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SATURATED PLASTICITY:
ART AND NATURE

Abstract

This essay takes up the question of the relationship between art and nature in the middle period of Schelling's thinking, concentrating primarily on his 1807 Munich address, On the Relationship of the Plastic Arts to Nature. It discusses the theme of saturation, first in terms of its relationship to chemistry and alchemy, and then in terms of the relationship between the forms of both art and Nature and their consummate and indissoluble relationship to the dynamic (plastic) formless and groundless ground of Nature. Resisting the tyranny of the naturalistic fallacy, I argue for the intrinsic value of the living ground of nature, and discuss this life in terms of plasticity, with special reference to the recent work of Catherine Malabou. Finally, I argue that what relates both art and nature is the saturating plasticity of the imagination (what Coleridge, apropos of Schelling, calls esemplasy).

Those who believe classicism is possible are the same who feel that art is the flower of society rather than its root.

(Barnett Newman)¹

As Claude Lévi-Strauss remarked years ago, the arts are the wilderness areas of the imaginations surviving, like national parks, in the midst of civilized minds. The abandon and delight of lovemaking is, as often sung, part of the delightful wild in us. Both sex and art! But we knew that all along. What we didn't perhaps see so clearly was that self-realization, even enlightenment, is another aspect of our wildness—a bonding of the wild in ourselves to the (wild) process of the universe.

(Gary Snyder)²

Schelling's remarkable public lecture on the relationship between the plastic arts and Nature, first published in 1807 as *Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur*, was delivered in Munich in the Fall in celebration of King Maximilian I of Bavaria's name day. The importance that Schelling attached to the speech is suggested by the fact that

¹ BARNETT NEWMAN, "The New Sense of Fate," *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 168.

² GARY SNYDER, "Preface" (2010), *The Practice of the Wild* (1990) (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), ix. Henceforth PW.

he included a version of it with six additional comments in the form of endnotes in the first and only volume of his 1809 *Philosophische Schriften*, placing it right before the first appearance of the *Freiheitschrift*. This was no mere occasional speech in observance of Maximilian's feast day, but a surprising kind of festival, an explosive kind of feast. Schelling, in his call for the "revival [*Aufleben*]," that is, coming back to life, "of a thoroughly indigenous art [*einer durchaus eigentümlichen Kunst*]" (I/7, 328)³, and "rejuvenated life [*verjüngtes Leben*]" (I/7, 328) and an "art that grows out of fresh seeds and from the root" (I/7, 326), and which, "like everything else living, originates in the first beginnings" (I/7, 324) and returns to that which in itself is "without image" [*das Ungebildete*]" (I/7, 324), that is, for art that returns to life by returning to the source of art's life, marked this festival as a *kind of carnival*⁴, that is, as a *saturated progression of masks*⁵. In what follows, I will develop and defend my seemingly eccentric characterization of the address.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Schelling are my own responsibility. I am employing the standard citation style that follows the order established by Schelling's son, Karl shortly after his father's death.

⁴ I also here invoke Foucault's use of this image in his famous Nietzsche essay, where he refers to Nietzsche's eschewal of "solid identities" and his embrace of the "great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing." MICHEL FOUCAULT, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 94.

⁵ In such a call, Schelling has first and foremost the "fatherland" in view (I/7, 328). The question of specifically German earth and soil is, of course, quite complex. For a discussion of this problem, see DEVIN ZANE SHAW, *Freedom and Nature in Schelling's Philosophy of Art* (New York: Continuum, 2010). Here Shaw presents what he considers both the bad news and the good news regarding the political ramifications of Schelling's philosophy of art. Schelling had hoped that the philosophy of art could unite German-speaking world in a new mythology, beyond its sectarian tendencies and the corruption of a culture that denigrates all value into use-value. Shaw finds this ambition dangerous: "A mythologization of politics is closer to what Marx would call a mystification: an idealization of social relationships... it places *Bildung* or cultivation of peoples or publics over direct or democratic political engagement" (116). Schelling would eventually abandon the project of a new mythology, and not a moment too soon. "That Schelling turns away from the mythologization of politics when he changes his focus to a universal history of religion—just at the time when German politics becomes increasingly nationalistic—appears well advised in retrospect" (117). As much as Schelling dreamed of the unifying force of a new mythology, there is also an undeniable radicality to his insight into the utopian promise of art. In an increasingly globalized and totally administered world, the eruption of freedom testified by the work of art continues to be an inspiring political resource. "On the other hand, the revolutionary and utopian idea of art reemerged in the avant-garde of the 20th century and is still the focus of contemporary debates on the relationship between politics and art" (117). Schelling wrote no treatises on the political, and his passing comments on matters political continue to be a matter of earnest debate. Shaw for his part takes a strong stand: "If my concluding critique... is sharp or even polemical, it is only because I think the potential of the revolutionary sequence has yet to be exhausted" (7). I would simply add to Shaw's well taken point that Schelling in the Munich essay does warn that "without great general enthusiasm, there are only sects" (I/7, 327), that is, without an awakening to the source of art, art quickly collapses into the nationalization of particular forms of art. One need only think of Hitler's attack on "*entartete Kunst*," art that betrays its form, and his promotion of "German" art, which, as hollow, politicized forms of art, was nothing but kitsch. In radical evil, ground and earth are covered with *Boden*. German soil is understood in its national and cultural form, detached from its living earth.

I begin by briefly reflecting on my decision, perhaps provocatively, to speak of this progression of masks as saturated. Why saturated? The latter term derives from Latin roots indicating a drenching, a filling up and satiating. *Die Sättigung*, with its root *satt*, to be full, clearly speaks to this satiation and in reference to chemistry, Schelling reflects in the *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797, rev. 1803), for example, on the complete permeation of the alchemical *menstruum*, prime matter, and a superadded body. Without consummate and reciprocal saturation, either the *menstruum* attempts to dissolve the body or a dissolved body attracts a superadded body. Consummate satiation, the complete interpenetration of energy and form, allows for a perfect mixture, and nothing more can be added⁶. This (al)chemical saturation in which the formless and form interpenetrate in Nature can also, Schelling tells us in the Munich speech, be detected in the germinating upsurge of the work of art, as if it were an unknown and unexpected plant: “the artwork rises up out of the depths of Nature, growing upwards with definiteness and delimitation, unfolding inner infinity and saturation [*innere Unendlichkeit und Fülle*], finally transforms itself into charm [*Anmut*] and in the end reaches soul” (I/7, 321). The speech is rife with images of living soil, animating ground, and productive earth, all of which oppose mere surface and land [*Boden*]. The seed of art takes its life from the depths of this earth, watered by inspiration. Or one could say that in art one finds the saturation of gravity and light, that is, of the dark, attractive depths of ground or “mysterious night” (I/6, 257) of gravity in its coupling with the expanding clarity of form as light. And although Schelling has “represented” or “imagined” (two possible senses of *vorgestellt*) this movement in its constituent and therefore “separated [*getrennt*]” parts, he insists that in “the act of creation” it is “a single deed” (I/7, 321), a unified progression. It happens of itself, beyond the activity of creating or the passivity of being created, in something like the middle voice of artistic productivity.

In art, the soul, the animating *menstruum* of Nature, the eternal beginning, or what Schelling in the Munich speech simply calls *das Wesen*, is saturated with form and form is saturated with the living energy of the soul. Although opposing form, there is no soul separate from form because although form delimits energy, it does so in order to give it life and expression. When one conceives form solely in abstract terms, that is, removed from the sensuous, it appears as if it constricts *das Wesen* because it is inimical (*feindselig*) to it, but form has no independent standing. If form is “only with and through *das Wesen*,” how could *das Wesen* feel restricted by what it creates (I/7, 303)? “The determinateness [*Bestimmtheit*] of form is never in Nature a negation, but rather always an affirmation” (I/7, 303). In his book on Francis Bacon, Deleuze makes this point in relationship to painting when he explicates Bacon’s critique of the action paintings of Jackson Pollock. “The diagram should not, therefore, engulf the entire painting; it should remain limited in space and time. It should remain operative and controlled. Violent means should not be unleashed, and the necessary catastrophe should not submerge everything” (199). Bacon’s assessment of Pollock can remain a subject of debate—Pollock understood himself to be a force of Nature—but the broader point can still hold: without saturation there is only kitsch (empty forms posing as art) or

⁶ FRIEDRICH WILHELM JOSEPH VON SCHELLING, *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Errol E. Harris and Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 264-265.

catastrophe, the dark night of the *menstruum*. Composition demands saturation and in this sense it cannot be separated from *natura naturans*, the productivity and creativity of Nature.

But Schelling asks if we any longer understand what it might mean for us to recognize the classical principle that relates the plastic arts to Nature since the Greeks, namely that “art is the imitator of Nature [*die Nachahmerin der Natur*]” (KN, 345). That art should imitate Nature is a truism whose roots, despite their 19th Century fruits, stretch back to the various receptions of Aristotle, including his *Poetics*, where drama imitates and even completes φύσις, and the *Physics*, especially book beta, where Aristotle explicitly claims that τέχνη imitates φύσις (194a21). Aristotle, however did not mean that the forms that τέχνη brings forth are mere copies of the forms that φύσις brought forth. At stake in φύσις is the problem of bringing forth, of production as such, and hence τέχνη itself also relates to the problem of production, not to the procedure of representing in artistic forms the same forms that first manifested in φύσις. Art is not the skill of mimicking the forms of Nature. This however, was not to become the chief manner in which this thinking became the truism that it had long become before Schelling engaged it critically. Marcus Aurelius, for example, in his *Meditations* evokes this perhaps already terminally ill reading of Aristotle when he reflects that “No Nature is inferior to Art because the arts [merely] imitate the things of nature [Οὐκ ἔστι χείρων οὐδεμία φύσις τέχνης’ καὶ γὰρ αἱ τέχναι τὰς φύσεις μιμοῦνται]” (*Meditations*, xi. 10). From this perspective, plastic images—perceptual forms or shapes if you will—imitate the forms of Nature. Natural forms are represented naturally, and whether art copies them and in so doing either falls short of them or improves them, it fundamentally re-presents them. Art produces formal images, *Bilder*, and the source for these formal images is the *Bilder* of Nature itself.

In taking on this deathly perspective, Schelling here evokes the great poet-philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788), whose *oeuvre* Schelling in 1827 confirmed as the constant “touchstone” of one’s own understanding (HMP, 171/168) and whom Schelling in the 1809 comments on the speech calls an *urkräftiger Geist*, a spirit of primordial force (I/7, 294) before then exhorting his colleague Jacobi either to edit the “long hoped for” edition of Hamann’s works himself or to commission someone else to do it. After Schelling’s arrival in Munich, Jacobi had provided him with access to some of Hamann’s more difficult to find works as well as to some of his letters. Schelling’s relationship to Jacobi would soon degenerate into acrimony, and the dispute, initiated by Jacobi, but which inspired Schelling’s uncompromising response, included contrasting accounts of the import of Hamann’s writings⁷. It would be almost two decades before the complete edition of Hamann’s collected works finally appeared (edited and published over the course of six years in seven volumes and completed in 1827 by Jacobi and Schelling’s colleague at the Bavarian Academy, Friedrich Roth). It is perhaps fitting that, given Schelling’s lament about the fate of the arts as itself inseparable from the collapse into the rigor mortis of positivism of our relationship to the natural world, that Hamann appeared so irrelevant to the prevailing intellectual climate. Nonetheless,

⁷ For a concise account of this, see JOHN R. BETZ, “Reading ‘Sibylline Leaves’: J. G. Hamann in the History of Ideas,” *Hamann and the Tradition*, ed. Lisa Marie Anderson (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2012), 5-32; see especially 14-19.

Schelling, out of deference to the regal occasion, offered a “toned down [*gemildert*]” version of Hamann’s scathing comment, referring to him discreetly and indirectly as *der tiefsinnige Mann* (the profound man): “Your mendacious philosophy has already done away with Nature and so why do you demand that we should imitate it? So that you may be able thereby to revive your enjoyment by exercising the same violent deed against the students of Nature?” (I/7, 294).

In the 1809 comments, an emboldened Schelling included Hamann’s more incendiary original formulation: “Your murderously mendacious philosophy has done away with Nature and so why do you demand that we should imitate it? So that you may be able thereby to revive your enjoyment by murdering the students of Nature?” (I/7, 293). Hamann’s choice of words merits careful attention. First of all, you murder artists by murdering the source of art, namely Nature. Artists are students of Nature, but if you kill Nature yet still demand that art imitate it, artists produce dead works and in so doing, art and its artists are destroyed. To be clear: the death of art is a consequence of the death of Nature and all of this death amounts to a murder spree.

The Hamann’s image of murdered Nature appears again in Schelling’s 1811 fragment from the handwritten remains called *Über das Wesen deutscher Wissenschaft* [*On the Wesen of German Science*]⁸. Schelling claims that Hamann, that “profound spirit,” “felt more deeply than anyone the deathblow [*Totschlag*] of Nature via the use of abstractions as well as the utter vanity of his age in its elevation above and domination over Nature and in its moral enmity toward it” (I/8, 8). The murder weapons were abstraction, the dubious assertion of humanity’s self-importance, and an enmity toward Nature that stemmed from regarding it at best as value-neutral, but in no way valuable in itself. The crime was not without its witnesses, however, and Schelling counted Böhme and Hamann as chief among “this cloud of witnesses” (I/8, 8).

Schelling shall famously in the *Freedom* essay claim that the positivistic representation of Nature, or more precisely, its view of Nature as representable, is Nature-cide, the fatal flaw that epitomizes modernity: “Nature is not present to it” for modernity “lacks a living ground [*die Natur für sich nicht vorhanden ist, und daß es ihr am lebendigen Grunde fehlt*]” (I/7, 361). Nature therefore becomes a dead abstraction and its forces become mere repetitions of the same. Natural laws are its inviolable operators, and Nature is denied its miracle of natality, the power of its sovereign and formless life to produce and bring forth—birth—new forms of life, and Nature hence becomes incapable of living, free progressivity, so that it merely repeats what it has always already been, “swiveling,” Schelling says in the *Freedom* essay, “in the indifferent circle of sameness, which would not be progressive, but rather insensible and non-vital” (I/7, 345). I will return to the miraculous nature of natality, but we can already say that in the “indifferent circle of sameness,” Nature becomes a system of laws, that is, a system of dead representations that, like zombies, become implacable forces of the dead. A year before the Munich speech, in the 1806 *Darlegung des wahren Verhältnis der Naturphilosophie zu der verbesserten Fichteschen Lehre*, written after Schelling and Fichte had decisively broken around the

⁸ For reasons that will become clear later in the essay, I leave the word *Wesen* untranslated. I can already say at this point that following the convention of translating it as essence is in some important ways misleading.

question of Nature, Schelling claims that “The moralist desires to see Nature not as living, but as dead, so that he can tread upon it with his feet” (I/7, 17). Dead Nature is the mere surface beneath our feet, land that we imagine as being there for us, simply at our disposal.

Language emphasizing the life of the living ground preponderates in Schelling’s writings during the middle period. He was in part responding to many of his contemporaries who regarded Nature, as he puts it in the Munich speech, as a “dead aggregate of an indeterminable quantity of objects” or as abstract space filled with objects like a receptacle, or as raw materials for extraction and consumption—mere “ground from which one draws nourishment and sustenance” (I/7, 293). This contrasts with the soul of forms, “the living center” (I/7, 296), the “saturation (*Vollkommenheit*) of each thing” not through its “empty, abstracted form” but rather through the “creative life in it, its power to be present [*Kraft daꝛusein*],” which is lost on those who cannot see the genesis and production of form, but rather just see “Nature overall as something dead” (I/7, 294). Life is chemical saturation in the sense that chemical forms come to be seen as fundamentally alchemical, “in which the pure gold of beauty and truth emerge purified by fire” (I/7, 294).

In the Munich speech, Schelling immediately draws out the consequences of Hamann’s prophetic prognosis. To these murderers, Nature is not merely mute, but it is *ein völlig totes Bild*—a consummately dead image, an image saturated with death (I/7, 294). This also suggests, therefore, a second sense of saturation, namely, an exhaustion or blockage in which form is a mere abstraction, ripped from its animating wellspring. Aldo Leopold, the American pioneer of the land ethic, makes Schelling’s point in a much more contemporary, but also in a similarly prophetic fashion⁹. When he famously speaks of the “land ethic” and the awakening of an ecological conscience in which land is no longer reduced to the efficacious disposal of private property and “economic self-interest” (SCA, 209), he draws upon an event in which his perspective on the land, which he had earlier more or less regarded as something with no value beyond its value to humans, is shattered by the sudden—miraculous even—coming forth of the fire of life. In the backcountry of the Southwest, Leopold and his companions were eating lunch when they saw an animal that they first mistook for a doe. As it came closer, they realized that it was a wolf with a half dozen grown pups. “In those days we had never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack.” After they emptied their guns, they made their way down to the wolf.

“We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters’ paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.” (SCA, 130)

In his trigger happy youth, Leopold considered that the value of the land derived from its value to us as a place from we can derive our sustenance and pleasures, just as

⁹ ALDO LEOPOLD, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (1949) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). Henceforth SCA.

Schelling characterized the view of Nature as *Boden*, as mere “ground from which one draws nourishment and sustenance” (I/7, 293). For Leopold, the earth is still regarded as property, to be disposed of in fashions efficacious to human interests. Because we live on the earth, we can take it for granted, that is, as our property, as something that, as given, we conclude that we own. Such a position, I would suggest in passing, cannot be separated from Schelling’s account of radical evil, which “rests on a positive perversity [*Verkehrtheit*] or reversal of principles” (I/7, 367). One lives from the periphery as if from the living center, holding on to dead forms, including, most importantly, the *imago* of oneself, as if they were the wellsprings of life.

The death of Nature in its relegation to property is nothing new, and Leopold also characterizes this relationship as Abrahamic (SCA, 204-205), but it has taken on an increased order of magnitude in the last three centuries. In the reduction of natural science to positivism, an equation against which Schelling always combated, the land has no value that in itself contests the exclusive gauging of its value in relationship to human interests. One need only think of the naturalistic fallacy and its refusal to derive ethical claims from Nature. When Nature is saturated with death, the value of its forms are assigned by those who regard it as something exclusively at their disposal. Land is valuable when it serves human interests, and a wasteland when it does not. As Holmes Rolston III argued, “There is something overspecialized about an ethics, held by the dominant class of *Homo sapiens*, that regards the welfare of only one of several million species as an object and beneficiary of duty. We need an interspecific ethics. Whatever ought to be in culture, this biological world that *is* also *ought to be*; we must argue from the natural to the moral.”¹⁰ For Schelling, Nature and art do not express something good, a particular thing or two that we esteem, but rather the progressive life of the Good itself. The soul “is not good, but rather it is the Good” (I/7, 312)¹¹. Without such an intuition, natural and artistic form express emptiness and “inner nullity [*Nichtigkeit*]” for they are “without the saturation of content” [*ohne die Fülle des Inhaltes*]” (I/7, 305).

Leopold called the reversal of this perspective, the intuition of what Schelling called “infinite content” (I/7, 305), learning to “think like a mountain” (SCA, 129-133). When Leopold looked into the dying wolf’s eyes, he did not just “see” that they were green but he “felt” their fire, the life that moved Leopold to think not from the *form* of the wolf but from the *ground* of the wolf. One must, to use Schelling’s oft employed formulation, come to know the wolf so intimately that one moves *über x hinaus*, through x and thereby beyond x. As Schelling articulated this in the Munich speech: “We must go through the form [*über die Form hinausgehen*] in order to gain it back as intelligible, alive, and as truly felt [*empfunden*]” (I/7, 299). *Empfindung*, sensibility, is a difficult and critical term, but it could be at least said that is the intuition of the life, the living depths, of the form, in the concrete apprehension of the form, much in the way that the Zen tradition

¹⁰ HOLMES ROLSTON III, “Challenges in Environmental Ethics,” *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology*, fourth edition, ed. Michael E. Zimmerman, J. Baird Callicott, Karen J. Warren (Author), Irene J. Klaver, John Clark (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2005), 82.

¹¹ In the third or 1815 draft of *Die Weltalter*, Schelling makes this distinction about the Godhead: “But the good is its Being *per se*. It is essentially good and not so much something good as the Good itself” (I/8, 237).

speaks of the soundless sound and the formless form. Such an intuition, the shock of *Empfindung* in the sudden experience of the green fire, changes everything. When Leopold examined the wolf-free landscape, overrun by deer, he expected it to be a hunter's paradise, but instead found the flora of the mountains decimated by the exploding deer population. "Such a mountain looks as if someone had given God new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise" (SCA, 130-132). The awful majesty becomes the kitsch of an earth reduced to human economic interests. In the *Kunstphilosophie* lectures, Schelling strikingly claims that God is the immediate cause of all art (§ 23; I/5, 386), but, to borrow the phrase from the *Freedom* essay, God cannot be a "God of the living" if Nature is, as it is in radical evil, saturated with death. In evil, we are all dancing with a good conscience and intellectual self-certainty in a great self-enclosed circle of pure light. In our dance, we are not *like* God but *as* God. Such a dance in the realm of detached light is the fire not of life but of hell, as if the relentless proliferation of suburbs and shopping malls expressed the grace of Nature.

I think that for this reason the great Thirteenth Century Zen Master Eihei Dōgen (1200-1253) also loved mountains and counseled us to think like mountains, whose dominating forms display not only the presence of form, but also, in their emptiness (lack of intrinsic, free standing identity), the saturation of Dharma. "But after entering the mountains, not a single person meets another. There is just the activity of mountains. There is no trace of anyone having entered the mountains"¹². Mountains are not property. "Although the mountains belong to the nation, mountains [really] belong to people who love them. When mountains love their master, such a virtuous sage or wise person enters the mountains" (S, 162). Hence Dōgen tells us that we should "know for a fact that mountains are fond of wise people and sages (S, 163). Thinking like a mountain demands that we "do not view mountains from the standard of human thought" (S, 163).

If art imitates Nature, then not only must we rethink Nature by learning to think like a mountain, but we must therefore also reconsider what it means to imitate. Starting with Nature itself, how does Nature repeat again and again its own progression? How does Nature imitate Nature? Nature does not progressively imitate itself by merely repeating its forms recursively as if they were laws. In the 1800 *System*¹³, Schelling speaks of the "free μίμησις [*freie Nachahmung*]" of the act of self-consciousness, the act by which eternity again and again becomes transposed as living form, as that "with which all philosophy begins" (ST, 65). Indeed, "philosophy in general is nothing but free μίμησις, a free repetition [*Wiederholung*] of the original series of actions in which an act of self-consciousness evolves itself" (ST, 66)¹⁴. In the Munich speech, Schelling contrasts "servile μίμησις [*dienstbare Nachahmung*]" (I/7, 294) and its "tangible lack of life" (I/7, 300), with "vital μίμησις" (I/7, 301). Servile imitation, which reproduces and represents

¹² EIHEI DŌGEN, *Shobogenzō, Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2010), 160. Henceforth S.

¹³ FRIEDRICH WILHELM JOSEPH VON SCHELLING, *System des transzendentalen Idealismus* (1800), ed. Horst D. Brandt and Peter Müller (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1992). Henceforth ST.

¹⁴ For more on the problem of μίμησις in Schelling's philosophy, see my "Schelling and the Force of Nature," *Interrogating the Tradition*, ed. John Sallis and Charles Scott (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 255-274.

forms as if the forms themselves were stillborn, allies itself the Nature-side of positivism. “Death and unbearable severity would be the art that wanted to present the empty husk or delimitation of the individual” (I/7, 304). As Kandinsky famously claimed in 1911, “An effort to animate past principles of art, at best, results in artworks akin to stillborn children.”¹⁵ Living imitation, moreover, has the force of a miracle, “the miracle [*das Wunder*] by which the conditioned is elevated to the unconditioned” (I/7, 296) and the beauty that grips us “with the power of a miracle [*mit der Macht eines Wunders*]” (I/7, 315). As Georges Bataille once characterized the miraculous: impossible, but there it is!¹⁶ A future that could not have followed from what preceded it nonetheless, unexpectedly and unprethinkably, comes forth. The miracle is the temporality of Nature and art, its living temporality. As William Blake articulated it in one of his wonderful “Proverbs of Hell” from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “Eternity is in love with the productions of time.” This love in the free and living repetition of its temporality is the grace (*χάρις*, *Anmut*) of the soul as it expresses itself in the green fire of form.

Finally I return to the masks themselves, whose saturated progress expresses the marvelous non-sequiturs of free, living *μίμησις*. The carnival is the festival of plasticity itself, of *das Bildende* as such. How do we think plasticity as living masks, symbols, and husks? As a first hint as to how one could here this word, we can look at how in her recent work, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*¹⁷, Catherine Malabou understands the “conceptual portrait” of her own work as a *transformational mask*. Found in several cultures including the Pacific Northwest, a transformational mask is a mask that opens up to reveal another mask beneath it¹⁸.



¹⁵ WASSILY KANDINSKY, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (1911) (Bern: Benteli Verlag, 1952), 21.

¹⁶ GEORGES BATAILLE, *The Accursed Share, volumes 2 and 3*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 204-206.

¹⁷ CATHERINE MALABOU, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). Henceforth PDW.

¹⁸ This photograph of a Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka'wakw) transformation mask by John Livingston (1951-), adopted Kwakwaka'wakw artist, is by Yvette Cardozo, used here with her permission. The mask is from the private collection of Bill Hirsch and Yvette Cardozo. It is made of red cedar, 44 inches wide, 30 inches tall. When closed, the mask shows the head of a thunderbird. Strings are pulled to open the beak, showing both a human face in the center and sea monster designs.

Such a mask is, however, no “mere mask,” no hollow husk, no lifeless symbol. The mask for Malabou, following Claude Lévi-Strauss, indicates “an agonism between form and its dislocation, between systematic unity and the explosion of the system” (PDW, 6).

“Transformational masks never reveal the face they mask. They are ill-suited to the human face and never marry the model, nor are they designed to hide it. They simply open and close onto other masks, without effecting the metamorphosis of someone or something... rather than disguising a face, the masks reveal the secret connection between *formal unity* and *articulation*, between the *completeness of form* and the *possibility of its dislocation*” (PDW, 2).

Transformational masks are the living temporality of plasticity. “Plasticity thus appeared to me from the outset as a *structure of transformation and destruction of presence and the present*” (PDW, 9). The carnival is the temporal progression of masks, endlessly unfolding layers of divine personae without God being something beneath the masks, but rather the dynamically productive excess of their visibility, the dark mother of gravity¹⁹.

We could now say that just as Nature is not only *naturata* (the clarity of what is), but also the productivity of *natura naturans* (nature producing itself anew), art is not just the catalogue of artworks and techniques, but the miracle of art, so to speak, arting. Nature natures and art arts! At the beginning of the Munich speech, Schelling argues that the “relationship” between Nature and the *Bilder* of art, the plasticity or shaping into form brought forth in *die bildende Kunst*, is located in a “living center” that holds art and Nature together. “The plastic arts therefore stands manifestly as an active copula [*Band*] between the soul and Nature and can only be grasped in the living center between both of them” (I/7, 292). What is this living center that governs the relationship between φύσις and τέχνη, Nature and art? How do the images of Nature relate to the images of art? The living center is the imagination itself. The life of *die Bilder* is the productivity of *Einbildungskraft*.

The latter already literally speaks of the sovereign introduction (*ein*) of image (*Bild*) into that which is at first without image. Schelling sometimes spoke of this “expulsive [*ausstoßende*]” movement as the *In-Eins-Bildung* (e.g., I/7, 60), that is, the conjunction of soul and form as a saturated production. The many become one [*Eins*] through have coming into [*In*] form [*Bild*]. Coleridge, for his part, attempted to render this movement through his remarkable neologism “esemplastic,” derived from the Greek “εἰς ἓν πλάττειν, i.e. to shape into one...”. The shaping is “plastic” (from πλάττειν), suggesting the unified and unifying movement from the formless to the formed. As Coleridge reflected: “I constructed it [the

¹⁹ Prevailing Kwakiutl resistance to the reduction of their living culture—the potlatch is enjoying a great resurgence among the canoe-faring First Nations peoples of the Northwest coast of Turtle Island—to museum artifacts provides, I believe, powerful testimony for Schelling’s own plea for “a thoroughly indigenous art [*einer durchaus eigentümlichen Kunst*]” (I/7, 328). These transformation masks are inseparable from the soil that grants them their life as cultural practices. On this issue, one can also see Deleuze and Guattari on the problem of earth in the fourth chapter (“Geophilosophy”) of *What is Philosophy?* “The earth is not one element among others but rather brings together all the elements within a single embrace while using one or another of them to deterritorialize territory.” GILLES DELEUZE and FÉLIX GUATTARI, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 85.

word ‘esemplastic’] myself from the Greek words, εἰς ἓν πλάττειν, i.e., to shape into one; because, having to convey a new sense, I thought that a new term would both aid the recollection of my meaning, and prevent its being confounded with the usual import of the word, imagination.”²⁰ The relationship between the plastic arts and Nature is the plasticity of the esemplastic itself.

When I repeat the movement of the imagination as if I were simply reproducing something I once saw as if it were the same thing, that is, represented, rather than, as in Proust, productively re-imagined, art is lost. Kitsch, to use a term made famous by Hermann Broch, has a murderous relationship to Nature. Kitsch is not, as Broch insisted, bad art, but rather pseudo-art, something non-artistic trying to pass itself off as art. As such, Broch concluded, kitsch is an experience of radical evil. “The maker of kitsch does not create inferior art, he is not an incompetent or a bungler, he cannot be evaluated by esthetic standards; rather, he is ethically depraved, a criminal willing radical evil.”²¹ The life of the imagination is always a struggle and sometimes our artworks are just not all that good, but failed art is still art. The struggle for art is always also the ongoing struggle against the lurking forces of kitsch. In Milan Kundera’s novels, which eschew the facile world of stereotypes and economies of imitation, kitsch is the “absence of shit” in the sense that it is a rejection of all that does not accord with itself: “Kitsch has its source in the categorical agreement with being.”²² Schelling had long understood this agreement as the danger of dogmatism, which we can now see is inseparable from the problem of evil.

We could also say, extending Schelling’s position, that kitsch is a kind of *Doppelgänger* of art, haunting us from the realm of the dead. In this saturating of death, we see that we have more fundamentally lost faith in life. Art calls us back, paradoxically, beyond the mistake of positing an exclusive disjunction between art and Nature, to a more natural attunement to life. As Deleuze argued in his text about cinematic images of time:

“Cinema seems wholly within Nietzsche’s formula: “How we are still pious.”... The modern fact is that we no longer believe in the world. We do not even believe in the events that happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world that looks to us like a bad film... The link between the human and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith... The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link... Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reasons to believe in this world.*”²³

When we believe in the world, when the study of science inspires our love of poetry and when the love of poetry awakens our passion for science, the past is re-imagined, the unprethinkable future and exposes and disables our clichés of living and dying, and in the

²⁰ SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE, *Biographia Literaria* (1817 edition), ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 168.

²¹ HERMANN BROCH, “Evil in the Value-System of Art,” *Geist and Zeitgeist: The Spiritual in an Unspiritual Age*, ed. and trans. John Hargraves (New York: Counterpoint, 2002), 37.

²² MILAN KUNDERA, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans Michael Heim (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 256.

²³ GILLES DELEUZE, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 171-172.

relationship between art and nature, we become vulnerable to the green fire that is the shock of real tears and the trembling of real laughter.