The Truth of Art

An Encounter with:

Tom Rockmore, *Art and Truth After Plato*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, 335 pages.

MARTIN THIBODEAU

As Tom Rockmore indicates in the opening sentences of *Art and Truth After Plato*, his book “addresses anew the old question, often neglected in contemporary aesthetic debates, about art and truth, or art and cognition. This theme is now rarely examined in part because of the assumption that the question was resolved long ago” (Rockmore 1). Clearly, this echoes Plato’s famous claim in Book 10 of *The Republic* where he states that the “ancient quarrel between [poetry] and philosophy” (Plato 607b) has been solved in favor of philosophy, and that poetry ought to be banished from the well-governed city. Nevertheless, Rockmore sets out to revisit this debate by arguing that Plato “has never been satisfactorily answered, and [...] taken as a whole the later Western aesthetic tradition counts as an ongoing effort to reformulate a successful anti-Platonist analysis of art and art objects of the most varied kinds” (Rockmore 1). As a result, Rockmore’s book offers an insightful, extraordinarily rich, and fascinating account of key moments of this history, as he outlines how the most prominent philosophers advocate for reconnecting art and truth.

Not surprisingly, Rockmore begins by reexamining Plato’s arguments, which condemn art and which over the centuries have been intensively scrutinized and have received different and even widely divergent interpretations. In Rockmore’s view, Plato’s position is best understood neither as an attack on art in general nor solely as a disapproval of “contemporary artists in ancient Greece” (11), but first and foremost as a criticism of art on epistemological grounds. In other words, Plato’s attack on art is grounded in and derived from his theory of knowledge. Specifically, he refers to Plato’s so-called theory of what constitutes “forms” or “ideas,” what he refers to as mind-independent realities lying behind appearances. Hence, as Plato’s famous thesis goes, works of art, be they poetic, literary, musical, pictorial, or other, do not and cannot grasp the truth as they at best merely “represent” or “imitate” (*mimesis*) appearances. It is only philosophy that Plato believes is able to

“reach” or “see” such mind-independent realities as truth. Yet, as is also well known, Plato’s theory of forms evolves throughout his dialogues. Rockmore follows the evolution of Plato’s critique of mimetic art as it unfolds from his early dialogues, such as *Ion*, to his later dialogues, such as *The Republic*, *Cratylus*, and *The Sophist*. Certainly, Book 10 of *The Republic* marks a pivotal point with respect to Plato’s criticism and condemnation of art in general and of imitative poetry in particular. Rockmore identifies a certain change of mind in dialogues such as *The Sophist*, *Statesman*, the *Timaeus*, and *Parmenides*, allegedly written after *The Republic*. If not indicative of a complete change of mind, these dialogues at least express a certain shift that commits Plato to a slightly different and arguably more positive appreciation of imitative art. Such an appreciation, Rockmore proposes, opens up the possibility of distinguishing between “good” and “bad” imitations and leads one to debate which kind of poetry would be admitted in the (ideal) city.

It is of course this possibility that was to be endorsed and emphasized by Plato’s most important student, Aristotle. Indeed, it is well known that Aristotle, despite Plato’s negative criticism, rehabilitated imitative art. As Rockmore explains in his second chapter, such rehabilitation is asserted on the basis of both Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s theory of the form and thanks to a significantly different understanding of the term “*mimesis*.” According to Aristotle, artistic practices are not deceptive and potentially morally dangerous activities that invariably fail to grasp the so-called mind-independent and invisible realities that Plato calls forms. Rather, Aristotle argues in the *Poetics* that art works are able to successfully imitate or depict different aspects of human life and more specifically of human action. In other words, imitative arts are to be valued first and foremost not with respect to knowledge and cognition, but for their practical, ethical, and moral insights. Obviously, such a positive view implies an understanding of “imitation” or “*mimesis*” that is not essentially conceived of in terms of “representing” or “copying” an imperfect reality, as Plato did, but rather of a “productive” or “creative” activity which, insofar as it insightfully depicts and illuminates human life and action, is to be considered with regards to its social usefulness.

Rockmore points out that it is noteworthy that Aristotle’s redefinition of *mimesis* in nonrepresentationalist terms does not overcome Plato’s objections. Aristotle’s novel emphasis on “action,” “making,” “producing,” and even “creating” certainly captures aspects that are intrinsic to the polysemic notion of *mimesis* but were overridden by Plato’s sweeping critiques. However, such emphasis does not by any means answer Plato’s critique in its own terms: it rather merely changes the terms of the issue. More specifically, Aristotle’s understanding of *mimesis* does not succeed in reassigning to art the cognitive function that was denied by Plato. Instead, he highlights a different type of knowledge

which, as aforementioned, has to do with the educational values of imitative arts with respect to human life and action.

In Chapter 3, Rockmore continues his examination of this debate between a Platonic and an anti-Platonic appreciation of art as it was reframed within the context of medieval philosophy in order to reframe the issue at stake in terms congruent with the Christian worldview. This essentially entailed discriminating between the view that art's cognitive relevance is to be evaluated in terms of its ability to represent mind-independent, invisible forms beyond appearances, and the proposition that art's value involves the representation or contemplation of the beauty of nature and of the world seen as visible creations of a transcendent and invisible God. Thus, after briefly retracing some of the key moments of the particularly complex and convoluted reception of Plato and Aristotle in medieval philosophy, Rockmore focuses on Augustine and Aquinas. For they, according to Rockmore, "are [not only] the two most important medieval Christian thinkers, [but] also the two most important Christian aesthetic thinkers" (94). Even though Augustine and Aquinas are generally depicted as pursuing in Christian terms the Plato-Aristotle opposition, their views are actually much closer to each other with respect to art. Neither of them has developed a comprehensive aesthetic theory, but they both have presented changing, often equivocal, unclear, and more or less scattered remarks on art. However, both have advocated for a positive, anti-Platonic conception of art as producing beautiful things that, as such, represent or participate in beauty itself, i.e. divine beauty considered as the highest truth or as the final cause of all things.

Rockmore devotes Chapter 4 to what is widely considered as a pivotal moment in the history of Western philosophical reflection on art: Kant's theory of aesthetics. Kant's critical philosophy, Rockmore writes, has not only profoundly reshaped modern epistemological debates, it has also influenced modern aesthetics in such a way that "later aesthetics [is] often depicted as a series of reactions to [Kant's] aesthetics theories" (105). Divided in several short sections, this chapter, as I understand it, presents its analysis in two main steps. The first retraces the different influences which have shaped Kant's views and which have contributed to redefine in significantly different terms the issue of art during the 18th century. In Rockmore's view, such a redefinition leads one to consider art not with respect to its mimetic capacities but rather in terms of "taste," which amounts, in different words, to a shift from a conception that identifies beauty in "objects" or artworks to a conception that rather locates beauty in the "subject" or the eye of the beholder. On this basis, the second step focuses on Kant's properly critical work dealing with matters of art and beauty: the *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

In this latter work, Kant, as is well known, examines those matters essentially with respect to a type of judgment which he qualifies as

“reflective” and which he distinguishes for the determinate judgments of knowledge and morality. More specifically, Kant distinguishes two types of reflective judgments, namely judgments of taste or aesthetic judgments, and teleological judgments. Not surprisingly, matters of art and beauty are dealt with in the first section of the book, entitled *Analytic of the Beautiful*, where Kant examines the features of aesthetic judgment, i.e. the judgment stating that “X is beautiful,” which Kant describes as a judgment which, albeit “subjective” and “particular,” claims to be objectively and universally valid. But interestingly enough, Rockmore, unlike a certain number of commentators, contends that in order to take the full measure of Kant’s complex and in many ways paradoxical theory of aesthetic judgment, one must also take into account the following section devoted to the *Analytic of the Sublime* as well as the second part of the *Critique of Judgment* which instead deals with teleological judgments. In Rockmore’s words, “Kant relates both aesthetic and teleological judgments to the faculty or power of judgment (*Urteilkraft*) with which the *Critique of Judgment* is officially concerned” (131). Indeed, such a comprehensive account gives a better sense of the extent to which Kant’s position is fundamentally paradoxical or, more precisely, to use Kant’s own technical term, “antinomic.” On the one hand, Kant’s aesthetic theory can be qualified as anti-Platonic for it does grant philosophical legitimacy and autonomy to aesthetic judgments—and by extension, to beauty and art—as they are assigned their proper place within the systematic framework of Kant’s critical philosophy. On the other hand, however, Kant’s aesthetic theory can also be qualified as Platonist because the philosophical legitimacy and autonomy of aesthetic judgments are gained at the cost, so to speak, of firmly and clearly distinguishing such judgments from determinate cognitive and moral judgments. As a result, Kant considers the claims of reflective aesthetic judgments as neither cognitively nor morally true, but rather as merely aesthetic, as merely a matter of taste. Rockmore writes: “Kant suggests he is a deep Platonist, while taking an anti-Platonic approach to art and art objects. In denying that aesthetics yields knowledge [...], Kant undoes the Platonic link between art and truth.” (143)

In Chapter 5 Rockmore turns to Hegel, who with Fichte and Schelling is viewed as one of the main representative of German, post-Kantian idealism. Like his entire philosophy, Hegel’s aesthetics or, more accurately, his philosophy of art can be understood as both following and sharply criticizing Kant. Hegel’s philosophy of art can effectively be seen as an attempt to solve the aforementioned Kantian paradox. Thus, unlike Kant who quite obviously had very limited knowledge with respect to art, Hegel was extremely knowledgeable and had a strong and unusually broad art culture, including but not limited to ancient and modern literature, theater, sculpture, painting, music, and opera, as well as Indian and Egyptian art. Undoubtedly, Hegel harnessed his vast artistic culture and

sought to understand beauty and aesthetic phenomena not from the perspective of the spectator's judgments, but rather with respect to art and artworks themselves.

Although Hegel never published a book on aesthetics, he discusses art in some detail in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) as well as in the different versions of the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*. However, it is without a doubt in his *Aesthetics: Lectures on the Fine Art* that he deals most extensively with the topic as he expounds what Rockmore views—rightly, I believe—as “the most systematic and the most comprehensive philosophical theory of aesthetics we possess” (147). In each of these works, but in a different, yet complementary fashion, Hegel advocates for the connection between art and truth. In the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled “Religion in the Form of Art,” he points out that artworks were once the privileged means whereby the ancient Greeks “objectified” and sought to understand the divine as well as themselves, their community, and their relationship to the world. In terms highly reminiscent of Aristotle, Hegel argues that such objectification had a deep ethical dimension and that accordingly art was assigned an essential social function. In the *Encyclopedia*, he deepens his thought and claims that art belongs with religion and philosophy to what he describes as highest forms of knowledge, which he calls “absolute spirit” (*absoluter Geist*). But, as is well known, Hegel does not understand the truth-claims expressed by art, religion, and philosophy a-historically or transcendently, as Kant does, but rather as being socially and historically situated and “realized.” As a result, Hegel opens his *Lectures on Fine Arts* with the (in)famous declaration according to which “art, considered in his highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past” (Hegel 1, 11). This declaration, of course, is none other than Hegel’s so-called end-of-art thesis around which the entire *Lectures on Fine Arts* revolve and which contends that if art (the beautiful) was once “the sensible manifestation of truth” (111), it has now “lost for us [We, Moderns] genuine truth and life, and has rather been transferred into our *ideas* instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place” (11).

Certainly, this thesis has attracted a great deal of attention and received different interpretations by authors such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Benjamin, Adorno, and others. In the last sections of the chapter Rockmore briefly comments on a recent interpretation proposed by Arthur Danto. As Rockmore rightly points out, Hegel’s thesis does not claim that art has become superfluous or that it has lost its cognitive relevance, but rather that art’s status, role, and function have experienced deep changes over time and have become something very different from what they once were in Antiquity and even during the Middle Ages. For his part, Danto, in *The Death of Art*, interprets Hegel’s end-of-art thesis as being essentially concerned with the experience of art and artworks in the modern, and by

extension contemporary, Western world. More specifically, Danto understands the end-of-art thesis as capturing what he believes has become our contemporary aesthetic experience, namely that there is no more a dominant view of what a work of art is and that, accordingly, there is no more a definite criterion allowing us to clearly distinguish between art and non-art, between artworks and objects. However, as Rockmore stresses, Danto's interpretation surely has its merits with respect to the understanding of the trajectory of 20th-century visual arts from Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol and beyond, but it obviously has very little to do with the gist of Hegel's thesis, which, once again, is essentially a claim about art's social status and function in the modern world. Nevertheless, beyond this objection Danto's as well as others' interpretations of the end-of-art thesis clearly illustrate to which extent Hegel's views are profoundly relevant and fruitful for the understanding of important features of our contemporary aesthetic and/or artistic experience.

In Chapter 6 Rockmore is concerned with Karl Marx and what he calls "Marxist aesthetics," a term by which he designates aesthetic theories that essentially built on Friedrich Engels' interpretation of Marx's thought and which, in his view, include authors such as Georg Lukács, Theodor Adorno, Bertolt Brecht, Hebert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Terry Eagleton, and Frederic Jameson. As in previous chapters, Rockmore expounds his analysis in several short sections, which one brake down into three main sets. The first set examines key aspects of Marx's and Engels' theory of knowledge, and one such aspect has to do with Marx's critique and reformulation of Hegel idealist dialectics in supposedly "materialist" terms. As Marx famously claims in the *Capital* (1873), "My dialectical method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite [...] With him it is standing on his head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell" (Marx 20). According to Engel and other Marxists thinkers, Marx has in effect successfully extracted the rational kernel from what they believe is Hegel's mystical position, which most of them take to mean that Marx has succeeded in putting forward the right or true (scientific) approach which enables one to take into account the "concrete," "real" experience on the basis of which knowledge and cognitive claims are performed. Such experiential basis is neither to be conceived of as "spirit" (*Geist*) nor as "self-consciousness" (*Selbstbewusstsein*): it first and foremost refers to the historical and social context or, more specifically, to the historically changing social, economical, and material conditions under which human beings live, evolve, and perform their cognitive claims.

Now although Marx, as Rockmore reminds us, "never worked out a free-standing aesthetic theory" (Rockmore 207), he without a doubt had a keen and sustained interest in art and especially literature. In the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, he builds upon his reformulation of

Hegelian dialectics, his particular emphasis on economic component of modern industrial capitalism, as well as his distinction between superstructure and base, and discusses the issue of the relationship between artistic realm and society as a whole or, more precisely, the relation of art to its economic surroundings. But while discussing this issues, Marx notes that ancient Greek art still counts for us as a norm or an ideal, and he does so in such a way that he in fact opens up to the possibility that there be a model: now this seems hardly consistent with his view according to which base or economics is prior to superstructure or that all other types of social relations and institutions are dependent upon economic relations. More precisely, if, according to Marx's initial understanding of the relationship between superstructure and base, art is determined by economic relations, or in simpler terms, if a certain type of art is only possible within a certain historical period, then how is it possible for a type of art—in this case, ancient Greek art—produced at a relatively early stage of economic development to nonetheless be considered as belonging to the highest level of artistic achievement? This apparent independence of art from its economic surroundings clearly seems to go against the grain of the deterministic and causalist understanding of the relation of superstructure to base. As Rockmore puts it, "Marx's remark on Greek art apparently undermines the very distinction between superstructure and base, which justifies the Marxist claim for the cognitive superiority of socialist realism, and that is the basis of the Marxist theory of aesthetic" (211).

Engels and other Marxists thinkers spend a great deal of energy in solving this problem. According to Rockmore, the most consistent attempt to overcome it as well as to produce something like a systematic and comprehensive Marxist aesthetic theory is to be found in the work of Lukács. Rockmore holds that in his numerous works and essays devoted to the topic, Lukács has advocated an anti-Platonist view following which artworks do convey truth claims about the adequate grasping and representation or reflection of social reality. More specifically, Lukács sought to demonstrate that the different forms of artistic realism and especially literary realism perform truth claims that consist both in representing, reflecting or mirroring the falseness and illusions of capitalist economy and bourgeois ideology, and in pointing towards what would be a true, free, and classless society.

Finally, in Chapter 7, Rockmore focuses on 20th-century art and aesthetic theories. As he points out in the opening remarks, modern art has undergone numerous transformations and "differs from earlier art forms in a variety of ways" (232). Obviously, the increasing commodification of art and artworks figures amongst these transformations, but one of the most significant is without a doubt the rejection of representation or imitation by modern, avant-garde art. According to Rockmore, this rejection of the

representational approach amounts to nothing but a turning away from the understanding of the relationship between art, truth, and representation as it has been defined by Plato's critique of *mimesis* at the dawn of Western philosophy. More precisely, the trajectory of late 19th- and 20th-century art, from impressionism, postimpressionism to cubism and conceptual art as well as Duchamp and Warhol calling into question the very difference between artistic objects and any other object can be understood as a process by which art, while adopting a nonrepresentational approach, gives up its claims to truth and thus "emancipates itself from its bi-millennial Platonic philosophical tutelage" (233).

Additionally, Rockmore also contends that art's rejection of representation is to be coupled with the dismissal of the representational approach performed by 19th- and 20th-century philosophers both in the fields of epistemology and aesthetics or philosophy of art. Referring, on the one side, to the critique of epistemological representationalism performed by Nelson Goodman and post-Wittgensteinian analytic philosophy, as well as to Schelling's, Nietzsche's, Heidegger's, and Gadamer's aesthetic theories, on the other, Rockmore demonstrates that different, but significant trends of 20th-century philosophy have advocated for a nonrepresentational conception of truth, a conception which is to be extended to art. As a result, it appears that the common rejection of representationalism by art and aesthetic theories leads to a paradox: they seem to be heading in opposite direction. Rockmore writes that "artistic practice and aesthetic claims evolve in different ways. Artists who turn away from representation can be understood as giving up claims for truth in art, roughly the same claims writers on aesthetics reaffirm in attempting in invoking nonrepresentational epistemological strategies" (233).

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Art and Truth after Plato is a remarkable work for which Tom Rockmore must be praised in several respects. First of all, it provides an extraordinarily nuanced and thorough historical account of how, from Plato until the present day, art has been considered as having deep and enduring connections to truth. Secondly, it demonstrates, once again in a remarkably nuanced and meticulous fashion, how Plato's and Aristotle's opposing views on the relation of art to truth have profoundly defined this history. Each historical era—whether the Middle Ages, Renaissance, or Modernity—can be explored in terms of how this seminal debate between Platonic and Aristotelian views are redefined. Thirdly, one must praise the author for having included in his historical reconstruction a chapter on medieval Christian aesthetics. Rockmore is right when he demonstrates how medieval aesthetics—not often considered in similar historical reconstructions—play a crucial role in the various theories of how art,

representation, and truth are connected. Finally, Rockmore's meticulous and in-depth analysis of Marxist aesthetics is commendable. Rockmore's analysis clearly shows how unfortunate it is that Marxist aesthetics were discredited in recent decades. As he points out, Marxist aesthetics "has long been one of the liveliest and most interesting of all the many Marxists themes" (194), and despite what appear to be important internal flaws, Marxist aesthetic theories have provided fruitful and provocative accounts of the relationship between art, truth, and representation as well as between art and politics.

That being stated, I do however have two interrelated reservations about Rockmore's historical reconstruction. My first has to do with an issue which, had it been fully thematized, would have significantly contributed to clarify Rockmore's argument in the second half of his book (Chapters 4 to 7). This issue is usually referred to as the autonomy of modern art. More specifically, according to sociologists and philosophers such as Weber, Habermas, and others, modern art is part of a larger process which is best understood as the result of a process of "disenchantment" of the world, and which aims at replacing what one could call the "substantial" norms of the Christian religion and of pre-modern metaphysics with a formal rationality that seeks to establish its legitimacy on the basis of nothing but the cognitive capacities of human subjectivity. According to these thinkers, this process leads to the division of reason in three distinct spheres, namely theoretical, practical, and aesthetic reason. As Habermas has emphasized, this tripartite division of reason—or what he calls the differentiated network of modern reason—finds its philosophical expression in Kant's tripartite system and its institutional existence in the modern sciences, in the constitution of modern forms of law as distinct from questions relating to morality, and finally in autonomous art and art criticism. As suggested above, it is as a result of this process that Kant grants philosophical legitimacy and autonomy to aesthetic judgments (and art) as he assigns them their specific place within his system. Yet, as we saw, such legitimacy and autonomy implies by the same token that aesthetic judgments are neither cognitively nor morally true, but merely "aesthetically" true. In other words, aesthetic judgments and, by extension, artworks are, on the one hand, understood as raising legitimate truth claims, but such truth claims, precisely because they are autonomous—hence distinct from both cognitive and moral truth claims—actually are, as it were, "empty" or a mere matter of (aesthetic) taste, on the other. This is what can be called the paradox or the antinomy of modern aesthetics and it appears at each "moment" of Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgment in the first section of the *Critique of Judgment*.¹

¹ In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgments is divided in four "moments." Each one explores an aspect or a feature of the claim raised by such judgment and each of these features is expressed in terms of a paradox. Hence, the first

Arguably, it is none other than this antinomy which 19th- and 20th-century post-Kantian philosophers and writers such as Schiller, Schelling, Hölderlin, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Gadamer, as well as Lukàcs and other Marxist thinkers tried to solve, and this led them to advocate for a reconnection of art to truth. Of course, Rockmore alludes to this antinomy ensuing from art's autonomization in the modern world, but it should have played a much more significant role, perhaps by forming the conducting wire of his investigation in the second half of his book. (For an illuminating analysis of this issue, see Bernstein.)

This leads to my second reservation which concerns Rockmore's analysis of 20th-century aesthetic theories. To a certain extent Rockmore is right in considering the aesthetic theories of Goodman, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Danto, as each provide significant contributions to the topic. However, Rockmore should also have considered the work of Adorno who cannot "simply" be classified, as Rockmore would suggest, as one of many Marxists writers examining aesthetics. It is true that Adorno implements the Marxists notions of commodity fetishism, alienation, as well as the distinction between Use-value and Exchange-value, but his views are fundamentally at odds with every version of Marxist revolutionary concern. Instead, Adorno's contribution deserves to be considered as the most thorough and comprehensive aesthetic theory of the 20th century. In his numerous essays, especially those devoted to music and literature as well as in his monumental unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* published in 1970, Adorno provides an in-depth analysis of how modern and avant-garde art has dealt with its autonomy and protested against its "aesthetization" while claiming its reconnection to truth (see Bernstein and Thibodeau). In short, Adorno's aesthetic theory is best considered, I contend, as the most complete appraisal on the development and transformation of modern art during the 19th and 20th Centuries and, thus it should be considered as a significant contribution by any work on the subject.

Despite these reservations, *Truth and Art after Plato* is an outstanding work that should additionally be acclaimed for belonging to those all too rare books that are both accessible to the beginner and thought provoking for the specialist.

moment (§§ 1 to 5) claims "that taste is the ability to judge an object [...] by means of a liking or disliking devoid of all interests." The second (§§ 6 to 10) holds that beautiful is that which, without a concept, is liked universally." The third (§§ 11 to 17) affirms that "beauty is an object's form of purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose." And finally, the fourth (§§ 18 to 20) contends that "beautiful is what without a concept is cognize as the object of a necessary linking."

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