



Response to Tom Rockmore's *Art and Truth After Plato*

Alina Feld

Hofstra University

alinanfeld@yahoo.com

Abstract: A superb scholarly achievement, Tom Rockmore's hermeneutic of art and truth in the Western tradition constitutes itself in a historical investigation (or history) of the principal articulations of philosophical aesthetics from Plato and Aristotle to the present. With a brilliant command over this vast territory, he reconfigures major philosophical arguments from the double perspective of the ontology and epistemology of art in response to Plato's attack on artistic representation. I will follow Rockmore's endorsement of the Aristotelian-Hegelian argument for a social relevance of art and its role in deepening self-consciousness irrespective of representationalism, mimetic or not.

Keywords: Plato; Rockmore, Tom; art; truth; end of art; aesthetics; representation; mimesis.

It is most appropriate that Professor Tom Rockmore's exceptional work is being discussed under the auspices of the Karl Jaspers Society since Jaspers himself has been deeply attuned to art, artists, and aesthetics; moreover the 2013-2014 KJSNA meetings are devoted to this overall topic.¹ Rockmore's *Art and Truth after Plato* is a seminal contribution to the philosophy of art, aesthetics, and the history of philosophy.² He explores one of the fundamental problems in philosophy, namely, the relation between reality and appearance, between original and its mimesis, presence and representation, and its relevance for our understanding of truth. In his investigation, Rockmore provides a sweeping view of the history of Western philosophy in its major articulations while entering into conversation with the

principal art theorists and incorporating their aesthetic debates.

Rockmore's compendium of the history of philosophical aesthetics is highly significant for several reasons. It is a timely philosophical remembering of the major paradigmatic moments of thinking about art that have constructed both our artistic trajectories and our understanding of ourselves through art. Timely—since the apocalyptic hermeneutic that we have cultivated in recent decades—perhaps initiated by a misunderstood Hegelian slogan of the end of art—has paradoxically resulted in a practice of historical *amnesia*, of leaving tradition behind toward a radical thinking, a postmodern melancholy, a brave new world of global technological enhancement and transhumanism or of empty reductionism. With this tendency toward cultural and historical self-forgetfulness, personal identities have begun to shrink or vanish. Rockmore's effort at remembering the richness and complexity of the Western cultural experience and experiment is a

¹ Presented at the KJSNA Session Author Meets Critics, Baltimore, December 27-30, 2013.

² Tom Rockmore, *Art and Truth After Plato*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press 2013, 344 pages. [Henceforth cited as *ATP*]

most welcome task and accomplishment. Moreover, the contemporary new propensity toward praxis and away from *theoria* (as reflection or contemplation) should be at least questioned and its extremes curbed by a return to deliberation and a life lived philosophically. On the threshold of globalization and transhumanism, Rockmore's *ars memoriae* reconstructs the constellations of our most inspired and free imaginary, our imaginative exploits, throughout the past two millennia, of the human signature par excellence.

Rockmore's book is not only a history of aesthetics, but also a philosophical investigation into the "old question about art and truth or art and cognition" (ATP 1). As aesthetics is considered in relation to the major shifts in the history of thinking about the nature of truth, Rockmore's book emerges as an erudite, all-comprehensive, insightful, remarkable scholarly performance focused on the epistemological relation between art, truth, beauty, and the good.

The introduction is a helpful and concise overview of the book, its content, arguments, and economy. Rockmore views the history of aesthetics or the "post-Platonic Western aesthetic tradition" as "a series of responses to the Platonic attack on artistic representation," "on the relation of art and truth" (ATP 1) at least until the twentieth century when we enter a post-Platonic world of non-representationalism where even the art object disintegrates. The seven chapters discuss the main stages in the history of aesthetics: Plato; Aristotle; Medieval Christian (Augustine and Aquinas); Immanuel Kant; G. F. W. Hegel; Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and György Lukács; the twentieth century.

Rockmore introduces Plato's theory of art as grounded in his ontological-epistemological dualism and involving the Platonic theory of Forms. Art is understood as *mimetic*, a copy of the copy, imitation of imitation, thus at "a third remove from the truth," from the world of originals, the Forms. In Plato's well-known example, the poet/artist painter of the bed is an imitator on a lower level than the craftsman who makes the bed. Both are prisoners of the cave feeding on the shadows projected on the wall and imitating them. They are not among those lovers of wisdom and epistemological intuitives who unshackle themselves as they begin the steep climb toward the light. Plato forbids them entrance to *kallipolis*, the beautiful city, which is the *object d'art philosophic par excellence*. As *mimesis*, the value of art consists in being a good copy of the original: Plato establishes an epistemological connection

between art and truth, between the highest level of ontological reality (the Forms) and epistemological capacity (as philosopher; craftsman; poet/artist). Only the philosopher can provide a faithful copy because only he has the proper epistemological capacity to see, contemplate, and know the truth. The social function of art consists in creating in the receiver the appropriate epistemological capacity and cultivating the higher contemplative levels of the intellect. A philosophical elite knows ultimate truth by means of contemplation and subsequently by recollection. The elite is meant to be in charge of the city-state and rule it according to the metaphysical realities intimately known to it.

The artistic outcome of this knowledge would be true philosophy, ideal city, perfect soul rather than art as we came to know it: Homeric epics and Greek tragedies would be exiled, and only hymns to the gods would be allowed citizenship by cultivating the contemplative *nous*, rather than passions and instincts. The ideal citadel of the political state or the state of the soul would flourish in an élan toward the Platonic Good.

Rockmore welcomes Aristotle's response to Plato: his theory of causality brings the transcendent Forms down and within, into immanence, thus making knowledge possible and accessible to all. While the economy of the human being remains the same, Aristotle understands its workings in opposition to Plato. For Aristotle art remains mimetic, and Rockmore eloquently shows that the difference between the two consists in a different interpretation of mimesis that is grounded in their ontology and epistemology. Thus Aristotle, too, endorses a mimetic understanding of art, in his case, art copies the inner form or drive as activity that involves the passionate nature; in other words, art should represent human life in its essence, immanent reality, in its totality rather than transcendent forms. The form within is the inner drive toward actualization of potential, toward *eudaimonia*. It is a striving toward self-actualization, and not a state of contemplation as it is for Plato. Rockmore turns to the *Poetics* as Aristotle's response to Plato. Here, tragedy becomes the privileged site for this unfolding. Rockmore follows Aristotle's famous argument about tragic catharsis: tragedy stirs the passions, brings them to effervescence and purges them of excess, thus allowing for the citadel of soul or society to restore its proper hierarchical orderly and measured functioning: the intellect controlling the passions and instincts.

Rockmore explains that although Plato associates the true with the beautiful, he cannot allow art as such,

being at a third remove from truth, to play the role assigned to philosophical art, and thus rejects the idea of artistic value without cognitive claim (ATP 101). If not true, art is not good either. Rockmore emphasizes that Aristotle brings about a "sea change" in aesthetics. For Aristotle, Rockmore argues, imitation is not cognitive in Plato's sense, but in a new sense: art deals with general truths and thus does not have to mirror-copy the real but rather to represent human reality. The result is a different link between the true and the good or social utility. Plato and Aristotle describe two fundamental positions with respect to art: Art as a source of truth if based on knowledge but otherwise guilty of false representation which would be socially harmful; and art as an imitation of the world in which we live, human action and life, (Plato's second best object), without reference to a mind-independent reality (ATP 102-3).

Rockmore's discussion of Platonic vs. Aristotelian aesthetics is relevant to perennial philosophical debates as well as to the ongoing contemporary debate in politics and pedagogy as censorship and unrestricted freedom of access to information circumscribe our mediated reality. Aristotle had in mind the specific parameters of Greek tragedy which guide the psyche through a therapeutic regimen. The question has been asked whether tragedy can still exist or be produced; whether there can be a Christian tragedy; whether even Shakespeare's tragedies would conform to Aristotle's definition. And if not, whether the cathartic effect would be enacted by exposure to performances that do not qualify as Aristotelian tragic. We remember Augustine's difficulty to renounce gladiators shows and his realization that vicarious experience of such is detrimental to the psyche: he realized *avant la lettre* the Kantian intuition regarding the experience of the sublime: the fascinating or contaminating power of evil even in watching from a safe distance a tremendous event, the dynamic and mathematic sublime (ATP 124-27).

In chapter 3, Rockmore addresses Medieval aesthetics with an emphasis on Christian aesthetics in the context of the rise of Christianity in Constantinople and the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 (including the rise of renaissance humanism, the division of Christianity in the Reformation, the overseas colonization) until the beginning of the modern period in the early sixteenth century. Rockmore reviews the periods of ancient influences on Western Medieval aesthetics, Platonic and Neoplatonic during the early Middle Ages and Aristotelian after the twelfth century due to William Moerbeke's translation of the *Poetics*.

In the absence of any normative theories of aesthetics, Rockmore discusses selected medieval thinkers' reflections on beauty and the ontology of art—those of Augustine and Aquinas in particular—and the shift in aesthetic views as a result of Christian metaphysics and corresponding epistemology. He enters into conversation with major theorists of Medieval aesthetics as well as theorists devoted to Augustine and Aquinas, such as George Duby, Edgar De Bruyne, Władysław Tartakiewicz, Karol Svoboda, Robert O'Connell, Carol Harrison, John Maren, Marten Wisse, and Umberto Eco.

Medieval Christian aesthetics develops according to epistemological possibilities inaccessible to Platonic dualism. The transformation of aesthetics during Medieval times is based on the Neoplatonic idea of emanation that is the ground for oneness, and continuity from the One or God to the world, and justifies the emergence of the notion of natural and objective beauty as a result or reflection of God's creation, or with Aquinas as a *transcendental* or transcendental property of being along with *unum, res, ens, aliquid, bonum, verum* (ATP 100). The typical claim of medieval Christian aesthetic for a cognitive relation between beautiful objects or nature and truth is based on Neoplatonism, subsequently pursued by Pseudo-Dionysus, which postulates a deeper ontological unity and identity between the epistemological subject and object. This, Rockmore notes, leads to an anti-Platonic approach to aesthetic phenomena in Christian Medieval art.

Nonetheless, Medieval art while representational is not strictly mimetic and develops through allegory and analogy. Rockmore observes the interesting play between Platonic and Aristotelian influences within this new *Weltanschauung*. God or the Plotinian One takes the place of the Platonic Forms and cannot be known directly (distinction between Plato, a pre-Christian pagan rational philosopher, and Plotinus, a Christian mystic and theologian), but can be inferred from his own creation through analogy and allegory. Art and truth are necessarily linked and form a triad with the good.

In the subchapter on Augustine, Rockmore discusses Augustine's views on beauty and compares his aesthetics with the Byzantine vision which emerged at the same time with John Damascene and Theodorus Studites, in reaction to Platonism and the Old Testament prohibition of art initially and subsequently surrounding the iconoclastic controversy. It is in the chapter on G. F. W. Hegel that Rockmore will bring up the relevance of icon art as Christian art par excellence,

as the representation of God especially during the iconoclast controversy. In his reflection on Aquinas, Rockmore engages Umberto Eco's reflections in his monograph on Aquinas, and investigates Aquinas' notions of beauty as a transcendental and of visual and intellectual pleasure that lead to subjective dimensions of beauty.

In chapter 4, Rockmore navigates the Kantian continent with grace and expertise. Kant puts forth a modern and Christian version of the Platonic dualist epistemology: the *noumena* replace the Forms, but unlike the latter, and similar to the Christian/Plotinian God/One, they can never be known. Art is a matter of subjectivity, of taste, pleasure and pain (after Burke), of genius, and imagination. The judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment but is rather aesthetic, i.e., one whose determining ground is subjective. Rockmore enumerates the consequences: The problem of beauty does not depend on the object but rather on the subject; a judgment of beauty is wholly subjective; judgments of beauty are based on the perception of pleasure or displeasure; this depends on a faculty situated in the imagination; since a judgment of beauty contributes nothing to cognition, beauty and aesthetics are unrelated to cognition (in this respect Kant is firmly on the side of Plato); judgments of beauty which do not relate to things in themselves relate solely to representations.

Kant suggests he is a Platonist while taking an anti-Platonic approach to art and art objects. He denies that aesthetics yields knowledge (*First Critique* knowledge), thus canceling the Platonic link between art and truth. The question is what if any knowledge aesthetics has at its disposal (*ATP* 220). Plato suggests there is true representation based on intuitive knowledge of the forms, and false representation lacking knowledge as in imitative arts. Kant who is still understood as a representationalist, denies intuition of the real, hence knowledge of things in themselves, and denies representationalism while turning to constructivism. The result, Rockmore argues, is that Kant's theory of aesthetics does not yield knowledge as Plato understood it in intuitively grasping the forms, nor knowledge, as Kant understands in the *First Critique* in bringing sensation under the categories. In Kant's *Third Critique* the theory of aesthetics does not yield knowledge, it yields interpretation or hermeneutics, and formulates a theory of aesthetics based on a subjective or non-categorical approach to experience. Due to the Kantian epistemological limitation of the knower's capacity only for the phenomenological dimension of the world

and never for the *noumenal* one, the connection art-truth has been eliminated. What was introduced instead was a connection between art and the moral dimension, obscurely argued, Rockmore notes, by Kant in the experience of the sublime.

In chapter 5, Rockmore welcomes Aristotle over Plato, and Hegel over Kant. Hegel's aesthetic theories are developed dialectically, out of a vast field of data, and are comprehensive covering a wide range historically from Egyptian art to the end of art, and in depth. Consistent with his commitment to careful and thorough reading of the texts, Rockmore discusses Hegel's theory of art in the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, *Encyclopedia*, and *Lectures on Aesthetics*. While the *Phenomenology* treats religion in the form of art as a specific approach to the problem of cognition; the *Encyclopedia* provides an a-historical description of art in Hegel's effort to formulate a systematic account of the philosophical sciences; and the *Aesthetics* offers Hegel's views on a series of phenomena on a historical basis.

For Rockmore, these three treatments are united through Hegel's discovery of the concept of spirit that distinguishes his aesthetic theory. Thus, with Hegel, new aesthetic paradigms are formed. He understands art as a living organism in a historical evolution, as one manifestation of the Spirit, in its passage through different forms in a striving toward reconciliation. Art, religion, and philosophy are the three legitimate epistemological modalities: while both art and religion are representational, philosophy transcends representation and is conceptual. Art and religion have fared together but that collaboration is neither obligatory nor guaranteed. Rockmore goes over the well-known tripartite typological classification of religious art: symbolic; classical; romantic. Hegel thinks art is central to religion, and illustrates religion in the form of art in claiming that "only Christianity is successful in depicting God" (*ATP* 172): "set forth in his truth, concrete in himself, as person, as subject, and more closely defined, as spirit" (*ATP* 172). For Greek art, "the god is not abstract but rather individual and can be known as such;" for Christian art, though "represented as an individual, God cannot be known as such. God can only be known through spirit, not in external but rather in internal form" (*ATP* 172).

Hegel reestablished the connection severed by Kant between art and truth. What is truth in Hegel's case? Rockmore explains Hegel's view: art reveals the truth about ourselves, art makes us aware of ourselves, thus deepening our self-consciousness — in art we meet

ourselves. Thus, for Hegel art has a cognitive role. Indeed there is a cognitive sequence from art through religion to philosophy. Moreover, art functions in the cognitive progression within religion itself: natural religion of spirit in the form of immediacy; the religion of art in which religion has externalized itself in concrete form; revealed religion that unites the other two forms of religion in true religion. Although art and religion have been intimately connected, art's cognitive value is not exhausted in its relation to religion. Human beings know the world and themselves in a social context and rise to self-consciousness that is not exhausted within religion, but continues beyond it in a post-religious society in the romantic form of aesthetics. Rockmore argues, that while we know the world and ourselves in and through art, it is only when art develops beyond art in a post-Christian world therefore, that we reach self-knowledge of ourselves. This claim is related, Rockmore notes, to Hegel's notion of the end of art.

Rockmore elucidates some myths about Hegel: the notion of the death of God – adopted by Alexander Kojève and Francis Fukuyama; and that of the end of art, which influenced Arthur Danto. However, he observes a key distinction between Hegel and Danto: Danto is concerned about the contemporary phenomenon of the vanishing of the distinction between art and non-art and the question of the end of art refers to this phenomenon. For Hegel art is changing and adapting to the needs of history. Thus today art must adapt to a secular world, no longer embedded in religion, and function independently in accordance with post-Christian late modernity.

While chapter 6 provides an exceptional case of anti-Platonic art and truth based on social realism, chapter 7 offers another tour de force through the complexity of new trends and tendencies in art and theories of art. The chapter has two parts: the first addresses Kantian and post-Kantian alternative theories of aesthetics that led to the twentieth century developments in both philosophy and art. Rockmore reviews the implausibility of Plato's theory of art and truth connection through the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus, Bishop Berkeley, Kant, and Nelson Goodman and concludes that there is no possibility of proving a theory of truth as correspondence to mind-independent reality, Form, God, or thing in itself.

The chapter continues with an overview of the theories proposed by F. W. J. Schelling, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger. Schelling's philosophy of art considers art superior to philosophy, thus providing a complete reversal of Plato's views.

While for Hegel the three epistemological modalities of art, religion and philosophy represent ascending stages toward ultimate actualization of being and knowing, with Schelling art becomes a privileged epistemological form conducive to an encounter with the whole human being, both the rational and the non-rational dimensions, for which, according to him, philosophy is not sufficient. Along this same line, Nietzsche in his qualified *Graecophilia*, invokes the Dionysian irrational mode, of original and primordial art which subsequently strayed or got lost in Apollonian, rational, Socratic art. Both Schelling and Nietzsche, Rockmore notes, illegitimately use reason to argue for unreason, and endorse the myth of the irrational as superior to the rational. This alternative tradition continues with Heidegger who after *the turn* esoterically develops a theory of aletheic art or art as revealing the truth of being, endorsed indirectly by John Sallis' art as transfiguration of the senses. Rockmore cautions that their anti-Platonic art and truth connection and epistemological representation have not been properly demonstrated and thus fail to convince.

The second part of the chapter is devoted to the novel theoretical and practical experiments challenging tradition, that began with *l'art pour l'art* and aestheticism, and continued with impressionism, cubism, abstract art, and non-art as art which cancels the distinction between art and non-art. *L'art pour l'art* completely renounces the attempt to fulfill Plato's ambitious standard of representation that subordinates art to external ultimates: art has intrinsic value and does not need any validation from epistemology, religion, morality or social functionality. Impressionism begins a new struggle against Platonism, one that envisions a different connection between art and the truth of subjective fleeting perceptions. Rockmore observes that impressionism metamorphosizes via Cézanne into cubism and abstraction, the other end of the spectrum: art is called to be true not to immediate subjective perception but to intellection, to what one knows to be the case and not to what one perceives. In what relation to Platonism are then cubism and abstract art? They both witness to a subjective personal vision that does not have objective transcendent existence. Rockmore explains that representationalism presupposes a "unified cognitive object" (ATP 257), one that has been disintegrating progressively since Impressionism.

In the Conclusion, Rockmore reviews the principal tenets of aesthetic theory since Plato, all of which failed to mount a convincing argument. He seems to agree with

and endorse an Aristotelian-Hegelian-Feuerbachian constructive aesthetics: art witnesses to human life as a striving toward actualization of one's potential for being and happiness. It is thus a historical phenomenon and hence both its nature and relevance change according to the times. It is a valid epistemological modality, a knowing not of mind-independent reality (Forms, the Good, the One, God, *noumena*) but rather a knowing of ourselves. It is an experience through which we become

aware of ourselves. Its social function is validated irrespective of its truth content.

Thus, Professor Rockmore's *Art and Truth after Plato* constitutes a major scholarly and philosophical accomplishment as a treatise in cognitive theory under the guise of aesthetics delighting in proving that representationalism has failed and the turn to constructivism has been justified.