

ART AS EXPERIENCE:
GADAMER'S REJECTION OF AESTHETIC
CONSCIOUSNESS THROUGH PLAY, SYMBOL
AND FESTIVAL

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**ART AS EXPERIENCE: GADAMER'S REJECTION OF AESTHETIC
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ABSTRACT

Although Gadamer's aesthetic writings are aimed at dismantling the scientific method's monopoly on truth-claims, they also constitute an aesthetic theory in themselves. This theory is the application of Gadamer's anti-methodological stance to the process of artistic interpretation in an attempt to give artworks the right to make credible claims about reality and escape the "aesthetic consciousness" that prevents art from making these claims. To describe the mechanics of this process, Gadamer employs the concepts of play, symbol, and festival to showcase how artworks relate to history and tradition, how they disrupt the subject-object relationship, and how their persistent character provides a constant source of self-understanding for an audience. This thesis intends to show that this attack on aesthetic consciousness is the focus of Gadamer's aesthetic theory, and that the concepts of play, symbol, and festival, in their relation to his concept of *Erfahrung*, are the means of this attack.

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Introduction

To claim that an artwork is a statement of some kind is to claim what many people take for granted. Indeed, it is hard to deny that an artwork is speaking to us, given its presence as something that can be encountered and questioned. It is making a case for something, and its physical arrangement represents this case for its audience. As members of the audience, we interact with it, in that we devote our senses to understanding what it is trying to say, and through this process we allow it draw a question from us—"What is this?" Certainly, this is not the only question it draws. "What is it?" is another possibility, along with a host of others. But the first question goes beyond the second, which sees the artwork as an object in all its otherness, limiting our understanding of its relation to the whole of our human experience. Asking "What is this" is to bring the artwork into the midst of the subject, and into the subject's present moment of experience, as if they are admitting that their understanding of reality must make allowance for the artwork's presence. To acknowledge the "this-ness" of the artwork is to acknowledge the existence of something outside oneself, a thing that can be distinguished from other things, yet bound to the reality that both object and subject occupy. To question an artwork's existence in this way is to inquire into, not just what it says, but *the means by which* it makes a statement. With our subjectivity so thoroughly disrupted by the artwork's presence, our questions are directed not only at the work, but at ourselves in relation to it. What does the this-ness of an artwork say, through the subject matter it depicts, about the this-ness of *us*? Now the tables have turned; art is no longer just making a statement about itself, but a statement about its audience. It is forcing its witnesses to produce a response to its claim, and in doing so, the witnesses receive knowledge of themselves. They make associations between the elements of the work they

recognize, and the elements that remain unfamiliar. The artwork expands the audience's understanding of the world, and by proxy, their situation within it.

This is the point that Hans-Georg Gadamer makes in his aesthetic writings (specifically in *Truth and Method* and *The Relevance of the Beautiful*). An aesthetic experience is something connected to us, which speaks to our relationship with the world. In order to understand what an artwork is saying, everything we have come to know is drawn out of us. To enter into this understanding means that we are leveraging our fore-conception of reality—that is, the set of preconceptions that constitute our knowledge—in order to recognize the points of familiarity that artwork holds for us. In doing so, the aspects of the artwork that appear unfamiliar to us become understood more fully and are added to the collection of things we know. The interpretation of artwork is the cycle of movement between things recognized and things not, so that the unfamiliar is made recognizable. Art's ability to generate new understandings in us, by building on what we have come to know, is what makes art intrinsic to our reality, and embedded within the historical tradition that binds us together. Through this embeddedness, an artwork constantly adds to our experience as we struggle to make sense of what it has to say. And when we uncover what this meaning is, based on its relation to things we know, we discover the truth of an artwork—the self-understanding that it provides us with. An artwork's presence is the source of this truth, because it ratifies our connection to the world and to history. By embracing the otherness of an artwork, we no longer see reality as a subjective projection, but as a network of inter-subjective relationships that constantly generates newness within the framework of a living history. Art brings the past into the present, awakening our understanding of not only the experience we have had before, but also of the experiences yet to come.

This is not the way artworks are often perceived, however. With the rise of the scientific method throughout the Enlightenment, tradition was subsequently devalued. Art could no longer be regarded as having a claim to truth, because the variability of artistic interpretations was seen to be incompatible with science's search for experimental consistency. As well, art's relation to history was equally repugnant for the Enlightenment, because the "old ways" of pre-Enlightenment Europe were being devalued and ignored. The progress promised by science stood in contrast to the "false" ideas of history, which were seen as the product of dogma. And because of art's dependency on history, and all the unscientific, mythic ideas of the past, art could no longer be seen as the beholder of truth. Because of this, the Enlightenment presented art with an ultimatum: it must renounce its claim to truth, or be completely replaced by science as the source of culture. The response by artists was to submit to the first proposition, and make art something altogether "other" than what practical, empirical reality could provide. This attitude, that art can no longer provide us with truth, is what fostered "aesthetic consciousness", and removed the experience of art from the experience of life.

In response, Gadamer proposes that art's claim to truth has been unfairly ignored, and that it is time to re-integrate art with truth. In order to do so, he casts the interpretation of art as a "play-experience", in which a dialogue takes place between the artwork and subject, to the extent that the subject fuses their understanding of history with the artwork. The concept of play, in this sense, is what allows Gadamer to state that the ontological existence of an artwork is the source of its truth, because it can deliver a representation of something to us, something that broadens our understanding of the world, making our perception of ourselves and life in general clearer and less distorted by our own subjectivity. His notion of aesthetic consciousness as incompatible with the play-experience is expounded upon by two other concepts, symbol and festival. It is

these, he believes, that demonstrate how the play-experience manifests through language, and how approaching art in this way escapes the need to separate the experience of art from the experience of reality. Through play, symbol, and festival, Gadamer re-integrates art with the historical tradition in which all existence is embedded, granting art the ability to provide us with self-understanding, and rejecting aesthetic consciousness as the enemy of this provision.

Chapter 1: The Nature and History of Aesthetic Consciousness

I. The Meta-Prejudice of the Enlightenment

Aesthetic consciousness is the view that the truth expressed through the experience of an artwork (*Erlebniskunst*) cannot be related to any other mode of experience.¹ This phenomenon, Gadamer believes, is a product of the Enlightenment's focus on scientific methodology as the solely reliable means of achieving truth. In its pursuit of falsifiable, experimentally consistent data, the Enlightenment began to diminish the importance of the human preconceptions of reality—or prejudices, as Gadamer calls them—that constitute our foreknowledge. In other words, the Enlightenment believed that the human fore-conception of reality, which is what conditions how a human being perceives the world, was no longer an appropriate starting point for human understanding. This resulted in the emergence of a “prejudice against prejudices”, which sought to eliminate, (or at the very least, discredit) those conclusions about the world that were devised prior to the emergence of the scientific method.² The search for conclusive data through repeatable experimentation became one of the Enlightenment's primary goals, and as such, preconceptions about reality were no longer the driving force behind understanding, but were instead seen as obstacles to it. Without the rational spirit of Enlightenment thinking to guide our investigation of the world, past judgments and assumptions were devalued and disregarded as flawed, and the historicity of understanding was if not denied, overlooked. As Gadamer writes:

¹ Jason Paul Bourgeois, *The Aesthetic Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007), 51.

² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 1989), 272.

[The Enlightenment] wants to understand tradition...rationally and without prejudice. But there is a special difficulty about this, since the sheer fact that something is written down gives it special authority...the Enlightenment tends to accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgment seat of reason...[thus] it is not tradition but reason that constitutes the ultimate source of all authority. We can know better: this is the maxim with which the modern Enlightenment approaches tradition...³

This passage neatly summarizes the Enlightenment's skepticism toward the historicity of phenomena. No longer could tradition be automatically granted authority by virtue of its historical relationship to human experience, because to do so would be an act of dogmatic submission to tradition. Instead, tradition must be taken as an object of critique, and viewed through the lens of rational skepticism.⁴ To do any less would be to abandon the courage that, as the Enlightenment believed, allows us to make use of our own understanding, without allowing our foreknowledge to override our rational powers.⁵ History, theology and art quickly fell out of the Enlightenment's purview, and as its natural scientific methodology established itself as the sole carrier of truth, it threatened the credibility of those fields whose natures stood in contrast to it. The reason for this contrast was the distinction imposed by the Enlightenment, between a faith in authority and faith in one's own capacity for reason. Despite the fact that authority is a testament to one's knowledge, it was perceived as a dogmatic phenomenon by the Enlightenment, because its ability to condition human behaviour suggested a blind obedience to

³ Gadamer, *TM*, 272.

⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 272.

⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 271.

prior knowledge.⁶ Those with authority are expected to provide answers regarding the things we encounter, overriding our own investigations and imbuing those more experienced with a greater degree of influence over the way we think. Thus, Enlightenment thinkers diminished the importance of knowledge that could not be obtained through the natural scientific methodology that it upheld, resulting in the diminishment of knowledge obtained through authority and tradition.

II. The Romantic Reaction

Romanticism was the reaction to this threat, as it sought to revitalize interest in those fields that the Enlightenment was determined to neglect. But Gadamer makes it clear that this reaction did not undo the unhistorical fallacy brought about by the Enlightenment; rather, it served to deepen it. Instead of allowing their work to reveal truth by virtue of its subject matter and relation to human experience, the artists, historians, and philologists of the Romantic period began to assert their respective fields as above and beyond the domain of everyday human experience.

In contrast to the Enlightenment's faith in perfection...we now find that...the world of myth, unreflective life, not yet analyzed away by consciousness, in a 'society close to nature'...acquire[s] a romantic magic, even a priority over truth...[thus] the romantic reversal of the Enlightenment's criteria of value actually perpetuates the abstract contrast between myth and reason.⁷

Gadamer is saying that Romanticism's rejection of the Enlightenment falls into the same anti-traditional extremism that plagued the latter. The only difference is that now, instead of pure,

⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 279.

⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 273.

absolute knowledge becoming the normative standard of thought, the collective, primeval consciousness believed to have existed prior to the Enlightenment is being held in the same regard.

The fallacy here, as Gadamer illustrates, is that the Romanticists uphold myth as something antithetical to reason in an attempt to form a bulwark against rationalism. In fact, the opposite is true—myth is derived from reason. The component of myth is what allows a collective consciousness to move beyond ritual and fear, and to attain knowledge of how it is situated in relation to things outside itself. Collective consciousness creates a dialogue with the divine through myth, and through this dialogue the collective can overcome its alienation from the divine, the divine being that which allows things to exist independent of the collective's influence. In other words, myth functions as the interpreter between a culture and the unknown, demystifying those aspects of existence that cannot be adequately explained through method, and the revelation of these aspects constitutes not a collective innocence (or to use Gadamer's words, "primeval stupidity"), but a collective knowledge.⁸

The second part of this romantic fallacy is the division between mythic and poetic thought, a division that feeds directly into the creation of aesthetic consciousness. Gadamer believes that this division of mythic perspectives arose from the belief that poetic accounts of myth constitute subjective distortions of the myths that bind communities, and that while these accounts may stir the passions of their readers, they have little to offer in the way of truth.⁹ Ironically, the "abstract contrast between myth and reason" that the Romanticists railed against becomes an analogue to a contrast of their own, in which myth has taken the place of reason and

⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 274.

⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 274.

art has taken myth's former place.¹⁰ Therefore, the ensuing hypocrisy that overtakes the Romantic cause lies in the attempted fusion of Enlightenment concerns with historical revivalism. As quickly as Romanticism defends what it takes to be an innocent, bygone era of mythic togetherness, it diminishes the credibility of poets and artists to convey their understanding of the tradition they inhabit. Thus, both Romanticism and the Enlightenment constitute the same break with the continuity of meaning found in tradition.¹¹ The only difference between them lies in their respective normative values—reason for the Enlightenment, myth for Romanticism—which are inflated to compensate for the absence of historical continuity in each. The Romantic fixation on myth and history does not re-introduce these concepts to the human experience of the present, but instead analyzes them abstractly. Rather than providing context for present events, and allowing this context to build upon our understanding of the present, the past is treated as a kind of museum piece—it can stimulate interest in the events and relics of history, but beyond this it is largely reduced to a form of novelty.¹² With history's relation to the present so obscured, the culture to which it belongs is persuaded to regard it from a position of detached bemusement, subsequently isolating it from the tradition that binds the culture in the first place. This attitude is directly responsible for the advent of aesthetic consciousness, but to understand why, we must analyze Gadamer's critique of Kant's aesthetics and the Romantic reaction that followed.

Gadamer believes that the radical subjectivization of art that began with Kant is the cause of aesthetic consciousness, because Kant's establishment of taste as the primary factor in understanding artworks led to the detachment of art from a shared human experience (i.e.

¹⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 274.

¹¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 275.

¹² Gadamer, *TM*, 275.

tradition). For Kant, taste is the faculty of reflective judgment, as conditioned by a normative value of beauty. Through the principle of taste, Kant diminished the objective, ontological reality of artworks, in favour of how well they embody the standard of beauty. In the case of Kant, beauty is the manifestation of moral truth, and our receptivity to beauty determines our access to the sublime. Gadamer observes a tension between the Kantian concepts of genius and taste, in that Kant ascribes greater significance to taste, while giving genius secondary status in his argument. As Gadamer writes, “I maintain that for Kant the concept of genius was really only a complement to what was of interest to him ‘for transcendental reasons’ in aesthetic judgment...applying aesthetic judgment to the beautiful and sublime in *nature* is more important than the transcendental foundation of *art*.”¹³ Much like *Truth and Method*’s own use of aesthetics to prove a larger argument about truth, Kant leveraged aesthetics in the first volume of the *Critique of Judgment* to support his teleological argument in the second. It is this aim of legitimizing the teleology of nature that demands taste be accorded a more significant position because taste is the means by which human beings are made aware of beauty, thus cultivating us socially and providing us with a pleasure of reflection that is cognitive, and not physical, in nature.¹⁴ Yet despite the primacy of taste, Kant still considers genius to be the means by which human beings create artworks on par with natural beauty. Genius—as the synthesis of understanding and imagination—is what allows human artworks to become beautiful. Thus it is *beauty* that enjoins taste with genius in that beautiful artworks are judged by taste and made manifest through genius.¹⁵

¹³ Gadamer, *TM*, 54-55.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 185.

¹⁵ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 189.

However, Gadamer believes that Kant's claims regarding beauty are inadequate, because taste, which is our means of locating where the beautiful lies, places a restriction on the beautiful without any defining principle of its own.¹⁶ In an attempt to provide taste with this defining principle, thus making it compatible with the objective character of beauty, Kant standardizes taste with the concept of the *perfection of taste*. Although this standardization can support itself in terms of an *artwork's* beauty—given that human artwork is consciously influenced by standards of taste—Gadamer believes it falls flat when applied to instances of *natural* beauty, because nature operates independently from the conscious creativity of genius. Therefore, any attempt to standardize our judgments of nature's beauty will result in even more radically subjective judgments of taste, because the genius that could otherwise embody the principles of taste is absent from natural activity.¹⁷ The ensuing diversity of judgments only underscores the relativity of human taste, and fails to bind it under a singular, normative value. Genius, on the other hand, does not possess this open-endedness. It employs a specific language through art, which is grounded in a human understanding of life that allows its subject matter to be more explicitly conveyed to an audience. Whereas our recognition of beauty in nature relies on our own, subjective mood, the products of genius have definiteness in what they say, which is what truly engages the free play of our cognitive faculties.¹⁸ Although Gadamer does not necessarily prefer genius to taste as a guiding principle for aesthetics, he does believe that "genius is ultimately a manifestation of this vivifying spirit for, as opposed to the pedant's rigid adherence to rules, genius exhibits a free sweep of innovation and thus the originality that creates new models."¹⁹ As that which creates beauty, rather than that which affirms or denies the beauty of

¹⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 57.

¹⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 57.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 51-52.

¹⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 53.

what is created, genius promotes the willingness to disrupt convention and enrich the subject's understanding of themselves and their world. But at the same time, the concept of taste has a similar interest for Gadamer, due to the historicity it provides. The concept of what is tasteful changes from culture to culture, and it is through this cultural taste that our interpretation of art reveals its connection to history. What a culture considers "tasteful" is a part of its tradition, and informs the members of that culture as to how they stand in relation to that tradition. As he writes, "One does violence to the concept of taste if one does not accept its variability...[and genius] fulfills...the requirement of being immutable in the stream of time."²⁰ Despite his appreciation for the historicity of taste, his sentiments toward genius exhibit a stronger commonality with Romanticism, in that natural beauty and taste, having been found incompatible with each other, are diminished in favour of genius. But this commonality should not be taken for granted; it is in Romanticism that Gadamer's aesthetic critique becomes even more pointed, as he takes aim at the cult of genius it fostered, and the aesthetic consciousness that resulted from it.

As mentioned earlier, the Romantic movement attempted to break away from the prejudice against prejudices—or "meta-prejudice"—of the Enlightenment, and elevate the significance of the human sciences above the Enlightenment's elevation of reason. But the divide between myth and reason was only further deepened by the efforts of Romanticism, resulting in the abstraction of the very concepts it sought to demystify.²¹ Two factors reveal the relationship between these efforts and aesthetic consciousness: 1) German Idealism's reversal of the Kantian priority of taste, and 2) the resulting focus on *Erlebnis* as the ultimate unit of consciousness. In the first case, Gadamer claims that the shift from taste to genius began with Fichte and Schelling,

²⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 58.

²¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 273.

with their establishment of genius as the universal aesthetic principle. The *standpoint of art* as the unconscious production of genius became for the Idealists the only standpoint for aesthetics at all.²² Gadamer states that, initially, it was the goal of the Idealists to use the newfound superiority of genius as a bridge between genius and nature, thus defining nature as the product of spirit.²³ By extending the concept of genius into the domain of natural science, the Idealists were able to make a case for art's claim to truth in a way that did not have to appeal to a standardization of taste. Gadamer's footnote regarding Friedrich Schlegel illuminates the conclusion of this theory: if the standpoint of art is conditioned by the inflation of genius, then taste becomes untenable as a universal aesthetic principle.²⁴ But there is a problem with this approach—if taste is completely ignored as a principle, our understanding of the artwork's historicity becomes more limited. As discussed, taste is not only a subjective property, but a culturally held one. Taste defines how a culture perceives itself, and illustrates the kinds of things that culture finds acceptable. It provides access into the prejudices of a particular tradition, and although the standardizing of taste can prevent a culture from critically assessing these prejudices, acknowledging the influence of them at least gives the culture some knowledge of what these prejudices are. By ignoring taste completely, and advocating genius in place of it, Gadamer believes Romanticism has merely gone from one aesthetic dogma to the other. The authority of tradition, which would otherwise determine an artwork's congruence with a culturally-held standard of taste, is being deprived of its claim to make any such assertion. Instead, the role of the artist, as the one who applies their genius to the creation of art, is given the authority to dictate not only the claim the artwork is making, but the standard by which the work ought to be judged. Gadamer is not advocating one principle over the other, but is

²² Gadamer, *TM*, 58.

²³ Gadamer, *TM*, 58.

²⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 58.

expressing the extent to which taste and genius have each been radicalized, and how this radicalization can stifle an artwork's ability to speak for itself as a historically-grounded object that invites us to discover its meaning.

Recognizing this dismissal of taste, Hegel manages to assert a new aesthetic principle: man's encounter with himself.²⁵ We will see that this moment of self-encounter will be the inspiration for Gadamer's antidote to aesthetic consciousness and will deeply influence his critique of subject-centric models of interpretation. For our current purposes, it will suffice to say that for Hegel, the work of art constitutes the dissolution of the divide between subject and object.²⁶ As the encounter with a work of art proceeds, the subject discovers correlations between their particular life experience and the subject matter of the artwork, which allow the subject to understand themselves better. But the rejection of Hegel by the neo-Kantians kept this concept of self-understanding largely dormant, and the elevation of genius, as committed by the Idealists and fathered by Kant, re-established itself as the dominant aesthetic principle.²⁷ Gadamer believes that defining art through the concept of genius has only served to deprive artworks of their claim to truth, leading to the rise of aesthetic consciousness. This deprivation, Gadamer states, was given its primary justification through the concept of *Erlebnis*, and it is the neo-Kantians' popularizing of this concept that severed art from the tradition in which human experience is embedded.

The concepts of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* are contrasting modes of human experience. *Erlebnis* refers to experience as a particular instance that is so fully understood, the subject gains

²⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 59.

²⁶ Jeff Mitscherling, "Hegelian Elements in Gadamer's Notions of Application and Play," in *Continental Philosophy Review* (Vol. 25, No. 1), 66.

²⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 60.

total self-knowledge from it, and will never be able to, nor need to, return to that experience again in order to understand it. In this sense, *Erlebnis* remains isolated from other experiences, in that a moment of *Erlebnis* cannot form the basis for understanding successive experiences. It is a precious thing that can never be repeated or built upon. *Erfahrung*, on the other hand, denotes experience as an ongoing, transformative process (what has been referred to as “continuous human experience”, or “human experience” up to this point). With *Erfahrung*, a single moment is related to the larger whole of a person’s experience, with each moment bringing the whole into greater clarity. To explore this contrast in greater detail, *Erlebnis* will be broken down further. *Erlebnis* is so immediately and fully grasped that it becomes separated from the continuity of life; a moment so remarkable that it does not need to be contextualized in order to be fully understood.²⁸ Although an instance of *Erlebnis* may have profound significance for the subject, it is exhaustible in terms of the understanding it provides. The nature of understanding as a developmental process, as it is under *Erfahrung*, becomes ignored in favour of the instantaneous, “absolute knowledge” of the experience that *Erlebnis* is assumed to possess. From this, it is clear that the nature of *Erlebnis* forms a direct analogue with the nature of aesthetic consciousness. With aesthetic consciousness, the artwork undergoes an abstraction “from all the conditions of a work’s accessibility”²⁹, in that the work’s connection to the past—whether in terms of the conditions of its creation, or the various interpretations of it recorded over the years—displace it from *Erfahrung*, and thus prevent the subject from gaining any self-understanding from it.³⁰ In other words, because the artwork is so removed from the context *Erfahrung* provides, it is kept from the history of our experiences; the artwork’s meaning is considered “too pure” to be

²⁸ Tracie Constantino, “Philosophical Hermeneutics as a Theoretical Framework for Understanding Works of Art,” in *Arts and Learning Research*, ed. Joan Russell and Regina Murphy, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2002-2003), 83.

²⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 85.

³⁰ Constantino, *Understanding Works of Art*, 84.

understood by all but the most sensitive connoisseurs. Moreover, the “absolute knowledge” of *Erlebnis* prevents the subject from remaining open to new experiences, a crucial element that *Erfahrung* accommodates.

The abstraction caused by aesthetic consciousness is what Gadamer terms “aesthetic differentiation”, which is the process of removing the experience of an artwork from the experiential flow of one’s life, thus exalting it as the standard of an aesthetic ideal, one that permits access to a form of knowledge that is all-encompassing and absolute.³¹ This, Gadamer believes, is to not only overextend the significance of an artwork’s subject matter, but to abstract it to the extent that the subject’s experience of it takes precedence over the historicity of the artwork itself (i.e. how it is conditioned by historical tradition). As Gadamer writes:

In the experience of art is present a fullness of meaning that belongs not only to this particular content or object but rather stands for the meaningful whole of life.

An aesthetic *Erlebnis* always contains the experience of an infinite whole.

Precisely because it does not combine with other experiences to make one open experiential flow, but immediately represents the whole, its significance is infinite.³²

Removing a single experience from the influence of other experiences is to give that experience a place of privilege. The significance of *Erlebnis* is justified on the grounds that in its uniqueness, it *alone* must represent the nature of every experience, and therefore be the source of absolute knowledge. Gadamer’s criticism of Hegel shows the fallacy in this kind of thinking, and how it is the foundation for aesthetic differentiation. Gadamer claims that, for Hegel, the ultimate

³¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 70.

³² Gadamer, *TM*, 70.

goal of conscious experience is the acquisition of total self-knowledge, which is the experience that consciousness has of itself.³³ Because this self-knowledge is so complete, it overcomes the need to include, let alone acknowledge, anything foreign or alien; i.e. that which would stand in contrast to it. Thus, the acquisition of self-knowledge in this way does not incorporate *Erfahrung*, but instead *overcomes* it, in order to completely recognize the identity of consciousness and object (i.e. the identity of self-knowledge).³⁴ The only way the truth of self-knowledge can be achieved, Hegel believes, is through science, because science allows us, through the dialectic of question and answer, to discover ourselves in that which is foreign. Although both Gadamer and Hegel agree on the nature of dialectic inquiry as the provider of self-understanding, Hegel's reliance on scientific methodology is the breaking point between the two. Hegel's belief in scientific methodology, to uncover the familiar within the alien, ends up disregarding the alien in favour of the familiar. The self-knowledge derived through this method is a result of the subject projecting their current self-understanding onto the object. But this self-understanding is a product of their fore-conception of reality, making it a product of their prejudices. We can see the Enlightenment's meta-prejudice pulling the strings here. But interestingly, under Hegel's model, two sets of prejudices are involved. Not only does the scientific methodology itself constitute a prejudice, but so too is the subject's self-understanding prior to encountering the object. Gadamer believes that Hegel's system undermines itself, because the subject's attempt at attaining a pure, universal, unbiased form of self-knowledge is grounded in subjective preconceptions. In addition, the view that this self-knowledge is absolute means that not only are the subject's prejudices being used to reveal the truth, but they are no longer being challenged by the dialogical nature of inquiry; thus once the subject attains self-

³³ Gadamer, *TM*, 355.

³⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 355.

knowledge from the object, they are discouraged from inquiring into its nature any further, leading the dialectic to a dead end. This unwillingness to explore is because the subject's recognition of themselves in the object is regarded as "complete", which satisfies the expectations dictated by the subject's prejudices. This is the fallacy of *Erlebnis*, and it underscores the problem of trying to derive infinite knowledge from particular experiences.

By contrast, Gadamer's advocacy of *Erfahrung* seeks to acknowledge our current situation, by constantly building on what we already know.³⁵ For him, the infinite is not found in the truth provided by a particular experience, because to remove a particular experience from the continuous flow of *Erfahrung* results in its abstraction, which serves to make it a paradigm for every other human experience. This, Gadamer believes, is to disregard the historical conditions that lead to those experiences, which deprives the subject of understanding how these experiences influence each other. Moreover, experiences which are not seen as constituting an *Erlebnis* run the risk of being dismissed entirely. In this way, *Erlebnis* can be seen as the Enlightenment's meta-prejudice in disguise, in its use of science to confine the subject's experience to the domain of the familiar and unchallenging. By contrast, Gadamer's system does not represent the infinite through the nature of self-knowledge; the infinite is revealed in the nature of dialectic inquiry—the synthesis of "question" and "answer" continues indefinitely, with the object providing the subject with self-knowledge, for as long as the subject chooses to engage in a dialogue with the object. In turn, the subject is encouraged to engage in further encounters with the object, and receive new forms of self-knowledge with each successive encounter. Gadamer summarizes this phenomenon neatly in his own words: "The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is

³⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 357.

made possible by experience itself."³⁶ It is *Erfahrung*, and not *Erlebnis*, that allows experiences to couch themselves within the linear flow of human life, therefore allowing the subject to remain open to new experiences, and to clearly perceive the connections between them. *Erfahrung* provides events with the ability to influence each other, which in turn allows past events to provide context for present ones, and present events to reveal the aim of prior ones. As the subject moves through the past into the future, regarding these events as elements of *Erfahrung* integrates the subject's situation with their embeddedness within history, to the extent that the subject is open to successive experiences, rather than assuming that one particular experience is all that is needed to understand oneself.

This willingness to experience *further* becomes the basis of the concept of play, and it is the spirit of play that allows aesthetic experience to return to the model of *Erfahrung*. But before we can see how this return occurs, and how it imbues art with its claim to truth, we must understand the extent of *Erlebnis*'s influence on aesthetic theory. This extent is demonstrated by what Gadamer calls "pure perception", and it serves to reinforce aesthetic differentiation—art's removal from the real. Pure perception is a form of aesthetic interpretation, in which the interpreting subject abstracts their perception of an artwork, until the artwork is no longer seen within the context of human experience. In other words, pure perception keeps an audience from making connections between the things an artwork depicts, and things in reality.³⁷ This is an expansion of the "sensitive connoisseur" example mentioned earlier, in that deriving meaning from an artwork becomes an act of cultivating one's receptivity to the genius that the artwork displays, rather than articulating the work's meaning through its relation to other elements. Thus through pure perception, aesthetic consciousness acquires a methodology rooted in *Erlebnis*,

³⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 355.

³⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 89.

which stands in contrast to the binding quality of *Erfahrung*.³⁸ Gadamer claims that “seeing is articulating”, highlighting the need to relate the subject matter of an artwork to the elements of reality that surround it—the history of its creation, the time in which it was made, the biography of its creator, even the space in which it resides. The relation of an artwork to things in the world, and not to some abstract, universal concept, is what imbues the work with meaning, making aesthetic experience a constructed event, and one that involves an understanding of a work’s real-world context.³⁹ Pure perception is an attempt to escape this model of understanding. Aesthetic differentiation demands that a “perverse formalism” be enforced on the artwork, in that its subject matter, its content, is being abstracted to the extent that the form⁴⁰ of the artwork is the audience’s focus.⁴¹ This diminishing of an artwork’s content is a direct by-product of *Erlebnis* and the inflation of genius. The artist is thus perceived by society as having a messianic importance; they are regarded as a conduit to the divine, as made manifest by their artistic achievements. Gadamer seeks to undo this perspective. Even “abstract art”, with its focus on nonobjective expression and lack of recognizable forms, has the capacity to make objective truth-claims. These kinds of artworks still contain their own content and meaning, but the subject must scrutinize them more carefully, and meditate on their connection to reality with greater mental focus.⁴² An artwork’s lack of recognizability does not deprive it of its content, leaving it an empty vessel to be filled by the subjects’ interpretations, but simply issues a greater challenge for the subject’s cognitive abilities. Abstract artworks make the “agony of seeing” more

³⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 97.

³⁹ Constantino, *Understanding Works of Art*, 88.

⁴⁰ “Form” in the sense of an aesthetic mode or genre (eg. “Art for art’s sake”), not form in terms of shape, line, colour, etc.

⁴¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 92.

⁴² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 8.

palpable, and therefore make relating the work to reality more of a struggle.⁴³ But this struggle never precludes the artwork's relationship to reality, as aesthetic consciousness would have us believe it does. It is only the subject's unwillingness to relate the alien to the familiar that leads them to abstract the alien, because doing so allows the subject to relate the alien to the universal, safely eliminating the possibility of error. *Who is to say* the sculpture *doesn't* represent an universal concept, such as "love", or "nature", or "harmony"? There is an interpretive laziness here, in that the agony of seeing, and the struggle to articulate what is being seen, is sidestepped for the incontestable safety of universal concepts, which although intangible, are at least *mentally* graspable, and therefore, familiar.

This is the trajectory of aesthetic consciousness—from the inadequacy of taste to the inflation of genius, the rise of aesthetic differentiation, and the dogma of pure perception. Gadamer's advocacy here, of engaging with the unfamiliar, is the resulting antidote to this dogma, and its compatibility with *Erfahrung* is made clear in the concept of play.

⁴³ Gadamer, *TM*, 91.

Chapter 2: The Function of Dialogue in Play and Horizons

I. Play and the Fusion of Horizons

For Gadamer, the nature of play stands in direct opposition to aesthetic consciousness, making the play-experience a direct expression of *Erfahrung*. Gadamer defines play as a “to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end...it renews itself in constant repetition”.⁴⁴ In this sense, play is non-teleological, in that its movement is not tied to a particular outcome beyond the confines of the play-experience. The most basic examples of play, Gadamer says, are phenomena such as the “play of light” or “play of the waves”; even the nature of words, gears, and limbs apply to this kind of dialogical movement.⁴⁵ In each case, we have a set of participants—the gears, waves, or rays of light—that are constrained to a set of relational boundaries. The waves crash against each other and the shore—these phenomena represent a group of “players” in that they continuously, repetitively collide with one another, for no particular purpose.⁴⁶ They do not move as they do by virtue of their existence alone, as this would assume that it is their *nature* to crash into each other, suggesting their behaviour has a teleological significance outside of their actions. Instead, they crash in relation to the *conditions* established by gravitational forces, which allow for the waves’ behaviour to exist. This is the model Gadamer uses to explain the behaviour of play. Like the waves, the participants in any kind of play are subordinate to the conditions that bring their play-experience into being. The implications that this model has for aesthetic consciousness demonstrate how untenable the latter really is. From the perspective of play, the experience of art (*Erlebniskunst*) is no longer defined by the subjectivity of the interpreter, but by the work of art itself, as it establishes the

⁴⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 103.

⁴⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 103.

⁴⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 101.

conditions—the *rules of the game*—that determine to what extent the interpreter will lose themselves in the work.⁴⁷

The act of “losing oneself” is essential to the concept of play, as it illustrates the connection between play and *Erfahrung*. To explain it, Gadamer outlines a system of understanding that accounts for the players’ loss of subjectivity. But to understand this system, we must first see its roots in his later section on horizons of understanding, which helps clarify the relationship between *Erfahrung* and play. Gadamer’s view of horizons is tied to the need for understanding what history gives to us, in the present. What we know of the past is the connection between our present awareness of the world and the tradition to which we are a part; this much we learned from the preceding chapter. But what is the barrier to understanding this tradition, which grounds our present awareness within the historical substantiality it provides? This would be human finitude, because it showcases the extent to which we are bound to the present, to a fixed standpoint within tradition. All subjects inhabit a fixed standpoint, and it is this fixedness that constrains the subject’s understanding within a similarly fixed range of vision, due to the prejudices that such a standpoint provides us with.⁴⁸ There is a demarcation between the things the subject understands well, and the things it is less familiar with. The figurative “distance” between the subject and the limit of their understanding—i.e. the barrier between the familiar and the alien—is what Gadamer deems a “horizon”. As he writes, “The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.”⁴⁹ With regard to human understanding, a horizon is the field of view in which the subject can regard the things it knows in relation to itself, and distinguish these from the things it does not know. In this

⁴⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 106.

⁴⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 302.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 302.

sense, the quantity of things known, and the degree to which those things are known, either limit or expand the subject's horizon, with greater quantities and degrees of understanding making the horizon wider. This gives horizons a malleable character, because they expand with a fluctuating degree of regularity, depending on how far the subject ventures into the unfamiliar. In this expansion, the breadth of the subject's horizon conditions the significance of those things they understand, because the more complete the subject's understanding of something is, the more that thing is pulled away from the edge of the horizon (the boundary between the familiar and unfamiliar) to the subject. As the subject's understanding of things increases, the ensuing growth of the subject's horizon positions these things in such a manner that the subject is prevented from distorting the things' significance. This is because the greater the horizon, the clearer the subject's vision of things outside the subject becomes. The subject is "...not limited to what is nearby but...able to see beyond it."⁵⁰ As the interpreting subject learns more about the phenomenon they are confronted with, they gain a clearer perception of the phenomenon's relations to other phenomena. This clarity diminishes the effect of the subject's prejudices on the object, allowing the object to retain its objectivity outside of the assumed significance that the subject ascribes to it. In gaining this kind of knowledge, the subject begins to see an object's significance not in relation to their subjective situation, but in relation to the larger context provided by the object's historicity. In this sense, the concept of the horizon is the foundation of hermeneutic understanding. It serves as the cognitive framework within which human beings understand phenomena, and it defines how this understanding enlarges our perceptive scope.

Gadamer's next task is to describe the behaviour of the horizon, and how it makes the unknown knowable. To do this, he employs the concepts of "transposition" and "fusion" to

⁵⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 302.

account for how this process works. The mechanics of transposition are analogous to the dialectic model of inquiry from the preceding chapter, in that the subject's horizon comes into contact with the horizons of other subjects, resulting in an exchange of understanding. Like a conversation between two people, the overlap between the horizons facilitates a trade of perspectives. The things known by one party are being received by the other, and if each party comes to accept the other's interpretations of these things, but remains cognizant of the unique angles by which the subjects approach each other, then transposition between them can be maintained.⁵¹ Gadamer points out that there is a weakness in this model, however. Unlike a true conversation, transposition is not focused on agreement, but on simply determining the viewpoint of the other. Thus, the subject's transposition into what is alien merely brings it into contact with the unfamiliar without any need to place the subject's self-understanding in danger of being challenged.⁵² As a result, merely transposing oneself into the situation of the other presents a barrier to understanding. One subject's desire to withhold their self-understanding from the other only serves to reinforce the prejudices of both subjects. As Gadamer states:

Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other...To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.⁵³

⁵¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 305.

⁵² Bourgeois, *Gadamer and Balthasar*, 76.

⁵³ Gadamer, *TM*, 305.

We can see elements of the dialectical mode of inquiry from Chapter 1 in this passage. Also, we can see how it correlates with the concepts of *Erfahrung*, fusion, and play. With regard to horizons, the function of question and answer that allows one subject to “read” the understanding of the other is at work in transposition. But as Gadamer claims, the view of transposition as “placing ourselves in the other situation” can result in refusing to revise our prejudices regarding the other, leading us to an interpretive stagnation.⁵⁴ Although subjects are initially confined to regarding the other *in light of* their own prejudgments, transposition does not invite the subject to critically assess this starting point. There is a balance needed here, in order for transposition to be compatible with the dialogical movement of play. The subject must acknowledge to what extent their horizon is conditioned by their prejudices, and in doing so interpret the other as something familiar. How can this be achieved without the *complete* dissolution of the subject into the objective whole, or the subject’s refusal to moderate their fore-conception of reality?

Gadamer’s response is to redefine the subject-object model of dialogical understanding. For him, the process of transposition cannot simply be Subject A sharing its understanding with Subject B. This would involve each subject reducing the other to an object of understanding, leading to the overemphasis on subjectivity shown above. Instead, it is the *fusion of horizons* that allows for the acquisition of knowledge from another horizon, and this newly-acquired knowledge does not simply maintain the size of the receiving subject’s horizon, but enlarges it. Fusion is the ultimate result of mediation between the subject and the various historical contexts of what it encounters, and these contexts are what actually allow understanding to take place.⁵⁵ Both subject and object are embedded in history, and the subject’s awareness of this history—its “historical consciousness”—is what keeps them from distorting the significance of what they

⁵⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 303-305.

⁵⁵ Constantino, *Understanding Works of Art*, 89.

come to understand. It is the subject's ability to relate these contexts to their own experience that allows truth to be revealed, and there is no historical context that cannot relate *in some way* to our present understanding of the world. Fusion occurs when we bring our horizon into contact with the greater horizon of history and allow it to inform us about that which is unfamiliar. The universality of history provides human understanding with the "rules of the game", so to speak, and lets it act as an objective referee, one that makes the rules intelligible to the players, and applicable to their situation. And as historical consciousness allows the subject to fuse their horizon with the grander horizon of history, their horizon is filled by the contexts history provides, increasing their understanding of the world and expanding their horizon accordingly.⁵⁶

II. The Primacy of the Play-Structure

Just as history allows for new understandings through fusion, the spontaneity of discovery found in play comes as a result of the rules imposed on the players. In the same way that plasma allows individual blood cells to move freely through capillaries, interpreting subjects are similarly nourished and given mobility by the historicity that defines both them and the things around them. Subjects check and validate their prejudices in light of history's authority and allow this authority to reveal more clearly the relationships between things in the world. But the nature of fusion, through its "raising up" of subjectivity into the grander sphere of historical tradition, does pose a resemblance to *Erlebnis* and thus does not sound compatible with *Erfahrung*. To avoid this incongruence, Gadamer makes a number of statements that reinforce the connection between horizons and *Erfahrung*, by linking both more directly with the nature of play:

⁵⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 304.

The particular nature of a game lies in the rules and regulations that prescribe the way the field of the game is filled. The playing field on which the game is played is...defined far more by the structure that determines the movement of the game from within than by what it comes up against—i.e., the boundaries of the open space—limiting movement from without.⁵⁷

We can see how this statement is aligned with *Erfahrung* by examining how play and transposition are incompatible with *Erlebnis*. In the section on horizons, Gadamer appears to indicate a correlation between *Erlebnis* and the “rising to a higher universality” suggested by fusion. It seems that both concepts appeal to the same idea; a mode of experience that is lifted out of the continuity that *Erfahrung* represents. In order to denounce that this is the case, we must ask: what is it that distinguishes *Erlebnis* from fusion? The answer is that the fusion of horizons never involves a departure from *Erfahrung*; it constitutes the acquisition of new understandings, and the overturning of prejudices, but always from within the continuity of human experience. The “higher universality” that comes as a result of fusion is not a lifting-out-of, but an acquiring-from-within. Our willingness to submit our prejudices before the judgment seat of history in order to understand the unfamiliar does indeed suggest a shift in focus. However, our embeddedness within the very history we turn to proves that this consultation is not an experience removed from *Erfahrung*, but a dialogue that occurs within it. Likewise, the play-experience also involves a dialogical approach to self-understanding, which situates play within the continuity of *Erfahrung*, but at the same time granting it a distinction from other modes of behaviour.

⁵⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 107.

As shown in the above quotation, Gadamer discusses the establishing of a perimeter around the play-area to demarcate the space in which the rules of the game apply from the space(s) where they do not. This demarcation is necessary because a game contains a set of rules unique to itself, in that they set before the players a series of tasks that need to be achieved in order for the play-experience to manifest in reality. These tasks are not intended for any purpose other than the manifestation of the game; they redirect the subject's energies from the interactions that characterize ongoing, everyday activity, to a set of interactions confined to the rules of the game.⁵⁸ In this way, the purposiveness that guides everyday activity is being sublimated in favour of the goals set by the game's rules. The separation of the play-space from all others is therefore a necessary process in order for a play-experience to take place within it. But if the significance of that space is defined exclusively by its demarcation alone, and not by the structure of the game that is played there, then the space gains special significance, with or without a game playing itself out within that space. Taking the space to be significant in itself, without understanding *why* it is unique, is to foster a prejudice regarding it: that *any* uniquely demarcated space is elevated above the flow of ordinary human existence, regardless of what actually takes place there. This is a direct example of *Erlebnis*, and we can see how it reinforces aesthetic differentiation. An audience that ascribes a special significance to an art gallery does so because they view art galleries as distinctly "aesthetic" spaces and therefore deprive the artworks they contain from making claims about reality. The audience's preconception of what an art gallery is overrides how they interact with the artworks within it, and the self-understanding they receive from the artworks will be likewise distorted. This is because nothing is being done to challenge the audience's prejudices, a task that would otherwise fall to the works in the gallery. Automatically inflating the significance of the gallery space places an interpretive barrier

⁵⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 107-108.

between the artworks and the truth they can give to the subject. Therefore, it cannot be the space marked out for play, but the *structure* of play—as expressed by the tasks it sets before us, and as presented by the players involved—that allows for the assessment of our prejudices and permits the growth of our horizons. This process demands a de-subjectification; a submission to the play-experience an artwork sets before us, rather than a projection of our own prejudices upon it. We must still regard play-experiences as having a self-contained purposiveness, but this does not have to demand isolating the meaning they provide from every other meaning, and thus from every other experience.

If the space carved out for a play-experience is defined by its structure, we must discover how human beings enter into this structure, and the implications this has for aesthetic consciousness. Essential to the structure of play is the involvement of human reason, which sets the rules that confine the activity of play within the play-experience and maintains the play-experience's non-purposive nature.⁵⁹ Just as the transposition of the subject's horizon is a conscious undertaking, play is similarly fuelled by the subject's conscious awareness of their environment. This is what Gadamer takes to be the distinction between human play and the play found in nature: unlike nature, human beings have the capacity to “choose” to enter into a game.⁶⁰ The human desire to play suggests that play is something other than the kinds of activities we typically engage in. Gadamer summarizes this distinction by alluding to the transformed emotional state the player undergoes:

The ease of play—which...refers phenomenologically only to the absence of strain—is experienced subjectively as relaxation. The structure of play absorbs

⁵⁹ Gadamer, *RB*, 23.

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 107.

the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence.⁶¹

The separation between play and non-play consists in the alleviation of this strain, and this alleviation comes as a result of the subject's willingness to yield to the other, and relinquish the sovereignty of their prejudices. We have seen how this yielding plays out with regard to the fusion of horizons, but with regard to play, the existence of the rule-set that confines behaviour within the play-experience is essential to making this yielding possible. We can refer to the rule-set of a play-experience as the "play-structure". Without an external play-structure governing the subject's behaviour, the subject must rely on their own foreknowledge to make sense of the present, inhibiting their perception of its relation to the past. This is also the point on which Gadamer agrees with Johann Huizinga; play resides outside the domain of "practical life", in that, as stated previously, its intended aim manifests as a set of tasks within itself.⁶² Thus, play-structures must always contrast against a subject's prejudices in order to be regarded as the rules of play, because it is the subject's prejudices that the play-structure seeks to overthrow. But herein lies the crucial point: the process of questioning and validating our prejudices, so as to clarify the things we seek to understand, has the character of a play-experience itself; in fact, this process is what defines every play-experience. Moreover, this means that a play-structure is what allows for this questioning process to take place. This is the fundamental reason why a play-experience cannot be a moment of *Erlebnis*; its very existence as a play-experience depends on the relation of its structure to every other human experience. The subject's decision to become a player, and to enter into play, is conditioned by the prejudices and events that lead to them making that decision. Therefore, the self-understanding gained through the play-experience is

⁶¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 105.

⁶² Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1950), 158.

also product of these prior moments, making its play-structure directly responsible for shaping our understanding. From this, we discover that the dialectic of inquiry, play, and the fusion of horizons all form the essence of the hermeneutic experience, in that each represents the interconnectedness of *Erfahrung*. All three share the same model of dialogical encounter, because each involves the subject questioning their fore-conception of reality, and gaining a clearer historical understanding of their relation to the world.

III. The Presentation-Manifestation of Art and *Mimesis*

Our examination must now carry these concepts into a more deeply aesthetic direction. Gadamer believes that play characterizes the truth of an artwork, and that this experience does not support the thesis of aesthetic consciousness. The indictment of *Erlebnis* at the heart of this argument makes Gadamer's position logical. But in what way does an artwork possess the kind of play-structure needed to reduce the audience's subjectivity, in the same way that play has primacy over the player? Also, does it possess both this structure *and* the identity of another "player", with whom the audience engages? Answering these questions will demand an assessment of what Gadamer believes is unique to the ontology of artworks and how the earlier analysis of horizons and *Erfahrung* feeds into the dialogue between art and audience.

Unlike other forms of play, such as the play of waves or light, an artwork acquires a kind of material permanence that allows it to stand as a testament to the play-structure it is made to represent. What makes this quality particularly unique and distinguishes art from games or other forms of human play is the autonomy of this representation. As a self-contained material object, an artwork is able to persistently and immediately present its play-structure with a level of

sustainable permanence not found in games or sports.⁶³ In those kinds of play, the players, as rational human beings, choose to enter into the game. But art never has to make this choice. It presents its structure *through* its physical and historical horizons, and it is this fusion of its historical horizons that stands in place of the interchangeable human players who would otherwise present its play-structure. It stands as the *presentation-manifestation*, an individual entity that, provided all of the parts of its arrangement remain intact, consistently presents its play-structure to a receiving audience. An artwork's horizons coalesce with its play-structure, resulting in the artwork manifesting not only as a physical object, but undergoing a "transformation into structure" (*Verwandlung ins Gebilde*), which is the status an object acquires when its presentation of play-structure acquires an ontological consistence.⁶⁴ Unlike a game, the self-understanding provided by an artwork's play-structure is not dependent on someone encountering it in a certain moment. Its "self-presentation" persists regardless of who is there to receive it; it becomes like an eternal wellspring of truth, one that can always be counted on to provide self-understanding, regardless of whether the audience is there to receive it. This self-presentation is what allows an artwork to engage its audience in a play-experience.

To explore the idea of self-presentation further, Gadamer's concepts of presentation (*Darstellung*) and representation (*Darstellung für jemanden*) need to be delineated more closely. We have established that the nature of play is fully realized when a group of players submits their purposive will to a game's structure (or "play-structure"), and then presents this structure by co-coordinating their movements to the rules it provides. These movements are what constitute the presentation (*Darstellung*) of the play-experience. Similarly, an artwork possesses

⁶³ Gianni Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, ed. Santiago Zabala, trans. Luca D'Isanto, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 143.

⁶⁴ Vattimo, *Art's Claim*, 143.

this same ability, in that it presents the audience with a play-structure that challenges their preconceptions and foreknowledge. This is what makes the interpretation of art analogous with the fusion of horizons. The various contexts that define the artwork's ontological makeup are what constitute this analogy, because they stimulate the use of the audience's historical consciousness in order for the audience to experience self-understanding through them. But in the case of artworks, this self-understanding is received through representation, and this is where Gadamer attributes representation to the Greek concept of imitation (*mimesis*):

Imitation, as representation, has a special cognitive function. For this reason, the concept of imitation sufficed for the theory of art as long as the cognitive significance of art went unquestioned.⁶⁵

Gadamer draws on Platonic essentialism here, in order to illustrate how artworks embody their presentation. Plato ranks objects of *mimesis* (i.e. artworks) beneath the physical things they are a likeness of, because for him, physical objects are imperfect imitations of the Forms, and as "imitations of imitations", objects of *mimesis* represent the Forms even less perfectly than the things they are made to resemble. However, understanding what a *mimesis* represents still involves an act of *recognizing* its presentation, and this act is what allows a presentation to be received as a representation.⁶⁶ For a subject to recognize something means they have acquired a degree of knowledge regarding the essence of what it represents, and if the artwork's essential character is that of the play-experience it presents, then the representation of that play-experience is equally essential to the artwork. We can see a problem emerging here: in order for recognition to occur, the subject must possess prior knowledge of the thing an artwork represents, so that the

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 115.

⁶⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 115.

artwork's play-structure will be made clear. This makes it appear that the audience's subjective knowledge is still needed to understand an artwork's truth. Does this suggest that artistic interpretation is not merely the passive reception of truth? Moreover, does this mean subjectivity is at least partly responsible for defining the truth of an artwork?

Gadamer dissolves these concerns with the concept of *Erfahrung*. It is true that the self-understanding received from an artwork will manifest differently for every subject who encounters it, and that a multiplicity of interpretations will emerge from these various subjects. However, the memories that constitute the fore-knowledge—and therefore, the prejudices—of every subject are still determined by their embeddedness within the objective pantheon of history. If we ascribe objective reality to the things that happen over the course of a person's life, and state that these things are what constitute their human experience as *Erfahrung*, then their subjective recognition of what an artwork's *mimesis* represents is similarly conditioned by objective reality. As well, the ontological finitude of both artwork and subject embeds both within the same historical tradition, providing both with a definable point of origin, allowing us to make objectively credible claims about how the artwork presents its play-structure, and how the subject receives its representation. This means that in order for the subject to fuse their horizon with the historical horizons of the artwork, they must submit themselves to the play-structure that lies within the artwork and allow this structure to provide them with the "knowledge of the presentation"—the representation—that defines the artwork's essence. It is this knowledge that will allow the subject to question the artwork's representation, leading them to discover the self-understanding it provides them with.

Thus, the truth of an artwork is not revealed when the subject arbitrarily imposes their self-understanding on an object to see how closely they can make the work fall in line with how

they perceive themselves. Instead, this truth is what the subject *receives* when they inquire as to what the artwork represents and allow the artwork to reveal this to them. From this, we can define representation as the received form of presentation. It is, as the phrase *Darstellung für jemanden* suggests, a “presentation for someone”, in that it is what an audience receives from witnessing a play-experience and allowing itself to be caught up in play.⁶⁷ The audience is thus brought into the play-experience the artwork represents, because they *recognize* how the play-structure and fusion of horizons within this representation *relate* to other experiences they have had. But what is essential is that the subject remains aware that these prior experiences are what constitute their prejudices; therefore the subject must remain open to allowing the truth revealed to revise their prejudices. Only through this process of revision, Gadamer believes, can true understanding occur.

We can immediately see how this process clashes with aesthetic differentiation. As shown above, the recognition of an artwork removes the fourth wall between artwork and audience, and accommodates the inter-subjective nature of interpretation. But most importantly, it acknowledges that art is knowledge, because to interpret it is to understand it in relation to other things that can be known, allowing the event of interpreting it to condition, and be conditioned by, everything else we experience.⁶⁸ Aesthetic differentiation, on the other hand, does something quite different. As a process grounded in *Erlebnis*, aesthetic differentiation ignores the importance of the artwork’s historical horizons entirely, because it is only in the single experience of encounter with the artwork as a pure, isolated entity that meaning is revealed. And this meaning is never objectively verified in light of what history tells the subject; thus the aesthetic experience under *Erlebnis* does not involve the fusion of horizons at all,

⁶⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 117.

⁶⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 97.

because the audience is deprived of their ability to juxtapose their prejudices against the artwork's historical and ontological horizons. Because the artwork's representation is so abstracted from its situatedness in history, it is similarly kept from providing the audience with the play-structure it contains, which would otherwise allow for the audience to understand the truth provided by the artwork. The outcome of aesthetic consciousness is that it prevents artworks from expanding a subject's horizon. And since this lack of growth causes the subject to over-value the things they are familiar with, they end up ascribing a distortedly high significance to them. Hence, the prejudices that maintain the subject's fore-conception of reality are not being adequately challenged or assessed, but are instead taken for granted. But as Gadamer makes clear, "interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones."⁶⁹ We cannot say, from Gadamer's perspective, that an audience has "interpreted" an artwork unless the dialogue of question and answer takes place between them both, and succeeds in expanding the audience's horizon with each successive encounter they have with the work. And because this dialogue takes on the form of a play-experience—provided by the artwork representing its play-structure, through its manifestation of horizons—to ignore these horizons is to ignore the dialogue that the work is attempting to engage us in.

⁶⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 267.

Chapter 3: The Language and Temporality of Play through Symbol and Festival

I. Language, Play, and the Hermeneutic Circle

We have seen how the play-experience makes itself known through art, by means of the subject's recognition of what an artwork represents. However, merely acknowledging that this process of recognition belongs to *Erfahrung*, given its relation to the fusion of horizons, will not suffice to explain it fully. What remains to be understood are the mechanics that stand behind this process. As we venture towards understanding these mechanics, we find ourselves confronted by some preliminary questions. How is it that an artwork's play-structure and historical horizons are recognized as a representation? Is there a correlation between what an artwork communicates and language in general? Also, if the aesthetic experience is characterized as a play-experience, as Gadamer claims, how does the aesthetic experience similarly distinguish itself from other experiences, without elevating it to the level of *Erlebnis*? Gadamer employs the concepts of "symbol" and "festival" to mitigate these concerns. In doing so, he demonstrates how aesthetic consciousness impedes the freedom of expression that language provides, and becomes a barrier to the hermeneutic nature of understanding.

To fully explain how an artwork communicates itself, we must turn to Gadamer's larger argument regarding language, and link it to the concept of the play-experience we have been concerned with thus far. At the crux of this larger argument is Gadamer's division between the concepts of "world" and "environment", and the role that language plays in this division. For him, humanity's capacity for language is what makes the species so unique; it is language that

reveals humanity's freedom from its natural environment, and conversely it is this freedom that makes language itself possible.⁷⁰

To have a world means to have an orientation (*Verhalten*) toward it. To have an orientation toward the world...means to keep oneself so free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is. This capacity is at once to have a world and to have language. The concept of *world* is thus opposed to the concept of *environment*, which all living beings in the world possess.⁷¹

Nested within this passage are shadows of the concepts we have just explored. First, the concept of "orientation" and the presentation of a thing "as it is" to the self are directly congruent with the fusion of horizons. The subject's orientation, in this case, refers to how the subject is situated within the horizon of history, its *situation* within the historical tradition to which it is resigned. By the same token, the phrase "what one encounters of the world" is synonymous with the things within the subject's horizon, and their presentation "as they are" refers to the degree to which they are objectively understood. It is the "freedom from" these things, however, that provides the most tangible link between play and language. Gadamer's wording is specific for a reason here: to be free from something is to withhold one's subjectivity and allow the object to present itself to them as it is. In keeping with what was discussed about prejudices, it is when the subject acknowledges their prejudices, and assesses their validity in light of the thing being experienced, that the truth of the thing's nature is more fully revealed to the subject. This means that the human being has *risen above* its environment, because they are no longer strictly dependent on

⁷⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 444.

⁷¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 443.

their environment to provide them with understanding—in other words, they no longer operate on the same level as an animal. Gadamer believes animals lack the ability to conceive of their environment in any context other than their own, subjective viewpoint.⁷² The capacity for language is what affords humanity the ability to rise above environment in this way; to acquire knowledge of how they are situated in their environment, and what the implications of this situatedness are. The human subject acquires this knowledge when they are able to express what they experience through language. As a result, “the verbal world in which we live is not a barrier that prevents knowledge...but fundamentally embraces everything in which our insight can be enlarged and deepened.”⁷³ Rising above our environment lets us regard it as a “world”, and this viewpoint lets us more clearly perceive the inter-subjective relationships that populate it.

However, this rising-above should not be confused with the rising-out-of that characterizes *Erlebnis*. The concept of world does not demand that we become removed from our experience within a physical environment, nor does having a world provide the subject with infinite knowledge; rather, it means that we acquire another “posture” towards it.⁷⁴ Because the subject is still situated within the horizon of history, they do not leave the domain of *Erfahrung*. This situatedness demands that the subject comes to understand their situation, and in turn this demands an understanding of those things outside the subject. This “coming to an understanding” is what comes as a result of language, and it highlights not only the relation of language to play, but its disruption of the traditional subject-object model of understanding.

Language has its true being only in dialogue, in *coming to an understanding*. This is not to be understood as if that were the purpose of language...For language is by

⁷² Gadamer, *TM*, 445.

⁷³ Gadamer, *TM*, 447.

⁷⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 445.

nature the language of conversation; it fully realizes itself only in the process of coming to an understanding. That is why it is not a mere means in that process.⁷⁵

Much like the play-experience, the human use of language is not centered on coming to an understanding as an ultimate "goal". A true conversation does not simply cease to play itself out once the speakers receive the knowledge they were looking for. This kind of dialogue would possess the nature of basic transposition, with both parties acquiring knowledge of each other from within the confines of their own prejudices, neither making an attempt to surprise the other and learn something new. It would also carry a markedly Hegelian flavour, wherein the conversation would flow to a dead end once the speakers' expectations for knowledge are satisfied. If we are to agree with Gadamer, and take the conversation between two people as a conversation taking place within *Erfahrung*, then the conversation itself must be a phenomenon of *Erfahrung*. This is why the disclosure of "world" is so vital to human language for Gadamer—it is the disclosure of "world" that allows two people to discuss a thing that both have experienced, from different perspectives. This combination, of two different perspectives on the one hand, and their unity with a common subject matter on the other, is what makes a conversation an aspect of *Erfahrung*. The unknown element that the other represents is overcome by the sharing of interpretations regarding an aspect of the world, an aspect that both can articulate and respond to through language. In this way, "...language is a medium where I and world meet or, rather, manifest their original belonging together....*Being that can be understood is language.*"⁷⁶ The human capacity to rise above environment and understand the world not only makes language possible, but allows us to share information about what belongs to experience. World is not some abstracted, ideal *world-in-itself* that remains divorced from material existence,

⁷⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 446.

⁷⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 474.

for such a view of the world would lie beyond language and thus remain unintelligible; rather, world is how we perceive our environment when we attempt to understand the inter-subjective relationships that take place within it.

The concept of world is, as Gadamer claims, "...the common ground, trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who talk to one another."⁷⁷ In the same way that a demarcated play-space still rests within an environment, but achieves a distinction from it because of the non-purposive nature of what takes place within the space, the world also denotes a kind of play-space, in which a network of hermeneutic exchanges can play itself out. What kind of play-experience occurs within the play-space of the world? We can turn to the fusion of horizons for the answer. Gadamer makes it clear that "coming to an understanding" means to engage with the other in such a way that our prejudices regarding it are assessed and revised. In order for this revision process to take place, an act of recognition must be made between the subject and the object of perception they are trying to understand. This recognition hinges on the *subject matter* of the dialogue that both subject and object are engaged in, and it is the influence of the subject's fore-conception that helps them recognize the subject matter that determines to what extent the subject understands the object they are confronted with. Much like the agony of seeing, the degree to which the subject matter of a dialogue is recognized will inform the subject as to how much revision their prejudices must endure, in order to reach an understanding of the present object. In addition, the influence of subject matter on human understanding means that the dialogue concerns an actual entity, situated within the flow of tradition, allowing the subject to regard the object as situated within the same, objective reality as both themselves and the subject matter. The subject is able to fuse their horizon with that which is other, because they allow their

⁷⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 446.

recognition of the subject matter that concerns the two of them to bridge the gulf of understanding between them. The statement made earlier, that the fusion of horizons is a play-experience, appears clearer now. But what is the element that provides play-structure for this kind of dialogical exchange? The answer is language. Language establishes the rules of the exchange, which makes the parties involved players in the game of dialogue. Subject and object are no longer subordinate to one another; they are equally subordinate to the language that allows the subject to recognize the other, through the recognition of their shared subject matter. An appropriate model for this kind of exchange would be a sport, like soccer. Language acts as the rules of the game, the subject and object become players, the subject matter is the ball, and the world is the playing field. The players respond to the ball with moves and countermoves, anticipating each movement and responding accordingly, within the consistent framework established by the rules. So it is with the relation of language to understanding; over the course of a conversation, both speakers discuss a topic they recognize, within the structure established by language, playing through the to-and-fro movement of speaker and listener with each response one of them makes. And the conversation takes place within the world that the parties have been cognitively raised to, so that their use of language can occur.

This behaviour, of anticipating a movement while staying mindful of that movement's relation to a larger process, directly corresponds to the hermeneutic circle. Gadamer states this case rather clearly:

The circle...is neither subjective nor objective, but describes understanding as the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter. The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding...proceeds from the

commonality that binds us to tradition. But this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition.⁷⁸

Just as a play-experience, as a unified, singular phenomena, comes into being through the presentation of its many parts, so too does understanding operate under a similar tension between a complete concept and its constituent facets. As human beings, it is our nature to understand things as *wholes*. This is what Gadamer refers to as the “fore-conception of completeness”, which means that we always expect the phenomena we encounter to have relationships with other phenomena. In turn, these relationships are what allow us to perceive the phenomena as conceptual “building blocks”, and understand how the arrangement of them makes the concept they represent possible. Gadamer uses the example of written texts to account for this behaviour—we always assume the completeness of a text before we begin to explore the parts that comprise it, and this assumption is based on the specific content that the text concerns.⁷⁹

Texts are understood not on the basis of isolated words or sentences, but on the relations between those words or sentences that constitute a unity of meaning, a unity that the book is taken to represent as a completed whole. This unity provides the interpreter with the *content* of the book, and to understand this content means that they have acknowledged the truth of their orientation towards it. We must expand on this point further. In the case of texts as unities of meaning, the reader approaches texts with prejudices in tow. They do not believe their prejudices to be true in themselves, but acknowledge that they are prejudices genuinely carried and actually possessed—their existence is, in a word, true. It is with this acknowledgment of one’s prejudices that the reader can begin to make judgments about what they read, to see how closely the subject matter of the text aligns with their prejudices. This is how the reader leverages their fore-conception of

⁷⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 293.

⁷⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 294.

reality to access the unity of meaning found in the text; by drawing on their experience of reality to bring the unfamiliar aspects of a text within their horizon of understanding. Gadamer's use of the word *lesen* in the original German is illuminating in this regard. Used in the context of "reading", *lesen* carries a connotative richness in German that does not translate smoothly into English. It is not only reading in the sense of receiving a transmission of content, but as an active *gathering* and harvesting of meaning.⁸⁰ It involves the recollecting of what the subject already knows, which allows for the collecting of what new thing the subject is confronted with. The things recognized in the text are what allow the reader to gain access to the things unfamiliar to them. Both categories of things are gathered together, and this gathering of what came before and what currently confronts the reader is what allows them to recognize the text's unity of meaning. Thus, the subject matter (i.e., content) that links the subject to the object it seeks to understand is what makes understanding possible, and allows the fusion of horizons—as the "play-experience of understanding"—to occur. The dialogue of question and answer between subject and subject matter is what allows our horizon to fuse with history, and our capacity for language is what allows for us to adequately define *how* we are situated in relation to history, making our fusion with it possible. Language serves as the play-structure that underlies the fusion of horizons, and makes possible the recognition of the commonality between those horizons.

II. Symbol's Relation to Play through Art

Now that the relation of language to play has been delineated, the aesthetic implications of language as play-structure begin to emerge. How do artworks make use of language in this

⁸⁰ Jean Grondin, "Gadamer's Aesthetics: The Overcoming of Aesthetic Consciousness and the Hermeneutical Truth of Art," in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, Vol. 2, 1998), 7.

way, when they already represent their play-structure by virtue of their ontological existence? Gadamer invokes the concept of the symbol to account for an artwork's use of language. For him, a symbol—in general, i.e., not specific to symbolism in artworks, is a sensible object that stands in place of a non-sensible concept, giving the concept a tangible point of contact for an interpreting subject. Gadamer is invoking the Greek meaning of *symbolon* here; a token of remembrance, made from a medallion split in two, which is used to help remind the bearer of their relationship to another family. The intangibility of the relationship is made recognizable through the *symbolon*, so that the bearer of one half can be mindful of the bond they share with an entity that is not present; in this case, the other family.⁸¹ This element, of recognition through the material *substitution* of that which is not present, effectively describes the basic function of the symbol. We can also see that, given the intrinsic connection between recognition and representation, the symbol makes recognition possible through its representation in a similar manner to an artwork. It is a unique fusion of language and subject matter that strongly resembles the presentation-manifest of art. First, it represents itself based on how it substitutes for an object of understanding, i.e., its subject matter. This representation must involve the intentional use of language, because the subject's knowledge of this language will allow them to recognize the object of the symbol's representation. The symbol takes on the character of an articulated—and thus, intelligible—statement that can make itself known to the subject, and thus communicate what it is intended to represent. Secondly, the subject recognizes the symbol's meaning because of its relation to the subject's *Erfahrung*, providing the subject with the fore-conceptual framework needed to recognize how the symbol's representation is situated within *Erfahrung*.

⁸¹ Gadamer, *RB*, 31.

However, a symbol alone, such as a badge, medallion, or religious token, should not be conflated with an artwork. The reason for this is that an object that exists strictly as a symbol of something else has a *purposiveness* outside itself, something that is incompatible with the play-experience an artwork provides. To this end, Gadamer claims that not all representations are necessarily representations of art, because to indicate the existence of something outside oneself is not strictly the character of an artwork.⁸² The element of self-understanding, and the truth it provides, is missing from the equation proposed by the symbol. Gadamer believes that a mere gesture towards something that is not present is the character of two modes of symbolic representation, neither of which is analogous with the presentation-manifest of art. He uses the example of the picture to illustrate this:

The essence of a picture is situated...between two extremes: these extremes of representation are *pure indication*, which is the essence of the sign, and *pure substitution*, which is the essence of the symbol. There is something of both in a picture.⁸³

According to Gadamer, a sign's ontological significance is dominated by that which it represents, to the extent that its representation gains no autonomy. Unlike an artwork, the multiplicity of audience interpretations is absent here. Its function is to point away from itself, and its representation is forever chained to the aspect of tradition—of the past—that it is meant to indicate.⁸⁴ It is through their connection to the past that an object serving as a sign can be elevated to the status of a memento, in that their presence awakens our memories of the events they represent, linking us more closely with the horizon of history. But even in this case, the

⁸² Gadamer, *TM*, 151.

⁸³ Gadamer, *TM*, 152.

⁸⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 152.

sign's significance is contingent on whoever experienced the event that the memento refers to. As a result, even a memento can cease to act as a sign, if enough people forget the subject matter it represents. What is unique to an artwork, however, is that it does not point away from itself, but towards the content it itself expresses. The artwork signifies nothing other than itself, giving it what Gadamer calls an "ontological valence"; a hermeneutic depth that demands we linger over it, partaking in the agony of seeing until self-understanding is reached.⁸⁵ The use of "valence" in this case suggests a level of attractiveness contained in the artwork; that in its self-contained representation, it is inviting us to submit to the play-experience it presents us with, and enter into the event of meaning it provides.

With regard to the symbol, Gadamer believes that an artwork has more in common with it than a sign, but that it still falls short of the unique blend of both that is proper to an artwork.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, the symbol can still take the place of what it represents, and present the meaning of this representation with just as much ontological potency as the original thing it represents. However, what is lacking from the symbol is its ability to *make a claim* regarding its representation. This line of thinking goes back to what was said earlier, about art making a claim about us, as subjects, and inviting us to question what it has to say. This is not only what separates symbols from artworks; it demonstrates an artwork's use of language. The artwork possesses the standing-in-for of the symbol, in order to represent its content through its ontological presence. But unlike the symbol, an artwork's meaning is not bound to the content its representation stands in place of; this would significantly limit the number and variety of interpretations one could have of it, and would also limit its ontological valence. In order for the self-understanding that the audience receives from it to be different for each subject—by virtue

⁸⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 153.

⁸⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 153.

of its ontological valence—the artwork must not be regarded as the product of its representation, but as that which defies any attempt to constrain its meaning in this way. Gadamer refers to this constraining of a symbol's meaning as the symbol's "institution".

By "institution" we mean the origin of something's being taken as a sign or functioning symbolically. In this fundamental sense, even so-called "natural" signs—e.g., all the indications and presages of an event of nature—are instituted... This is also true of all artificial signs. Here the sign is established by convention, and the originating act by which it is established is called its "institution."⁸⁷

An object taken to be strictly a symbol has an exhaustible meaning. By having a definable event of institution, the symbol's meaning is constrained to very particular content, making its representation for each subject manifest with a greater degree of uniformity in each case. The commonality that is given to the subject through the symbol's subject matter is reduced in scope, to the extent that the symbol no longer represents a set of things both familiar and unfamiliar to the subject. As we saw with the hermeneutic circle, both the known and the alien must be taken together in order to reach new understanding. But in the case of that which is strictly a symbol, such as a badge or a monument, only the familiar content is "read" by the subject, because a badge or monument has had its content instituted, in order to make it symbolic of something. Thus, in contrast to an artwork, the manners in which the subjects recognize a symbol's representation will bear a closer congruency with each other, meaning that a smaller range of understandings emerges between the subjects. In this way, the act of institution bears the mark of *Erlebnis*, because it is attempting to limit the symbolic scope of the object to a particular subject

⁸⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 155.

matter, and thus impose a cap on the number of interpretations one can have of it. This imposition is the result of what Gadamer referred to above as “pure substitution”; *Erlebnis* presupposes that complete understanding of the symbol can be gleaned from a single encounter, because only one, “correct” meaning can be gleaned from it. But unlike the symbol, an artwork is able to *resist* any attempt we make at instituting its symbolic content.⁸⁸ The artwork’s use of symbolism is not tied down to any purpose other than the artwork’s presentation-manifest, allowing its content to remain within the context of *Erfahrung*, and not be encumbered by the constraints of *Erlebnis*.

Despite art’s freedom from institution, it should still be regarded as the product of intention. Gadamer states that “the symbolic in general, and especially the symbolic in art...is no mere bearer of meaning—as if the meaning could be transferred to another bearer.”⁸⁹ The meaning that an artwork possesses is fixed within the artwork, as an ontologically complete (but not hermeneutically exhaustible) entity. However, the meaning it shelters within itself is by no means an accidental meaning. An artwork is still an ordered arrangement, a creation made according to an artist’s intention. If we are to escape the view that the artworks are empty vessels waiting to be filled by the subject’s understanding, it helps us to recognize artworks as possessing more of an allegorical character than a symbolic one. An example of what Gadamer means by allegory would include something like the *Narnia* books, in which religious concepts are illustrated through metaphor, to demonstrate their use in an identifiable way. Whereas the symbol is the coincidence of the sensible and non-sensible, allegory is the meaningful, intended relation of the sensible to the non-sensible.⁹⁰ With what has been said regarding recognition, we

⁸⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 155.

⁸⁹ Gadamer, *RB*, 33.

⁹⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 74.

can see why allegory is a more attractive model for aesthetics under this system. The subject matter of an allegorical work is directly linked to *Erfahrung*, in that the reader's understanding of it is based not exclusively on an instituted meaning, but on things and events that the reader has discovered in their own experience. The writer of an allegory uses symbolism to communicate a particular set of ideas, in that the symbols used will allow the ideas they represent to be recognized by the audience. The act of substitution that is unique to the symbol is being leveraged by the artist, to provide a tangible starting point for the audience. What makes the starting point tangible is its symbolic relation to each audience member's *Erfahrung*, and it is the artist's task to craft the arrangement of these symbols so that the audience will recognize them as elements of *Erfahrung*, allowing the audience to become lost in the work. Thus, the concept of allegory is a direct parallel to the hermeneutic circle, because each recognition of an artwork's symbols leads to a greater understanding of what the artwork has to say as a whole, complete entity.

Aesthetic consciousness seeks to undermine this act of recognition. By asserting that art has no actual relation to human experience, the cult of genius that dominated 19th century aesthetics began to devalue allegory as a limited, old-fashioned use of symbolism. The fixed, stable, intended nature of an allegory's meaning was seen by the Romanticists as grounded in dogmatism. With Romanticism's radicalization of the Enlightenment's meta-prejudice, anything concomitant with tradition was summarily dismissed, and this included the value of allegorical works. The unconscious production of genius, as the new guiding aesthetic principle, demanded that art employ a form of symbolic representation free from the underpinnings of tradition.⁹¹ Taken this way, the symbol becomes the means by which the artist articulates the knowledge of

⁹¹ Gadamer, *TM*, 79.

the infinite, which is the knowledge that *Erlebnis* seeks to provide. The artwork is no longer making a claim about what the audience knows, granting them access to its historical horizons. Instead, as having undergone aesthetic differentiation, the artwork is abstracted and removed from the domain of *Erfahrung*, able to only symbolize an equally abstract, universal concept.

Since the aesthetic consciousness...knows that it is free, the symbolism it imparts to everything is also 'free.' However ambiguous and indeterminate the symbol still remains...it has its own positivity as a creation of the human mind. It is the perfect consonance of appearance and idea which is now...emphasized in the concept of symbol, whereas dissonance is reserved for allegory or mythical consciousness.⁹²

With this passage, Gadamer is illustrating the irony of using the symbol for the purpose of *Erlebnis*. Without the foundation of history to give an artwork its connection with *Erfahrung*, the symbolism it employs is limited in its representation. It cannot represent the truth of experience. Instead, it is relegated to abstract universals, and therefore seduces the subject into the interpretive laziness mentioned earlier. The subject ascribes to the artwork's symbolism whatever abstract concept they believe it stands in for. As a concept so abstracted from the artwork's content, it becomes incontestable, and ends the dialogue of question and answer.

This reveals the solipsistic aspect of aesthetic consciousness, and likewise, *Erlebnis*—to give the subject complete, subjective, hermeneutic "freedom" over the artwork's content is to prevent them from asking further questions of it. Just as it is impossible to credibly disprove the validity of pure subjectivism, it is equally impossible to say that someone is wrong for believing

⁹² Gadamer, *TM*, 80.

that on first glance, a sculpture, such as Bernini's *Apollo and Daphne*, symbolizes the concept of love's transformative power. The position of its two figures, without any other knowledge of the sculpture's content, could certainly support this interpretation. But this claim, that a *concept* is being symbolized, is nothing more than an abstraction of the sculpture's content. The story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on which it is based, the life and personal history of Bernini, his source of inspiration, how much he was paid for the sculpture, for whom it was sculpted for—these aspects not only go unacknowledged through such an abstract claim, but its placation of our initial, immediate interpretation of the world takes away even the *need* to consider them. And yet, despite the attempt at ignoring these historical facets through aesthetic consciousness, they are permanently enmeshed within the artwork's ontology, and thus, its representation is forever conditioned by them, regardless of whether or not they are recognized. Moreover, because the subject in question is satisfied with thinking that a universal concept is being represented, there is no need for them to validate their assumptions. If they did, and investigated the background details, they would have discovered the story in *Metamorphoses* that informs the sculpture and seen the allusions to lust and virginity it contains. Knowledge of these allusions would take the sculpture from being the symbol of some lofty, conceptual ideal to the domain of *Erfahrung*, where experiences of lust and virginity possess actuality—things that human subjects have a more tangible knowledge of, and that give the sculpture's symbolic content an allegorical character. What this shows is that the freedom that the subject appears to gain through aesthetic consciousness is not the freedom to understand, but the freedom to *institute*. They become the arbiter of the artwork's symbolic content, dictating the nature of what is being represented, rather than submitting to the claim the artwork already makes, about both the subject and the things they have experienced over the course of their life. Due to this, the fusion of horizons that would

occur between the subject and the sculpture is not able to take place, because the play-experience that it provides the subject, through the reassessing of their prejudices, is not being performed. This is why Gadamer says that an artwork is more than "...a meaning that is experienced only in an indeterminate way... The fact that it exists, its facticity, represents an insurmountable resistance against any superior presumption that we can make sense of it all."⁹³ It is this resistance, and the subsequent need for successive encounters with an artwork, that the concept of festival makes intelligible.

III. Festival and the Historically Affected Consciousness

If we are to displace aesthetic consciousness, we must account for how an artwork manages to retain its ontological completeness throughout time, without the raising of its representation into the domain of infinite knowledge. To this end, we must examine the temporality of an artwork, in both its persistence as a completed whole of meaning, and its embeddedness within the flow of *Erfahrung*. An artwork's temporality is best defined through the character of the "festival", because the concept of festival embodies the aspects of recurrence and persistence that are integral to the nature of artworks.

The festival has a strong relation to play and *Erfahrung*, in that the unique temporality of the festival is synonymous with the demarcation of a play-space. Festivals operate within a mode of time that is distinguished from the flow of time in general, but is not removed from it completely. The event of the festival is not a part of practical, measured time, a view that regards time as a formless entity, void of meaning until we carve out a space within it and fill that space with our own plans. This use of time reflects the institution of the symbol, in which the subject

⁹³ Gadamer, *RB*, 34.

sets the goals that give time its “purpose”. In the case of the festival, a section of time has already been carved out for us, defining it as a moment that lacks purposiveness. This is not to say that the festival is not the product of human intentionality, but festival exists for no other purpose than the binding of a group for the sake of a celebration. At this point, the parallels to the play-experience are made clear. As Gadamer writes:

We speak of “enacting” a celebration...[which] removes all idea of a goal to be attained. To enact is not to set out in order subsequently to arrive somewhere, for when we enact a festival, then the festival is always there from the beginning. The temporal character of the festive celebration that we enact lies in the fact that it does not dissolve into a series of separate moments...But all of this only takes place for the sake of the festival that is being enacted...the temporal structure of the performance is [therefore] quite different from the time that simply stands at our disposal.⁹⁴

“Performance” in this case is taken to be synonymous with the presentation of play, and the denial of “separate moments” clearly indicates that the festival’s unifying nature is opposed to the concept of *Erlebnis*. With regard to performance, this is the unity of movement that the participants engage in, making the festival an act of celebration. What makes this possible, however, is the recurring nature of the time in which the celebration plays out, which distinguishes the festival from other activities that take place within the successive flow of ordinary time. The structure of the celebration retains its consistency each time it is enacted, in terms of when, where, and how the festival is to take place. This parallels the nature of a game, which can involve the same play-space, play-structure, and players each time it is played. But

⁹⁴ Gadamer, *RB*, 41.

what is unique to both the game and the festival, and what demarcates them from the ordinary flow of time, is that something new is recognized and understood through every encounter with them. No two festivals will ever play out in exactly the same manner, just as no two plays of a game will involve exactly the same set of moves and countermoves. In the unity of presentation provided by a game's play-structure, it gains the ability to repeat itself, but never with an arrangement of players and movements identical to its previous instantiation. A new instantiation of a festival is not a "different" festival from the one that came before, in the sense that an entirely new festival is set before us, nor is it the symbolic representation of an "original" celebration that happened prior to all the instantiations of it that followed.⁹⁵ To regard the festival in these ways would be to define its experience as *Erlebnis*, or more accurately, *Erlebnisse*: a series of disconnected, self-contained experiences, rather than the interconnected nature of experience expressed by *Erfahrung*. Gadamer makes this clear:

The festival changes from one time to the next, for there are always other things going on at the same time...but neither is [the festival] determined by its origin so that there was once the "real" festival...its own original essence is always to be something different (even when celebrated in exactly the same way)...[it] is temporal in a more radical sense than everything that belongs to history. It has its being only in becoming and return.⁹⁶

To become something and return again means that the thing returning is recognizable to us, and that we can recognize what it is when it returns, even if it presents itself in a slightly different way. As we established earlier, recognition is a result of *Erfahrung*, as it provides the continuity

⁹⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 123.

⁹⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 123.

of experience needed to perceive the true, actual relationships between the phenomena we encounter. Therefore, a festival such as Thanksgiving, which has a particular means of presenting itself through those who submit to this means, is not an event that becomes increasingly distanced from the first celebration of Thanksgiving with each successive celebration of it. Rather, every return of Thanksgiving is what allows Thanksgiving to present itself in a new manner, each time it returns. Between the recognition of what came before, and the confrontation of how it approaches us now, we are able to expand our understanding of that thing, relating it to what we already know as we participate in its celebration, as a present event.

This is the process of our memory of the past being brought forward into the present, “the constant interaction between our aims in the present and the past to which we still belong” that shapes our understanding of the tradition to which we, and everything around us, are bound.⁹⁷ We have seen how a historical consciousness is helpful in revealing the past’s influence on the present. But the limitation of a historical consciousness is its tendency to view history as something remote and isolated from the present. This is the historicist approach to history, which Gadamer does not believe does justice to the claims history makes on the present, because it has the character of a transposition rather than a fusion. Like aesthetic differentiation, historicism can rob the events of history of their ontological valence, which immediately prevents the subject from fusing their horizon with the tradition represented by those events. The struggle to both accept and overcome the foreignness of history is not being engaged in, because in its zeal to report historical events as objectively as possible, historicism makes no accommodation for how contemporary events are formed by prior ones.⁹⁸ As such, the historical events go under-interpreted, and the subject understands them strictly in terms of whether they sit within or

⁹⁷ Gadamer, *RB*, 49.

⁹⁸ Bourgeois, *Gadamer and Balthasar*, 76.

outside of their horizon of understanding. We can compare this approach to history with the festival. It is possible to acknowledge the festival from a distance, and come to understand it only in terms of the significance we have ascribed to it in advance. In this sense, we are not really participating in the festival; for this would mean that we present it as a play-experience through our participation, and such a distanced approach to what it represents would not make this a true participation. Rather, this approach is a transposition into the festival, because we are refusing to enter into the unique mode of time that brings the festival into being, as a recurring event. Instead, we remain on the periphery, treating the festival as an instance of novelty within the flow of time, without taking the risk of submitting to its structure, and experiencing its historical significance through participation in it. In other words, the festival is no longer regarded as the past brought into the present, but as a moment that we believe can be fully understood without actually taking part in its presentation. What Gadamer is trying to show us is how the festival encapsulates the play-experience's nature as the mediation of past and present, and how the historically effected consciousness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) keeps us from perceiving history as *Erlebnisse*, rebuffing aesthetic consciousness in the process.

The historically effected consciousness (which will be hereafter referred to as HEC) is the subject's awareness of how their interpretation of the past is fundamentally influenced by their present situation within history, and how their present situation is the product of the past.⁹⁹ This view establishes the temporality of what we have learned about prejudices: they are the result of what came before, and are therefore conditioned by these prior events. As our exploration of language revealed, our prejudices are what provide us the point of entry we need, in order to recognize an artwork's subject matter and "decode" the statement it makes. The

⁹⁹ Bourgeois, *Gadamer and Balthasar*, 75.

awareness of the past that HEC stands for is what provides us with this recognition, and situates the artwork within *Erfahrung*. Moreover, HEC also provides the insight needed to validate our prejudices. This second point is more fully understood through the concept of *lesen*. Reading what is set before us involves the use of things known to identity things unknown. *Lesen* is the gathering of past and present phenomena together, the genuine conflation of things recognized in both time periods that gives us the insight needed to assess our prejudices and achieve the understanding this assessment provides. For an artwork, it is its “contemporaneity” that makes this acquisition of knowledge possible.

“Contemporaneity” belongs to the being of the work of art. It constitutes the essence of “being present.” This is not the simultaneity of aesthetic consciousness, for that simply means that several objects of aesthetic experience (*Erlebnis*) are all held in consciousness at the same time—all indifferently, with the same claim to validity. “Contemporaneity”...means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence...Thus contemporaneity is not a mode of givenness in consciousness, but a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it.¹⁰⁰

Like the festival, interpretation is a process that demands the subject’s participation, in order for understanding to occur. Although the subject is not the one providing the festival with its true meaning, they are still responsible for providing their subjective awareness of history to the interpretive process, so that the festival’s subject matter—the reason for its happening—can be recognized. HEC allows the subject to understand the contemporaneity of what the festival presents, because the aspects of the past that inform its present situation must be recognized by

¹⁰⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 127.

the subject in some way, before the subject is able to understand it. HEC also conditions our experience of art, and allows our fusion with its horizons to occur. As the product of an artist's intentions, the ontological properties of an artwork, as parts of *Erfahrung*, have a binding quality for its subjects. The private, subjective experiences of *Erlebnisse* are no longer suitable for defining interpretation; instead, it is the historical ground of tradition that allows the audience to achieve commonality with the artwork's subject matter, and perceive the work as contemporaneous, rather than as the voiceless fossil of a bygone era.¹⁰¹ What this proves is the importance of *lesen* for the interpretive process. The act of "recollection" that *lesen* signifies is, in fact, the fusion of horizons, and is therefore a play-experience. The challenge an artwork tasks us with is to understand and question the symbolic language it uses in making a claim both about us and the world we are resigned to.

At this point, the congruence between defining *lesen*, HEC, play, symbol, and festival is unavoidable: they are all different representations of the hermeneutic process of inquiry, the infinite dialectic of question and answer ascribed to Gadamer at the beginning. But artworks, with their ontological persistency, become much more than testaments to this process. What we discover through HEC and the festival is that artworks are the physical representation of the hermeneutic circle. In them are all the parts that constitute the whole of what they have to say, a whole that can never be fully understood in its entirety. And just as language is used to understand the subject matter that concerns something else, so that we can anticipate and receive parts of that thing while staying mindful of its total essence, art challenges us with the proposal of attempting to reach that essence through the symbolic language it employs. How do we define the temporality of something like this, an entity that gives through representation, but the

¹⁰¹ Gadamer, *RB*, 40.

meaning of which can never be exhaustively known? The answer is through festival. Each encounter we have with an artwork regards the same artwork, but at a different point in our lives than the prior encounter. Thus, the play-structure and historical horizons of the artwork remain the same, but our interpretation of it will be different, given our understanding of the world that surrounds both us and the artwork. In exactly the same way as the festival, the recurrence of our contact with an artwork generates a new understanding of it. The reasons for the festival's celebration do not change, but the participants, activities, and individual moments within the celebration are entirely new. But this newness does not change the "fabric" of the festival, because the intentions that caused it to come into being have remained, and offer themselves to be recognized through the festival's presentation. Through HEC, we can distinguish between what is new and what is carried over from the past, and this consciousness is what brings the artworks of the past into our experience of the present, without denying the artwork its relation to the historical period in which it was made. That a single encounter with an artwork does not yield the full extent of its meaning is proof of its relation to the festival, and shows to what extent the hermeneutic circle is incompatible with *Erlebnis*. The meaning of an artwork is revealed in a new way with each successive encounter the subject has with it. Its significance cannot be fully gleaned through one pure, precious moment of insight, divorced from the continuity of experience, but through our active attempt to integrate the whole of *Erfahrung* with what an artwork—be it picture, text, building or sculpture—is representing to us.

Conclusion

An artwork is not interested in our opinion. Its existence is not something that cries out for us, as subjects, to provide it with the sense it lacks. It is the result of an artist's sense, and it carries within itself an intention that makes its representation understandable. In its disdain for the authority of history, aesthetic consciousness wants us to believe otherwise. By keeping aesthetic experience contained within its own, uniquely "aesthetic" domain, science is able to let its guard down. It no longer has to compete with the truth of art because we are being kept from acknowledging artworks as the bearers of truth. The aesthetic differentiation that causes us to perceive art as something outside the flow of history is what makes us feel responsible for its meaning. Under aesthetic consciousness, the challenge to view art as something that speaks to us is replaced with the challenge to view art as something that needs speaking *for*. No longer is self-understanding, as truth, the thing obtained through an encounter with an artwork. The subject-matter that binds the artwork and the subject together is overruled in favour of a strict subject-object relationship, a transposition of horizons rather than a fusion. The subject is only interested in the artwork insofar as it provides them with the novelty of something "other", and gives them the opportunity to make claims about the artwork. No effort is being made to understand what the artwork represents outside what the subject *wants* the artwork to represent. This is what Gadamer believes is what comes of aesthetic consciousness; an encounter with art becomes the equivalent of a doctor's examination or an oral exam, in the sense that the subject only wants to determine the nature of the artwork insofar as its otherness, and not be challenged to accept and recognize the self-understanding it provides the subject with.

Taking what was laid out in the previous chapter, to view the encounter with art as a festival event helps us engage in a play-experience with it. The artwork becomes for us a never-

ending wellspring. It bubbles from the same place, but no subject will ever drink all the water it has to offer, and the degree to which we are thirsty makes every experience of drinking it unique. As it nourishes us, we learn something about our relationship to the water that it provides—how it tastes to us, and how we react to being quenched by it. Every return to the same wellspring will provide a new revelation of truth, in terms of how we understand ourselves in relation to what it gives us, and the same is true of an artwork. The presentation an artwork provides is the water we drink of the wellspring, and just as the essential properties of water do not change to give us a new experience of drinking it, the presentation of an artwork is similarly bound to its ontological makeup. So long as an artwork's presentation-manifestation is able to remain intact, it will serve in the same capacity: as an eternal fountain of new understandings, that can be returned to numerous times. Just as *Erfahrung* connects all human experiences together, every encounter with an artwork is shaded by every previous encounter with it, along with all the other life experiences we have had between those encounters.

By contrast, an *Erlebnis*-centric model of understanding hermetically seals every aesthetic experience off from the rest of our experiences, keeping us from understanding their truth. Under this model, we no longer allow ourselves to be filled by the self-understanding an artwork provides. Instead, artworks are taken to be that which must be filled with meaning, and we make claims about what this meaning is on the basis of our prejudices. The result is that our prejudices remain unchallenged, limiting the size of our horizon of understanding. This is why Gadamer's aesthetic theory is so dependent upon history and play—when the subject matter of an artwork demands that we surrender our prejudices to the objective truth of history, in order to understand what the work is saying, we can employ our HEC to link the subject matter with things we recognize. This allows us to bring that which is unfamiliar closer to us, expanding our

horizon of understanding to encompass those alien entities and concepts that once lived beyond it. Through this process of understanding, art becomes an element of *Erfahrung*, and is able to have meaning for us outside of an isolated, “precious” moment that only allows our prejudices to be maintained, rather than revised. Memories, and our ability to relate what we remember to what we encounter, are what give credence to an *Erfahrung*-centric model of understanding.

Gadamer’s support of *Erfahrung* is not just to show how artworks possess continuity with us, however. In the pursuit of self-understanding through art, what is truly gained is continuity with *ourselves*.¹⁰² Our situation within the world is more clearly understood when we are tasked with understanding that which is foreign to us. This is the aspect of reality, and human experience, that method cannot account for. Whereas method attempts to dictate a particular set of rules that have a purposive outcome, art’s outcome is only that it exists. How we come to understand it is the challenge that it confronts us with. To rise to this challenge is to determine how the artwork is situated in relation to us. In doing so, the play-experience of art is fully realized, and the truth it reveals can be made known.

¹⁰² Gadamer, *TM*, 133.

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