

# Passionate living and truth-telling *techné*

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It is a commonplace among philosophers that we actualize our humanity most fully by “living a creative life,” and that creativity is the response to desire or passion. In this article, I argue that Plato’s “cave allegory,” important limitations notwithstanding, provides the paradigm for a philosophical understanding of what this means, and by extension, how this call to *be* passionately is a call to live life as a work of truth-telling *techné* (art). To demonstrate that Plato’s characterization of passionate living remains viable as a structure for understanding the artist’s task, despite his notorious dismissal of certain forms of art, I consider how Heidegger confirms and updates it via his more contemporary existential analyses of “everydayness” and “anxiety” in *Being and Time*. Importantly, however, Plato’s conception of the “truth” that we ardently seek, and desire to share through truth-telling *techné*, is open to challenge. One may justifiably disagree with his articulation of “truth” and transcendent beauty on grounds of the shift from transcendence to immanence in ontology, and the correlative shift from economy to complexity in understanding “truth.” This is where the notions of “the beautiful,” “the ugly,” and “the sublime” come into play. It is disagreements concerning the nature of the ultimate object of human passion that fuel disagreements concerning the truth to be told in truth-telling *techné* and, arguably, the kind of *techné* most suited to this task. Yet there is widespread agreement concerning the perspicacity of Plato’s distinction between “truth-telling” *techné* and the mere imitation of what already exists. This distinction is used here to round out the above account of what it means to live a creative life by contrasting such a life with its opposite, which one may call “kitsch.”

**Key words:** Passion, Plato’s “cave allegory,” truth-telling *techné*, Heidegger, imitation, kitsch.

## Hartstogtelike lewe en waarheidsgeoriënteerde *techné*

Filosowe aanvaar geredelik dat mense hul menslikheid optimaal aktualiseer deur ’n “kreatiewe lewe te lei,” en dat kreatiwiteit die antwoord is op begeerte of passie. In hierdie artikel argumenteer ek dat Plato se “grot-allegorie,” in weerwil van belangrike beperkinge, die paradigma voorsien vir ’n filosofiese verstaan van bogenoemde stelling, en verder verduidelik in watter sin hierdie oproep om hartstogtelik te *wees*, neerkom op ’n uitnodiging om ’n mens se lewe as ’n waarheidsgeoriënteerde *techné* (kunswerk) te leef. Ten einde te demonstreer dat Plato se karakterisering van hartstogtelike lewe, ten spyte van sy berugte verwerping van sekere kunsvorms, geskik is as ’n struktuur om die kunstenaar se taak te begryp, word aangetoon hoe Heidegger dit bevestig en opdateer aan die hand van sy meer tydg-enoodlike, eksistensiële analises van “alledaagsheid” en “angs” in *Sein und Zeit*. Dit is egter belangrik om daarop te let dat Plato se opvatting van die “waarheid” wat ons so naartiglik soek, en begeer om via waarheidsgeoriënteerde *techné* in te deel, aanvegbaar is. ’n Mens kan tereg van hom verskil ten opsigte van sy formulering van “waarheid” en transendente skoonheid op grond van die ontologiese verskuiwing vanaf transendensie na immanensie, asook die korrelatiewe verskuiwing van ekonomie na kompleksiteit in die begrip van waarheid. Dit is hier waar die begrippe van “die skone,” “die lelike,” en die “sublieme” op die spel geplaas word. Meningsverskille ten opsigte van die waarheid wat betrokke is by waarheidsgeoriënteerde *techné* – die geskikste soort *techné* vir die taak van waarheidsbevordering – word gevoed deur meningsverskille oor die aard van die hoogste voorwerp van menslike passie. En tog is daar breë instemming oor die skerpsinnigheid van Plato se onderskeid tussen waarheidsgeoriënteerde *techné*, en die blote nabootsing van wat reeds bestaan. Genoemde onderskeid word hier benut om bogenoemde weergawe van die betekenis van ’n kreatiewe lewe af to rond deur ’n sodanige lewe met die teendeel daarvan, wat as “kitsch” beskryf kan word, te kontrasteer.

**Slutelwoorde:** Passie, Plato se “grot-allegorie,” waarheidsgeoriënteerde *techné*, Heidegger, nabootsing, kitsch

In the well-known “cave allegory” of the *Republic*, Plato (1892d: 214-217) describes life in the cave (a metaphor for the state of ignorance that characterizes the ordinary phenomenal experience of day to day living), in a way that is uncannily reminiscent of today’s movie theatres (Olivier 2002: viii). It is as if from birth we exist in a cave, bound so that our gaze is fixed on the back wall. Behind us the lighted cave mouth, enhanced by a large fire, functions as a “projector” that causes our shadows to be cast upon the wall’s surface. Adding the “film strip,” Plato imagines a parapet behind us, complete with moving figures that also cast shadows on the wall by blocking the fire’s light, and an echoing, synchronized “surround sound” whose source we attribute to the shadows. For the most part, the prisoners in the cave believe this shadow-world to be their true reality.

According to Plato's (1892: 215) allegory, a person's intellectual journey towards wisdom is the consequence of a forced liberation from the sway of the shadow-world, by one who has returned from a vision of the Real beyond the cave. Such an instructor initiates in others an awareness of their lack, or that is, a state of anxiety associated with a traumatic awakening to the ontological inferiority of the finite shadow world of "what appears" in ordinary life. This awareness of lack, in turn generates a passion for fulfilment, for the sake of which they, too, undertake the painful journey towards wisdom. In the Platonic version of "nihilism," the ascent out of the cave represents the slow process of intellectual disillusionment, whereby, step by step, the pseudo-foundations and securities of the actual world of our experience are negated as illusory and false. Nihilism in this sense is not purely negative – it is the negation of the current state of affairs for the sake of a better dispensation. Lyotard (1992: 9), for example, links nihilism to "a shattering of belief... a discovery of the *lack of reality* in reality – a discovery linked to the invention of other realities." First pointing out the real figures that are the source of the shadows, the instructor thus leads the apprentice gradually up the arduous ascent out of the cave towards the final goal; namely an intellectual apprehension of the "truly Real." Because the journey is arduous, it defeats all but those genuinely motivated by a passion for wisdom, or truth.

For Plato, wisdom, the ultimate object of human passion, involves the recollection of an original, unearthly vision of beauty that transcends ordinary human capacities, and against which all earthly objects (things, pleasures and aims) pale into insignificance. In terms of the cave allegory, we can at best characterize such shining illumination as a vision of the sun outside the cave, which itself is a mere representation of the associated intellectual intuition of "the universal author of all things beautiful and right, parent of light and of the lord of light in this visible world, and the immediate source of reason and truth in the intellectual" (Plato 1892d: 217; 1892a: 453). In the light of this intuition, everything previously called knowledge here on earth is uncovered as mere illusion: if I once thought I knew, now I only know how little I know (Plato 1892c: 113).

Wisdom, therefore, implies an intellectual awakening to the proper order of the universe, which, in turn, guides the existential "way of the soul" by indicating how a soul should comport itself during its earthly sojourn and beyond this (Plato 1892d: 218). According to the composite figure developed by Socrates in his second speech in the *Phaedrus*, Plato (1892a: 452-454) explains the proper order of the universe as follows. Beyond the arch of the heavens there is "shining illumination," a mere name for the timeless Being that really is. Perceived only by intellect, it is the object of true knowledge. In the heavens, the highest of living beings, the immortal gods, make regular, cyclical journeys (in winged-chariots) to the apex of the arch, where they may contemplate this "shining illumination," for the duration of one revolution. The gods are accompanied on their journeys by a "comet's tail" of lesser souls; for all those who care for their own good, cherish the opportunity to observe what is, and are nourished and happy while studying the truth. This nourishing contemplation is the supreme goal, the desire for which motivates all living souls. Unlike the gods, who are equipped with perfect horses, these charioteers are hindered by unevenly matched pairs. Struggling to balance a light, spirited horse, uplifted by higher spiritual desires, with a dark, heavy horse burdened with base desires, the weakest souls easily break their wings and fall to earth without illumination (they do not become human). Others manage momentary glimpses of the shining illumination before they too break their wings and fall to earth. The extent to which these souls were nourished by illumination accounts for differing talents in embodied human souls. While all souls are immortal, for Plato (1892a: 456), only the gods persistently escape the fall into the recurring life and death cycles of bodily mortality.

For Plato (1892a: 455), notably, in contrast with the absolute timelessness of shining illumination, life (immortal or mortal) is thoroughly temporal, involving an endless and intricate pattern of cycles, cycles within cycles, and re-cycling. Even the gods are constantly on the move (Plato 1892a: 453-454). The only respite from the otherwise ceaseless temporal movement of living comes from contemplation of the timeless, shining illumination. However, this is but a temporary, nourishing rest (the sleep-cycle of the universe). Pure Being, as plenitude, is withdrawn insofar as there is life (time) at all. One could say that life emerges in the original difference between Being and time. Plato differentiates, further, between the temporal endurance that characterizes the endless repetition as the same in the cyclical movement of the gods, and the paradoxical self-repetition through procreation that belongs to the temporality of mortals.

If pure shining illumination is associated with truth and beauty, at the opposite end of the scale, the Earth, as correlate of the cave, is a place of falsity and ugliness. According to Plato, souls fall from the one (shining illumination) to the many (the earthly manifold); from Being to time, the spiritual to the material, abstract to concrete, light to dark, beauty to ugliness, truth to falsity, good to evil, and so on. In fact, he (1892a: 457) insists that we are marred “by that living tomb which we carry about, now that we are imprisoned in the body like an oyster in its shell.” But all is not entirely lost in the fall to Earth, for locked in the depths of the soul lies a memory of what our souls saw when they were travelling with the gods. The Earth becomes the place of struggle and testing, where this memory may fade in certain souls and due to their ignorance of it, such souls may be corrupted further (Plato 1892a: 456). Notably, neither the gods nor the ignorant desire wisdom: the gods are wise, and the ignorant have forgotten that they have forgotten the shining illumination, and do not suffer its lack, unless awakened somehow from the fascination of the shadow-world. Alternatively, those for whom this memory has been unlocked by the arduous intellectual journey out of the cave experience a yearning for the joy of re-acquaintance with the beautiful shining good (in Lacanian terms, this describes a yearning for the impossible, namely, *jouissance*). Plato (1892a: 456) calls such yearning the highest kind of human love and describes it as characteristic of “him who, when he sees the beauty of earth, is transported with the recollection of the true beauty, he would like to fly away, but he cannot, he is like a bird fluttering and looking upward and careless of the world below.” It is the strength of this love of wisdom that breaks the shackles of the everyday and stimulates the soul’s wings to re-grow. Understood in terms of love, this journey is described in the *Symposium* as a step by step movement from earthly to heavenly delights. In Plato’s (1892b: 581-2) words:

And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty, using these as steps only, and from one going on to two, and from two, to all fair forms, and from fair forms, to fair practices, and from fair practices to fair notions, until from fair notions he arrives at the notion of absolute beauty, and at last knows what the essence of beauty is.

It is one thing to understand the true path of the soul intellectually, but quite another to put this knowledge into practice. Yet, the test of true knowledge is in the doing. Upon returning to the cave, then, the sojourner must now match the intellectual journey with a life lived as an existential journey along the true path of the soul, which involves a *techné* (practice or art) of living. The Greek term *techné* denotes “art” as such, and gathers together a wide spectrum of meanings from “art” as it is ordinarily understood to “skill,” and it therefore includes the skill of self-edification (Murdoch 1977: 1). The best practical recourse for fallen souls, according to Plato, is to enter into a retrieving gathering-together, from out of the manifold “imagery” into which they have fallen, which aims to restore or remake them in conformity with the true order of the universe. The first task of *techné*, then, is to restore beauty to our souls as far as we can in this fallen state, which prepares the way for leaving the worldly altogether. The love of beauty that motivates this *techné*, accordingly, does not inspire the desire to have things (e.g.

a beloved) but to create or give birth to a beautiful soul. Here, Plato (1892a: 460-461; 1892d: 219) counsels a severe restriction of the so-called baser desires (not only desires related to the body and to appetite, but also desires related to opinion – honour, glory, success, piety in the eyes of the community) in order to liberate the higher passions, and ultimately the desire for wisdom.

This places the lover of wisdom in a position of risk concerning the second task of *techné*, namely truth-telling. According to Plato's cave allegory, individuals are liberated from bondage, not by their own efforts, but by instructors from among those who have seen the sun and obeyed the injunction to return to the cave. Speaking of these souls, Plato (1892d:220) insists: "each of you, when his turn comes, must go down to the general underground abode, and get the habit of seeing in the dark." The lover, for good or ill, is the one who liberates the soul of another from its bondage in the cave by enchanting or attracting the "higher" part of the soul through the kind of truth-telling *techné* that perplexes and arouses curiosity (Plato 1892a: 480). In response to the lack that perplexity implies, love is awakened, and the soul becomes open to persuasion, to being attracted, and to being seduced into giving up the false pleasures that charm the baser part of the soul. Truth-telling *techné* as seduction is never a matter of packaging the truth to sell to others, but of inspiring them to seek it out for themselves and inducing them to create a beautiful soul within. Yet there is always a dual risk (to both teacher and student, seducer and seduced) to apply philosophy as a "pharmakon" for broken wings (Derrida 1981: 133). A creative life requires a self-overcoming that includes the emancipation of desire from convention (combined, of course, with the tutelage of moderation). This first task of *techné* is associated with a kind of divine madness that one may define in more prosaic terms as "unconventionality." In fact it is precisely this freedom from law and convention combined with passion that may enable a soul to climb to the peaks of wisdom. Yet, because the lover of wisdom rises above the petty busyness of the rest, because this soul "forgets earthly interests and is rapt in the divine, the vulgar deem him mad, and rebuke him; they do not see that he is inspired" (Plato: 1892: 456). The lover of wisdom, then, risks being misunderstood and becoming the victim of the blind ire of the ignorant.

Socrates' *techné* is the sting of the gadfly in the form of philosophical dialectics (Plato 1892c: 124). In Derrida's (1981: 133) terms, it is a "pharmakon" (both poison and cure) in the sense that its effect of engendering perplexity and arousing curiosity is both paralysing and liberating. Perplexity involves the paralysis of aporetic confusion, but it is also the liberating stimulus to move (to grow, develop – that is, to honour the proper order of the living), for it arouses curiosity and desire to "find out"/sort things out, to articulate/synthesise/unify. Again, Socrates' kind of truth-telling *techné* is a means of liberation. Yet it also risks a kind of moral paralysis in an un-ready soul. It is the loosening of the grip of a handed-down tradition (opinion that has not been reflected upon), in order to enable reflective movement (growth/life), but it is also the loosening of the grip of powerful moral constraints (that which is true in opinion – albeit not yet reasoned belief), and undirected, uneducated soul can lose its way/go awry. All truth-telling *techné*, then, which is a matter of interference, can do harm as well as good.

To sum up so far, according to Plato's allegory passionate living is initiated by an intellectual journey out of the cave towards a wisdom or "truth" beyond its confines (defined as an intellectual understanding of the proper order of the universe and, accordingly of the "true path of the soul"). This intellectual journey must be echoed in practice, upon returning to the cave, through an existential journey along the true path of the soul, where one attempts to recollect, restore, or remake one's own fallen soul in conformity with the true order. Generally speaking Plato's point that living a fully human life demands a *techné* (art) that directs our souls towards the "truth" is not especially contentious and has since been adopted by many

philosophers, including Heidegger. It is also not contentious that this lover of wisdom carries the burden and the risk of conveying this “truth” to others through some form of truth-telling *techné*, which inspires them to embark on these journeys for themselves. What does remain contentious, however, is Plato’s conception of the sought after “truth” that is to be told via truth-telling *techné*, as well as his adjudication among the various forms of *techné* on its basis. These issues have become contentious because so much has changed in ontological thinking between Plato and Heidegger. Specifically, the shift from transcendence to immanence in ontology, and the correlative shift from economy to complexity in understanding “truth” make it impossible to harmonize their insights in most respects.

I shall touch upon how these changes are at the root of striking disagreements between Plato and thinkers such as Heidegger, below. First, however, I aim to show that Plato’s characterization of passionate living remains viable as a structure for understanding the artist’s task, despite his notorious dismissal of certain forms of art, since the vast difference in ontological outlook does not nullify the structural analogy between passionate living as Plato sees it and Heidegger’s (1962: 149-241) more contemporary existential analyses of “everydayness” and “anxiety” in *Being and Time*, where he argues that passionate living is a matter of resisting the inertial tendency of “the they” to rest content with the shadow world of everyday superficialities, and to seek a higher “truth” beyond these, captured in the aphorism “become who you are.” For both thinkers, despite their differences, it remains that being passionate involves the following: firstly, the intellectual journey towards the truth (that is, the anxiety of traumatic awakening, disillusionment or negation, and the passion for wisdom); secondly, upon finding the “truth,” the existential journey in which life’s task is to remake the soul and/or its world accordingly through creative, restorative *techné*; and finally, the task of seducing others through truth-telling *techné*.

### **Heidegger on the passionate act**

In our essentially passionless, day-to-day living amidst the cave-dwelling “they” (Heidegger’s shorthand for the intersubjective domain), we remain comfortably buoyed by the supportive medium of common sense, communal experience and shared understanding, which allows us to feel complacently “at home” in our world. Yet, he (1962: 234) emphasises that “*the more primordial phenomenon*” is the antithesis of such “average everydayness,” namely, the discomfort of the “not-at-home.” In agreement with Plato, then, he insists that a state of comfortable, passionless complacency does not express what it means to be fully human. Rather, human being (in its verb sense) is essentially a structure of “care,” synonyms for which are “love” and “passion” and, in psychoanalytical terms, “drive.”

In his justly famous analysis of anxiety, he explains that the existential structures of “average everydayness,” namely, idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity, exhibit the structure of “falling”; a “*downward plunge*’... into the groundlessness and nullity of inauthentic everydayness.” However, for Heidegger, given the ontological shift in philosophical thinking from transcendence to immanence (discussed below), this “downward plunge” is not analogous to the Platonic fall described in the *Phaedrus* (1892b: 454), where broken-winged souls plummet to an earthly imprisonment. Nor is it analogous to the biblical fall from Paradise, for that matter. It is not as if we were ever a different (purer, spiritual) kind of being, who fell from grace to a corrupt state of human physicality, from which we may potentially save ourselves through cultural advances (Heidegger 1962: 220; 223-4). Rather, Heidegger (1962: 210; 219; 223-5) describes “falling” as the permanent drift intrinsic to an essentially embodied human being towards the

state of “average everydayness,” described as an inertial tendency to rest content with everyday superficialities.

Yet, even if falling remains unavoidable, Heidegger argues that “average everydayness” is a privative term: all of its existential structures are manifest forms of “escapism.” Moreover, such escapism is a matter of turning away from our own selves (Heidegger 1962: 227-9). But what in our deepest recesses do we strive to repress by busying ourselves with the ordinary concerns of day-to-day living? According to Heidegger, we try to escape the anxiety (angst or “dread”) engendered by a traumatic confrontation with the true groundlessness of our own existence. Notably, we are marked as human by our unique capacity to experience such anxiety; but it is not a matter of volition. Instead, dread is a mood that overtakes an individual without warning, and cannot be dispelled at will. In a moment of anxiety, everyday familiarity collapses and one is overtaken by a sense of uncanniness, of “not-being-at-home” in our cave (Heidegger, 1962: 233-4). Thus, he (1962: 234) argues: “When in falling we flee *into* the ‘at-home’ of publicness, we flee *in the face of* the ‘not-at-home’; that is, we flee in the face of the uncanniness which lies in Dasein... this uncanniness pursues Dasein constantly, and is a threat to its everyday lostness in the ‘they.’”

This discomfiting collapse of familiarity threatens us because it discloses the essentially artificial process (textual in the broadest sense – including linguistic, visual, and auditory *techné*) through which we constitute our shadow-world. Carried along in signifiers all “text” presupposes an underlying “Symbolic Order”; a conceptual framework, “necessary fiction,” or set of stereotypes (Žižek, 2002: 57-8). This pre-formed understanding which has already been “deposited” in language, tacitly directs the basic way we understand the world and our responses to it. As soon as we express ourselves in signifying media we are, Heidegger (1962: 211) argues, “delivered over to this interpretedness, which controls and distributes the possibilities of average understanding and of the state-of-mind belonging to it.”

In anxiety, then, confronting the necessarily artificial nature of “what is,” individuals face the disillusioning fact that our fabrications have no absolute, transcendental ground that would certify or secure them as eternally valid. As Derrida (1978: 279), remarks, every time we think we have established such a transcendental ground, the passage of time demonstrates otherwise. The fact that the transcendental ground has a history suggests that human existence has no pre-given grounding “centre.” This does not mean that it is absolutely groundless, but that the responsibility for finding intrinsic grounds lies with us. When anxiety comes upon us, then, it forces us to face the equivalent of the journey out of the cave; namely, the lonely, alienating and disconcerting “existential solipsism” associated with the discovery that our projects are sustained by none other than ourselves (Heidegger 1962: 233). But Heidegger by no means wishes to suggest that anxiety essentially casts each individual adrift (although this may occur contingently in pathological cases), for clearly we cannot thrive in a permanent state of dread. Rather, as essentially self-annulling, the discomfort of dread calls one (elicits the passion) to reconfigure the world in a way that restores equilibrium. The passion that motivates *techné*, then, still manifests as a desire to restore the truly Real. Once anxiety has struck, however, this necessary reconfiguration can no longer be attempted with innocence or naiveté, for it is now accompanied by the insight that each individual is free to choose a singular path towards this end, and is correlatively obliged to face the weight and challenge (the trepidation and excitement) of personal responsibility for thoughtful, creative action. Such action, moreover, is not a matter of inventing something out of nothing; at best one enters into questioning dialogue with one another about existing deposits, with the aim of revivification, which is also to open them to the risk of revision or modification (Heidegger 1962: 211-212). In other words, *techné* works in opposition to the sway of the shadow-world, but can never simply escape it altogether:

“In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed” (Heidegger 1962: 213). Creative action brings something “lost” back to life in understanding, defends its truth value, makes it intelligible to others, and enables interlocutors to intervene by discarding or modifying insights when necessary.

Heidegger’s analyses imply that artistic endeavour is a necessary response to the existential anxiety engendered by a fundamentally traumatic human condition. In agreement with Plato on this point, he argues that we only actualize the full potential of our humanity when we realize our power of “truth-telling” *techné*; for we are marked as successful humans by our capacity to respond creatively to the threat posed by anxiety, instead of disappearing, through the comfortable escape hatch of average everydayness, into the massive, screen-gazing thong of brain-dead automata. The creative task of life itself consists in mounting a resistance to the inertial pull of the cave-dwellers by means of a truth-telling *techné*, of which creating artworks traditionally understood would be just one manifestation.

### **A complex truth: “the beautiful,” “the ugly,” and “the sublime”**

The parallel between the Platonic and the Heideggerian accounts of what it means to actualize our humanity by “living a creative life” suggests that any disagreement between these thinkers concerns not the call to *be* passionately and the articulation of its process, but the nature of the “truth beyond” that is the ultimate object of human passion. To negotiate this terrain, one must take account of the two abovementioned shifts in fundamental ontology that have occurred in the interim between Plato and Heidegger. Firstly, there has been a shift from transcendence to immanence (paradoxically) in understanding the notion of a “beyond.” Plato believes that the material, shadow world is actually mere appearance (a false illusion), beyond which lies a transcendent, truly Real world of non-material, or intellectual entities. After Kant’s “transcendental turn,” however, what Lyotard (1992: 12) calls “the incommensurability between reality and concept,” no longer takes the Platonic form of the incommensurability between a material world that is mere appearance and a transcendent, truly Real that embodied mortals can never experience. Rather, with Kant (1933: 390-392) this incommensurability occurs between our real, but limited, experience of phenomenal reality, which is always incomplete, and the thought or Idea (produced by pure reason) of this same phenomenal reality taken as it “truly” is; that is, as a complete whole. This whole is impossible to imagine, let alone experience, because it produces the paradoxes of a “finite infinite” (the world has a beginning-point), or an “infinite entity” (the world has no beginning-point). In Kant’s terms these two impossibilities form either side of an antinomy, since reason has no good grounds for dismissing one rational notion or Idea of the world-whole and promoting the other.

If Kant thought that this antinomy was resolvable, later thinkers insist that it is not. Derrida (1993: 16), in fact, prefers the term “aporia” (impasse) for this state of affairs. In this case, the falsity associated with the shadow world involves an illusion radically different from the Platonic. In Heideggerian terms, it is the illusion of unreflective existence (existing as swept along in the flow of events where the aporia one faces if asked to choose between these opposing rational Ideas of the “truly” Real is not acknowledged and one version of the truly Real (usually the first, which names the world-whole as a totality) is indeed tacitly promoted as an ideal above the other. By contrast, thinkers such as Heidegger insist that the “truly Real,” indeed names the world as it “truly” is: paradoxical. It names an aporetic complexity that is “lost” in the stolid course of everyday life, and whose restoration should be desired and actively brought about through truth-telling *techné*. Here, then, “beyond” the shadow world lies not a transcendent true

Reality of abstract entities, but the truth of immanent complexity, acknowledged by genuinely reflective concrete existence. In this case, the very same material existence is undergone reflectively, consciously and, importantly, decisively (precisely due to its undecidability), such that existence becomes a choice. In short, following Heidegger, poststructuralist thinkers such as Derrida and Lacan accept that the ultimate object of human passion cannot be conceived of as a transcendent Real. But, they add, what lies “beyond” possible experience, the so-called “truly” Real, is a complexity that is necessarily misrecognized (misconstrued) in the construction of coherent “economic” experience. Accordingly, the truly Real that ordinary experience can never match, must be understood in terms of the paradoxical linkage between the ideas (in fact, fundamental delusions) of wholeness, produced not by reason, but by desire.

Like all interesting philosophical concepts, then, the idea of “wholeness” is irreducibly complex. It gathers together three different articulations of the whole, associated respectively with the notions of “the beautiful,” “the ugly,” and “the sublime,” which may be described in terms of the differences between a closed or complicated system, a non-systematic freeplay, and an open-ended complex system (See Cilliers 1998: 3-5). The first two of these conceptions correlate with Plato’s definitions of “the beautiful” (associated with harmonious, rational, cosmic order) and its binary opposite, “the ugly,” which excites precisely because it offends beauty. Plato, for example, deplors the ugly offensiveness of laughter, which, unlike the beatific or amused smile, “is undignified, explosive, something violent and extreme” (Murdoch 1977: 73). Such laughter, then, offends beauty since it has no logos. As Murdoch (1977: 74) notes: “We laugh wildly without knowing quite why (lack of self-knowledge) at situations and absurd jokes which resist analysis.” Plato, then, understands the ultimate object of our passion (the truly Real) to be the pure form of beauty, articulated with truth, purity and goodness, which describes and unchanging ordered cosmos or closed system. Correspondingly, he dismisses the ugly (construed as the disorderly chaos of a non-systematic freeplay) as a privative falling away from the Real.

Suspicious of this configuration, thinkers could swing in the opposite direction, insisting instead that the truth of the Real lies in its ugliness (its ultimate absurdity). In this case, the actual, phenomenal world of human experience becomes the erection of beautiful facades that disguise the truth of its decadence. Although Nietzsche’s (1974: 123-4; §60) contrast between the beauty of a sailboat seen at a distance and the ugly truth (the petty cacophony on board) immediately springs to mind, many thinkers through the ages have similarly separated truth from morality and beauty, arguing instead that both form mere façades that veil the truly Real; namely, a state of unspeakable chaos or absurdity. Representing a significant axiological difference, beauty here loses its intimate connection with truth and moral goodness and picks up more pejorative connotations of superficiality and tyranny. Similarly, ugliness loses its entirely pejorative connection with falsity and wickedness and picks up connotations of freedom and anti-authoritarianism. As Murdoch (1977: 73-74) remarks: “Of course there is a bad absurd (degrading, hurtful), but is there not also a good absurd? Loss of dignity need not be loss of moral stature, can be surrender of vanity, discovery of humility; and a sense of the ludicrous is a defence against pretensions, not least in art.” Like its opposing Platonic conception, however, this representation of the “truly Real” as pure ugliness, while not exactly false, is narrowly one-sided.

Both understandings of the truly Real in terms of ultimate beauty (cosmos) or ultimate ugliness (chaos) are sublime in what Lyotard describes as the Modernist, or Kantian, sense. This might initially sound strange, since Kant contrasts the feeling of the beautiful with that of the sublime. But these feeling-states should be distinguished from both “the beautiful” and “the sublime” thought of as Ideas of reason or ultimate, albeit impossible, objects of desire. Lyotard



(1992: 10) describes the feeling of the beautiful as the pleasure experienced when there is “an accord between the capacity to conceive and the capacity to present an object corresponding to the concept.” But absolute beauty, as an object of desire, remains beyond our capacity to present it as an imaginable object, and our feeling in relation to this Idea, therefore, must instead be a feeling of the sublime. According to Lyotard (1992: 10-11), the feeling of the sublime

occurs when the imagination in fact fails to present any object that could accord with a concept, even if only in principle. We have the Idea of the world (the totality of what is), but not the capacity to show an example of it. We have the Idea of the simple (the nondecomposable), but we cannot illustrate it by a sensible object that would be a case of it. We can conceive of the absolutely great, the absolutely powerful, but any presentation of an object – which would be intended to ‘display’ that absolute greatness or absolute power – appears sadly lacking to us. These Ideas, for which there is no possible presentation and which therefore provide no knowledge of reality (experience), also prohibit the free accord of the faculties that produces the feeling of the beautiful.

This conception of the unrepresentable sublimity of the beautiful and the ugly implies that the truth-telling task of *techné* is to present the unrepresentable negatively. That is, the artist’s task cannot be to present an imagined version of what the truly Real is, but to demonstrate that the present state of affairs can never match the unrepresentable ideal of what it should be. This, as Lyotard (1992: 12) notes, “the avant-gardes continually expose the artifices of presentation that allow thought to be enslaved by the gaze and diverted from the unrepresentable.” Yet, this modernist sublime, he (1992: 13) adds, harbours “a nostalgia for presence.” Its accent falls “on the inadequacy of the faculty of presentation, on the nostalgia for presence experienced by the human subject and the obscure and futile will that animates it in spite of everything.” This concurs, interestingly, with the point taken from Lacanian psychoanalytic theory that we may acknowledge consciously or intellectually that the ultimate object of our passion is an impossibility, but the unconscious drive towards it persists nevertheless. Taking a cue from post-structuralist thinkers in general, I favour the stance that acknowledges the sublime status of the “truly Real,” not in the sense that it transcends our limited powers of representation, but in the sense that it cannot in principle “let itself be made present” (Lyotard 1992: 13), regardless of the extent of our powers. The idea of the whole itself is unrepresentable because its conception involves an insuperable paradox; an undecidable vacillation between the beautiful and the ugly. It is therefore accessible as paradox, which simultaneously renders it ineffable. Such thinkers, then, insist upon the impossibility of arbitration concerning competing conceptions of the Real, and name the Real “traumatic” or “sublime” in the sense that it remains a paradoxical combination of incommensurate qualities. This understanding of “the sublime” describes what Lyotard calls “the postmodern sublime.”

### **Truth-telling *techné***

Given the complexity of the notion of wholeness that characterizes the ultimate object of human passion, it is hardly surprising that irresolvable disagreements arise concerning the truth to be told in truth-telling *techné*, and, arguably, the kind of *techné* most suited to this task. In light of his account of the “true” order of the universe, which likens the material world to a dark prison for fallen souls, it may not be so remarkable that Plato, even though he beheld some of the finest artworks in history, so harshly condemns the plastic arts as the decadent product of an irrational, morally dubious sensibility. As Iris Murdoch (1977: 5) remarks, Plato insists that painters and poets, “exhibit the lowest and most irrational kind of awareness, *eikasia*, a state of vague image-ridden illusion.” Invoking the “cave allegory,” she adds, “this is the condition of the prisoners who face the back wall and see only shadows cast by the fire.” By contrast, for him, the highest human artists are philosophers, whose “truth-telling” *techné* (philosophical

dialectic) gives birth to invisible “insight” or intellectual “visions” of the Forms and directs our souls towards the “truth.”

While Plato is not hostile to “the arts” as such, he does distinguish between its superior and inferior kinds on the basis of his metaphysics. His hostility towards certain kinds of *techné*, then, is at least partly due to his insistence that they produce impure material imitations of the pure, abstract Forms, and that such degraded copies can never direct the soul towards the truth, but always keep it imprisoned in the cave. Because of its materiality, then, a medium such as painting serves to deflect the soul from the proper path that moves upwards from material appearance to immaterial Reality. On this account, painting, for example, panders to the corrupt soul who “does not easily rise out of this world to the sight of true beauty in the other; he looks only at her earthly namesake, and instead of being awed at the sight of her, he is given over to pleasure, and like a brutish beast he rushes on to enjoy and beget” (Plato 1892a: 457). On these grounds, Plato favours non-material word-art above painting and the plastic arts as a purer form of *techné*. Yet poetry also fares badly in his estimation because it works its magic by means of worldly imagery rather than abstract concepts and arguments. Plato therefore disdains the works produced by the likes of painters and sophisticated poets; for they serve no purpose but imitation of the “real art” produced by philosophical discourse.

These mimetic pseudo-artists, in his view, offer superficial imitations of imperfect real-world subjects from a single viewpoint, losing nearly everything of the Form in the process (Plato 1892a: 311). They can do so quite successfully, moreover, without understanding their subjects or acquiring the practical skill to craft them (Plato 1892a: 311-313; 315). Thus, a technically masterful imitation can masquerade as an authoritative account of a subject’s essential nature. The “creator of mere appearances,” he (1892a: 308-9) remarks sarcastically, presumes to play god: “this is he who is able to make not only vessels of every kind, but plants and animals, himself and all other things – the earth and heaven, and the things which are in heaven or under the earth; he makes the gods also.” Seduced by the facile satisfaction of superficialities the innocents who contemplate such artwork take it to embody the beautiful itself, and, having supposedly found beauty, they search no further. In saving the soul the trials of the ascent to the true *techné*, which engenders wisdom if practiced well, such mimetic pseudo-art becomes the source of spiritual corruption, since it deflects the soul from the quest for beauty and thereby deactivates the passion for genuine edification (Plato 1892a: 320-322). Such fake authority is troubling enough, Plato argues, when artists restrict themselves to crude efforts to reduplicate beauty by imitating simple, good things, for here they elevate the particular, rendering it attractive, and, therefore all the more difficult to turn away from. But when they place the pseudo-authority of their art behind the bad or ugly -- which is always much easier to do because the complex, various, entertaining, and extreme, represents a cornucopia of cheap thrills -- then, as Murdoch (1977: 6) puts it, he insists that “art both expresses and gratifies the lowest part of the soul, and feeds and enlivens base emotions which ought to be left to wither.”

This is hardly fair criticism. Good painters and writers, as Murdoch (1977: 7) puts it, “are not just copyists or even illusionists, but through some deeper vision of their subject-matter they become privileged truth-tellers.” Again, as Canaday (cited in Harries 1968: 79) remarks, some artworks are “not only a representation of reality but a revelation of it.” Perhaps recognising this, Plato is not consistently so harsh in his estimation of worldly *techné*. He does in fact grant the edifying value of wholesome, harmonious, simplicity in certain “inferior” kinds of visible-world *techné* (poetry, music, architecture, furniture, and so on). In a well-known example, he (1892a: 308-311) insists that the most skilled carpenter at best makes a particular bed that is an imperfect copy of its true Form. Yet the harmony and simplicity that characterizes a well-constructed bed can serve to introduce individuals to the notion of beauty, and encourage

them to seek ever higher forms of beauty. Moreover, he is obliged to grant that such *techné* as poetry can direct the soul towards truth if it points towards something beyond itself and inspires thinking, if only in order to defend his own copious use of poetic imagery.

In the *Phaedrus*, for example, he (1892a: 447; 451; 474) grants that philosophical humanity in search of self-knowledge is aided by myth/metaphor, and, with the caveat that poetic imagery functions as both true and false, allows Socrates to turn to the Muses for inspiration, placing him, like the poet, in the hands of a sacred or divine other who speaks through him. In effect, he here grants that the fruitful poetic imagery in myths and tales, such as that of the winged-souls summarized above, may point to the truth that the proper “way of the soul” is directed by the hierarchical order of the universe. He insists only that we must (despite the difficulty) “see” or recall something more original *through* the resemblances, by considering their application to more abstract and universal relationships in reality. As Allan Bloom (1991: 398) notes, for Plato, philosophers should use poetic images in the way that geometers use circles drawn in the sand – to elicit an understanding beyond the particular representation. It would be difficult not to apply the same kind of arguments to the plastic arts. This is not to deny that the danger of poetry and painting lies in the forgetting that images are merely charms that should move us to think. One hears similar worries concerning the fascinating pull of spectacle in contemporary terms. Nevertheless, fascination with the material, particular image for its own sake might be a danger associated with the plastic arts, but Plato does implicitly grant here that it is not essential to its production, and that the “downward” pull of the material particulars can be overcome.

This suggests that it is not precisely or only the materiality of painting and poetry that seems to trouble Plato, but something in addition to this. This additional trouble is revealed in his consideration of the proper way of the soul in its quest for immortality. Part of his criticism of painters and poets concerns what he sees as the attempt in their very practice to subvert the proper order of the universe. In the *Symposium*, he (1892b: 578) explains that the word recollection implies that knowledge is fleeting since we inevitably forget things. In his view, however, knowledge “is renewed and preserved by recollection, and appears to be the same although in reality new, according to that law of succession by which all mortal things are preserved, not absolutely the same, but by substitution, the old worn-out mortality leaving another new and similar existence behind.” Mortal nature seeks as far as possible to be immortal, but it is only by the above-described means of “procreation” that a mortal thing participates in immortality. There are many examples: I repeat myself as the same differently in the sense that I remain the same person even though I repeat myself differently physically as I grow older; humanity reproduces itself as a type, in spite of individual differences; or I produce off-spring either physically or spiritually in the sense of creative ideas that are developed in conversations and passed on to be elaborated in other conversations.

Certain forms of *techné*, according to Plato, do not obey this dynamic of re-production (replacing the old by the new, by another like itself) but simply repeat what has already been made manifest in the past in the dead mode of imitation. In relation to such *techné*, a soul is not moved to “recollect” in the living, developmental mode of thinking, reasoning, and articulating. Plato’s paradigm example here is the *techné* offered by the sophists. As Derrida (1981: 107) puts it: “The sophist thus sells the signs and insignia of science: not memory itself (*mnēmē*), only monuments (*hypomnēmata*), inventories, archives, citations, copies, accounts, tales, lists, notes, duplicates, chronicles, genealogies, references. Not memory, but memorials.” In short, the sophist sells information rather than education and tools of persuasion – the techniques of making the weaker argument seem the stronger – rather than truth. For Plato the trouble here is that one can know everything the sophist knows without moving any further along the soul’s proper path to wisdom. His concern, then, is that some forms of *techné*, among which he

includes the plastic arts and image-rich poetry, involve only imitation pretend to an immortal status, an intrinsic, self-contained Being that they do not warrant. On these grounds, he not only favours discourse (*techné* as word-art) above painting and the plastic arts as a purer form of *techné* because it is non-material, but he also privileges a specific kind of word-art; not poetry, but argument, and within argument, not rhetoric, but philosophical dialectics as a *techné* in which conversations are produced anew each time.

Insofar as painting and poetry, and indeed any *techné*, are similarly imitative rather than educative, and insofar as they sell technique above insight, and so on, one may certainly grant Plato his concern. Yet, again, this reductive characterization of painting and poetry as merely the imitation of what already exists, and therefore as producing information and not education, is hardly fair. Clearly, any artist capable of worthy, truth-telling *techné* does not blindly imitate, but passionately resists, the comfortable shadow world of “what appears” by negating its power of fascination and actively seeking to discover what it “truly should have been” in order to re-make it accordingly. As Murdoch (1977: 76-77) puts it: “Good art... provides a stirring image of a pure transcendent value... and perhaps provides for many people... their clearest experience of something grasped as separate and precious and beneficial and held quietly and unpossessively in the attention. Good art which we love can seem holy.” Such art, she adds, “provides work for the spirit.” To say that painting and poetry can also educate, that it provides “work for the spirit,” that is, to criticize Plato for reducing painting to mere imitation, affirms his argument against mere imitation; namely that to tell the truth will never be an imitation of what is/appears, since it is precisely what already is that must be negated in the name of the truth beyond it. If a work is not open to renewal, therefore, it could be accused of falsifying the process of life.

In fact, it is not difficult to argue that, across the board, the criterion of passionate “truth-telling” *techné* as contrasted with the passionless, merely imitative *techné* that diverts us from the truth, allows us to distinguish between the treasure and the trash among our various arts. Instead of dividing types of *techné* on the basis of Plato’s distinction between truth-telling *techné* and imitation, then, one may use it to differentiate, within each art-form, between truth-telling “fine art” the brainless, merely mimetic and essentially passionless “art events” that constitute kitsch and “fine art”; a term that registers an acknowledgement that some art has transformative, and therefore genuinely edifying, powers that take it far beyond simple imitation and enable it precisely to serve as the kind of stimulus for reflection capable of engendering the passions that set an individual moving along the path to wisdom. In the discussion to follow, I have employed this modified distinction to elaborate on the above account of what it means to live a creative life, by contrasting such a life with its opposite, which one may call “kitsch.”

### **Truth-telling *techné* versus imitative kitsch**

One thing is certain, truth-telling *techné* demands the difficult struggle beyond the comfortable shadow-world of the cave to risk an anxious real existence in which one is exposed to traumatic events that demand and prohibit a proper response. It is certainly difficult, as Murdoch (1977: 80) remarks, “to do justice to this hardness and this randomness without either smoothing them over with fantasy or exaggerating them into (cynical) absurdity.” Success here, across all of the differences concerning the truth that is the object of our passion, is the mark of fine art. By contrast, a refusal to accept the hard fact of human finitude is the mark of kitsch, which “covers up this salient trait of human experience under a layer of sentimentalism, illusion and falsity which functions like an anaesthetic or worse, a powerful narcotic, inducing a kind of stupor” (Olivier 2003: 105-6). In *The unbearable lightness of being*, as Olivier (2003: 110)

remarks, Milan Kundera's famous "two tears" provide a powerful image by means of which to characterize kitsch. The first is the tear of genuine affect, elicited by the experience of something profoundly moving. Kitsch arrives on the scene in the second tear, which aims to preserve and universalise the first (that is, capture, re-present or imitate it).

Kitsch, then, is recognisable as the sort of work that releases one from the task of genuine understanding, of making the thing one's own (Heidegger 1962: 212-213). Such artworks do not open the world to us "in an articulated understanding," which would necessarily be complex. Instead, they close off complexity by covering over uncomfortable anomalies, simplifying and smoothing in order to reach the lowest common denominator (Heidegger 1962: 213). As Plato argued, the trouble occurs when the work's facile solution to life's anxiety is mistaken for genuine understanding; for this discourages inventive new inquiry, suppresses argument, and encourages emotional and ethical idleness (Heidegger 1962: 213; 222). Kitsch panders to human curiosity, associated with an Augustinian "lust of the eyes" (Heidegger 1962: 215-216). The curious being, merely scanning the surface, and carried along "only by the looks of the world," may be fascinated, without comment, by the graceful somersaulting pattern of the bodies falling from the twin towers. But in this mode of detachment, humans soon get bored, and require distracting novelty. The curious eye, Heidegger (1962: 216) comments, "concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen... but just in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty." In short, he adds: "Curiosity has nothing to do with observing entities and marvelling at them... To be amazed to the point of not understanding is something in which it has no interest."

By contrast, then, given the complexity of the truly Real as a concept, one might describe truth-telling *techné* as the kind of art that elicits a state of passion precisely by expecting us "to be amazed to the point of not understanding." One cannot do justice to Heidegger's difficult insight without understanding what Derrida (1993: 13, 20) has appropriately named the "plural logic of the aporia," which describes the configuration of three "dead-ends" or impossibilities that constitutes our attempt to arrive at the truth about the Real. The implication, of course, is that one cannot, therefore, ever arrive at some final, full Truth that will stand without question for all time.

To elaborate, Derrida would by no means deny that it is a part of wisdom, a matter of truth-telling, to show that there is an underlying order and purposivity (beauty) in the world, despite the apparent disorder around us. Put slightly differently, and more accurately, despite life's jumble, it is a part of wisdom to see that chaos or ugliness is "not-All." But showing that ugliness is not-All, is not the same as showing that its opposite, beauty, *is* All. Any attempt to privilege beauty, in fact, unleashes the tyranny of order, which discards or covers over whatever does not fit, so allowing the stultifying dead-end of pseudo-perfection, which Harries (1968: 76) names sweet kitsch, to enter our aesthetic. Sweet kitsch, then, characteristically strikes a note of superficial falsity, which shows itself, for example, when the passion for the beautiful devolves into a sentimental infatuation with the delightful. A case in point is Burne-Jones, whom Murdoch (1977: 78) cites as saying, "I mean by a picture a beautiful romantic dream of something that never was, never will be -- in a light better than any light that ever shone -- in a land no one can define or remember, only desire -- and the forms divinely beautiful." Sweet kitsch also shows itself as an infatuation such as Bouguereau's with passionless harmony. As Canaday (cited in Harries 1968: 75-76) remarks: "it is so completely, so absolutely, all of a piece. Not a single element is out of harmony with the whole; there is not a flaw in the totality of the union between conception and execution... this is perfection of a kind, even if it is a perverse kind." Tellingly, Harries (1968: 79-80) remarks, kitsch becomes popular "when genuine emotion has become rare, when desire lies dormant and needs artificial stimulation." Like religious

kitsch, he adds, which “seeks to elicit religious emotion without an encounter with God,” erotic kitsch merely titillates in the absence of a genuine lover. Similarly, if Mondrian himself painted as a response to the anxiety elicited by a spiritual exigency, the appropriation of his work for “interior decoration” (extended even to supermarket coffee cups), detached from the spiritual exigency which elicited it, becomes empty kitsch. Here, the end product is merely reproduced without the anxiety that was the driving force behind its origination, so converting a genuine truth-telling response into a boring cliché.

Derrida would also not deny that it is equally a matter of truth-telling to reveal the world’s underlying ugliness, the chaos in the cosmos. As Murdoch (1977: 82) remarks, “to see misery and evil justly is one of the heights of aesthetic endeavour.” Again, put negatively, it is a part of wisdom to see that there is always a moment of disorder in any order, that beauty is not-All. Yet, to show that beauty is not-All, is not the same as showing that ugliness is All. Attempts to privilege the ugly, to insist that life is pure suffering and despair, lead towards the stultifying dead end of the desire for nothingness. Here, the inescapability of the nothingness pervading everything is not seen as cause for tears, but the condition of a freedom that is impossible to those who believe that humanity occupies some place in a meaningful order (Harries 1968: 82). Yet, this infatuation with the absurdity of life reduces the passion for the ugly to an obsession with the enjoyable lyricism of despair. As Harries (1968: 82) puts it: “How easy it is to wax lyrical over despair, to wallow in it, to enjoy it.... the popularity of decline, anguish, nothingness, and absurdity, and death illustrates this. This too is kitsch, sour kitsch.” Sour kitsch is epitomised by the melodramatic lugubriousness of “dark” teenage poetry that addresses broken love, marital brutality and similar tragedies with the scant life-experience offered by a comfortable middle-class environment.

It seems wise, then, to accept the impossibilities faced by the drive to actualise pure beauty or the absolutely ugly. Both extremisms represent not absolute truth, but the aporias of sweet and sour kitsch. Derrida argues, moreover, that the aporia of such aporias is that a harmonious, balanced fusion of opposites is equally impossible; they remain tied together, instead, as a dilemma that cannot be resolved. Perhaps, then, truth-telling in its most encompassing sense would be a matter of indicating, rather than showing or revealing, that the “true” configuration of the Real is a traumatic gathering together of three fundamental impossibilities. It is this ineffability that constitutes the Real as unrepresentable, transcendent or sublime. Fine art acknowledges this.

Attempts to reveal or manifest the sublime as such (to represent the un-representable) inevitably slip into a kind of ideological kitsch that shows itself when the passion for the sublime is substituted with zealous enthusiasm for a finite ideal. To acknowledge the sublime ineffability of the Real, when it, for example, traumatises a comfortable value system is supremely anxiety-provoking, for it reminds us of how precarious human existence really is. We are faced then, as Harries (1968: 151) remarks, “with a perennial temptation to seek refuge in a pseudo-ideal which may be based on an illusion, but which has the advantage of assigning to man a definite place.” Ideological kitsch, then, is a response that seeks to disguise the ineffability of the Real by, as Harries (1968: 149) puts it “absolutizing splinters of the old value system or by erecting new idols in the place of the hidden or dead God.” Art, “pressed into service of a pseudo-ideal,” acts to transform the world “in the image of that ideal” and thereby to deflect us from seeing things as they really are (Harries 1968: 152). Yet, as Lyotard (1992: 16) notes: “we have paid dearly for our nostalgia for the all and the one, for a reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, for a transparent and communicable experience.” The art of Hitler’s Third Reich, according to Harries, exemplifies such ideological kitsch, for its idol is “the pseudo-biological conception of race or people.” The shift whereby the finite takes the place of the transcendent,

moreover, is not acknowledged. “Rather it is veiled by using a language which speaks of the finite as if it were the transcendent” (Harries 1968: 150). In the words of Hans Kiener (cited in Harries 1968: 149), for example:

The Führer demands that the artist abandon his isolation; that he address himself in straightforward manner to the people; this must be apparent in the selection of a theme which must be both popular and easily understood, and which must be important within the heroic ideal of national socialism; it must express itself in a commitment to the ideal of beauty of the pure Nordic man.

Generalising from this, Harries (1968: 151) remarks that kitsch occurs whenever the finite replaces the transcendent, giving “definite content to what is demanded of the artist.” In this case, dogmatism becomes inevitable. There is no reasonable answer to the question why this or that finite idol (the pure Nordic man, for example) should represent the ideal. Since the choice is arbitrary, it cannot be defended on rational grounds and is promoted, then, only by a dogmatic refusal to reason.

Wisdom, in conclusion, is a matter of acknowledging the aporetic circle in which we are caught. Heidegger’s (1962: 210; 225) observation that we humans cannot but live out our lives for the most part in a state of “average everydayness” suggests that it is not just contemporary post-modern culture, but culture as such that is, as Olivier (2003: 107) puts it “conspicuously addicted to kitsch.” One takes kitsch works in, if at all, with a comfortable glance, perhaps with a little momentary quiver of sentimental titillation or horror, and one would forget them with equal facility were it not for their relentless ubiquity in a media-saturated environment, which keeps them constantly within the field of reception, so to speak. But the very fact that we are constantly bombarded with an incessant repetition of over-familiar “art-events” adds to the boredom. So, kitsch does not elicit passion, but kills it off.

Yet, following the line of Heidegger’s (1962: 223-225) argument concerning the relation between average everydayness and anxiety, this means that the passion must be there first, in order to undergo such an emptying out. We are first and foremost constituted as passionate beings and “average everydayness” is the depletion or the exhaustion of passion: kitsch, as the aesthetic equivalent of “average everydayness,” is passion drained. It is the traumatic experience of anxiety (a threat to security, identity, or belonging) that brings us back from kitsch, and reminds us that we *are* primordially “homo-aestheticus.” If passionate *techné* is a response to trauma in the form of a drive to restore an original wholeness, the notion of wholeness that forms the delusional, albeit necessary, object of our passion is irreducibly complex. Because of the impossibility, therefore, of ever arriving at the final Truth concerning the nature of the Real, artworks that emerge from passionate action have an unsettling power to call out to us for a passionate “interpretative” response that acknowledges their Sisyphusian struggle for truth. Yet, as soon as the “products” (philosophical, scientific, aesthetic) of this struggle are returned to the public domain of the “they,” as, paradoxically, they must be to fulfil their truth-telling function, they risk devolution into the falsity of kitsch, where pretenders refuse to match the original struggle with their own creative attempts to come to terms with the occasioning trauma, but allow themselves the false freedom to mimic the first response, without the anxiety that occasioned it. In this case, the imitative response, paradoxically, does not confirm the first, but depletes it, for it is thereby converted into something unproblematic, manageable, understandable, ordinary, superficial. To turn in a circle, then, we are set up again for the traumatic experience of anxiety that brings us back from kitsch. Thus, the artist’s work is never done.

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