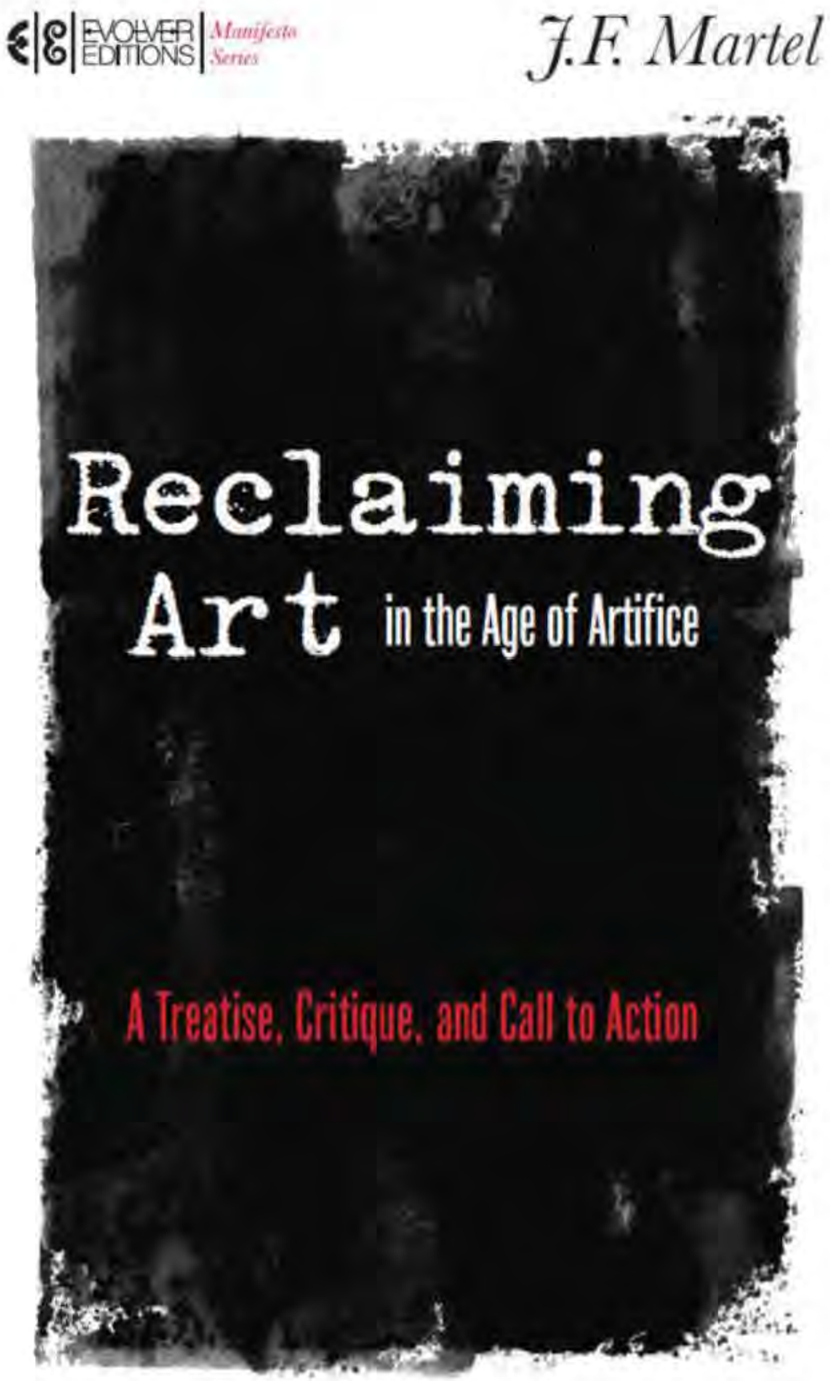

EVOLVER EDITIONS Manifesto Series

J.F. Martel

Reclaiming Art in the Age of Artifice

A Treatise, Critique, and Call to Action

Praise for Reclaiming Art in the Age of Artifice

"J.F. Martel is an incisive cultural critic with a penetrating vision of art. His book is a quiet manifesto for the creative act, reminding us of the numinous quality of the aesthetic object, as well as the intrinsic strangeness of our lives in the world."

—Daniel Pinchbeck, author of Breaking Open the Head and 2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl

"The complete colonization of the mind is the final frontier of capitalist domination. As Martel is aware, this domination proceeds, at ever-increasing speed, through the reduction of the imagination to that which can be predicted and controlled. Far from being merely the commodification of the aesthetic, this project is engineered to eliminate the ineffability and uniqueness of human existence, as such. This book is a beautifully written lament and a passionate, prophetic plea for what remains not only of art but also of humanity."

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Manifesto

Art is the name we have given to humanity's most primal response to the mystery of existence. It was in the face of the mystery that dance, music, poetry, and painting were born.

Since the dawn of the current era, art has been under threat.

In the place where it belongs on the cultural landscape, two idols stand like golden calves demanding worship:

Pornography, the use of aesthetics to manipulate through desire; and

Propaganda, the use of aesthetics to manipulate through fear.

Even where true art is made, powerful economic and political forces are there to subjugate it to one of the idols.

The work of art is apolitical and free of moralism. "The artist," Wilde said, "is free to express everything."

It is precisely the absence of political and moral interest that makes art an agent of liberation wherever it appears.

Art opposes tyranny by freeing beauty from the clutches of the powers of this world.

True beauty is not pretty. It is a tear in the façade of the everyday, a sudden revelation of the forces seething beneath the surface of things.
Only the revelation of beauty can save our world.

The artist is always and for all time a seer, and artistic creation is always and for all time an act of prophecy.

The artist does not choose the prophecy. Rather, the prophetic shines through her work. It comes from elsewhere.
The artist therefore needs enough courage to stay true to the work at hand. Even greater courage is required of those to whom the finished work is given, for their interests will always recommend dismissing the vision for fear of its implications.

Only through art can human beings express and share the archetypal powers that shape the universe.

To abandon art would mean forfeiting the gift of vision, which, by all appearances, was given to humans alone.
To reclaim it might enable us to recover our faith in this world, and act in accordance with that faith for the benefit of life on earth.

Preface

Think of one of those rare, truly exceptional outings to the cinema. In the lobby afterward the experience elicits from us a language of paralysis and disappearance: "I forgot myself. It could have gone on forever." Stepping out into the street, we feel that somehow nothing is the same as it was before. The passing cars, the night sky above the glass towers, the streetlights reflected on the wet pavement: everything glows with a strange immediacy and newness. It is as if the film had done something to the world. A similar thing might happen when we put down a great novel or take in a powerful piece of music.

The Book of Revelation contains a memorable line: "Behold, I make all things new."[1] Reflecting on this ancient text, the critic Northrop Frye defined the Apocalypse as "the way the world looks once the ego has disappeared."[2] Every great artistic work is a quiet apocalypse. It tears off the veil of ego, replacing old impressions with new ones that are at once inexorably alien and profoundly meaningful. Great works of art have a unique capacity to arrest the discursive mind, raising it to a level of reality that is more expansive than the egoic dimension we normally inhabit. In this sense, art is the transfiguration of the world.

This book is an attempt to explore the nature of art at the present historical moment. It does not constitute a definitive statement or aesthetic theory so much as a journey into the realm of art, and a personal one at that. Nevertheless I hope the reader will emerge with a deeper appreciation for art's unique power, as well as a sense of urgency with regard to our need to make art a more central part of our lives and communities. My belief is that doing so is essential if we are to find solutions to the serious problems we face today, be they political, environmental, economic, or spiritual.

That may seem a silly idea at first glance. After all, what could be more superfluous than art in the face of the authoritarian turn in contemporary politics, the systematic devastation of the biosphere, the ever-widening economic gap, or the rising tide of anxiety and mental illness? The objection is valid so long as we continue to see art as simply a source of entertainment or a platform for "self-expression." Art, however, is more than that. It deals in consciousness itself, the stuff dreams are made of. In fact—and this is a major contention of this book—art is the only truly effective means we have of engaging, in a communal context, the psyche on its own terms. My argument is that by rethinking art in that light we can reorient ourselves individually and collectively toward alternative modalities of being, setting the stage for what Daniel Pinchbeck calls a new mythological consciousness able to resolve issues "through symbol and image, without need of rational explanation."[3]

Art breaks down the barriers that normally stand between the physical and the psychic, between your soul and the souls of others. "Through art alone are we able to emerge from ourselves, to know what another person sees of a universe which is not the same as our own and of which, without art, the landscapes would remain as unknown to us as those that may exist on the moon."[4] For the French novelist Marcel Proust, who wrote those words, art is a meeting place in which human beings commune at a level that ordinary language and sign systems do not allow. Without art, connection at this deeper level is impossible. This is a troubling idea to consider in a time when aesthetic forces ranging from sensationalistic news spectacles to manipulative viral marketing seem bent on achieving a very different end. The all-consuming razzle-dazzle of sound and light with which we are bombarded does not draw us into the secret universe of another consciousness. On the contrary, it fools us into taking as self-evident a picture of life that in reality belongs to nobody, effectively producing an artificial space wherein the market and the state can thrive as though they were inextricable parts of the cosmos rather than the mutable accidents of history that they are. We are in danger today of losing the capacity to distinguish between artistic creation as Proust defined it and the aesthetic creativity that goes into a commercial jingle, a new car design, or a hollow summer blockbuster. If our confusion suits the reigning political and economic regime just fine, it is because it stands as proof that the operation to supplant the dream-space of soul and psyche with a fully controllable interface is going according to plan.

Should we speak then of true art, and contrast it with other aesthetic forces that are in full swing today? Is there a "Way of Art" that we are in danger of losing in our preoccupation with information, amusement, and distraction? What do we gain by recognizing art's power and letting it act upon us? These are questions that this short book touches on. My hope is that the answers it proposes can contribute to a wider discussion.

ONE

"A Sudden Explosive Event"

In his 1970 Nobel Prize lecture, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn proposed that if art has never revealed its intrinsic "function" to us, it is because such a thing is beyond our ken. For the Russian writer, we are mistaken when we call art a human innovation; we ought instead to see it as a gift, something that came to us from beyond the bounds of our world. Solzhenitsyn illustrates his point by comparing the work of art to a technological marvel that a man from the proverbial Stone Age comes across in the wilderness. Unable to penetrate its secrets, the man can only turn the object this way and that, looking for "some ordinary use to which he can put it, without suspecting an extraordinary one." Solzhenitsyn goes on:

> So also we, holding Art in our hands, confidently consider ourselves to be its masters; boldly we direct it, we renew,

> reform and manifest it; we sell it for money, use it to please those in power; turn to it at one moment for amusement … and at another … for the passing needs of politics and for narrow-minded social ends. But art is not defiled by our efforts, neither does it thereby depart from its true nature, but on each occasion and in each application it gives to us a part of its secret inner light.[1]

Art is mysterious because its purpose is unknown and its effect always exceeds the ends we put it to. If it is true, for instance, that nearly all human societies see the possession of artistic objects as a sign of prestige and power, it may simply be because art's primary quality makes it a suitable sign for those who want to legitimize their authority. And while it may be the case that art ennobles us by bringing beauty into our lives, or that it conveys complex cultural ideas simply and effectively, or that it preserves the beliefs of one age for the next—again, these functions could very well follow from art's original, mysterious, irreducible shining. Just as it is the gleam of gold that makes it precious in our eyes and not its preciousness that makes it gleam, so the primary quality of art could precede all of its uses and appropriations. In other words art may be something before it becomes all the things we claim it to be.

The sheer variety of aesthetic theories may be the best evidence we have that art cannot be boiled down to a single use, and even that it eludes usefulness altogether. In fact, one of the reasons art affects us so deeply is that it calls us out of the means-and-ends thinking that has us reducing everything to a function. Oscar Wilde's infamous statement, "All art is quite useless," was more than a pithy remark aimed at ruffling Victorian feathers; as far as he was concerned, it was a plain statement of fact. For the Aesthetic Movement of which Wilde was a leading exponent, art stood in absolute defiance of utility. Which is to say that the Aesthetes saw works of art as things whose only purpose is to be perceived—and this may be as close to a catch-all definition as we are likely to get. Nevertheless, even the Aesthetes understood that in the day-to-day we treat art like anything else. Only when we encounter it on its own ground, out of any context that would allow us to make it serve a calculable end, does its peculiar nature become difficult to ignore.

One way to demonstrate the inherent power of art is to go back to its earliest beginnings. This is what Werner Herzog does in Cave of Forgotten Dreams (2010), his documentary about the paintings of the Chauvet Cave in the Ardèche Valley of Southern France. The Chauvet paintings include some of the oldest known at the time of this writing, dating back over thirty thousand years. Most are depictions of animals—horses, ibex, lions, owls, and others, the only human figurations being a series of handprints and the partial figure of a woman. A bull is given eight legs to create the illusion of movement, and a rhinoceros is shown with a sequence of heads, giving the impression that it is thrusting its horns into the air. The painters deliberately placed these dynamic images in parts of the cave untouched by the light of day, obliging their audience to see them by firelight, in a play of billowing shadows that brought them to life before their eyes. These details lead Herzog to speculate that the cave painters were engaged in a form of "proto-cinema." Be that as it may, there is certainly nothing crude or naive about the images, which on the contrary exhibit a high degree of technical skill, especially when we note the uneven surfaces and primitive materials. They are naturalistic yet highly stylized, strange yet beautiful.

The obvious question is why a Paleolithic society primarily concerned with survival would bother to descend into the bowels of the earth to make movies in the dark. This is what the scientists in Cave of Forgotten Dreams are trying to figure out, though they do not seem quite convinced that they will succeed. Through Herzog's lens, we see them moving about the cave like pilgrims in a Gothic cathedral or space explorers in the ruins of an alien civilization, giving every detail of the environment the same meticulous scrutiny. To avoid disturbing even the dust on the floor, they severely restrict their access to parts of the cave, even to the point of impeding the very studies these measures are meant to facilitate. It is as though the most innocuous detail could solve the entire puzzle.

One scientist reports having had overpowering dreams during his first foray into the cave, dreams of supernatural lions, “powerful things” who showed him a new, “indirect” way of understanding the world. He had to withdraw from the project temporarily for fear of being overwhelmed by these nightly encounters. Later on, another researcher points to some flecks of charcoal on the floor, explaining that they fell from a cave painter’s torch. Standing in awe before the smattering of prehistoric detritus, her expression recalls nothing so much as a baffled UFO witness pointing out the traces of the flying saucer she claims landed in her backyard.

Incidentally, at several points Cave of Forgotten Dreams begins to feel more like a science fiction film than a documentary. The sight of the scientists tackling the enigma of art recalls typical scenes from that genre, among them Solzhenitsyn’s image of the hunter finding an alien artifact, and the hominids approaching the black monolith in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968). The science fiction analogy is appropriate because the discovery of the Chauvet Cave is closer to the hypothetical unearthing of extraterrestrial artifacts than we might initially think. These “memories from long forgotten dreams,” as Herzog calls the paintings, seem to belong to “a familiar but distant universe.”[2] The fact that they rival the great art of later ages in emotive power is at once comforting and disquieting. In the images this prehistoric people have bequeathed to us, we get a glimpse of something like a shared humanity, but we also gaze into a stranger part of ourselves, something reaching to the depths. Since we do not know the context in which the paintings were made, we cannot in good faith chalk them up to some clear pragmatic end. We are seeing art in its naked state, deprived of any discernible appropriation. This can trouble our secular sensibilities since it confronts us not just with the mysteries of nature, but more strikingly still with the riddle of the presence of such things as us in the otherwise coherent physical world. Given the fact that the molecular chemistry that makes life possible is the same throughout the cosmos, would finding works of art on Mars or a more remote planet be any more uncanny than finding them here on earth?

The Chauvet Cave is one in a long list of archaeological finds revealing the aesthetic genius of the Upper Paleolithic. The famous Venus figurines of the Rhine Valley were carved by the same people who made the paintings, though some are five thousand years older than the earliest images from Chauvet. The same lost culture also fashioned ivory flutes designed to play a full pentatonic scale, as well as statues of fantastical creatures, such as a humanoid being with the head of a lion. Based on these discoveries, scholars have had to make the extraordinary observation that artistic expression does not appear to have evolved over time. Quoting Herzog, "it rather burst onto the scene like a sudden explosive event."[3] As if to illustrate just that, the lead archaeologist in the documentary points out that the image of a female pelvis in the cave appears alongside that of a monstrous bull, a composition eerily reminiscent of Pablo Picasso's modern paintings of the woman and the minotaur. Incidentally, it was Picasso who, upon visiting the caves of Lascaux, sighed that the first artists had "invented everything."

The irruption of art into time some forty thousand years ago signals much more than the invention of a new cultural practice. As Herzog notes in his bold narration, it marks the birth of the "modern human soul," by which I hear not reason so much as the imagination, the power to think in and through images. Without this faculty, human intelligence would distinguish itself from that of the higher animals only quantitatively. Many animals use tools, ratiocination, even language of a sort, but only humans are capable of the symbolic jamming that allows for the creation of works of art. Only humans seem able to drop the logic of immediate need to engage in an activity, which, from a purely evolutionary standpoint, can only be considered superfluous if not downright dangerous for our survival.

So there was no evolution, no slow birth: the aesthetic imagination sprung up fully formed like Athena from Zeus's cracked skull. Besides the obvious "Why?," the question that preoccupies scientists and thinkers is how. How can a life form evolved to survive and reproduce like any other suddenly interrupt the automatic drift of reflex and instinct to produce meaningful images in pictures, songs, sculptures, poetry, and dance? And why has it continued to do so ever since? The most puzzling thing about art may be that it leaves no one as puzzled as the ones who make it. In a sense, art is inseparable from puzzlement itself. "Right back in the early morning twilights of mankind," Solzhenitsyn continues in his Nobel lecture, "we received it from Hands which we were too slow to discern. And we were too slow to ask: for what purpose have we been given this gift? What are we to do with it?"[4] It isn't just a flair for romance that prompts him to see art as a Gift; the choice of metaphor is as good as any. If its insinuation of a transcendent Giver is too much for some, then Herzog's phrase of a sudden explosion can serve just as well, for the point is that art was an event in the truest sense of the word, something that nothing coming before could have enabled us to predict, and whose causes remain as obscure now as they ever have, and perhaps ever will.

It is a strange thing to catalog the conflicting theories as to what the first artists thought they were doing down there in the caves, because the truth is that, to this day, we do not know why we make art. In the end, art may not be our invention at all. It may well have appeared in history as it does in the life of many individual artists: as an outside call, a sudden flash of inspiration, an inner wanderlust exerting such a powerful pull that ultimately we would have to say that Picasso got it wrong: the early humans didn't invent art. Art invented humanity.

* * *

The birth of the imagination gets a powerful retelling in Kubrick's aforementioned 2001, wherein a mysterious monument appears in primeval Africa to endow our evolutionary ancestors with the power to imagine. In the film's most iconic scene, one of the hominids who encountered the monolith examines some animal bones in the desert. Whereas in the past the bones would have held no interest for him, now he finds himself seeing into them and trying to divine their meaning. In his mind the bones coalesce into an image amid the flux of the world, an image from which he catches a glimpse of the Big Picture. In a flash he becomes aware of the entire cycle of life and death, and of his place within that cycle as a mortal creature. It is through this sudden leap of the imagination that the idea of using one of the bones as a hunting weapon occurs to him. As he picks up a large femur and uses it to smash the other bones apart, new images come to him of tapirs falling in the hunt. The imaginative faculty has given him the power to perceive Self, Life, and World as separate parts of an ineffable whole, to formulate a gestalt of his total situation while projecting new possibilities that could be realized through action on his part.

Samuel Coleridge described the imagination as "the living power and prime agent of all human perception."[5] It achieves its fullest potential in artistic expression because it is there that it transcends mere representation to bring forth unprecedented images of the world. Once freed from the bind of immediate biological need and mechanical causation, the mind acquires a kind of second sight. Thinking becomes a process through which the virtual potentialities of nature can be perceived and actualized. While a rat is unable to see a piece of cheese as anything but food, for a human being a thing as banal as a block of cheddar contains countless potentialities: it could be a gift, a projectile, a paperweight, a science experiment, material for a sculpture, not to mention rat bait. If the meanings we ascribe to things depend on the ends they can serve, then humanity has the power to generate a potentially infinite number of meanings for anything. Kubrick's monolith can be construed as a symbol for the blank canvas of mind itself, the interior movie screen upon which new visions, unprompted by the algorithms of sensory-motor reflex, are endlessly projected. It is the supreme imago, or primordial image, that encompasses the vast field of the psyche as humans experience it. The Serpent wasn’t kidding when it told Eve that by eating of the forbidden fruit, she and Adam would become “as gods, knowing good and evil.” So far as we know, only the human mind can detach from the physical plane and think in the absolute terms of morality, extrapolating from the way things are, the way things ought to be. Small wonder the authors of Genesis wrote that human beings were created in the image of God.

Today, the tendency is to eliminate the notion of any categorical difference between humans and other animals. Popular science and secularism have a stake in proving that the old idea of humankind’s primacy over other species is nothing but an arrogant conceit. Insofar as primacy implies moral excellence, we can hardly disagree: after all, only humans are capable of true evil. There is also good reason for claiming that many if not most of our actions are prompted by the same blind instincts that govern other organisms. But even the arch-rationalist Richard Dawkins, in The Selfish Gene, admits that human beings make an uncanny exception to the rules of life on earth: they seem to have the ability to redirect the commands of instinct in ways no other animal could even conceive of.[6] While it may be true that humans have a monopoly on evil, it is also true that only humans are able to speak in terms of good and evil to begin with. In the grand scheme we may be no more relevant than other sentient beings, but what other species has the luxury of being able to proclaim its own irrelevance in the cosmos? Whether we are superior or inferior to cheetahs and blackpoll warblers may be up for debate. That we are different from them in a fundamental way is not. Other animals do astounding things, but spinning free-floating images of possible worlds from raw psychic material isn’t one of them. In the creative imagination, things are revealed to humans that are hidden from the rest of the known cosmos.

This is not an argument for anthropocentricism. I am merely saying that by denying the human imagination the unique place it occupies in the theater of nature, we are forfeiting the one thing that can bestow upon us the nobility we admire in other species. Homo sapiens is the animal that means something, or that desperately wants to mean something. Undoubtedly our thirst for meaning has a lot to do with our petrifying awareness of death, itself a side effect of the imagination, and one that makes our unique position as much a curse as it is a gift.

As the prime fruit of the imagination, art is the incontrovertible sign of humanity's presence on earth. But what constitutes the human itself? The prehistoric paintings at Chauvet confront us with a dimension of ourselves that, though familiar in ways, remains in many respects unknown and may ultimately be unknowable. Human consciousness has access to a powerful otherworld, the place of dreams and myth, poetry and lunacy. I will refer to it in this book as the "imaginal," the name Henry Corbin gave to the intermediate realm, central to the cosmology of the Sufi mystics, between the rational mind of Man and the inscrutable mind of God. As a concrete manifestation of this imaginal realm in the public sphere, art calls us back to the source as a matter of course.

We do not know why we make art, and yet we cannot subtract it from our self-image as a species without losing the thing that makes us what we are. When it comes to human nature, the Sphinx may have said it best with her riddle about the creature that walks first on four legs, then on two, and then on three. Oedipus's answer, according to the story, was Man, who begins life crawling, then walks upright, and ends his days leaning on a crutch. On the surface, the riddle amounts to a clever joke, but at the level of dream and symbol it shows us the human being as a protean entity, a shape-shifter whose nature must remain elusive given its capacity to become all things through the imagination —the human being as a human becoming. If Solzhenitsyn was right to compare art to an extraterrestrial artifact, then we are the aliens in the story. Art discloses our own mystery even as it lays bare the mystery of consciousness and the mystery of the world. It is paranormal, an anomaly casting doubt upon our most cherished certainties about the nature of reality. We must therefore approach it as we would any other anomaly that simultaneously demands and defies an explanation, even if our faith in explanations is precisely the thing it asks us to abandon in the end. The painters of the Chauvet Cave may have worked by firelight, and their modern counterparts may work in the glow of spotlights or LED screens, but at the deepest level artists have always worked by the light of stars yet unborn.

TWO

Art and Artifice

In 1917 the ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev commissioned a new libretto from Jean Cocteau. When the young poet asked for advice on how to proceed, Diaghilev replied with a simple directive: “Astonish me.” The phrase would serve Cocteau as a mantra throughout his career, resurfacing, for instance, at the beginning of his classic film Orpheus. Not surprising, as few statements could better encapsulate the impetus that has driven artistic creation since the beginning. Astonishment is the litmus test of art, the sign by which we know we have been magicked out of practical and utilitarian enterprises to confront the bottomless dream of life in sensible form. Art astonishes and is born of astonishment. There is only one thing that it can be said to “communicate” more effectively than other mediums can, and that is the weirdness of the

Real.

This does not mean that art can't accurately represent actual things and situations, only that such representations are secondary to the overarching goal of capturing a shard of pure reality with such force and immediacy as to rid it of all that does not conform to direct experience. A naturalist painter in nineteenth-century Paris and an abstract expressionist in twentieth-century Manhattan could scarcely differ more in terms of their style and interests; nevertheless, they are united in their drive to capture the raw stuff of immediate experience with arrangements of lines and colors. The particular attributes of their respective bodies of work are varying means for achieving a common end. Both are realists in the real sense of the word. Regardless of personal convictions or professional concerns, an artist's power comes down to two things: her sensitivity to the radical mystery of existence, and the artistry and craft with which she can channel that mystery into an object or performance. Neither existential awe nor a given metaphysical outlook need to serve as an explicit motivation. Simply, the emergence of artistic vision—and the need to express this vision without distorting or conceptualizing it—is contingent upon an underlying wonderment at being itself, a wonderment without which there would be no art.

To be astonished is to be caught unawares by the revelation of realities denied or repressed in the everyday. Astonishment has an intellectual as well as an emotional component—in it, the brain and the heart come together. Far from distracting us from the strange and the uncanny in life, the astonishment evoked by great artistic works puts them square in our sights. The work demands that we feel and think the mystery of our passage through this body, on this earth, in this universe. We realize afterward that the world is not what we thought it was: something hidden, impossible to communicate though clearly expressed in the work has risen into the light of awareness, and the share of the Real to which we are privy is proportionately expanded.

Every great work of art constitutes a complete image of life, conveying in a palpable way the image maker's awe at the way things are. At the literal level, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (1845) features a bleak November night, a black bird, and a dead woman—only this and nothing more. But taken as a whole it embraces the fullness of life and death. Even in the case of less overtly mystical works, such as Edgar Degas's seemingly benign pictures of ballerinas, an attentive look can trigger effects capable of launching us out of the ordinary and into the Weird. ("Why this moment? That hand? That shadow?") Art calls to the surface of things their real and immanent strangeness.

Virtually everyone has been astonished by at least one work of art in the past, even if for some it could only have happened in youth, before the world had strapped on the dream-stifling armature of responsible adulthood. Wherever or whenever the experience occurs, it seems to enjoy a kind of absolute reality in the minds of those who have it. Caught in the throes of astonishment, we feel as though we were experiencing something that transcends personal opinion and relative viewpoints, and that does so with such force that it would seem absurd, after the fact, to entertain the possibility that it was all just in our heads. As Immanuel Kant explained, aesthetic rapture is a peculiar kind of subjective phenomenon, since it presents itself as anything but subjective. It asks to be shared with others in hopes that they too might experience this thing that has had such a profound effect upon us. Naturally, the desire to share our astonishment is bound to be frustrated as we meet people who respond to our beloved work with indifference or even repulsion. We then remember that the affective power of works of art varies from person to person, and even from moment to moment within the same person's life, a fact we usually put down to personal taste, though little consideration is given to what that term might mean. People have their own inclinations, and given that the aesthetic is held, not just by Kant but also by common wisdom, to be a private affair, its variability across the broad spectrum of human personalities can only seem inevitable.

Consequently many people, from the Socrates of Plato's Republic onward, have warned us of the dangers of art, claiming that ultimately it comes down to emotional manipulation and sensorial trickery. In their view, which courts the status quo in a culture such as our own that judges art primarily on the basis of entertainment value, artistic works are inexorably "psychological," having no substance outside the brains they impact. After all (we are told), artistic artifacts exist in specific cultural and historical milieus, and their perceived aesthetic quality is inseparable from the established sign systems in which they were formed. Inuit throat singing and Japanese Noh theater may be celebrated as high achievements in their respective cultures, but the typical Westerner is likely to find them inaccessible, if not repellent, on first encounter. The existence of profound cultural variants in the aesthetic realm has led to the widespread belief that art isn't only subjective but utterly relative, the whole show boiling down to cultural conditioning. Most educated people in the West subscribe implicitly to this theory, which might dictate, for instance, that the attachment Irish people feel to their folk songs has nothing to do with objective quality and everything to do with how the Irish have been taught to respond to certain tunes in a certain manner. While this may be true in some cases (it would be wrong, I think, to see popularity as proof that a thing is an artistic masterpiece—think of the latest stock pop on the radio), it wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that the theory began to be applied categorically and across the spectrum. Today, aesthetic relativism has become something of a dogma even in artistic circles. As a result, the term art has become a floating signifier, applicable to anything and nothing, while art itself has come to be perceived as a malleable concept shaped under specific circumstances between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and destined to change—if not disappear—in the course of time.

From this point of view, to speak of art as a universal aspect of the human ethos could only be construed as naive. Be that as it may, that is exactly the view that I want to entertain here. From the position I adopt in this book, art is an objective pursuit with the same claim to truth as science, albeit truth of a different order. At the very least the consistency and universality of aesthetic expression throughout history and around the globe suggests that the undertaking that finds its modern formulation in the concept of art is a distinct sphere of activity with its own ontology. My belief is that what the modern West calls art is the direct outcome of a basic human drive, an inborn expressivity that is inextricably bound with the creative imagination. It is less a product of culture than a natural process manifesting through the cultural sphere. One could go so far as to argue that art must exist in order for culture to emerge in the first place.*

Regardless of its essence and origin, one thing seems certain: art bears witness to the bafflement that the mere fact of existence elicits in our brains, which the imagination has cleaved from the rest of creation. It is the means by which we can express the imaginal realities that precede the divisions and reductions of the discursive mind. In a sense the first artist was not the painter in the cave but whoever dared give an answer to the enigma of the night sky with its million stars. No scientific answer could do justice to this enigma. The naturalist theory that would reduce art, myth, and religion to primitive forms of inquiry awaiting the arrival of the scientific method is the result of a gross misunderstanding. The wonder we feel when we look at the stars is not concerned with the mechanical how of things, but with their form and purpose—the why of it all. "Why?" is a problem science can't lick; in fact, the very nature of science prevents it from even framing the problem. What science does—and does beautifully—is to enrich the mystery by revealing ever deeper layers of the physical universe, which becomes more puzzling with each new discovery. Any adequate response to the mystery of existence must be poetic, for only the poetic can take on the "why." If poetic answers are always figurative, never literal, it is because no sooner has the question of being been raised than we leave the world of determinate things to travel in a far stranger country. Rather than solving the riddle, art frames the riddle in such a way that its insolubility becomes splendidly evident. In the aesthetic dimension of vision and dream, the question in itself is an answer. Art as manifested in myth is a way for human beings to share and celebrate their unknowing.

Yet the question remains: Why does art elicit such divergent reactions from us? How can a work that bowls one person over leave another cold? Doesn't the variability of the aesthetic feeling support the view that art is culturally determined and relative? Maybe not, if we consider the possibility that the artistic experience depends not on some subjective mood but on an individually acquired (hence variable) power to be affected by art, a capacity developed through one's culture in tandem with one's unique character. For evidence of this we can point to works that seem to ignore cultural boundaries altogether, affecting people of different backgrounds in comparable ways even though the specific articulation of their personal responses continues to vary. Consider the plays of William Shakespeare, or Greek theater, or the fairy tales that have sprung up in similar forms on every continent. We could not be farther removed from the people who painted in the Chauvet Cave, nor could we be more oblivious as to the significance they ascribed to their pictures. Yet their work affects us across the millennia. Everyone responds to them differently, of course, and the spirit in which people are likely to receive them now probably differs significantly from how it was at the beginning. But these permutations revolve around a solid core, something present in the images themselves.

If the basic power of a given artistic work is objective, then it exists whether or not there are people there to experience it. The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, may be empty as you read these words, but the dark paintings are hanging there even now, as hauntingly present in your absence as they would be if you were sitting in front of them. Incidentally, Mark

Rothko is a painter who has been described by some as an artist of universal appeal and by others as pretentious or inaccessible. Speaking personally, it was only after several exposures that I finally got Rothko. When that happened I felt that I was finally seeing something that had been there all along, only I had been blind to it until then. Similarly there are many people who, while initially perplexed by Inuit throat singing, have since come to appreciate its strange and sensual beauty. Is it not possible that these people aren't fooling themselves and have in fact learned to apprehend new forms of beauty that are potentially accessible to anyone? We tend to see our "personal tastes" as positive personality traits, whereas they could just as well indicate limitations that we might overcome given the right opportunity, the appropriate context, and a little courage. Each person's unique take on reality will no doubt favor certain aesthetic experiences over others, but it may be that the world is filled with potential aesthetic experiences that our "tastes" prevent us from having for no good reason.

What I mean by the "power to be affected" has nothing to do with enjoyment. Ultimately, whether we judge an artistic work to be enjoyable or not may be immaterial when we consider the effect it has on us. A film might affect us in profound ways even though we found it difficult to watch or failed to grasp the point, if any, that the filmmakers were trying to get across. Most people have experienced artistic works that, although their own egos may have found them lacking in certain respects, continued to work on them long afterward, subtly altering them whether they wished it to or not. The crucial factor isn't whether we have been amused or delighted by a work but whether we have let the forces within it penetrate the closed perimeter of our lives and expand our horizons. True sensibility, real good taste, involves the ability to recognize when such forces are present, and to distinguish between superficial reactions and the deeper affects these forces elicit.

Today, the propensity to be affected by anything is often perceived as a weakness. Given that we are constantly besieged by aesthetic objects looking to manipulate us (advertising, rhetoric, and all the rest), our reservations may be understandable. But unfortunately the guardedness that is so essential to our mental wellbeing in this media-saturated world also contributes to the rampant apathy that is frosting over the globe like the beginnings of an unprecedented psychic ice age. Wherever apathy reigns supreme, the "strong" are those who can boast that nothing affects them. Numbness and dumbness become positive qualities, and any passionate engagement with life becomes a cause for embarrassment. How many hipsters out there consider passionate commitment of any kind to be a sign that one has been duped? Fortunately this attitude can only go so far, because everything in actual experience suggests to the contrary that passion and sensibility are necessary for anything meaningful to happen to anyone. They are the vital signs that make the difference between an existence that is truly lived out and one that is merely observed from the stifling security of a castellated self that falsely imagines that it can remain detached from the rest of the universe.

If the majority of aesthetic works fails to astonish us, then, it may have something to do with the ingrained insensitivity that is part and parcel of contemporary life. It may also have something to do with the fact that art, as Solzhenitsyn said so eloquently, is constantly being put to uses that are at odds with its essence. Indeed, the moment a work of art appears, all kinds of other factors come into play. Cultural institutions, social pressures, laws, customs, fashions, and trends pull it in every direction. Fame, money, conformism, attention-seeking, and knee-jerk rebellion can lure artists to abandon their own vision in order to emulate those of others, to adhere to formulas and paint by numbers, or to value external convention over inner vision. The inevitable result is a lot of bad art that couldn't truly astonish anyone. It should come as no surprise, when looking over the glut of aesthetic objects that proliferates around us, if we feel the need to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic art—

which is to say, between art that astonishes by attuning us to the radical mystery of being, and art that attempts to reinforce our shared illusions, comforting or intimidating us with the notion that there is nothing to wonder at since everything has been figured out.

Such a distinction is precisely what James Joyce attempts in his novel A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, published the same year Diaghilev gave Cocteau his piece of advice. Toward the end of the novel the protagonist Stephen Dedalus (Joyce's alter ego) outlines his personal theory of art to a group of friends.[1] Derived from the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and the medieval Scholastics, the theory posits that the most fundamental power of art is to reveal the quidditas or "suchness" of things—and to do so without the percipient having to act in any capacity but that of witness. The coming chapters involve interpreting and developing this idea. Before we can talk about what authentic art is, however, we are better to go by way of negation and discuss what it definitely isn't.

For the young James Joyce, true art is "static," while false art, which I will here call artifice, is "kinetic." These qualifiers, static and kinetic, refer to the effect of the work on the percipient, not to any property of the work itself. Proper art stills us, evoking an emotional state in which "the mind is arrested and raised above desiring and loathing."[2] Improper art does the opposite, aiming to make the percipient act, think, or feel in a certain prescribed manner. Artifice foregoes the revelatory power that is art's prerogative in order to impart information, be it a message, an opinion, a judgment, a physiological stimulus, or a command. Whether the information is good or bad, true or false, pleasant or not is unimportant: artifice isn't improper because it is immoral but because it hitches the aesthetic on intentions originating from outside the aesthetic realm. In other words, where art inheres in autotelic expression (expression for its own sake), artifice inheres in practical communication.[3] Proper art moves us, while artifice tries to make us move.

All artifice seeks a univocal effect, a single meaning in every instance. It is therefore naturally implicated in the creation of Consensus, a term I am using to describe the cloud of received opinions and ideas in which we all live and that claims authority over our own direct, immediate experience of the world. Consensus is the statistical world of useful knowledge, generalization, habit, custom, and ideology. Works of artifice reinforce Consensus (or doxa, as Plato called it) by representing reality as though everything had already been mapped out. They bolster up the opinions that float in the air, the stuff "everybody knows." There is no room for genuine conception in Consensus, but only preconception, pre-thought, all things having been packaged prior to delivery.

As an example, consider Avatar (2009), James Cameron's blockbuster about a race of aliens fighting off a human invasion. Every element of that film, from script, sets, and performances to animation, direction, and editing, is geared to prevent the slightest whiff of ambiguity to enter the picture. The motives of the villains, the virtues of the good guys, and the appropriate objects of our sympathy and animosity—all is crystal clear. The audience knows from start to finish what the right and wrong answers are: not in a single frame of Avatar is the prearrangement of moral forces to be questioned or doubted. The film has done all the thinking for us, and we are presented with an opinion: humans = bad, nature = good. If this opinion took the form of an academic lecture instead of a 3-D extravaganza, most members of the audience would be put off by its facile analysis. Yet because Avatar is an aesthetic spectacle, it surreptitiously converts our emotions into vectors for its ideas. In the resulting state of passive receptivity, we perceive these ideas as given when they are really oversimplifications of highly complex truths—as many realize when the spell eventually fizzles out. A great film might present us with a feeling for the uncertain in all situations. Generic blockbusters like Avatar, however, furnish us readymade opinions, judgments, and conclusions. The viewer's sensibility, her distinctiveness as a singular consciousness, is brushed aside to make way for the abstract generalizations that the filmmakers have chosen to impart by aesthetic rather than discursive means.[4]

In the preface to The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890), a text to which I will often return, Oscar Wilde wrote, “When critics disagree, the artist is in accord with himself.”[5] Variance of opinion is an inevitable and even beneficial outcome of what Joyce calls proper art. The last thing artificers want, however, is to divide their audience. Their competence as creators hinges on their ability to replicate the same emotional response in as broad a demographic as possible. The perfect artifice would evoke exactly the same emotional state in everyone regardless of who they were. In all that is peculiar, unexplainable, or strange in life, the artificers see an obstacle to overcome. Anomalies must be ironed out of the work, which for its part must exhibit seamless continuity and smoothness. In Hollywood, new films are screened for test audiences in order to locate points in the story where viewers may become bored, confused, or conflicted. Since such moments make for a less amusing experience, market logic dictates that they be excised from the film before it is released. As we shall see when discussing the role anomalies play in artistic expression, what commercial cinema loses through this practice is more than minor details—it is art itself.

Joyce describes two types of artifice. The first, which he calls pornographic art, induces in the perceiving subject a state of desire for the object perceived. In pornography (not necessarily sexual), things are presented in such a way as to make us want to possess or consume them. The second type of artifice, didactic art, induces by contrast a state of repulsion for the object in the percipient; the didactic work presents the object in such a way as to make the subject loathe or despise it. Both types of artifice are “kinetic” because they move us in a specific direction by appealing to physiological urges rather than individual sensibilities. “Desire urges us to possess, to go to something. Loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something,” is how Stephen Dedalus puts it in Portrait.[6] The kinetic emotions provoked by works of artifice manifest at the sensory-motor level of twitch, reflex, and blind drive.

Attraction and repulsion are natural biological reactions, essential to the survival of any organism. As riots, witch hunts, or fascist rallies make terribly clear, however, they can come on with enough force to override other faculties. When this happens, blind instinct overtakes the mind, resulting in a semiconscious state that reduces those affected to a mere quantity proportionate to the force of the stimulation. Once I am completely caught in the pull of purely physiological attraction, for example, the object of my desire becomes all that exists for me. The value of the object, even if it is a person, is degraded to the uses I can make of it, and all else matters only to the extent that it aids or hinders my ability to satisfy my desire. At their most potent, kinetic emotions can strip other people of their humanness, turning them into things to be exploited and then thrown aside. Sexual pornography uses the aesthetic to turn people, usually women, into playthings that exist solely to please the viewer. Paradoxically, the more a pornographic work succeeds in turning the people it depicts into things, the more the viewer himself is objectified in turn. This is because the kinetic power of artifice inheres precisely in replacing concrete individuality with an abstraction. Artifice compels us to judge all things solely against the needs and wants it imparts. As we are led to judge, so we ourselves are judged, because we have made the universe itself a grand tribunal where the significance of all beings, ourselves included, is reducible to instrumental value.

Of course, no one has ever needed artifice for such leveling to occur. It is just an extremely efficient way of bringing it about. It would be perfectly possible to persuade, say, a group of men that women are subhuman using rational arguments rather than aesthetic illusion. The medieval theological belief that women do not have souls, just like the Victorian scientific belief that women are incapable of thinking straight, were rational ideas even though they were rooted in irrational emotions. Those who advanced such ideas did so by appealing to reason, presenting their evidence in hopes of winning others over. Intellectual discourse is tricky, however, because there is always the danger that the desired conclusion will prove untenable over the long term—especially if it is absurd. A much more effective means of imposing general judgments, especially in a mass society, is to bypass reason altogether by administering them aesthetically to people who would likely refute them in a discursive context. This is what artifice makes possible. Imagine a susceptible male in front of a screen showing a naked woman on all fours gazing wantonly at the camera. There is no need to persuade the man that women are sexual objects, because the aesthetic image presents the figure in such a way that she really is a sexual object and will remain so for as long as it exerts its power. The video deliberately avoids providing any the context by which the woman could be known beyond that; it limits the elements of representation to the bare minimum, preventing any question as to what this woman could be doing there on the floor besides waiting for the viewer to have his way with her. Assuming this viewer is an average person with a sense of right and wrong, he would probably disapprove of this reduction of another human being. But unless his personal beliefs were strong enough to modify the behavior dictated by the work of artifice, they would not matter very much until the porn reel stopped rolling.

Artifice can lead us to acts of self-betrayal. It is not in the least concerned with who we are or what we believe, only with what we do, and how we behave. This, of course, is the supreme logic behind marketing, which is fundamentally pornographic in Joyce's view. The marketer's goal is to have us act in certain ways whether or not we personally approve of the prescribed behavior. Marketing and advertising exemplify the basic principle of the consumer culture that William S. Burroughs dissects in Naked Lunch (1959): "The junk salesman does not sell the product to his consumer, he sells the consumer to his product."[7] The product itself is secondary, all products being junk from the salesman's cynical viewpoint. What matters is that it be captured in an image, a "brand experience," which the target can identify with and consume. As the marketing guru Clotaire Rapaille told Douglas Rushkoff in an interview, the most effective feats of the marketer's craft go straight to the "reptilian brain," the most primitive part of the nervous system. "The reptilian always wins," he says. "I don't care what you tell me intellectually—give me the reptilian."[8]

So pornography is about pulling strings, be they heartstrings, purse strings, or G-strings. The other form of artifice, didactic art, is essentially pornography in the minor key. Its goal is to trigger repulsion for the object, to turn the viewer away from it or intimidate her into adopting to a particular opinion about it. Its most overt manifestation is the classic propaganda film, which unites its audience by opposing it to an Other deserving fear and hatred. But it needn't be so obvious. Social criticism, vicious satire, moral fables, shock art—any aesthetic work designed to make us judge, even as it arranges things so that only one judgment is logically admissible under its terms, is didactic. This form of artifice therefore includes all works driven by ideology, as well as all works designed solely to convey a message or moral.

Although didacticism is used extensively by authoritarian regimes, it is also a favorite of interest groups operating within open societies. In the video spot recounting the thirty-second morality tale of a hitherto upstanding citizen who kills a child while driving drunk, in the PSA comparing "your brain on drugs" to an egg in a frying pan, and in the photograph showing a bent cigarette alongside the factoid linking smoking with impotence, the objective is the same: to use the aesthetic in order to make the audience feel rather than think a moral directive. These flagrant examples exist alongside more subtle ones. The better part of popular fiction genres, for instance, often rest on a didactic foundation. Critics have written extensively of the ideological underpinnings of generic horror, science fiction, fantasy, romance, and so on. Didacticism exists in the "high arts" as well.

Conceptualism, to cite just one example, is art that gives the concept—that is, the intellectual idea—primacy over the affect. While it can produce works that make important political points, often in clever and ingenious ways (think of Banksy or the early Damien Hirst), it seems to achieve the aesthetic emotion that Joyce ascribes to proper art only in very rare cases. That is, it tends not to astound us with the ineradicable mysteriousness of things (in fact, many conceptual pieces come with a written explanation that spells out the meaning of the work). Invariably, all forms of didacticism place art in the service of moral judgment. Their purpose is to teach us how to act, tell us what to think, and show us how to feel, all by giving us something to judge.

Again, my intention is not to claim that artifice, didactic or pornographic, is invariably "wrong," only that it falls short of the effect that art alone can achieve. It fails because it subordinates the aesthetic to interests that are foreign to it. Considering the fallibility of human beings, it is probably true that artifice is necessary for maintaining the social order. Certainly political rulers have always resorted to it: the examples range from the national anthems blared at sporting events to the rows of severed heads proclaiming a military victory. And if an oil company can put out a slick ad full of blue skies and lush forests in an effort to convince us that it is a paragon of ecological responsibility, it seems only fair that an environmental group might respond with an equally compelling video revealing the truth in the form of tar-covered sea birds, lunar landscapes, and chemical rivers. Likewise, the fables of an Aesop, a La Fontaine, or a Disney may not rival Shakespeare in transformative effect, but they are certainly useful tools for preserving a cohesive moral code (regardless of what one might think of that code). But all of that is the stuff of history, the ebb and flow of rival forces vying for dominance in the world. Suffice it to say that aesthetic power diminishes to the degree that a work is placed in the service of an opinion, a judgment, or a notion—that is, to the degree that it gets mixed up in history's incessant fracas.

The ends of art and artifice differ fundamentally, even though the means by which they achieve them are the same. Nor are the two always easy to tell apart in the real world, where a given work can contain traces of both. There are works of artifice that in some elements forgo their stated objective to produce moments of mystical brilliance. Likewise, a critic so inclined could probably find hints of artifice in even the greatest work of art. Theory is too abstract to apply to anything but the most obvious cases. It can, however, serve to boil things down to their essentials, and the essential thing we are left with when we subtract artifice from the sum of aesthetic works is astonishment, a sense of the numinous.

[*] I am not objecting here to the view that the class of objects we call "art," which can unite things as different from one another as paintings and dance pieces, was a modern development. The question is whether the development constitutes an invention or a discovery. People were making artistic works as potent as those of the greatest postmedieval artists long before the concept of art arose. That they did not call these things art does not mean that the term does not apply in retrospect. By analogy, ancient societies practiced a host of activities whose reliance on empirical observation and experimentation could lead a modern observer to describe them as scientific pursuits. The fact that these societies never thought of such disparate activities as belonging to a single enterprise called "science" does not take anything away from their scientific value.

civilization, older even than humanity itself. In the end, however, the danger of not going beneath the surface may be higher than that of diving in. For if the symbols that come our way have a secret purpose, it is to reveal to us what we most need to see—and so are most afraid to see—in the moment of encounter.

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* In a medical context, a cough is a sign pointing to an underlying condition, and this underlying condition is all that concerns the doctor. All signs are essentially symptoms enabling a diagnosis. If, however, the medical clinic where the diagnosis takes place happens to be a on a theatrical stage, everything changes. An actor's cough in a dramatic performance doesn't function as a sign. Being a fiction, its role is symbolic. In order to appreciate it as a symbol, it is necessary to understand how coughs work as signs in normal life (in the same way as it is necessary to know the Spanish language to read a Spanish poem). Ultimately, however, the meaning of the symbol may be only tangentially connected to its mundane function as a sign. What is important to note is that humans have the capacity to interpret any cough, even a real one, as a symbol, that is, as if it were happening on a stage (as if its occurrence were intended to have meaning in and of itself). This capacity is the beginning of the aesthetic mind behind all poesy and myth, i.e., behind all art.

FIVE

Rift and Prophecy

Beauty and symbol are the two faces of the numinous, that enigmatic force that bestows upon certain things, places, and moments an otherworldly power. It is the combination of radical beauty and symbolic resonance—of apparition and depth—that makes aesthetic objects so overpowering. While at the surface there may appear to be an insurmountable difference between a Shinto shrine and a Tom Waits concert, both use beauty and symbol to confront us with what is strange and sacred in life. Their similarity is as profound as their differences.

Beauty without symbolic depth results in ornament. Symbol without beauty results in psychoanalysis. Only when the two meet can we speak of art. The artistic works that combine the two elements most compellingly are what are called the classics. In his magisterial book The Analogical Imagination, the theologian David Tracy defines the classic as a work exhibiting a permanent "excess of meaning."[1] We speak of classics as "timeless," he says, not because they belong to no time, but because they are perpetually timely; their relevance never wanes, and each generation, each percipient, must interpret them anew. According to Tracy we know we are dealing with a classic when a work makes us realize that our general outlook on life is not as complete as we thought it was, that "something else might be the case." In the light that the classic emanates, things suddenly seem less clear-cut than they used to seem—we find ourselves in the presence of something greater than we are, something potentially infinite. Classics take us to the apex of the numinous, the point of what Werner Herzog calls "ecstatic truth."[2]

Since this definition of the classic differs from the usual one, it should come as no surprise if some classics in Tracy's sense do not appear in the official canons of critics and historians. In other words, not all classics are classical. Tracy notes jazz, gospel, cinema, and pop music as new areas where classics can and have emerged; today we could add hip-hop, digital art, and comic books to the list. No doubt some people would still feel uneasy placing the Sistine Chapel and the White Album in the same category, but if art really does boil down to the appearance of nonhuman forces in the human world, it would seem foolish to postulate that art would favor certain traditions or genres over others. Art can happen anywhere, and there are greater and lesser works in every part of the cultural landscape. Although the official canons contain great works of art, to be sure, they may also contain works preserved mainly for their historical relevance or technical innovation. These are classics of a kind, but not in Tracy's sense of perpetual meaning machines, each of which is sui generis, existing in a class of its own.

This brings us to an important distinction, namely the distinction between classics proper and what I will call "masterworks." Masterworks are perfect examples of form, flawless aesthetic products whose every detail is exquisitely rendered at the technical level. This type of art never fails to impress us as a feat of human achievement, yet it rarely blows our horizons open as classics do. The oil paintings of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, for instance, are near-photographic executions that pushed the technique of his day to new heights. Those of Eugène Delacroix may not be quite as sophisticated from a technical standpoint, but they hold a monstrous power that is absent from those of his rival Ingres. One explanation is that Delacroix made classics while Ingres made masterworks. This is not to say that Ingres was not an artist: masterworks are obviously works of art. Their impact, however, is easier to assimilate. The symbols they contain do not impose themselves on us with the same violence, and that makes it easier for us to keep a safe distance from them. To see the imaginal weirdness that lurks in a masterwork, it is necessary first to break through its formal shell, breaking up the outward seamlessness to get to the chaos underneath. Since relatively few people are prepared to do this and publicize their interpretations, and since those who are prepared to do so usually work with a view to professional consensus with their fellow critics, masterworks have a tendency to be reduced to one or two "official" interpretations. Consequently they often end up being regarded as allegories. Given that masterworks include the most technically sophisticated pieces, it is a short step from there to misconstruing art itself as primarily allegorical.

Classics have nothing to do with aesthetic sophistication. They use the aesthetic as a springboard to something else. The creation of a classic will often require the artist to deviate from prevailing standards in order to push the originary vision through. If there is one prerequisite for producing a classic, it is the willingness to follow the vision wherever it leads, even if it demands a breach of convention, technique, or popular taste. (It may not even be a question of if but when, for how can one produce a truly singular work without reinventing the medium to some extent?) We often hear that the master artist is "in love" with her material: that the sculptor loves the marble, the dancer loves the body, the musician loves his instrument. For the maker of classics, however, the medium always seems to be an obstacle; love is never without a tinge of spite. William S. Burroughs was so contemptuous of language that he took to describing it as a disease. He conceived his work as an attempt to confront language in hopes to cure the mind of the "Word virus." Indeed, if the goal of art is to take us beyond our ordinary preconceptions to reach the heart of the Real, it would seem essential that there be a fight, a struggle to wrest from the medium something to which Consensus dictates it is not naturally inclined.

As we saw in the last chapter, the work of art is at once surface and symbol. The symbol is the event that the artist calls forth, and the surface is the interface for portraying this event. Because they transcend our habitual mode of thought, however, symbols cannot manifest fully if the surface remains too loyal to the rules and regulations of consensual reality. The fight to break through Consensus in order to produce the New results in works that do not fully conform to the conventional picture of the world. Accordingly, many classics seem uneven—sometimes even amateurish—from a strictly technical point of view. "While they pass under our eyes they are full of dents and grooves and lumps and spikes which draw from us little cries of approval and disapproval," E. M. Forster said about such works. "When they have passed, the roughness is forgotten, they become smooth as the moon."[3]

All classics being unique, it would be impossible to list off their common characteristics. In fact, there may only be one such thing: the rift, which breaks the consensus trance and opens the work onto the chaosmos of the Real. The presence of rifts in classic works of art, I think, is what distinguishes them from the rest. For a symbol to disclose itself in full, you need the classic, and for the classic, you need the rift. When The Paris Review asked Hemingway to explain his idiosyncratic style, he answered that "what amateurs call a style is usually only the unavoidable awkwardness in first trying to make something that has not heretofore been made.”[4] It is to these awkwardnesses that I am referring to when I talk about rifts. They are fissures or caesuras in the body of a work. They can take the form of imperfections, surreal excesses, strange turns of phrase, inconsistencies, stylistic flourishes, and narrative coincidences—all kinds of things in which a master craftsman—a maker of masterworks—would see errors to correct.

One example from film is the continuity error. Professional film directors tend to pay close attention to continuity, going to great lengths to make sure that the door appearing at the beginning of the film has not miraculously changed colors when it is seen again at the end, that the sandwich or cigarette isn’t at different stages of consumption from shot to shot, that a character’s arc follows a logical progression of decision-making that the viewer will find “believable.” Some members of the film crew could even jeopardize their job for letting in too many such mistakes, which cinephiles have made a hobby of spotting and sharing over the Internet. But for all that, some of the greatest directors have shown a startling proclivity to continuity errors. Could it be that on some level they realized that cinema is more akin to dreaming than to real life, and that what matters when making a film is not verisimilitude but symbolic power?

But it can go even deeper than that. Sometimes the errors that crop up in films bring something new to the picture, something the filmmaker could not have foreseen even though it somehow completes the vision in a novel way. If your purpose is to build a waking dream, discontinuity on the surface may be essential to coherence in the depths. Besides, it is worth noting that reality itself isn’t nearly as smooth and logical as continuity clerks and script supervisors would like us to think it is. Life is full of strange occurrences, missing time, disappearances, synchronicities, and absurd coincidences, all of which we are encouraged to dismiss as unimportant even though they seem to be integral to life in this world. In a very real sense, to insist on “realism” is to insist on the unreal.

Classics consistently weave worlds where dream-life and waking-life are shown to be one and the same. These are synchronistic worlds where there is no such thing as a mistake or chance occurrence. The idea of synchronicity, an "acausal connecting principle" in Jung's original formulation, evokes a universe at odds with conventional materialism, a place where meaning rather than mechanical causality is at the helm. Synchronicity implies a kind of panpsychism that views consciousness as a dimension of the universe itself rather than an isolable feature of the human brain. The psyche becomes the dynamic field in which the material universe itself acquires its form and substance. In its embrace of synchronicity, the classic work of art calls us to the animism that characterized archaic societies and survives today in indigenous cultures.

All artists are animists, shamans, while they work—even those who might otherwise call themselves atheists or secularists. Through the act of creation they endorse the innate, "primitive" belief system that William James and Sigmund Freud found lingering beneath the rationalist veneer of the modern mind. In art, meaning is as ubiquitous (and as independent of humans) as the weather. The mere presence of plot in a movie, of harmony in a piece of music, or of composition in a pictorial image suggests a universe where events conform to meaningful patterns. It matters little what worldview prevails in the story or the artist's head: the fact that it is a story bespeaks the work's animistic underpinnings.

Creators who would consciously work against our latent animism in order to push for some form of "hard realism" compromise the creative process because their denial does not allow meaning to transcend their intellectual powers. The greatness of all great art lies in its capacity to convey the Real in all its mysterious richness, not in the communication of an opinion as to what is true and false, right or wrong, possible or impossible. For a filmmaker, conveying the Real may well mean using the best take even though it contains a camera jerk or a mysterious detail that does not fit the scheme yet simply feels right. It definitely means letting chance and chaos play a part in the process so that unforeseen connections are allowed to enter into the work and augment its breadth and power. It also means letting the leaps, breakages, and interruptions that were part of the original vision make it all the way to the finished product.

One cinematic example of an accidental rift is the sudden appearance of 2001's black monolith in Stanley Kubrick's penultimate film, Full Metal Jacket (1987). It happens near the end, when the platoon is being decimated by a sniper hiding in the ruins of a bombed Vietnamese city. As the soldiers gather around a dying comrade in the rubble, there appears silhouetted against the sky in the background a burning building bearing an uncanny resemblance to the black monolith. Considering that 2001 links the monolith directly to the beginning of warfare, and that the shot of the American soldiers in Vietnam constitutes a visual echo of the similarly huddled group of hominids from the Dawn of Man sequence of the earlier film, it is difficult to dismiss the occurrence as a meaningless coincidence. Nevertheless Kubrick insisted that, significant as this subtle touch is, it was unintended.[5]

Rifts can take the form of non sequiturs or leaps of logic that allow the numinosity of the surrounding symbolic material to come to the fore. One example occurs in Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" (1824). Using the lyric of the first verse as a guide, it appears at the beginning of the line, "Alle Menschen werden Brueder" ("Brotherhood unites all men"). A sudden syncopation interrupts what would otherwise have been an all-too-smooth progression, throwing the work (and the listener) out of the piece for a moment. Another example occurs in From Hell, Alan Moore's prophetic refabulation of the Jack the Ripper case, at the moment when Dr. William Gull, Moore's choice for the Ripper's identity, has a vision while caught in the ritual ecstasies of dismembering a corpse. Looking up from his ghastly work, he finds himself standing in the offices of a mid-1990s London corporation. The room swarms with hip professionals too entranced by their technological marvels and bland existence to see the blood-covered Victorian gentleman standing in their midst. The moment is foreshadowed many scenes earlier when Gull, in the immediate aftermath of another murder, raises his bloodied fists in glory before the sudden apparition of a modern skyscraper. The fact that Gull's accomplice loses sight of him for the duration of the vision tells us that these are more than mere hallucinations: Gull is actually being transported into the future that his acts, for reasons elaborated symbolically throughout the graphic novel, are helping to bring about. These asynchronic intrusions of the present upon the past that Moore is recounting open the narrative onto its own symbolic depths, forcing the attentive reader to reconsider everything else that happens in the story in their light. Similarly, in E.T. the Extraterrestrial (1982), there is that unforgettable moment when the camera tilts down to reveal the eponymous alien sprawled on the ground near a drainpipe. The diffuse lighting, the sickly hue of E.T.'s flesh, and the wide angle of the shot disrupt the misty fairy-tale atmosphere, confronting us with an unexpected flash of the Real. The scene seems at odds with all that precedes and follows it because it undermines the movie's apparent optimism, allowing Spielberg's opus to stand alongside the Grimms' fairy tales as a romance haunted at every turn by the unspeakable. In all of these cases, the rift wakes the listener up to the symbol in the work like the strike of the Zen master's staff calling the meditator to the clarity of the present moment.

In the companion book to his BBC documentary Ways of Seeing, John Berger offers a beautiful example of a rift from a portrait that Rubens made of his wife. Although in many ways a typical nude, the portrait distinguishes itself by its refusal to idealize the female figure (as masterworks often do). The woman appears standing against a dark background holding a fur around her waist. "Her body confronts us, not as an immediate sight, but as experience—the painter's experience," Berger writes. The result is a fragile, tragic beauty. We are seeing the woman not as she might appear “objectively” but as a singular event, an apparition within the subjective field of the one whom she beholds and who beholds her. Berger points out various details that conspire to produce this effect: “her disheveled hair, the expression of her eyes directed towards him, the tenderness with which the exaggerated susceptibility of her skin has been painted.” But he then calls attention to an “error” in the work, one that would have had a masterwork-maker like Ingres starting over, but that is precisely the element that gives Rubens’s portrait its power. The upper and lower halves of the woman, separated by the fur she holds, do not align. The legs angle to the right in such a way that they could not possibly connect with her waist.

> Rubens probably did not plan this: the spectator may not consciously notice it. In itself it is unimportant. What matters is what it permits. It permits the body to become impossibly dynamic. Its coherence is no longer within itself but within the experience of the painter. More precisely, it permits the upper and lower halves of the body to rotate separately, and in opposite directions, round the sexual centre which is hidden: the torso turning to the right, the legs to the left. At the same time this hidden sexual centre is connected by means of the dark fur coat to all the surrounding darkness in the picture, so that she is turning both around and within the dark which has been made a metaphor for her sex.[6]

The painter’s ability to follow the vision in spite of the dictates of form allowed him to transform a nude body into a dynamic hybrid of mind and matter, self and other, which attains its fullness in erotic love.

Sometimes rifts take the form of stylistic excesses, moments where the thread of a work flies off into some unforeseen place. These can include metaphors, digressions, twitches, or puns that break the fluid progression of things. Mona Lisa’s smile is such an ellipsis: its ambiguity breaks the image open, turning what would otherwise have been a brilliant portrait into an insoluble enigma. Other rifts are less noticeable even though they alter our experience just as strongly. In the opening pages of Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse, for instance, there is a rift that makes that book as otherworldly as any science fiction novel. It occurs when Mrs. Ramsey goes into town with the insecure Mr. Tansley. The two have been walking awhile, with Mr. Tansley rambling nervously about this and that, when suddenly:

> the houses falling away on both sides, they came out on the quay, and the whole bay spread out before them and Mrs. Ramsay could not help exclaiming, "Oh, how beautiful!" For the great plateful of blue water was before her; the hoary Lighthouse, distant, austere, in the midst; and on the right, as far as the eye could see, fading and falling, in soft low pleats, the green sand dunes with the wild flowing grasses on them, which always seemed to be running away into some moon country, uninhabited of men.[7]

That last phrase, "some moon country, uninhabited of men," can be glossed over as a simple flourish or seized upon as the crux of the passage. In fact it is a crack in the surface of the text, opening it onto an alien world which then floods in as violently as the beauty of the bay does Mrs. Ramsay's head. From that point on, the entire novel seems to take place in that nonhuman moon country. It is impossible to know how this line ended up on the page. I would hazard to guess that the surface of the moon was the last thing on Woolf's mind when she started writing that paragraph, and that the metaphor was the result of an image that suddenly came to her as she visualized the moors beyond the town precinct. That she decided to trust and follow this hunch among many others is a testament to Woolf's genius and the reason To the Lighthouse has as much to offer now as it did when it first appeared.

But if Kubrick did not intend the monolith to crop up in his war film; if Rubens did not intend the miscalculation that brought his painting to life; if Woolf never foresaw the little excesses that transformed her real-world narrative into myth, where do rifts come from? If the testimony of the artists themselves is to be trusted, it is the work that imposes the rift on the artist and not the other way around. The process has designs of its own. It is more than a creation: it's a creature.

After visiting a Van Gogh exhibit, a friend told me that one particular painting seized him with such force that for a long time he could not look away. Although it wasn't one of Van Gogh's more famous works, it affected him like no other did. His description of the experience was remarkable: “It was an insignificant painting that no one seemed particularly interested in, but it grabbed me and wouldn’t let me go. I felt like I was in dialogue with a living thing. I felt that I, by turning away, would have been disrespectful to it.” As he watched the work, so the work seemed to watch him. Most people have had comparable impressions of a living presence when confronted with great works of art. In fact, the sensation that an Other is present may be the rule with aesthetic encounters, so long as the work is powerful enough and we allow ourselves to succumb to it.

The classic work of art is a form of life with its own bizarre consciousness. In the performing arts—theater, dance, music—this consciousness is not reducible to the minds of the performers on the stage. The participants are parts of a spiritual organism that includes and transcends them. In our modern materialist mindset we naturally attribute the impression that a work speaks in its own voice to the intention of the author, who used it as a vehicle for her own ideas. But as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, works of art express much that their authors never intended to say: they exceed the limited views of those who bring them into being.

Homer opens The Iliad and The Odyssey with the same words: “Sing, goddess.” The author-centric conception of art is a relatively recent development. For animistic societies, the artist was the conduit, not the origin, of the work of art. The work’s content and even its form were thought to come from another plane, one that the artist accessed under the guidance of a spirit guide, muse, or daimon. It was the artist and not art who deserved to be called the medium. The belief survives in indigenous societies today. In Cave of Forgotten Dreams, the scientist who dreamed of lions on his first visit to the Chauvet Cave shares a story about an ethnologist who once asked an Australian Aborigine why he painted. The man replied simply, “I am not painting,” and continued to work. An analogous view holds among contemporary shamans in the Peruvian Amazon, who collect beautiful medicine songs called icaros. The shamans do not compose these songs; they learn them directly from the forest spirits. The songs appear fully formed in their minds as gifts from the Otherworld.

This may seem outlandish until we consider the fact that we all receive such gifts on a nightly basis in the guise of our dreams. It might benefit us to give a closer look to these nocturnal events that instrumental reason has tended to neglect.* As the Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges observed, the truly astonishing thing about dreams is neither the brain chemistry involved in producing them nor the secret messages they may or may not convey; it is the fact that dreams exist at all.[8] “Even the dumbest dream can astound us with its art, the range of its reference, the play of its fancy, the selection of its detail,” the psychologist James Hillman wrote.[9] Once we recognize that even unexceptional dreams can rival Steppenwolf in aesthetic complexity without Hermann Hesse having a hand in the matter, it may not seem so foolish to entertain the possibility that what we call creativity isn’t something we humans possess so much as something that works through us for reasons of its own. Dream design requires considerable work from parts of the mind that elude the conscious ego completely, and we are hard-pressed to come up with an answer as to who or what goes through the trouble of composing them in all their exquisite detail.

The strange thing about dreams is that they are natural phenomena that use and manipulate cultural constructs—codes, languages, and signs—as though they understood them better than we did. The mere fact of dreaming reminds us that the line between nature and culture is illusory. Evidently, nature is capable or weaving designs that, if found in waking life, we would logically attribute to a conscious designer. Is culture then an aspect of nature, and consciousness an aspect of a reality that goes beyond human cognition? Considering the fact that the mind cannot look at nature from the outside, as the Enlightenment proposed it could, even the most sobering scientific discoveries of the past—natural selection, DNA, the Big

Bang—can hardly hope to make a dent in the pesky weirdness that lies at the root of it all. Consciousness has been called science's final problem, but since it is the basis on which the coherence of all other problems rests, its puzzling nature makes everything puzzling. Every night we confront our own absolute otherness in the form of our dreams. Small wonder that they are conveniently dismissed as nonsense. Acknowledging the mystery of dreaming may not require us to revive the belief in literal demons or gods, but it does force us to recognize autonomous agencies within nature that we cannot account for scientifically, even though they are eminently—and intimately—there.

As mentioned above, the old belief that a nonhuman agency guides artistic creation is not limited to shamanic cultures of the past and present; we also find it in the thoughts of many if not most modern artists. The statements of writers, painters, musicians, dancers, filmmakers, and architects to the effect that the creative process hinges on relinquishing rather than exerting control are so numerous and well known that one particularly eloquent example can suffice. In a 2012 interview, the novelist William Gibson said, "If the conscious part of me that thinks about story and motivation … were to sit down and outline something, it wouldn't be very good. I need the Stranger to sign in and give me the marching order."[10] In the course of the interview, Gibson uses the terms stranger, muse, and unconscious interchangeably because they are all valid descriptors for something that can only be hinted at in metaphors. Whichever term one prefers, the meaning remains the same: creating a work of art amounts to collaborating with invisible forces that lead the way.

To the question of where rifts come from, then, we can answer that they come from Nature itself. Wherefore in his essay "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," Jung describes the work of art as an autonomous complex that foists itself upon the mind of the artist, demanding to be given form on its own terms. "One might almost describe it as a living being that uses man only as a nutrient medium employing his capacities according to its own laws and shaping itself to the fulfillment of its own creative purpose."[11] The image of the artist creating in a state of quasi-divine inspiration is less cliché than platitude, so often does it happen in the arts and however much the diligent servants of the culture industry would like us to think that, on the contrary, it all comes down to practice and hard work. Even in cases where the artist truly believes himself to be in full control, painstakingly selecting every detail of a work in progress, the impression of creating in freedom is an illusion, at least according to Jung. The artist, he says, "fancies he is swimming, but in reality an unseen current sweeps him along."[12]

The production of artistic works therefore involves two concurrent processes. There is the process of immediate awareness, in which the artist follows the flow of inspiration under the more or less conscious guidance of the subconscious forces that give it shape, and there is the unconscious, daimonic process, which handles the synchronicities, the unforeseen resonances, the "chance" associations—in short, the rifts—that the artist could never plan for even though they are essential to the final work. Perhaps this is what Brian Eno was thinking when he advised, "Honor thy error as a hidden intention."[13] The willingness to give the unconscious the last word is what makes classics possible. Otherwise the best one can hope for is a beautiful handicraft, at best a masterwork.

The rift is mystery's share of the work of art. It forces us to engage with the work by thinking the connections this work leaves undetermined. Here I do not mean thinking in the usual sense of computing data, but thinking through the imagination, through that part of us that, for lack of a better word, we must call religious. The power of the classics resides in the fact that they are never completed. They need us to finish the job and give them a final form. Since every percipient is unique, every such final form will also be unique, constituting a truly novel take on the ungraspable Real disclosed in the symbols.

Although it may just take one rift to make a classic, the greatest classics are riddled with rifts, to the point where one sign of artistic genius may be the capacity to fill a work with rifts without making it so brittle that it falls apart. In a Shakespeare play, every other line contains a flourish that throws us out of the drama and into a chaosmos of dream images and correspondences. It is the rifts that allow the play to work on so many levels—psychological, philosophical, historical, political—and to elicit so many different interpretations. The chances that Shakespeare intended King Lear as a study of how the printing press altered the human sensory apparatus, and thus the functioning of the monarchical system, are very slim. Yet that is exactly what Marshall McLuhan argues compellingly in The Gutenberg Galaxy.[14] Through his offbeat interpretation, McLuhan extracts from the symbols in the play a truth that was always there even though it did not surface for centuries, and even though the author could never have conceived it, let alone deliberately put it in his work. There is no hyperbole, then, in describing the classic as an oracle, and the creation of classic art as an act of prophecy.

[redacted]

Prophecy here does not mean fortune-telling. It is not at all concerned with the future, its focus being the brute reality of the unfolding present. E. M. Forster devotes a short chapter to this topic in Aspects of the Novel, and while he is discussing literary fiction specifically, his ideas can apply to the best works in any medium. To prophesy in art, Forster muses, is to raise emotions above the human pitch so that they reconnect with the generative powers of the universe. It is to raise "human love and hatred to such a power that their normal receptacles no longer control them."[15] Drawing on examples from Emily Brontë, Dostoyevsky, Melville, and D. H. Lawrence, Forster shows how the prophet "[irradiates] nature from within, so that every color has a glow and every form a distinctness which would not otherwise be obtained."[16] This amplification and saturation of reality reach down to the psychic forces or gods that swim like strange deep-sea fish beneath the surface world, revealing the essential in the situation.

Occasionally in this book I have opposed two concepts: reality and the Real. Reality, in the present context, denotes the world we perceive by means of the body and mind. It is split, and always has been, between the physical and the mental, mind and matter. Reality always manifests as a duality. The Real, on the other hand, is the totality of disparate realities, the divided kingdom of psyche and matter restored to an unfathomable unity. The Real is the still point at which the physical universe and the universe of dream, image, and spirit reveal themselves as aspects of a single phenomenon. Drawing on medieval alchemy, Jung called it the unus mundus, the "one world."[17] If the concept sounds like nonsense, it is nonsense that thinkers much less esoteric than Jung are taking seriously. At the end of his book The Mysterious Flame, for instance, the British philosopher Colin McGinn writes, "My whole point has been that mind and brain form an indissoluble unity at the level of objective reality. In some way we don't understand, consciousness and the brain are intelligible aspects of the same thing, not the chalk and cheese they seem to be.... There is an order underlying the heterogeneous appearances. There has to be, or we would not be possible."[18] On the plane of the Real, the virtual and the actual coexist. We are outside time, in the infinite.

The prophetic power of art connects us to the Real. It vaporizes all categories, all contingencies, all inessential properties, until we are left only with the forces whose clashes and embraces produce the phenomenal world. Self and other, past and future, here and there are revealed as faces of the same obscure object, like the faces of a diamond or the phases of the moon. We stand before what T. S. Eliot calls "the dance" in a classic poem:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh
  nor fleshless;
Neither from nor toward; at the still point, there the
  dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it
  fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither
  movement from nor toward,

> Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
> There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.[19]

From the still point, time unfolds in a seamless tapestry and the forces behind love and hate, growth and decay,thought and feeling come luminously into view. Art gives form to these forces, thereby giving us the means to read the patterns of Life.

Interestingly, it is only by focusing intensely on the immediate being of things that we can come to see that, in the end, no being is fixed, and in truth all things are insofar as they are caught in a wave of becoming.[20] "Being" is an abstraction; nothing can be said to exist that does not instantiate some kind of dynamic change, that is not in the process of changing into something else. So to uncover the suchness of things is also to show the direction in which things are moving. The optics of art offer a panoramic view of time past, present, and future as it manifests timelessly in the Real.

The most obvious and perhaps least controversial example of the prophetic nature of art is myth. The applicability of the myths in every age, their immanent polyvalence that has proven immune to time, make them genuine oracles that have served people since antiquity. Although the modern abstraction of mythology in textbooks and dictionaries has resulted in a line being drawn between myths and art proper, the truth is that no myth can exist apart from its aesthetic expression, which for its part must take an artistic form, be it a poem, a song, a statue, a picture, or a tale. As Northrop Frye argued, literature (and by extension all other art forms) is nothing more nor less than the continuation of myth-making in historical consciousness. Myth is art, and art is myth, and the same prophetic power that drives ancient mythology is also present in artistic works produced in a more secular age.

We live at a highly complex time that no expert analyst could have predicted. Certain works of art, however, discerned the potentialities that have actualized themselves long before they became evident, sometimes in ways that their creators could not have intended. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground (1864) anticipated the nihilism that would consume the world in the twentieth century, a mentality that, once actualized, found a fuller articulation in the work of later writers such as Franz Kafka. William S. Burroughs's Naked Lunch heralded a society founded upon the manufacture and maintenance of societal addiction through a doctrine of control that Burroughs called "the algebra of need." That doctrine is ubiquitous in today's hyperculture of spin and consumption.[21] J. G. Ballard's novel Crash (1973), along with the paintings of Francis Bacon and the "body horror" of David Cronenberg, prophesied from within this emergent ethos of control, envisioning the breakdown of the human person as the man-machine dichotomy disappeared and humans converged with their technological appendages. Ballard's Crash, for instance, presents a world in which sex has become a form of currency that circulates through the social body like money or road traffic. It is a place where only a violent death frozen in the glare of media coverage holds the promise of salvation. Meanwhile Francis Bacon's paintings of humiliated and tortured figures in well-lit chambers gave a foretaste of the strange marriage of public revelation and private isolation that is the dark side of today's social media culture.

All of these examples provided snapshots of the historical moments at which they appeared. At the same time, they anticipated future developments with startling lucidity. This isn't to say that their premonitions that came to pass had to do so, since at the time they were potentialities whose actualization would depend on a number of factors. A society in tune with the spirit of prophecy might have been better able to cooperate with the archetypal forces that these works of art revealed in order to avoid the situations they predicted.

Notes from Underground, Naked Lunch, and Crash exemplify a more or less explicit form of prophecy, but some classics function in a less direct mode. Their prognostications only become obvious as certain developments take place. The paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, who died in 1516, are filled with wonders embodying aesthetic and technological ideas from a distant age that Bosch himself probably never entertained as a historical possibility. The “Zone” in Andrei Tarkovsky’s Stalker (1979) constitutes an uncanny premonition of the “zone of alienation” that would appear at Chernobyl less than a decade after the film’s release. Wagner’s music was for Nietzsche a prophecy of the rising Dionysian spirit that would instigate a new kind of thought, one that would find a negative instantiation in the Nazi phenomenon and a more positive one in the cultural upheaval of the 1960s.

I will end with a more recent example. The rock band Wilco’s 2001 album Yankee Hotel Foxtrot is packed with images evoking the phantasmal nature of contemporary North American life. A sense of menace pervades the entire record. Listening to it, one has the feeling that something dreadful has happened, or is about to do so. The sounds and voices entwining with the musical arrangements sound like fragments of radio broadcasts from a vanished planet. “I would like to salute the ashes of American flags / And all the fallen leaves filling up shopping bags,” Jeff Tweedy mutters at the end of one song. And in “Jesus, Etc.,” he sings of buildings shaking and skyscrapers scraping together as “voices” whine, smoke, and escape.[22] This, in early 2001, mere months before the attack on the World Trade Center showed us precisely the sight that Tweedy was groping at in the dark. As if to confirm the prophetic nature of the record, the band selected as their cover art a photograph of two identical Chicago towers seen from the ground. Most incredibly, Yankee Hotel Foxtrot was originally slated to be released on September 11. The date changed when the label dropped the record on account of its unconventional sound, which the band was unwilling to alter. The moment the towers collapsed in Manhattan, songs to which Tweedy had ascribed no particular significance (the lyrics were the result of experiments in automatic writing) suddenly exploded with a superabundance of meaning. In some circles today, Yankee Hotel Foxtrot has the strange honor of being something of an official elegy to that time when American history took a definitive turn, even though it was recorded before anyone saw anything coming.[23]

Classics are oracles, and what makes them oracular is the rifts they contain. If the above examples, chosen for their relevance to the present time, emit a rather gloomy light, it is because these are gloomy times, not least of all for the arts, which now have to compete with an unparalleled clamor of artifice, the purpose of which is precisely to blind us to the realities that authentic art tries to make us see.

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[*] If the brief surge of interest in dreams during the golden age of psychoanalysis never delivered on its promise, it was probably because most analysts were more interested in decoding the life out of dreams—laying them out like butterflies on a wooden board—than in meeting them on their own decidedly unscientific ground. Neurology hasn't been much more helpful, since its interest has always lain in figuring out the mechanism of dreaming rather than the composition of dreams themselves.