

ART, TECHNOLOGY, AND TRUTH in the Thought of Martin Heidegger

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In mythology, autochthones (from the Ancient Greek αὐτός "self," and χθών "soil"; i.e. "people sprung from earth itself") are those mortals who have sprung from the soil, rocks and trees. They are rooted and belong to the land eternally.¹

I. INTRODUCTION

In his "Deromanticizing Heidegger," American philosopher Don Ihde attempts to denounce some arbitrary stances in Martin Heidegger's thought in order to propose a philosophy of technology purged of what he deems the philosopher's romantic, and implicitly Nazi, preferences. Ihde begins in stating: "A century after his birth, two very contrary statements can be made concerning Martin Heidegger: First, in a significant sense, he is surely one of the most important founders of the philosophy of technology [...] Second, we all also know that he joined the National Socialist German Workers' Party and remained with it through the war [...] My question is this: Is there something at the very heart of Heidegger's thought that makes both of these contraries possible?"² The aim of this present work attempts to answer Ihde's question following a close reading of Heidegger's public speech "Memorial Address"

¹ Josine H Blok. "Gentrifying Genealogy: On the Genesis of the Athenian Autochthony Myth." In *Ancient Myth. Media, Transformations and Sense-Constructions*, 251–75. Edited by Ueli Dill and Christine Walde. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 261.

² Don Ihde, *Heidegger's technologies: postphenomenological perspectives*, (New York, Fordham University Press, 2010), 74.

(*Gelassenheit*).³ If we assess the rest of Heidegger's works in light of this speech, then it is possible to reach a systematic understanding of the relationships that exist between art, technology and truth in Heidegger's thought. In turn, this analysis specifically allows us to appreciate what aspects of Heidegger's philosophy lead him to his so-called romanticism and the consequent error of subscribing to Nazism. Finally, this essay also explains how, in the words uttered ten years after the end of the war, Heidegger himself managed to offer an alternative to fascism so as to confront the threats of modern technology.

II. THE CONCEPT OF EARTH: PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON HEIDEGGER'S ROMANTICISM

Many of Martin Heidegger's works, such works as "The Origin of the Work of Art," or "The Question Concerning Technology," are filled with a romanticization of German country life that remains implicitly related (at least it is hard to argue otherwise) to Heidegger's involvement with Nazism. And yet, this supposed romanticization does not result from a mere ideological preference, but rather, is grounded in the very concept of a homeland (*Heimat*) or a home ground (*heimatlicher Boden*) consequently employed in Heidegger's "*Gelassenheit*" (*n.b.* both of these concepts approximately correspond to what in "The Origin of the Work of Art" he refers to as 'the earth').⁴ Heidegger concludes through his phenomenological explication of the work of art that the essence of the work is the strife between earth and world, and that "[w]hat thus happens in the strife [...] is the inauguration of the open in the struggle between the unconcealed and the concealed, the coming-out of hiding and deception—this self-contained event is the happening of what we call truth."⁵ The making of a work of art produces the earth, comparable to the sound in music, the words in literature or color in the visual arts. Nonetheless, we cannot reduce the earth to such isolated concepts as 'matter' or 'the sensuous' since Heidegger conceives of it as the opaque aspect of beings, which resists being brought to the clearing of intelligibility. In opposition to the earth, the world is that which is opened by the work. Earth and world, then, describe two different dimensions of intelligibility: the opaque, or that which resists interpretation (concealment), and the world as "revealing," or the transparent aspect of entities. Art as "the becoming and happening of truth"⁶ manifests then when the earth—as that which closes upon itself—becomes brought to the open of the world in the strife instigated by the work; that is, in the tensional relationship established between what there already is and the elusive aspect of the receding earth.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on thinking: a translation of Gelassenheit*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1959)

⁴ Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 110

⁵ Martin Heidegger, "Vom Ursprung des Kunstwerks: Erste Ausarbeitung" *Heidegger Studies Vol. 5* (1989): 5-22.

The original text reads: "Was so in der Bestreitung geschieht: die Eröffnung der Offenheit des Widerstreits von Unverborgenem und Verborgenen, das Herauskommen von Verdeckung und Verstellung, — dieses in sich gefügte Geschehen ist das Geschehen dessen, was wir Wahrheit nennen."

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 71.

Despite the alleged ontological complexity of Heidegger's concept of 'earth,' he still can claim that, "[w]e notice that a work of art has flowered in the ground of our homeland. As we hold this simple fact in mind, we cannot help [but remember that] at once [...] during the last two centuries great poets and thinkers have been brought forth from the Swabian land. Thinking about it further makes clear at once that Central Germany is likewise such a land, and so are East Prussia, Silesia, and Bohemia."⁷ Given these statements, it seems like we must concede to Ihde that Heidegger's romantic tastes are intrinsically linked to his nationalist ideology and represent a great obstacle not only for the philosophy of technology, but also for his aesthetics (including his concept of truth). Nonetheless, this pivot too hurriedly dismisses Heidegger's thought, which can be corrected if we approach his critique of modern technology from the horizon of his remaining corpus.

As stated earlier, Heidegger claims that the essence of the work of art takes place in strife, which itself hosts the occurrence of truth as unconcealment. In "The Question Concerning Technology," the essence of technology as enframing (*Gestell*) is characterized as modernity's hegemonic mode of unconcealing. In this way, art and technology are revealed as diametrically opposed modes of unconcealment or truth, and as Ihde points out—concerning the latter—Heidegger has the tendency to oppose a 'good' technology to a 'bad' one. What characterizes the good technology is its artistic dimension as a result from art not yet being distinguished in its particularity from the rest of technology, as is the case in Greek philosophy—where the concept of *techné* is understood as encompassing the *poiesis* of fine arts since the artist is not distinguished from the artisan. Yet, Ihde understands that Heidegger's distinction has its grounds in subjective preferences; in particular, a nostalgia for traditional modes of production and an ecological awareness that rejects those technologies that "provoke" (*herausfordern*) nature. In "*Gelassenheit*," Heidegger claims that in order to face the threats that modern technology poses, "[w]e can use technical devices as they ought to be used."⁸ Phenomenology (methodologically speaking) precludes this type of normative claims because it must be descriptive. Although we might conclude that in this speech Heidegger betrays his arbitrariness by uttering explicitly normative claims, there are still, nonetheless, many sufficient arguments to doubt this deduction. In the next section, I initially expound Heidegger's characterization of the provocative mode of unconcealing as derived from a more original one, and secondly, offer an interpretation of Heidegger's project in "*Gelassenheit*" that emphasizes the non-normative grounds of his statements. In both of these cases, the original/derived distinction grounds Heidegger's preferences. These must be understood as stemming from a purely phenomenological basis that does not allow itself to be tainted by subjective tastes or a normativity incompatible with the phenomenological method.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on thinking: a translation of Gelassenheit*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1959), 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

III. BEYOND ROMANTICISM: THE TRANSCENDENTAL ARTWORK

In the “Question Concerning Technology,” after a brief detour through the traditional conception of technology as a means to an end, and a reinterpretation of Aristotle’s concept of causality, Heidegger formulates the essence of technology as the *Gestell*, or “enframing”. The *Gestell* marks one of the epochs in Heidegger’s depiction of the history of western metaphysics, which just as the Idea was for Plato, is the way in which being announces itself to us in our times. What characterizes our epoch is that the *Gestell* interpellates us to unconceal the totality of beings as “stock” (*Bestand*) in the manner of a provocative order or solicitation (*herausfordernde Bestellen*).⁹ Discerning what exactly Heidegger considers to be the particular characteristics and limits that enable us to distinguish the provocative mode of unconcealment from non-provocative ones represents a tough exegetical challenge. Why exactly does the hydroelectrical dam on the Rhine provoke Nature whereas the temple does not? In this respect, Ihde opposes Heidegger’s description of the Greek temple in the “Origin of the Work of Art” to that which J. Donald Hughes offers in his *Ecology in ancient civilizations*. While Heidegger offers a highly romanticized depiction of the temple, Hughes emphasizes the environmental impact that one can see around the Acropolis. Hughes also mentions how even Plato witnessed these concerning ecological transformations when he visited various temples devoted to the guardian spirits of streams, which had already dried out by his time. Nonetheless, these counterexamples suffer from two defects. First, the contrast between these examples results from Heidegger’s stance that we must understand the work of art in the context of the world that is opened up by it. It is then justified to offer a romanticized depiction of the temple since only in this way can we offer an account of its original situation in which the temple properly functions as a work of art. The two examples offered by Hughes depict works whose worlds have already closed. Second, we must concede to Ihde that Hughes’ examples demonstrate how the damage done to nature is not something exclusive to modern technology. However, this does not mean that Greek technology provoked nature in a Heideggerian sense. What concerns Heidegger is the complete hegemony of a certain way of approaching beings that threatens to take over all other possible modes of unconcealment. We must take into account that even if the ancient Greeks could be said to have damaged nature just as much as the English did in the times of Francis Bacon, the difference between the two of them—and of unique interest to Heidegger—is how from a certain historical horizon nature can be seen as something to be dominated, which is clearly incompatible with the Greek conception of *physis*.¹⁰

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), 17.

¹⁰ In more analytical terms, the distinction is not quantitative but qualitative. It does not refer to a measurable difference in ecological damage but rather to a change in humanity’s relation to nature. The type of comparison that Ihde makes rests in the type of thinking that Heidegger is criticizing, that is, the calculative mode of thought that hopes to settle all questions by way of empirical observations and measurements.

The ultimate danger that the *Gestell* represents is that all modes of unconcealment would be redirected to that of provocation. This would signify the end of meditative thinking and the total hegemony of what Heidegger terms the calculative mode of thought. Heidegger claims that the *Gestell*, which becomes pervasively evident in our times with the advent of such technologies as the nuclear bomb, began operating and developing itself long ago—being the root of modern science’s instrumental character and understanding of nature in terms of measurable extension. In this way, Heidegger worries that the only possibility that would remain for man would be “of pursuing and pushing forward nothing but what is revealed in ordering (*Bestellen*), and of deriving all his standards on this basis. Through this the other possibility is blocked, that man might be admitted more and sooner and ever more primally to the essence of that which is unconcealed and to its unconcealment, in order that he might experience as his essence his needed belonging to revealing.”¹¹ In the language of *Being and Time*, man would fall into an improper mode of existence in which he would no longer understand himself from himself, and, remain oblivious to his own essence as a consequence of understanding both nature and himself in terms of stock (*Bestand*). Ihde admits that “Heidegger does not simply outright condemn modern technology—its essence, enframing, is simultaneously a revealing of the world and an openness.” In spite of this, Ihde dismisses the danger that Heidegger warns us of by introducing the following question: “In short, all of nature, including the human being, will be seen as reduced to a vast resource well (*Bestand*) – but the question then is: for who, or for what end?”¹² However, if we properly understand Heidegger’s stance that the *Gestell* grounds an epoch of our understanding of beings, then it does not result from any human will or in favor of any human interests. In this respect, Heidegger’s stance regarding the hegemony of the *Gestell* can be compared to Michel Foucault’s description of power relations. Instead of the traditional models of power vested in a source of authority, an individual figure or within a particular group, the microphysics of power do not respond to any such central source; instead, oppressed individuals reproduce within themselves these same structures biopolitically.¹³ The following quote from Heidegger’s “*Gelassenheit*,” thus, takes on the following relevance: “these forces, since man has not made them, have moved long since beyond his will and have outgrown his capacity for decision[s].”¹⁴

Another aspect of Heidegger’s romanticism remains in his nationalism as a form of the concept of ‘home ground,’ which specifically protrudes in “*Gelassenheit*.” In relation to art, Heidegger asks “does not the flourishing of any genuine work depend upon its roots in a native soil? [...] does man still dwell calmly between heaven and earth? [...] is there still a life-giving home-land in whose ground man may stand

11 Martin Heidegger, *The question concerning technology, and other essays*, (New York, Harper Perennial, 2013): 26.

12 Don Ihde, *Heidegger’s technologies: postphenomenological perspectives*. (New York, Fordham University Press, 2010), 81.

13 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 26.

14 Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on thinking: a translation of Gelassenheit*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1959), 51.

rooted, that is, be autochthonic?”¹⁵ These concepts lend themselves easily to an interpretation that relates Heidegger’s thought immediately back to his involvement with Nazism, but this issue is far more complex. The concept of earth is the result of a phenomenology of the work of art and his phenomenology—as is the case for the phenomenology of “equipment” towards the beginning of *Being and Time*, which focuses exclusively on the artisanal mode of production—takes the thematic entity under description from the perspective of a primitive experience. In this way, we can say that Heidegger’s phenomenology of art, although seeking to arrive at the essence of art as such, focuses on a model of art in which the production of beautiful objects is not yet distinguished in its particularity from the rest of technological production. In this manner, there seems to be a radical difference between the Greek temple as studied in the “Origin of the Work of Art” and the example of Van Gogh’s painting “A Pair of Shoes” offered in that very same text. While the essence of the work of art as strife must be descriptive of all forms of art, it seems that the Greek temple is limited to the world of the Greeks, whereas Van Gogh’s painting properly reveals to Heidegger the essence of art as such. Iain Thomson claims that “in Van Gogh’s painting—the strange space which surrounds these shoes like an underlying and yet also enveloping atmosphere—one can notice that inchoate forms begin to emerge from the background but never quite take a firm shape; in fact, these shapes tend to disappear when one tries to pin them down.”¹⁶ In this manner, Van Gogh’s painting can be said to reflect the structure of the type of strife that Heidegger deems the essence of the work of art.

Meyer Schapiro famously objected to Heidegger’s interpretation of Van Gogh’s painting as nothing but a subjective projection of his own romantic preferences, since the shoes that the painting depicted were Van Gogh’s own—those of a city man, and not, as he states, those of a countrywoman. Most Heideggerians would claim that Schapiro misses the important aspects of Heidegger’s example; namely, the ontological depth sought in the phenomenological description of the work. While I partially agree with this rebuke, the fact that Van Gogh painted his own shoes¹⁷ acquires utmost importance precisely because it means that we are facing an ontological work that reflects on its own being—a transcendental art¹⁸ that reveals

15 Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on thinking: a translation of Gelassenheit*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1959), 47-48.

16 Thomson, Iain D., “Heidegger’s Aesthetics”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/heidegger-aesthetics/>>.

17 Van Gogh’s painting then doesn’t reveal the world of the country woman but the world of the artist. Here we have an opposition between the two modes of reading the concept of earth. If we take the shoes to be those of the German country woman, we read the earth as soil (in a way reminiscent of the Nazi slogan “blood and soil”) whereas if we take them to be the artist’s, we are confronted with the concept of earth as that dimension of intelligibility that resists totalitarian closure. I’d venture to claim that Van Gogh’s painting could only reveal art’s essence to Heidegger in so far as it expresses the artist’s relationship to the earth which involves a constantly renewed attempt to seize those fleeting instants that are worthy of being immortalized in the artwork. Derrida seems to be pointing in this direction on *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* and also on *The Truth in Painting*.

18 There is much to develop and further enquire in regard to this concept since the reflexive character of modern art is an extensive phenomenon. I recently came upon a book by literary critic Robert Alter named “Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-conscious Genre,” which sees in the Quixote not only the birth of the novel, but also the archetype that contains all the self-reflexive exercises that later novelists will explore and exploit (with the

the conditions of its own possibility. This kind of art differs altogether from what one could deem pre-transcendental art, such as the Greek temple, or any other work of art previous to Cervantes' revolution in putting forth his highly reflective *Don Quixote*—comparable to that started in philosophy twenty years later by Descartes in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*.¹⁹ We can say, without departing too much from Heidegger, that a work of pre-transcendental art is a sensible manifestation of the spirit of a community or, in less Hegelian terms, that it consolidates its ethno-political identity by providing a tangible foundation for its political organization. Nonetheless, we can only claim that this is art's function because of Heidegger's radical claim that the temple founds the Greek world in the sense of a cosmovision, opening the historical horizon of intelligibility for their understanding of beings. As Heidegger says, "Standing there, the temple first gives to things their look, and to men their outlook on themselves."²⁰ While the temple's essence is the strife in which the earth is brought to the clearing of human intelligibility, Van Gogh's painting reflects the strife itself, as his broad brushstrokes abandon the defined lines of realism and evoke the elusive and receding aspect of the earth. In this way, we can appreciate the link between Heidegger's aesthetics and nationalism, since as long as an explicit distinction between transcendental and pre-transcendental art does not arise, the concept of 'earth' remains tied to that of a 'home ground' and autochthony. Heidegger's "*Gelassenheit*" functions as an exhortation for thinking about a new autochthony that would allow us to dwell properly in the midst of the irreversible changes brought through modern technology.

Releasement (*Gelassenheit*) is the attitude that Heidegger proposes as that which we need to assume in order to face the threats of modern technology. In "The Experience of Technology: Human-Machine Relations," Ihde states that "there is a 'technosphere' within which we do a good deal of our living, surrounding us in part the way technological artifacts do literally for astronauts and deep sea investigators."²¹ Despite his romanticism, Heidegger similarly observes that, "[f]or all of us, the arrangements, devices, and machinery of technology are to a greater or lesser extent indispensable. It would be foolish to attack technology blindly. It would be shortsighted to condemn it as the work of the devil. We depend on technical devices."²² Given that we depend on the world of technology or the technosphere, releasement means saying "yes" to modern technology, remembering, however, that

exception of those who subscribe to literary realism). Furthermore, an interesting dialogue can be opened with Danto's philosophy of art since his periodization of the history of art responds to the degree of self-consciousness evidenced by artists. Danto distinguishes between pre-art and Art, the latter corresponding to the epoch in which artists as the makers of beautiful objects are distinguished from artisans. The infamous claim of the end of art precisely refers to the epoch in history, the 20th century, where art itself becomes philosophical as it explicitly poses the question, "What is art?"

19 We could also mention here another exponent of the Spanish renaissance: the painter Velazquez, known for his self-portrait *Las Meninas* and his extensive depiction of mirrors.

20 Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21.

21 Ihde, D. *Technics and praxis*, (Dordrecht, D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1979), 14.

22 Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on thinking: a translation of Gelassenheit*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1959), 53.

the essence of modern technology insofar as it compels us to understand nature merely as a quantitatively measurable reserve of resources (including what we deem the “human resources”) threatens to redirect all modes of unconcealment to that of provocation. Since this would signify a fall into an improper mode of existence as we stop reflecting upon ourselves to understand humanity merely in terms of stock, releasement simultaneously has to say “no” to the pervasiveness of the *Gestell*: “We can affirm the unavoidable use of technical devices, and also deny them the right to dominate us, and so to warp, confuse, and lay waste our nature.”²³ This saying yes to the unavoidable character of technology acknowledges that “a profound change is taking place in man's relation to nature and to the world. But the meaning that reigns in this change remains obscure.”²⁴ Given this opacity in modern technology's essence, the openness to mystery becomes the other part to Heidegger's solution to face the dangers of the *Gestell*. With this openness, Heidegger simultaneously recognizes the imperative to accept the inevitable while humbly admitting that his limitations as a man of a past generation preclude him from imagining how man can dwell properly in the time of the *Gestell*. Insofar as “mystery” is defined by Heidegger as that which shows itself at the same time as it conceals itself, the openness to mystery is the way in which we keep meditative or self-reflexive thought alive by staying in the realm of truth as unconcealment. It is worth noting how the mystery to which we remain open evokes the concept of earth, for one of Heidegger's main contributions to philosophy is his stance that humans first and foremost understand the world through the manipulation of tools and the production of works. Thus, thought as openness to mystery and art are identified—as in Nietzsche's stance that art is the properly metaphysical activity of man or Danto's claim that the defining trait of 20th century art remains its philosophical character since it explicitly poses the question “What is art?”

V. CONCLUSION

Releasement and openness to mystery “grant us the possibility of dwelling in the world in a totally different way. They promise us a new ground and foundation upon which we can stand and endure in the world of technology without being imperiled by it. Releasement toward things and openness to the mystery grants us a vision of a new autochthony, which someday even might be fit to recapture the old and now rapidly disappearing autochthony in a changed form.”²⁵ The lost rooting that Heidegger denounces is not simply the subordination of meditative thinking to calculative thought: the hegemony of modern technology brings about the shortening of all distances in space and time, the erasure of all localisms as a result of globalization. As Ihde claims, “[t]he dramatic space shots of Earth from the moon or a satellite are very un-Heideggerian precisely because they place Earth at a distance

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on thinking: a translation of Gelassenheit*, (New York, Harper & Row, 1959), 54..

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Pg. 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

from Earth-as-ground. But they are also irreversibly part of the postmodern view of Earth-as-globe, with a very different sense of what constitutes our ‘home’.”²⁶ As this essay demonstrated, Heidegger recognizes this irreversible aspect of the profound changes in humanity’s relation to nature and the world and exhorts us to *think* so that we can build a “home” in the technical world. In this regard, Heidegger’s thought is closer than ever to the spirit of Kant’s philosophy: not only does he offer a critique of the illegitimate claims of the science of his time that threaten to warp and destroy human freedom, but he also calls upon us to understand our dwelling within the world in cosmopolitan terms. ♦

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²⁶ Don Ihde. *Heidegger’s technologies: postphenomenological perspectives*, (New York, Fordham University Press, 2010): 85.