

Heidegger's Revolutionary
(Anti-/Counter-/Post-)Modernism:
A Rejoinder to Harri Mäcklin, "A Heideggerian
Critique of Immersive Art"¹

Jussi Backman

CONTACT: University of Jyväskylä, Department of Social Sciences
and Philosophy; jussi.m.backman@ju.fi

In the context of these "Reciprocative Rejoinders" on and beyond Heidegger and Heideggerian thought, I will voice a few reflections inspired by Harri Mäcklin's Heideggerian reading of immersive art. "Immersive art" refers to a rising twenty-first-century artistic trend, prominently represented by collective agents such as teamLab and Meow Wolf, that typically immerses the perceiver into a holistic experiential environment, often created with the help of virtual and augmented reality technologies. With elegance and sophistication, Mäcklin argues that while, on the one hand, immersive art can be seen as an epitome of the production of intense aesthetic lived experiences (*Erlebnisse*) and the subjective manipulation of meaningful reality that, for Heidegger, characterize late modern art, immersive works of art are also amenable to a more "positive" Heideggerian analysis. As sources of genuine *wonder*, beyond mere aesthetic stimulation, capable of transporting the beholder to "another place" and exposing her to overpowering dimensions of meaningfulness beyond subjective control, immersive artworks also serve a transformative function that

potentially indicates a path beyond the objectifying aesthetic approach and its footing, the modern metaphysics of autonomous subjectivity. Mäcklin thus shows immersive art to be situated on the very threshold of the ongoing decision (*Entscheidung*), described by Heidegger, between the modern completion of the Western metaphysical tradition and the ensuing transition (*Übergang*) to another, postmodern and postmetaphysical, beginning, inception, or onset (*Anfang*) of thinking (GA 7: 81/EP 95-96; GA 45: 124/108) – a decision whose multiple facets, listed in section 44 of *Contributions to Philosophy*, include the question of “whether art is an arrangement of lived experience [*Erlebnisveranstaltung*] or the setting-into-work [*Ins-Werk-Setzen*] of truth” (GA 65: 91/72).

Mäcklin’s double reading of immersive art highlights the wider ambivalence of Heidegger’s approach to modern art which, as we know, was generally rather bleak and seemingly symptomatic of a certain cultural conservatism, expressed in remarks such as one in his *Black Notebooks* on a 1947 exhibition of modern French painters at the Munich *Haus der Kunst*: “What is now on exhibit there (Picasso, Braque, Juan Gris) is no inception [*Anfang*] but rather the end, indeed, the end of art’s demise [*Verendung*]. Surrealism... is the last clamor of the fading cry of distress of defunct metaphysics” (GA 97: 300-301).² But despite the disparaging tone of such comments, it is a mistake to read this account, which situates modern art within the end of metaphysics, as a categorical normative evaluation. Heidegger may not strike us as a particular modern art aficionado, yet his main point is not to deny modern works of art their significance within their own context, but rather to try to map that context in its historical specificity. As it is put in the 1955-56 lectures on *The Principle of Reason*, modern (here: abstract) art “has its legitimate function [*legitime Funktion*] in the domain of... [the] technico-scientific world-construct” (GA 10: 31/20). And in a 1952 discussion in Munich on “Art and Technics,” Heidegger points out:

Contemporary artistic practice has perhaps nothing more to do with the previous conception of art and its tasks. However, this transformation must be accepted

as a task assigned to us [*uns aufgegeben*]. Saying this is not to voice a critique of the works of art being produced today. (GA 76: 393)

As Mäcklin's analysis clearly demonstrates, Heidegger's dismissive attitude and his personal artistic preferences, which are sometimes read as a flat and wholesale rejection or condemnation of modern art, are insufficient guidelines for any attempt to look at artistic phenomena within a "Heideggerian" framework.³ Such an attempt clearly cannot be a dogmatic reproduction of Heidegger's idiosyncratic stance or tastes but must rather assume the form of an inventive application of the main conceptual resources bequeathed to us by Heidegger's philosophical project. Only in this way can it be said to be a reciprocative rejoinder, a genuine attempt to think. We should not downplay the hermeneutic relativism inherent to Heidegger's thinking: meaningful historical phenomena are not given to us as objects of approval or disapproval according to fixed criteria, but as assigned interpretive tasks that are to be understood in the light of their singular historical situation. While modern and contemporary art may appear to be anomalies or symptoms of deterioration if judged by the standards of classical art or the Hegelian thesis of the "end of art," this simply indicates that the position and the function of art have changed; new standards must be found for a new era. As Heidegger writes to the conservative author Rudolf Krämer-Badoni in 1960, the task of thinking modern art (which he himself largely omitted) entails the task of thinking the late modern technical epoch within which it is embedded. Contextualizing modern art in this manner does not mean reducing it to a mere scion or superstructure of technicity (as a Marxist-type materialist reading might be inclined to do).

You write that I "deliberately overlook the epoch of abstract art." To put it more carefully: abstract art is not discussed. Why not? Because, in my opinion, there is nothing substantial to say about it in terms of thinking as long as the *essence* of technics...is not sufficiently

clarified. That is not to say that abstract art is an offshoot [*Ableger*] of modern technics.⁴

Mäcklin's case study takes an important step towards filling this gap by thinking contemporary art in the light of the Heideggerian analysis of technicity. It shows that immersive art clearly belongs within a wider late modern cultural framework, but is not simply reducible to a symptom of an underlying monolithic social totality: contemporary art is more than the "cultural logic of late capitalism" analyzed by Fredric Jameson in his famous study.⁵ Mäcklin detects in contemporary immersive artworks elements both of the "danger" and the "saving power" discovered by Heidegger at the heart of modern technics. In his 1949 Bremen lectures, the latter suggests that while the "enframing," "positionality," or "setup" (*Gestell*) that provides the fundamental matrix of the technical world threatens to annihilate the singular meaningfulness of things – their situatedness in a unique historical juncture – altogether, an awareness of this matrix as itself a finite and historically constituted configuration of being paradoxically prepares the way for another, post-technical configuration (GA 79: 68–73/64–69). One of the most important implications of Mäcklin's analysis follows from the fact that this same ambivalence and twofoldness applies more widely to Heidegger's account of modernity in general. In the rest of this brief note, I will therefore apply Mäcklin's fruitful insight into Heidegger's philosophy of art to the later Heidegger's philosophy of history.

On the level of tone and rhetoric, Heidegger undeniably comes across as a nostalgic antimodern reactionary, glorifying the greatness and simplicity of the Greek "first inception" of philosophy in which being in the sense of intelligible presencing (*Anwesen*) and truth in the sense of *alētheia*, the unconcealment of intelligibility to receptive thinking, took hold of the inceptual Presocratic thinkers, Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus (GA 65: 459–60/361–62; GA 54: 10–11/7–8). On this surface level, the later Heidegger's master narrative of Western philosophy reads as a mournful tale of decline in which the "ontotheological" metaphysics first introduced by Plato and Aristotle shifts the focus from presencing and unconcealment as such to the maximally

present and veridical entity or substance, thus subjugating being to beings or, to be more precise, to the being-ness (*ousia*) of beings (GA 65: 209/163–64; GA 6.2: 312–13/N4 208–9; GA 6.2: 367/EP 4). Metaphysics anchors beings in the most beingful being or the most substantial substance, which scholastic Aristotelianism proceeds to identify with the Christian Creator and which modern metaphysics since Descartes relocates into the self-consciousness of the thinking ego as the fundamental subject in respect to which beings are allotted the status of apprehended and represented objects (GA 6.2: 112–71/N4 85–138). We are told that this progressive “forgottenness” of being, its metaphysical occlusion by a series of paradigmatic beings (GA 5: 364–65/274–75), ultimately reaches its modern culmination, completion, and end in Nietzsche’s metaphysics of the will to power, in which being and truth become mere instrumental constructions of subjectivity as purely self-referential will that solely wills its own empowerment and enhancement (GA 6.1: 591–92/N3 155–57). In this dreary climax of the Heideggerian story, metaphysics is ripe to be replaced by its heir, late modern technics, the ceaseless and aimless ordering, disposing, and positioning of beings as exploitable resources (GA 7: 76–78/EP 93–95). One important thread of this narrative is the aestheticization of the work of art – invoked by Mäcklin – from a locus of meaning-disclosure into a repository of subjective sensual stimulation (GA 6.1: 74–224/N1 77–220).

And yet, in some of his most illuminating and crucial passages, Heidegger reminds us that the lamenting tenor of this account of metaphysics as the history of being is misleading. There is a certain “determinist” logic to this story, in the sense that it is determined by its outcome, in terms of which it is recounted. Metaphysics was never a contingent error or errancy of Western thought; it was, as the 1936–46 notes on “Overcoming Metaphysics” have it, “a unique, but perhaps also the necessary, fate [*Verhängnis*] of the West and the presupposition of its planetary dominance” (GA 7: 75/EP 90, tm) – “necessary” in the sense that without metaphysics, we could not find ourselves at its *end*. Being itself can only appear in its distinction to or differentiation from (*Unterschied*) beings at the point where “beings have...first entered the most extreme oblivion of being [*Seinsvergessenheit*]” (GA 7: 76/EP

91, tm), in other words, when metaphysics has been completed (with Nietzsche) and its initial exclusive focus on the beingness of beings becomes manifest in the light of its ultimate implications. The point is not to “criticize” any previous epoch of philosophy, for on their own terms, they were all perfectly fine. The fact that the Greek thinkers did not inquire into being as the appropriating event (*Ereignis*) that makes intelligible presence and *alētheia* possible was not an omission (*Versäumnis*): philosophically, they did what was relevant in terms of their own finite standpoint.

The reason the Greeks did *not* inquire here is that this question runs *counter* to their ownmost task, and therefore it could not at all enter their field of view. Their failure to question was...due precisely to their original power to stand firm in the determination [*Bestimmung*] meted out to them. (GA 45: 122/107, tm)

The metaphysics of modernity holds, for Heidegger, the same narrative necessity as capitalism does for Marx: the genealogy of the present, in the Foucauldian sense of a “historical ontology of ourselves,” cannot be narrated without it.⁶ We cannot understand where we are today, the determinate situation meted out to *us*, without it. Only through its ultimate modern phase of completion and culmination can the history of the epochal forgottenness of being, like the history of humanity’s alienated modes of production, unfold into the contemporary transition to a post-history.

We need to reflect here on the inception of Western thinking and on what happened in it and what did not happen, because *we* stand at the end – at the end of this inception. (GA 45: 124/108, tm)

The completion of metaphysics as the essential fulfillment of modernity [*Neuzeit*] is an end only because its historical ground is already the transition into the other inception. This other inception...does not renounce what

has been, but goes back into the grounds of the first inception. (GA 6.2: 21/N3 182, tm)

There is thus no real nostalgia, no homesickness in Heidegger's anti-, counter-, or postmodernism. As he reminds his small circle of disciples in what was to be his last seminar in 1973, the historical dimension of his project was never about a "return" (*Rückkehr*) to a Presocratic origin. There is no origin to return to, home is always already irretrievably lost. There can only be a turn towards (*Zukehr*) the origin "from out of our present age" (GA 15: 394/FS 77) – that is, a reappropriation of the first inception of philosophy and the epochal history of being from out of its contemporary end, resulting in its transformation into another inception, one that has never previously been. If Heidegger is a conservative, he is not a reactionary who wants to retrogress or revert, but a conservative revolutionary, an accelerationist who seeks to subvert by progressing to the very end of a circular trajectory.⁷ In its passage through modernity, metaphysics has ended up making a full circle – but one that does not leave the point of departure as it initially was upon re-turning or revolving back to it. As Heidegger explains in a 1971 letter to Gadamer, the required "step back" (*Schritt zurück*) is "the retreat [*Einkehr*] into the 'other inception,' that is, into the *one* and the *selfsame unique* inception [*einen u. selbigen einzigen Anfang*] of Western-European thinking, but *this* inception thought in another manner."⁸

With these remarks, I wish to submit that Mäcklin's essay offers us an important insight into the complicated and ambivalent dynamic involved in any inventive and nondogmatic "Heideggerian" attempt to tackle contemporary artistic and cultural phenomena, and late modernity in general, in terms of the thesis of an ongoing completion of metaphysical modernity and a transition to another, postmodern inception. This complexity and ambivalence bestow the Heideggerian approach with a certain context-sensitivity and plasticity that is often overlooked. In my view, taking these features into account is of utmost importance for our current attempts to assess the continuing theoretical relevance of Heidegger, seriously compromised by the thinker's disturbing idiosyncrasies that have increasingly been brought to light

with the publication of the *Black Notebooks*. Heidegger explains that a reciprocative rejoinder is a hermeneutic repetition (*Wiederholung*) that “does not let itself be persuaded by ‘the past,’ just in order to let it recur as something formerly actual” (GA 2: 510/SZ 386, tm), but rather makes a creative response to and use of possibilities inherent in the past. This is what Heidegger’s reappropriation of the inception does, this is what any responsible engagement with Heidegger must do, and this is what Mäcklin’s essay does. It is more crucial than ever that we regard “Heideggerian philosophy” not as a dogmatic set of propositions or a normative matrix of evaluation, but as a hermeneutic tool and a heuristic conceptual framework. This is the true spirit of the Heideggerian slogan “Ways, not works.”

NOTES

- 1 I want to thank Lee Braver and Harri Mäcklin for wonderfully helpful comments on and support with this note.
- 2 For an overview of the question concerning Heidegger’s relevance for contemporary art, see Jussi Backman, Harri Mäcklin, and Raine Vasquez, “Editors’ Introduction,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology* 4, no. 2 (2017): 93–99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20539320.2017.1396695>.
- 3 On Heidegger’s “condemnation” of modern art, see, e.g., Julian Young, *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120–21, 163.
- 4 Letter to Rudolf Krämer-Badoni, April 25, 1960, in Rainer A. Bast, “Ein Brief Martin Heideggers an Rudolf Krämer-Badoni über die Kunst,” *Phänomenologische Forschungen* 18 (1986): 179. My translation. See also Dennis J. Schmidt, *Between Word and Image: Heidegger, Klee, and Gadamer on Gesture and Genesis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 79–80.

- 5 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).
- 6 On genealogy as a “historical ontology of ourselves,” see Michel Foucault, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 45-49.
- 7 On Heidegger and the German “conservative revolution” of the Weimar period, see Reinhard Mehring, *Martin Heidegger und die “konservative Revolution”* (Freiburg: Alber, 2018); Timo Pankkoski and Jussi Backman, “Relativism and Radical Conservatism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Relativism*, ed. Martin Kusch (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 219-27, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351052306-24>.
- 8 Letter to Gadamer, December 2, 1971, cited in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 4: *Neuere Philosophie*, vol. 2: *Probleme, Gestalten* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), 482n31; trans. Richard E. Palmer in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 457-58n33. Translation modified.