

THE COSMOLOGICAL AESTHETIC WORLDVIEW IN VAN GOGH'S LATE LANDSCAPE PAINTINGS

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ABSTRACT: Some artworks are called sublime because of their capacity to *move* human imagination in a different way than the experience of beauty. The following discussion explores how Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* along with some of his other late landscape paintings accomplish this peculiar movement of imagination thus qualifying as *sublime* artworks. These artworks constitute examples of the higher aesthetic principles and must be judged according to the cosmological-aesthetic criteria for they manage to generate a transition between *ethos* and *phusis* and present them in unity. Here, referring to Heraclitean, Kantian, Nietzschean and Heideggerian metaphysics and aesthetics, I propose that the principles of motion and transition be the new *cosmologic-aesthetic categories* for the judgment of sublime artworks as well as for the understanding of the world (*Weltanschauung*) they represent.

KEYWORDS: Van Gogh; Heidegger; Kant; Nietzsche; Heraclitus; Sublime; Dionysian; Fire; Motion; Transition; Phusis; Logos, Ethos; Beauty

There is a chance that initial responses to Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* may be just as diverse and unpredictable as to any other painting. However, one can safely say that a mere "beautiful!" does not adequately account for the striking experience of seeing *The Starry Night* for the first time. Some artworks are called sublime because of their capacity to *move* human imagination in a different way than the experience of beauty. The following discussion explores how Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* along with some of his other late landscape paintings accomplish this peculiar movement of imagination thus qualifying as *sublime* artworks. These artworks constitute examples of the higher aesthetic principles and must be judged according to the cosmological-aesthetic criteria for they manage to generate a transition between *ethos* and *phusis* and present

them in unity. Van Gogh achieves this effect by depicting the sky, sun, moon, stars, fields, mountains, trees and human dwellings as extensions of the motion inherent in *phusis*. These paintings are *dynamic* as they relate immediately to human sense-intuition (*Anschauung*), thus moving the human imagination and subsequently stimulating the power of judgment, which by then has already classified the experience of seeing them as *sublime*. Once acknowledged as sublime, this dynamic-aesthetic quality of the artwork actualizes the transition between the moving forces it represents and the human concept it has activated. Therefore, the dynamic-aesthetic quality comes to be part of the universal *logos* which is timeless, in other words is, was, will be, and spaceless, or which is there, here, closer, further, inside and outside. When *looking at* these paintings one is also looking at *logos*, the bridge on which humanity dwells. The moving experience of the artwork means witnessing the very grounding of humanity within the senseless cosmic forces.

To what extent can we say, then, that a technically perfect photograph of the Milky Way would fail to create a similar effect to *The Starry Night*? Is it bound to fail? While the photograph aims to present the “thingly” qualities of the Milky Way, the painting goes *beyond* merely phenomenal characteristics of the landscape and thereby becomes the artistic creation reconciling the phenomenon *with* its concept. Heidegger explains this as follows:

Art presences in the art-work . . . the artwork is something over and above its thingliness. This something else in the work constitutes its artistic nature. The artwork . . . says something other than the mere thing itself is. . . . The work makes publicly known something other than itself, it manifests something other: it is an allegory. In the artwork something other is brought into conjunction with the thing that is made.¹

This evidently applies to Heidegger’s example of Van Gogh’s *A Pair of Peasant Shoes*. Even though no background or setting is provided for the viewer, thanks to the artful rendering of the artist, one senses that “this equipment belongs *to the earth* and finds protection in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself.”² Here, not only does the equipment but also its very concept belongs *to the earth*, precisely as the stars, moon and human dwellings belong to the absolute motion in *The Starry Night*. Earthiness, as an elemental characteristic, prevails in the physical qualities of the painting like color, tone, and vividness of the painting as well as in the conceptual qualities like the weariness, antiquity, and usualness of the painted thing. Earth is present in the painting both as a

¹ Heidegger, Martin. ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’ in *Off The Beaten Track* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp.2-3.

² Heidegger, Martin. ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, p.14.

physical element and as an aesthetic concept, and these phenomenal and conceptual qualities are essentially dependent on each other. For instance, the weariness of the shoe is not only demonstrated by the shades of dark brown but it also *belongs to* the color as the color belongs to the conceptual quality of weariness of the shoes heavily used in farming. Only then does the painting make the characteristics of the shoes explicit and aesthetic. Accordingly, the work of art makes the invisible visible, the conceptual physical, and the noumenal phenomenal by way of actively transmitting one to another. While the physical and conceptual qualities of the element of *earth* are transmitted in *A Pair of Peasant Shoes*, the very principle or idea of motion itself (which is essentially only apprehensible) has become physical and sensible in *The Starry Night*. These sublime artworks serve as transition between the essentially physical qualities of the concept of the thing and the essentially conceptual (metaphysical) qualities of the phenomenal presence of the thing. The very accomplishment of this transition regenerates the thing artistically depicted in its unity. In other words, the artful depiction brings the thing together with its *phusis*.

The element of fire renders Van Gogh's paintings cosmic especially with regard to his later works that finalized his particular style. In these paintings, cosmic colors dominate the landscape thereby depicting and emphasizing the heat and movement inherent in *kosmos*. In other words, by the addition of extra heat on actual or earthly colors, the fire within rocks, mountains, trees, farms, houses, people is represented as their primary component. This makes the paintings warmer, moving and vivid. Unlike the white dots on a black background rendered by a photograph of the night sky, the use of a strong all-encompassing blue brings life to *The Starry Night*. The prevalence of blue in the entire landscape generates a unity between the sky and the earth by artfully conveying the motion from the former to the latter. Moreover the white stars of the "actual" photograph have become yellow and gold in the "artistic" painting. While the photograph portrays a strict opposition between the sky and the earth, the painting performs their unification. The lifeless contrast of black and white is replaced in the painting by the complementary colors of blue and yellow which make the human *ethos* moving and living. In *The Starry Night*, the human dwellings centered in the landscape surrounding the church and lights inside the houses alter the landscape not only because of their material presence but also because of their direct impartation of the motion and the light inherent in nature. Van Gogh uses the same brush to paint the lights radiating from the human dwellings as the stars and the moon. Their color is that of fire from distance. Human beings only make use, transform and transmit the fire inherited from the stars and the Sun. The link between the cosmic fire and human lights strengthens Van Gogh's representation of the immediacy of this connection. The cosmic fire inherent in *phusis* and the fire used by humans to make and craft tools and

artworks, to warm themselves to keep their senses alert, to scare their prey, to cook and gather—or simply the fire that shapes their *ethos*—is one and the same. And, as the fire used by humans is the extension of the cosmic fire and as the earth is the extension of the Sun, *ethos* is the extension of *phusis*. Heraclitus describes this as follows: “This (world-) order (*the same for all*) did none of gods or men make, but it always was and is and shall be: an ever-living fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures.”³ Thus fire, by instilling its essential motion into *phusis*, renders it subject to a fiery cyclicity and thereby transforms *ta panta* into *kosmos*.⁴ Hence fire acts as *logos* in the cosmic realm. Nietzsche also associates *phusis* and fire with *logos* and concludes that “the one overall Becoming is itself law; *that* it becomes and *how* it becomes is its work. Heraclitus thus sees only the One, but in the sense opposite to Parmenides.”⁵ The Heraclitean singularity is *neither* metaphysical *nor* merely phenomenal but cosmological or both conceptual and phenomenal. Van Gogh’s late landscape paintings are exemplary for their success in bringing together the conceptual and phenomenal under the cosmological principle of *phusis* with specific reference to the element of fire. Ultimately, the cosmic and the earthly can only be reconciled artistically, through the aesthetic human representation which serves as *logos*.

Some of the other late landscape paintings where the element of fire even more visibly present are the ones depicting the rising sun dominating the sky, trees, wheat fields, vegetation and mountains such as *The Sower*, *Wheat Fields in a Mountainous Landscape*, *Olive Trees*, *Enclosed Field with Reaper* and *Scene in Arles*. In these paintings, the Sun penetrates the entire landscape including the human beings that are usually represented as part of the fields they are working in. The yellow sky represents the heat that encloses and penetrates the things to which the rising Sun appears while making them appear to the farmers and the painter. While the rays of the Sun and the things they illuminate are *objected* to the farmers and the painter, the farmers (as one of the appearing things) are in turn *subjected* to the Sun. While the farmers use the Sun and its heat as a tool for their livelihood, they themselves become a momentary extension of the morning light. In *The Sower*, with the first appearance of things around him, the farmer *sows* the wheat seeds on the earth with the assurance he has of the constant presence of the now-rising Sun that will heat and nourish the seeds imparting to them the motion they need for their growth (*phusis*). *Phusis* as *arkhē* needs the elemental force that represents the natural processes of life and death, or namely fire, both for its

³ Kirk, G. S., *The Cosmic Fragments*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1954, p.307.

⁴ Also see Heidegger, Martin and Fink, Eugen, *Heidegger – Fink, Heraclitus Seminar 1966/67* trans. Charles H. Seibert, University of Alabama Press, 1979, p.78.

⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, trans., ed. Whitlock, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006, p.63.

phenomenal representation and for its elemental constitution. And the rising sun accomplishes the very transition between *fire* as the phenomenal representation and as the elemental constitution of *phusis*. In Heraclitus's words fire acts as *logos* in the cosmic realm, it is the primary component and driving force of all things. The sower, as the wise man of soil who had already done the ploughing and who has the knowledge of seasons (or the gradually increasing and decreasing presence of heat), sows the seeds on the earth and expects the driving force of *fire* to take its course. And he instinctively trusts this driving and ordering (*logos*-like) force of fire that transforms *ta panta* into *kosmos* by subjecting everything to a singular *phusis*. As Kahn suggests, Heraclitus's *kosmos* refers to "the entire organized cycle of elementary and vital transformation."⁶ And the expectation of the eternal recurrence of this organized cycle of transformation is what makes the sower sow the seeds without hesitation or *a priori* thinking. By doing so, he affirms his existence and survival as the extension of this cycle of transformation underlying his *phusis* and the *phusis* of *kosmos*. The very affirmation of this link through the activity of sowing represents *logos*, ordering and reordering the things surrounding the sower and thereby revealing their cosmic character. The multitude of seeds in the right hand of the sower has the same potential for growth as the birds stealing some of these seeds, the trees in the horizon and the sower himself. The wise man of soil just allows the seeds to realize their potential letting them go through the process or cycle of life which links not only his *phusis* but also his *ethos* to *kosmos*. This transition renders the landscape suitable for the presence of the sower, and the presence of the sower (as well as the activity of sowing) meaningful for the landscape. While the sower belongs to the landscape, the landscape belongs to the sower exactly as the grown wheat and the heat of the yellow Sun and sky belong to each other. The extension bestows meaning on the eternal cycle of life it re-presents, and *phusis* (the rising sun) can only acquire its identity from *logos* and through *ethos* while *ethos* (the sower) is only meaningful when it is represented within a landscape or an environment. This is the idea Nietzsche attempts to impart in the prologue of *Zarathustra* where he makes Zarathustra declare:

"You great star! What would your happiness be if you had not those for whom you shine? For ten years you have come up here to my cave: you would have tired of your light and of this route without me, my eagle and my snake. But we awaited you every morning, took your overflow from you and blessed you for it!"⁷

The revelation of this necessary bidirectional transition between the star and the prophet or the Sun and the wise man of soil, or *kosmos* and *ethos* (the latter being the

⁶ Kahn, Charles H., *The art and thought of Heraclitus*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, p.131.

⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. Del Caro & Pippin, Cambridge University Press, Kindle edition, 2006, pp.1-2

extension of the former) is what makes this painting sublime by moving the viewer's imagination and forcing it to extend beyond the familiar territory of the beautiful.

It is not the Sun's beauty but rather its overflowing heat that Van Gogh depicts in his late landscape paintings such as *Evening the End of the Day (after Millet)*. This painting portrays the unity of the yellow sky, yellow wheat fields and now-yellow exhausted ploughman at the end of the day when the Sun's overflow is visibly marked on its willingly exposed subjects. The strong man of plough puts himself out in the middle of the vast field all day long knowing that he will have to yield to the intense heat of the nearest star thereby becoming its extension, and this unity as well as life it sustains on earth is born from the star's overabundance which presents itself as a sublime experience to the painter. But how does this overabundance or overflow lead to unity? Kant would argue that when the painter encounters the abundant and dynamic elements of nature, his faculty of imagination fails to come up with a satisfactory account of this aesthetic experience. This leads his imagination to resort to his capacity for rational thinking and temporarily detaches his understanding from the overwhelming presencing of nature. This escape towards a dualistic understanding of reason and nature results from the painter's sudden realization of the ploughman's essential unity with the Sun's overflow and its extensions on earth (the wheat fields), and Kant calls this experience as a whole "sublime". Nietzsche thinks that the Dionysian music, as the representation of momentary consciousness of inhuman magnitude, infinite dynamism and indivisible oneness of motion (*phusis* as *kinesis*), constitutes a very similar experience. The Dionysian pessimism inherent in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles is similarly a sign of overflow of existence and abundance of health.⁸ But crucially this overflowing health and eventual unity is born from the initial terror and horror this tragic experience elicits shaking the foundations of human *ethos*. This monstrous or sublime experience destroys the veil of Maya, reveals the oneness of nature and stimulates man's creative powers.⁹ The superabundance founds the unity of nature only after its apprehension and understanding by humankind, the moment which constitutes the essential inspiration for the painter. *Ethos* (represented in Van Gogh's paintings by the ploughmen, the sowers, farmers and the wheat fields), through its unveiling of the essential *kinesis* of all things, attaches itself back to *phusis* through the sublime artwork and represents itself as an extension of the essential motion while appending a new meaning to it. This new meaning transforms *kinesis* into *phusis*, motion acquires a new positive name and begins

⁸ Nietzsche, 'An Attempt at Self-Criticism', in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Geuss and Speirs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.4

⁹ Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy' in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Geuss and Speirs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p.21

to be called 'nature' by an abundantly optimistic and self-confident form of being, the humankind. This is the way the painter (as the genius representative of humankind) transforms superabundance into unity, *kinesis* into *phusis*, and *ta panta* into *kosmos* by 'giving meaning' to the underlying motion of things, in other words, by successfully 'ex-posing the bidirectional transition' between the always-underlying and always-unifying senseless motion and its self-affirmative and self-conscious extension.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche declares that this type of artistic creation can only be an expression of superabundance and over-fullness, of "a desire for change, for novelty, for future, for *becoming*."¹⁰ Van Gogh's expression in his late landscape paintings is a depiction of aesthetics of *becoming*, while the *Weltanschauung* he aims to impart in these paintings can be understood as an ethics of *becoming*. The strong and exhausted man of plough wearing his dirty and used jacket at the end of a normal day of work looks aesthetic to the eye (of the painter and the viewer) and is fitting or ethical for the environment in which he works and acquires his livelihood. In other words, his oneness with the elements and the color of the now-setting Sun makes him both aesthetically and ethically *becoming*. His very exhaustion due to his willing exposure to the elements in the course of the day reveals his unity with the superabundant energy of the Sun and makes him look *sublime* within the landscape while proving his strength or will-power and thereby making him a *good* man, farmer and father. By exposing his will-power, the ploughman affirms the abundance of motion from which he acquires his livelihood, and this is by no means a struggle for existence.¹¹ Heidegger argues that for Nietzsche, "life not only exhibits the drive to maintain itself, as Darwin thinks, but also is self-assertion, . . . which wants to be ahead of things, to stay on top of things, . . . going back into its essence, into the origin. *Self-assertion is original assertion of essence*."¹² Therefore, the ploughman's will results from an affirmation of motion, life and growth or namely *phusis* as it is, and this unconditional and direct affirmation of life makes his being ethical and his appearance aesthetic.

The sense of unity is also pervasive in Van Gogh's other late landscape paintings such as *Trees and Undergrowth*, *Enclosed Field with Peasant*, *Landscape from Saint-Remy* and *Enclosed Field with Ploughman*. Van Gogh successfully represents the principle of unity that derives from the superabundance of healthy green foliage covering the entirety of his paintings in *Trees and Undergrowth* series. The exhaustive presence of the foliage makes these paintings extend beyond the boundaries of the canvas and emphasizes the

¹⁰ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, ed. Williams, Bernard, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, sec.370, pp.235-6

¹¹Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, p.208.

¹² Heidegger, Martin. *Nietzsche: Volume I Will-to-Power as Art*, trans., ed. Krell, D.F., San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1961, p.61

mathematical abundance of *growth* (*phusis*). Kantian mathematically sublime is the representation of the abundance, vastness, and manifold unity of nature.

Kant draws attention to the negative (violent) outcome of the experience of *mathematically abundant* sublime as well as its successively apprehended motive elements that lead to “the consequent comprehension of the manifold *unity* of intuition.”¹³ This culminates in the annihilation of space in our aesthetic judgment of these elements following the movement and enlargement of our Imagination¹⁴. Both the individual elements (such as individual trees, branches, leaves, flowers) and the space in which they exist and grow *belong to* the waves and shades of green which represent the abundance and manifold unity of nature as an idea acquired through sense-intuition (*Anschauung*). Rawes rightly argues that Kant’s mathematically sublime can be understood “in terms of the relationship between limit and imagination”¹⁵. And “Leibniz heightens the operation of division in the geometric method so that the finite geometric identities of the whole and part become a continuous plenitude of irreducible singularities; in that sense, plenum represents...a kind of topological figure, through which the relationship between the internal structures are continuous with the external form (like in Baroque), rather than derived from a finite limit (like in Renaissance)”¹⁶ This point is similar to what Deleuze signifies in his notions like “the fluidity of matter”, “elasticity of bodies”, “pleats of matter” and “folding – unfolding matter”¹⁷. Both Leibniz and Kant construed the magnitude as the constitution of an object by the recognition of which it can be regarded as a whole. In other words, magnitude and plenitude reconcile the formal limitlessness of object with subjective imagination.

The created sense of “unity” is among the most important characteristics of the Kantian mathematically sublime along with “massiveness” which is visibly present in such Van Gogh paintings as *The Starry Night* series in the form of the massive sky dominating and penetrating earthly things (as in the paintings of Da Vinci). The Kantian sublime also establishes the relation between massiveness and the all-

¹³ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, sec.26: p.138

¹⁴ In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche agreeing the necessary annihilation of time in the aesthetics of human nature, defines the real meaning of life as metaphysical, and a human being can only be considered valuable owing to its metaphysical insight: “a human being – only has value to the extent that it is able to put the stamp of the eternal on its experiences; for in doing so it sheds, one might say, its worldliness and reveals its unconscious, inner conviction that time is relative and that the true meaning of life is metaphysical” (Nietzsche, Friedrich. ‘The Birth of Tragedy’, p.110)

¹⁵ Rawes, M. S. H. *Aesthetics and Geometry in Proclus, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant and Bergson*. PhD Thesis, 2004, p.157

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.149

¹⁷ Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold – Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Conley, Athlone Press: London, 1993, pp.4-8

encompassing unity of individual members. The sublime violates our faculty of imagination through its irregular, chaotic, and wild character deriving from the *vastness* and *extensive* power underlying in the manifold unity of nature. “The imagination reaches its maximum, and in the effort to extend it, sinks back into itself, but is thereby transported into an emotionally moving satisfaction.”¹⁸ Kant here refers to the Egyptian pyramids and Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome. It would not be wrong to describe *The Starry Night* series as the painterly equivalent forms of such sublime architectural artworks. In these paintings that represent all things as a moving unity, Van Gogh portrays the entire landscape as a vast ocean with waves of diverse colors and modes. Ocean as a general term could stand for the fluidity of all matter including the mountains, fields, houses, sky, stars, boats, port and the old couple standing on the deck in *The Starry Night over the Rhone*. The metaphor of ocean would also confirm the previously established links between superabundance, plenitude, unity and motion. The plenitude of its waves or its superabundance is what maintains the ocean as a moving unity. This is how the sublime phenomenon of ocean comes to represent the magnitude and dynamism of *phusis*.

Phusis inherent in *kosmos* is equally visible in Van Gogh’s depiction of the night sky, and the success of Van Gogh’s depiction of the unity of *kosmos* in *The Starry Night* also lies in the very essence of the night sky. While the morning sky detaches the lit area from the rest of the universe, the night sky reconciles the area previously isolated by the light with the *kosmos*. Light is usually employed as the phenomenon of truth and unconcealment (*aletheia*) owing to its simplifying effect on the sense-perception of phenomena. However, the morning light, while illuminating and heating the earth, covers it with a light blue veil and renders other planets, stars and moons invisible. Shedding light on the earthly things and thereby warming them, the Sun puts them in motion, and by doing so, localizes the human understanding. This is why it is ‘natural’ for most animals to hunt and for humans to work during the day. But the same activating power of light is also what defines human beings as *phenomena of nature*. In the spotlight of the Sun and wrapped in a blue veil, the earthly phenomena *live* the day under fire’s reign. However, as night lifts daylight’s veil, *ethos* physically reconnects with *kosmos*. This explains Van Gogh’s fascination with the night sky and the sunset. *The Starry Night* represents this reconciliation of the sky with the earth, hence reaffirms the essential unity underpinning *kosmos*. In the painting, while a massive moon represents the weakened but still pervasive light emanating from the Sun, the abundance of other stars and the swirls stand for the unity of the morning light with the rest of the universe.

¹⁸ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p.136.

Yet, such physical facts (as the unity in color, massiveness of the night sky and unifying presence of fire) are not the most distinctive features of *The Starry Night*. Indeed, the painting is rendered sublime by the use of the spiralling motion represented right at the centre of the artwork and the waves of motion that penetrate the entire landscape. The eye-catching swirls are unique and specific to *The Starry Night*. Two spirals, an immense one and its smaller extension, constitute undoubtedly the most distinguishing feature of this painting. What do these spirals signify? And why are they placed in the center of the painting? From a cosmological point of view, they are the products of the interactions (such as attraction and repulsion) between the forces of *phusis*. The constant interactions of the forces of attraction and repulsion lead to pulsation, defined by Kant as “the continuous sequence of impacts and counter-impacts in an intermediate space.”¹⁹ Pulsation produces the necessary excitation of world-material for the continuation of motion or life. As such the spiral is the living image of the intermediate space constituted by the moving forces of nature. It represents the constant process of creation and destruction in nature or the dynamic (and not mechanical) force of the eternal recurrence, which defines the endless and unpredictable *becoming*.²⁰ The image of the spiral perfectly depicts a pulsating, becoming and thus moving universe. In his *Universal Natural History and the Theory of Heavens* Kant uses a similar picture of the cosmic-dynamic continuum underpinning the inevitable coexistence of chaos and order in an expanding and pulsating (moving) universe. Schönfeld summarizes Kant’s argument on *motion* as follows:

Nature, in the Universal Natural History, streams outward in a wavefront of organization (1:314.1-2), generating worlds (1:314.8), biospheres and sentience (1:317.5-13, 352-3) and finally reason, human and otherwise (1:351-66). Organization is fragile, and spontaneity, pushed far enough, invites chaos. Mature cosmic regions decay, chaos sets in, and entropy follows in the wake of complexity. But entropy provides the very conditions that allow the cosmic pulse

¹⁹ Kant, Immanuel. *Opus Postumum*, ed. Förster, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.24.

²⁰ In his essay on Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, Deleuze voices a similar view: “how does one explain it is both cycle and moment: on the one hand continuation; and on the other, iteration? On the one hand, a continuation of the process of becoming which is the World; and on the other, repetition, lightning flash, a mystical view on this process or this becoming? On the one hand, the continual rebeginning of what has been; and on the other, the instantaneous return to a kind of intense focal point, to a zero moment of the will?” and later on he continues, “the eternal return is predicated only of becoming and the multiple. It is the law of a world without being, without unity, without identity. Far from presupposing the One or the Same, the eternal return constitutes the only unity of the multiple as such, the only identity of what differs: coming back is the only being of becoming.” (Deleuze, Gilles. ‘On the Will to Power and the Eternal Return.’ in *Desert Island and Other Texts* trans. Taormina ed. Lapoujade, Semiotexte, Los Angeles, 2004, p.121, p.124.)

to bounce material points back to order. Thus the expanding chaos curdles at its center into order, followed by chaos, by order, by chaos.²¹

Deleuze, in his essay on the eternal recurrence sees “coming back (as) the only being of becoming,” which is why he describes the eternal recurrence as “the instantaneous return to a kind of intense focal point.”²² Hence the spiral is the most appropriate aesthetic symbol of the eternal recurrence. In addition, according to Deleuze, “if we insist on thinking of the eternal return as the movement of a wheel, we must nevertheless endow it with a centrifugal movement, by means of which it expulses everything which is too weak, too moderate, to withstand the ordeal.”²³ This centrifugal movement is the driving force of the spiral or the zenith of *phusis* that drills into the abyss of non-being to *create* being through becoming. According to Heidegger, “*Phusis* is a going in the sense of a going-forth, and in this sense it is indeed a going *back* into itself; i.e. the *self* to which it returns remains a going-forth. The merely spatial image of a circle is essentially inadequate because this going-forth that goes back into itself precisely lets something go forth from which and to which the going-forth is in each instance on the way.”²⁴ “*Going-forth*” is the equivalent of the will-to-power in Nietzschean thought. Only through the will-to-power can eternal recurrence of *phusis* be affirmed. Only through drilling into the static block of the abyss, can the drill itself come into being. The very categories of time and space emerging from the static abyss are the outcomes of the spiralling motion’s contact with humanity. Aesthetically, spirals symbolize the passageways reaching out to a timeless and spaceless realm. This effect resembles the central Dionysian effect in Greek tragedy without which the latter would not be sublime. The Dionysian is the artistic representation of the spiral and its zenith. The spirals remind the spectator of the existence of a superhuman cosmic reality to which all human concepts are linked. They generate an affirmation of this reality by absorbing the gaze of the spectator. As the spirals endow the painting with movement and depth, the Dionysian, as the aesthetic representation of *logos*, performs the extension of *phusis* within human *ethos*. A cosmologic-aesthetic understanding of

²¹ Schönfeld, Martin. ‘Kant’s Philosophical Development’ in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-development/> Retrieved on June 2, 2009.)

²² Deleuze, Gilles. ‘On the Will to Power and the Eternal Return’, p.125.

²³ Ibid. Friedman defines this centrifugal force as *elastic force*: “whether it be the gravitational force due to a central body around which the moving body rotates, the elastic force in a sling used to twirl the rotating body, the pressure directed towards the center of an external aether or whatever. . . . Thus if we use ‘central force’ to denote the (Newtonian) force responsible for the centripetal acceleration, we thereby necessarily go beyond the merely mathematical moving forces.” (Friedman, Michael. *Kant and the Exact Sciences*, Harvard University Press, 1992, p.228.) Thereby the primary purpose of Kant’s *Transition* project was, like Newton, to advance from mathematical kinematics to physical (cosmological) dynamics and philosophical foundations (Ibid. pp.230-5.)

²⁴ Heidegger, Martin. ‘On the Essence and Concept of *Phusis* in Aristotle’s *Physics* B, I’ trans. Sheehan in *Pathmarks*, ed. McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.224.

eternal recurrence (or the spiralling movement at the centre of this painting and life as a whole) presupposes the artistic connection of the principles of transition and motion, thus generating raw material for the advancement and renewal of human *ethos*.

Could the spiral(s) symbolize Nietzsche's doctrines of eternal recurrence and the will-to-power at the same time?²⁵ In other words, how can we reconcile the cosmological and the aesthetic using this simple analogy? The will-to-power can be conceived as the spiral's *extending-forward*, while the eternal recurrence is its *circling-around-itself*²⁶. Crucially, unless it extends forward, the spiral ceases to be a spiral and remains a circle eventually (after eternities of circling-around-itself) collapsing back into itself. On the other hand, if defined solely by its extending-forward, the spiral transforms into a comet-like linear figure ultimately running into exhaustion. It is humanity's extending-forward that attracts the overabundant moving cycle of eternal recurrence. In other words, the extension draws the attention of the cyclical *phusis* which flows-towards this point of convergence and discharges its forces like a lightning strike. The lightning brings eternal recurrence and will-to-power together. When applied to the realm of *ethos*, the spiral's local or earthly extending-forward pertains to humanity's zeal to *create* and *represent*—human art, while the spiral's circular movement represents humanity's zeal to *see*, *understand* and *know*—human philosophy and science as its derivative. The necessity of bringing art and philosophy together requires the reconciliation of cosmology (distinguished from other branches of metaphysics) with aesthetics. Van Gogh's stylistic spiral accomplishes this reconciliation between the artistic and philosophical goals.

What do we want to achieve by defining humanity as an *extension* of *phusis*? How does such reversal contribute to our philosophy and aesthetic theory? In Heidegger's view, "we will get closer to what *is* if we think everything in reverse—assuming, of course, that we have, in advance, an eye for how differently everything then faces us. A mere reversal, made for its own sake, reveals nothing."²⁷ How can things come to face us differently or indeed more clearly when we attempt at this reversal? Does Heidegger refer to the reversal of thinking from *ethos* to *phusis*? Does he aim to attain a better picture of humanity as a part of the presencing of *phusis*? Though Heidegger does not explain this thoroughly, this reversal actually motivates the original purpose of this paper, while the reversal of the dialectical logic constitutes one of the outcomes of the

²⁵ Heidegger poses the same question: "How can being as a whole be will to power and eternal recurrence at the same time? It is a mistake to oppose these thoughts to each other." (Heidegger, Martin. *Nietzsche Vol II: Eternal Recurrence*, trans., ed. Krell, D.F., San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1961, pp.198-9.)

²⁶ Heidegger confirms this as follows: "The configurative forces collide," "Circle is the sign of the ring that wrings back to itself" (Ibid., p.213).

²⁷ Heidegger, Martin. 'The Origin of the Work of Art', p.21.

cosmological-aesthetic worldview. Both *phusis* and *ethos* originate from and are defined through their transition to each other—the synthesis comes first and determines how thesis and antithesis face us. Similarly, *logos* determines how we see *ethos* or being-human and *phusis* or being as a whole.

Heidegger uses the example of the Greek temple, which gives surrounding things their appearance and humans their outlook on themselves. The temple and the sculpture of the god within it, as the aesthetic representation of the divine in human nature and of the human in divine being, serves as a transition between the conceptual realm of humanity and the physical realm of *phusis*. In doing so, it creates and recreates the background or landscape where it is placed. The temple gathers around itself the unity of all possible concepts of humanity and the things of nature, and thus functions as *logos* or, in Heidegger's words, as the "gathering gatheredness." In the specific case of the temple, the gathering gatheredness of *logos* comes to be the "rising-up-within-itself" by which "the work opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force."²⁸ This intermediary world serves as a passageway, as the extension of *phusis*, which not only establishes a link but also, by doing so, determines and identifies its two ends. This allows *phusis* to flow into the particular realms of being, i.e. being-human. However once the connection is made and the flow starts, *phusis* itself begins to transform according to the type of being it has been connected and this occurs because it actually needs this transformation to remain self-sufficient in-itself as a meaningful motion. Based on the human definitions of temporality, the motion *phusis* embodies comes to be defined as growth and progress. Likewise, this connection brings life to human concepts, which remain alive as long as their connection to the essential motion is maintained. The maintenance of this connection requires the continuity of the flow in the passageway. Timeless artworks of human genius such as the Greek temples, the Egyptian pyramids, the tragic plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Van Gogh's paintings, Mozart's music *et cetera* transform and strengthen both *phusis* and *ethos* by reinforcing the flow in the passageway and enlarging the bridge set between the two rims of the canyon on which the later generations will dwell, gather, produce and regenerate.

How do Van Gogh's late landscape paintings like *The Starry Night* reach the level of *logos*? Van Gogh's *presence* within the painting is reinforced through his powerful intertwining of the human dwellings with the night sky set in *motion*. The landscape metamorphoses into a self-portrait as well as a portrait of *logos*. This corresponds to our earlier claim that genius, both as idea and artist, functions as the transition between nature and art. Van Gogh does not express his feelings about the natural phenomenon

²⁸ Ibid., p.22.

as a detached rational observer (nor, as romanticists would argue, does he become nature's tool for self-expression) but rather, I argue, he operates his own transformation into the artistic and dynamic bridge or passageway between *phusis* and *ethos*. The oneness of the colors accentuates the essential unity of the sky and earth, nature and human, *phusis* and *ethos* while emphasizing the motion inherent in both. However, this would never have been accomplished had the painter failed to represent and embody *logos* or the aesthetic principle of transition. Every work of genius is the self-portrait of the artist as idea, and the idea as artist. The artist transforms into the artwork by channelling his *phusis* into his creation: his artistic powers flow into and actualize the aesthetic phenomenon. Heidegger agrees with this construal of the (genius) artist as the transition through which the artwork manages to stand-for-itself:

Through him (the artist), the work is to be released into its purest standing-in-itself. Precisely in great art (which is all we are concerned here) the artist remains something inconsequential in comparison with the work — almost like a passageway which, in the creative process, destroys itself for the sake of the coming forth of the work.²⁹

This explanation not only fits into the argument made above about the self-embodiment of the artist with the artwork but also strengthens our point on the function of the genius as the transition between the ideal-conceptual and the thingly character of the artwork. The artwork's standing-in-itself depends on the continuous repetition of this very transition between the phenomenal and conceptual existence of the artwork. The permanence of this transition, initially fuelled by the artist's creative force, depends on the affirmation of the existence of the passageway but this time within the artwork itself. Thus, contrary to Heidegger's point, the artist is not exactly a self-destructive passageway that eventually ceases to exist, but rather, linking his genius to *phusis* and becoming its extension, he himself transforms into *logos* that transmits between nature and art. Viewers looking at the painting are not looking away from the artist but rather looking directly at the artist's gaze that defines his *style*.

The *style* is the artistic gathering or summation of the ways the artist uses to reconcile the physical and conceptual within the artwork. But the artist is not fully aware of his style until having properly attained this reconciliation where his ultimate *Weltanschauung* lies. The artist's way of depicting the world remains to determine the way the spectators look at and understand the artwork. *The Starry Night* cannot and should not be seen and analyzed devoid of the understanding of the style through which Van Gogh has undertaken its creation. The *motion* present in all of his paintings after the maturation of *his style* is equally or even more intensely present in *The Starry*

²⁹ Ibid., p.19.

Night. Nevertheless, it would appear simplistic to associate this motion with the psychological state of the painter even though *psyche* or spirit itself is considered essentially linked to *phusis*. The artist's *Weltanschauung* after the maturation of his style transforms into *logos* itself and comes to portray the ways *phusis* is apprehended, seen and understood. Indeed, most of Van Gogh's late landscape paintings display such quality. The peasants, their equipment, the houses and farms are all part of the motion in nature or *phusis*. This artistic representation is not a product of *logos* but *logos* itself. *Ethos* is aesthetic only insofar as it is placed in *phusis* through its immediate connection to *logos*. Heidegger here defends a similar line of argument:

Within *human* relation lies the other ambiguity in the setting-to-work which . . . is identified as that between creation and preservation . . . it is the *artwork* and *artist* that have a "special" relationship to the coming into being of art. In the label "setting-to-work of truth," in which it remains undetermined (though determinable) who or what does the "setting," and in what manner, lies concealed *the relationship of being to human being*.³⁰

The relationship between *phusis* and *ethos* is revealed through the self-attachment of the artwork and the artist to the aesthetic principle of transition or *logos*. Humans are mediately linked to the moving forces of nature by the reflective power of judgment. By contrast, other organisms are the outcomes of nature's on-going evolution; just a phase in its quantitative and qualitative growth. Being-human is not only the simple continuation of other organisms but also the meaningful representation of the archaic dynamics within nature in the form of advanced aesthetic representations such as the art of tragedy. This entails a renewal of our understanding of *ethos*. In his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger argues, "If the name "ethics," in keeping with the basic meaning of the word *ēthos*, should now say that "ethics" ponders the abode of man, then that thinking which thinks the truth of Being as the primordial element of man, as one who ek-sists, is in itself the original ethics."³¹ However, Heidegger continues, this is not ethics itself but ontology, namely the philosophical inquiry that thinks Being. So, for a more specific and coherent picture of ethics, what we need is a philosophical inquiry that thinks humanity in relation to Being in general. The argument follows that this inquiry must not be isolated from the original thinking, or the thinking that thinks *phusis*. This is because the thinking of *ethos* must be grounded on a much larger background; the image of human can only be perceived within a greater landscape. For neither the human image nor the whole canvas is coherent once separated from each other. Van Gogh's *Starry Night* represents them as intertwined and becomes the

³⁰ Ibid., p.55.

³¹ Heidegger, Martin, 'Letter On Humanism' in *Basic Writings* ed. Krell, Routledge: London, 1978, p.258.

artwork of *logos*, which, by bridging the gap between *phusis* and *ethos*, generates a new *Weltanschauung*.

What does this bridge stand for? What does “artwork of *logos*” mean? How does the reversal of thinking affect aesthetics? Heidegger responds as follows:

The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other. Nonetheless neither is the sole support of the other. Artist and work *are* each, in themselves and in their reciprocal relation, on account of a third thing, which is prior to both; on account, that is, of that from which both artist and artwork take their names, on account of art.³²

The so-called “third thing” corresponds in our analysis to the aesthetic *logos* through which we should define and redefine the phenomenal existence of the artwork as well as the conceptual existence of the artist. It is equally wrong to call a thing or an artwork pure “object” and to call a person or artist pure “subject.” An object is not an object unless seen by the subject and a subject is not a subject until it sees or senses an object. This very reciprocal relation determines and defines them. Thus, neither can a thing be called an object, as it is necessarily defined through its relation to a sensing being, nor can a person be called subject, since he can only become a sensing being when there are sensible things around him. Heidegger makes a similar point in his analysis of *phusis*:

Under the spell of our modern way of being, we are addicted to thinking of beings as *objects* and allowing the being of beings to be exhausted in the objectivity of the object. But for Aristotle, the issue here is to show that artefacts *are what* they are and *how* they are precisely in the movedness of production and thus in the rest of having-been-produced.³³

The act of creation or art (or the movedness of production) is the origin of both the artist and the artwork, and aesthetics must be understood neither as a system of thought inquiring the formal qualities of “objects” nor as a vast set of doctrines based on the experiences of “subjects” including artists. It can neither be reduced to the senseless and meaningless realm of phenomena, nor be considered the outcome of mere subjective imagination. But rather it is the philosophy of “art” as the origin of the created and the creator, the produced and the producer, the artwork and the artist. Art must be studied as the foundation of human *ethos*, not as an outcome of it.

Likewise, *phusis* or the idea of nature is apprehensible and requires human imagination and artistic creativity to connect to *ethos*. Heidegger associating the World with *phusis* writes:

³² Heidegger, Martin. ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, p.1.

³³ Heidegger, Martin. ‘On the Essence and Concept of *Phusis* in Aristotle’s *Physics* B, I’, p.194.

World is not a mere collection of the things—countable and uncountable, known and unknown—that are present at hand. Neither is world a merely imaginary framework added by our representation to the sum of things that are present. *World worlds*, and is more fully in being than all those tangible and perceptible things in the midst of which we take ourselves to be at home. World is never an object that stands before us and can be looked at. World is that always-nonobjectual to which we are subject as long as the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being.³⁴

Then, continues Heidegger, “The setting up of a world and the setting forth of earth are two essential traits belonging to the work-being of the work. Within the unity of that work-being, however, they belong together.”³⁵ This belonging togetherness of the world and the earth within the repose of the artwork brings forth the essential motion the artwork embodies and represents. This occurs when *logos* meets *phusis* just as the physical or earthly and conceptual or worldly characters counterbalance each other within the artwork. But, at the same time, this simultaneous balancing can only take place if *logos* approaches *phusis*. The senselessly moving but resourceful earth must be kept in constant and creative interaction with the conceptual human world(s) or *ethos* through the artwork or *logos*.

A last crucial point concerns the triviality of the concept of ‘beauty’ in the judgment of artworks like *The Starry Night*. One of the most important purposes of the theory of cosmological aesthetics is to disprove the authority of the concept of beauty in aesthetic judgment. For instance, it would be absurd to claim that we can judge Homeric epic and Aeschylean, Sophoclean, Shakespearean tragedy, or Egyptian pyramids on the sole basis of the concept of beauty. It is simply not sufficient to use the criterion of the beautiful to judge most of the artworks that transcend the time and culture in which they have been produced. Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* is certainly one of these. The sublime and the Dionysian come to the fore as more encompassing criteria for the judgment of artworks that are not simply “beautiful.” As the representations of the transition from nature to art, these concepts encompass most of the characteristic adjectives depicting the gods in polytheistic myths such as the terrible Zeus, ecstatic, inspiring and foreign Dionysus, vengeful Hera, obscure Hermes and disturbing Poseidon. Kant and Nietzsche frequently resort to these adjectives in their definitions of the sublime. This does not make the form-giving Apollonian (namely the beautiful) less necessary but rather suggests that in modern and contemporary aesthetic theory,

³⁴ Heidegger, Martin. ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, p.23. The link between world and artwork echoes the archaic relation between *phusis* and *logos* as the setting-forth and transmitting: “To the work-being belongs the setting up of a world”. “In setting up a world, the work sets forth [*Herstellen*] the earth. . . . *The work lets the earth to be an earth.*” (Ibid.)

³⁵ Ibid., p.26.

such category dominates a much broader territory than initially intended. The domination of the formal qualities of the artwork in the theories of aesthetic judgment denies the essential dynamism underpinning the processes of creation and judgment. This is why, in their analyses of artworks, modern art critics occasionally have recourse to exhausted paradigms like object and subject, and thereby fail to theorize the sublime artworks such as *The Starry Night*. The exhaustion in aesthetics and the philosophy of art is the direct result of the exhaustion of the beautiful as an idea, as a concept and as a mere adjective. The cosmological-aesthetic worldview extends beyond the earthly, familiar, tame, formal and static realm of the beautiful.

Both the sublime and the Dionysian cover a realm beyond that of the beautiful, beyond the mere outcome of human *ratio* or the reduced measure of formal perception. This *ratio* serves humanity as the earth's atmosphere shields her from the destructive force of meteors and excessive sunlight. But the foremost element *fire* (the Sun) exists outside the atmosphere and sustains life on the planet. Similarly, beauty serves human *ethos* as a protective beneficent shield against the overabundance of cosmic forces. However, the shield itself cannot simultaneously function as a stimulating or primary moving force. For this, the penetration of the heat of the sunrays—the motion they embody—is necessary. As an experience, the sublime acts like the potentially destructive but essential life-giving moving force, and as a judgment it determines the extent of the movement within the aesthetic phenomenon. This is why it is more appropriate to call the Sun sublime rather than beautiful just as it is to associate it to the element of fire rather than earth. The earthly is formal or sculptural (like the Apollonian) and the beautiful is the earthly individuating judgment made on the aesthetic phenomena. By contrast, the cosmic is moving and fiery (like the Dionysian) and the sublime is the cosmic unifying judgment made on the aesthetic phenomena. Van Gogh's style is Dionysian and cosmic especially with regard to his late colourful works that finalized his unique style. Unless acknowledged as such, the concept of beauty will continue to veil the vast realm of aesthetics by perpetuating its inherent dualities, ultimately preventing the advent of appropriate criteria for the judgment of artworks like *The Starry Night* and *The Sower*. Therefore, I propose that the principles of motion and transition be the new *cosmologic-aesthetic categories* for the judgment of sublime artworks as well as for the understanding of the world (*Weltanschauung*) they represent.

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