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Hegel's Last Lectures on Aesthetics in Berlin 1828/29 and the Contemporary Debates on the End of Art

Alain Patrick Olivier

► **To cite this version:**

Alain Patrick Olivier. Hegel's Last Lectures on Aesthetics in Berlin 1828/29 and the Contemporary Debates on the End of Art. European Society for Aesthetics Conference, European Society for Aesthetics, May 2017, Berlin, Germany. pp.385-397. hal-01705884

HAL Id: hal-01705884

<https://hal.science/hal-01705884>

Submitted on 19 Feb 2018

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**Proceedings of the
European Society for Aesthetics**

Volume 9, 2017

Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

Published by the European Society for Aesthetics

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Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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Hegel's Last Lectures on Aesthetics in Berlin 1828/29 and the Contemporary Debates on the End of Art

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ABSTRACT. The thesis of the “death of art” or the “end of art” is both a central and a structural thesis in Hegel’s *Aesthetics* and one of the most discussed of his philosophy. One can wonder, nevertheless, how the End-of-Art is compatible, even constitutive of a theory of contemporary art. The problem is both a current and a historical one. In this paper, I try to consider this paradox while returning to the very sources of Hegel’s philosophy, i.e. to what is deemed the origin of the “rumour” of an “end of art” thesis, namely in the letters written by his student and composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. I take then into account how the thesis appears in the last lecture on aesthetics given by Hegel at the Berlin University in 1828/29, in order to clarify to what extent the thesis is compatible or not with the possibility of modern art, and if Arthur Coleman Danto’s and Dieter Henrich’s assumptions for example are tenable regarding the new sources.

1. Introduction

The thesis of the “death of art” or the “end of art” (*Ende der Kunst*) is both a central and a structural thesis in Hegel’s *Aesthetics* and one of the most discussed topics (maybe discussed too much, compared to other questions) of his philosophy. It has belonged as well to art practices and art theories from that time until the recent update in A. D. Danto’s writings and the discussions about them (see Iannelli 2014). One can wonder, nevertheless, how the End-of-Art-Thesis (EAT) (whereby art is a “thing of the past”, *etwas Vergangenes*) is compatible, even constitutive of a theory of contemporary art (whereby art is a thing per se as is self-consciousness or the spirit of the present time). The problem is both a current and a historical

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one. In the following, I will try to consider this paradox while returning to the very sources of Hegel's philosophy, i.e. to what is deemed the origin of the "rumour" of an "end of art" (Geulen 2002). I will discuss this question by relating only to the 19th century context, the Hegelian philosophy and its reception. I will take into account how the thesis appears in the last lecture on aesthetics given by Hegel at the Berlin University in 1828/29, especially in the transcript of Adolf Heimann, which has been recently published (Hegel 2017). But first, I would like to introduce my approach by clarifying both the philological and the philosophical problem.

i) The first difficulty is namely a philological one. Hegel died in Berlin in 1831 without having published his lectures on aesthetics. What we knew under the title *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik* until the end of the 20th century was the posthumous edition, published by his disciple, H.G. Hotho, which has been constantly republished and translated up until today (Hegel 1835-1838). However, recent scholarship since the 1990s has shown that this edition greatly distorted the content of Hegel's lectures and began with the edition of the original sources. Not only did Hotho not distinguish between his own taste and philosophy and that of his master, but his edition did not take into account the evolution of the course in the various versions of the lectures that Hegel provided between 1820 and 1829. It superimposed, on the contrary, the various lectures without giving any information about any possible transformation. What the sources show, in contrast, is that Hegel's philosophy, which is often regarded as a dogmatic, idealistic and closed system, when not a classical one, in fact is a dynamic, critical and concrete system of one substance with the present and modernity. Relating to our topic, this leads to the hypothesis that Hegel could have modified his fundamental thesis of the "end of art" or could have given different versions of it over the years, which would have been then mixed or contradictorily juxtaposed in Hotho's posthumous edition.

ii) This is related then to the philosophical problem concerning the status of the EAT in the Hegelian system. For Dieter Henrich (2003), for example, the thesis can be regarded as one "theorem" in Hegel's philosophy. It concerns not only the philosophy of art but the whole of the system. It determines the place of art as subordinated to religion and

philosophy (and reciprocally, the place of religion and philosophy in relation to art). Nevertheless, Hegel would have retreated – according to Henrich – in his last lecture in Winter 1828/29. He would have tried to introduce a soft version of the EAT which enables the possibility of art after the end of art. This “soft” thesis could be seen as a waste of aesthetic and metaphysical radicalism, on the one hand, as well as an open door, on the other hand, to provide an aesthetics of the present and modernity. In this more minimalistic aesthetics, Hegel would also have given up the “hard” and substantial conception of the work of art on behalf of what Henrich calls – in reference to Hegel – the “partiality” of the work of art. Such a position would be also more convenient for us today, under the conditions of modernity or postmodernity, under the conditions of a postmetaphysical approach of aesthetics. The sources of Hegel’s last lecture as well as some other documents recently published related to its reception now give us the opportunity to shed some new light on this philological and philosophical problem.

In the following, I will therefore go back to the origin of the “rumour” of the “death of art” and to the question of it possibly being attributed to Hegel, while returning to the first formulation of the thesis, namely in the letters written by his student and composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Then, I would like to explore whether Henrich’s assumption is tenable regarding Heimann’s transcript, in order to clarify to what extent the EAT is compatible or not with the possibility of modern art.

2. Mendelssohn Bartholdy and the “Rumour” of the “End-of-Art”

The origin of the “rumour” of the “death of art”, according to Hegel, can be found in two letters written by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Mendelssohn was a student at the Berlin University and attended Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics in the winter of 1828-29, just before beginning his journey through Europe. He wrote from Neapel to his father Abraham Mendelssohn Bartholdy, on Mai 7th 1831:

Aber toll ist es doch, daß Goethe und Thorwaldsen leben, daß Beethoven erst vor ein Paar Jahren gestorben ist, und daß H. behauptet, die deutsche Kunst sei mausetodt. (Mendelssohn Bartholdy 1861, 155; see also Nicolin 1970, 430)

A few months later, he wrote to his sister, from Lauterbrunnen, resuming his criticism by using another formulation. He does not say that art is “dead”, “mausetodt” according to the philosopher, but that art is over (or washed up), “Kunst ist aus”:

und da machte es mich grimmig, daß das Unwesen immer noch fortgeht, und daß der Philosoph, der behauptet die Kunst sei nun aus, immer noch fortbehauptet, die Kunst sei aus, als ob die überhaupt aufhören könnte. (Mendelssohn Bartholdy 1861, 256; see also Nicolin 1970, 432; Mendelssohn Bartholdy 2009, 367)

Both letters were first published after Felix’s death by the family within the well-known edition of his *Reisebriefe* (Mendelssohn Bartholdy 1861). Since a great number of people quoted were still alive, the names are often reduced to their initials. In the Hegel-Forschung [Hegel scholarship] as well as in the Mendelssohn-Forschung, it was established until now that the letter H. referred to Hegel (Nicolin 1970). However, the recent edition of the letters of Mendelssohn Bartholdy (2009) shows that in the original Felix actually meant Hotho:

Aber toll ist es, dass Goethe und Thorwaldsen leben, dass Beethoven erst vor ein Paar Jahren gestorben ist, und daß Hotho behauptet, die deutsche Kunst sei mausetodt. (Mendelssohn Bartholdy 2009, 264)

This is not an error made by the modern editors; the manuscript of that letter clearly mentions in all the letters the name of Hotho. This implies that Felix was *not* criticizing Hegel in his letters and not referring to his lectures on aesthetics. This astonishing discovery leads to the suspicion that Hotho and not Hegel has to be seen as the author of the EAT. But it also does not

exclude the possibility that Hotho was simply restating Hegel's position. So I have tried to find some explanations about what Hotho's conception of the "end of art" could have been at that time and how far his conception could have been different from Hegel's own assumption in his last lecture. I just want to make two short remarks.

i) The first thing is that Mendelssohn is using the adjective "mausetodt". I did not find in the sources of Hegel's lectures the idea that art could be "dead". I did not find either, as such, the idea that art is "aus" (as the last letter of Mendelssohn indicates). However, I have found, for example, this last expression in one of the writings of Hotho, i.e. in one of his *Morgenblatt* chronicles written in 1828. He wrote:

Ein Hauptgrund des allgemeinen Verfalls fast aller deutschen Bühnen ist in der heutigen Stellung der Kunst überhaupt zu suchen. Ihre Zeit ist aus; sie steht in dem Widerspruche, einerseits noch die Prätension zu haben alles Höchste und Beste, Tiefste, Gedigenste, alle großen Interessen des Lebens, alle Wahrheiten des Himmels und der Erde darzustellen zu wollen, und dennoch anderseits für die Darstellung solchen Inhalts nicht mehr die genügende Form zu seyn, und mehr und mehr inneren Ernst zur Sache nur des Spasses und Amüsemments verkehrt zu sehen. Die Kritik ist an die Stelle des Kunstgenusses getreten, und die Kunst hat ihre Majestät verloren. (Hotho 1828, 188)

We can notice that Hotho is using the EAT for criticizing what seems for him to be a decline of art in Germany. Art is becoming an entertainment without any true or ethical content. And that is precisely the form of art that Mendelssohn wanted to produce at that time. We can also notice that Hotho is speaking about the performances of the Theatre of Königsstadt, and this is exactly the place where Hegel liked to go to attend comedies and Italian opera. Hotho and Hegel did not agree about this kind of music and theatre. This was not a symptom of death or decline for Hegel. On the contrary, Hegel's enthusiasm for Italian opera is without any equivalent in his letters. And this was not only private entertainment for him, but the lectures of 1826 and 1828 show that his experience with Rossini's operas and especially with the performance of Italian singers improvising is a speculative one, and a

key for his music aesthetics.

ii) The second thing is that Mendelssohn evokes, in the first quotation, the possibility that there are no more (German) artists in the contemporary world. This could be confirmed by the quotation – believed to be by Hegel – in the posthumous edition of the Aesthetics (in the chapter about the “End of the Romantic Form of Art”) that it is no longer possible that great artists like “Dante, Ariost oder Shakespeare in unserer Zeit hervortreten” (“No Dante, Ariosto or Shakespeare can appear in our day”, Hegel 1835-1838, vol. 2, 236; Hegel 1970, vol. 14, 235; Geulen 2002, 14). I did not find this idea in Heimann’s transcript. But Thorwaldsen and Goethe are mentioned when Beethoven is not directly mentioned.

We can notice that this is a discussion between Hotho and Mendelssohn about the future of German art and not about art in general. It is obvious that Hotho – often in opposition to Hegel – tried to rehabilitate in his writings and in his edition German art from the past, while criticizing the productions of the present. In his own lectures on Goethe written in Winter 1832 (“Über Goethe als Dichter”) recently published by Francesca Iannelli (2007), Hotho considers that “the pure principle of art is exceeded” in the last period of Goethe’s production (the period of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, of the *West-Östlicher Diwan* and the last version of *Faust*) on behalf of a form of “Oriental wisdom”:

Das reine Prinzip der Kunst ist überschritten. Orientalische Elemente einer Weisheit, aber Wo es gilt, ist aber noch die alte Frische. (Hotho 1832/33, in: Iannelli 2007, 343)

There is no evidence that Hegel considers Goethe as a minor artist, or that his last productions would not belong to art, or that they would be expressions of a decadent form of art. On the contrary, Hegel undertook in his last lectures an apology of Goethe’s *West-östlicher Divan*, which was criticized at that time by some of his own nationalist students. Goethe’s *Divan* – like Klopstock’s Oden, like oriental Poetry – seems to consider the end of art as the fulfilment of the romantic work of art, when not the higher expression of freedom and subjectivity.

The fact that Mendelssohn does not attribute the EAT to Hegel but to Hotho in his letter, now makes us suspect that Hegel would not have indeed pronounced it in his lecture of 1828/29, but that could be indeed an extrapolation by Hotho in the posthumous edition.

3. The EAT in the Lectures of 1828-1829

But this is not really the fact. Things are more complex, as is usual when reading Hegel. It is not true that Hegel gave up the EAT in his last lecture. He emphasized on the contrary, such an assumption. Hegel even spoke of the “Auflösung der Kunst” (a “dissolution of art”, Hegel 2017, 206) referring to the end of the romantic form or to the antique comedy. In the introduction to his lecture, he spoke – according to Heimann, and what one does not find in the edition of Hotho and the other versions – about a “Vernichtung der Kunst” (an “annihilation of art”) (Hegel, 2017, 25). He also said that “Kunst hat auch ein Nach”, “art has also an after” which is the “Bewusstsein von Kunst”, the “consciousness of art” in modern times (ibid.). The conclusion of the lecture is:

Für uns ist die Kunstphilosophie eine Nothwendigkeit geworden, da wir über die Kunst hinaus sind. (Hegel 2017, 207)

According to this, the EAT does not imply that art is not possible in the present day. Hegel mentions that art is still in progress. There is no end to art history, but our relationship to art has changed. There is now a scientific consideration for the works of art instead of a fetish or religious attitude towards objects. Not only does the EAT imply that art is possible in the present, but it makes possible the apprehension of art as art, the consideration that objects are works of art. This opens the possibility for a new “régime esthétique” as Rancière would say for an aesthetical relationship of everything. This is the end of a heteronomous relationship towards art. Before this aesthetic turn, works of art were not perceived as such; they were, for example, religious objects.

All this seem to confirm A. Danto’s interpretation of the EAT. But

this does not necessary mean that “the philosophy of art” is the “fulfilment and fruition” of art, or that “art already is philosophy in its vivid forms” as Danto (2005, 16) writes. Art is not a form of philosophy for Hegel, but – according to me – art is, in his system, the realization of a radical principle of freedom and subjectivity, which is specific to modern times, which can be seen as the signature of modernity. This principle of freedom and subjectivity finds its concretization both in Goethe’s last poetic works and in Rossini’s vocal music.

This is the reason why the “hard” version of the EAT, where art belongs to the past, is compatible with the soft thesis of the “end of art”, where art belongs to the present as a form of “art after the end of art”, i.e. art in the period after the age of enlightenment. There is no contradiction and there is need to think that this would be an evolution in Hegel’s thought, as Henrich thinks.

If we come back to Henrich’s (2003) hypothesis, we have also to know, if Hegel had introduced a new category in his last lecture, namely the category of “objective humour” to describe the final state of the work of art at the end of the romantic form of art. But this is not an innovation which appeared in the system in 1828. The category of “objective humour” is attested to in the lecture of 1820/21, in the transcript of W. Asheberg, published by H. Schneider (Hegel 1995). The conception of humour is to be found in all different versions of Hegel’s lectures. Moreover, the concept of humour is as well attested to in Hotho’s own lectures on aesthetics from 1833 on. And it does not mean that a humorous work of art like Goethe’s *Divan* would be a minor form of the work of art, and that Hegel’s legitimization of contemporary art should be what Henrich calls a Biedermeier option. The humorous works of art – according to Hegel – are progressive forms; they are not less significant than the works of art of previous times. They are, on the contrary, the realization of the radical principle of modernity we have already mentioned, i.e. the successful expression of free subjectivity. The work of art disappears as such to make way for a higher principle, which is the positive assertion of a new concept of subjectivity. The end of romantic art opens a period where subjectivity is emancipated from the objectal and naive conception of the work of art. The

subjectivity of the producing subject (the brilliant artist) and that of the spectator lays claim to its rights: its superiority regarding the content and the materiality of the work of art. The death of art is only the death of the object: the *Zerfall* of the ontological conception, not the death of art as such. This is why the “soft” thesis regarding art after the end of art is not a minor thesis, a concession toward the metaphysical options; but this soft thesis coincides with the central principle of Hegel’s philosophy.

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4. Paganini, Humour and the End of Art

I would like to evoke another example of humorous work characteristic of modernity for Hegel, which does not belong to the field of poetry like Goethe’s *Divan* nor to the field of vocal music like Rossini’s operas; but, in continuity to this, to the field of instrumental music. Hegel uses for the first time the concept of the “humorous” at the end of the chapter on music in his lecture of 1828/29. He describes there the phenomenon of musical virtuosity and ingenuity as a form of the fulfilment of the musical work of art. The “genius shows his mastery upon the exteriority and his interior unattached freedom”. The fact that the musician “interrupts himself in a humoristic way” is a mark of his “freedom” and “free will” (*Willkür*):

In der Virtuosität verliert das Instrument sein Recht als Sache, es wird Organ des Künstlers, das Genie zeigt seine Meisterschaft über das Äußere und innere ungebundene Freiheit. Das Momentane beweist die Willkür, melodisch fortzugehen, humoristisch sich zu unterbrechen, und auch innerlich seine Freiheit über das Instrument darzutun. Der Künstler kann aus einem beschränkten Instrument, wie Violine, ein großes machen, den Charakter überwinden, und die Mannigfaltigkeit von Klangarten anderer Instrumente hervorbringen. Wir haben jetzt das wundervolle Geheimnis vor den Ohren, daß ein solches Instrument zu einem selbstlosen, beseelten Organ geworden [ist], und das innerliche Produzieren der genialen Phantasie wie in keiner andern Kunst. (Hegel 2017, 187)

Hegel probably refers here to the performances of Niccolò Paganini he had heard in Berlin at that time, in the Spring of 1829 (see Olivier 2003, 80). Such a performance would have legitimated for him this new and conclusive

development regarding modern instrumental music and especially modern virtuosity, which was criticized in the previous lectures. The reason for this new appreciation is to be found in the fact that this form of music is related to the same principle as the late modernity of humour, of radical subjectivity and freedom. As Alessandro Bertinetto (2012) reminds us, Paganini does not repeat himself: this kind of improvisation is a “fleeting moment” which is hard to seize, even theoretically and which questions the objective structure of the work of art. In Hotho’s edition, this mention of the “humorous” does not appear and we do not understand the significance of this new evaluation of musical virtuosity within the framework of Hegel’s aesthetics. Like Goethe’s *Divan* and Rossini’s operas, this example of a non-old-German-work of art is underestimated. But it is also true that this does not confirm the idea that art would be “a thing of the past”, or that artists like Dante, Ariosto and Shakespeare are no longer possible in the present.

5. Conclusion

I would like to conclude in this paper by distinguishing again between two interpretations of the EAT we have considered. The first one is a naive and objective interpretation of the EAT: the idea that there is no more work of art in the present, or that the artistic productions of the present are lower than the productions of the past; there is no more innovation. This first interpretation seems to agree with Hotho’s position but not with Hegel’s. The other interpretation is a more critical one, which concerns a rather epistemological level. The end of art is the beginning of a free reflexive and critical or philosophical relationship toward the works of art. The EAT is therefore a structural thesis which makes the work of art and the discourse on art possible, at least the philosophy of art. So we have to understand dialectically that the EAT is the condition of the possibility of art, the beginning of art as such. Art does not only survive in the philosophical or critical discourse, but also survives in the exhibition of the creative and intellectual process of its production, which thus becomes the substantial element.

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