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## **PUTTING ART TO WORK: FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE**

### **Abstract**

The question of my study concerns the viability of Nietzsche’s theory of art as it is configured in his last writings. In order to come to an answer to this question regarding Nietzsche’s work I will follow two steps: 1. the assurance of an adequate point of view with regard to his conception of art by designating it as “tendentious theory of art” and extracting the consequences of this description; 2. the adumbration of a hermeneutical horizon where Nietzsche’s theory of art can receive a chance at viability by reevaluating the ludic and the excessive coordinate of art.

**Key words:** Art, Excess, Metaphysics, Nihilism, Nietzsche, Heidegger

In a 1986 interview, Gadamer expresses his lack of understanding regarding his friends or students’ enthusiasm for Nietzsche and the productive use of his work<sup>1</sup>. One can indeed ask – and this would not be far from Nietzsche’s spirit – what could the explanation be for this strong interest that Gadamer calls into question, besides the inertia corresponding generally to the secondary literature relative to the work of a great philosopher. Nevertheless, to raise such a suspicion means to engage in a too greater project – which would require a very systematic investigation of the main sections of Nietzsche’s philosophy – to be developed in a journal study. Still, it does not represent a necessity to do this all at once – we can begin with the theory of art. My only concern in this study will be to sketch the viability of this theory; therefore I will not take into consideration the significance of Nietzsche’s theory of art for the history of aesthetics. Of course, this determination of the intended investigation cannot be understood as such, without some guide lines. At the same time, it would make no sense to choose too vague a research field in comparison to the answer possibilities of this particular

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<sup>1</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The 1920S, the 1930S, and the Present”, in Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson (ed.), *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*, translated by Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss, State University of New York Press, 1992, p. 145.

theory of art. For this reason, I will delineate my inquiry alongside the practical discussion of Nietzsche's thoughts regarding art.

Due to the fact that Nietzsche's philosophy is not lineal, and after all we cannot extract from it only *a* theory of art, in order to proceed with my research I am forced one more time to restrain my study by choosing as field of investigation only several excerpts from its later period. During this period we can notice a turn-over to the ideas from *Die Geburt der Tragödie*<sup>2</sup>, therefore, when necessary, these excerpts will be corroborated with some from the earlier work.

### 1. Art as Countermovement to Decadence

At a random read of some fragments concerning art from the later work of Nietzsche, one can notice that his conception is articulated in contrast to metaphysics as a decadent state of the human being, and, implicitly, to nihilism as consequence of metaphysics<sup>3</sup>. For instance, while the metaphysical tradition says "No" to life and to becoming; while it projects its fundamental values onto a world that is beyond our immediate reaching, and *thus* falls into decadence by not being able to find the link between its highest values and the sensitive realm of man's existence anymore<sup>4</sup>, art represents a "Yes" said to life and to becoming<sup>5</sup>. Art will remain in the only existing world, our empirical world. If nihilism, as active nihilism,<sup>6</sup> neutralizes the perspective of traditional metaphysics, art will create another world, a fluid one, beyond the inert world of metaphysics, but also beyond the void of the active nihilism.

The artists were always concerned with the enhancement of their power. They represent "the basic instincts of power"<sup>7</sup>. From this perspective, the artistic one, concepts like Beauty, Good and Truth, conceived apart from their relation to our senses, are totally absurd. Their

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<sup>2</sup> For more details about this turn-over in Nietzsche's conception of art see, for instance, Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 117-147.

<sup>3</sup> This perspective is explicitly stated by Nietzsche in an excerpt from 1888: "Our religion, morality, and philosophy are decadence forms of man. The *countermovement: art*".

<sup>4</sup> Concerning the roots of decadence in metaphysics see KGW VI<sub>3</sub>, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, "Die Vernunft in der Philosophie", pp. 68-73, and "Wie die *wahre Welt* endlich zu Fabel wurde", pp. 74-75.

<sup>5</sup> See KGW VII<sub>3</sub>, 37 [12], pp. 313-314; and also KGW VIII<sub>3</sub>, 14 [119], pp. 88-91. With regard to the affirmative character of an anti-nihilistic attitude see KGW VIII<sub>1</sub>, 7 [38], pp.315-316; and KGW VIII<sub>3</sub>, 16 [32], pp. 288-289.

<sup>6</sup> See KGW VIII<sub>2</sub>, 9 [35], pp. 14-16.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. KGW VIII<sub>1</sub>, 2 [130], p. 127; and KGW VIII<sub>3</sub>, 17 [5], pp. 324-325.

value is always perceived in the horizon of what helps us achieve more power. Beauty or ugliness only have a biological value. Something is beautiful as long as it serves life. On the other side, ugliness is a counter-term for life<sup>8</sup>. In the world of art there is no place for lamentation, for metaphysical dolour, because the artist has never grounded his existence on in a world beyond the sensitive one, which turned out to be a mere illusion. Of course, this does not mean that there are no spiritual states for the artist, but only that these states are always grounded in the sensitive world. Always the artist is concerned with himself and his own passions<sup>9</sup>. He is never projecting himself onto a world beyond the empirical one, and that is why he has no contact with some inert idols like those of metaphysics.

Art, according to Nietzsche, reminds us of our animality<sup>10</sup>. Of course, we must not understand this characteristic in a rough way. Animality means indeed display of power, excess, but also it means innocence, childlikeness [*Kindlichkeit*]. This is the most important component of the artist – his ludic nature<sup>11</sup>. Through this indifference regarding the “eternal values”, through the joy of play<sup>12</sup> artists are those who can embody an alternative to metaphysics, and thus implicitly to nihilism. The world of the artists is the world of metaphysics, but *overturned*<sup>13</sup>.

## 2. Making Sense of Nietzsche’s Theory of Art

Since Nietzsche’s approach to art is subordinated to his attempt to exceed the traditional way of understanding the world, grounded in metaphysics, none could expect from it to display what can be called, by using a paraphrase, “theory for art’s sake”. Judging from such a perspective we can notice not only that Nietzsche’s theory of art isn’t viable, but it’s thoroughly detrimental. If we take a look at the same paragraphs from the *Will to Power* we’ll see that a pretty large part of art and artists is not subsumable to Nietzsche’s description of art. Some concrete examples of artists that don’t respect the criteria of good art are: Victor Hugo, Richard Wagner and Emile Zola<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. KGW VIII<sub>3</sub>, 10 [167], pp. 220-221.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. KGW VIII<sub>2</sub>, 10 [33], pp. 138-139.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. KGW VIII<sub>2</sub>, 9 [102], pp. 57-58.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. KGW VIII<sub>1</sub>, 2 [130], p. 127.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. KGW VIII<sub>3</sub>, 14 [84], pp. 55-56.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. KGW VIII<sub>2</sub>, 11 [3], pp. 251-252.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, KGW VIII<sub>2</sub>, 9 [171], p. 100; 10 [37], p. 139; 10 [52], pp. 147-148; and KGW VIII<sub>3</sub>, 14 [47], p. 33.

Nevertheless to remain at this verdict in reference to Nietzsche's theory of art would mean to disregard the core of it, its *tendentious* coordinate. Using a theory of this kind we can see art, for instance, from the point of view of our ascension to the world of Forms (Plato) or to God (the Christian iconoclasm), or from the point of view of spirit's evolution into the conscience of liberty (Hegel). Always, in these theories, art is conceived from a different point of view than its own. The explicit question of this kind of theories is: "What value has art *in order to...*?" This question is only a subdivision of a more general one: "What can we do *in order to...*" Art is, from this perspective, at least a *potential* help. For instance, art *can* help us get to the truth<sup>15</sup>, or it can't<sup>16</sup>, or, as a third possibility, a dialectical one, art *can* help us, but only to a certain level<sup>17</sup>. I will name this kind of theory "tendentious theory of art". These being stated, if we want to judge the viability of Nietzsche's theory of art, we have to approach it from an adequate perspective, which is, from its own perspective. This perspective is the critique of nihilism and the attempt to overcome it. Therefore, the question: "can Nietzsche's theory of art be a viable one?" is similar to: "can Nietzsche's theory of art provide us with the possibility of exceeding nihilism?" In other words, since this theory conceives art only as a remedy, to grasp its viability implies to observe its efficiency towards the disease against which is fighting, namely against nihilism. Such an inquiry with regard to metaphysics, and implicitly to nihilism, thus one that exceeds the field of aesthetics, represents a common place for Nietzsche's commentators. For this reason, in order to give Nietzsche's theory of art a chance at viability, it is required first of all to place it in a horizon which *could* free it from the negative character imposed – explicitly or not – by some former interpretations. Still, it would be too great a task trying to adumbrate a horizon beyond all the negative interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy. Therefore, I am constraint one more time to restrain the aspirations of my study by considering only one of these interpretations – Heidegger's.

### 2.1. Nietzsche as the Last Original Metaphysician

According to what it had been shown from the perspective of Nietzsche's theory of art, the attempt to exceed nihilism manifests itself as "overturn" of

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<sup>15</sup> See Martin Heidegger, „Der Ursprung de Kunstwerkes“, in *Holzwege*, GA 5, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1997, pp. 1-74.

<sup>16</sup> See Plato, *Republic*, Book X.

<sup>17</sup> See G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Ästhetik*, Werke 13, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1970.

the traditional metaphysics. This peculiar designation of the endeavour to reach beyond metaphysics' perspective is seen by Heidegger as a mark of failure. Nietzsche's attempt is to surmount nihilism by affirming becoming and the sentiment of life in detriment of the inertial world-view of metaphysics, which has as basis, according to Heidegger, the determination of Being [*Sein*] as *presence* [*Anwesenheit*]. Of course, this overturn is not a simple inversion, a simple change of places, because this would bring nothing new along with it – we would still be confronted with the same insurmountable distance between the two world-views. What actually takes place in Nietzsche's philosophy is, according to Heidegger, a metamorphosis of the sensible realm into the ground from which supra-sensible one gets its consistency. Through this reversed valorization a final possible configuration of metaphysics is reached<sup>18</sup>. But this inversion does nothing but to deepen the determination of Being as presence because now becoming plays the role which was played by the supra-sensible. In this respect it is perfectly natural for Nietzsche to say: "to impose upon becoming the character of being – that is the supreme will to power"<sup>19</sup>. In order to unfold the last possibility of metaphysics; in order to proceed with this last metaphysical original project, and in this way to carry it out, it is not necessary for a simple inversion to take place. Decisive is the instance which sustains the whole of metaphysics, which is, from Heidegger's point of view, Being interpreted as *presence*. To fulfill the metaphysics means to circumscribe to Being as *presence* the supra-sensible realm, as well as the sensible one, understood as life, as a game between the centers of force, as eternal recurrence of their combinations again and again, *in the same order*<sup>20</sup>. Thus, there is no need for the both regions to subsist, as for Plato. We can forget the absoluteness of the supra-sensible realm, but we cannot do the same with Being as presence. As long as the unfolding of thought participates at one of the possible combinations supported by the conception of Being as presence, it participates, as a part, to the whole of the world grounded by this particular conception.

The fulfillment of metaphysics consists in the exhaustion of its possibilities, and when these are only two, it is identical to overturn:

But what must be understood by the "end of metaphysics"? Answer: the historic moment when the *essence possibilities* regarding metaphysics are

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<sup>18</sup> See Martin Heidegger, „Die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen und der Wille zur Macht“, in *Nietzsche II*, GA 6, Zweiter Band, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1997, pp. 1-22.

<sup>19</sup> KGW VIII<sub>1</sub>, 7 [54], pp. 320-321.

<sup>20</sup> KGW VIII<sub>3</sub>, 14 [188], pp. 166-168.

exhausted. The last of these possibilities must take this shape in which the very essence of metaphysics finds itself overturned<sup>21</sup>.

Consequently, “overturn” is just another name for “fulfillment”. Yet, for this equivalence to be possible one must take into account the possibilities of configuration, through a simple combinatorial game, of a system of thought like the one represented by the traditional metaphysics. We have already seen that Heidegger understood as essence of metaphysics the conceiving of Being as *presence*, and the elbow room of *presence* was determined by the dualism between the sensitive world and the intelligible world. Since the possible combinations are two, following the display of one of them, the fulfillment of the other, and thus fulfilling the metaphysical system, is the overturn of the first.

These being stated, the cause of the nihilism is, according to Heidegger, deeper than Nietzsche comes to realize. This cause is, of course, the forgetfulness of Being as main feature of metaphysics. For this reason, Heidegger can say not only that Nietzsche remains caught in the structures of nihilism, but also that he cannot escape it, that Nietzsche's road is a dead-end<sup>22</sup>.

## 2.2. To Being and Beyond

After this short delineation of Heidegger's exegesis, which also circumscribes Nietzsche's theory of art, it seems that the answer to the question of my study would be negative. Yet, we must not forget that such a verdict follows from a *particular* description of the metaphysical tradition, and nihilism, namely as “forgetfulness of Being”. Consequently, in order to overcome nihilism we must surmount the forgetfulness of Being. If Heidegger's solution is functional, then his verdict with regard to Nietzsche's endeavour to exceed metaphysics, and implicitly nihilism, is correct. On the other hand, if Heidegger fails, then his diagnosis concerning nihilism becomes at least dubitable, and therefore his interpretation of Nietzsche loses its strength and can be reconsidered.

In order to avoid a one-sided testing of the efficiency of Heidegger's position, I'll work with a formal definition of nihilism, one that is present in both his and Nietzsche's philosophies: nihilism is the lack of aim corresponding to our world-view. As a consequence of this definition, we can infer that if Heidegger's proposed solution is functional and, thus, he is

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Heidegger, „Das Ende der Metaphysik“, in *Nietzsche II*, p. 179.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, GA 40, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1983, § 58, pp. 208-214.

right about Nietzsche, then the answer to the question of Being will have to exclude the lack of aim from our world. Before even trying to test this assumption it can come to our mind some classical examples of phenomena which were seen as inaccessible to a world-view that has as ground Being. The place of these particular phenomena was explicitly designated as “beyond being”- we can think for instance about the Christian *living God*<sup>23</sup>. This kind of phenomenon can't be ignored for the simple reason that *it can* constitute the aim of our world-view. Consequently, even if we would be able to overcome the “forgetfulness of Being”, this would not necessarily imply that our world-view will not lack aim anymore.

Still, since Heidegger didn't come to an answer regarding the question of Being, we can't say that something is “beyond being”. Since we have no limits, we cannot speak about something that is “beyond”. Then again, if there is no explicit answer to the question of Being, this does not mean that the *horizon* of this answer cannot be circumscribed. Such an attempt can be found in Jean-Luc Marion's *Réduction et donation*. The French philosopher claims that if ontology, according to Heidegger<sup>24</sup>, accomplishes phenomenology, and phenomenology makes the ontology possible, then we must have contact with *the phenomenon* of Being. More precise, Being has, somehow, to show itself. Since *Sein und Zeit* doesn't provide such a result, this task will be entrusted to another writing, with a different perspective – *Was ist metaphysik?*. However, what is here described as phenomenon is not Being as such, but nothing [*Das Nichts*]. This perspective, according to Marion, is grounded also by the fact that Heidegger doesn't only reframe afterwards the conference by a foreword and an afterword, but also feels the need to rewrite some of the text's fragments. All these lead to the conclusion that Being's phenomenalisation is not reached. The relation intended between Being and nothing is to be achieved through a hermeneutical outlook<sup>25</sup>. On the other hand, this interpretation of nothing as Being involves some serious difficulties which will determine Heidegger to envisage as mediation between Being and nothing Being itself, the call of Being [*Anspruch des Seins*], to be accurate. Yet, the call of Being is made by a “silent voice” [*lautlose Stimme*]<sup>26</sup>, and for this reason it's not at all obvious if it bears the mark of Being. At the

<sup>23</sup> See Dionisie Areopagitul, “Despre teologia mistică”, in *Opere*, translated by Dumitru Stăniloae, București, Paideia, 1996, pp. 247-251.

<sup>24</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, GA 2, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1977, § 7, pp. 36-52.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, *Réduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phenomenology*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1989, p. 272.

<sup>26</sup> See Martin Heidegger, „Nachwort zu *Was ist metaphysik?*”, in *Wegmarken*, GA 9, Frankfurt am Main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1976, pp. 306-307.

same time, even if the call of Being would manifest itself beyond any ambiguity, it is still possible for *Dasein* not to be receptive, and in this way not to hear the call of Being. Consequently, Being would not be able to show itself<sup>27</sup>.

Besides these objections, Marion tries to bring forth a “counter-existential”, which carries with itself the possibility of a total failure of the call of Being. This new kind of existential is represented by a deeper kind of *boredom*. Instead of liberating us from a particular region of entity [*Seiendes*] and thus bringing us in front entities as a *whole* just so that Being would show itself<sup>28</sup>, boredom *could* liberate us not only from entities, but also from Being itself<sup>29</sup>. In order for Being to enter in the range of boredom, just like the entities, it should be “present” somehow. Simultaneously *Dasein* should be able to be subjected to this fundamental form of boredom, thus to manifest a kind of infidelity with regard to its ontological structure. This second condition is accomplished by the fact that *Dasein* is described not only through its authenticity – its concern for Being –, but also through inauthenticity – forgetfulness of Being. Therefore Marion’s scenario can be seen as plausible from two perspectives: 1. if Being calls, boredom can make *Dasein* deaf towards it; and 2. due to the same boredom *Dasein* can remain indifferent towards the “wonder of all wonders” [*Wunder aller Wunder*]: that entities exist<sup>30</sup>. In short, it can be said about *Dasein* that it *could* be, without too many difficulties, subjected to a deeper kind of boredom which casts Being into shadow<sup>31</sup>. Consequently, in the horizon opened by this particular kind of boredom a deeper call than that of Being can occur – it’s what Marion names “the call as such” [*l’appel comme tel*]<sup>32</sup>, towards which man *should be opened*. From this call – from what could interpellate us from outside of us – our world-view could receive its aim.

After this short excursion into Jean-Luc Marion’s analysis of Heidegger, I have to make a correction to my criteria for a *viable* solution to the problem of nihilism. Let us say that an answer to the question of Being would have solved this problem. Still, that would not have meant that we have found a solution, once and for all, for the lack of aim that threatens our world-view. To solve once and for all the problem of nihilism would mean that our world is inert, just like the one of metaphysics – a world with *no* possibilities for evolution, a *perfect* self-enclosed world, different from the one we know from our everyday life. Therefore, a viable solution to nihilism

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Marion, pp. 280-281.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, „Was ist metaphysik?“, in *Wegmarken*, p. 110.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Marion, pp. 283-287.

<sup>30</sup> See Heidegger, „Nachwort zu *Was ist metaphysik?*“, p. 307.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Marion, pp. 289-294.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 294-297.



will have to deal not only with the actual lack of aim, but also to prevent the *possibility* of slipping again into an aimless world-view; will have to be a fluid solution. From this perspective Nietzsche's theory of art can be reevaluated.

### 2.3. In Excess of Metaphysics

As I already showed, according to Nietzsche art has the sensitive world as only elbow room from which it extracts its guiding lines. For this reason there cannot be any way for it to risk its orientation by way of losing touch with its ground. At the same time by means of the ludic nature of the artist everything that comes into art's sight – even the most solemn values of metaphysics – is subjected to a reversed alchemy, and thus becomes a perfectly contingent and perishable entity. Already from this perspective, any attempt to present Nietzsche's theory of art as being caught in the context of metaphysics is to be seen as superfluous. Due to the fact that all the elements from art's range – be them firstly metaphysical or not – become game variables, substitutable by any other.

Yet, we must not forget that all these considerations of Nietzsche do not apply to every form of art. Not every artistic manifestation can be regarded as cure to nihilism. This function can be assigned first of all to the Dionysian state of artist's mind. The art form following from this horizon brings into saturation every feature of the remedy-art. The Dionysian artist is not just extracting his world-view from the sensitive world, and thus still being able to configure freely his own individuality, but quite the contrary. Caught up in frenzy he becomes part of the shapeless Dionysian realm:

The muses of the arts of "appearance" [*Schein*] paled before an art that, in its frenzy [*Rausch*], spoke the truth. The wisdom of Silenus cried "Woe! Woe!" to the serene Olympians. The individual, with all his limits and restraints [mit allen seinen Grenzen und Maassen] succumbed to the *Selbstvergessenheit* of the Dionysian states, forgetting the Apollonian precepts. Excess revealed itself as truth [*Das Uebermaass enthülte sich als Wahrheit*], and the contradiction, the pleasure born of pain spoke out from the heart of nature<sup>33</sup>.

According to John Sallis, we can witness in this excerpt from *Die Geburt der Tragödie* how every limit, every preceding configuration of the

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<sup>33</sup> KGW III, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, pp. 45-46. The English translation of this excerpt that I have used – partially modified – is to be found in John Sallis, "Dionysus – In Excess of Metaphysics", in David Farrell Krell and David Wood (ed.), *Exceedingly Nietzsche*, London and New York, Routledge, 1988, p. 6.

world is washed away through the display of excess. Yet, what comes forth is not to be seen as ground or new determination of “what is”, but, on the contrary, as dissolution of any ground or determination, as pure abyss. All these apply also to the artist whose subjectivity is dissolved into the realm of abyss<sup>34</sup>. From this point of view, artist’s activity cannot be alienated from the “ground” of his creation. Without subjectivity there can be no question with regard to some kind of pre-given structures that would configure – and eventually inertialize – the content of Dionysian intemperance. It wouldn’t be at all inappropriate to name this sort of artistic creation, by using an expression of Claudia Baracchi, “mimesis-without-distance”<sup>35</sup> or we can see here, along with Sallis, “nature adding art to itself”<sup>36</sup>.

The remedy-art, as Dionysian art, takes entirely part to world’s flow. On account of this it does not share the strong marks of metaphysics, and also does not risk inertializing its own horizon. Art avoids the nihilistic alienation from the world not only due to its essential sensitive coordinate or to the ludic nature of the artist, but above all because of the impossibility of a strong determination of its realm, because of excess and, consequently, because of the dissolution of artist’s subjectivity.

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>35</sup> See Claudia Baracchi, *Of Myth, Life, and War in Plato's "Republic"*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> See Sallis, pp. 10-11.

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