

*Note: "ITA" in the first line means the "imitation theory of art" – that is, mimesis.*

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Heidegger is clear that the essence of art does not lie in the ITA. He is also sure that it does not lie in connoisseurship, or what we know as aesthetics. And finally, as we have seen, he does not believe that the essence of art resides in the making, manipulating or manufacturing of artworks.

The 'work' that art *does* is categorically not the object – painting, sculpture, drawing, print and so on – that we have come to call an artwork. This evaluation also holds for musical and

poetical works. In Heidegger's thinking, art in its essence is a mode of creating an open region in which truth ('*aletheia*') emerges. 'Art is the setting-into-work of truth... Art lets truth originate' (OWA: 202). This concern returns us to the question what is the truth of art; what is its essence?

In light of the postmodern critique of concepts such as essence and truth, originality and intentionality, Heidegger's questioning about the essence and truth of art may seem not just outmoded but also ideologically problematic. Feminism and post-colonialism in particular have identified how 'truth' has been formulated for the benefit of the dominant order and how 'essence' has been used historically (particularly in relation to sex, race and class) as an essentialising term to maintain the status quo and keep people in their place. Why would we want now to return to these terms, given the ideological baggage they carry?

Heidegger clearly wants to distinguish his use of notions of truth and essence from the common understanding that we attach to the terms. He derives his notion of truth from his enquiries into early Greek life, and draws attention to the Greek term '*aletheia*', which the Romans translated as '*veritas*'. We usually understand *veritas* or truth as the correctness of an idea. Something is true because it correctly represents or corresponds with a fact, or is in accord with its subject matter. In the West, the history and theory of visual arts associate *veritas* with truth to nature, that is with mimesis. This relationship between *veritas* and mimesis is evident in a famous story recounted by Pliny, which tells of the rivalry between two Greek painters in the fifth century BC, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, to paint the most true-to-life painting.

However, Heidegger makes it very clear that his use of the term 'truth' does not fit with corresponding theories of truth. While he may draw from van Gogh's 'mimetic' painting of the peasant shoes to argue that truth happens in van Gogh's painting, truth is not to be equated with correctness. Heidegger explains that while truth happens in the work of art, 'this does not mean that something is

correctly displayed', that is mimetically portrayed. Rather, he says truth happens when something is brought forth out of itself. For Heidegger,

'Bringing-forth' brings hither out of concealment forth into unconcealment. Bringing-forth comes to pass only insofar as something concealed comes into unconcealment. This coming rests and moves freely within what we call revealing (*das Entbergen*). The Greeks have the word *aletheia* for revealing. (QCT: 11–12)

*Note: The next paragraph refers to comments earlier in the book about an artist named "Bhabha."*

Here we can return to Bhabha's astounding revelation when he came face-to-face with *Ghost*. In that moment, Bhabha observes that, as 'one turns to face the other, it encounters a blind spot, the necessary void: it discloses these beings in their full but concealed strangeness as what is radically other – with respect to the nothing' (Bhabha 1998: 22). In his account of this encounter, Bhabha brings us very close to Heidegger's understanding of truth as the work of art. For Bhabha, as for Heidegger, it is through strife that a truth emerged in and through the artwork. In an artwork, Heidegger says, 'truth is set to work' (OWA: 175). The revelation that happens through the encounter with an artwork, not the art object, is the work of art.

This is a very different way of thinking about truth, and also about the essence of art. Van Gogh's shoes did not reveal the truth because they provided a good mimetic likeness of a pair of shoes, but because they provided a revelation about the Being of the peasant's shoe. Where shoes in a shoe shop or in a shoe catalogue are reduced to an exchange value, van Gogh's painting of the shoes provides a space, an open region for the truth of the shoes to emerge. We are pulled up short, pulled out of the humdrum of the everyday and everyday thinking, and are brought to a different place of thought. As Heidegger observes, 'The essence of art, on which both the artwork and the artist depend, is the setting-itself-into-work of truth. It is due to art's poetic existence that, in

the midst of beings, art breaks open an open place, in whose openness everything is other than usual.” (OWA: 197)

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