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0521839033 - Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure

Lambert Zuidervaart

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Introduction

Critical Hermeneutics

The question, famed of old, by which logicians were supposed to be driven into a corner, . . . is the question: What is truth?

Immanuel Kant¹

The idea of artistic truth has fallen on hard times. It has received few sustained visits in Anglo-American philosophy since midcentury analyses by John Hospers (1946) and Monroe Beardsley (1958). Even continental philosophers after Martin Heidegger and Theodor W. Adorno have come to doubt its viability. The topic is complex and contentious, and the most important contributions come from thinkers whose work resists paraphrase. One must think twice before entering labyrinthine ruins where contemporary philosophers fear to tread.

Yet the issues traditionally addressed under the label of “artistic truth” have not disappeared. If anything, they have intensified: the role of artists in society, relations between art and knowledge, and questions about validity in cultural interpretations. What has changed is the paradigm with which philosophers work. Whereas philosophers used to sort out such issues in terms of a mediation between epistemic subject and epistemic object and whatever transcends this mediation, now they emphasize interpretation, discourse, and historicity. To revisit the idea of artistic truth is to test the potential and limitations of a postmetaphysical paradigm in contemporary philosophy.²

The shift in philosophical paradigm finds a counterpart in the movement from modern to postmodern arts. As I have indicated elsewhere, this artistic movement involves three changes in emphasis: from the autonomy of art to the social constructedness of the arts; from the primacy of form to the primacy of context; and from an orientation toward the future to an embrace of contemporary contingency.³ These developments dramatically reconfigure the field onto which the idea of artistic truth must map. They also intensify the issues that artistic truth theories traditionally addressed.

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Unless one rejects such developments in the arts, or finds little of worth in them, one's theory of artistic truth must take them into account.⁴

These two cultural conditions, the one philosophical and the other artistic, provide the broad context in which "artistic truth" is to be reconsidered. After some remarks on the history and significance of the topic, let me indicate the sources for my own account of artistic truth, sketch the argument of this book, and comment on its scope and methods.

I.1 LOCATIONS

The Western philosophical debate about truth in art goes back to Plato and Aristotle. Whereas Plato's *Republic*, on a nonironical reading, denies the representational arts of his day any capacity to carry truth, Aristotle's *Poetics* suggests that Greek tragedy (and, by extension, other "imitative arts") can provide true insight into the sorts of events and characters that could occur under certain conditions. The difference between Plato and his most famous student turns on their contrasting accounts of the nature and location of universals, and on corresponding differences in their theories of knowledge and representation.

The Plato-Aristotle debate in its many versions lasted until the nineteenth century, when new theories of art as expression transformed the ways in which truth is attributed to art. Now the most forceful advocates of "artistic truth" would link it with creativity, imagination, and the expression of that which exceeds the grasp of ordinary or scientific understanding. One glimpses this new tendency in Immanuel Kant's account of artistic "genius" as an imaginative capacity for expressing "aesthetic ideas." Yet Kant would have rejected romantic claims that art's imaginative character makes it a "higher" source of truth than are science and bourgeois morality – a higher source alongside philosophy and religion, in G. W. F. Hegel's account of "absolute spirit."

The debate shifts once more with the so-called linguistic turn in twentieth-century philosophy.⁵ Although many traces remain of both pre-Kantian accounts of representation and post-Kantian emphases on expression, a philosophy whose head is linguistically turned cannot easily posit direct connections either between (representational) art and reality or between (expressive) art and the inner self. Increasingly, the questions whether art can carry truth, and whether this capacity or its lack is crucial to art, get posed in one of two ways: (1) Can arts-related language (commentary, criticism, historiography, and the like) be true or false? (2) Are the arts themselves languages, such that, depending on one's theory of language, the arts lack or possess truth capacities in the way that languages do?⁶ Because of the turn toward language, the traditional idea of truth's being "in" art, whether representationally or expressively, seems increasingly outdated or difficult to sustain.

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Two responses to the linguistic turn characterize much of twentieth-century aesthetics. Continental philosophers such as Theodor W. Adorno claim that the ability to challenge ordinary language gives art a unique capacity to carry truth. Analytic philosophers such as Monroe Beardsley, by contrast, employ conceptions of language that render art an unlikely vehicle of truth. As a result, the topic of artistic truth hovers between aesthetic conceptions of artistic truth that oppose traditional theories of knowledge, on the one hand, and epistemological conceptions of propositional truth that underestimate art's cognitive capacities, on the other. Yet contemporary philosophy contains resources for a more robust conception of artistic truth, as this book will show.

If the debate over truth in art, in its shifting guises, were merely a philosopher's concern, others might find it interesting but unimportant. This is particularly so of the way the debate has proceeded since philosophy became institutionalized as an academic profession and began to doubt its own social relevance. Yet I believe the topic has societal importance at a time when mass media, entertainment industries, and new computer technologies have become driving forces in an increasingly globalized consumer capitalist economy. A deep ambivalence pervades contemporary Western societies concerning the role of visual imagery, literature, and public performances in human life. Many people regard these as "mere entertainment" providing diversion for consumers and profits for producers and investors. Others, however, worry about the pedagogical, political, or moral impact of the arts, holding these at times to unyielding standards that the critics do not meet in their own lives. Neither side seems to grasp what enables the arts to provide either the "entertainment" or the "instruction" that people find satisfying or troubling, as the case may be. Nevertheless, everyone turns to visual imagery, literature, and performing arts to gain orientation and to confirm or disconfirm orientations already found. Gaining orientation is essential to the acquaintance, recognition, understanding, and know-how that belong to "knowledge" in a broad sense. To that extent, it is not esoteric to regard the arts as ways of acquiring and testing knowledge or to consider specific works or events or experiences of art to be more or less truthful. The challenge for philosophers is to give an account of artistic truth that illuminates the contemporary cultural scene. Such an account should provide theoretical insight of use to those who develop public policies, educational strategies, and personal or group decisions in connection with the arts.

Let me illustrate the search for orientation in music, a field many philosophers have found highly resistant to a theory of artistic truth. Writing in the *New York Times* about the fifteenth annual Mahler Festival in Boulder, Colorado, Stephen Kinzer explains the attraction of Gustav Mahler's music:

Mahler's music is deeply complex and almost unbearably emotional. Its great themes are despair in the face of tragedy, followed by redemption and determination to live

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on. That message perplexed his contemporaries. . . . Many of them were far removed from the depths of human torment and lived in societies where death was often idealized as something ethereal and even beautiful.

Today, after the 20th century's world wars and mass slaughters, Mahler's music touches many more souls than it did when it was written. Its difficulty also attracts ambitious musicians, and 90 or more arrive here at their own expense each year to play it.⁷

So both the "complexity" of Mahler's music and its "great themes" of despair and redemption help explain its attraction today.

Kinzer's article documents this assessment in detail, quoting both musicians and audience members, both seasoned professionals and eager students. For example, Richard Oldberg, a professional horn player and the festival's music director, says Mahler "deals with the most profound questions of life." Calling Mahler's compositions "music for our time," Oldberg observes that "the events of Sept. 11 make him more contemporary than ever. Mahler is the great prophet of the idea that life involves great pain and suffering, but also that after it all, there is resurrection and triumphant affirmation." In a more personal vein, twenty-one-year-old student Ana Mahanovic says that Mahler's music has had "an enormous influence on my life. It has such a connection to the great questions of who we are, why we're here and where we're going. It's given me a real emotional focus, and also a focus to my studies. I want to devote myself to this music."⁸

There was a time, and perhaps there still is, when professional philosophers disdained talk like this of "great themes" and "great questions" in music, of how, by "dealing with" these themes or "having such a connection" to these questions, certain music can foster social and personal orientations. These philosophers would declare such talk "merely metaphorical," as if the claims made could not be meant "literally" or be regarded as true. The time has come, it seems to me, for philosophy not to be so dismissive. If philosophers have learned anything from the linguistic turn, it should be to pay close attention to ordinary language in daily usage. As Kinzel's newspaper account illustrates, people do regularly claim that music helps them find orientation or reorientation, that this comes by way of what music says, and that in some related sense such music is true. A contemporary account of artistic truth should shed light on such language usage and on the experiences to which it belongs.

Unfortunately, standard general theories of truth often prove deficient in this regard. I do not have the space to review them here.⁹ The easiest way to indicate their inadequacy is to observe that they restrict their attention to linguistic and conceptual bearers of truth. Richard Kirkham lists the following as candidates for the sorts of things that Anglo-American philosophers have considered capable of being true or false: "beliefs, propositions, judgments, assertions, statements, theories, remarks, ideas, acts of thought, utterances, sentence tokens, sentence types, sentences (unspecified), and

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speech acts.” Although Kirkham urges tolerance about which candidates to admit, arguing that “there is no sort of entity that cannot in principle bear truth values,” he does not actually expand the field beyond linguistic and conceptual entities.¹⁰ But few philosophers after Kant regard linguistic and conceptual truth bearers as central to the arts. Hence, so long as general theories of truth restrict the class of truth bearers in these ways, it will be difficult to construct a theory of truth in art.

Difficult, but not impossible. I can think, for example, of two ways to regard propositions as vehicles of artistic truth.¹¹ One way is to say that works of art simply *are* propositions or that artworks can be true or false only insofar as they function as objects of logical discrimination, in both production and reception. Reminiscent of early Wittgenstein’s description of propositions as pictures, this first approach says nothing about the unique manner in which art “carries” truth or falsehood. Another way to locate artistic truth in propositions is to say art *embodies* propositions in a variety of phenomena and media. On this approach artistic truth would exist independently of its embodiment, even though certain propositions could be unique to art, in the sense that they cannot be expressed or communicated except by way of art.¹² The disadvantage to this second approach is that it reifies a logical function into a thing in itself, as if propositions are independent and eternal universals simply waiting to be instantiated. Not only is this a questionable view of propositions, as this book argues, but also it ignores the social, historical, and political character of artistic truth.

Although some other version may be possible, and although I have not given a detailed account of the two versions mentioned, I think the propositional view of artistic truth is beyond redemption. If there is truth in art, it will have to be located in something other than propositions. The same applies to the other conceptual and linguistic contenders – judgments, sentences, utterances, assertions, and the like. For what distinguishes much of art, as it has developed historically in various societies and under various political conditions, is its tendency to favor the nonconceptual, nonlinguistic, and nonpropositional. In fact, partly because Western societies have privileged science and technology but have failed to find meaning in instrumental rationality, much of art has become antipropositional. To expect its truth to be propositional would misread recent history. A better approach is that recommended by Adorno: to try to understand such art’s unintelligibility. This book argues against a propositional view of truth bearers and in favor of an account of artistic truth as nonpropositional.

Philosophically, however, a dogmatically antipropositional approach also will not do. This can be observed from one antipropositional approach to truth bearers that might seem compatible with a theory of artistic truth but actually undermines the entire project. Some philosophers have used speech-act theory to propound a deflationary thesis to the effect that “is true” is not a genuine predicate. Consequently, “there are no such properties as

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truth and falsity,” and “nothing can bear truth values.”¹³ The deflationary thesis has one potentially salutary effect, namely, to break a fixation on conceptual and linguistic entities as privileged bearers of truth. But this potential is purchased at the price of rendering theories of truth superfluous, and that would apply to a theory of artistic truth as well. The deflationary thesis is a parallel in the analytic tradition to a questioning of the very idea of truth within some of French poststructuralism.

Although the characterization of truth bearers forms only part of an adequate theory, it is decisive for the question whether truth can be meaningfully attributed to art. That is why I find Adorno’s idea of truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) so instructive.¹⁴ Adorno’s idea allows one to attribute a non-propositional import to art phenomena that is true or false but is neither representational along either Platonic or Aristotelian lines nor expressive in the manner proposed by romantic theories. Once that fundamental point is granted, one can address the other questions of truth theory – roughly, what truth is, what it means, and what it does.¹⁵

Another prominent feature to standard theories of truth lies in their criterion of truth. Many are correspondence theories. Correspondence theories of truth hold that there are truth bearers and that a truth bearer is true if and only if it corresponds to a state of affairs that obtains. They differ concerning the class of truth bearers (e.g., beliefs, propositions, sentences, or statements), the nature of states of affairs (whether they are facts, and whether they are mind-independent, as realists hold), and the type of correspondence required (congruence [e.g., Bertrand Russell] or correlation [e.g., J. L. Austin]).¹⁶ In addition, most correspondence theories are propositionally inflected, even though many propositionally inflected theories of truth are not correspondence theories. “Propositionally inflected” theories (my term) regard propositions as the sole or the primary bearers of truth. The historical roots to such theories, and to the conflicts among them, lie in the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle, with whom the debate about truth in art began.

Propositionally inflected correspondence theories of truth have dominated Anglo-American arguments concerning “artistic truth,” both for and against. Among philosophers whose theories I discuss at some length, T. M. Greene, Monroe Beardsley, and Nicholas Wolterstorff all employ propositionally inflected correspondence theories of truth. Their “opponents” – I. A. Richards, Albert Hofstadter, and Nelson Goodman, respectively – either demote propositions as truth bearers or dismiss the criterion of correspondence or both.¹⁷ Holding a correspondence theory does not preclude giving an account of artistic truth. Both Greene and Hofstadter, for example, give such accounts within the general framework of a correspondence theory. Yet, by insisting on correlation or congruence with states of affairs that obtain, correspondence theories miss the intrinsically interpretive character of art making, art experience, and art phenomena. Such theories usually lead to

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the conclusion that, to be true, art phenomena must be true independently of their being interpreted as true. This conclusion cannot be right, however, if, as Joseph Margolis has argued and as I hold, art itself is interpretive through and through.¹⁸ A nonpropositional and noncorrespondence theory of artistic truth is required, which I shall attempt to provide. Although it needs to incorporate insights from traditional representational and expressive accounts, this alternative theory will take seriously both the linguistic turn in philosophy and the hermeneutic character of the arts. Now let me mention some sources to my alternative and outline the book's argument.

1.2 DIRECTIONS

This book describes artistic truth as a multidimensional process of imaginative disclosure. The primary sources for this description lie in Adorno's idea of artistic "truth content," already mentioned, and in Martin Heidegger's general conception of truth as "disclosedness." Attentiveness to truth's hermeneutic character helps make Heidegger's conception fruitful for a theory of artistic truth. Heidegger holds that even assertions and propositions are results and means of interpretation. The key to their truth, and to any truth, resides not in correspondence to states of affairs but in the hermeneutic openness of the interpreter. Correlatively, truth is not primarily the property of certain "truth bearers" such as assertions and propositions. Rather it is a process in which assertions and propositions, like artworks and speech acts, get their bearings. Although Chapters 4 and 5 point out problems in Heidegger's conception, it offers a way to think about truth that does justice to the interpretive character of the arts.

In addition to Adorno and Heidegger, another source to my account lies in Searlian speech-act theory, as modified and extended by Jürgen Habermas into a theory of communicative action. On the one hand, John Searle's theory of speech acts enables one to recognize and reconceptualize the limited but important role of assertions and propositions in the pursuit of truth. On the other hand, Habermas's tripartite differentiation of validity claims into propositional truth, normative legitimacy, and expressive sincerity suggests a model for distinguishing among three dimensions of artistic truth and linking these with arts-related language. Chapter 6 pursues this suggestion in detail.

I use "art" and "the arts" to include not only the traditional fine arts but also newer forms of mass-mediated or site-specific art. The labels also include folk art and so-called popular art. My most comprehensive term for the objects and occurrences people experience as art is "art phenomena." Within the category of art phenomena I distinguish "art products" from "art events." A piece of music or a novel would be an art product, whereas a recital or a public literary reading would be an art event. Western philosophers have mostly concentrated on art products rather than art events, to the

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impoverishment of our theories of art. Western philosophy of art since Kant has also concentrated on what I take to be a subcategory of art products, namely, artworks. On my own account, artworks are art products that have been institutionally constituted to “stand on their own.” The means of such constituting are many. I think, for example, of the writing and publishing of musical scores, coupled with the training of professional musicians, the availability of dedicated sites for music performance and enjoyment (e.g., concert and recital halls), the rise of specialized music organizations (e.g., symphony orchestras and concert choirs), and the development of technological modes of music dissemination (recordings, broadcasting, and the like). The development of educated listeners, together with a philosophical notion of artistic autonomy, also help constitute certain products of music as musical works of art.¹⁹

Distinguishing between artworks and other art products helps sort out various dimensions of artistic truth. In particular, the truth of artistic import – what Adorno calls “truth content” – has prominence in artworks but not in other art products, some of which have little import. Unlike Adorno, I do not take the relative absence of artistic import to spell a complete lack of artistic truth or to signal artistic falsity. On the three-dimensional model constructed in Chapter 6, rock concerts and lullabies can also be found true in certain respects.

My account of artistic truth unfolds in three stages: exploration (Chapters 1–3), articulation (Chapters 4–6), and confirmation (Chapters 7–9). The conclusion (Chapter 10) recapitulates this account and indicates its societal implications. I begin in Chapter 1 with the challenge posed by Monroe Beardsley’s highly influential denial that artworks can be true. His position marks a watershed in Anglo-American aesthetics. It collects the unresolved issues in logical positivist debates and channels them into a resolution that permeates most of analytic aesthetics. Beardsley denies artistic truth in order to promote the arts as autonomous fields of aesthetic experience that is intrinsically worthwhile. But his scientism, empiricism, and inconsistently behaviorist theory of language undermine his efforts to promote art’s intrinsic value, casting doubts on his denial of artistic truth.

Chapter 2 considers two alternatives to Beardsley’s approach, both of them within continental philosophy. Albert Hofstadter affirms existentially what Beardsley metacritically denies. For Hofstadter, there is artistic truth, and it is not propositional. Unfortunately Hofstadter provides no art-internal ways to distinguish between truth and falsity. Herman Rapaport, by contrast, pronounces a plague on both metacritical and existential houses. Not only does he dismiss any effort to theorize truth as correspondence but also he challenges all attempts to tie artistic truth to distinctively human existence. Yet he heaps such grand postmetaphysical expectations on the artwork that modernist autonomism à la Beardsley and Hofstadter collapses. What is required now, I argue, is an account of artistic truth that

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abandons a fixation on autonomous artworks and recognizes the sociohistorical situatedness of both art and aesthetics. Beyond metacritical denial, existential affirmation, and postmetaphysical deconstruction, we need a critical hermeneutic reconstruction of artistic truth.

Chapter 3 completes my explorations in this direction. It revisits Kant's aesthetics, from which contemporary philosophical stances toward the idea of artistic truth derive.²⁰ My reconstructive reading of Kant derives the aesthetic dimension from three polarities in modern Western societies: between play and work, between entertainment and instruction, and between expression and communication. From these polarities I develop a notion of the aesthetic as the intersubjective exploration, interpretation, and presentation of aesthetic signs. My general term for such intersubjective processes is "imagination." Then I describe aesthetic validity as a horizon of imaginative cogency. I argue that aesthetic processes, so construed, are crucial to cultural pathfinding, and that aesthetic validity claims in art talk contribute to this pursuit. Aesthetic validity, cultural orientation, and art talk constitute the hermeneutical matrix from which questions of artistic truth emerge.

With these explorations as background, I articulate my own account of artistic truth in Chapters 4–6. Chapter 4 examines the general conception of truth proposed by Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The chapter aims to fashion an alternative conception that frees Heidegger's insights from a reactionary garb. I propose to conceive of truth as the life-giving disclosure of society. This process is marked by fidelity to historically contested principles such as solidarity and justice. It is a process to which a differentiated array of cultural practices and products can contribute in distinct and indispensable ways. Linguistic claims and logical propositions belong to such an array, but so do the practices and products of art. The pursuit of assertoric correctness or "propositional truth" is one important but limited way in which life-giving disclosure can occur. This pursuit goes astray when it either does not support or does not receive support from the pursuit of other principles such as solidarity or justice.

Chapter 5 carries my critical dialogue with Heidegger into a discussion of his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art." The chapter aims to retrieve a conception of artistic truth as imaginative disclosure for which questions of aesthetic validity remain crucial. Within art, I argue, truth as disclosure must always be related, but not restricted, to imaginative cogency, which is important in nonartistic cognition and conduct as well. Imaginative cogency is not identical with disclosure in art. It is a principle of aesthetic validity to which any disclosive art practices must appeal, as must evaluative judgments about disclosure in art.

Chapter 6 works out the details of my idea of artistic truth as imaginative disclosure. First I review Habermasian responses to Adorno's idea of artistic truth content or import (*Wahrheitsgehalt*). Then I propose an approach that combines insight from both sides. I consider artistic truth to be internal to art

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phenomena, as Adorno claims, yet differentiated into three dimensions, in a manner reminiscent of Habermas's theory of validity. I identify these three dimensions using the terms "authenticity," "significance," and "integrity." These dimensions intersect in their needing to measure up to a principle of aesthetic validity: all three occur within the horizon of imaginative cogency. They also intersect in supporting pursuits of cultural orientation and in opening our personal and social worlds to ones we do not currently inhabit. By connecting artistic truth with world relations, I am able to show how art conversation makes the truth dimensions of art available for art discourse.

Chapters 7–9 seek confirmation for my account by testing it with regard to Anglo-American debates. The first debate, discussed in Chapter 7, occurs between emotivists and propositionists during the heyday of logical positivism. Whereas I. A. Richards thinks the arts epitomize an "emotive language" that has no cognitive function, Theodore Meyer Greene presents art as a cognitive enterprise to be evaluated according to the truth or falsity of artworks' propositional content. I demonstrate problems and potentials on both sides of this debate, neither of which provides an adequate account of artistic integrity.

In contrast to the epistemological character of the logical positivist dispute, the next debate is primarily ontological. Chapters 8 and 9 examine two opposed ontologies within analytic aesthetics concerning art's cognitive functions. Nelson Goodman proposes a nominalist and conventionalist theory of art as a symbol system. Nicholas Wolterstorff offers a realist and intentionalist theory of art as a field of action. They disagree on two crucial topics, namely, whether propositions are the locus of truth, and whether correspondence governs art's cognitive functions. I argue that Goodman liberates truth from its propositional cage but at the expense of art's significance. Wolterstorff emphasizes art's significance, but, in restricting truth proper to asserted propositions, he ignores artistic authenticity.

My assessment of Anglo-American debates shows that, although emotivists, propositionists, nominalists, and realists all draw attention to various aspects of artistic truth, none of them proposes a sufficiently comprehensive approach. Emotivists and nominalists do not account for the artwork's integrity. Propositionists and realists provide such an account but misconstrue art's hermeneutic character. Of the theories considered, Wolterstorff's realist theory comes closest to giving an adequate account of significance, but it neglects authenticity.

I propose instead to regard authenticity, significance, and integrity as intersecting dimensions of artistic truth, with the expectation of integrity being more prominent for artworks than for other art phenomena. What all three dimensions involve is best characterized as "truth with respect to" rather than either "truth-about" or "truth-to." People in modern Western societies expect art products and art events to be true with respect to the