

The Problem of Truth in Van Gogh's Painting: Some Different Theoretical Interpretations

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The article raises the problem of the relationship between art and truth, reviewing the interpretations of V. Van Gogh's famous painting *A Pair of Shoes* (1886–87) in the works of famous theorists and art critics. Raising the question of what truth is revealed in the artist's painting, the most important disputes on this topic between M. Heidegger, M. Schapiro, J. Derrida and F. Jameson are briefly discussed. This artist's painting also caught the attention of the famous Lithuanian philosopher A. Šliogeris, who considered it as a diagnosis of the death of Western visual art itself. Along with the dispute of famous theoreticians about this, an attempt is made to consider the point of view that the death of art itself and the rise of civilisation of technology are revealed in van Gogh's paintings.

Keywords: art, dialogue, interpretation, painting, technology

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to raise the issue of the death of art by recalling the famous painting of the modern artist Van Gogh, which received special attention from philosophers and art theorists who raised the issues of truth, reality, depth and the death of art itself. Artist's works have attracted a lot of attention from prominent theorists. His painting *A Pair of Shoes* has been interpreted by M. Heidegger, M. Schapiro, J. Derrida, F. Jameson and other interpreters. As J. Zachariaš notes, '[i]n all Vincent van Gogh's extensive work there are almost no other paintings that were so unimportant for the artist himself, yet so extensively discussed by so many leading philosophers, aestheticians and historians of art' (Zachariaš 2014: 354). Van Gogh's works also caught the attention of the famous Lithuanian philosopher A. Šliogeris, who considered them in his own original way. We know that at the beginning of the Western thought tradition, art was not separate from craft, and techne was the common source of both. Later, art gradually gained more and more autonomy and became separated from the field of technology. However, according to Šliogeris, in Van Gogh's painting we see the process of the destruction of art itself and the diagnosis of the rise of the civilization of technology (or Screen civilisation). Reviewing the aforementioned theorists' search for Truth in van Gogh's

painting and relying on analytical, hermeneutic and comparative methods I aim to discuss this radical idea.

VAN GOGH'S 'PAIR OF SHOES' AND TRUTH LOOKING FROM FOUR DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Among the several examples of specific works of art that Heidegger discusses in his essay *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (*The Origin of the Work of Art*) (1935; 1993) Van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes takes center stage and functions as a leitmotif in Heidegger's text. Van Gogh's painting was first mentioned by Heidegger as part of his initial discussion of the 'thingly character' of works of art. Heidegger begins his essay with the question of what is the word 'origin' and writes the following:

'Origin here means that from which and by which something is what it is and as it is. What something is, as it is, we call its essence. The question concerning the origin of the work of art asks about its essential source' (Heidegger: 143).

The relationship between truth and art is defined as follows:

'Art is the origin of the artwork and of the artist. Origin is the provenance of the essence in which the Being of being essentially unfolds' (Heidegger: 182).

In other words, 'origin' means that which *ontologically conditions* a being, i.e. that on the basis of which a particular being is the *kind* of being it is. So it turns out that 'origin' of the work of art essentially means the 'mode of Being' of the work of art. The mode of Being of the work of art will turn out to be *art* itself. Heidegger is seeking the ontological origin of artworks by disconnecting himself from the usual view (the ontic/causal view) which holds that the origin of a work of art is the artist. Art, as a mode of Being, makes both artist and artwork ontologically possible. This leads us to two questions: (1) What is the *essence* of art?; (2) How and where are we to *discover* this essence? Heidegger answered the first question in this way:

'The artwork opens up in its own way Being of beings. This opening up, i.e. This revealing, i.e. the truth of beings has set itself to work. Art is truth setting itself to work' (Heidegger: 165).

In response to the second question, Heidegger notes:

'[W]e shall attempt to discover the essence of art in the place where art undoubtedly prevails in an actual way. Art essentially unfolds in the artwork' (Heidegger: 144).

Another important and original aspect of his interpretation of art is the opposition of world and earth, which unfolds as strife in artist's painting: 'In setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work is an instigating this strife... Setting up a world and setting forth the earth, the work accomplishes this strife' (Heidegger: 175).

At the same time, Heidegger directly connects it with truth: 'Earth just through the world and world grounds itself on the earth only so far as truth happens as the primal strife between clearing and concealing' (Heidegger: 180).

Heidegger refers to van Gogh's painting to explain why works of art are naturally present as things. The real meaning of the content of the painting begins to speak for Heidegger only when he seeks to clarify the concept of 'equipmentality' or 'instrumentality'. For philosopher the shoes in artist's painting are not only 'a common sort of equipment' which reveals

the nature of equipmentality. The image of shoes in the painting also allows him to develop the theme of the strife [Streit] between 'earth' and 'world', which is central to his concept of truth. Heidegger writes the following:

'From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety as to the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth, and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-within-itself' (Heidegger 1993: 159–160).

In other words, although Van Gogh's painting primarily serves as a place for developing the strife of earth and world it ultimately becomes the example of Heidegger's concept of art as the happening of truth. For Heidegger, the truth happens in the Van Gogh's painting, therefore the reference to Van Gogh's painting is an attempt to indicate this event. In the light of this event, the truth itself happens.

The artwork and the artist, he explains, exist in a dynamic where each appears to be a provider of the other. Neither is without the other. Nevertheless, neither is the sole support of the other. Art separate from both work and creator thus exists as the source for them both. Rather than control lying with the artist, art becomes a force that uses the creator for art's own purposes. Likewise, the resulting work must be considered in the context of the world in which it exists, not that of its artist. In discovering the essence, however, the problem of the hermeneutic circle arises.

In sum, the hermeneutic circle raises the paradox that in any work, without understanding the whole, you cannot fully comprehend the individual parts, but without understanding the parts, you cannot comprehend the whole. Applied to art and artwork, we find that without knowledge of the essence of art, we cannot grasp the essence of the artwork, but without knowledge of the artwork, we cannot find the essence of art. Finally, it turns out that the essence of art for Heidegger is the strife of earth and world, which the artist, in this case Van Gogh, formalises in a painting.

Zachariaš makes an accurate observation that '*A Pair of Shoes* has become a touchstone work in art history, as well as being the starting point for what was probably the most celebrated discussion between a philosopher and art historian ever to have taken place' (Zachariaš 2014: 354). In the essay *The Still Life as a Personal Object – A Note on Heidegger and van Gogh* (1994), art critic Meyer and historian Schapiro argue that Heidegger's famous Van Gogh painting of shoes has been misinterpreted. The philosopher's interpretation, according to the art critic, is based on a metaphysical concept of art that has no basis. In particular, it is not clear which of artist's eight paintings of shoes Heidegger interprets. We can say that he raises the question: why does Heidegger think that van Gogh depicts the shoes of a peasant woman? According to him:

'Professor Heidegger is aware that Van Gogh painted such shoes several times, but he does not identify the picture he has in mind, as if the different versions are interchangeable, all disclosing

the same truth. A reader who wishes to compare his account with the original picture or its photograph will have the some difficulty in deciding which one to select' (Schapiro 1994: 136).

Schapiro's deep dive into painter's correspondence and friends' writings shows that they are not *women's* shoes. Heidegger was possessed by his imagination, which distorts the actual truth, forcing us to doubt the philosopher's interpretation of the picture in general:

'In his account of the picture he has overlooked the personal and physiognomic in the shoes that made them so persistent and absorbing a subject for the artist (not to speak of the intimate connections with the specific tones, forms, and brush-made surface of the picture as painted work)' (Schapiro 1994: 139).

The shoes shown in the painting are more reminiscent of the artist's own shoes than those of a peasant woman. And then he gives his take on the painting:

"When Van Gogh depicted the peasant's wooden sabots, he gave them a clear, unworn shape and surface like the smooth still life objects he had set beside them on the same table: the bowl, the bottles, etc. In the later picture of a peasant's leather slippers he has turned them with their backs to the viewer. His own shoes he has isolated on the floor and he has rendered them as if facing us, and so individual and wrinkled in appearance that we can speak of them as veridical portraits of aging shoes' (Schapiro 1994: 139).

Derrida engages in a discussion between Heidegger and Schapiro in which he posits the multiple modes of attachment and ideological inflection in their mutual dispute, and the models of representation, mimesis and affect, that underpin the terms of their dialogue. Consideration of Van Gogh's shoes is a practice of his own philosophical deconstruction, which rethinks Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh's painting and Schapiro's critique of it. At the same time, Derrida also raises the problem of the truth of art, to which the very title of the book *De la vérité en peinture (The True in Painting ('Pointure'))* (1978; 1987) refers. In his reading of Derrida's notion of Pointure, M. Payne notes that "Restitutions" operates through a set of metaphors, a key one being that of Pointure, relating to printing in terms of the "small iron blade with a point, used to fix the page to be printed on to the tympan" as well as "the hole which it makes in the paper" (Payne 1993: 228). Interpreting Derrida's concept of pointure, he says that 'language in its search for truth punctures the painting, not as one might take a knife to a canvas but as one might lace a shoe' (Payne: 229). The thinker meticulously unravels the course of Heidegger's thought, distinguishing the smallest 'steps' of thinking ('rings' and 'laces') and the rhetorical devices associated with them, thus showing Heidegger's aim to get rid of the view of the thing as a product of matter and form established in the metaphysical tradition, which is taken for granted. In his deconstruction Derrida draws attention to the fact that the German philosopher uses an effect that is already associated in advance with his considerations about the equipmentality of the equipment. Van Gogh's painting itself then becomes an immediacy description, and immediacy becomes a certain condition for the being of the object to manifest itself. In turn, Schapiro's critical strategy is based on the fundamental assumptions that painted shoes can belong to someone, and that those shoes are real, regardless of the fact that they are painted. But, for Derrida, the very possibility of assigning shoes to someone immediately attracts the mimetic representational tradition of art interpretation that Heidegger was trying to overcome. Derrida's analysis reveals that Heidegger does not have any specific image in mind when he talks about the origin of a work of art, and concreteness is

generally irrelevant to his considerations. However, concreteness itself ('that picture') remains Heidegger's point of departure. But the depicted shoes are incorrectly attributed to someone, so there is no reason to associate them with the soil and the world of the peasant woman. Derrida reconciles the subtle technique of his deconstruction and sees the truth neither in Schapiro's nor in Heidegger's encounter with the shoes, but rather in something beyond either of them. For Derrida, the term *pointure*, due to its polysemy, is a synonym for rest, for something which is annexed to any substantialistic assertion. That is his fundamental opposition to Heidegger. The truth, to use Van Gogh's painting as allegory, is always leaking, has always holes (see the shoes) and is process-related (see the coming and going of the shoelaces). Derrida's text, written as a discussion between several non-identifiable speakers, inscribes itself into the platonic tradition of maieutics. There also, only a partial truth is revealed, the end is always open.

Derrida asserts that Heidegger is arguing for the specter of art, the intrinsic, while Schapiro argues for the representational object, the extrinsic (Derrida 1987: 375–382). He claims that there is no restitution between Heidegger and Schapiro because there is no truth to the matter (Kelly 2003: 104). As such, Derrida holds that an artwork has no meaning unless meaning is given.

The history of the interpretation of the painting does not end there and continues to live on. The problem of truth in the analysis of Van Gogh's painting appears in Jameson's cultural criticism in a different profile. In his book *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991) he contrasts Vincent Van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* with Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* (1980) as an example of the difference between modernism and postmodernism. In the modernist example, Van Gogh paints a pair of peasant shoes in which Jameson states that it is possible to connect this image to history as 'it [the work] requires us [the viewer] to reconstruct some initial situation out of which the finished work emerges' (Jameson 1991: 58). The 'initial situation' according to Jameson is the world of 'agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil, a world reduced to its most brutal and menaced, primitive and marginalized state' (Jameson 1991: 58). Against these exhausting pressures the shoes flare up in 'a glorious materialization of pure colour in oil paint,' a 'Utopian gesture,' an 'act of compensation' against the 'specializations and divisions of capitalist life'. In Van Gogh's work, history is acknowledged and the work of art only makes sense within this frame. To Jameson such a reading is 'hermeneutical, in the sense in which the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth' (Jameson 1991: 59).

However, in the postmodernist example of Warhol, history is entirely absent from the artwork. Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* presents us not with a pair of shoes that belong to anyone and would indicate a use and life attached to them, but several pairs of brightly coloured women shoes on a black background shorn of all context. Andy Warhol's shoes evidently no longer speak to us with any of the immediacy of Van Gogh's footgear. In contrast to Dutch painter, there is no 'initial situation' in which we can place Warhol's shoes in order to give the painting meaning and in which we could 'restore to these oddments that whole larger lived context of the dance hall or the ball, the world of jetset fashion or of glamour magazines' (Jameson 1991: 60), in Warhol's painting we miss a hermeneutic dimension.

According to Jameson, the main difference between high modernism and postmodernism is that postmodernism introduces 'a new kind of flatness or depth, a new superficiality in the literal sense' (Jameson 1991: 60). For him, Warhol's painting is a fetish in both the Freudian and Marxist sense, although in this case he is only concerned with the Marxist definition.

Warhol replicates the fetish by closing off the initial situation for us to give meaning to the shoes. Instead the shoes exist in isolation from all context (and history) except for the sole important value of the shoe's status as a commodity.

Thus, we see very different approaches of thinkers to the shoes depicted in van Gogh's painting, and different meanings that are revealed in the very polylogue of critics, raising the question of what is the truth depicted in it. Of course, we can say that the different profiles of truth seen in it ultimately show us the impossibility of a single definition of truth in a modern work of art, on the other hand, also the difference between a modern painting and a postmodern one, in which it is no longer possible to see the depth and the surrounding world at all.

THE RISE OF TECHNOLOGY AND THE DEATH OF ART IN PHILOSOPHY OF ŠLIAGERIS

In this context, there is a unique approach of the Lithuanian philosopher Šliogeris, developed in his various works, but, first of all, in the book *Pokalbiai apie esmes (Conversations about Essences)* (2013). First of all, it is interesting that the Lithuanian philosopher believes that the most important Truth emerging in Van Gogh's painting is sensuality, which cannot be destroyed or even transferred to language:

'In a work of art, the only thing that matters to me is that which is generally indestructible, which man cannot destroy, and one thing he cannot destroy – sensibility. He cannot destroy color if he is a painter; cannot destroy the sound that is torn from the world if he is a musician. Art is justified only to the extent that it remains faithful to sensibility, to the extent that it distinguishes and shows the intensity of the sensuous object... What else is indestructible in a work of high art? Individuality... Life lasts as long as individual forms remain. That movement of individualization is very important and fateful. A classical work of art is only valuable in so far as it preserves a secondary, lifeless individual, but an individual nonetheless. It even focuses on the individuality of the individual. What do I mean by that? Well, the fact is that without Vermeer's painting you might not have seen the girl pouring milk at all, and without Ruisdael you would never have seen how beautiful the mill is in the cloudy landscape. Maybe you wouldn't even see the shoes if Van Gogh hadn't shown them. And Van Gogh takes it and shows it: look, he says, at the shoes, how wonderful they are, even though they are worn, even though they are not decorated with pearls or diamonds' (Arvydas Šliogeris 2013: 302).

The second important aspect of Truth that we see in Šliogeris interpretation is the death of art itself. We know that Hegel already wrote about this in the 19th century, but when talking about Van Gogh's works, the Lithuanian philosopher emphasises the clearly visible self-destruction of art itself:

'What was going on when Van Gogh was creating? It is precisely at that time that the great constructions of capitalism take place. In other words, the technological world is finally taking hold. Van Gogh sees that what the artists of the past did, is now easily done by machines. Although the Screen does not yet exist in the physical, technical sense of the word, he realizes that this work, that wonderful work that requires a lot of skill, is done by an engineer. He is left with no other option and begins to lean towards the aesthetics of ugliness. Van Gogh, as they say, is simply guided by the hand of fate. Everything starts to fall apart; what I call the situation of the death of technologically destructible things is emerging. Van Gogh's last paintings, after which he shot himself, show us that everything is already collapsing, the traditional world is collapsing: houses are collapsing, trees are splitting, stars are exploding. For example, looking at the painting "The Starry Night", you see how the total process of destruction of the work of art takes place from the inside' (Šliogeris 2013: 297).

Looking at van Gogh's painting as a diagnosis of the coming technological-capitalist era, Šliogeris confirms the well-known opinion that great artists are like seismographs, which naturally record the underground vibrations of the culture of their time. They are the diagnostics that inform us of our ontological condition in this world. Van Gogh's painting warns us about such a future civilisation of the Screen and the slide towards ugliness:

'Of course, that picture shows the process of destruction of a natural object, as instead of a tree a cellulose bag or a nuclear bomb appears. Van Gogh feels that the tree is in agony – its "scientific-technological" interior no longer matches its natural exterior. When he looks at the beautiful olive tree, he sees that this is no longer true, that in fact the olive tree is exploding from within. Therefore, he became a convulsive, one might say, mad olive grove, mad house, exploding stars. That picture is fantastically accurate to me – exploding stars! Just as in the current astrophysical myth, there are big bangs, supernovae, universes colliding, and all kinds of galactic cataclysms happening. Van Gogh is perhaps the first to clearly show this madness, but as an artist he inevitably slips into the aesthetics of ugliness, by the way, just like Cézanne. Picasso presents already obviously ugly works. Guernica, Picasso's other paintings, no longer just lean toward the ugly, they belong to the aesthetic of ugliness. It would be futile to look for beauty here. After these art shifts, a wide door opens for anti-art and open ugliness: from all kinds of futurists or expressionists to current performances – cutting fingers or stomachs, or other abominations. Van Gogh, Gauguin or Cézanne were still on the side of beauty: you could say they were angel's advocates, or heaven's advocates, while Picasso and his successors are already Satan's advocates, or hell's advocates. They seek to artificially (!) install the incrustations of hell into the artificial technological paradise, but all that remains are primitive stimuli and a repulsive abomination' (Šliogeris 2013: 297–298).

Such an interpretation of Van Gogh's painting raises the following questions: Is it true that art gave birth to technology and became unnecessary? Perhaps we are actually living in an ontological state where art has given birth to technology and is no longer actual? These are open questions that are probably impossible to answer unequivocally.

CONCLUSIONS

In the article, reviewing the interpretations of Van Gogh's painting by different theoreticians revealed the multiplicity of the understanding of Truth itself.

For Heidegger, Van Gogh's painting primarily serves as a place for developing the strife of earth and world. It ultimately becomes the example of Heidegger's concept of art as the happening of truth. For Heidegger, the truth happens in the Van Gogh's painting, therefore the reference to Van Gogh's painting is an attempt to indicate this event. In the light of this event, the truth itself happens.

Derrida defines Heidegger's position as an argument for truth within a frame, while Schapiro locates truth outside the frame. In this sense, we must understand the frame both directly and metaphorically: it is the physical frame around the picture, the linguistic frame around the word, the socio-historical frame around the meaning and the experiential frame around the viewer. Heidegger finds the truth, which is revealed through the struggle between the earth and the world, in the picture essentially within the limits of the picture. Schapiro, by contrast, finds truth outside the frame. Derrida shows in his analysis that where the frame begins and ends is inseparable; all interpretive reading is distinctive and original. Derrida essentially explains that the truth about shoes is multifaceted and cannot be definitively determined. The truth in painting, for Derrida, is that there is no single clearly defined truth.

Art critic and historian Meyer Schapiro argues that Heidegger's famous Van Gogh painting of shoes has been misinterpreted. It is not clear which of artist's eight paintings of shoes Heidegger interprets. Schapiro's deep dive into painter's correspondence and friends' writings shows that they are not *women's* shoes. Heidegger was possessed by his imagination, which distorts the actual truth, forcing us to doubt the philosopher's interpretation of the picture in general.

Jameson compares van Gogh's painting of worn shoes with Warhol's work of diamond dust shoes and concludes that this is where the difference between high modernism and post-modernism emerges. Postmodernism introduces a new kind of flatness or depth, a new superficiality. And this is the truth that we can see when we compare the works of these artists.

In the context of all these different interpretations of van Gogh's painting, Šliogeris emphasises truth as a measure of diagnosis for art itself and for modern civilisation as a whole. His look at the works of the Dutch painter brings new and unique colours to the field of art criticism. According to this philosopher, Van Gogh's works diagnoses the death of Western art itself and the rise of the global technological civilisation.

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TAUTVYDAS VĖŽELIS

Tiesos problema V. van Gogho tapyboje: keletas skirtingų teorinių interpretacijų

Santrauka

Straipsnyje keliama meno ir tiesos santykio problema, apžvelgiamos garsaus Vincento van Gogho paveikslas „Batų pora“ (1886–1887) interpretacijos žymių teoretikų ir menotyrininkų darbuose. Keliant klausimą, kokia tiesa atsiskleidžia menininko tapyboje, trumpai aptariami svarbiausi M. Heideggerio, M. Schapiro, J. Derrida's ir F. Jamesono ginčai šia tema. V. van Gogho tapyba patraukė ir žymaus lietuvių filosofo A. Šliogerio dėmesį, kuris ją svarstė kaip paties Vakarų vizualiojo meno mirties diagnozę. Atsižvelgiant į garsių teoretikų ginčus, bandoma svarstyti ir požiūrį, kad V. van Gogho paveiksluose atsiskleidžia paties meno mirtis ir technologinės civilizacijos iškilimas.

Raktažodžiai: menas, dialogas, interpretacija, tapyba, technika