

# COLLISION

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Aesthetics After Hegel

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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## ABSTRACT

While recent aesthetic theory has put forth considerable effort to make sense of Hegel's provocative claim that art has come to an end in the modern era, it devotes relatively little attention to the various ways in which art might continue to play an affirmative, even redemptive, role in disclosing the basic normative structures of a particular way of life. Whether we condone or condemn the so-called "end of art" thesis will turn, I argue, on the more basic question of what Hegel takes to be the primary task of modern art. Focusing specifically on Hegel's analysis of Dutch genre painting in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, I argue that Hegel regards modern art, not as a failure to convey the deepest interests of a culture or society, but as a welcome liberation of art in which it comes to reflect the diversity and complexity of human experience.

## KEYWORDS

Hegel, end of art, modern art, Dutch painting, everyday

# The "Death of Art" and the "Sunday of Life": Hegel on the Fate of Modern Art

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The caricature of Hegel as an enemy of modern art persists even today. It is rooted in his ambiguous but highly contentious claim that, for us moderns, art "is and remains for us a thing of the past."<sup>1</sup> Art — *in its highest vocation* — offers human consciousness a glimpse of reality in its full disclosure, what he calls "Absolute Knowing."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Hegel appears to revoke this privilege with the further claim that art fulfilled this vocation in classical Greek sculpture. With the subsequent rise of the modern, or "romantic," arts, art cedes its vocation to "higher" forms of self-expression, religion and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> On account of the allegedly downgraded status of modern art, modern aesthetic theory has made Hegel out to be indifferent, or even hostile, to the continued philosophical significance of art.<sup>4</sup> One recent scholar, for example, describes Hegel's *Aesthetics* as "a gigantic war-machine directed against aesthetics in general."<sup>5</sup>

There are several reasons to question the common trope that portrays Hegel as an enemy of modern art. To begin with, it contradicts his obviously deep reverence for the works of Shakespeare, Cervantes,

Goethe, Rembrandt, Van Eyck, and countless other post-classical artworks presumed to be “dead” on his view. *Something* was clearly very much alive in romantic art that warranted Hegel’s rather extensive analysis of it in the *Aesthetics*; it is this *something* that concerns me here. For even if art is in some sense “a thing of the past” for us, it is an altogether different, and I think more philosophically productive, question to ask: What becomes of art once it has fulfilled its highest vocation?

More importantly, the standard view of Hegel overlooks the potentially positive, reconciliatory significance of art’s coming to terms with its own limits.<sup>6</sup> Whatever else an artwork may be, for Hegel, it is inherently *affirmative*, in which case we should expect art to maintain some deeply redeeming character even well after its purported demise. My strategy here, then, is to sidestep the intensely disputed terrain concerning the meaning of Hegel’s so-called “end of art” thesis and to focus instead on the potential *value* of modern art for Hegel. The latter inquiry, I believe, will in turn shed new light on the former. In particular, I argue that Hegel’s rich analysis of Dutch genre painting in the *Aesthetics* breathes new life into the diminished hope for an affirmation and celebration of everyday life in modern aesthetic theory.

## • The End of Art •

However we interpret the “end of art” doctrine in Hegel, it decidedly does *not* mean that art ceases as a practice. It is a basic empirical fact that art persists in the romantic era, and Hegel, a devoted patron of the arts, was keenly aware of this.<sup>7</sup> Art carries on, but unlike the art of antiquity, romantic art doesn’t *mean* to us what classical art did to the Greeks. The highest vocation of art — revealing the inner depths of the human spirit — reached its zenith in Myron and Praxiteles, never to return again. So if art is no longer the appearance of the *ideal* of beauty, we must ask: What significance, if any, does modern art have? What does art *do* for us, after it has ended?

Hegel’s more pessimistic critics take him to be downgrading all art that fails to fulfill the lofty purposes of classical art. But here we must guard against the oversimplified view that Hegel simply rings the death

knell for modern art in the name of an unchecked classicist bias. The point is not that romantic art has lost its significance altogether, but that it has lost its significance as something *divine*. True, “we bow the knee no longer” before the work of art, but this hardly warrants the controversy it has elicited.<sup>8</sup> We simply do not experience the work of art, past or present, as an object of religious veneration. Far more contentious than the claim that art has lost this significance for us, it seems, is the claim that it ever had this sanctified status at all. If ever a god were seen in the *Torso of Apollo*, now we find only a beautiful figure in marble; works of art no longer have that kind of normative pull on us.

This narrative is affirmed by the fact that we do not look to Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings or the poetry of Charles Simic for substantive answers about what we should do, who we should be, and what we should believe. Even the grandest conceits of modern art fall well short of offering a cosmology or comprehensive mythology for modern life. Seen in this light, Hegel’s view of art’s fate simply gives philosophical stilts to the implicit recognition that art plays a very different role in modernity. Indeed, if the “death of art” entails that we need not invest ourselves in the moral authority of Jeff Koons or Matthew Barney, then perhaps we have little reason to grieve the end of art after all.

## • The Liberation of Art •

Moreover, even as Hegel laments the breakdown of normative unity in the modern era, he sees the consequent loss of art’s religious function as *liberating* for the continued pursuit of art:

Art strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes *Humanus* its new holy of holies: i.e., the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates.<sup>9</sup>

Divested of its mythological significance, art is free to explore the rich particularity of human existence — the *Humanus* — in all its complexity. Indeed, Hegel’s insistence on the positive aesthetic value of art’s transition to secular humanism is in my view the real strength of his theory. Rather than staking the continued relevance of art on the romantic prospect of reviving a Golden Age of art, Hegel locates the vitality of modern art in its

celebration of the commonplace. With the breakdown of Greek cosmopolitanism, individual subjectivity emerges and manifests in scenes of everyday life in romantic art: a milkmaid laboring, a peasant wedding, or a mother nursing her sick child. Post-classical art reflects the transition in the subject matter of art, from social agency within the *polis* to the inner life of modern individual subjectivity. Inner subjectivity, or “inwardness [*Innerlichkeit*],” becomes both “the fundamental principle of romantic art” as well as its principal content.<sup>10</sup> The “willing and self-knowing subject” becomes the subject of artistic representation, which means that romantic art is free to run the gamut of human experience as the proper object of artistic representation.<sup>11</sup>

Thus romantic art seizes on and expands art’s fundamental capacity to aesthetically transform the sensible particular. Once nature has been “emptied of gods” and the explicitly religious significance of art begins to wane, the subject matter of art becomes radically diversified.<sup>12</sup> With the inward turn of the modern subject, a broader spectrum of subject matter presents itself for artistic depiction. Aesthetic content becomes “infinitely rich” and can “adapt its shape to ever-altered circumstances and situations in the most multifarious ways.”<sup>13</sup> When art no longer serves a quasi-religious function, it reflects on subjectivity as such and finds “inexhaustible content” in “the whole of mankind and its entire development.”<sup>14</sup>

Because of this transition, the residual religiosity present in romantic art will gradually give way to the secularization of aesthetic content.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, this tension between an eroding spirituality and an emerging sense of reflective agency is what Hegel takes to be the most philosophically salient feature of romantic art. “Thus in romantic art,” he explains, “we have two worlds”: a spiritual realm and the realm of the external as such.<sup>16</sup> On the one hand, Christianity’s focus on the inner life of the soul outstrips art’s potential to give outward form to a more complex religious narrative.<sup>17</sup> Since art no longer embodies the whole of *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical life, we moderns no longer bow the knee to art. On the other hand, however, this *failure* of art to fulfill our deepest religious needs at the same time ushers in a humanist interest in the everyday that, as Hegel suggests, makes romantic art more *aesthetically* interesting. It is no longer the ideal harmony of form and content that constitutes the beauty of the romantic artwork, but rather its capacity to transform and exalt even the pedestrian details of daily life through artistic representation.

With this, Hegel introduces a new standard by which romantic works of art deserved to be called “great”. If modern works of art are judged in terms of the Ideal of artistic beauty (i.e., the perfect correspondence of form and content), he maintains, they “must undoubtedly fall short.”<sup>18</sup> However, romantic art has a feature that is still of “special importance”, namely,

the artist’s subjective conception and execution of the work of art, the aspect of the individual talent which can remain faithful both to the manifestations of spirit and also to the inherently substantial life of nature, even in the extreme limits of the contingency which that life reaches, and *can make significant even what is in itself without significance*...In view of these aspects we may not deny the name of works of art to the creations of this sphere.<sup>19</sup>

The beauty of modern art lies in making significant the insignificant. In romantic art – which is by far the most developed topic of Hegel’s lectures – it is not the divine, but rather the miscellany of “prosaic life” that constitutes the sensuous appearance of the Idea. This development can be observed most acutely, Hegel thinks, in Dutch genre painting.

Hegel describes the secularization of art in Dutch painting as a “transition from a more peaceful and reverential piety to the portrayal of torments and the ugliness of the world generally.”<sup>20</sup> Importantly, however, it is not a transition from divine beauty to the banal homeliness of the everyday that characterizes Dutch art; rather, it is a matter of singling out the “trivial” and even the “repugnant” and imbuing them with *liveliness* in the form of art. Even such seemingly insignificant detritus, the likes of which are otherwise lost in the course of commonplace affairs, is transformed in the context of art and takes on an appearance worthy of intense admiration.<sup>21</sup> When art sheds its religious occupation, it turns its gaze to the particulars of existence and “exalt[s] these otherwise worthless objects which, despite their insignificant content, it fixes and makes ends in themselves; it directs our attention to what otherwise we would pass by without any notice.”<sup>22</sup> The work of art is no longer ideal, but it can still idealize the quotidian. Thus there remains an “ideal feature” of non-Ideal art that is evident in Dutch painting, namely, its capacity to reconcile us with the mundane world; it is the “Sunday of life which equalizes everything and removes all evil.”<sup>23</sup>

If art is dead, then for Hegel there is liberation in death. Its afterlife is marked by the vitality of Dutch painting. This distinctly modern standard – the *Humanus*, the “new holy of holies,” as Hegel calls it—exalts

the richness and variety of human life.<sup>24</sup> The gradual transition from communal religious life to secular modernity marks the end of art *qua* religion, but in so doing, inaugurates an artistic freedom that “strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment.”<sup>25</sup> While modern art can no longer satisfy our deepest interests, in its capacity to traverse the whole spectrum of human content, Dutch painting holds out the possibility of redemption in modern life through the aesthetic transformation of the everyday. Yet the truth that we find in Dutch painting is at the same time “an ingredient in any work of art”: it provides “the vision of what man is as man, what the human spirit and character is, what man and *this* man is.”<sup>26</sup> This, then, gives way to a new and very important question: Can aesthetic experience be liberating for the *post-romantic* subject?

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup>G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 1, trans. T. M. Knox, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11. For the original German, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*. Bände 13-15 of the *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. by E. Moldenauer and K.M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). A more recent edition by Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert (Hamburg: Meiner, 2007) includes Hotho’s notes from the summer semester of 1823.

<sup>2</sup> See Section III of the *Philosophy of Mind* (292ff). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (424ff) art is presented as an aspect of religion, which Hegel refers to as “Art-Religion.”

<sup>3</sup> This somewhat anachronistic use of the term “romantic” in Hegel designates the whole of post-classical art. This includes, but is not identical to, the familiar aesthetic genre of romanticism.

<sup>4</sup> See Erich Heller, *The Artist’s Journey into the Interior* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 115; and Israel Knox, *The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer* (New York: Humanities Press, 1958), 103. In the German tradition, see Hermann Glockner “Die Ästhetik in Hegels System,” 438-9; and Rüdiger Bubner, “Über einige Bedingungen gegenwärtiger Ästhetik” in *neue Hefte für Philosophie* 5 (1793), 679.

<sup>5</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Unpresentable,” In *The Subject of Philosophy*. Edited by Thomas Trezise (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 151.

<sup>6</sup> Here my own analysis differs from that of Adorno. While Adorno certainly believes that art has this function of showing us our deepest interests, he patently denies that art should aim to *reconcile* us to the grim reality of modern culture — it shows us what cannot be realized in late capitalist society. My take on the significance of art is slightly more optimistic: I see the critical potential of art (in keeping with Hegel) as ultimately something *affirmative* in the sense that it points *beyond* that which it criticizes, namely, to human freedom.

<sup>7</sup> Apart from Hegel’s rich art-historical knowledge of post-classical European art, he came to experience much of this work first-hand, in various museums and galleries of Germany, France, and Austria, and in the private collections of various wealthy art patrons whose acquaintance he had made as a Professor at the University of Berlin. As a dedicated theater-goer, Hegel also maintained

close personal relationships with several artistic elites in Berlin, including the composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, and the celebrated opera singer Anna Milder-Hauptmann. Cf. Otto Pöggeler, *Hegel in Berlin: Preußische Kulturpolitik und idealistische Ästhetik. Zum 150. Todestag des Philosophen* (Berlin: Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 607.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 518-9. See also Hegel, *Werke*, Vol. 14, 128-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 524.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 525.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 526.

<sup>15</sup> Despite the normative decentralization of post-classical art, Hegel does not think romantic art abandons its religious significance altogether. Art retains a vestige of its religious heritage in its occasional return to Greek mythological themes, but especially in the predominantly Christian subject matter of Byzantine, Renaissance and Baroque art in Europe. Hegel's point is that art itself is no longer the principal focal point of religious or ethical life. The transition from classic to romantic art is the transition from art *as religion* to *religious art*; that is, from religion in the broad sense (i.e., as comprehensive mythology) to religion in the narrow sense (i.e., as Christianity). Instead of providing a concrete embodiment of cultural normativity, romantic works of art reflect the values of *inner spirituality* — e.g., specific “virtues” (*Ibid.*, 553f), individual character (*Ibid.*, 577f), and inner beauty (*Ibid.*, 583) — independently of the social institutions that once gave shape to ethical life, like the family or the state. Whereas classic Greek sculpture represents the values and deepest interests of antiquity, romantic art turns its attention to the free, self-sufficient subject *reflecting* on the base normative structures of modern life.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 527.

<sup>17</sup> Consider, for example, of the use of gilded script in early Italian Renaissance paintings to visually depict Biblical scenes of the Annunciation: “*Ave Maria, gratia plena dominus tecum...*”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 596.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 883.

<sup>21</sup> For an excellent and thorough discussion of Hegel's account of the formal devices employed in painting to convey the emerging consciousness of modern subjectivity — *framing*, *flatness*, and *glazing* — see Chapter 2 of Benjamin Rutter's recently published monograph, *Hegel on the Modern Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on Fine Art*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 887.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 607.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 887. Emphasis original.

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