

Hegel and Gadamer on the Contemporary Understanding of Art: An Evaluation

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Abstract

Philosophers have different views on art, in the ancient period Plato believed that art is an imitation of the third order and the artists are to be expelled because they corrupt the society. In the medieval and modern era philosophers accepted that art is beauty. The problem is that people nowadays think that art is imitation and beauty and not. Knowing that art has moved to another level. This article is a reaction against this view that art is not imitation and beauty. Hegel approaches this problem when he says that art is not beauty but art has an essence which is the manifestations of the absolute mind, of which religion and philosophy are the other two. In Hegel's philosophy of art, art has a historical development which includes: Architecture, painting, music and poetry. Gadamer attempts to resolve this problem by dismantling the traditional understanding of art as beauty and imitation by introducing a phenomenological reconstruction of art as an experience. For Hegel, art is spiritual and also relate to the contemporary understanding of art because of architecture, music, painting and poetry. For Gadamer, art relate to contemporary understanding of art because any art work that is worthy to be called an artwork address us, it speaks to us. Today we have a better understanding of art which goes beyond that of Hegel and Gadamer. Art is now realistic because it has an artistic value from the inside, it is objectivistic because it is an object of reflection and it is relativistic because is an image of an age and concerns that particular culture. In this work, our method is textual analysis; it means a critical look at of the original works of our authors and commentaries written on them by other writers in order to evaluate our authors.

Introduction

Generally, a lot of people believed that art is about imitation and beauty. This is because they do not know the contemporary art has moved to another level. The major reason why they were influenced is because when Plato said even one enters the cinema hall and there is a drama either comedy or tragedy it is more an imitation because those who performed are not the real characters. Also people are easily attracted to things that are beautiful than what is ugly that is why they think art is beauty. But today art is not about imitation, beauty and ugliness but art has an intrinsic value from the "inside" which is the image of that particular age and culture. Hegel and Gadamer contributed to the development of contemporary art, in spiritual level like Hegel and linguistic level like Gadamer. According to Hegel, art is essentially figurative. This is because it seeks not to imitate nature, but because its purpose is to express and embody free spirit and this is achieved mostly adequately through the images of that age. Art for Hegel is different from religion and philosophy because art expresses spirit, self- understanding, not in pure concepts, or the image of faith, but in human beings. The main principle of art for Hegel is not to imitate nature, but to decorate our surroundings, to prompt us to be moral, to be political and to contemplate on and enjoy created images. For me, Hegel's understanding of art is very close to the contemporary understanding of art.

According to Gadamer, art is not imitation and beauty, he dismantles the old tradition of Plato, Hegel and Kant and introduced the phenomenological reconstruction of art into an experience. For him, a work worthy to be called a work of art address us, it speaks to us and reminds us of the things imbedded in the work of art but Gadamer also realizes that language cannot express everything in art work. Gadamer moved art from imitation and beauty to the level of linguistic and communication as a way of life. In this work, we reflecting on what is Art?, types of Art, Hegel on Art, Gadamer on Art, Evaluation and Conclusion.

What is Art?

Art is the expression of human creative skill and imagination. We have various branches of creative activity such as painting, music, literature and drama. The oldest form of art are visual arts, which include creation of images or objects in fields including painting, sculpture, print making, photography and other visual media. Architecture is often included as one of the visual arts; however, like the decorative arts, it involves the creation of objects where the practical consideration of use are essential in a way that they usually are not painting. Art may be characterized in terms of mimesis, its representation of reality, expression, communication of emotion, or other qualities. Reflecting on the Ancient period Harold Osborne remarks:

The test of art that is most generally applied in the Western World undoubtedly is fidelity to nature. We Westerners have done our best to bind art down to the world of material phenomena, we have made fidelity of reproduction the highest virtue in painting and sculpture, and have considered that the perfection of art lay in the artist's power to create illusive imitations of nature (Osborne, 1968:32).

It means that in the ancient period people were reflecting on nature by creating image about nature. One can note that the history of art existed for almost as long mankind from early pre-historic art to contemporary period. However, some theories restrict the concept of "artistic works" to modern western societies. After the naturalism in the ancients we have those called the realist who believes that when the reality represented in art work coincides with the actual world of experience we call that art realistic. Then we have anti-idealism, Francis Bacon writes: 'I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of human presence and memory trace of past events as the snail leaves its slime' (Bacon, 1985:286) in deed, the term idealistic' in the language of art history and criticism has acquired a composite meaning from interwoven strands of ideas which is important to distinguish perfectionist, normative, and metaphysical idealism. Perfectionist idealism is applied to art which reflects for preference nature at its best and most attractive, but attempts to improve and perfect nature by eliminating the inevitable imperfections of individual things. It means, even in order to choose out the most beautiful figure, at any rate in the sense that such idea is implicit in the standards by which he chosen normative idealism. This is an artistic idea which is about the sense of norm or a general truth, as distinct from variable individual instances of any clears. It is here that Aristotle differs from Plato in the ninth chapter of Aristotle's poetics; Aristotle says:

For poetry tells of universal truths, history of particular occurrences. By universal truths we mean the kinds of thing a certain type of person will say or do according to probability or necessity, which is what poetry aims at-tacking on the names afterword (Aristotle, 1986:242).

What Aristotle is saying is that literature is distinct from history by this the means journalism that which gives us an insight into the typology of human nature what man will naturally do as a matter of fact and not that recorded by accidental events. We have the metaphysical-idealism, it means the Greeks believe in metaphysical doctrine that an artist may obtain an intuitive vision of ultimate reality; the universal idea of Plato, and imitation, this reality in his art work originated with the Neo-Platonists it was perpetuated in a theological form during the middle ages.

Then we have the Aesthetics of Chinese Pictorial Art. Throughout classical antiquity and the Middle Ages the artist was ranked as manual worker and an artisan in a social framework which did not recognize the dignity of manual labour. In China, this was a different case because painting, poetry and music were regarded as pursuits worthy of the gentleman and scholar in a social structure which accorded very high prestige to scholarship and culture. Osborne commenting on Chinese arts says:

Two things stand out as most important for understanding the aesthetic concepts implicit in Chinese critical writing about visual arts. The first is the large extent to which the language of Chinese appreciation and criticism is rooted in the aesthetics of calligraphy in the Chinese and not the serve of the western term. The second is the fact that when Chinese writers speak about emotion and expression in painting they connect these things with calligraphic techniques rather than the subject matter (Osborne, 1968:68).

However, in the western this is not so because they are influenced by the instrument which provides the artists with mechanical equipment for communicating his message; by expressing his personality.

After the Chinese idea in art we have the Medieval and Renaissance Aesthetics. The metaphysical and rationalistic character of medieval aesthetics exemplified in St. Thomas Aquinas. In his look called the *Summa Theologica*, he discusses beauty as an aspect of the good. For him beauty and goodness in a thing is identical, he defined goodness as desirability everything is good in so far as it is desirable and a thing is desirable in so far only as it is perfect of its sort. Aquinas remarks:

For beautiful things are those which please when seen. Hence beauty consists in due proportion; for the senses delight in things duly proportioned, as in what is after their own kind because even sense is a sort of reason just as is every cognitive faculty.
(Aquinas, 1987:32).

What Aquinas is saying above is that beautiful is the same as the good, and they differ in aspect only. For the Renaissance aesthetics important advances were made in the practice and technique of the visual arts leading in the direction of greeter naturalism which is closed to empirical sciences and the study of certs. The discovery of mathematical theories of proportion was outstanding achievements of the period. The main principles that dominated the period in that the arts of painting and sculpture are a thing of the mind and intelligence. Art and poetry imitate nature and to thin end empirical sciences provided useful guidance. The plastic art, like literature, also pursues a moral purpose of social amelioration, aspiring to the ideal. Beauty, which is the goal of art, is an objective property of things. The arts are subject of perfection which rationally apprehensible and can be precisely formulated and taught.

In the modern period, we have Kant who said that art is not an imitation of the third order but art work can be contemplated up as “art for the sake of arts” After Kant we have Heidegger in the contemporary period who said art leads to Being. Also art is not a mere thing but it has a symbolism and an allegory. According to Heidegger Art is a mystery because all artists are inspired and control by Being. Heidegger writes:

The meaning of pervading technology hides itself, that which shows itself and at the time withdraws is the essential trait of what we call the mystery. I call the comportment which enable us to keep open to the meaning hidden in technology, openness to mystery
(Heidegger, 1966:35).

What Heidegger is saying is that art is also technology and they are connected to Being, therefore art and Being are mysterious. In this period, Karl Marx accepted that art is part and parcel of the superstructure and it is determined by the mode of production or economic system. Marx remarks: “All art made within the system is a commodity to be bought and sold as object of desire upon which human feelings are projected: the work of art in it is a consumer object therefore must be an object of desire but it is fetish” (Marx, 1973:35).

According to Kant, art is always about the society, and the artist is always a part of the culture, art is never independent or absolute. Art can only be human alienation because nothing is left for symbolizing because symbols communicate meanings. Let us now discuss types of Arts.

Types of Art

The types of art are as follows: (1) Fine art (2) Visual art (3) Liberal art, (4) Decorative art, (5) Applied art (6) Performing art.

- Fine art is visual art considered to have been created primarily for aesthetic and intellectual purposes judged for its beauty and meaningfulness, specifically, painting, sculpture, drawing and graphics etc. It is an activity requiring great skill.

- Visual arts: There are art forms such as ceramics, drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, design, crafts, photography, video, filming and architectural, current usage of the term “visual art” includes fine art as well as the applied, decorative art are fine arts.

- Applied art: The applied arts are the application of design and decoration to everyday objects to make them aesthetically pleasing. The term is applied in distinction to the fine arts which aims to produce objects which are beautiful and/or provide intellectual stimulation in practice the two overlap.

- Decorative arts: Are arts or crafts concerned with design and manufacture of beautiful objects that are also functional; it includes interior design, but not usually architecture, the decorative arts are often categorized in opposition to “fine arts” namely painting, drawing photography, and large scale sculpture, which generally have no function other than to be seen.

- Performing arts: Are art forms in which artists use their voices and/or the movements of their bodies, often in relation to other objects to convey artistic expression as opposed to for example, purely visual arts. Performing art include a variety of disciplines but all are intended to be performed in front of a live audience.

These includes: dance, music, opera, theatre, and musical theatre, magic, illusion, spoken word, mine, performance art recitation and public speaking, circus art etc.

- Liberal arts: The areas of learning that cultivate general intellectual ability rather than technical or professional skills. Liberal arts are often used as a synonym for humanities, because literature, language, history and philosophy are often considered the primary subject of the liberal arts.

It is the medieval studies comprising of the tritium and quadrivium. Let us now discuss Hegel on Art.

Hegel on Art

Georg Friedrich Hegel is a German Philosopher. Hegel's philosophy of art provides an apriori derivation from the very concept of beauty itself, of various forms of beauty and various individual arts. Hegel's philosophy forms part of his overall philosophical system. In order to understand the main claims of his philosophy as a whole. Hegel argues in his speculative logic that Being is to be understood as self-determining reason or "idea". In the philosophy of nature, however, he goes on to show that logic tells half the story; for such reason is not something abstract. It is not a disembodied logos but takes the form of rationality organized matter. According to Hegel, not just pure reason but physical, chemical and living matter that obeys rational principles. Hegel in his work called the Philosophy of *Fine Art* writes:

A work of art is, however, not merely censorious thing, but spirit manifested through a sensuous medium. As a little can we exercise our sense of taste on a work of art as such, because taste is unable to leave the object in its free independence; but is concerned with it in a wholly active way, resolves it, in fact, and consumes it. (Hegel, 1975:15).

Hegel believes that art is not an imitation of the third order talked about by Plato but it is an essence which manifest the absolute spirit, of which religion and philosophy are the other two. Also Hegel says that art differs from philosophy and religion; however, by expressing spirit of self-understanding not in pure concepts, or in the images of faith, but in and through objects that have been specifically made for this purpose by human beings. Such objects conjured out of stones, wood, colour, sound or words render the freedom of spirit visible or audible to an audience. In Hegel's view, this sensuous expression of free spirit constitute beauty. The purpose of art for Hegel, is thus the creation of beautiful objects in which the true character of freedom is given sensuous expression. The principal arm of art is not, therefore, to imitate nature, to decorate our surroundings, to prompt us to engage in moral or political action, or to shock us out of our complacency. It is to allow us to contemplate and enjoy created images that are beautiful precisely because they give expression to our freedom. Art's purpose, in other words, is to enable us to bring to mind the truth about ourselves and so to become aware of who were truly are. Art is beauty sake for Hegel, for the sake of a distinctively sensuous form of human self-expression and self-understanding.

Hegel says:

A work of art is only truly such in so far as originating in the human spirit, it continues to belong to the soil from which it sprang... And for this reason the work of art is higher rank than any product of nature whatever, which has not submitted to this passage through the mind. (Hegel, 1975:39)

What Hegel is saying is that any art work is more than nature because an art work is an image of its age. Hegel also idealized art and one should note that the work of idealization is undertaken not (like modern fashion photography) to provide an escape from life into the world of fantasy, but to enable us to see our freedom clearly. It is worth noting at this stage that Hegel's account of art is meant to be both descriptive and normative. Hegel goes out to give broad criteria that truly beautiful art must meet, and he is critical of work that claims to be "art" but that fails to meet these criteria. Hegel in order to be relevant and different from others posited his systematic philosophy of Art. Hegel's philosophical account of art and beauty has three parts:

- (i) Ideal beauty as such, or proper beauty, Hegel is well aware that art can perform various functions; it can teach, edify, provoke, adorn, and so on. His concern, is to identify art's proper and most distinctive function. This he claims to give intuitive, sensuous expression to the freedom of the spirit.

The point of art is not to be “realistic” – to imitate or mirror the contingencies of everyday life. But to show us what is divine and freedom look like. Such sensuous expression of spiritual freedom is what Hegel called the “ideal” or true beauty.

- (ii) The particular forms of Art. Hegel acknowledges that art also goes beyond ideal beauty. It goes beyond ideal beauty when art takes the form of symbolic art. It also goes beyond beauty when it takes the form of romantic art. The form of art that is characterized by works of ideal beauty itself is classical art. These are the three forms of art, or “forms of the beautiful”, Hegel believes are made necessary by the very idea of art itself. The development of art from one form to another generates what Hegel regards as the distinctive history of art.
- (iii) The system of the individual Arts. Art in Hegel is account, not only undergoes a historical development but also differentiates itself into different arts. Each art has a distinctive character and exhibits a certain affinity with one or more of the art forms. Hegel does not provide an exhaustive account of all recognized arts, he says little about dancing, about cinema, but he examines the five arts he thinks are manmade such as Architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry-which are epic, lyric poetry and dramatic poetry.

However, Hegel cannot do without dialectics, in his dialectics Hegel accepts the Greek and African art because art is beyond beauty. He did not accept the Chinese art of emotions. Hegel cover art and he developed and more complete philosophy of art than most philosophers before him. In keeping with his emphasis on the historical development of ideas and of consciousness he asserted: Art express in art that history in general was moving forward to a climax. Commenting on Hegel Beat Wyss remarks:

Hegel's philosophy of art is reaching the top, because Art taught people to look twice at things; for this reason, Hegel described it as the eye of the spirit. External, sensual stimulation was transformed into internal concept. The work of art was the mediator between blind fact and the absolute spirit, by artistically recreating nature it presented the sensual in a spiritual light. (Wyss, 1999:140).

Hegel maintains that aesthetics are symbolic, classical and romantic art. Each of these is defined by the relationship between idea and form that is common within itself. Hegel took ancient Egyptian and Indian art as examples of this, with their animal headed gods and monsters demons and heroes. The second is exemplified by classical Greek sculpture. Here the perfect, idealized human form embodies the ideal without any sense of distortion. But while the perfection is evident, the depth of the idea expressed is limited. Hence the third stage, romantic art, stresses inwardness, when it uses images, it often emphasizes the inadequacy of the image to complete the idea, now apprehended more adequately in an inward way much Christian art has this character, focusing as it does on the crucifixion, on martyrdoms and sufferings.

In summary, Hegel philosophy of art is not to imitate of nature but it is that which manifest the mind of the Absolute spirit. Hegel believes that every art work is an image of its age. For him art is not mere beauty but goes beyond beauty to the inside of the art work that is an art work has an intrinsic value. Let us discuss Gadamer on art.

Hans-Georg Gadamer on Art

Gadamer was a student of Martin Heidegger and he was very much influenced by Heidegger on hermeneutics’ but he differed from Heidegger by posited his own view of philosophical hermeneutics’. For him, it means that there is no interpretation which does not have a background. Heidegger believes that since man is throw into this world one can interpreted without baggage. However, there another interesting aspect of Gadamer and that is his aesthetics and art; it is this art that is our concern in this work. Gadamer’s aesthetic does not follow the tradition of Plato, Kant and Hegel. But he approached aesthetic in an experience which stands squarely in the phenomenological tradition. He is primarily concerned with the place of art in our experience of the world. His approach to aesthetic theory is one of those rare intellectual achievements which are simultaneously deconstructive and constructive. Gadamer writes:” Hermeneutical aesthetics presupposes phenomenological involvement with the subject matters of art rather than disinterested detachment”. (Gedemer, 1986:3).Gadamer’s aesthetics is deeply respectful of art’s ability to disrupt and challenge customary expectations. It attributes on ethical significance to art as being able to reveal the imitations of fixed cultural expectancy and to open the spectator towards the other and the different.

In another perspective, Gadamer talked about art as interlocutor. Gadamer says:

“Art addresses us, and it is the ability of art works to bring things to mind and to hint at unseen meanings is the reason to claim that in its speculative capacities, art, functions essentially like language” (Gadamer, 1989:87).

Indeed, Gadamer believes that language cannot express or communicate all that is imbedded in an art work. What he is saying is that language has unit, because there are so many things one lacks the vocabulary to explain about the work of art. Gadamer accepted that an image that is worthy of being called a work of art, has the power to affect us immediately. It means art work must say something to someone. This means that art work must be so outstanding that one must be forced to look at it so that one can understand oneself and others.

Gadamer’s conversation on art points to broader themes in which it is interrogative in nature, work through ending and reinterpretation Gadamer talks about tradition. According to Gadamer tradition is not a misplaced conservation but a canon or body of work asks of us. The question of tradition is one of the most controversial within Gadamer’s philosophy. It arises because of the way Gadamer establishes individual and collective learning on the acquisition of accrued experiences and practices, rather than upon any methodological norm. This argument exposes the enlightenment prejudice. Tradition is presented as a resources and a provocation for thinking and creativity. It is presented as being inconstant debate with itself; its renewal demands change and transformation. In continuation Gadamer says, this virtue of dialogical conception of tradition is that it is not culture specifically. This is because its main focuses is on the subject matters which different cultural practice address, it offers a model of cognitive engagement that can operate between distinct traditions rather than in just any one. Gadamer discussed literature and art. The engagement with literature and art has been a confining feature throughout Gadamer’s life and work. He has written intensively on poets such Celan, Goette, Holderlin, Gadamer’s engagement with art is strongly influenced by his dialogue with the history of Plato. At the same time; that engagement provides an exemplification of Gadamer’s Hermeneutics as well as a means to develop it further. He takes the experience of beauty to be central to an understanding of the nature of art. There are three basic reasons why he reflected on literature and art, they are as follows: (a) arts as play (b) symbol and festival. The role of art as play is central notion in Gadamer’s hermeneutics thinking generally, providing the basic for Gadamer’s account of the experience both of art and understanding. C.Lawn reflecting of Gadamer’s art as a play remarks:

The meaning of art as a play is what is revealed and opened up in the constant oscillation between art work and interpreter. The meaning of art work is never final, just as a game never reaches true finality, the game can always played again and players will always be drawn into its horizon. (Lawn, 2006:911)

What Gadamer also wants to emphasize with the notion of play is how art is more than the heightened state of feeling or aesthetic consciousness. We need to take account of two relationships at work in the operation of play. On the other hand, there is the dynamic between the players and the game, while on the other there is the relationship between the players and the spectators, it is what Gadamer terms a “playing along with”. Gadamer’s notion of art as a representational play whose purpose is to be what it is, represent what it does, outside the subjectivity of its participants. He rejects platonian notion that mimesis is some sort of copying. As transformed into structure, art as play, or specifically, the action of a drama no longer permits of any comparison with reality as the secret measure of all copied similarity. It does not operate as an enchantment but a transformation in the true. Art than, would seem to be an essentializing agent in so far as it reveals what is essential. Gadamer talks of art as a symbol, the symbolic character of the art work is seen, by him, not in terms of any form of simple, representation, but instead in terms of any form of character of art as always showing something more than literally present to us in the world. The art work, no matter what its medium, opens up, through its symbolic character, a space in which both the world, and our own being in the world, and brought to light as a single, but inexhaustibly risk of totality.

In the experience of art, we are not merely given a “moment” of vision, but are able to “ideal” along with the work in a way that takes us out of ordinary time into what Gadamer calls “fulfilled” or “autonomous” time. Thus, the art work has a festive, as well as symbolic and playful character. Since the festival similarly takes us out of ordinary time, while also opening us up to the true possibility of community.

Evaluation

We give credit to both Hegel and Gadamer by opening the doors for proper reflections on contemporary art.

For now, we have to place side by side Hegel and Gadamer to show their prose and coins and diversities and to see which one of them best explain the contemporary situation. For Hegel and Gadamer they believe that art is not aesthetics but it has an intrinsic value. This is because Hegel says art is an essence which has an image of an age and in particular culture. Gadamer maintains that any work worthy to be called an art work must address us and reminds us what is in the art work. Hegel and Gadamer rejected art as imitation and beauty. Hegel believes that art is spiritual because it is one of the manifestation of the absolute mind in which philosophy and religion are the other two. Hegel believes that art is different from philosophy and religion because art expresses spirit, self-understanding, not images of faith or pure concepts but in human beings. For Hegel, art is not to imitate nature, but to decorate our surroundings, to prompt us to be moral, to be political and finally to contemplate and enjoy created images. According to Gadamer art is linguistics in nature because every worthy art work address us. It speaks to us and reminds us the hidden and unseen things in the art work.

However, what Gadamer and Hegel is criticizing is the artistic work like drawing, painting and drama which people think it is imitation and beauty. In the area of diversities, Hegel goes spiritual and ontological. While Gadamer goes into linguistic and communication. Indeed, Hegel is more close to the contemporary understanding of art because he included in his philosophy of art architecture, painting, sculpture, music and poetry. To be particularistic, Hegel says that art is use to decorate our surroundings and also to contemplate and enjoy created in ages. However, today there is better understanding of art in Hegel because Hegel in his dialectics confirms the ancient art and African arts that beauty is from the “inside” and not outside. Today the better understanding of art goes beyond Hegel and Gadamer, therefore our contribution to knowledge is that art is realistic, objectivistic and relativistic.

1. The realistic position; whereby aesthetic quality is an absolute value independent of any human view.
2. The objectivist position; whereby it is an absolute value, but it is dependent on general human experience.
3. The relativist position; whereby it is not an absolute value, but depends on an varies with, the human experience of different human beings

In the contemporary society, art today is no longer beauty and imitation, art is an object of reflection and art is the most elusive of traditional problems of human culture. Art is incomprehensible, because it is a mystery. According to Martin Heidegger, the man of science and technology, the poet that names the “Holy” and the philosopher that thinks “Being” they are all inspired by the “Divine” no one is better than the other. Art today has been defined as a vehicle for expression or communication of emotions and ideas, a means for exploring, appreciating formal elements for their own sake, and as mimesis or representation. Indeed, art has several meanings in our contemporary society, it is a study of creativity, a process of using the creative skill, a product of what man has made, the audiences experience with the creative skill. Art today means an image of its own age which is authentic and has symbolic meanings which is not imitation and beauty.

Conclusion

In summation, we have come to an end of this discussion on Hegel and Gadamer on the contemporary understanding of Art. An Evaluation. “We give respect and honour to Hegel and Gadamer who brought art from the level of imitation and beauty to another level. Today, we have a better understanding of art which goes beyond that of Hegel and Gadamer. Therefore, we recommended that art should be realistic, objectivistic and relativistic. Realistic because art should be real and not an imitation since what is real is both seen and unseen. It means art is both physical and spiritual which can be independent of human view. Art is objectivistic because it is an object of meditation in which one can experience it. And it is relativistic because art work varies from one human beings to another. It also varies from one culture to another. Final recommendation is that art is beyond “imitation and beauty” but art has an intrinsic value which has authenticity and symbolism and not a mere thing scattered around.

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