The Historicity of the Work of Art in Heidegger

Sven-Olov Wallenstein

The theme of historicity is central in Heidegger, and it traverses the whole of his work, from the early reflections on the concept of time, through the analysis of ecstatic-horizontal temporality in the ’20s, up to the expanded and reworked concept of history that appears after the “turning” and that guides the attempt to think being itself as history. And even in the final stages of the development of his thought, where the question of the Event of appropriation seems to imply that we in a certain way should “take leave” of the history of being and step out of the closure of metaphysics—“to leave metaphysics to itself”—the step must still be understood as historical through and through, since it is situated at the end of a tradition and forms its critical limit.

I will not attempt to trace this concept of historicity as such in Heidegger, which would be an immense task, but will rather focus on a more limited, though essential topic: the historicity of the work of art. By this I do not propose to undertake a Heideggeresque interpretation of art history, though this would no doubt be an interesting task—in particular the examination of whether the various conceptions of art and artistic practice that have been developed throughout Western art theory could be strictly mapped onto the “epochal” structure of metaphysics, as Heidegger appears to assume when he outlines a “destruction of the history of aesthetics” in the first volume of his Nietzsche, or whether we would have to address a much more many-layered and non-synchronous structure, which I believe to be the case, although this argument cannot be pursued here.

My question here, then, in relation to Heidegger, has to do with history as the element of truth: the element in which works of art acquire their meaning, on which they act, and on the basis of which they prepare us for other possible futures. I say “possible futures” with good
reason, for Heidegger is often understood to be someone who, in spite of the radicality of his questioning of the history of aesthetics, in fact blocks the way to a positive reflection on modern art, and whose allegedly complete rejection of contemporaneity as a mere negative “oblivion” leaves him with little or even nothing productive to say about the condition of artistic modernity. Even though this case could be maintained on the basis of the surface level of some, though indeed not all, of his texts, I shall argue that there are other ways to pursue a Heideggerian mode of questioning, and that the productive link between Heidegger’s dismantling of metaphysics and contemporary art is to be found within the domain opened up by the question of the essence of technology. In saying this I would like to free us from a certain image of Heidegger, just as he himself attempted in the case of Nietzsche: to think through him, beyond, or even against him, but in order then to come back to him, though in a new and different way.

I. The (Greek) origin of the work of art: The origin and the repetition

In Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, Heidegger sets for himself several tasks. The most important one can be heard in the title of the lecture, first held in 1935, that served as the basis for the essay, “Die Überwindung der Ästhetik in der Frage nach der Kunst.”¹ Heidegger’s attempts to undo the edifice of aesthetics should not be construed as something negative, no more than should the earlier “destruction of ontology”; rather it seeks to free us up for a different experience, to allow us once again to approach art as a unique mode of disclosure situated beyond “aesthetics” in all of its classical and modern forms. The Postface clearly states what is at stake: Erlebnis, as the modern,

¹ The lecture was then developed in three subsequent talks in 1936, which provided the tripartite structure of the text published in the first edition of Holzwege in 1950 (together with a Postface), to which an important “Zusatz” (written in 1956) was added in the Reclam edition from 1960. The lecture version from 1935 has now been published in a French-German edition as De l’origine de l’oeuvre de l’art. Première version inédite (1935); there is also an even earlier version from the same year, apparently never presented as a lecture, now published as “Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes. Erste Ausarbeitung.” Here, I will make use of the version published in the Gesamtausgabe edition of Holzwege (GA 5) which also contains a selection of Heidegger’s own marginal notes; henceforth cited as UdK.
subjectivized and “aestheticized” form of the Greek *aisthesis*, is the element in which art dies, although this process might require hundreds of years in order to reach its completion. But, as Heidegger says in a handwritten marginal note, this does not simply mean that art would be over and done with, but rather that we have to attain a *new element* for its becoming:

"Dieser Satz besagt aber doch nicht, daß es mit der Kunst schlechthin zu Ende sei. Das wäre nur der Fall, wenn das Erlebnis das Element schlechthin für das Kunst bliebe. Aber es liegt alles daran, aus dem Erleben ins Da-Sein zu gelangen, und das sagt doch: ein ganz anderes Element für das “Werden” der Kunst zu erlangen. (UdK, 67, marginal note b)"

In order to attain this element, a whole series of precautionary measures have to be taken. Already from the outset, as Heidegger seeks to locate the very terrain of the question he is pursuing, he faces difficulties bearing on the same kind of reductionism and philosophical “inscription” of art into an encyclopedic system that is at work in German Idealism—a philosophy of art encountering or determining art as an object or ontic region among others, and this is one of the problems that will stay with Heidegger throughout the rest of his career. The question of the origin of the work of art must, Heidegger says, inquire after the “Herkunft ihres Wesens” (1), and not presuppose this essence as already given in relation to modern subjectivity. Keeping in mind the new notion of essence that becomes predominant in Heidegger’s thinking after the turning, where essence is not to be understood as generality, as *quidditas* in the sense of a general conceptual order subsuming particulars, but as a coming-to-presence in a temporal movement, we see that this question does not bear upon a formal generality valid for all times and in all contexts, but instead attempts to locate the origin of the work of art in the movement of being’s historical unfolding – indeed, as we shall see, as one of the primary manifestations of the event of being.

Heidegger’s analysis first follows a movement back to the traditional notion of the artwork as a thing, as a unity in a manifold, as a bearer of properties, etc., in order to show that it has to be thought in a different way. In using the famous examples of the van Gogh painting and the Greek temple, he wants to show that the work has to be understood as the setting-up of a world ("Werksein heisst: eine Welt aufstel-
len,” 30) in opposition to an earth, thus reflecting the twofoldness (Zweifalt) of truth itself as a-letheia, concealing and un concealing at once, which is then set (in)to the work as the “chasm” (Riss) between its material and its signifying dimension. I will however not follow the development of these concepts here, and I assume them in any event to be fairly well known, in order to move on to a passage at the end of the text.

The moment that interests me here is when historicity comes to the fore in the third section. Here Heidegger says that the sphere of the work extends out to include the “preservers” (die Bewahrenden) as necessary constituents in the founding of truth, which in its turn occurs above all through Poesy (Dichtung), which Heidegger in a transgeneric and non-literary manner claims to be the essence of art (although it remains closely connected to the sphere of language). This event of poesy is an instituting (Stiftung), and Heidegger proposes that we should see it as consisting of three dimensions (to which there also corresponds, he says, three respective modes of preserving, although this is never developed in the text): bestowing (Schenken), grounding (Gründen), and beginning (Anfangen). In its first aspect as bestowing, the work is an overflowing, and its “thrust” (Stoß) into the extra ordinary cannot be deduced from any pre-existing rules or norms, but it in fact declares everything that is already there and instituted to be invalid. But, and this second aspect changes the direction of the first movement in a decisive way, the thrust does not send us out into a complete void, it is addressed to the preservers to come, and the openness it grants is that into which a Dasein (not in the sense of individual finite existence, but as a historical human collective, “ein geschicht liches Menschen tum”) is already thrown, i.e., a world anchored in an earth that is specific for each people, that becomes its own earth (“Dies ist die Erde und für ein geschichtliches Volk seine Erde,” 63), and which becomes a “supporting ground” (tragende Grund) only through this poetizing projection. In this second dimension, as grounding, creating thus means drawing from a source (Schöpfen), as opposed to creating out of oneself as the subjective genius does.² If the poetic project in the first sense seems to come from nothing, in this second sense

² This is in fact a rather reductive conception of the genius, which in its Kantian version only violates the rules because it is in contact with a more profound nature, for which it is the mouthpiece. On the relation between Heidegger and Kant on this point, see Jay Bernstein, The Fate of Art, 99-108.
it remains essentially tied to a historical people: that which is thrown to
the people, through the project, is “die vorenhaltene Bestimmung des
geschichtlichen Daseins” (64).

If these first two aspects have an initiating quality (although the first
more so than the second, as we have seen), then the third dimension,
beginning, will allow us to grasp poesy’s function within history in
another sense. Bestowing and grounding have “das Unvermittelte des-
sen, was wir ein Anfang nennen” (ibid), but this initiating, as a “leap”
(Sprung), is however something which has been preparing itself for a
long time, just as it also reaches into the future (as a “Vorsprung”) and
has already gone beyond everything which is to come, even though this
may remain concealed until the very end. Thus the beginning already
contains the end within itself, as a fold of time and history, and as such
the proper beginning has nothing to do with the “primitive,” which,
Heidegger claims, always lacks a future because it is incapable of the
bestowing and grounding leap.

In this three-fold temporal structure we can recognize important
traits of the analytic of Dasein’s ecstatic temporality in Sein und Zeit,
where past, present and future as objective-worldly temporal exten-
sions are brought back into Dasein, which exists as “temporalization of
temporality” (Zeitigung der Zeitlichkeit). As the origin of temporaliza-
tion, Dasein is however neither conceived of as a theologically defined
nunc stans located outside of time, nor as the transcendental subject
acting as the founding kernel of time, but as a now always standing
outside of itself, ec-statically opening up towards the future and allow-
ing it to approach us on the basis of the presencing of the past, and
only in this way being able to receive the present as the intersection of
the other two modes.

Now, instituting qua basic trait of poesy, of Dichtung, is accredited
with the same temporalizing function, and in this way it can assume
the function of instituting history, not only in relation to a separate
sphere of aesthetic values, art history, cultural memory, etc. (all of
which for Heidegger belong to the “death of art” as it has been pro-
claimed in Hegel’s Aesthetics), but to beings as such: “Immer wenn das
Seiende im Ganzen als das Seiende selbst die Gründung in die Offen-
heit verlangt, gelangt die Kunst in ihr geschichtliches Wesen als die
Stiftung” (64). And, Heidegger adds in a gesture which on the one
hand inscribes the whole of the artwork essay within a highly tradi-
tional discourse, but also fundamentally connects it to his project of
overcoming Western metaphysics in all of its ambivalence: “Sie [die Stiftung] geschah im Abendland erstmals im Griechentum” (ibid).

How should this traditionalism be understood? Does Heidegger claim that all art, if it is to remain within the sphere of poesy as instituting and putting truth (in)to (the) work, must necessarily remain within the Greek orbit? It is true that he, in his critical discussions of the traditional concepts of the thing, of the passage from truth as aletheia to truth as ortothes, of the genesis of aesthetics in Plato’s separation of the aistheton from the noeton, etc., attempts to bypass Greek metaphysics and all of its subsequent transformations in search of a non-metaphysical concept of art. But does he ever, on another level, question the metaphysics of Greece, the metaphysics of a certain and necessary origin which holds the historical schema together? The insistence of this figure in Heidegger’s discourse has been pointed out by many commentators. The poetic as well as philosophical founding of truth occurred in Greece in its originary form, so Heidegger seems to claim unequivocally, because this was the site for art’s and philosophy’s irruption into a finite historical world, and thus also for the setting of a measure for all of what is to come.

On the other hand, different epochs of art may open different spaces, and Heidegger mentions the medieval transformation of beings into ens creatum, which then becomes a mathematically calculable object at the beginning of modernity, and in all of them the openness of truth must be fixed in a corresponding Gestalt. Each of these epochs, he says, has its own form of unconcealment, and is a way in which an “essential world” breaks forth through a “Stoß” where history begins anew or takes a new turn. But even though these remarks endow art with a certain autonomy with respect to the Greek founding moment, at the next level they re-inscribe it even more forcefully into the sending of being, since the “shapes” produced by art only become possible within an openness granted by the history of being, which appears to be Greek through and through.

It should be noted that this Grecocentric claim could, at least in some respects, be read as a conditioned one. The suggestion that the instituting event occurred in Greece, in, with respect to, the Western

---

world, could be taken as a sign of reserve, although Heidegger does not in this context consider any other possible world, except the “primitive,” which he rejects as devoid of future, and thus outside of the anfängliche historical project of poesy. Does this mean that it could not occur once more, somewhere else? For instance, in a modernity, or even post-modernity, which would no longer, as a finite historical project, be essentially determined by the Greek beginning, but rather would have to come to terms with a different type of finitude for which the irreducible multiplicity and plurality of origins, and not the twofoldness, no matter how abyssal, of the origin, would be that which is decisive? Even though elements for such a thought of finitude may be unearthed in Heidegger’s writings, for instance in his occasional remarks on the possible dialog between the Eastern and the Western world, the proximity he establishes between the history of metaphysics and the history of art as a sequence of Gestalten, and the position accorded to the instituting, which already reaches all the way to the end, seem to imply that the new thrusts can occur only to the extent that they preserve a continuity with the initial Greek instituting, which in this sense retains a supra-historical value. Poesy is a radical founding of history; it bestows, grounds and begins anew, but always on the basis of the Greek Anfang. Greece is the proper beginning, and as such it will always be “ahead” of us.

The traditionalism of this gesture is evident, as is its background in the tradition of German Idealism, although the image of Greece produced in Heidegger’s writings will be different, more conflictual, due to his view of Greece as already marked by the retreat from and obliviousness to the truth of being, an unconcealment and a forgetfulness from which we can never awake, but to which we can only become attentive. On the one hand, Heidegger places himself in a basically Hegelian position, which conceives of history as a unitary space founded by a first, Greek presentation, that eventually comes back to us as a fulfillment at the other end of the span of the tradition. On the other hand, the important difference is that Heidegger does not think that art in any simple sense could be sublated into philosophical and conceptual thought, and that philosophy will not necessarily have the last word (above all since it did not have the first word, whose disclosive power unfolded without there being such a discourse as “philosophy” in the sense handed down in the Platonic tradition). For Hegel, if the end is already present in the beginning, this means that the begin-
ning is something abstract and unmediated, the simple presentation of being in the mode of a “not yet,” i.e., not yet mediated through consciousness; for Heidegger, the beginning as *An-fang* has already reached into the farthest future, since the fullness of its unthought opens the space for all further determinations, although without predestining them in any teleological fashion, which of course leaves the sense of the “farthest future” highly indeterminate.

The question of the origin of the work of art, then, finds itself, at the very moment when an answer seems to take shape, struck by a profound ambiguity. We have seen that art is the instituting preservation of the truth of beings in the work, and the essence of art is Poesy, a poetizing which brings together both creators and preservers on the basis of a thrust that opens a future. “*Die Kunst läßt die Wahrheit entspringen*” (65), Heidegger says, and this is the fundamental sense that Heidegger wants to hear in the word “origin” (*Ursprung*): to let something spring forth, as an originary leap (*Ur-Sprung*) in which truth becomes historical and grounds the historical Dasein of a people. The measure of this origin was however first established in Greece, and all subsequent origins will somehow have to measure up to this first event. But, he adds, the question concerning the essence of art was not raised in order to elucidate the meaning in art in the bygone days of ancient Greece, in fact it was not a historiographical question at all, but resulted from a contemporary need. Can art, for us, once more become an *origin* in the sense established above, can it become a “Vorsprung” reaching into the future, or is it condemned to remain a “Nachsprung,” i.e. a merely intra-cultural phenomenon? In short: does Hegel’s verdict on the end of art in modernity, its sublation into the retrospective gaze of aesthetics as a philosophy of the history of art, for which this history is necessarily closed, still stand?

Now, in determining the origin of art as this originary leap, at once drawing on a Greek source but also requiring that it somehow be binding for our future, for our historical Dasein, Heidegger seems to place modern art in the face of an impossible challenge: either it should return to the Greek instituting moment, which is impossible, as Heidegger himself would be the first to point out—the world of the temple has crumbled, the flight of the Gods is irrevocable—or it should assume its modern destiny, which could mean simply a state of melancholy, a kind of work of mourning in relation to the past. But perhaps there is another way to be Greek, to be different from the Greeks while yet
returning to their heritage—for the beginning, the *An-fang*, remained hidden from its moment of inception, which also means for the Greeks themselves. Perhaps, then, it is only at the end that there is a possibility to recover the possibilities of the *Anfang*, to return to it in a way which is “more anfänglich”, i.e. where the *Beginn* (the factual inception of metaphysics and art somewhere, sometime, in the Mediterranean world) starts to separate itself from the *An-fang*, as that which always comes towards us from the future, and where the Greek oblivion of being shows itself a positive source: “Der Beginn des Abendländischen Denkens ist nicht das Gleiche wie der Anfang. Wohl aber ist er die Verhüllung des Anfangs und sogar eine unumgängliche. Wenn es sich so verhält, dann zeigt sich die Vergessenheit in einem anderen Licht. Der Anfang verbirgt sich im Beginn.”

II. The essence of technology: framing as the final form of metaphysics

The question of whether Heidegger’s meditations on the origin of art ensnare us in a historical loop, condemning us to the repetition (in an almost Freudian sense) of a lost origin, must therefore bear just as much on the determination of the end of metaphysics, and on the status of contemporaneity. I think that the way to address this question, if we want to remain within the orbit of Heidegger’s thinking (while still, as I would like to do here, also maintain a certain distance from it) has to pass through the question of the essence of technology, which may allow us to understand how modern art, precisely in its irrevocable modernity, can provide a thrust. And this, I will argue, it can in do in what from a Heideggerian vantage point would appear precisely as its destructive and nihilistic qualities, in its very dismantling of the “aura” and everything that the Heidegger of the 1930s claims to be the essence of “die grosse Kunst.”

---

4 *Was heißt Denken?*, 98.
5 The proximity in time between Heidegger’s essay and Benjamin’s essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” from 1935 is surely no coincidence. Both of these diagnoses take into account the predominance of Erlebnis, and a destructuring of the subject that must be interpreted as a moment of truth, and as a form of attunement to technology. Although they, at least on surface, draw diametrically opposed conclusions from this predicament. For a discussion of the relation between Benjamin and Heidegger on this point, cf. Willem van Reijen, Der Schwarz-
In order to substantiate the claim that the step beyond the closure of metaphysics in Heidegger’s later work is fundamentally related to technology (Technik),\(^6\) we must first examine what he means by the essence of technology, and then why this essence would be intimately intertwined with the “essential provenance” of the work of art, i.e., its coming to presence in and as history. In “Die Frage nach der Technik” (1953) Heidegger attempts to show that this essence is itself nothing “technological” (technologisch) in the sense of being connected to certain types of industrial production, scientific theories, equipment, machinery, etc.—to use the terminology from Sein und Zeit, we might say that it cannot be reduced to any “ontic” model—but has to do with the sending of being itself. This means that we should neither embrace nor reject technology, and above all, that we should not understand it as something neutral that could be used for any purpose of our own choosing. The interpretation of technology in terms of instrumentality or as a tool for human action is insufficient, above all because it rests on an anthropological metaphysics—man as the master and technology as a mere tool. If on the other hand, Heidegger claims, we attempt to understand it as a sending of being (Geschick des Seins), i.e., as a way in which the history of metaphysics comes to an end, exhausting all of its possibilities in a movement of completion and saturation, then we may be able to grasp how technology extends back into the root system of the Greek techne, and in this sense constitutes a radical form of “disclosing” (Entbergen). If we understand technology in this way, we can see that it too belongs to the sphere of truth as a-letheia—even

---

\(^6\) For a brief but lucid discussion of the distinction between technics and technology, cf. Jean-Yves Goffi, Philosophie de la technique. The normal acceptance of “technology” would, as Goffi points out, be “technics” (in the sense of practical knowledge inherent in all human activities) as informed and systematized by modern science, which is not wholly foreign to Heidegger’s use of the word Technik, although they are certainly not the same. The word Technologie is in fact seldom used in German, where both aspects seem to be merged in Technik; when it is used, however, it often refers to concrete material artifacts (machines, equipment, etc.), as is the case when Heidegger occasionally uses the term. In fact, Heidegger’s conception of Technik cuts transversally through the distinction technics-technology, since he reconstructs it on the basis of the Greek techne which, as we shall see, for him is neither theory nor practice, nor is it determined as the interplay of scientific generality and practical everydayness, but is conceived of as a, or even the, fundamental way of “letting-presence,” of allowing-to-appear. For the sake of consistency, I will translate Technik as “technology” throughout, although the reader should be aware of the wider sphere of this concept’s associations.
though this structure of truth and disclosure has indeed changed fundamentally within modernity, since it is no longer a receiving and allowing to come forth, as in the Greek constellation of *physis*, *techne*, and *poiesis*, but rather an active, volitional positing and challenging, a whole complex of operations that Heidegger will thematize under the concept of *Ge-stell* (which I here will translate as “Framing”).

Even if modern technology only contains a faint echo of the originary Greek conception, it is essential that this thread leading back to the origin, no matter how thin the thread may seem to us today, never gets completely cut off. In fact, the intention of Heidegger’s meditations seems to be to re-establish this connection, and to do so in order to provide a different perspective on our modernity and our technological world. And that this connection will be mediated through the concept of “art” – although now understood as pointing towards the sphere of the Greek term *techne*, rather than the “aesthetic” system of modern fine arts – gives an indication of the central function of art (although in a way that severs the term from its current acceptance) in the turning away from metaphysics. It will be through a transformed idea of art, or rather a “constellation of truth” (*Konstellation der Wahrheit*) bringing together art and technology as two modern descendents of the Greek *techne*, that Heidegger will attempt to open up a free relation to the essence of technology and, as a result of this, will also attempt to determine the essence of thinking in a new way, as something attuned to technology, to its *essence*, although not in the sense of being held captive or overwhelmed by it. The way beyond aesthetics into art leads through the essence of technology, the way beyond technology into its essence leads through art, and this constellation can only be grasped if we are attentive to the hidden dimension of *techne* that holds sway in both of them.

Just as in the case of Poesy, the question of essence of technology in the 1953 essay once more opens by leading us through language. What do we hear in the word “technology,” Heidegger asks, what reverberations are there in *Technik*? Wouldn’t the normal approach, the “natural attitude” as it were, be to understand it as an instrument, as a tool? And if this is so, in what way does this help us understand the essence of technology?

First of all, Heidegger claims, as we have already noted, that the essence of technology is not itself something technical. Other types of

---

7 “Die Frage nach der Technik”, 35. Henceforth quoted in the text as *FT*. 

153
understanding—as means to an end, or as a human doing (Tun)—are also rejected as too instrumental and anthropological. These determinations could indeed be “correct” (Richtig), but they do not reach the “true,” which is required if we are to have a free relation to the essence of technology.

This correctness however still provides us with a guiding thread for our questioning, and we have to probe deeper into the means-ends relationship, if we are to proceed from the merely correct to the true as disclosure: “Nur dort, wo solches Enthüllen geschieht, ereignet sich das Wahre” (7). We have to seek the true through the correct, and thus we must start with instrumentality. Instrumentality, Heidegger continues, is the sphere where causes and effects unfold, and where things are done in order to achieve something. But what, then, is a cause? Heidegger delineates the classical Aristotelian fourfold schemata: causa materialis, formalis, finalis, and efficiens. But why these four types of causes, and what is meant here by “cause”? For us moderns, the efficient cause has become predominant, and we are barely able to perceive the other three aspects as equiprimordial modes of causality, Heidegger notes, and especially so in the case of the final cause. The Aristotelian conception is essentially different, however: it has nothing to do with “bringing about” (bewirken), and in order to avoid such connotations Heidegger translates the Greek word for cause, aition, as “Verschulden.” The efficient cause has no priority here, and Heidegger gives the example of the bringing forth of a silver bowl intended for ritual use in the temple: the silversmith does not produce or make it “als den Effekt eines Machens” (9), he gathers together the three other modes of bringing-forth, the hyle, the eidos, and the telos, in a bringing-to-appear (zum Vorschein bringen), which is the movement of apophainestai. The silversmith is not a maker or a producer, but someone who gathers together and allows to appear, and does this in a mode of “acting” which cannot be circumscribed by the distinction between the active and the passive voice. This allowing the not-yet-present to presence is traversed by a “Bringen,” Heidegger says, and he cites a phrase from Plato’s Symposium, which introduces us to the important concept of poiesis, which is determined as that kind of aition which brings out of non-being and into being (he gar toi ek tou me ontos eis to on ionti hotooun aitia pasa esti poiesis).8

8 Symposium, 205 b.
Poiesis, Heidegger notes, does not just include artisanal or artistic productions, but it also refers to the productive dimension of physis. The difference between them is that the products of physis come to presence out of themselves, whereas the artisanal product based on poiesis requires another, for instance the silversmith, in order to appear. Both of them however bring the not-yet-being into unconcealment, and thus they both belong to aletheia, to truth as disclosure and presencing. The decisive conception here seems to be that the movement of poiesis is something which the “maker” receives, and to bring about means to guide or allow to appear rather than to put a subjective faculty into play: poiesis means to acknowledge what is already there, to draw out of physis in a collaborative way rather than as a subjective imposition.

Now, all bringing-forth is rooted in unconcealment (Unverborgenheit), which also includes the structure of means and ends—instrumentality in the wide sense of the term—as the founding trait of technology. The questioning of instrumentality thus leads us back to unconcealment, and all pro-ductive bringing about has this as its precondition. Technology cannot be exhausted by the idea of means and ends, however, but has to be understood as a mode of unconcealment, and thus of aletheia, even though a highly limited and reductive one if we compare it to its Greek counterpart.

But if our modern concept of technology derives from the Greek techne, this historical link does not lead us back exclusively to artisanal knowledge, but just as much to the sphere of what has for us become the “fine arts,” which means that techne is itself poietical. And furthermore, techne does not only exceed practical knowledge, but as we have seen also contains a moment of knowing, of “making true” (aletheuein), and the decisive is in fact not the practical aspect of producing, but rather disclosing. “Technik,” Heidegger summarizes this phase of his argument, “ist eine Weise des Entbergens. Die Technik west in dem Bereich, wo Entbergen und Unverborgenheit, wo aletheia, wo Wahrheit geschieht” (13).

But in what sense could this apply to modern technology, above all since it has acquired a wholly new relation to the exact natural sciences as the rational substructure of modernity? It is still an unconcealing, although its structure has changed, so that it is no longer a poietical activity as for the Greeks, but a “challenging forth” (Herausfordern) that no longer acts in accordance with nature, no longer completes and
fulfils the movement of *physis*, but demands of it that it should provide energy that can be stored, transmitted, and circulated. The old windmill is subjected to the vagaries of the wind and climate, whereas the modern power plant lays claim to a mastery over nature. Our activities “pose” (*stellen*) nature, they draw everything into a productive cycle, so that all moments eventually form an interlocking whole, and in this sense always aim towards a totality, to a “technical absolute” that no longer recognized an outside, and where the artifice no longer forms the Other of nature, but wants to become its own ground.\(^9\)

Heidegger’s most famous example of this is the river Rhine, which now appears as a supplier of electric energy. The power plant is not built into the stream like the old wooden bridge, on the contrary the stream is now “built into” (*verbaut in*) the power plant. Something “uncanny” (*Ungeheure*) holds sway here, Heidegger says, and this we will note if we compare the Rhine as “verbaut in das *Kraftwerk*,” and as “gesagt aus dem *Kunstwerk* der gleichnamigen *Hymne Hölderlins*” (15), and in this passage between the different senses of the work, Heidegger also prepares the constellation of art and the essence of technology that will be the essay’s final proposal.

All of these operations are still to be understood as modes of disclosing, although they now come together in a different way: the cycle of production finds its overriding determination in “steering” (*Steuerung*) and “securing” (*Sicherung*), i.e., in a cybernetic structure. Here the structure of disclosure changes: everything becomes a “standing reserve” (*Bestand*) for something else, and thus it can no longer be understood even as “ob-ject,” i.e., something which stands in a determined *there*, in a firm over-against, but only as a fluid and infinitely malleable possibility of *productive transformation*. It should be noted that Heidegger’s view of technology in this respect does *not* amount to a simplistic theory of the “objectification” of nature, or to a critique of the subject-object dichotomy in the name of some pre-rational unity, as is occasionally presumed, and finally, it should not be interpreted as a pure and simple *rejection* of “instrumental reason”: the structure of objectality has already been dissolved and overcome in Framing, just as that of sub-jectality (*Subjektität*, a term that Heidegger uses in order to distinguish sub-jectality in general from subjectivity, *Subjektivität*, as consciousness), and instrumentality is only the superficial aspect of a

---

\(^9\) For a discussion of the idea of a “technical absolute” in this sense, see Jean-Philippe Milet, *L’absolu technique*. 
more profound structure that demands to be deciphered. All of these terms have become part of the standing reserve, whose operation is precisely to organize, mobilize, and displace, to render transformable and communicable, to initialize cycles of production and reproduction that no longer acknowledge any outside, and in this sense can be called “ab-solute,” ab-solved from all externality. Extrapolating somewhat from Heidegger’s suggestions, we might say that the attempt to make fixed oppositions fluid, the drive towards mutual interpenetration of opposites and their subsumption into a neutral third term, is what propels technology forward (and our current fetishism of “information” surely inscribes itself in this lineage). This is why technology cannot be understood on the basis of machines or mere technical innovations. Hegel’s definition of the machine as an “autonomous tool” is insufficient, Heidegger claims, since it is based on artisanal production; from the point of view of the standing reserve, the machine is wholly heteronomous, since it is what it is only as a function of the reserve.

The agent of this positioning cannot be man as a subject: man has never had aletheia at his disposition, and this applies just as much to modern technological disclosure as to the Greek unfolding of being. Man is himself drawn into the standing reserve, although not merely as a passive respondent, but as the one who is challenged to perform the operations of the reserve, and to carry out its specific mode of unconcealment, and thus he is never just merely one part among others (tools, machines, raw materials, communications systems, etc.) of the reserve. Unconcealment occurs as a sending, but only to the extent that man responds to it—if it is true that technology is not just a human undertaking, not an instrument for the completion of our projects, then we must add that neither is it simply without man: it gathers man as the

10 Contemporary theories of information technology, networks, “immaterials” (Lyo- tard), etc., occasionally revive these Heideggerian themes. I borrow this idea of technology as driven forth by the emphasis on mediation and the insertion of a third from Lyotard; cf. his essay “L’inhumain,” in L’inhumain. Causeries sur le temps.

11 Heidegger does not give any precise reference to Hegel, but he is presumably referring to the discussion of how the division of labor renders work more efficient, but also more mechanical and capable of becoming externalized. In the Enzyklopädie, Hegel writes: “Die damit zugleich abstraktäre Arbeit führt einerseits durch ihre Einformigkeit auf die Leichtigkeit der Arbeit und die Vermehrung der Produktion, andererseits zur Beschränkung auf eine Geschicklichkeit und damit zur unbedingten Abhängigkeit von dem gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhange. Die Geschicklichkeit selbst wird auf diese Weise mechanisch und bekommt die Fähigkeit, an die Stelle menschlicher Arbeit die Maschine treten zu lassen” (§ 526).
“Besteller” into what Heidegger calls the *Ge-stell*. *Ge-stell*, “Framing,” is Heidegger’s term for that kind of unconcealment which permeates the essence of technology, although it is itself nothing technical, not any kind of machinery or specific technology. *Framing* is the name for that which gathers together all the different moments of technology as the unfolding of the metaphysical determination of being into its final and most ambiguous moment.

However, Heidegger adds, in order to see this gathering-together as a figure of a radical possibility it is also necessary that we in this *Stellen* recognize an echo of the *Her- and Darstellen* that formed part of the Greek *poiesis*, otherwise we would lose sight of the fact that they both belong to *aletheia*. In the modern challenging-forth there is still a trace—which as such is not just a remnant, a reminder of what once was, but also an inverted trace of *what is to come*, approaching us from the future—of another possible relation to being, and the meditation on the essence of technology demands of us that we follow this trace in order to re-establish a connection to what on a more straightforward historiographical level would seem irretrievably lost. The setting up of a statue in the Greek temple and the modern *Stellen* “sind zwar grund-verschieden, und bleiben doch im Wesen verwandt” (20), and this kinship is what opens the possibility of thinking their articulation in a way that directs us beyond the surface of technology (machinery and technical appliances, instrumentality and efficaciousness) and into its essence, as the ultimate presencing of being within the order of epochality and withdrawal. To experience the co-implication of the Greek *techne* and Framing is a necessary precondition for experiencing the end of metaphysics as the *end*, as the final gathering of all the different sendings (“eschatology,” as Heidegger says in another passage),¹² where all possibilities are brought together, and as it were exhausted from within, and thus making another relation to this history possible.

As early as *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerk*, Heidegger makes use, as if *en passant*, of the notion of *Ge-stell* in connection with the *Gestalt* of the work of art. The question then arises as to how we are to under-

---

stand the nucleus Stellen, and the way it branches out into a whole series of compound expressions which remain operative throughout the artwork essay: Her-stellen, Auf-stellen, Zurück-stellen, or Setzen, as in truth putting itself (in)to (the) work (Ins-Werk-Setzen)—especially given that the everyday and ontic meanings of these expressions are insufficient. We should understand them on the basis of the Greek notion of thesis, Heidegger suggests, as modes of “Aufstellung im Unverborgenen.” (UdK, 48) In the Addendum, he returns once more to this problem, and begins by noting an implicit contradiction between the claim that art would be both a “Feststellen” of truth (51) and “Geschehenlassen der Ankunft von Wahrheit” (59): the first statement implies a willing, an acting which codifies, inscribes, and renders permanent; the second is a letting, and in this sense “ein Sichfügen und so gleichsam ein Nichtwollen, das Freigibt” (70). This contradiction is dissolved, he claims, if we grasp that thesis neither means to place something before oneself in terms of an egologically defined subject-object positionality (which, we may note, is the basic sense in phenomenology and its “thetic” acts of consciousness), nor the positioning within consciousness as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis that we find in German Idealism from Kant to Hegel. Thesis in the sense of “setting” (up and forth) should not be conceived of as a positioning emanating from subjectivity, as the concept of Setzung had been formed within the metaphysics of subjectivity in German Idealism, but as a letting-presence that cannot be reduced to the subjective modes of either activity or passivity.

This terminology might seem surprising given the status accorded to the terms in the later works, and not only the role of Ge-stell in the analysis of technology, but also that of Gestalt in the discussion of nihilism in Zur Seinsfrage, where they are explicitly connected to the Platonic theme of the typos from Timaeus, as modes of metaphysical “typing” or inscription of eidetic forms. This connection is important, however, and this for two reasons that inform Heidegger’s implicit rereading of his work: (a) it indicates the extent to which a heroic and voluntaristic terminology is essential in the artwork essay, although in

a form removed from the sphere of subjectivity and transposed to another level, which in the later phase could be understood as a reconfiguration of Framing; (b) it opens a passage from the subsequent writings to the earlier ones, so that the later essay on technology might implicitly look back to the earlier use of Ge-stell, and be construed as a kind of implicit self-criticism in order to rethink the respective essences of art and technology as mutually intertwined. The work of art repeats the Greek notions of thesis, poiesis, etc., and does so in such a way that their original essence comes to shine forth beneath their modern, technological interpretation, both of which were still tangled together in Der Ursprung. The constellation of art as the saving force hidden within technology in the later texts is fundamentally dependent on this connection. Heidegger’s own commentaries in the Addendum (UdK, 72 f) are clear evidence of this (this text was written in 1956, three years after “Die Frage nach der Technik”), as well as the conclusion to the lecture on technology: “Weil das Wesen der Technik nichts Technisches ist, darum muß die wesentliche Besinnung auf die Technik und die entscheidende Auseinandersetzung mit ihr in einem Bereich geschehen, der seinerseits mit dem Wesen der Technik verwandt and anderseits von ihm doch grundverschieden ist. Ein solcher Bereich ist die Kunst.” (FT, 35, emphasis mine)

We noted earlier that man is neither a passive recipient nor the active “subject” of technology, but rather someone who is placed into Framing as the one summoned forth to undertake and carry out its implications: technology is neither independent of nor wholly dependent on man. For Heidegger, it is impossible for us simply to assume another stance or “attitude” towards Framing in retrospect, we can only change our relation to it to the extent that we are already inside of it, caught up in its way of presencing as that which is. We are, as Heidegger says, sent on a path, a trajectory, the “sending” of both poiesis and Framing as possibilities, and hence our freedom resides in our belonging to the sphere of the sending in a more intimate and thoughtful way, in becoming attentive to its essence as essencing, and not in a act of will or some type of volitional causality in relation to it. Just as with truth, freedom belongs to the free and the open, to the “gelichtete,” which in its turn is founded on the twofoldness of a-letheia as simultaneously concealing and un concealing. That which sets free always and necessarily has an opaque and hidden side: “Die Freiheit ist das lichtend Verbergende, in dessen Lichtung jener Schleier weht, der das
Wesende aller Wahrheit verhüllt und den Schleier als den verhüllenden erscheinen läßt. Die Freiheit ist der Bereich des Geschickes, das jeweils eine Entbergung auf ihren Weg bringt.” (25). The sending is in this sense nothing like an unavoidable destiny, rather it is an appeal to our freedom—we are claimed by the sending in such a way as to render a response possible. There are two possibilities lodged within this sending, Heidegger notes: the first being simply to fulfill the commanding call, the second to think through the sending so as to become aware of the fact that Framing is only one of several ways to think being, and that being’s disclosure both needs and uses man, in the double sense of “brauchen” that Heidegger plays upon in this context when he talks about “die gebrauchte Zugehörigkeit zum Entbergen” (26).

This ambiguity turns every sending into a danger, or perhaps even into danger itself: in Framing we stand at the edge of an abyss where man might turn into a pure reserve, and where the memory of being is on the verge of becoming obliterated. This is the negative side of Framing, one that covers over the possibility of ek-sistence and has the effect of erasing the memory of poiesis in dissimulating its own character as a process of disclosing. But given the twofoldness in this utmost danger, we must be wary of demonizing technology, Heidegger cautions us, and instead we should meditate on the “secret of its essence” as simultaneously danger and promise, and he cites two lines from Hölderlin’s hymn Patmos: “Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch.”

For this protective dimension to be saved, we require the movement of a “memorial thinking” (Andenken) able to step back into the essence: from the instrumental to the causal, then to the sending of unconcealing, and finally to the “granting” of openness in the sending itself, which “uses” (braucht) man so that he may perform his part in unconcealing. The essence of technology must remain ambiguous, however, since it points to the “secret” of disclosure, to the twofoldness of truth. The two moments, Heidegger claims, are like two astral trajectories both nearing and withdrawing from each other, just as (aesthetic) art and (instrumental) technology must seem infinitely at odds

---

14 For Heidegger’s understanding of “Brauch,” cf. above all “Der Spruch des Anaximander,” Holzwege, 362 ff, where the term is derived from Anaximander’s to chreon, normally translated as “necessity.”
and yet intimately intertwined at the line separating completed nihilism from the other beginning.

Thus there is a fundamental analogy between the dismantling of aesthetics, which was projected as early as the essay on the origin of the work of art, and the release of technology from the instrumentalist interpretation, in that they both point toward the constellation of truth: the closer we come to the essence of technology, Heidegger claims, the more enigmatic art becomes, and the only way to experience this constellation is to abide within the movement of questioning, which is “the piety of thought” (die Frömmigkeit des Denkens, 36).

It is on the basis of the unity of techne, which comprises both our (aesthetic, subjectivist) “art” and our (instrumentally and/or anthropologically interpreted) “technology,” that art may become a countermove to Framing—memorial thinking, in its retro-activating, desedimenting and archeologically reconstituting strategy, needs to find the common ground for that which in the conceptual diaspora of late modernity appears as free-floating concepts devoid of inner relations. And the inner relation between art and technology is essential for this move: rooted in techne, they have within post-Cartesian modernity come under the rule of instrumentality and aesthetics, which is reflected in the tension between the memory of the Greek thesis and the positional quality of the Stellen. Thinking through this constellation, understanding it as a sending, would then begin to open up a free relationship to their common history, and to the secret hidden in it.

In all of this, there is surely a certain proximity to a romantically tinted critique of technological modernity, but also an essential distance that needs to be measured. When Heidegger, in the seminar on “Zeit und Sein” (1962), talks of Framing as a “Janus-head,” the emphasis is on the constellation, on the duality of the figure and its capacity to form a passage: completed nihilism, where being appears as nothing, has to be traversed as the desert that it is, and the only way is forward, never back to any kind of lost origin. It is only when all the epochal transformations have been exhausted and we are faced with the final, utmost concealment of being that we are set free from the

metaphysical quest for foundations and security—when metaphysics deconstructs, as it were, its own authority by being fully realized. This aspect gets wholly lost if we interpret Heidegger’s thought as merely a critique of technology. As the descendant of Platonic eidetics, Cartesian subjectivity, and Nietzschean will to power, Framing is the (pen)ultimate and unavoidable way in which being yields itself up as thinkable, as the final horizon of thought within metaphysics. The way out of the reign of technicity cannot be to reject it, or to entertain Romantic fantasies about a world existing before “objectification,” but can only be a memorial thinking leading us into the essence of technology as coming to us from the future just as much as from the past: the sending of openness that is being’s unfolding emanates from early Greek thinking and reaches its final stage at the completion of modernity, but which then, as if in a strange fold in being and time, allows us to return to the beginning as an other or second beginning (andere Anfang), lodged within the first and yet needing to have passed through the epochal sequence in order to be given to thought.

III. Conclusion. Framing and modern art

The whole of Heidegger’s thinking on art can, and indeed has been, interpreted as a backward-looking romanticism, and some have claimed that he rejects any possibility for art to entertain any essential relation to truth in modernity. Otto Pöggeler, for instance, claims at one point that Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes makes any treatment of modern art impossible, and although Heidegger planned a sequel which was supposed to deal with the possibility of art in a technological world, this project failed to materialize since it was contrary to his own philosophical presuppositions. It is indeed true that Heidegger devotes little time to commenting on modern art, and when he does so, he seems to take a rather negative stance. The only modern work mentioned in Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes is van Gogh’s painting of a pair of peasant shoes, and even though it serves as the point of entry into an entire meditation, and in fact provides us with first insight into the complex of earth and world, there is no indication that Heidegger

16 Otto Pöggeler, Philosophie und Politik bei Heidegger, 157. In a later work, Bild und Technik, Pöggeler returns to this question in much more detail, drawing especially on Heidegger’s notes to Klee. I will return to Pöggeler’s arguments in another context.
would ascribe to it the same world-formative power that belongs to the Greek temple or the cathedral in Bamberg. The modern work of art seems hopelessly enclosed in the museum, in the critical edition, in academic discourse, and as such its power is usurped on the one hand by a culture of Erlebnisse, and on the other by a culture of learned commentaries.

In a handwritten note to Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes (UdK, 67), Heidegger asks whether modern art is able to step out of the sphere of “Erlebnis,” or whether what we experience today is merely “das technologische des Schaffentriebes” and “das Wie des Machens,” which contribute in the highest degree to rendering art even more subjectivist and “Erlebnis”-oriented. The note then goes on to speak of the emptiness of “so-called informal art” (by which is probably meant postwar abstract painting, l'art informel of the 1950s), and the verdict on modernism seems unequivocal.

But let’s take our cue from another passage, this time from Der Satz vom Grund, in order to begin to assess these verdicts in another light. Here Heidegger provides us with a rather different perspective, and claims that abstract painting is in fact the only appropriate form of art in a world dominated by technology: “Dass in einem solchen Zeitalter die Kunst zur gegenstandslosen wird,” Heidegger writes, “bezeugt ihre geschichtliche Rechtmässigkeit und dies vor allem dann, wenn die gegenstandslose Kunst selber begreift, dass ihre Hervorbringungen keine Werke mehr sein können, sondern etwas, wofür das gemässe Wort fehlt” (66). Just as technology exceeds the duality of object-substance and subject-consciousness, absorbing both of them into the transformational and positional matrix of Framing, art must become non-objective, or “free of objects” (gegenstandslos) since it is precisely not a question of opposing the subjective and the objective. Emmanuel Martineau has proposed this type of reading, although without referring specifically to the analysis of technology, but rather emphasizing the affinity between Heidegger’s early conception of “das Nichts” and

---

17 It is thus surely no coincidence that the exemplary works selected by Heidegger are, not only architectural, but also religious buildings, and his motivation for this choice seems to be that it ties together a whole series of trans-aesthetic dimensions whose nucleus is constituted by an experience of the holy. The discussion of architecture, building and space constitutes an important thread running throughout Heidegger’s oeuvre; for a brief discussion, see my “Three Ways of Retrieving Heidegger: The Case of Architecture.”
the non-objectivity of suprematism in Malevich. Extending Martineau’s remarks in a somewhat different direction so as to connect them to my topic here, I would also locate an important affinity in how the painter and the thinker each in their respective ways determine the connection between the non-objectivity of art and technology.

Now, there is an important sense in which this “nothingness” could be taken as the proper truth of modern art: non-objectivity, resistance to, and even destruction of, the object-form as well as the subject-form, to the form-matter duality, etc., characterizes modern art precisely to the extent that it is attuned to the essence of technology. Its “moment of truth” (to use an expression from Adorno that is not so far from Heidegger’s “Konstellation der Wahrheit”) is its un-truth in relation to the traditional categories of aesthetics (beauty, pleasure, expressive signification), its way of violently undoing them so as to allow the lethe in a-letheia to shine forth as the necessary and inescapable withdrawal of being’s own presencing. The question whether there can be “grosse Kunst” in late modernity perhaps needs to be displaced in a way that may contradict a certain Heideggerian sentiment, but surely not the movement of Heidegger’s questioning: the greatness of late modern, and perhaps even postmodern art (if we leave the art historical dividing line between them undecided for the time being), could be this very dismantling of the idea of greatness, of historical Stiftung, of the “people” and their “native soil,” etc., in such a way that art at the end of metaphysics would allow us to perceive the end as a necessary loss that is the other side of a multiplicity of beginnings. “The origin of the work of art,” both as a question as well as a specific text by Heidegger, would then be more complex than a certain interpretation of (and to a large extent also by) Heidegger—though not the only one possible—has suggested, an interpretation that is historical through and through: the Greek origin is lost, but also in a certain way retrieved in Framing as its own absence, as the necessity to reinvent other grounds and origins, and the “greatness” of modern art would thereby be at once identical to and radically different from the origin.

The “thrust” would then have to recognize the radical absence of the ground from which it draws its meaning, that the “people” it addresses is an indeterminate entity, and not tied to any particular soil or community—that le peuple est toujours un peuple à venir, as Deleuze used

18 See Martineau’s preface to the selection of Malevich’s writings, La lumière et la couleur, as well as the more elaborated argument in Malévich et la philosophie.
to say. And perhaps just not recognize it, but also bring it about in an active way, so that the grounding must always be an undoing of the soil, of the natal, always something un-heimlich. And finally, the Anfang would not already have leaped ahead of us so as always to have determined the end, but would have to be thought of as opening up an unknown future.

This would indeed be something like an undoing of the temporal knot in Heidegger’s thinking on the origin of the work of art in 1935, but maybe not in the later works, especially those when art is connected to the question of technology. For me anyway, to follow this line of thought, as it cuts across Heidegger’s texts and opens up the question of modern art, would indeed by a way to think through him, beyond and against him, but in order then to come back to him in a new and different way.

References

Heidegger, Martin, Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes, in Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe [GA] bd. 5 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1977).
— Wegmarken, GA 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1976).

—Bild und Technik (München: Fink, 2002).


