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## Education and imagination : (the origin and truth of art)

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# Education and Imagination (The Origin and Truth of Art)

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The Postmodern voice of Vilém Flusser says: “The historical distinction between true and false, between reality and fiction, between science and art must be left to fail. And leaving such an ontological, epistemological and ethical-political distinction, i.e. criticism, is what we mean by “posthistory”. It is neither here nor there no matter if we evaluate it negatively or positively. It is important that we learn to live with it”<sup>1</sup>. Despite the opening words of the article, “The Power of Image” by Vilém Flusser, neither he (although he advises us to learn to live with it) nor other postmodernists remain completely immune to the disappearance of the difference between truth and falsehood, between reality and fiction. They know that we have something to fear. Can we dismiss thinking and art from the power of truth?

<sup>1</sup> Flusser V. *Moc obrazu*, „Výtvarné umění“, no. 3–4/96, p. 131.

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Can we give up on the truth? What would it mean? The whole of Western philosophy and thinking are based on the difference between reality and illusion, the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction. What are we afraid of? Gadamer and Heidegger would probably say that beauty should not disappear for the sake of aesthetics, Flusser would say that art should not disappear only for design to remain, and Bělohradský would say that logos should not replace logos.

It is the fear of losing the distinction between truth and falsehood, losing the human sense of truth and lies, losing the meaning and the truth in human behavior which brings contemporary philosophy back to the very origin.

Philosophers have always wondered how we discover something new, unfamiliar, unprecedented (be it human activity, thought or universal events). How do we make great scientific discoveries, create brilliant works of art, come up with original ideas, reveal different, unusual and previously unsuspected associations, or create a whole new concept?

People have connected this ability to create with the idea of a kind of inner strength, a mysterious power, which they call imagination, imagery, and fantasy. Besides the fact that it helps the creation of new work, ideas, discovery, it conceals a latent danger, it can also be a delusion, presumption, a mirage, an illusion and a dream. It is born in the womb of the natural world and manifests itself in very different forms; it evades

all by unequivocal determination and takes on various forms.

Perhaps the oldest example of concretization of ancient Greek imagination is Heraclitus' fraction B89: "The wakeful have one common world, but the sleeping turn everyone into their own"<sup>2</sup>. If we take the fraction as an example of **cosmic imagination**, it assumes the world is a structured whole and leaves this order – logos – that rules in the world and people, to break through into the world and human knowledge, so that the truth emerges from invisibility into visibility. Non-reason, non-consciousness, somnolence turn us away from the common world. If we give up logos, we resign from the whole and we sink into particularity. Heraclitus' fraction B64: "Lightning dominates the universe"<sup>3</sup>, tells us that being breaks through into everyday life, a man stricken with logos is the truth apprehended and pervaded, ruled, illuminated. Therefore, in relation to Heraclitus and later Plato the polymath Posidonius called it the most important thing in man, which allows him knowledge and creation, as *hafé*, ignition, touch<sup>4</sup>, like the meeting with the truth of being itself.

These "spark" types of activities (art and creation), for which the Greek language has the term *techne*, were first mentioned by Plato. In the dialogue with Ion, Socrates wants to penetrate the secrets of the profession of a rhapsode (incidentally Ion is one of the best, or even the best lecturer of the Homer poems), to explore this type of knowledge; he poses the question of whether it is a skill or something else. And after

<sup>2</sup> Svoboda K. (1962), *Zlomky předsokratovských myslitelů*, Praha, NČSAV, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> Kratochvíl Z. (1995), *Výchova, zřejmost, vědomí*, Praha, Hermann a synové, p. 63.

he deduces that it is not a skill because it shows that it is nothing to do with what the Ion lectures, he does not have deep knowledge, his attention turns to it being "something else". He calls this "divine influence" and offers the metaphor of a magnet. Just as a magnet attracts iron rings and passes on the power to attract other iron objects, a Muse creates a divine spark of enlightenment in people and through them a chain of further enthusiasts is created, enraptured, transformed, but also easily modifiable and manipulated in their enthusiasm, which is itself contagious. Their power enters the weak. Plato says: "The poet is weightless, ephemeral, sacred, he cannot write poetry until he receives divine inspiration and until he is conscious, until reason prevails"<sup>5</sup>. "Imagination and creativity are gifts to those whose "divinity is eliminated by reason" and who "use them as their servants, prophets and divine oracles, so we understand that it is not them who tell us these precious things if they are not sane, but that it is God Himself who speaks to us and is heard through them"<sup>6</sup>. The Ion therefore receives this skill from the gods rendering him their unwitting tool.

It is widely known that Plato changed from this ambivalent concept of the artistic *techne* of his first dialogues to a position of an apparent contradiction. By calling rhapsodes "interpreters of interpreters"<sup>7</sup> and painters "imitators of imitators"<sup>8</sup> he claims that creation is the imitation of something "appearing as it appears" (pros to *phainomenon*, os *phainesthai*). The ontological non-origin of this

<sup>5</sup> Platón (1979), *Dialogy o kráse*, Praha, Odeon, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 20–21.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Platón (2003), *Ústava* [in:] *Platónovy spisy*, Sv. IV. Praha, OIKOYMENH, p. 352–353.

volatility, lightness and elusiveness, the ontological non-anchorage, non-original imitation changes, as is stated in "Constitution", all kinds of artistic forms (painting, poetry) "from truth to the third place". For humanity and thus human behavior to be truthful it must turn to goodness, beauty and justice, it must be characterized by "residing in the vicinity of goodness", it must be borne by a desire (mania) for good.

For Plato these are the primarily reasons for him ultimately demanding the expulsion of artists from Kalipolis. The decision was not an easy one, as he writes, even he was educated in the love of Homer, he connects him with a sense of "awe"<sup>9</sup>, but: "[...] man should not value himself more than truth, so that which I say should be spoken"<sup>10</sup>. From now on, the only vanishing point legitimizing art as a thorough human activity will be the truth of existence. The hierarchy of the structured world, at the peak of the highest good idea (*ton Agathon*), ideas of ideas, ideas of things and the last perceptible things themselves, is reflected in the Platonic hierarchy of human activity, distinguishing the maker from the imitator, but who is the real creator?

When Plato rejects Homer and the tragic poets, he permits them neither in his state nor in education, it is something more than just a quirky theory of art. It is, as Fink says, a "devastating attack on the mythical substance of Hellenism"<sup>11</sup> or according to Patočka it is a "burning of tragedy"<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 343.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Fink E. (1970), *Metaphysik der Erziehung im Weltverständnis von Plato und Aristoteles*, Frankfurt a. Main, Vittorio Klostermann, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Patočka J. (1991), *Platón. Přednášky z antické filosofie*, Praha, SPN, p. 155.

Plato's criticism of the poets is a crucial judgment about being, the truth and the world. Plato wants to replace the tragic principle of internal conflict overcoming faith and mythical internal enhancement with Socrates' pervading logos. This starting point could perhaps be called **imagination logos**, Plato characterizes it not as being a myth but as being "solid, grounded", mathematical or geometric, in which the soul gains "solid contours", "edges". Therefore, Kierkegaard in his text "The Present" refers to Socrates (who he regards as an ambassador of ardor and truth) in connection with moral character and *charassó* which in ancient Greek means "to sharpen"<sup>13</sup>. He understands moral character, "ordering of the soul", its *arete* as being an indentation, a notch in the soul, peace and a scale. It is a peace-knowing soul which will not differentiate the outward signs of things: the larger from the smaller, the common from the rare, the heavier from the lighter. This level of the soul, "knowledge" of the soul, "wisdom" (*sofia*) is not the knowledge of the many but the knowledge of the individual (idea). It does not discard things in contradiction; it does not see one thing as being good and the other as being evil. It is the opposite of uncertainty, sophisticated ambiguity.

The Alcibiades dialogue speaks of this internal struggle between unity and ambiguity, where the questions: What is "care of the soul"? What does the requirement "care for thyself" mean in the sense of the maxim "gnothi seauton", know thyself? Who is this "thyself" to whom they are referring? How can we know what "care for thyself" requires? Can we understand him as being an egoistic, utilitarian, and pragmatic Sophist

<sup>13</sup> Kierkegaard S. (1969), *Současnost*, Praha, MF, p. 27.

in the dialectical play of opposites from which I choose the alternative which seems to me the more favorable?

The Alcibiades dialogue develops other dialectic knowledge of thyself and care of the soul than we find in Constitution. Unlike the strict rejection of vision (or sensory knowledge) as a source of knowledge in the order of *doxa* – popular opinion, to which are condemned prisoners in the cave in the VII book of Plato's Constitution, Alcibiades speaks in his Plato's Socrates of a kind of knowing vision: "Let me take an illustration from sight, which I imagine to be the only one suitable to my purpose." As the Delphi inscription advises: Know thyself, one should also "see thyself". Where, however, should we look if we want to see ourselves? Alcibiades proposes (like an egocentric) to look in the mirror, however, Socrates, on the other hand, considers the possibility of looking into the eyes of others, and of meeting with them. He says: "Then the eye, looking at another eye, and in that in the eye which is most perfect, and which is the instrument of vision, will there see itself... if the eye is to see itself, it must look into the eye, and in that part of the eye where sight which is the virtue of the eye resides (*arete*)"<sup>14</sup>. Such a view into the eye will then spawn the right image in the soul itself, namely *arete* (virtue), emergence of the true self, consistent and detectable for thyself. The other, who looks into your eyes (the eye is the window the soul) is not public opinion, anonymous, but parallel, it is the other. It allows me to see myself through the "eyes of the other" to see myself through (dia)logos. Self-knowledge requires two examining powers of sight which

reflect and collide with another examining force. The requirement to see myself as others see me is not an attractive alibi, this is how the power of questions and answers must be responded to, the power to remain in a dialogue with puzzling questioning. Self-awareness is, as Patočka says: "the emergence of our new form, of *arete* itself, which arises from dwelling in the overall good"<sup>15</sup>.

It is as if our relationship with the truth has passed through other people. Either we move toward the truth with others or we move to somewhere where there is no truth. Because the care of the soul does not apply to our own selfish interests it is always the care of the whole (unity and oneness of self, unity of community and the cosmos). It is not any old vision, sensory experience, which gives birth to popular opinion (*doxa*) but a knowing vision, focusing on a fundamental and comprehensible whole.

This explains another reason for Plato's rejection of the poets: the difference between ancient mythical imagination and imagination of logos. "Sophocles in Antigone speaks of two things that not even man, the most amazing creature with its all-controlling and all-restraining ability, can do: overcoming death and overcoming evil. Sophocles saw this as being elementary, definitive, and fundamentally beyond human possibility and human reach, however, Socrates shows that if something is "beyond the reach of human *techne*" it does not mean that it is beyond the reach of man, that there is something like human wisdom, a strangely obscure approach, negatives entwined, knowing not knowing"<sup>16</sup>. "Poets make man too passive," he says, however, in contrast to this educating

<sup>14</sup> Patočka J. (1990), *Sokrates. Přednášky z antické filosofie*, SPN, Praha, p. 118.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> Patočka J. (1991), *Platón...*, op.cit., p. 155.

philosophy, they turn the soul to good, they give the soul a solid form (*eidos*), whose expression is *arete*, "virtue", which is not private virtue but something firmly determined and occurring in changing specific situations, it is man's attempt to examine the whole when faced with a particular situation"<sup>17</sup>. Plato uses the term "arete" to convey the effort to find the meaning of life and life's plan of the pedagogical process of education as the formation and shaping of the soul, like "care of the soul".

When considering the nature of imagination it is not possible to overlook this period. The question of the **legitimacy of art** was raised for the first time. For the first time in human history art was put into the context of not only beauty, usefulness, usability, but also the truth. Gadamer alludes to this when he says: "If fact, as far as we know, it was in the context of the new philosophical outlook and the new claim to knowledge raised by Socratic thought that art was required to justify itself for the first time in the history of the West. Here, for the first time it ceased to be self-evident that the diffuse reception and interpretation of traditional subject matter handed down in pictorial or narrative form did possess the right to truth that it had claimed. Indeed, this ancient and serious problem always arises when a new claim to truth sets itself up against the tradition that continues to express itself through poetic invention or in the language of art"<sup>18</sup>. Plato was the first to build traditional forms of art on the unclaimed right to truth and truthfulness. This new artistic expression is not raised and given

<sup>17</sup> Patočka J. (1996), *Péče o duši I.*, Praha, OIKOYMENH, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Gadamer H.-G. (2003), *Aktualita krásného. Umění jako hra, symbol a slavnost*, Praha, Triáda, p. 5.

by tradition but must always look and find its own meaning to legitimize the new form, shape, content and meaning of artistic communication.

The search for truth of art took on a variety of forms, one of the most important was the German mystical tradition (greatly inspired by neo-Platonism) associated with the names of Meister Eckhart and Paracelsus. It could perhaps be described as being the **mystical imagination**, in which man himself is traditionally conceived as a biblical image, in the image of God, *imago Dei*. The similarity of the terms image (Bild), education (Bildung) and creative power, imagination (Einbildungskraft) suggest the relation: education is self-realization, creation and self-creation. Angelus Silesius said: "In front of every man is an image of what he should be. If it is not, it is not full of peace"<sup>19</sup>. Meister Eckhart offers us a path to this peace, "A man is transformed into what he lovingly regards"<sup>20</sup>. Meister Eckhart's mystical imagination explains not only the self-creation of man, but also the universal nature of art as creation: "When an artist makes an image from wood or stone, he transmits the image onto the wood, cutting off only the pieces that hide the image and helping to reveal it; what is thick, he removes, what hinders, he removes, and then finally he reveals what is hidden beneath the surface"<sup>21</sup>.

Michelangelo (also deeply influenced by neo-Platonism) believes that the artist, the sculptor is not a privileged creator, but he only carves out the statue from inside the marble (as his sculptures

<sup>19</sup> Lichtenstein E. (1966), *Von Mister Eckhart bis Hegel. Zur philosophischen Entwicklung des deutschen Bildungsbegriff [in:] Kritik und Metaphysik Studien. Hens Heimsoeth zum achtzigsten Geburtsjahr*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, p. 264.

<sup>20</sup> Sokol J. (1993), *Mistr Eckhart a středověká mystika*, Praha, Zvon, p. 39.

<sup>21</sup> Lichtenstein E. (1966), *Von Mister...*, op.cit., p. 272.

of slaves in the Stanze suggest). Just as the philosopher assists in *maieutike techné*, he assists in the birth of the truth (the truth is born as a child when it comes into the world), as an artist, sculptor, he assists in the birth of beauty from stone. Therefore, art has the nature of truth, ancient Greek *Aletheia* in the sense of the unconcealedness of beauty, the truth of art lies in leading art from concealedness to unconcealedness. In other words, art is an obvious truth.

Paracelsus translated the word "Imaginatio" into German as the above-mentioned "Einbildungskraft". Fantasy and imagination and the power of visualization are but three terms for the human ability to transform the outer world into the inner world, to create inner worlds of imagery (*Bildwelten*) which reflect the outer world and to express this interiority through human work which may be within man himself. Paracelsus says that "man is created base on his *Bildung*"<sup>22</sup>. According to Paracelsus, *Bildung* is an order, a signature all human reality. That which is divine in man is not contained only to a small extent, it is not undermined by substance. The world and man are fully-fledged images of God.

This is also echoed by Leibniz: "Nothing external enters into our soul from casualness"<sup>23</sup>, all of these forms are contained and constantly fostered in our soul. Therefore, we cannot learn anything, whose "idea was not already in our soul"<sup>24</sup>. Leibniz deliberated the problem of *Selbstbildung*, self-education on the grounds of the individual metaphysical monads based on

the principle of "pre-established harmony", the harmony of God, the world and man. Leibniz's fragment on true mystical philosophy says: "In our very nature stands a true picture of infinity, omniscience and the omnipotence of God. In each individual substance, like you and I, is something eternal consisting of three distinct parts: soul, spirit and body. In everyone there is everything and everything in everyone acts with a certain strength of clarity"<sup>25</sup>. Every part of the universe, including man, in some way reflects the whole. Man is a microcosm highlighting the cosmos or macrocosm. Because everything is interrelated, because everything resembles one another, one can understand from another, from analogy. This completes the widely shared view that human activity, education, art, production are actually nothing more than *ars imitatur naturae*, art imitating nature, the work of God.

Heidegger calls the search for the truth of art in modern philosophy a task of finding the "essence of a work of art". An example of this can be found in his essay "The Origin of a Work of Art"<sup>26</sup>. What is interesting here are the methodological assumptions of the possibility of such findings. If the author intends to find the essence of a work of art, he shows it primarily as a whole, referring to **the artist** ("The artist is the origin of the work. The work is the origin of the artist. Neither is without the other"<sup>27</sup>), **the art** ("In themselves and in their interrelations artist and work are each of them by virtue of a third thing which is prior to both, namely that which also gives artist and

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 265.

<sup>23</sup> Leibniz G. W. (1982), *Monadologie a jiné práce*, Praha, Svoboda, p. 82.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> Lichtenstein E. (1966), *Von Mister...*, op.cit., p. 271.

<sup>26</sup> Heidegger M. (2008), *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, Stuttgart, Reclam.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

work of art their names – art<sup>28</sup>), **the thingness of the work** (“There is something stony in a work of architecture, wooden in a carving, colored in a painting, spoken in a linguistic work, sonorous in a musical composition. The thingly element is so irremovably present in the art work that we are compelled rather to say conversely that the architectural work is in stone, the carving is in wood, the painting in color, the linguistic work in speech, the musical composition in sound<sup>29</sup>), and to what **exceeds the thingness** of the work (“The work makes public something other than itself; it manifests something other; it is an allegory. In the work of art something other is brought together with the thing that is made. To bring together is, in Greek, *συμβάλλειν*. The work is a symbol<sup>30</sup>), the **symbolic nature of the work**. Attentive readers will not miss the analogy between the Aristotelian concept of cause and Heidegger’s characteristics: the what, how, what and what design and creation based and face. Besides its immediate importance which he calls “usefulness” (“The basic feature from which this entity regards us, that is, flashes at us and thereby is present and thus is this entity<sup>31</sup>.) and reliability, is something else, or better yet something more. Heidegger shows an example of this using van Gogh’s painting of peasant’s shoes (he painted it several times, without perspective, without giving any context), merely resting, shoes from which, as the philosopher says, “being stares” at us.

What is painted here? Does the art change the diction of the philosopher’s speech, a poem instead

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 21.

of a categorical piece of equipment? (“From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, and trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death<sup>32</sup>).

The “truth” of the shoes is understood through a flash of imagination as the truth of human action, the truth of the world, on which we walk, the truth of life that is given to us. Or in other words, Heidegger’s is every human work – for instance a bridge is not only a technical construction connecting the opposite shores (usability), a tool (reliability), over which you can cross the river with dry feet, but it is what spans the landscape and thus it helps to create. Not only is a temple built in a certain style, but (like Notre Dame for Victor Hugo) a work, which in itself “fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace, endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human being<sup>33</sup>. A work, a great work of art

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 27–28.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 37.



is not a depiction, description, or interpretation, “in the work the work makes the truth of being,” writes Heidegger<sup>34</sup>.

Heidegger’s lecture given in Freiburg in 1935 as an attempt to critique the conceptual apparatus of traditional metaphysics, encouraged Gadamer to try to find the real, authentic experience of art, to understand the speech of a work of art and ask of the truth of art. This, he describes in the first part of his *Wahrheit und Methode* in contrast to aesthetic consciousness, which he denotes as being secondary since it was established on the basis of aesthetic experience which is verbalized by an aesthetic court either accepting or rejecting the work of art. However, external verbalization, categorization and abstraction, which want to deal with a merely “pure work of art” miss that which is essential, i.e. the “language of a work of art” and the “truth of a work of art”.

And there is one more important feature. Imagination as **chiasmus** – consistency, woven into one whole, crisscrossing and meeting inside and out, eye and spirit, visible and invisible. Maurice Merleau-Ponty alluded to this important structure for the creation and perception of an image. While Heidegger pondered over the essence of the work in the context of artist-work-art, Merleau-Ponty saw it in the context of seer-seen-visible, transforming the usual concept of the nature of sight. An image based on a subject-object layout of the seer and seen proved to be insufficient, due to the fact that these identical objects in vision firstly issue an “empty” subject to the seer. Merleau-Ponty shows that vision is not a passive reflection of the seen; he wonders what vision actually allows, not in the sense of *a posteriori* “to have eyes to see”

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 34.

(ears to hear...), but in the sense of a priori, what enables human vision? What is given in vision. This “given”, allowing vision, is then called visible.

“The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though between it and us there was an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand. And yet it is not possible that we blend into it, nor that it passes into us, for then the vision would vanish at the moment of formation, by disappearance of the seer or of the visible. What there is then are not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor is there a seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them – but something to which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of seeing ‘all naked’ because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh... As though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them, as though it knew them before knowing them, it moves in its own way with its abrupt and imperious style, and yet the views taken are not desultory – I do not look at a chaos, but at things”<sup>35</sup>. The seer and seen not in the relationship of subject and object, rather it is a tangle of interdependencies. The painter lives in fascination. The actions most proper to him—those gestures, those tracings of which he alone is capable ... to him they seem to emanate from the things themselves”. “Inevitably the roles between the painter and the visible switch. That is why so many painters have said that things look at them”<sup>36</sup> so the mountain Saint-Victor “paints”.

<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty M. (1998), *Viditelné a neviditelné*, OIKOYMENH, Praha, p. 128–129.

<sup>36</sup> Merleau-Ponty M. (1971), *Oko a duch a jiné eseje*, Obelisk, Praha, p. 14.

And it is true in other forms of art, writers say that the characters to whom they give life suddenly seem to live their own lives, to revolt against their creators, and then their creators can do nothing else but let them die or kill them off (AC Doyle with his Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie with her funny little man Hercules Poirot).

Merleau-Ponty considered art and specifically painting as a form of primordial experience. When he spoke of Cézanne, which for him was the prototype of an artist, he says the he does not want to be a cultured animal, but he seizes culture at its beginning (origin) and reestablishes it, he paints as if nobody ever painted before. Art is not an expression of ideas, communication, as this would be already formed and spoken to others. The “idea” cannot precede the “execution”. An artist creates his work, like a child speaks his first words. ■

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Keywords: art, truth, reality, art as an addition to being, creativity

### Education and Imagination (The Origin and Truth of Art)

#### Abstract

This paper addresses the nature of human creativity and the issue of whether creativity can be “taught”, as well as the birth of art and the relationship of art and truth in philosophical reflection. It is based mainly on the texts of Gadamer, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty (and interpretations of ancient philosophers), who critically define aesthetics and aesthetic consciousness.

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