when we encounter it. However, this leads us into **aesthetic arbitrariness**. Ultimately, the **subjectivization of aesthetics paves the way to aesthetic nihilism** and thus denies art its own autonomy. And that, Gadamer suggests, is the true “end of art.”

Therefore, Gadamer strongly criticizes Kant for **completely separating beauty from truth**, and does so in order to **recover the original cognitive meaning of taste**. To make this point, Gadamer rejects the **subjectivization of aesthetics** as a product of what he calls **“aesthetic consciousness”** (*ästhetisches Bewußtsein*). Aesthetic consciousness treats the form of an artwork — e.g. its shape, its structure, etc. — as entirely distinct from its content. It acknowledges only the form as the proper object of aesthetic appreciation. As a result, the artwork becomes **just a shell**, an empty form designed to evoke pleasant feeling. And its content, which may be related to the truth, is not taken into account. But for Gadamer, this is a profound mistake. He argues in *Truth and Method* that a work of art doesn’t only bring us pleasure, but also **truth**. There, he raises the fundamental question of the **validity of artistic truth**, and in doing so, he **echoes Heidegger’s idea** that art is a site where truth *happens*. In this conception, beauty and truth are no longer two separate domains — they are **not** things that can be split apart at will by a subject’s consciousness. Accordingly, a work of art can no longer be understood simply as a **cultural achievement**, or as a **manifestation of the human spirit**. Because if we do this again, we will once again reduce art to a subjective activity and fall into the trap of the philosophy of consciousness. In doing so, we would **miss what art actually reveals: the truth of Being**.

Heidegger’s interpretation of Van Gogh’s artwork: the peasant woman’s shoes and her Being-in-the-world

In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger argues that the **work-being** of an artwork lies in its capacity to let us grasp the **Being of an entity** which comes into

presence through the **conflict between earth and world**. To make his theory of art more concrete and persuasive, Heidegger offers several specific examples of artworks in the essay. Among these, the most famous is his interpretation of a painting by **Vincent van Gogh**. What do we see in the painting? Simply a **tool** (*Zeug*) — to be more precise, **a pair of worn leather shoes**. Heidegger doesn't actually specify which painting he's referring to. But according to Heidegger, the shoes in the painting are a pair of peasant shoes, and Van Gogh had painted them several times.

We undoubtedly already have a certain **pre-understanding** of what shoes are — we know them as **tools**. Tools are made for practical use, and they're typically designed according to a structural pattern: **form plus material**. Of course, materials and forms vary depending on the purpose of the tool — but the essence of a tool, namely its *tool-being* (*Zeugsein*), is grounded in its **usefulness** (*Dienlichkeit*): its capacity to help us achieve something. However, Heidegger insists that this concept of usefulness is **not enough** to explain the full truth of what a tool is. Back in *Being and Time*, Heidegger already pointed out that tools are not simply *objects present-at-hand* (*vorhanden*), but **ready-to-hand** (*zuhanden*). In fact, the more frequently and fluently we use them, the less we consciously notice them — and thus the more authentically they fulfill their essence. In our everyday activity, we **don't stare at** the tools we use. We just use them. A hammer, a pen, a pair of shoes — they seem to disappear into the flow of our activity. Only **when a tool breaks, is damaged or dysfunctional**, it becomes **unusable** (*unverwendbar*) for us, and suddenly appears before us as an object of concern, so that we have to set it aside. But even in that moment, it hasn't completely lost its readiness-to-hand, because it still belongs to a broader **context of equipment** — the totality of tools (*Zeugganzheit*) — that remains in the background of our understanding. In short, there are still a certain aspect of tool-being that cannot be explained by usefulness. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger goes one step further. Using the example of **the peasant shoes** in Van Gogh's painting, he suggests that usefulness actually depends on something **more fundamental**: our **tacit trust** in the tool's perfect functioning. He calls this underlying condition **reliability** (*Verlässlichkeit*). It is this reliability that allows the tool to quietly serve its purpose. In this reliability, the tool also connects all related entities and activities, thereby revealing a world presented by the tool as a whole. Therefore, if we want to truly grasp the **truth of tool-being**, we must not only recognize the tool's usefulness, but also uncover both the **reliability** that sustains it and the **world** that shows itself through the totality of tools.

Thus, Heidegger's interpretation of the Van Gogh painting begins with an account of the shoes in terms of their practical usefulness, as follows:

“The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field. Only then do they become what they are. They are all the more genuinely so, the less the peasant woman thinks of her shoes while she is working, or even looks at them, or is aware of them in any way at all.

This is how the shoes actually serve. It must be in this process of the usage that the equipmentality of the equipment actually confronts us.

But on the contrary, as long as we only imagine a pair of shoes in general, or merely look at the shoes as they stand there in the picture, empty and unused, we will never learn what the equipmental being of the equipment in truth is. From van Gogh's painting we cannot even tell where these shoes are. There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes to which and within which they could belong; only an undefined space. Not even clods of earth from the field or from the country path stick to them, which could at least point toward their use. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more." (*Off the Beaten Track*, 13-14)

As mentioned earlier, such kind of explanation for tool-being as usefulness remains insufficient. Heidegger therefore proceeds to offer a now-famous — and perhaps the most frequently cited — **phenomenological description** of the shoes. Through this evocative passage, we begin to see how the *tool-being* of the peasant woman's shoes brings forth an entire world — the world she inhabits, lives through, and labors within. He goes on to write:

"From out of the dark opening of the well-worn insides of the shoes the toil of the worker's tread stares forth. In the crudely solid heaviness of the shoes accumulates the tenacity of the slow trudge through the far-stretching and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. The shoes vibrate the silent call of the earth, its silent gift of the ripening grain, its unexplained self-refusal in the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, wordless joy at having once more withstood want, trembling before the impending birth, and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth* and finds protection in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself." (*Off the Beaten Track*, 14)

Through Heidegger's description, the **whole relational structure of meaning** (*Bedeutsamkeit*) that is connected together by the *tool-being* of the peasant shoes, seems come alive on the page. We can almost **see with our own eyes** the peasant woman wearing those shoes — and with her, the world where she inhabits, cares about, and orientates herself in everyday life. But be aware that: this world is **not** a mere collection of *things in a physical space*, not a sum total of *res extensa*, as Descartes might put it. Instead, it is an **openness** — a clearing (*Lichtung*) — revealed by human *Dasein*, a **being-in-the-world** (*In-der-Welt-sein*) accompanied by a particular **state of mind** (*Befindlichkeit*) with understanding (*Verstehen*). And this *state of mind* is not simply a private, internal feeling. It is a **basic mood** (*Grundstimmung*) which shapes how the being-in-the-world relates to everything it encounters. In this case, it is the mood that arises through the peasant woman's everyday dealings with her tools, her

work, and her environment. The shoes, then, are **woven into the unfolding of her life** — into birth and death, joy and sorrow, exhaustion and perseverance. And yet, they do so **silently**, i.e. without calling attention to themselves. It is because they are so **reliable**, that they **disappear into her activity**, even as they **carry her through life**.

In short, the shoes in Van Gogh's paintings reveal the world of the peasant woman because of their usefulness on the one hand, and on the other hand, through their **reliability**, quietly **retreat** into the **concealment of the earth**. And it is precisely in this **conflict** between world and earth, in this tension between revealing and concealing, that we can truly grasp the **truth of tool-being**. **Now, just as we grasp the tool-being of the shoes, we also clearly understand the work-being of the artwork:** the setting-itself-to-work of the truth of the entity.

3. Schapiro's criticism: Van Gogh's shoes and Heidegger's subjective interpretation

Heidegger's poetic description of Van Gogh's painting has drawn a great deal of attention, because he captures, in a striking way, **how truth happens in a work of art**. But this also leads to an interesting consequence: **almost no one goes on to ask** a very important follow-up question: **Does Heidegger's explanation of art in *The Origin of the Work of Art* truly succeed in avoiding the problem of the subjectivization of art?** Many people are so content with Heidegger's insights that they never ask this question. Strangely enough, this question only began to surface later, and indirectly through a **seemingly unrelated** question: To whom do the shoes in Van Gogh's painting actually belong?

Since Heidegger **never specified** which painting by Van Gogh he was referring to in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, this naturally aroused the curiosity of the American art historian **Meyer Schapiro**. Drawing on the catalog of Van Gogh's works compiled by **Jacob Baart de la Faille**, Schapiro pointed out that, during the time when Heidegger was writing his essay, there were **eight paintings** of shoes by Van Gogh that were **publicly** exhibited. However, only **three of them** matched Heidegger's description — in particular, the phrase **"the dark opening of the well-worn insides."** These are Van Gogh's works **No. 255, 332, and 333**, all of which were painted in **Paris between 1886 and 1887**. According to historical records, Van Gogh painted shoes most frequently during his Paris period, and this was likely because he **owned three pairs of shoes himself**, which he used for painting practice. Based on this, Schapiro argued that the shoes in those three paintings were **not peasant shoes at all**, but rather **Van Gogh's own urban footwear**. In other words, the shoes that Heidegger so vividly described as belonging to a peasant woman were, in all likelihood, **Van Gogh's own shoes**, worn in the streets and **not in the fields**. Schapiro even wrote directly to Heidegger to ask **which painting** he had in mind when writing the essay. In his reply, dated **May 6, 1965**, Heidegger stated that he had seen the painting

in **Amsterdam in March of 1930**. Using this information, Schapiro further concluded that Heidegger must have been referring to **Van Gogh's work No. 255**. And indeed, if you look at that painting, you'll see a pair of **worn leather half-boots**, with the shoelaces loosely hanging off the edges. The shaft of one shoe bends outward, clearly revealing — in Heidegger's words — “**the dark opening of the well-worn insides**.” Since then, this painting has also been regarded by many scholars as what Heidegger meant in his article.

Since the shoes in the painting most likely belonged to **Van Gogh himself**, Schapiro used this discovery to **launch a pointed critique** of Heidegger's interpretation. He made **two main criticisms**. **First**, Schapiro argued that although Heidegger's description of the peasant woman, her world, and the earth is poetic and even moving, it has **nothing to do** with the actual shoes depicted in the painting. According to Schapiro, Heidegger's interpretation is based not on the artwork itself, but on **his own imaginative projection**. In other words, Heidegger was simply reading **his own associations** into the painting — projecting a romantic image of countrified life onto a pair of **urban, well-worn shoes** that likely belonged to Van Gogh himself. If that's the case, Schapiro asked, then why do we even need a painting at all? We could just look at any old pair of peasant shoes and trigger the same associations. Then, there would be **no need to invoke** such Heideggerian “metaphysical power of art” at all. **Second**, Schapiro criticized Heidegger for **ignoring the personal and historical dimension** of artistic creation. He pointed out that artists — especially someone as emotionally intense and eccentric as Van Gogh — often choose objects that carry **deep personal significance**. In Van Gogh's case, choosing to paint **his own worn-out shoes** was not a neutral act. It likely expressed something about **his identity**, his journey as an artist, in short, about his biography. Later in 1994, Schapiro cited evidence and showed that “**the dark opening of the well-worn insides**” of the shoes was caused by Van Gogh walking long distances from the Netherlands to Belgium. That detail gives Van Gogh's painting a **biographical meaning**. But Heidegger, Schapiro argued, overlooks all of this. He treats the artwork as if it conveys some universal truth in a **completely impersonal, metaphysical manner**, disconnected from the artist's life and intention.

The Dutch-born American philosopher **Joseph Kockelmans** believes that **Meyer Schapiro completely misses the point** of Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh. According to Kockelmans, Heidegger wasn't trying to describe **the world of a peasant woman**, as Schapiro assumes. What Heidegger was really concerned with was something much more fundamental — **the tool-being of tools**. However, Kockelmans then goes on to make a rather interesting claim. He suggests that when Heidegger offers his **hermeneutic-phenomenological description** of the peasant woman's world, he must have had **more than one** of Van Gogh's paintings in mind — or perhaps more precisely, he **wasn't interpreting Van Gogh at all**. Instead, Heidegger was

describing **a real pair of peasant shoes, namely** the kind worn by rural women working in the fields of southern Germany. In other words, Heidegger wasn't responding to the **visible content of a specific painting**, but rather using any artwork as a springboard to speak about the **essence of tool-being** as it appears in lived experience. But here's where things get complicated. Kockelmans' defense of Heidegger, though well-intentioned, ends up **exposing a hermeneutical problem** at the heart of Heidegger's theory of truth in art. That is: even if Heidegger's interpretation aims to reveal the *Being* of entities in the dynamic tension between **world and earth through artwork**, the shoes he describes in his article are **clearly not** the same shoes that we actually see in Van Gogh's painting. In fact, Heidegger himself later privately admitted that the description he gave in *The Origin of the Work of Art* was based on **a memory** of a peasant woman from his **hometown of Meßkirch** and that woman was **his mother**. So, what does this mean? Essentially, Heidegger took the opportunity to **transfer his own imagined world** of the peasant woman from his youth onto the shoes depicted in Van Gogh's painting. But in doing so, Heidegger would arguably **fall into the very trap he was trying to avoid**. Now, his method of interpretation starts to resemble the **modern aesthetic theory** he himself had criticized, because it also treats the artwork as a kind of "experience stimulator" *which* meant to **evoke subjective experiences** in the mind of another viewer.

However, **this does not mean** that Heidegger's theory of truth in art is entirely untenable. In fact, his **ontological insight** that works of art enable us to grasp the **mutual belonging of** self-revealing and the self-concealing in relation to the Being of entities, remains **profoundly compelling**. What we must do, then, is **not to dismiss** Heidegger's interpretation outright, but rather to ask: **How can we make sense of his seemingly subjective interpretation within the framework** of a theory that claims to reveal ontological truth? This brings us to a difficult — but essential — question: **Can a theory of truth in art ever truly avoid subjectivism, if every interpretation inevitably arises from within the interpreter's own world?**

A Gadamerian defense: collaboration between personal imagination and ontological understanding

To address this problem, let us return to **our own experience of encountering** Van Gogh's painting, **No. 255**. At first glance, if we treat the painting **merely as an artifact**, it tells us very little about the *Being* of what it depicts. At most, it may offer us a moment of **visual pleasure**. But something changes **when we try to understand what this painting is about**. In that moment, the painting begins to **speak to us**. The first thing we recognize is that the entity depicted in the painting is **a pair of shoes**. This recognition already shows that our **pre-understanding structure** is at work — otherwise, we wouldn't even know what we're looking at. We also realize that this is a **still life painting**, a genre that typically portrays **real, everyday objects**. As for whom the shoes belonged to in real life — that remains unclear, and perhaps even

irrelevant for most of us. What matters more here is this: as we examine the **specific features** of the shoes (e.g. their worn leather, color, posture, etc.), these visual details **call up our own experience** with similar things in the past. These associations begin to **build a world** around the shoes. It is through this **process of understanding** that the painting comes to life. And it is at this moment that the *Being* of the shoes — their **tool-being** — is revealed. Along with it comes the world of the person who wears them, walks in them, depended on them for life. As Heidegger wrote, we can see the “**slow trudge**” and the “**tenacity**” of the wearer **from the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes**. We can also sense the unspoken **trust** the person had in her or his usage of these shoes which carried her/him forward day by day. Thus, that *reliability of the usefulness* is made visible in the world of the painting. And in this sense, it really **doesn't matter whose shoes they were**, because our understanding of **shoe-being** is not affected by the lack of any biographical information concerning them. But what **does matter** is **what kind of shoes they are**. Shoes that reveal labor, wear, and endurance, indeed **open up a world of their wearer**. But different types of shoes open up different worlds.

In a **still life painting** that depicts **peasant shoes**, the *Being* of those shoes will naturally be revealed **alongside the world of a peasant woman — or a peasant**. We would not, for example, see the world of a **geisha** in such a painting. The world that emerges is intimately tied to the *kind* of shoes being shown. Now, Van Gogh lived in **Nuenen, the Netherlands**, between 1883 and 1885, and during that time he produced many paintings of **peasant life**. So, **he undoubtedly knew what peasant shoes looked like**. If we look closely at the peasant women Van Gogh painted during this period, e.g. **his work No. 147 and 95a**, we'll notice that they typically wore **traditional Dutch wooden shoes**, but not leather shoes. And so, in this case, **Schapiro is right**: the leather shoes depicted in Van Gogh's work No. 255 are **not peasant shoes**. But even if they are not peasant shoes, we are still able to **reveal a world** around them. And the key point here is: the wearer of these leather shoes may now appear to us not as a peasant woman, but perhaps as an **anonymous traveler**, a **wandering pilgrim**, or even **Van Gogh himself**. In any of these cases, the **picture world** that comes alive in our imagination is no longer the world of the peasant woman, but rather the world of a **long-distance walker**. The mistake Heidegger made was to **insist too quickly** that the shoes belonged to a peasant woman. This led him to a **misguided interpretation** — at least from the perspective of art historical accuracy. **However**, that mistake did **not** prevent him from grasping what he was ultimately aiming at: the **truth of the shoes as tools** — the *tool-being* — that emerges through the artwork. In this light, the **essence of art**, as Heidegger put it, is still valid: it is “*the setting-itself-to-work of the truth of the entity.*” And so, our challenge here is to explain why Heidegger's subjective misinterpretation does not invalidate his theory of truth in art.

Gadamer, as I mentioned earlier, **inherits** Heidegger's theory of truth in art. But there are still subtle differences between the two philosophers. Through his own project of **philosophical hermeneutics**, Gadamer offers a way to **account for Heidegger's subjective misinterpretation** — not by rejecting it, but by grounding it in human **experience of understanding**. One of Gadamer's famous arguments is to regard the Being of the artwork as “play” (Spiel). What is essential about play is that, although it requires players to be enacted, **it's not something the players can fully control**. The play has a movement of its own. **The artwork “plays” with us in this way:** on the one hand, it addresses us, engages us, draws us in through its *presentation*; on the other hand, it **absorbs all our experiences** into its presentation — whether we're the artist or the viewer. Therefore, in the case of painting, the artwork is not a fixed object detached from the act of viewing, but something that comes into Being *in* the event of presentation. In that event, the players — the viewers — inevitably bring their **own personal perspectives** and experiences into their understanding of that artwork, so that the Being of the artwork always bear the player's personal imprints. That means: it is impossible for us to appreciate a work of art “purely” without any personal emotions and cognition. In short, every encounter with art is, from the beginning, **a personal interpretation**, not an impersonal reconstruction of the artist's original context or intention. This is not a weakness, but the ontological condition for understanding. When we engage with a work of art, we are **following the artwork's guidance**, as well as **bringing ourselves into it**. And through this interaction, we may arrive at what Gadamer calls a “**fusion of horizons**” (*Horizontverschmelzung*): a moment in which the world of the artwork and the world of the viewer come together. This means that the *Being* of the artwork **opens a space for imaginative freedom** — a space where different viewers can interpret the same painting differently, and often **with good reason**. This is because such interpretive differences are only **ontic**, not ontological. Even if a particular ontic interpretation — say, Heidegger's claim that the shoes belong to a peasant woman — turns out to be *factually incorrect*, it does **not necessarily undermine** the ontological truth that his interpretation reveals — *as long as* it still allows us to grasp the *Being* of the entity depicted.

In his book *The Relevance of the Beautiful* (*Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest*)², Gadamer offers a compelling example drawn from Dostoevsky's famous novel *The Brothers Karamazov* to show that there is **no inherent contradiction** between the **experience of truth** and the **diversity of artistic interpretation**. The scene Gadamer refers to comes from Chapter 7 of Book V of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which recounts an incident involving Smerdyakov, a

² Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Die Aktualität des Schönen*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977. (English translation in: *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Trans. by Nicholas Walker, ed. by Robert Bernasconi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.)

servant in the Karamazov household who also suffers from epilepsy. As Gadamer puts it:

There is the staircase that Smerdyakov supposedly falls down. This is described in some way by Dostoyevsky. This means that I know exactly what this staircase looks like. I know how it begins, then it gets dark, and then it goes to the left. This is obvious to me, and yet I know that no one else "sees" the staircase the way I do. And yet everyone who allows this masterly narrative to work on them will "see" the staircase exactly and be convinced that they see it as it is. This is the freedom that the poetic word allows in this case and which we fill by following the linguistic evocation of the narrator. It is similar in the visual arts. (*The Relevance of the Beautiful*, 27)

To better understand Gadamer's argument, let us turn directly to the passage from the novel:

Smerdyakov went to the cellar for something and fell down from the top of the steps. Fortunately, Marfa Ignatyevna was in the yard and heard him in time. She did not see the fall, but heard his scream – the strange, peculiar scream, long familiar to her – the scream of the epileptic falling in a fit. They could not tell whether the fit had come on him at the moment he was descending the steps, so that he must have fallen unconscious, or whether it was the fall and the shock that had caused the fit in Smerdyakov, who was known to be liable to them. They found him at the bottom of the cellar steps, writhing in convulsions and foaming at the mouth. It was thought at first that he must have broken something – an arm or a leg – and hurt himself, but "God had preserved him," as Marfa Ignatyevna expressed it – nothing of the kind had happened. But it was difficult to get him out of the cellar. (*The Brothers Karamazov*, 332)³

As we read this passage and enter the world depicted in the novel, a picture simultaneously forms in our minds: how Smerdyakov falls from a narrow staircase into a dark basement, then lies on the floor, convulsing and foaming at the mouth. The picture we each imagine will certainly differ, but at least we won't imagine Smerdyakov falling down the stairs of a spacious hall, because such an image is "unrealistic" or unconvincing.

Now, the reason why we arrive at **different ontic interpretations** of an entity is simple: our interpretations of an artwork are always shaped — to some degree — by **personal imagination**. But if we want to understand the *Being* of that entity in the artwork, we **must** begin with an ontic interpretation. In other words, to approach the entity **ontologically**, we must first engage it **ontically**. Of course, our ontic interpretations may sometimes be **inadequate**, or even **mistaken**. But this is not an irreparable failure, but part of the process of achieving understanding. The misinterpretation can be overcome, or at least refined, through an ongoing **dialogue with the artwork's horizon**. It is the hermeneutic circle that allows the work to

³ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *The Brothers Karamazov*. Trans. by Constance Garnett. New York: Random House, 1950.

“speak back” to us over time. Once we understand that **artistic experience** is not a matter of choosing between subjectivity and objectivity, but is instead the **result of a continuous interplay** between **personal imagination** and **ontological understanding**, then the difficulty we raised earlier — the potential contradiction in Heidegger’s theory of truth in art — no longer appears as a problem, but rather as **the very condition of truth’s happening** in art.

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