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Being in Heidegger's Shoes

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Including Heidegger's work among the among the most notable intellectual developments of the 20th century seems to be largely justified, even if some of its aspects are of doubtful value. During the years 1935-6 Heidegger gave a series of talks about art and later their content became available as the text of *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (known in translation as *The origin of work of art* [1]). In 1968 art historian Meyer Schapiro [2] spotted what appears to be a factual error in it and publicly questioned Heidegger's work. This could have been a minor academic quibble if it had not been wittily commented by Jacques Derrida in 1978. The French revue *Macula* published his article, *Restitutions - de la vérité en peinture*, and the same year it was incorporated in a book bearing the title *De la vérité en peinture* [3]. The case gained notoriety as it was part of the more general debate about Heidegger's political engagements but Derrida's exceptional popularity has given to it an extra dimension: recently a spectacle *De la vérité en peinture* was created on the stage and an exhibition took *Pointure* as title [4]. These far fetched developments witness the

sustained attention this case attracts. During the last three decades it has been discussed by most anybody concerned with Heidegger's aesthetic philosophy and/or political views [5]. There is little interest in retelling once more all the details and the gist of the story is readily grasped from two brief texts among Schapiro's writings. However there seems to be an aspect which appears to have been disregarded and perhaps worth investigating.

By taking a quote from Heidegger's text and to turning it against its author Schapiro realized a deft rhetorical move. After some pathetic writing about the peasant, whose shoes Heidegger saw in a picture by van Gogh, a defiant remark is found: "It would be the worst self-deception to believe that our description had first imagined [*ausgemalt*] everything thus as a subjective act and then projected it onto the painting". Schapiro pointedly commented: "Alas for him, the philosopher has deceived himself. He has retained from his encounter with van Gogh's canvas a moving set of associations with peasants and the soil, which are not sustained by the picture itself. They are grounded rather in his own social outlook with its heavy pathos of the primordial and earthy. He has indeed "imagined everything and projected it into the painting"". For Freudian minded exegetes Heidegger's text contained a 'denegation', an explicit denying, which according to them would not have occurred to someone convinced in his own thesis. Obviously Heidegger knew how weak his reading is [6] and by drawing attention to it he attempted to make it look stronger - a bluff to discourage criticism. Schapiro's actually took the challenge and offered evidence which showed Heidegger's musings to be not just fanciful but factually inadequate.

As Thomson recently noted [7], philosophers tend to minimize the mistake while other critics are prone to emphasize it. Of course, it is not difficult to see why it is thus. Except as refutations, particular facts are rarely important for philosophical texts. In dealing with a artworks or history, however, particulars are rather important. Most generally one might disagree with Heidegger's stance toward rural life: while he cherishes it, someone else could hate it if (s)he has had some hard experience of it. A pair of peasant shoes for she or him would be associated with mud, smell, dirt, aching muscles and other such unpleasant things. This is obviously a serious flaw in Heidegger's discoursing and it is rather distinct from the object that functions in his text, namely: a famous painting by van Gogh, showing a pair of peasant shoes. Changing different elements in this two-tiered description could reveal what matters for the discussion. "Famous" is just aimed at the audience which does not see the picture and, further, 'painting' might have been a 'drawing', just as 'van Gogh' might have been 'X', all of this leaving the situation essentially unchanged. Nevertheless dragging in van

Gogh's name might be objectable for those who appreciate his work but not Heidegger's writing. Schapiro actually raises separately the issue about van Gogh's 'presence'. But the viewpoints are clearly mismatched: for Heidegger it is a question of content while for Schapiro it is mostly some painting by van Gogh and nobody else. At this level of the description apparently nothing really matters, so the controversy is seen to be on the content shown: a pair of peasant shoes. Derrida has commented the fact that the shoes are taken to be a pair and he is superficially right as painting one or three shoes would have been odd. Replacing the pair of peasant shoes by some other peasant object, e.g. a bucket or a hoe, seems also possible with minimal violence to the text and to its meaning. So the point of all this scrutinizing turns out to be their presumed appartenance to a peasant. It just this point that has been shown to be false but not much depends really on it: extolling the farmers' work and contesting the use of van Gogh's painting are independent from it. An additional twist has been added as the owner of the shoes represented has been found to be not just some city dweller but van Gogh himself.

Der Ursprung offers a fairly complete view of Heidegger's aesthetic theory and this is, of course, what makes the quarrel rather important. Even if Heidegger generally objects to 'aesthetics' and insists to deriving his insights phenomenologically there are three salient points in it to be noted here: (1) Great art needs no name. This might sound rather archaic and, in postmodern times, even absurd: much of today's art is made just by the artist's name - one might start by remembering Duchamp's ready made and his *Fountain*. (2) There is a perennial essence of art - but Heidegger had to admit that the Greeks did not know it and their 'techne' was craftsman ability. (3) Art has some cognitive content, it is connected to 'aletheia', with the revelation of truth; allowing to see things differently, it suggests variation grounded in permanence. This conclusion and the steps to it are personal convictions of Heidegger but they are swamped in a distasteful rhetoric built on nazi ideology. It is still easy to perceive that his referings to 'Earth'/'soil', 'peasants', 'people', 'decisiveness', 'history', etc., etc. are value laden terms and keywords of official nazi discourse. The years 1935-6, when Heidegger delivered his talks, were indeed troubled time for artists: German officials carried a large scale attack on what they termed Degenerate Art/Entartete Kunst. The campaign culminated in an exhibition where examples of 'such' art were presented. A parallel counter-exhibition of genuine and healthy German Art was also set up. Its curators did not have a clear conception but their judgment was derived from official discourse and its diffuse ideology.

The first two points noted above appear however to be at odds with this. If art has a perennial essence, promoting a Deutsche Kunst, or any particular historic development should not matter essentially; modern art should be as legitimate as the older. What is

more, with their naturalistic approach, nazi ideologues firmly connected artists their work and indeed this allowed them to ban any production by Jews, racially inferior people and/or madmen - it is to them that 'degenerate' applies first of all. Heidegger however insisted that the artist disappeared in a work that was self standing - his personality or name did not matter. But connecting art with the revelation of truth, agrees with the official view: art is neither formal nor an amusement - it is edifying, not to say 'propaganda'. So, Heidegger is found to agree with nazism in principle but disagrees on details. In the same way as rector he had agreed with the political line but refused to allow a book burning in his university.

Today, just as in the mid sixties when Schapiro wrote his article, it is easy to perceive how conservative, outdated and unsound is the aesthetic theory from *Der Ursprung* [8] Heidegger's view of the *Shoes* seems equally unconvincing and most readers would rather agree with Schapiro who prefers to see a tramp standing in them. But when Schapiro challenged *Der Ursprung* he perceived just as clearly its political undertones. To put it bluntly, he accused Heidegger of appropriating van Gogh's work for the nazi ideology. If one insists that Heidegger had his own brand of nazism the accusation loses some of its sting. It might be argued that actually Heidegger could have been trying to save van Gogh's work from official condemnation. By ascertaining that the picture of the shoes embodies the values exalted by nazism he shielded it from the qualification 'degenerate art'. His rhetoric is distasteful heavy handed: one might suspect that a rather grotesque analogy is suggested between an ancient temple rising above the landscape and the shoes appearing out of nowhere in the canvass. But Heidegger was arguing against zealots and morons and the quip "It would be the worst self-deception to believe that our description had first imagined everything" would be intimidation tactic. Considering his own theory it appears rather superfluous to suppose that he was trying to convince not just his listeners but himself. The picture seems to have had some genuine value for him [9] and as he was able to tell where he had seen it more than thirty years before. Talking repeatedly of "van Gogh's picture" rather suggests that despite his position about the artist's unimportance he might have had some fondness for the Dutch painter. A context for the name dropping is created as Dürer, a known favorite in Hitler's taste, is mentioned at the end of the text, just as the beginning the name of his musical idol has been sneaked in. The point of identifying exactly which picture Heidegger had in mind, and Schapiro builds his case on this, is somewhat blurred by the vague mention that "Van Gogh has painted such shoes more than once", a knowledge perhaps not so common.

Even if Heidegger had viewed himself as something of a prophet for Hitler's Germany, his attempt at rescuing van Gogh famously failed. The painter, with his notoriously troubled personality, was readily labelled as a case of Entarte Kunst and his pictures were removed from German art galleries. They were not destroyed but offered for sale and Göring, as a private person, apparently bought one for himself.

[1] Heidegger M., *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes / The origin of work of art, Gesamtausgabe (Holzwege) Bd.5 / The Basic Writings. New York: HarperCollins (2008).*

[2] Schapiro M., 1994. *The Still Life as a Personal Object, Further Notes on Heidegger and van Gogh in: Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society, Selected papers 4, New York: George Braziller (1994).*

[3] Derrida J., *Restitutions - de la vérité en peinture in La Vérité en peinture, Paris: Flammarion (1978). (en: Truth in painting, Chicago:University Press, 1987)*

[4] Centre culturel de l'Université de Bourgogne, May 2012; University of Johannesburg, August 2012

[5] Thomson I., *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity, Cambridge:University Press (2011), provides references*

[6] He had given the talk more than once and the remark was left in the published text.

[7] *loc.cit.*

[8] *It is indeed normative, not 'phenomenological'.*

[9]

Thompson proposed here a rather bizarre explanation. Noting that van Gogh is also mentioned in the *Introduction to Metaphysics* he quotes the experience suggested by Heidegger in this text: "as if on a late autumn evening, when the last potato fires have burned out, you yourself were heading wearily home from the field with your hoe" (IM 37-8/GA40 38) and asserts that the figure of a peasant woman, wearing a bonnet and carrying a hoe, is seen subliminally in the right shoe. According to him this was actually seen by Heidegger and his writings attest of the deep impression it left. All of this seems to be proposed in earnest by Thompson, who provides a detail from the painting (p.114/Fig.5), returns to his discovery at the end of the chapter (p.120/n.74) and repeats it in the conclusion of his book (p.217).

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