

Lauren Fenton

The question of the vocation of art:

(film as modernity's gesture of reconciliation with the aesthetic)

"Modernity is the site of beauty bereaved – bereaved of truth"

Art today stands out largely as a gratuitous and self-justifying institution, unanchored, as it were, to the daily business of social life by any moral or cognitive rationale. Within the modernist framework, the aesthetic can only be defined in terms of negativity – it is the realm where human activities determined either by systems of propositional truths or systems of moral propositions lose their central role as the principal repositories of values in society. The aesthetic consequently appears as the sphere set aside for the momentary suspension of those values and value-making in general; free from any meaningful i.e. social obligation, artists can indulge in self-expression, and art-enjoyers can experience a relaxing interlude away from the serious work of living. When its autonomous status is taken seriously, even the efficacy of art's critique of social reality, however, is always put into question by the fact that it does not speak in the "language" of rule-based *praxis* or propositional truth: the validity of its own mode of valuing or disclosing truth is consequently held in suspicion by the world it stands in opposition to. Modern aesthetics, as itself inscribed in a tradition of analytic and rule-finding discourse, tends to hone down the meaning of art to an argument about the identification or evaluation standards of artworks, an argument, which, in necessarily confining itself to the intra-institutional framework and premises of art-practice, refuses to touch upon the more fundamental question of what justifies art as a social practice in the first place. The question of art's value is in fact left to the market: as such, even the edginess and satirical calling of the avant-garde shrinks into a commodity; art becomes worthwhile only if it is "interesting" or "witty"².

J.M Bernstein suggests that the traditional conception of art as an autonomous practice – derived from a classic interpretation of Kant's division of reason, morality and the aesthetic into three critiques – has effectively cut art off from the possibility of functioning as a genuine source of meaning-making and values in society, thereby precipitating a loss in the intuitive meaningfulness of our social reality. In this sense, to inquire into the value of art beyond the closed sphere of aesthetic autonomy is to ask what value-grounding truth is, in fact, disclosed by art and consequently, what different, non-

1 J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 4

2 These are adjectives Binkley uses to qualify Duchamps's work and "idea art", as opposed to "aesthetic" art in general.

propositional/legislative conception of truth and value emerges when art is defined as both truthful and valuable. Such a query does not imply attaching art to any pre-existent social imperatives, thereby subsuming art under a system of ends in which art could only play an instrumental, however important, role – Aristotle’s theory of tragedy as communally cathartic and Georg Lukasc’s theory of literature as the expression of social “objectivity” come to mind. The extra-artistic value of art, if it is to be genuine, must necessarily be self-defined, which paradoxically means that it must be generated *within* the sphere of its autonomy from rule-grounded cognition, within the sphere of its “vocation” as a practice. Of course, the question of the vocation of art is highly problematic, even at first sight: we have no fool-proof grounds for assuming that, even if there is a “truth” of art, art would express any one truth or vocation, across different artistic mediums and different historical evolutions of its activity.

Nevertheless, we can start searching for the significance of art’s particularity as a practice by considering what specifically differentiates its manner of meaning-making from the meaning-making which characterizes propositional truth and ethics, in other words, from the theoretical – the systematic subsuming of particulars under universals. What strikes us immediately, of course, whenever we create, judge or experience art in general, is that, contrarily to theoretical thinking, art is meaningfulness in the particular, in a medium – wherefore the term of “aesthetic”, which refers to art’s manifesting as *appearance*, as a sensuous apparition that extrudes from reality and yet does not exist abstractly, as a concept. This aesthetic specificity of art drives Kant’s third Critique, where art’s indispensability is revealed in our own fundamental predisposition towards aesthetic judgment, as our calling to live our *cognitive* nature in an exemplary way, as extra-ordinary fulfillment in the human, in the sensuous. Hegel and Theodor Adorno reinscribe this conception of the aesthetic as a human-cultural necessity within the context of art’s capacity to challenge the (Kantian) paradigm of modernity as the domination of theoretical cognition. I will argue on this basis that art in fact points towards the enigma or question of a human vocation, towards the possibility of discovering a resonance of meaningfulness in the free unfolding of our consciousness in the world – of striving for a completed sense of purposefulness in excess of the conditioned significance of our everyday. Alongside Tom Huhn and Gregg Horowitz, I will also further argue that this image persists even beyond the emergence of “anti-aesthetic” or “anaesthetic” art and Arthur Danto’s assertion that art can no longer claim any philosophical autonomy and has, in fact, abandoned its “vocation”. To this purpose, I will use Stanley Cavell’s *The World Viewed: reflections on an ontology of film* to evoke the possibility that film, as an artform that specifically seeks to break down the Danto-Adornian schism between the aesthetic ideal and the given by immersing us in a simulated present-ness, potentially empowers art to an unprecedented degree in its vocation to offer us an alternative form of meaning-making to theoretical

cognition, thereby raising the hope that dominance of theoretical truth over the truth inscribed in the aesthetic image/enigma is not a fatality for modern society or the modern subject.

As Bernstein points out, it is in *The Critique of the Power of Judgment* that the question of modernity is first raised – as the separation of theoretical truth, theoretical morality and aesthetic judgment into three self-sufficient and self-justifying spheres of practice – and where, consequently, we are first introduced to the fragmentation of human cognitive capacities, in the form of unbridgeable divisions of labor within both the individual and society, as a fact of human reality. This interpretation of Kant, which focuses on the revelation of modern everydayness as the alienation of consciousness from itself, occludes the possibility of a mending or healing of this “experiential”³ fracture, which is clearly put forth in Kant’s understanding of the aesthetic as the symbol of man’s deeply practical (as opposed to theoretical) vocation.

The aesthetic faculty or the faculty for “reflective judgment”, as the imaginative activity that, before any act of conceptualization, first brings to bear the representational powers of consciousness on the unintelligible stream of phenomena, corresponds, according to Kant, to the moment of emergence of the human capacity for transcendence, of the ability to stretch out oneself beyond “there-ness”, the everyday, towards the ‘other’ reality of supersensible cognition. However, because at this pre-theoretical stage of cognition consciousness is not yet broken into the routine of categorizing the particular as instances of concepts or universals, it remains at home in the particular– instead of subverting or instrumentalizing the phenomenal, it plays with it, intuiting the intelligible as a seemingly spontaneous arrangement of meaningfulness emerging from raw nature. In the course of aesthetic reflection, we in fact feel as if we are tapping into the inner purposefulness of the real itself, as if our cognitive capacity was itself essentially natural rather than in contradiction with the natural. We thus experience our ideal vocation – freedom – in its fullest sense, as the complete actualization of our cognitive potentiality, an actualization which is no longer predicated on the assumption that our will must necessarily be freed from (the determinability, necessity of) the world in order to exercise itself in the world, but which, on the contrary, presupposes that freedom can only exist qua embodiment in the sensuous, and, consequently, that our double nature as both sensible and supersensible beings does not indicate a flaw in our condition, but a basic wholeness. As a result, we experience a deep sense of gratification when in the grip of the aesthetic – we experience our cognitive condition as happiness, as both transcendental and vital.

This “ideal” condition is consistently opened up by art by means of the “aesthetic idea”, the intuitive poetic image. The aesthetic mode of cognition, in liberating the

3 *The Fate of Art*, p.8

individual from the systematic rule-giving of theoretical thinking, does not thereby re-confine her to the imprisoning immediacy of the “there”, but effectively creates a (subjective) world in which her cognitive faculty can actually function from within the non-logic, the indeterminacy of living phenomena. Because it is never ossified in the form of a determinate idea or concept, the aesthetic idea enables us to express a sense of the infinite plurality of phenomena while structuring itself as a disciplined intelligible totality. In this sense, poetic (verbal, musical or pictorial) language effectively reconciles our representation or understanding of the world with our experience of being/living in the world, allowing us to walk into a reality that is both unfamiliarity and at-homeness, a reality in which meaning behaves “naturally”, spontaneously bubbling forth from its signs:

“the poet ventures to make sensible...that of which there are examples in experience...sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature...animating the mind by opening up for it the prospect of an immeasurable field of related representations..., combining spirit with the mere letter of language.”⁴

The capacity to produce the aesthetic idea in effect is, according to Kant, not only the reiterated possibility of creating fresh “sense” out of the world (Gould), of transforming the everyday into an extra-ordinary reality in which one’s cognitive activity is no longer alienated from the daily business of living – it is also a way of communicating this transformative intelligibility, this “new sense” *between* individuals. The artist or “genius” does not content herself with being original, with producing meaning in excess of established (theoretical, conceptual) norms of meaning-making; she must also be exemplary, that is, she must herself establish a compelling standard of aesthetic intelligibility that, although it cannot be derived a priori or reproduced must nevertheless reverberate through history as an ideal to be succeeded through the achievement of another artist. In this sense, the aesthetic community, as the community of both artists and those who experience art, is in fact a union of individuals brought together not by common adherence to a (moral, theoretical) rule-giving system but by common aesthetic ideals or images which, in circulating between different members, continuously reinvigorate and re-inspire the communal mission of meaning-making. Ted Cohen elaborates on this idea of an aesthetic *sensus communis* when he claims that our different responses to and experiences of art form an alternative, extra-social means by which individuals differentiate themselves from and find common ground with each other. Because based on judgments of taste, which command potentially universal assent but are always contestable, art-practice represents an alternative social model in which neither individuals

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 192-193

need be subsumed by a hegemonic society nor the possibility of community repressed by an excessive individualism. Instead, individuals could identify themselves and each other via perpetually mobile, overlapping circles of community⁵.

This image of the exemplariness of aesthetic community makes manifest, along with the concept of the aesthetic idea, art's potential to deeply modify our rationale and goals both on an individual level and as a society by pointing us towards truly sustainable – constantly renewed and self-justifying (free)– forms of collective meaning. However, the capacity of art to effectively challenge the premises of modernity by successfully embodying truth and therefore, value, is more urgently brought to the fore by Hegel and Adorno.

The Kantian conception of aesthetic autonomy cannot fully redeem its own legacy, which, as Bernstein reminds us, remains the alienation of the aesthetic from the truth, the alienation of reflective subjectivity from real grounding in the objective. According to Hegel, Kant has effectively made impotent the aesthetic promise of reconciliation between man's freedom and the possibilities of its actualization by qualifying the aesthetic as purely subjective, that is, as already divorced from the actual/the real. For Kant, the purposefulness we see in beautiful things does not actually dwell in the object: it is our own innate purposefulness or freedom as subjects that we project onto the world. In this light, the “new sense” discovered in the course of aesthetic cognition appears doubtful, potentially illusory – in any case, incapable of actually reaching the truth of the noumenal. The work of art remains essentially limited in that it always a “mere” sensuous appearance; any infinite that it can communicate is really the infinite we discover in the experience of our own inwardness. For Hegel, this notion of art is revelatory of the essential solipsism that plagues modern consciousness – Kant, in a sense, is the prototype for the morbid “beautiful soul” of the romantic age: having discovered that his cognitive powers have allowed him to construct an intelligible reality beyond his here and now, the “beautiful soul” ceases to believe in any objective truth that might ground him outside of the sphere of his subjectivity. Aesthetic experience for such a character represents the futility of his quest for the truth: while thinking he can discover a grounded meaningfulness in the sensual yet intelligible shining/showing of the work of art, he finds out that the work is but an externalization of himself, an inwardness projected onto empty appearance. There is then, in fact, no possibility of a true reconciliation between the condition of our everydayness – as subjectivities living in an alternate reality of

⁵ “A world in which you and I never connected would be a horror. And so would a world in which we were exactly the same, and therefore connected unfailingly, with every object on every occasion. *The Marriage of Figaro* helps us be us. [Elaine May's movie] *Ishtar* helps me be me. Thank God for them both.” Ted Cohen, “High and Low Thinking about High and Low Art”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 51, 2 (1993), p.56

abstractions whose experience of “the real” is one of a dumb materiality – and the ideal of our vocation as embodied creators of concrete meaningfulness.

Hegel’s conception of the aesthetic represents an attempt to overcome this Kantian/modern schism between human condition and human vocation, between the experienced “falsity” of the ordinary and the promise of an authentic extra-ordinary. As William Desmond points out, Hegel sees in the aesthetic experience a means by which our vocation can become tangible to us, a means by which subjectivity or inwardness can be translated into objective truth. This metaphysical alchemy is made possible by the transcendental nature, for Hegel, of the work of art itself: like a human being, an artwork more truly exists in a supersensible (cognitive/spiritual) dimension; it is not reducible to a mere thing. The work of art is indeed a reflection of the artist’s subjectivity – it constitutes an object through which, as Kant already noticed, the subject can recognize himself and communicate himself to others. As such however, the work itself, independently from the subject, expresses its own spiritual quality in excess of its being/appearance. The beautiful work, while a (finite) object, is therefore more accurately a concrete manifestation of (infinite) spirit, in other words, an apparition or appearing that signifies a depth beyond appearance, the depth of consciousness that continuously reproduces and recognizes itself in the process of becoming self-conscious. In appearing sensuously in the work of art, subjectivity really objectifies itself and as such makes itself objective – grounded, real – thereby effectively *creating truth* where there was none before, where previously there were only the two estranged elements of one-dimensional, material “thereness” and an infinite but insubstantial inwardness. The beautiful “image” in this sense is transfigured into truth itself, as the synthesis of those two antagonisms, therefore fulfilling the promise of man’s ideal vocation:

“For Hegel, the beautiful art work may be such a *coincidentia oppositorum* in this sense: it is not just a mere laying side by side of the opposites, their juxtaposition which in no way transforms their opposition; rather it requires the confrontation and interplay of opposites such that they interpenetrate and coalesce into a new unity – such would be a living as opposed to an abstract reconciliation.”⁶

How far, however, does this reconciliation go? There is a touch of hocus-pocus to Hegel’s transfiguration of the aesthetic object into a vessel of truth: art, by definition, does express a two-dimensionality or spirituality without which it could not rise above the mere thing; however, it is also, by definition, “untrue” in the sense that it is an artifact, something that exists in opposition to rather than in correspondence with reality. As appearance or image, art cannot literally transform our experience of the everyday into an experience of

⁶ William Desmond, *Art and the Absolute: A Study of Hegel’s Aesthetics*, p. 139

the authentic. As Theodor Adorno rightly points out, artworks do “not have what the immanence of their forms claim to have”⁷: the reconciling synthesis of embodiment and cognitive transcendence that works exemplify qua their nature as aesthetic/sensuous ideas exists only within the thingly boundaries of the artwork. In this sense, the subject’s experience of meaningfulness in art cannot transcend the artwork’s material being – in other words, the “art” in art cannot be said to actually exist in the Hegelian sense, as an independent truth. This “non-existence” of the work of art is compounded by the fact that, as Adorno argues, the meaning of an artwork is dynamic and elusive, continuously emerging out of and disappearing back into the material background of the artwork, making it impossible to draw a sharp ontological line between the artwork qua art (imbued with sense, spirit) and the artwork qua artifact (empty, dumb). Consequently, insofar as the sense of any work – as Kant already elucidated – is essentially undetermined, the “spirit” in an artwork can never be identified; it can never be pointed out as something “existing”. It is as such incapable of being a basis, as Hegel claimed, for an objective or absolute truth. However, the fact that the aesthetic cannot compete with a theoretical mode of cognition in terms of its ability to exhibit soundness or certitude is not a form of deficiency or powerlessness vis a vis the theoretical; rather, it indicates that any vocation that art may have can only be particular to art, autonomous from what Bernstein calls “truth-only cognition”.

Can we then claim that art is in fact under no obligation to be truthful in order to be valuable and meaningful (as a practice)? In a real sense Hegel is correct in arguing that the aesthetic, in order to achieve genuine authenticity, must be grounded in some form of objective reality that transcends art’s origin in the subjectivity of artists and art-viewers. Otherwise, art cannot be metaphysically distinguishable from fantasy or daydreams – its relationship to our lives would be that of a make-believe game we play in order to escape the absence of fulfillment, of vocation in our daily life. It seems necessary that art, in order to deserve its name, its philosophical autonomy, be truthful – although not in the same sense as theoretical or propositional truthfulness.

According to Adorno, art functions as a negative or default truth by presenting itself as the image of a “possible” – rather than of an *actual* human vocation – made impossible by the social conditions governing modern empirical reality. As a sensuous or organic form of meaning-making, art testifies to the ultimate unfoundedness, the “lie” that is the bureaucratic mentality of a society organized exclusively on the basis of top-down principles and rules – in this sense, the hegemony of the theoretical mode of cognition, to which art represents an alternative, has cut us off from ‘real’ life by constructing around us an “iron cage” everyday of pointless and yet indispensable routines. Through its detachment from the background of the everyday, the genuine artwork opposes

⁷ Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 133

uniqueness and particularity to the banal, impersonal universality of the systematic, the naturally compelling, the irreplaceable, the self-sufficient to a rationale according to which individual entities are indifferently subsumable and exchangeable. In this Weberian context, art's truth is that it is a "necessary illusion"⁸ – although mere image, art achieves authenticity by maintaining a dialectical relationship with empirical reality that enables it to function as an autonomous realm in which a limited "salvation" from the deception of the everyday is possible. Art remains irreducibly an illusion – it cannot serve as a proxy for life itself – but an illusion without which we could not envision the possibility of our own redemption from literalness, from, in Herbert Marcuse's language, the "one-dimensionality", the passive immediacy that characterizes our experience of the (social, moral, theoretical) given.

Beyond the given, art indicates a real that is neither Hegel's "objective" reality nor simply another false construction. Therein lies the power of art's particular authenticity vis a vis other cognitive activities whose function is also essentially critical, notably philosophy: it does not positively claim to discover an alternative truth, an alternative grounding for value; instead it leaves the question of truth in suspense, as an enigma that both invites and resists decipherment. According to Adorno, this enigmatic quality in art stands for the Kantian "block" that always exists between the subject and the noumenal or "being-in-itself", an impassable barrier that art incarnates in its sheer materiality. And yet, art is not just itself, it can also be read or interpreted – the puzzle of this intelligibility both in excess of the sensible and in excess of the abstract, of any determined argument or reason, is also part of the enigma of art. The latter points to a basic incommensurability between aesthetic meaning and propositional signification that is made evident in the fact that the meaningful substance of an artwork can never be translated in the form of a literal fact-bearing or value-bearing statement. Even the conceptual art piece by Marcel Duchamps, "L.H.O.O.Q", which consists entirely in this title and the pun it makes about "the work", a print of the Mona Lisa with a painted goatee, can only mean what it means as a particular critique of the artworld in the medium of a title and of a disfigured print; in the same way the meaning of "ready-made" can only *appear in* the act of exhibiting a urinal or any other ordinary object – the "statement" that these works make is always more than a statement for the reason that one can never clearly couch down or justify any interpretation of what the work is about, what it really says. As such, art reflects a basic ambiguity or absence of intentionality that, in comparison with the act of Kantian freedom or self-determinacy expressed in other modes of cognition, appears like a resurgence of the natural, of an original wildness that resists signification. By keeping itself to itself, ultimately undecipherable and therefore uncontrollable, the aesthetic work provokes a longing in us for this "it" beyond ourselves:

⁸ *ibid*, p. 188

“To the degree to which man has spun a conceptual network around everything outside his subjective spirit, he has lost the sense of wonder in the presence of the other. Weak as it may be, art seeks to correct this tendency. By its very nature it instills wonder in human beings, just as philosophy was supposed to instill wonder, according to Plato, never mind the fact that it decided otherwise.”⁹

And yet philosophy – theoretical cognition – ultimately supersedes art and its enigmatic meaning-making by revealing, it seems, where art’s promise of transformation, the promise of the “wonderful”, fails. According to Adorno’s argument, art is always attempting to embody this “otherness”, this “in-itself” beyond the scope of our understanding that it cannot, of course, ever actually embody – since to do so would be make fully intelligible something “unnamable” (in Kant’s term) that by definition cannot be brought in front of us. Arthur Danto sees the historical vocation of art in this Adornian sense, as the continuous struggle of art to actualize, to manifest the non-propositional truth or enigma that it claims to symbolize. Because of its in-between ontological status as neither empirical reality nor statement, but as appearance/symbol, art in fact repeatedly fails, according to this scenario, to fulfill both its promise of incarnation, to “make real” the supersensible content of its symbol, and its promise to make explicit, to articulate for itself the enigma of its content. Art’s compensation for this failure is its capacity to make us feel “as if” that transformation of the unnamable into the real had in fact taken place, as if, in the words of Huhn and Horowitz¹⁰, the exterior manifestation or sign that constitutes the artwork were truly reconciled with its symbolic interior or meaning. Danto famously claims that this failure is not a fatality for art. Art has in fact already ceased, for Danto, to strive in vain to fulfill a “vocation” for representation and a search for representational adequacy that is properly philosophical. The key to art’s liberation from this inauthentic destiny was effectively to abandon its pretense at being an aesthetic symbol, something achieved, according to Danto, by the advent of “pop” in the visual arts, which he alleges proclaimed “the return of the everyday in art”¹¹, the destruction of the ontological difference between the artwork and reality. After pop, art could no longer continue its historical mission of finding ways to become a “better symbol”, insofar as the pop artwork, by “aestheticizing” the everyday had debunked the authority of the aesthetic vocation, which was to transform the everyday/the real into something other than itself.

To read along with Danto (and perhaps with Adorno) an inherent deficiency or a philosophical “disenfranchisement” in art’s aesthetic or symbolic vocation repeats, I

9 *ibid*, p. 184

10 Gregg Horowitz and Tom Huhn, *The Wake of Art: criticism, philosophy and the ends of taste*, p.49

11 *ibid*, p.33

believe, the Hegelian error of trying to hold art accountable to objective – a.k.a. *theoretical* – standards of validity, according to which the symbol as appearance always necessarily exists outside the ontological realm in which truth operates, outside both the empirical and the supersensible. As such, Danto's interpretation misses the real point of the aesthetic symbol, as well as the truthfulness particular to its own mode of cognitive embodiment. This vocation is in fact already elucidated by Adorno's account of the enigmatic nature of the artwork: art is not constantly attempting to make manifest a truth or "spirit" that it cannot adequately articulate; it is in fact not trying to represent a truth – a statement – at all. In this sense, the authenticity of art does not lie in its endeavor to bring a solution to the enigma of a meaning "in-itself", but instead to manifest the ambiguous truth of that enigma's incomplete decipherability/ultimate indecipherability. As such, the artwork does in fact make real what it promises, what it symbolizes – its (ambiguous, aesthetic) meaning makes itself known as the kind of meaning that can only reveal itself adequately in the mode of the aesthetic appearance, in the mode of the enigmatic.

What the Danto-Adornian conception of the aesthetic symbol really reveals is that the enigmatic meaningfulness of the artwork is an essential mode of apprehending "truth" or reality. Where theoretical cognition sees the world as a system of objective structures, art perceives in it a powerfully stimulating and at the same time forbiddingly unfathomable *je ne sais quoi* that indicates (but never affirms) a bottomless depth to the world, an excess of space underneath and above the abstract scaffolding of the theoretical. In this sense, the advent of pop, as a form of art which "aestheticizes" the everyday, which, by a minimal act of imagination, by *the act of withdrawing from and focusing its attention on it*¹², transforms a previously uninteresting literality, a meaningless obvious into a subject-matter as intriguing in its wonderful problematic proximity, in "the sheer contingency... crassness...of its configuration"¹³ as any distant ideal – in this sense the advent of pop effectively represents art's capacity to reveal the potential everydayness of the enigmatic. This moment represents an unprecedented victory for art, for art's capacity to transcend its illusion and perpetuate its own particular mode of meaning-making beyond the boundaries of its autonomy as a practice. Pop, by presenting the possibility of an extension of the aesthetic experience to all domains of human life – beyond its former grounding in nature and in the "traditional" realm of the aesthetic or formally beautiful – expresses not, as Danto thought, the end of art or the end of the aesthetic symbol but rather the hypothetical renewal of aesthetic cognition as a valuable alternative to the supremacy of theoretical cognition in modern society. What more powerful blow against

12 Huhn and Horowitz' interpretation of what goes on in pop art finds direct confirmation here in R.G Collingwood's own explanation, in *The Principles of Art*, of imagination as the primal act of dominance over/ withdrawal from the immediacy of the sensuous and the consequent achievement of consciousness as awareness of a self separate from the sensuous.

13 *ibid*, p. 30

the contemporary hegemony of the bureaucratic mindset than the capacity to experience its impoverished, trivialized everydayness as potentially an aesthetic idea, in other words, as possibly a source of infinitely uncertain, moment by moment significance that musters in us a feeling of enlivenment, that summons our *commitment* to life? Even in “anti-aesthetic” art the aesthetic confirms its power to realize the impossible reconciliation, what I have named earlier in this essay the ideal of a human vocation, the ideal that we can discover a mode of everyday “inseparably indexed to a personal vision”¹⁴, that we can achieve the completeness of our subjectivity within the very conditions of the given itself.

Part II: film intrudes ontologically in the question of the vocation of art

Historically anterior to the conceptualization of pop-art, film - as the artistic medium whose mode of being is to project an illusory given, a spontaneous reality secretly orchestrated by the filmmakers’ “personal vision” - is, to use Stanley Cavell’s terminology, ontologically poised to heal the experiential schism of the Kantian legacy. Rather than leaving us with the unkept promise of an Adornian art that can momentarily transform the given into the enigmatic, but fails in the end to redeem the enigmatic as a meaning-making alternative to ‘truth-only’ or theoretical cognition, film fabricates a parallel given from disparate elements of physical reality, one in which the viewer is present for the ‘magical’ reconciliation between the given, whose enigmatic depth is restored in the film-world, and Kant’s human vocation to live our inwardness as ‘truth’ realized and manifested in the objective. In this sense, film might represent the aesthetic’s unprecedented attempt to break the boundaries of its (post-Kantian) autonomy and convert society, as it were, *en masse*.

In *The World Viewed: reflections on an ontology of film*, Stanley Cavell very pertinently mentions that our way of remembering films, of recalling our experience of films differs significantly from the way in which we remember novels, paintings or pieces of music – memories of movies that have particularly struck us or moved us tend to almost blend in with the structure and texture of our memories from ‘real life’; they encroach on our present with something of the same insistency and luminosity as, in Cavell’s words, reminiscences “from childhood”. This important particularity of film derives, of course, from the fact that films are animated projections of reality; that they mechanically reproduce for us the perceptual quality of real life by making present to our consciousness the unfolding of the noise and movement of the world. Movies achieve this realism in art to an unprecedented degree not because they tend to represent realistic subject-matter – on the contrary, the representation of virtually any sort of fictitious subject-matter is made

14 *The Fate of Art*, p.8

possible in film – but because they bring the artistic medium, beyond the sensorial, into the phenomenological realm of the real. The film artwork is a composition of light the way a painting is a composition of paint, but we do not experience *light* when we watch a movie, whereas we experience the physical possibilities of the medium of paint when we see a painting. Film instead strives to re-create life in its totality, just as a novel or a play can by bringing us into the world of characters, events and decors, with the enormous difference, however, that in film our imagination plays the most minimal of roles in making us present to that totality: the world of film *manifests itself to us*, short-circuiting the usual necessity for the subject to provide an effort in making the artwork's world manifest. It is therefore natural, it seems, to remember movies as a series of occurrences that we literally saw happening before us – while remaining, paradoxically, fully aware that what we were really seeing was a representation of life and not 'real life' itself.

In this sense, art as the Adornian promise of the aesthetic image, as the illusion that shows up the masked potential of reality by annihilating the given of reality has never been more powerful, real or perverse as in film, because film has achieved a completeness in illusion that competes with reality itself while nevertheless irremediably being illusion, and therefore an unkept promise. In a contemporary social setting especially, in which we repeatedly experience modern life as the alienation of the subject's inwardness, the private world of our desires and truths, from the world 'out there', from an imprisoning objectivity in which the subject is checked at every turn by the reality principle – film represents an unprecedented possibility of individual fulfillment by directly responding to "the craving for our fantasies and reality to complete or to project one another." As such, it embodies the unattainable, by incarnating the potential, the possible, the imagined in the experience of the *present*. Cavell points out that this faculty of the medium of film is not equivalent to a flight into private fantasy: when it is art, according to Cavell, film exemplifies and makes manifest the collective inwardness of a culture as a whole, reaching beyond the superficial layer of tropes taped by consumerism to play out the patterns and rituals of significance encoded in such basic human realities as relationship, individuality, community, feeling. All art can justifiably be understood, a la Hegel, as exemplifying and clarifying these issues, but the power of film arguably derives from its particular form of expression, its capacity to animate stylized (limited, fictitious) characters and events in the "mode" of the given, so that the world of film is experienced as both immediately concrete and ideal: a living story that appears larger, more original than life – a myth. In recalling to us the sources of meaningfulness and value that can be discovered in the actual, film holds out the hope that modern life can heal itself, that inwardness and given can echo each other. Contra Cavell, this particular promise persists even when "traditional" (Hollywood) filmmaking, with its recognizable "automatisms" for producing myth, has ceded a measure of authority to the development of "modern" or

experimental filmmaking for which automatism and myths are no longer clearly identifiable.

Watching a movie is, at its best, a visceral experience that satisfies us in an almost physical way: we come out of the movie theater or exit the DVD menu with the sense that we have fed on another reality, that we have sneaked into the skin of the invisible man and experienced, in the most intimate sense, a life that is not ours. By satisfying this desire for effortless gratification or wish fulfillment, film performs a certain “magical” function for the subject. For this reason, is film a medium we might want to be suspicious of, because the power of film is too immediate or overwhelming, because we receive it almost like a gift, without having to ‘work’ for it, the way one works to understand abstract painting, classical music or ‘performance’ art? Is film too fun to be serious? Perhaps our suspicion of film as an art form which unabashedly seeks to pleasure us – this goal often being undifferentiated from its goal as an artwork, a characteristic of film reflected sociologically in the lack of a clear division between art cinema and the film/entertainment industry – arises more directly from a modern tendency to divorce ‘fun’ from the ‘serious’, life from meaningfulness.

Cavell refers us to Baudelaire and his *engouement* for the ordinary spectacle of modern life as a clue to understanding the *engouement* we seem to experience, as a society, for film: “the pleasure we derive from the depiction of the present arises not only from the beauty in which it can be attired, but from its essential quality of being the present.” Notwithstanding our ‘entrapment’ in a contemporary given which regularly appears drained of enchantment or interestingness, we are still called upon to enjoy the occurring and being of things for their own sake – like Arthur Danto responding to a wholly mundane suburban street-corner, we can and want to exclaim: “Good heavens. This is just remarkable!” In a similar way, by abducting us into another present which we are compelled to live fully, as it were, which calls us to renounce all distraction from our natural engrossment with the here and now, film reminds us that our authentic medium as subjects is not the hermetic sphere of subjectivity but this real, this succession of happenings that we set into motion and that set us into motion, these movements, these faces, these objects that gesture towards us with their undecipherable intelligibility, their Adornian enigma. The parallel between the artistic medium of film and pop art in painting appears here in their similar revolutionary stance towards the desirability of reality qua reality - film in this sense is also a response to modernist art as, in Cavell’s words, the last response in “the history of responses to the loss of connection with reality” is to seek to present rather than represent the given, letting the given ‘speak for itself’.

Film, which projects reality through a technological automatism, similarly responds to this (post-modernist) demand for a reduction in the subject’s cognitive interference with

or 'falsification' of the given. The experience of the viewer-subject in film is, as Cavell points out, one of absence: the movie unfolds in her presence but it exists, complete in itself, without her being present to it, not simply because, as audience, she cannot 'enter' the work, but because the very mechanism of point of view, of subjectivity in the film – the camera – is 'outside' the reality depicted by the camera. As a 'person' looking on into the world of the movie, the camera does not manifest itself as subject; it blends into the fabric of the film-reality as if the specific succession, the range, the angle and the composition of different shots were a *natural* way for reality to exhibit itself. Even when the camera acts 'subjectively', by moving in a way that illustrates the point of view of a protagonist or by representing itself in the subject matter of the picture, it retains its function as an objective 'eye' that automatically registers reality and not as a subject-author who participates in the world - the viewer experiences the film-reality as 'the thing in itself', as the world showing itself to us without our having to instigate or fabricate its manifestation. This relative absence of the subject-viewer/interpreter in the world of film is the necessary condition for film's capacity to "give" the real to the subject: "to satisfy the wish to act without performing, to let our actions go out of our hands, we must be willing to allow the self to exhibit itself without the self's intervention." In this sense, as spectators of a movie we escape from the framework of Heideggerian Dasein – no longer do objects emerge from the world as plausible focuses of attention, as elements that fit within our projects; instead they present themselves oblivious of us, achieved and meaningful in their own right. As such, the experience of film is the experience of the absence of anxiety, the absence of Dasein's fateful return to the knowledge that it *assigns* significance to the world, that no significance has its source outside the subject. As Cavell remarks, the camera does not permit us to realize the modernist myth, the omniscience or omnipotence of the subject before the world; on the contrary, it exemplifies the equally modernist defeat of that myth, our fantasy to give up the power of subjectivity in favor of a healing reintegration into a reality that is not ourselves, a reality to which we are simultaneously wholly absent as consciousness of ourselves/subjects and wholly present as consciousness of the other: "a world complete without me which is present to me...nature's survival of me." This gift of intelligible otherness to us/the viewer is crucially involved in the 'magic' of film, as that most urgent wish or need we find is instantaneously fulfilled by the movie experience.

However, we are also naturally well aware as movie-viewers that this experience of a-subjectivity, of impossibly intimate connection with reality is a fabrication, a product of subject agency and design. Montage and composition, if immediately experienced as integral to the 'objective' reality projected by the film are revealed as the purposive mold or cast of that reality the moment the movie-viewer, through an act of self-consciousness, retrieves herself from the film-world. Once its magic or candor is stripped off, a film returns to its being artistry: it becomes again like a painting whose frame defines and contains

entirely the reality it depicts, or like a performance whose spontaneity is, in fact, choreographed.

Film as such participates along with all other arts in the peril of the aesthetic or artistic appearance, according to Adorno's understanding of the artwork as a 'failed promise' to effect a definitive reconciliation between the reality of our inwardness and external reality. As Kant pointed out, because art appears and means in a natural or self-sufficient/artless way (just as beautiful nature appears artistic or artful), we experience in the aesthetic a reconciliation between our subjective powers of meaning-making and purpose, and the desirable, undetermined vitality of the real beyond the reach of the subject. Adorno reminds us, however, that this reconciliation takes place only in the mode of the image or imaginary – in art we remain in the grip of an illusion even though the reconciliation itself, as a genuine curative experience, is not illusionary. Beyond the time frame of our wholehearted focus on the movie screen, the painting, the performance, the piece of music, we are thrown back into our contemporary struggle to reconnect with the real, to assign meaning to the world in a way that feels 'natural', as if there were in fact, in excess of our act of assigning it, meaning that could be freely given by the real *to us*. Because film, by offering us automatic present-ness, allows us to experience the Kantian reconciliation in the extreme, in the flesh, it also raises up a clearer vision of the actualization of inwardness/subjectivity, of the possibility of realizing our ideals of meaningfulness in the world– conversely, it only exacerbates, insofar as the medium remains *merely* vision, the ultimate defeat of this reconciling image.

If reconciliation between inwardness and the real is both made possible and impossible by the medium of film, then what illumination about or solution to our human predicament can film, in the end, embody for us? What kind of subject is incarnated in the reality of film if the viewing subject, as interpreter of represented reality, as assigner of significance, is absent from it? In prose, music, painting or performance, we experience the sensuousness of the world in different forms, but the subject described, depicted or expressed in these mediums remains, paradoxically, discursive or self-conscious. I have to be capable of reading the mood obscurely painted in a portrait, or elusively captured in the movements of a piece of music; I have to intellectually process the set of abstractions that make up a character in a novel or a play. This 'supersensible' quality of the subject in art, this gap established between what is represented and what represents in the artwork, is the source of the "enigmatic" nature, for Adorno, of artistic meaningfulness. As Adorno points out, the significance we discover in a work of art is always threatening to reabsorb itself in the mute materiality of the art-medium; as such, the cognitive substance of the work is constantly shifting, persisting for the viewer/interpreter as an unidentifiable enigma. In film, the enigma of the represented subject exhibits itself differently, insofar as

the material basis of representation and the representation/represented in the movie are not cognitively dissociable. As you are watching Geena Rowlands losing her grip on reality in John Cassavetes' *A Woman Under the Influence*, there is no way you can, at any moment, see her character dissolve back into light or its reality put into doubt, the way you might doubt it if she was depicted in an Abstract Expressionist painting (dissolving back into paint) or being performed on stage (dissolving back into the actor). In film, the character-subject is, as Cavell reminds us, "projected", which means that she does not "project" meaning or express it, in the same way as a protagonist projects her self, her character in a novel, or as emotion and inwardness are expressed in a piece of music. Instead, she is what she is – unambiguously present, closed to us, separate from ourselves: much like a real person, acting and speaking in front of us intelligibly, and yet remaining in the end totally hermetic to our knowledge of her, impenetrable. Her character partakes in the same enigma as flesh and blood subjects do when viewed from the *outside*: inwardness in the film character is essentially hidden from us. As such, experiencing subjects in movies is not so much to gain insight about emotion or cognition, about subjectivity itself, but to witness the different forms in which subjectivity can manifest itself (successfully or unsuccessfully) in the world and how the world 'reacts' in turn, to the demonstration of subjectivity. We see on screen who we would want or not want to *appear* like: as viewers, we are not taken into the secret of who these characters are apart from what we see them as; we are concerned with how they can show themselves, and how the evidence of their appearance – their words, gestures, actions, silence – affects us and our ideals and fantasies of how we ourselves would, if we could, appear in the world, to the world. These ideals and fantasies on our part do not reflect vanity, superficiality, or self-absorption; they express our need, as individuals searching for sense and value in reality, to ourselves incarnate and realize meaningfulness in the flesh, a desire regularly thwarted by our entrapment in inwardness and by the modern confinement of possibilities of signification to the sphere of inwardness.

This particularity of the unfolding of subjectivity in film, as the representation of 'outsideness', accounts for Cavell's analysis that characters in films are not actually "characters", since they cannot be understood in terms of psychology – instead, a film-subject can be more properly defined as a "mythical" personality: she does not project an inward into the world but instead is projected herself as external reality. As such, she is, unlike a prose character, not an individual traversing or tracing a trajectory in an external setting (a subject), but a complete, self-contained entity, an element of the finite set of events that make up her world (an object). The most introverted, indefinite character, because he is projected as a film personality – as an object, a being among beings – is more at home in his film-reality and with himself than we are. For him, the film-reality that appears to the movie-viewer, in its unmediated presentness, as contingent, as a stream of

fortuitous events, is revealed in the course of the film as *necessary*, as indispensably constitutive of what he is: he has a destiny, which it is the film's mission to bring into light. This tendency in films is made clear by the fact that even an undecided or ambiguous fate for a movie personality becomes a destiny *to* undecidedness or ambiguity. For example, in Alain Resnais' *l'Année dernière à Marienbad*, the story ends with the two protagonists escaping from the vacuous luxury of the hotel-chateau only to lose themselves in the sterile geometries of the garden – their historical destiny is therefore left open, but that in itself indicates their true destiny, the meaning of their lives as the failed escape from the void of their social and psychological conditions, as the continuous disappearance of their selves into a timeless present of aimlessness and unreality.

This particularity in film-characters to embody a destiny, the specific way in which their subject-hood is revealed only through their fate as objects *belonging* to a world, is what constitutes their mythical nature, their natural predisposition to represent different 'types' of destinies. Cavell points out that this does not mean that movie personalities are reducible to generic figures, to stereotypes, but, on the contrary, that they manifest themselves as 'individualities' – their trajectories are meaningful to us because, while necessarily occupying a given place or role in the reality of the film, they incarnate unique possibilities of manifesting themselves purposefully within that context. Martin Compton as Liam in Ken Loach's tale of generational poverty, *Sweet Sixteen*, is a good example of this capacity for film-characters to inhabit a certain social or literary category while displaying, in excess of that category, an aura of inimitable distinctiveness that ends up lending significance and depth to the type. The general roles Compton takes on in *Sweet Sixteen*, as the rebellious adolescent/the powerless victim of economic inequality, only come to acquire meaning and power for us when we see them exemplified in the singular physiognomy, mannerisms, presence of Compton himself. Cavell sees in this kind of representation of subjectivity, as the exercise of singularity – of a singularity that can only manifest itself from the perspective of embodiment in a given actuality – an intimation of the "burden of responsibility" that we have, as subjects, to persist in the search for a personal destiny or vocation that can be realized within the social conditions that determine our lives. On the movie screen, we witness the fulfillment of our own desire for destiny, in other words, for self-consistency, self-coherence, self-sufficiency, a desire that we regularly experience as impossible in the face of a social given which too often appears unreceptive to and estranged from our dreams and goals. Film confronts us both with the image of another kind of given or reality, one in which individual/singular actions can be significant, and the image of another kind of (modern) subject, one who can achieve self-significance as an constituent of the world, of the given.

Does this image in film persist even when film (in its artistic form) no longer seeks to incarnate myth, to produce exemplary personalities capable of “inflecting mood and releasing fantasy” in movie-viewers? Cavell claims that film, since around the 60’s, has entered another stage in its history as an art: film now consistently explores the potential of its medium beyond traditional forms by renouncing the ‘automatic’ production of definable ‘types’ of movie-personalities and the different incarnations of those types in favor of a ‘modernist’ approach to its mission as an art-form. Cavell defines the latter as film’s search for self-definition, for the meaning of its own particular way of meaning-making; he opposes it to a pre-modernist approach, or the understanding of filmmaking as the generation of new instances within the given of the film-medium. Cavell asks, in this context, what alternative image of the possibilities of the realization of subjectivity does film offer, if it is no longer interested in creating instances of subjects who both distill values of singularity and serve as identifiable foci for a shared understanding of the roles and categories that define movie-viewers’ social/cultural reality (a particularity which I have referred to as film personalities’ capacity for destiny). In foregoing a traditional understanding of its art, has film relinquished the source of its unique power over its audience: the fleshy presentation or externalization of our collective desire to establish our specificity as individuals through *communal recognition*?

It does not seem necessary that a ‘modernist’ and a ‘traditional’ approach in film should be mutually exclusive (even within a same artwork); therefore the question is perhaps not whether film no longer produces types but what new understanding of the characterization of a film-subject has replaced the old definition of type as an identifiable social or literary role. It would be untrue to claim that art films today tend to be exclusively preoccupied by the question of their own identity as films, seeking to establish themselves as “new mediums” for meaning-making (Cavell) at the expense of preoccupying themselves with filmmaking, with creating new instances within the medium of film. In looking for new ways to convey conceptions of subjectivity and reality, experimental films, alongside a formal agenda to ‘re-invent’ film, are also seeking to more truthfully represent the new meanings subjectivity and reality have acquired for the contemporary audience. The fact is we no longer intuitively conceive of subjects as necessarily occupying a position or role within a communal reality. A communal reality for us is no longer a “given” – it has become a question, a search, a problem or an ideal, an issue that contemporary film has increasingly seized upon as a subject-matter. Within this contemporary context, the destiny of film-subjects, their capacity to achieve singular meaningfulness within the boundaries of their world, thrives in the gray areas in which different collective realities, spaces of shared-ness overlap and disappear into each other. Like the protagonist in Jim Jarmusch’s *Dead Man*, fortuitously named William Blake, such a subject can find himself stranded in a frontier town as the result of a technicality, become a murderer by accident,

and finally, literally float out of our sight. All the while such a subject will have walked a line between worlds he did not understand, a 'dead man' beyond the reach of real life possibilities, drifting from absurd contingency to absurd contingency – an expression of perpetual surprise registered on his face. We do not know who he is or why he is there or even what meaning he in the end achieved or by whom he was recognized; all we know is how essentially in accord he is with himself, how self-evident is his existential signature, as we watch him, against the background of a luminous black and white wilderness, unknowingly move towards the fulfillment of his fate.