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# Nietzsche's aesthetics as a metaphysics for modern and contemporary art

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**Paper Title:** Nietzsche's aesthetics as a metaphysics for modern and contemporary art  
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**Abstract:**

As early as 1872, Friedrich Nietzsche proposed in *The Birth of Tragedy* the concept that all artistic production derives from the clash of two conflicting opposites: the Apollinian and the Dionysian impulses. It is possible to argue that these two oppositional forces gave rise, in Modern Art, to the two paradigms that have guided artistic research as a modern project: the Bauhaus paradigm and the Duchampian paradigm. Whereas the Bauhaus attempted to envision a new future by seeing the reality behind things, Duchamp understood that *the new* can only be created by overthrowing the old, but only to bring it back into a different context.

I want to start with a passage from Jacques Rancière's essay "The Aesthetic Revolutions and its Outcomes," published in the March-April 2002 issue of the *New Left Review*.

We can also give to these two positions the names of a pair of Greek divinities, Apollo and Dionysus. Their opposition is not simply a construct of the philosophy of the young Nietzsche. It is the dialectic of the 'spirit of forms' in general. The aesthetic identification of consciousness and unconsciousness, logos and pathos, can be interpreted in two ways. Either the spirit of forms is the logos that weaves its way through its own opacity and the resistance of the materials, in order to become the smile of the statue or the light of the canvas—this is the Apollonian plot—or it is identified with a pathos that disrupts the forms of doxa, and makes art the inscription of a power that is chaos, radical alterity. Art inscribes on the surface of the work the immanence of pathos in the logos, of the unthinkable in thought. This is the Dionysian plot. Both are plots of heteronomy.

As you all well know, in this essay Rancière takes up the question of what he calls "the politics of aesthetics," which is to say the *play of art* elevated to a whole practice of life, as *the form of life*. Art and life or, rather, art as life: in this conjunction lies what Rancière saw

as the basic dialectic of autonomy and heteronomy that have characterized the debate about art as an autonomous practice and its political, heteronomous relation to life.

Rancière explores in his essay the idea that in reality the autonomy of art as life depends itself on a double heteronomy. These double heteronomy concerns the double source of every aesthetics. It is either Apolline, the logos that emerges out of the “abyss of being” and becomes static and fixed, eventually leading—if applied in politics—to an aesthetic regime of totalitarian cut; or it is the Dionysian, the pathos that disrupts the *doxa*, the fixed logos, bringing chaos and transvaluation of all values.

My claim is that this dialectic of the spirit of forms, expressed in the Apolline-Dionysius opposition—which is the opposition between life as art, as fixed logos, museums, vs. art as life, as the disruptive force of destruction for creation and re-signification—is the foundation of a metaphysics of art that has guided modern art production since the launching of the project by the avant-gardes.

I would like to explain this.

As we all know, Nietzsche developed the Apolline-Dionysian opposition in his first important work to be published, *The Birth of Tragedy*. In it, Nietzsche is clear about the fact that he is tracing the development of Greek tragedy in order to uncover the basic fundamental forces that drive the production of art. Eventually he wants to show that these forces are only one, the **will to life** or the **will to power**. That the production of art is actually only the most evident manifestation of the fact that everything in the empirical reality is nothing but a show, a parade of appearances that make life not only bearable but actually enjoyable, worth living and reproducing for it.

This is, of course, Nietzsche’s politics of aesthetics, where Schiller’s idea of play that makes man or woman fully human, is shown to be a reversed heteronomy: man is the object of the play of life; life plays with man by showing him how to play with things and go on living. The Dionysian artist, as the archetypical artist, opens up the eyes of the common spectator to show that in the end life is the play—sometime cruel—of the gods. It shows us thereby that the only possible, justifiable form of living is that of engaging in the play of life, in the staging of the show.

This all brings us to the fact that Nietzsche was actually describing a metaphysics. He called it an artist’s metaphysics, but in reality it was a metaphysics that applied to all kinds of knowledge—not just artistic. This metaphysics basically states that behind all the multiple beings of the world there is a life force, a will to life, that drives and produces differentiation. Man can access to that primordial unity of life by a breakdown of what Schopenhauer called the *principium individuationis*. Once he has seen this “abyss of being,” man understands that everything he sees is nothing but a passing appearance, a show. Out of his contact with the “genius of the world,” an individual can then proceed to create new forms that come as visions—the **logos** that becomes fixed. Or that the individual can proceed

to transfigure the *doxa*, to upend common knowledge and transfigure things. This is the Dionysian artist, who assumes as a political goal the transvaluation of all values.

Why is this all discussion so important?

I will give some background. Beginning in the 90's, a debate has been raging regarding the question of art research, or artistic research. This debate, as you all also know, became even more intense with the advent of the Bologna Process in 1998 and the almost forceful conversion of art schools into universities, or at least to become associated with universities. The catchword here is research, for the Bologna accords have as one of its imperatives the promotion and funding of research. So, in order to jump onto the wagon of European higher education, art schools have started to produce art research. However, and this is the key, this has been done without a common consensus on what art research is and how it is defined.

Yet, as art schools have moved into the university, the main approach has been that art research should adapt itself and follow the standards and regulations of scientific research. Many authors have assumed this position on the claim that art research is a totally new field waiting to be defined—therefore, art research should be defined in terms that have been applied to scientific research—which after all has a tradition of at least two hundreds of years.

One of the main reasons for which almost all authors agree that art research is not defined is, they claim, because art research is pre-paradigmatic. This is to say, it is in the state of what Thomas S. Kuhn had called the pre-paradigmatic state of sciences: this is the state where different groups of researchers follow different definitions and conceptions, whereby their research results are not comparable or correlatable. Kuhn, without stating it implicitly, implies that a field becomes paradigmatic when all the members of a field assume a common metaphysics. This common metaphysics allows the appearance of paradigms, which are model works of knowledge on which everyone agrees and which guide “normal,” everyday research into specific results. This “normal” research eventually leads to results that question the predominant paradigm, eventually arriving at a paradigm shift.

This is the predominant conception of how science research proceeds today.

My claim is that art research is a fully paradigmatic endeavor and that far from being a “new field,” art research has been produced ever since the appearance of modern art. In fact, art research is co-substantial to modern art because of modern art requirement that every work of art be a novelty, an innovation.

How is modern art paradigmatic? First of all, because it has a common metaphysics: the late Romantic metaphysics as described by Nietzsche, which can be seen as a systematic version of what Rancière's called “The Aesthetic Revolution.” Nietzsche's metaphysics, based on the Apolline-Dionysius opposition, gave rise to the two fundamental paradigms of art research and production: the visual, Modernist paradigm as the Apolline logos; and the Duchampian,

transfigurative paradigm as the Dionysian impulse to upend the *doxa*, language, in order to produce a transvaluation of values.

This is the reason that art research and scientific research cannot be correlated: science is ultimately grounded on Kant's transcendental or critical metaphysics which sees knowledge as a structure that conditions the "thing-in-itself." Whereas art is grounded on Nietzsche's artists' metaphysics, which denies the existence of the thing-in-itself and, rather, sees all phenomena of empirical reality as nothing but a show created by mankind itself for its own enjoyment and survival.

And this is the main point of my discussion: as art research moves into the university, it has to fight to sustain the tradition of research that has been an integral part of the modern project of art. In this tradition, research is carried out in order to find the formal elements that will bring into concrete reality an intuition, a vision or an irrational perception to reconfigure the show of things. Science is based on the faith that there is an external reality that can be described truthfully by rational structures.

It all bring us back to Rancière's ***Aesthetic Revolution***: as he states towards the end of his essay: there is in modern art a promise of political revolution, of a life constantly renewed through the play of art, which however can never be fully realized. But at the same time, art has provided modern life with the promise of emancipation and with the joy of transvaluation, acting as a cultural counterbalance to scientific absolutism. It remains to see whether the absorption of art schools into the universities ends with that last bastion of playful, disrupting pathos.

#### Conclusions:

Friedrich Nietzsche developed an artist's metaphysics that has acted as an epistemological and ontological grounding for the *paradigmatic* modes of art research and production of modern and contemporary art. Nietzsche's metaphysics, which he intended as a counter-proposal to Kant's transcendental metaphysics, was initially developed in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and later in *The Twilight of the Idols* and in his collected *Nachlaß*.

Nietzsche's artist's metaphysics is in reality a sum-up of two hundred years of Romantic search for a political and aesthetic alternative to the aporias of the Enlightenment. As such, it conjured up a series of concepts previously developed by the Romantic idealists into a unitary aesthetic manifesto. These concepts included, among others, that of culture as predominantly a form of game play (Schiller); of the Dionysian as the primordial element of life and vitality (Hölderlin, Schlegel); of the Apolline as a serene form of contemplation; of the concept of the Will to Power as the fundamental cause of all manifestations (Schopenhauer); of Life as the supreme value of all human activity (Fichte)—these were all ideals that Nietzsche summed up in his aesthetics.

In the form initially laid out in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche's artist's metaphysics rest on the dual concept of the Apolline and the Dionysian as the fundamental grounds on which all

artistic manifestations—and not only that of classical Greeks—are based. The Apolline is based on the visual, analytical contemplation of reality, while the Dionysian refers to a dissolution of the Apollinian *principium individuationis* as part of a process where individuals enter into a state of mystic rapture in unity with the world. These two principles would eventually give birth to two fundamental paradigms of artistic research and production: 1) The Modernist paradigm that sees art as a reduction into its essential nature, i.e., vision and the Apolline contemplation; and 2) The Duchampian paradigm, which understands that the role of art is that of creating new meanings and new created environments. It reveals also the processes by which power creates meanings and symbolizations within the rational construction of the world.