

The Suggestive Magic of Van Gogh in Heidegger's Interpretation

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Abstract

The present paper brings to the fore the unforeseen fit and harmony of Heidegger's artwork with the world, and supports the above statement with relevant details. On the one hand, it touches on the Heideggerian conception that takes the interpretation of art in a different direction, making it clear by eliminating established notions of appearance, and on the other hand, it outlines how Heidegger interprets Van Gogh's painting *A Pair of Shoes*, which has become particularly famous because of the controversy surrounding it. I will present Heidegger's highly perceptive interpretation of the original peasant world through the lens of reviews by Frederic Jameson, Meyer Schapiro and Jacques Derrida.

Keywords: artwork, truth, peasant world, art criticism

Introduction

"I am chained to the earth with more,
than by mere earthly bonds."
(Van Gogh, 2006, p. 293)

How can Vincent Van Gogh's paintings be interpreted in a way that both brings us closer to his intentions and allows for the freest possible reception? Placed in a position of infinite desire for the whole and finite fulfilment, perhaps this is a far from simple intention. Van Gogh achieved in his paintings a kind of exhilaration as if driven by *attunement* (disposition) and the intensity and daring experimentation that characterise his talent. As if he had missed something and now wanted to do everything at once *bring in*. The daring crossover of painterly consciousness and instinct, their interaction, creates a suggestive magic to reveal perfection.

What can be called the basic characteristic of modern art in general is clearly visible in the Dutch painter's depictions. It is that the paintings sharpen one's senses of what the artist is working from. The shoes, sunflowers, crows, the peasant man reaping his grain, all become tools of his symbolic art. Like the realists, Van Gogh was a painter of human labour and suffering. The symbolic meaning of the man working in the fields, the clear sky, the fiery sun, the bumpy fields, the worn clothes – *Reaper with Sickle, The Sower, Peasant Digging, Still Life with Potatoes, Peasant House at Sunrise, The Red Vineyards near Arles, Harvest at La Crau, Harvest in Provence, The Langlois Bridge at Arles* – is saturated with expression, with privacy, with the artistic elements of the cycle of life and death. Unlike Manet, Cézanne or Millet, Van Gogh often painted paired footwear or paths (with cypresses, poplars), separate from clothing, embodying the idea of a lifelong walk or a continual change of experience. Discipline and concentration striving for perfection of formulation tame the endless longing shown by the colours in these paintings.

In Van Gogh's conception of art, the beauty have no place. Yet his paintings show beauty in their own way; or: they show beauty in their own way. A beauty imbued with suffering, which does not blend in, but is woven into the whole of existence. All the paintings of his late period became almost symbols of fate, their effect heightened by the suggestive power of colour and not overshadowed by fear of being overwhelmed. But he did not always find the instinctive colours to express peace and serenity in his work, which was interrupted by bouts of illness, and the effect of depth often seemed weak and uncertain.

His discussion of the relationship between psychological meditation, schizophrenia and artistic creation enabled Karl Jaspers to dissect more general issues and to put Van Gogh's case in parallel with the careers of other artists suffering from similar illnesses, such as Hölderlin and Strindberg.

"On the one hand," he writes, "there are works that are round, that end in a universe, that do not make us question the existence of the artist or his other works, works whose salutary beauty we can enjoy almost timelessly, but on the other hand, in the history of European art, there have always been works that seem to be expressions of an existence, partial solutions, steps along the way." (Jaspers, 1986, p. 30.)

In Van Gogh's case, the latter possibility is taken to the extreme. His whole existence reaches a unique height, which we could never understand without his works of art and which is mainly expressed in them. The spring of 1998 marks a

major turning point in Van Gogh's art – Jaspers argues – for it coincides with the beginning of the Dutch painter's psychosis. His paintings are imbued with a dense melancholy, and what is particularly interesting is that this melancholy finds expression in the world of things. In these simplistic representations, concentrated on a single object, but therefore infinitely intensified inwardly (e.g. The two empty chairs: Gauguin's and Vincent's), a double correspondence prevails: the form that is represented and the idea that is represented. Behind the persuasive power of these works lies the state of mind that defines the work, the artistic mood, the life positions that emerge.

While Jaspers explored the relationship between life and work, illness and creation through Van Gogh's letters in his 1922 essay, Martin Heidegger was inspired by the painter's material spatial dynamics in a March exhibition at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. It was there that Heidegger first saw the oil painting *A Pair of Shoes*, which was analysed a few years later in *The Origin of the Work of Art* and which has provoked a wide-ranging debate among art historians and scholars, the following essay summarises the criticisms of which.

Criticisms of the interpretation of art

The rather wide-ranging polemic has not only developed over Heidegger's thoughts on the Van Gogh painting, but also over the nature and purpose of *The Origin of the Work of Art*, which comprises three units: the relation of thing and work to each other, the relation of work and truth, and the definition of art and truth. The primary reason for this is that Heidegger, noting the discrepancy between the philosophy of art and aesthetics, argues that aesthetics treats the work of art as an object and strongly objects to the subjective concepts that permeate it. "Aesthetics conceives of the work of art as an object, namely as the object of αἰσθησις, of sensory perception in the broad sense. Today, this perception is called perception. [...] All experience. Yet perhaps experience is the medium in which art dies." (Heidegger, 2006, pp. 62–63). In this context, he poses the question of the origin of art: 'Is art still an essential and necessary mode in which a decisive truth for our historical present is done, or is it no longer so? [...] Such questions, which sometimes arise in us more clearly, sometimes only vaguely, can only be asked if we first consider the essence of art.' (Heidegger, 2006, p. 63–64). The first result of this is that Heidegger has embarked on the path he chose, not starting from the concept of art, but considering the nature of the work as a work of art, from the point of view of the essence of truth. He believed that art could be defined by questioning existence, so that it could only be

examined through the essential structure of everyday life in conjunction with the problem of being and existence.

The source of these critiques is based on the first chapters of *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in which Heidegger formulates a simple description of the instrument, devoid of philosophical theories, in a highly perceptive manner, and shows in detail how an image, apparently representing a mere instrument, can reveal a peasant world.

"It's a pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet. From the gaping darkness of the footwear's trodden insides, the weariness of the workman's stairs stares back at us. In the familiar heaviness of the clumsy footwear, there is the tenacity of walking slowly through the long, ever-uniform furrows of the field, over which the harsh wind whistles. The greasy bite of the earth is embedded in his skin. The soles of his shoes show the desolation of the dirt road in the descending twilight. The secret call of the earth trembles in the footwear, the silent gift of its ripening grain and its mysterious renunciation of itself in the barren barrenness of the winter land. This footwear is permeated by the uncomplaining anxiety for a sure bread, the silent joy of a newfound poverty, the trembling at the coming of childbirth and the tremor at the threat of death. The means belong to the land and are preserved in the world of the peasant woman. It is from this preserved belonging that the instrument itself comes to rest in itself." (Heidegger, 2006, p. 24).

Through this Van Gogh painting, Heidegger demonstrates that the work of art has a property that enables it to create a specific medium in the world. The footstool shows the everyday life of a peasant woman, as the working woman is almost constantly pervaded by a constant worry about her daily bread, which makes poverty, poverty and the fear of death present. This painting reveals the very essence of the tool's existence: its reliability and suitability, through which the tool is revealed in all its truth.

"Whenever a peasant woman, heavy with a healthy fatigue, puts away her shoes late at night, and whenever she reaches for them again at dawn, when it is a holiday, when she does not care for them, she always knows it, without any scrutiny or examination. It may be in the fitness of the instrument, but

it rests on the totality of the essential being of the instrument itself. This is what we call reliability. Hence, through this instrument, the peasant woman is admitted to the listening call of the earth, by the instrument, and by the instrument's reliability she is secure in her world. For the world and for the earth, and for those who live like her, she is present only in this way: in the instrument." (Heidegger, 2006, p. 24).

The important thing then is that by showing that a pair of shoes exists, it makes available to people what they have not yet been able to experience. Because when a work is made, it becomes existent, it takes on a new space in the world. But Heidegger also arrives at another result: going beyond the material, the completed work (by virtue of the uniqueness of its being-a-work) is *capable of constituting a world*. Related to this is the fact that the instrument – in this case, the peasant's shoe – shows its instrumentality by being placed in that world in such a way that it reveals itself in its own truth. For it is a matter of the existent stepping out into the unconcealment of its being, that is to say, the truth of the existent comes into play. "In the work, if the opening of the existent [Opening] takes place through it, as it is and as it is, the happening of truth operates." (Heidegger, 2006, p. 26). Un-hidden (disclosed) is the original meaning of the Greek term ἀλήθεια. The proper definition of the word (aletheia) that we call truth is discoveredness, according to Heidegger's interpretation, which he discusses in detail in paragraph 44 of *Being and Time*, based on the traditional notion of truth. „ἀλήθεια, which Aristotle identifies with πράγματα, φαινόμενα, means "things themselves", that which is revealed, *the existent in the how~ of its disclosure.*" (Heidegger, 1989, p. 386).

From the above, it can be said that truth is to be understood as revelation, or the very definition of revelatory being. And this revealing-being is the mode of being of the Da-sein. In this respect, if truth is revelation, then as its counterpart, concealment as non-truth becomes evident. And that this close relationship is indeed at stake here is shown by the discussion of *earth and the world*, which will be discussed later. But beyond these detailed questions, it is worth highlighting here above all the question: what is a world for Heidegger?

"What can it mean to describe the 'world' as a phenomenon? It means letting what shows itself in the 'beings' within the world be seen. Thus, the first step is to enumerate the things which are 'in' the world: houses, trees, people, mountains, stars. We can *describe* the 'outward appearance' of these being

and *tell* of the events occurring with them." (Heidegger, 1989, p. 170).

It can be seen that this is not phenomenologically relevant, since this description is only formally meaningful. These are the natural things which, through their existence, show us what the world itself is like. But beyond this description there is something more important: the manifestation of the world, *the worldliness of the world itself*. Worldness is an ontological concept in Heidegger, known primarily as the existential definition of the Da-sein, in which the Da-sein relates to the world within a dominant mode of being, and within that, with spontaneous circumspection, to the things handinesses (instrument). But the work does not set up this whole structure, but the essence of the world, its being. The work-being of the work, then, like the instrument-being of the instrument, also possesses an essential characteristic, the character of production, and thus the Heideggerian thesis of what is at work in the construction of the world: the opening of its being.

In the course of the reflection on the work's being, another context is analysed, where Heidegger introduces the concepts of earth [Erde] and world [Welt] and their conflict. Their opposition to each other points to a condition in which, although different, they are interdependent. The earth flows in harmony with itself, moving calmly, while the world, with its openness, is constantly trying to overcome it. The concentration of the controversy created by their constant movement is constantly changing, becoming either more violent or more calm. This battle, according to Heidegger, is produced by the work, that is, the work-being of the work consists in the struggle between the world and the earth. As the primordial conflict between the earth and the world erupts, a *space* is created in which each being can appear as itself. *This playground, this space of openness, is what he calls the clearing of the present* [Lichtung]. It is the very centre of reality, the unfolding truth settling itself in the debate and playground it opens up. The clarity of openness and the settling into openness go together, the two are the same essence of the truth happening.

A further analysis of the work's genesis will briefly compare some of the similarities. Boros points to two very important ways of capturing the essence of truth as conceived by Heidegger in his volume *Philosophy in his discussion of the concepts of philosophy and the history of philosophy*. Heidegger "[turns] to art, looks to works of art for the revelation of truth, be it a painting by Van Gogh or a poem by Hölderlin. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, he writes, in an allusion to pragmatist philosophy, that the work of art 'realizes truth' or 'brings truth into action.'" (Boros, 2020, p. 28). The latter is relevant because the correlations between

the struggle of world and earth discussed above can be found in Hölderlin's poems, which I will quote below from *Heidegger's Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*. "Die Erde ist nur Erde als die Erde des Himmels, der nur Himmel ist, in dem er auf die Erde hinabwirkt." The earth is earth only as the earth of heaven, and heaven is heaven only when it descends to the earth (Heidegger, 1996, p. 161). And in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, we read, "The foundation of the world is the earth, and the earth permeates the world." (Heidegger, 2006, p. 37) Their meanings are almost identical. This is not to say that Heidegger adopts Hölderlin's ideas, but that he extracts his interpretations and seems to adopt them makes. „Sie birgt und trägt als der Bau der Himmlischen das Heilige, d. h. die Sphäre des Gottes.“ The earth hides and bears as the building of the Heavenly the sacred, i.e. the sphere of God (Heidegger, 1996, p. 161). This sacred land for Hölderlin is Greece, for which his affection is expressed in several poems. "It is a land with a strong navel, for on its shores are grasses in a thicket of flames and elements, where the common days are wonderful and people are pleased, and they dwell there as such." (Hölderlin, 1993, p. 161). This, then, is the land where beauty dwells, and whence comes the light of the truth of being. This light, which shines forth of its own accord, is truth, beauty itself. And he who can reveal this truth, in Hölderlinian terms: *the poetically dwelling man*.

In dwelling, man tends and tends his growing things on earth, these are forms of cultivation. This includes all works, buildings and constructions that are the result of human activity, and these are the essential consequences of habitation. But if this habitation is poetic, that is to say, if the poetry constructs the essence of habitation, then it can be conceived as a measure-taking by which man is measured. This measure can only measure the essence of man, which mortal man always and at all times does by measuring himself against God. "For man dwells by measuring "on earth" and "under heaven"." (Heidegger, 1994, p. 203). And this is the very measure-taking of man's dwelling, and thus poetry becomes a measurement of distinction. When Hölderlin speaks of dwelling, he has in mind a fundamental feature of human existence, namely that whether dwelling is poetry is shown by its relation to it (it is poetry that makes dwelling truly dwelling).

"If life is a torment, can you look up
Can a man say,
I want to be like that? Yes. As long as the feeling of friendship,
The pure, lingers in the heart,
It does not measure itself unhappily
To God, man is not unhappy." (Heidegger, 1994, p. 198).

Man is given the freedom to look up to the heavens, and it is this gaze that measures the openness between heaven and earth and brings this pair closer together. The interdependence of earth and sky (Hölderlin) and of earth and world (Heidegger) thus implies certainty. In this connection, I would like to point out a further significant connection. According to Hölderlin, the gaze traverses the space between heaven and earth, what he calls an opened dimension where man can measure himself against God. But how? "He may postpone the measurement, but he cannot exclude it." (Heidegger, 1994, p. 200). That is to say, if the taking of the measure does not take place, it is possible to postpone it, to postpone it, but the Da-sein cannot completely shut itself off from it. This position is also very similar to Heidegger's inauthentic way of being, where the Da-sein, in avoiding death, can overcome its fear of it by escaping into worldly concerns. He postpones his own confrontation with his own death, the Hölderlinic poetic unpoetic way of being seems to prevail. "Man's abstraction of himself corresponds to the hiding of the purity of being." (Heidegger, 2006, p. 293). And if the Hölderlinian continence takes place, *then man becomes poetic by reaching to himself*, by running forward to this Da-sein, he becomes determined to his own intrinsic Being-toward-death. The resolute as revealer is the resoluteness of the factual Da-sein, who existences in his own authentic with understanding.

Returning to the unique opposition between the earth and the world (the art-world of the work), in the space of their battle, a space is created – as I mentioned above – in which each being is given the opportunity to show itself as itself. *Lichtung* means an open space surrounded by a luminous centre. Light, in turn, can only illuminate that which is already present in a medium that is open to it. And this light can be grasped in the un-hidden, that is, in ἀλήθεια (aletheia). This is the interpretation of Hölderlin's medium (open) that Heidegger explores in his *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*. "Vollendruhe. Goldroth. [...] Und Geist, der Säulenordnung, wirklich Ganzem Verhältniß, samt der Mitt, Und glänzenden". Complete tranquillity. Goldroth. [...] And spirit, of the order of columns, really Whole relation, together with the middle, And shining." (Heidegger, 1996, p. 163). Which words attract attention: real, in the whole relation, and together with the middle. „Wir dürfen dieses »ganze Verhältniß«, in das Erde und Himmel und ihr Bezug gehören, [...] un-endlich zueinander gehören im Verhältnis, dass sie »durchgängig« aus seiner Mitte zusammenthält.“ This "whole relation into which earth and heaven and their relation belong [...] belong endlessly to one another in the relation which holds them together pervasively-throughout from its centre" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 163). This centre - neither earth nor heaven - shines. The light that permeates the middle, that is, the open, is presumably the same light that can

be grasped in the Heideggerian open, which holds heaven and earth together. And the openness in the work is the illumination, or *Lichtung*, into which the existent enters, and thus the un-hidden, or truth itself, becomes visible.

And it is at this point that the following clarification is needed. So what is the basis of a work of art? The created-being of the work and the made-being of the instrument are identical in that they are both created-beings in themselves, but they differ in that the made-being of the work is part of the making. The making of the instrument is never directly the bringing about of the truth, its made-being is the shaping of some material so that it is fit for use. Heidegger's train of thought culminates in the thesis that the reality of the work is not exhausted in its created-being, but that the proof begins here: it is by the work and in the work that the instrumentality of the instrument is revealed in its own being. "The work of art has made us aware of what the footwear really is." (Heidegger, 2006, p. 25). Consequently, he maintains that a work of art that is assumed to be real is a work of art only if it sets truth into action, and he holds this to be true with full conviction for all the arts.

Another example is given in the description, deliberately diverging from representational art to focus on a Greek temple building and its mission to explore the world. "In the temple, God is present through the temple. The presence of God is in itself an extension and delimitation of the precinct as a sacred precinct." (Heidegger, 2006, 31). This building is capable of gathering into a unity and ordering around itself the aspects (birth-death, blessing-cursing, triumph-demiliation, endurance-decay) that for man take the form of destiny. According to Heidegger, the abundance of these aspects is the world of the historical people. "It becomes itself in and from itself in order to fulfil its mission. [...] In its there-state, the church first gives things a face and helps people to find themselves. As long as the work remains a work, as long as God does not abandon it, this possibility will remain open." (Heidegger, 2006, pp. 31–32). So it is – according to Heidegger - with the statue of God, which is a work that makes God himself present. The linguistic work is born in the telling of the historical people, and decides "[w]hat is holy and what is profane, what is great and what is small, what is brave and what is cowardly, what is renowned and what is ephemeral, who will be the lord and who the servant." (Heidegger, 2006, p. 32). It can be assumed that the works of art briefly described above carry with them essential implications such as the meaning of history and understanding of the world. Thus, the sanctity of the artwork's elevation to the sacred, its dedication to God's grace, its majesty and luminosity as the presence of God, where the true as the essential provides guidance.

The very claim that a work of art constitutes a world raises a number of critical questions. "It seeps, no doubt, into his writing about art - art in general, poetry in particular, but his attention never turns to the theatre." (Boros, 2020, p. 44). Boros argues, in agreement with Nancy Jean-Luc's writing on philosophical art, that Heidegger is almost completely uninterested in theatre, in acting. This question cannot be answered by reassessing his individual works, but by observing how the work of art relates to and reflects the un-workable. Only the process of creation can reveal the artwork's creation. Heidegger conceives of the work-creation as creation [Hervorbringen]. For it is in the process of creation that the work becomes real, and is thus in fact dependent on creation, since the essence of creation is determined by the essence of the work. Creation itself is the release into something created [Hervorgehenlassen]. The becoming of the work into a work is a way of truth being and becoming. The connection between the work's being-created is supported by the following: 'The more solitary the work fixed in form stands in itself, the more clearly it seems to be detached from all its relations to man, the more simply the impulse to have such a work becomes open, the more essentially the extraordinary is revealed [aufgestoßen].' (Heidegger, 2006, p. 52). The reality of the work, then, as a sacred creation, is defined in its essential features by the essence of its being-work.

However, I should mention that Heidegger does have a connection with the best known figures in the world of the theatre, the playwrights, since in his 1953 *Introduction to Metaphysics* he discusses Sophocles' drama *Antigone* in three parts in §52, which is mostly a content-related, self-created series of comments on the basic text. Undoubtedly, the most interesting chapter of *The Poem of the Thinker* as the essential opening of the human condition is its 'uncanny not homelike' existence, which makes a very interesting connection with the symbol of the primitive Greek existence (Oedipus), the Freudian Oedipus complex, the non-home existence of the present of *Being and Time*, and what Hungarian literary critics of 1939 called the 'heroic Dasein'.

Heidegger's thought provided(s) inexhaustible insights into the foundations of art, which led to the emergence of critiques on the concept of the work and modern art. In what follows, I will confine myself to a few reviews that focus not only on the subject of the painting, the evocative power of the colours, but also on the peasant world that Heidegger associates. I would like to note here that Heidegger does not clearly identify which of several paintings of peasant shoes by Van Gogh – 8 in number (La Faille, 1939, pp. 54–607) - he defines, since he only needs to do so for ease of illustration. Well, in the light of this, it cannot be

considered a major omission, although critics such as Meyer Schapiro have argued the opposite.

Criticism of Schapiro

In his 1968 review of *Still Life as a Personal Object, Notes on Heidegger and Van Gogh*, the art historian Meyer Schapiro's denunciation of the above-mentioned omission occupies a prominent place. At the beginning of his reflection, in which he groups the paintings according to Heidegger's description and then describes them exclusively, he states that the painting in question is catalogue number 255, *A pair of shoes*, an oil painting from 1866, which the philosopher saw in Amsterdam. Convinced that he had succeeded in identifying the picture from which Heidegger's description was taken, he makes further critical comments. "A the shoes in the picture look more like the artist's own shoes than peasant shoes." (Schapiro, 1998, 24). Schapiro, in a 1994 supplement based on biographical and art historical data, argues that the artist's personal self-portrait is a symbolic self-portrait - *a true portrait of an ageing shoe* (Steinberg, 1998-1999, p. 136) - and rejects the idea that it is a peasant shoe worn by a peasant woman. In his opinion, no Van Gogh painting expresses the ownership of the peasant woman's shoes, and he even believes that the shoes depicted in the painting belong to the artist, and therefore cannot even be linked to Heidegger's reference *to the land*.

"Unfortunately, the philosopher has really lost his way this time. His encounter with Van Gogh's canvas led to lines of association about peasants and the land that are not supported by the picture. What he has to say is more likely to derive from his own pathos-laden social views of the ancient and the earthbound. It is true, then, that his description is 'a subjective act of first colouring the picture and only then putting it all in'. In his encounter with the work of art he experienced too much and too little." (Schapiro, 1998, p. 26).

The art historian, insisting on a contextual reading, is of the opinion that on the one hand Heidegger has little experience and expertise in art, and on the other hand he claims without doubt - on the basis of logic - that the shoes are Van Gogh's own. He bases this latter view on the fact that if the painter had not painted his own shoes, he would not have devoted an entire canvas to the lonely standing footwear.

Is this not a bold statement? After all, it is well known that, in contrast to the light and the world of light of the Impressionists, Van Gogh reasserted the heavy,

sombre, fate-defining and bearing earth with all the things that exist on it. In fact, every single painting of his late period is saturated with line symbols until his death. Yet the answers to the previous question give rise to a counter-argument. Van Gogh's two paintings of *The Two Empty Chairs*, which the artist completed on Christmas 1888, are a particularly good example. The paintings depict two empty chairs: one of his own chair in Arles, on which his pipe is lying with tobacco, and the other a chair he bought for his friend Paul Gauguin (both paintings are a chilling picture of the artist's mental state at the time.) His own chair is starkly simple, armless, rustic, yellow in colour and set on a red brick floor. Gauguin's chair is a delicate chair with an armrest, feminine in character, standing on a carpet with a dark green wall behind it. A few candles stand on the chair and two modern short stories lie beside it. These two images are the bearers of countless significant subliminal messages, and it would be difficult to misunderstand their targeting value. As is well known, the friendship between the two painters was founded on their strong artistic unity, until it was ended by Van Gogh's fits of jealousy, disappointment and intense feelings of hatred, which turned dramatic when he cut off his own ear. It was then that he painted these two empty chairs, pronouncing, as it were, their death sentence. With all this in mind, it can be said that, given the combination of Vincent van Gogh's life at the time, the impulses of his subconscious desires and many other factors, it is clearly not impossible that *The One Pair of Shoes* depicts his shoes.

Moreover, the trees, the silent suffering of the land, the anguish of the lines, the trees in the rural motifs of the laundress, the fields, the tortured olive groves, the mountains cut up by ravines, are striking, and they convey an expressiveness that probably had a strong influence on Heidegger at the Van Gogh exhibition in Amsterdam. These symbols, if you like, allow Heidegger's associative theory of shoes to fit, to put it mildly, normally with the earthly and peasant elements. My reflection is based on the following Heideggerian quote:

„Philosophical work is not an eccentric solitary activity. It has its place in the midst of the work of the peasants. When the young farmer drags his heavy plough up the steep slope, to lead it, laden high with beechwood, on a perilous descent to his house; when the shepherd herds his animals uphill with slow, slow steps; when the peasant man shapes countless shingles in his room ready for his roof, my work is of the same kind as theirs. In this is rooted the direct belonging to the peasant man." (Heidegger, 1999, p. 4).

To all this, it should be added that Heidegger's little house (Hütte) stood on the slope of a wide, high valley in the southern Black Forest, with peasant gates on the hillside opposite, so that the philosopher could follow the world of the peasant farmer day by day. It follows from all this that the increased potentiality of the pictorial elements, which are interspersed with rural-popular motifs, is most effectively manifested in the fact that they do not signify nothing definite, but can interact with each other in a wide variety of ways, and thus be linked to the picture as a whole, without the individual details revealing more than traces of pictorial coherence. To describe all this as openness through the derivation of the device is in fact a pictorial context freed from meaning, which, in Heideggerian terms, makes something visible, brings something forward, shows something.

After his 1968 review, the art historian continued his study of Van Gogh's art, and later, in 1994, he brought up the criticism of the peasant's shoes again. He did not fail to notice Heidegger's handwritten note on a page of one of the original editions. „Nach dem Gemälde können wir nicht einmal feststellen wo diese Schuhe stehen und wess sie gehören.“ From Van Gogh's painting we cannot even determine where these shoes stand and to whom they belong. (Heidegger, 1977, p. 18) Schapiro, in interpreting this note, compares Millet's drawing of wooden shoes with Van Gogh's shoes. It is from this position that his extreme nominalism emerges, as he tries to show that it is impossible to attribute a real existence to the general Heideggerian peasant world. He remains of the opinion that Van Gogh painted his own beat-up shoes as self-portraits, which could have led to an honest revelation of the morbid side of his self. He argues that Heidegger missed a significant aspect of the painting: the artist's presence in the work and his description of it overlooked the issues of personhood and uniqueness that the shoes raised in relation to the shoes, which made them permanent and worth painting in the artist's eyes (not to mention the intimacy of the particular tones, shapes and brushstrokes on the surface of the painting as a painted work of art).

"Van Gogh's painting of shoes can be described as a picture of objects that the artist saw as an expressive part of himself - he saw himself as a mirror image - selected, isolated, carefully arranged and intended for himself." (Schapiro, 1994, p. 33).

In my opinion, the style of the painting shows the sombre mood of the moment and suggests tension and loneliness. Van Gogh's technique is peculiar in that the brushstrokes remain open in their function of meaning because of their isolation from each other. They refer back to themselves at least as much as they contribute to the development of an interpreted world view in their objective context as a

process of re-cognition in the open playground of painting. The shoes, placed on the ground, juxtaposed, detached from clothing and context, and spiced with a depressive, melancholic attitude, reflect a post-pilgrimage state more than a self-testing portrait.

The Jameson critique

In addition to a number of aesthetes, the American philosopher Fredric Jameson also joined in the critiques of Heidegger's original interpretation of the peasant world, and in no way ignored Heidegger's central analysis. The first Heideggerian line he criticises is: "On the footwear there trembles the secret call of the earth, the silent gift of its ripening grain and its mysterious renunciation of itself in the barren barrenness of the winter land." (Jameson, 1998, p. 88). He believes that Heidegger's description needs to be supplemented somewhat by an emphasis on the renewed materiality, the transformed materiality of the work. For the earth is transformed, saturated with a multiplicity of visually visible experiences, which at first sight is reassuring and plausible, but all of which Heidegger himself approves and foregrounds in the way he fills with the aforementioned content. In his view, this pair of shoes shows rather the agricultural misery, a primitive and marginalized world as the whole material world of naked rural poverty.

"In this world, the fruit trees are ancient and exhausted pieces of wood sprouting from barren soil; the inhabitants of the villages are caricatures of a kind of grotesque typology of basic human traits, distorted to the extreme, and parched to the bone." (Jameson, 1998, p. 88).

Admittedly, this reading of the painting cannot be ignored either, but Heidegger's idea of the artwork as a body of ideas emerging from the gap between the earth and the world is interpreted by Jameson as the materiality of the body and nature without meaning. The struggle between the earth and the world, however, is revealed not only in the gaping darkness of the trodden footsteps, but also in the actual coherence of the painting, which Heidegger describes in terms of the pre-statement of the earth.

"To pre-establish [her-stellen] the earth means: to bring the earth into openness as an encloser. This production of the earth is provided by the work, insofar as the work itself is restored to the earth. The enclosure of the earth, however, does not unfold in its one-planar, rigid enclosure-but in an

inexhaustible profusion of simple modes and forms."
(Heidegger, 2006, p. 36).

All things of the earth, and the earth itself, flow in mutual harmony. "Here flows a self-contained stream of delimitation, which bounds all that is present in its presence." (Heidegger, 2006, p. 36). It is the earth that is essentially enclosing, and the world, as opening itself up, does not tolerate any enclosure. It cannot do without the openness of the world, nor can the world turn away from it. In their essence, they are always in dispute; only in this way can they participate in the debate between clearness and concealment. The work that sets up the world and produces the earth is the struggle to resolve this debate, in which justice is done.

To further explore Jameson's work, he selects Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* from a selection of late works by a central figure in contemporary art. It is clearly no coincidence that he chose Warhol's 1980 print *Diamond Dust Shoes*, which was made by Warhol, who became famous as a shoe illustrator and a key figure in contemporary art. This image, with its colourful nail shoes hanging down by their heels, clearly does not show the immediacy of Van Gogh footwear, and indeed, *these shoes do not speak to us at all*. This painting, with the contingency of an incomprehensible natural object, does not offer the viewer an intimate view of the world, but rather a repulsive one.

"In *Diamond Dust Shoes*, the repressed actually returns in some way, in the form of a strange, additional, decorative enthusiasm, which the title itself explicitly alludes to, obviously referring to the glitter of gold dust, a gold dust decoration that covers the surface of the painting, but still shines on us." (Jameson, 1998, p. 88).

The first impression of the sight of the lifeless shoes is of monotony and lack of depth, and of superficiality, which is perhaps the main formal characteristic of postmodernism. Even more clearly, this very photographic image reflects a sense of fear of death, with its cold elegance, its garish colours, its low-categorisable style of advertising image. The mediocrity of the image gives the impression of shoes discarded after a night of dancing and fun waiting for their wearer in a cramped old dressing room or hanging on the door of a lost property department. It is not only the phenomenology of this Warhol painting that is overshadowed by finitude; the painter has also produced several images of traffic accidents and many frighteningly colourful but unsubjective poster-like works of advertising grip that can be described as a taste destroyer. In his later work, his paintings of

electric chair parts and his black-and-white photographic negative of the *Pope of Popcorn*, with his death's head, further express the presence of death.

Derrida's duplicative critique

The inspiration for Jacques Derrida's summary critique is Meyer Schapiro's article *The Still Life as Personal Object*, which has already been discussed above and which the author dedicated to the memory of Kurt Goldstein (Schapiro, 1968, p. 26). Derrida takes an objective view, so to speak, of the discrepancy between Heidegger's peasant world and Schapiro's position, and begins his reflection below:

"– Here they are. I will begin. What kind of shoes? What shoes? Whose shoes? What are they made of? What are they? Here are the questions, that's all. [...] What I want to say is that there will be a kind of correspondence between Meyer Schapiro and Martin Heidegger. One of them said in 1935: to the peasant, or even to the peasant woman, this pair comes back from the field. – What makes you so sure it's a pair of shoes? What is a pair?" (Derrida, 1998–1999, p. 17).

According to Derrida, Heidegger has no doubt that the shoes belong to a peasant woman, but Schapiro refutes this claim 38 years later, with evidence to support it. Derrida believes that both are wrong to associate the shoes with a particular person, Heidegger with a peasant woman and Schapiro with the painter himself. He claims that the shoes in the painting are so shapeless that it is impossible to decide whether they are a pair at all (their identification as a pair is obviously a prerequisite for their being linked to one person). According to him, none of their claims can be substantiated.

"– No hurry... I am interested in this collapse. In his own way (that of a detective), Schapiro is on to it, and I am interested in his analysis, even if I find it unsatisfactory. To answer what the collapse means, do we have to narrow the question down to a dispute over the ownership of shoes? Should we collapse on the painting or on the shoes in reality? And just think 'whose shoes are they?'" (Derrida, 1998–1999, p. 118).

Schapiro, on the other hand, is right that Heidegger ignores the internal and external context of the painting. However, I will briefly comment on his remark about the absence of pictorial contexts below.

"A space has to be opened up to make room for truth in painting. Neither inside nor outside, it squares without allowing itself to be framed but it is not positioned outside the frame. It works, it works, it lets the frame work, it gives it work. [...] The trait retreats and retreats of its own accord, retreats and disappears. It withdraws, withdraws, withdraws. It is located between the visible edge and the central phantom by which we are enchanted." (Derrida, 1998–1999, p. 58).

In fact, everything fits into a frame – even thinking – whether it is perceptible or imperceptible. These possibilities also provide the starting point for his discussion: how far does it extend, does it owe its power to its invisible essence or to its material endowment? What can be said with certainty is that the frame has a specific function: it cuts out, regulates, condenses. The only question is whether it sufficiently directs attention to the delimitation of the work or rather to the part of the world it represents.

At the same time, Schapiro was explicitly concerned with the frames of painting, the boundaries and contours of the depicted scene. Hence his stubborn insistence on the internal and external context. For symbolist painters such as Gauguin, the frame was also important, but the avant-garde artists of the early 20th century were already besieged by its limits. Picasso was more overtly semiotic, and Klee was explicitly most concerned with borders and boundaries, with arranged frames. The classical requirement of a measured framing runs differently through the history of painting and other arts, which also presuppose some kind of frame: margin, canvas, parergon. A frame is the minimum necessary to protect and highlight the work and to separate it from the world. I would like to conclude this very brief passage from a Heideggerian line of thought: the work of art does not need a frame or a decoration outside itself.

However, the question arises: what context is Derrida referring to here? The starting point is that the shoes depicted in the painting do not belong to any context at all, and therefore open up a different world, a different set of ideas for the artist. The painting is almost devoid of colour, a depressing, dark, light brown, toneless image, where the shoes stand with their laces untied, abandoned, trampled, worn. I move on. Standing still?! Floating. "It does look a little like they're in the air." (Derrida, 1998–1999, pp. 121–122). The image does not in fact have a base that could be a pointing device in a depicted story or a narrated plot. If we take Schapiro's theory as a starting point, and this pair of shoes is a self-portrait, where did Van Gogh place himself, his own spirituality, in this way?

Among other reasons, I would rule out this possibility, because Van Gogh painted many self-portraits of himself in relation to his mood at the time, in which he himself, and not an object, is shown. Some of his paintings show him with a pipe in his mouth, wearing a straw hat, or with his head bandaged after having his left ear cut off, or sitting depressed at a table, while others show him in elegant clothes and using strong colours. While it is true that the painter's physical and mental suffering (in connection with his psychiatric illness) had a profound effect on his work, and that throughout his life he claimed that his sadness would never end, he was able to reveal in his art the nobility and beauty inherent in man. "To be someone's shoe is to become part of their existence or their station in life." (Hamsun, 1941, p. 27). The artist who makes his own isolated shoe the subject of his painting may convey the fatality of his social position, but it can in no way be interpreted, in my opinion, as a self-portrait.

Despite his strong insistence on the context of the images, Schapiro nevertheless extracts a few lines from Heidegger's theory without being interested in the framework of the thought process and subjects them to criticism.

"[w]hat can explain why he (Heidegger) naively, instinctively, uncritically attributes the shoes in the picture to such a specific 'subject', the peasant, or rather the peasant woman? Moreover, it is this narrow attribution and definition that guides the whole discourse on the image and 'truth'. Can we agree that this gesture is, as just described: naive, instinctive, uncritical" (Derrida, 1998–1999, p. 120)?

Agreeing with this critique, Derrida, somewhat in agreement with Heidegger, expounds a few sentences.

"A mitigating circumstance in Heidegger's defence: he had no 'intention' of taking an interest in such and such a painting, of describing it and examining its uniqueness in art history. Let us read this passage again from the beginning. He is not talking about the 'simple description' (einfach beschreiben) of a painting, but of 'an instrument', 'free of philosophical theories'. As an example, let's take an ordinary tool, say a pair of peasant's shoes. It is not yet a picture, not a work, a tool. Let's go further. To describe it, we do not even need to have a real example of such a utensil in front of us. Everyone knows it well. But still, since we are dealing with a direct description, it would be good to facilitate the illustration

(Veranschaulichung). A pictorial representation (bildliche Darstellung) will suffice. For this purpose, we will choose a well-known painting by van Gogh, who painted such footwear several times." (Derrida, 1998–1999, pp. 123–124).

It is clear that, hypothetically, painting is at the moment an intuitive incidental element," Derrida writes. The object to be described is not the painting, not the painted object as such, but an ordinary instrument that everyone knows. Nevertheless, Schapiro goes on to attack Heidegger's lines about the peasant world with further assertions.

"– [...] Schapiro, having attackingly and critically denied Heidegger's right to agricultural property, launches into a general attack. He starts with the question: is Heidegger's error only in the wrong choice of example (the latter proof he considers to be accomplished). No, it's that he failed to analyse his own example, but even if he was right and 'saw' peasant shoes, he missed the point, 'the presence of the artist in his work'. [...] From this moment on, Schapiro knows no bounds in appropriating shoes for his own van Gogh. [...] We are in the presence of van Gogh himself. In the picture, it is as if the artist himself 'appears' in his self-portrait, not just 'a piece of his own life', but an inseparable and thus entailing piece of the whole body, one of the 'things inseparable from his body', what is more, standing 'the erect body in its contact with the ground': the returning van Gogh's footstep passing through the picture." (Derrida, 1998–1999, pp. 130–131).

Schapiro is wrong, in my opinion, mainly in claiming that this is a copyist's description of Heidegger alone. On the contrary! *The work is preserved as a work of art, defining reality.* To make the truth happen in the work is to make the existent in its totality un-hidden and to keep it there, which in this case is evident in the manifestation of the instrumentality of the peasant's shoes. I think that Schapiro does not even consider the possibility that Van Gogh could have painted peasant shoes independently of his urban lifestyle. The sun, moon and stars he paints are elementary forces that flow through space, growing and growing, and in this way create land and sea, field and garden. (Conscious and unconscious symbolism often go together, but not always.) His symbolism is direct, experiential from the urge to endow the object with a wealth of content. Just as Csontváry, one of the most famous figures in modern Hungarian painting, is the painter of the Sun's

Path, so too can Van Gogh be considered a painter of personal experiences. For him, a motif is a symbol saturated with atmosphere, the expression of a specific destiny. His desire to simplify the means of expression, to separate objects, to keep clearly defined local colours and distinct lines became a means of revealing his deepest inner reality.

From the above, it can be said that Heidegger attempted to transcend an aesthetic interpretation of art that was contaminated by the metaphysical opposites of subject and object, truth and feeling, form and content. His thesis: art does not represent, it makes visible. As soon as a thing is elevated into a work of art, it develops its own unique world, since a work of art is also something produced. Art is a privileged way of creating truth, so that it takes on a different meaning beyond the traditional conception of art as a means of self-expression and aesthetic pleasure. "But it is art that makes the hidden earth visible, that produces something to which no imagination can otherwise reach; art opens up a space in which the very hiding of the earth is revealed. It reveals a secret without touching it." (Safranski, 2000, pp. 424–425). To all this it should be added, Safranski writes, that for Heidegger the world-shaping character of art and its special power are of particular importance, because when the work becomes a work of art, it also has a particularly significant aspect: it is not only necessary to create the work, but also to be able to preserve it. Preservers are just as important as creators, since they are intrinsically linked to the work's composition. "To let the work be the work is to *preserve* the work." (Heidegger, 2006, p. 52). *The preservation* of the work does not limit people to their experience, but makes them belong to the truth in the work. The truth in the work thus becomes a class belonging to the future preservers, that is, to a historical humanity.

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