

Paul A. Kottman

Noli tangere: On the limits of seeing and touching in Hegel's philosophy of art

Abstract

Hegel's exclusion of touch (and taste and smell) from the purview of fine art, which limits itself to the "theoretical senses" of sight and hearing, does not mean that touch is not theoretical. Rather, for Hegel, the theoretical significance of touch cannot be grasped artistically; indeed, that is a lesson which art, exclusively, teaches. For this reason, Hegel's philosophy of art offers unique resources for a critique of our contemporary visual culture and its obliviousness to the moral and theoretical implications of how human beings are touched, or touch one another.

Keywords

Visual culture, Pornography, Touch, Sight

The Author of this article has been invited for his internationally relevant work on the topic of the issue.

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kottmanp@newschool.edu

[...] the sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing, while smell, taste and touch remain excluded from the enjoyment of art [Deshalb bezieht sich das Sinnliche der Kunst nur auf die beiden theoretischen Sinne des Gesichts und Gehörs, während Geruch, Geschmack und Gefühl vom Kunstgenus ausgeschlossen bleiben.]

(Hegel, *Lectures on fine art*: 38)

Die Kunst ist für [den] Sinn des Gesichtes und Gehörs, [dies] sind theoretische, nicht praktische Sinne, nicht so, daß das Individuum am Gegenstand eine Veränderung macht, ihn zerstört [...]. Das Kunstwerk ist nur für [die] Sinne des Gesichts und Gehörs; Geruch ist praktisch, wenn Duft da ist, der zerstört wird, indem er in Luft sich verbreitet. Ebenso ist im Gefühl [Tastsinn] ein Widerstand der Materie und im Geschmack ist chemische Auflösung, so daß man mit Recht diese praktische Sinne nennen kann.

(Hegel, *Vorlesungen zur Ästhetik*, 1828-29: 26)

1.

According to the 1828-29 Heimann version of Hegel's *Lectures on fine art*, Hegel holds that only seeing and hearing are "theoretical" senses – touch (*Tastsinn*, *Gefühl*), taste and smell are not theoretical, but rather practical. That is, Hegel seems (in Heimann's version) to delineate a contrast between *theoretische Sinne* and *praktische Sinne*; seeing and hearing are theoretical, whereas smell, touch and taste are practical. Art deals with seeing and hearing, on this account, because art is for our theoretical interest and because art thus relies upon a prior division between the theoretical and the practical senses.

This may well be Hegel's view. And, in the pages that follow, I will not try to persuade anyone otherwise. But if it is Hegel's true view, then so much the worse for Hegel.

For it seems to me that Hegel's remarks – in the Hotho version of the *Lectures* – on the exclusion of touch, taste and smell from the purview of fine art offer unique resources for a critique of our contemporary visual culture and its obliviousness to the moral and theoretical implications of how human beings are touched, or touch one another. However, the worth of those resources will depend on reading Hegel's views on the relation of seeing to touch in the *Lectures on fine art* differently from what the Heimann text would indicate. While I will not try to dissuade anyone from thinking the Heimann version is legitimate – that is to say, I do make any claim to be reading Hegel "correctly" – I do want to begin by offering reasons for reading the Hotho version as pointing us in a more fruitful direction for thinking further about the issues Hegel raises.

In Hotho's version, art's reliance on seeing and hearing, as articulated in this passage, does not license us to conclude that only seeing and hearing are "theoretical" senses. The issue, for Hegel, is not that touch, taste and smell are insufficiently theoretical (*too* immersed in the "practical", so to speak) – but rather that "these senses cannot have to do with artistic objects". Because touch, taste and smell deal with "matter as such and its immediately sensible qualities", they "cannot have to do with artistic objects, which are meant to maintain themselves in their real independence and allow of no *purely* sensuous relationship" (Hegel 1975 [= LFA]: 39).

The important contrast between the senses, therefore, is not pursuant to a division between "theoretical" senses and "practical" senses; nor does (Hotho's) Hegel invoke a division between the "sensuous" and the "intellectual". As (Hotho's) Hegel repeatedly emphasizes, art's theoretical claims are also sensuous claims; and anyway, the "theoretical" senses of seeing and hearing, too, are of course themselves entirely sensuous. The important contrast, instead, concerns the way in which art – *das Sinnliche der Kunst* – entails the exclusion of touch, taste and smell ("smell, taste and touch remain excluded from the enjoyment of art") (LFA: 38).

Because it is a perennial – even constitutive – temptation of philosophy (especially of theoretical philosophy) to privilege the "scientific" dimensions of seeing (in particular) and hearing over the other senses, it can be tempting to read Hegel as grounding our interest in art in the theoretical superiority of seeing and hearing. Again, the Heimann version would legitimate such a reading. Nevertheless, it is crucial to Hegel's argument in the Hotho version that it is *art* which divides seeing and hearing from smell, touch and taste – since art includes the former and excludes the latter. Art, that is, does not just rely on a division between the five senses along theoretical lines (theoretical versus practical, or theoretical versus sensuous). Rather, art is a site at which the theoretical dimension of seeing and hearing is given its proper due, and *therefore* a site for understanding what is "theoretical" about all of our five senses.

For a start, if art cannot include – cannot make beautiful or enjoyable – taste, touch and smell, then this is not because these senses are untheoretical or somehow inherently less theoretical than seeing or hearing, but rather because art cannot make use of, or make adequately intelligible, whatever is theoretical about smell, taste and touch. Art can make use only of the theoretical senses of sight and sound, since artistic objects "are meant to maintain themselves in their real independence and allow of no *purely* sensuous relationships" (LFA: 39).

Again, I understand this to mean, not that touch, taste and smell are *purely* sensuous in the sense of being *merely* sensuous, or somehow *un*-theoretical – but rather than they are sensuous in ways that, as Hegel indicates, do not lend themselves to the making of art objects that “maintain themselves in the real independence”.

For smell, taste and touch have to do with matter as such and its immediately sensible qualities – smell with material volatility in air, taste with the material liquefaction of objects, touch with warmth, cold and smoothness etc. For this reason, these senses cannot have to do with artistic objects [...]. (LFA: 39)

This means that art’s use of the theoretical senses of sight and sound *does* in fact teach us something about the theoretical dimension of smell, taste and touch – namely, that the latter are related to art by their exclusion, an “exclusion” which is vouchsafed by the way in which these senses cannot “maintain themselves in their real independence [or]” by the making of art objects.

In short – while it might *seem* that whatever theoretical dimension there is to touch, taste or smell cannot be revealed in our contemplation of art objects, I nevertheless think that the more fruitful conclusion points in the opposite direction. The exclusion of touch, taste and smell from art objects – that is, the importance or meaning of that exclusion – is revealed *in* the exclusivity of art’s relation to the theoretical senses of seeing and hearing. In this way, the exclusivity of art’s relation to seeing and hearing teaches us something about the relationship between seeing and hearing, on the one hand, and touch, taste and smell, on the other – something which art, exclusively, teaches¹.

2.

To lend these considerations more concreteness, I will leave aside taste, smell and hearing, and focus instead on seeing and touch. I want to explore some implications of Hegel’s view that the theoretical significance of touch cannot be grasped artistically; and that *that* is a lesson which art, exclusively, teaches. For, it seems to me that Hegel’s philosophy of art offers unique resources for better understanding our contemporary visual

¹ Elsewhere, I have tried to show how “touch” – more precisely, how we touch one another – is a sensuous apprehension of the Absolute (Kottman 2017: 8 and *passim*).

culture and the implications of its obliviousness to the moral and theoretical implications of how human beings are touched or touch one another. (I speak of “moral and theoretical” implications in the same breath, because I also see Hegel’s philosophy of *Geist*, including his philosophy of art, as a refusal of the typically modern division of philosophy into two branches: moral / practical and theoretical.)

I shall give special attention to Hegel’s remarks on painting – the art-form in which the theoretical sense of seeing is most thoroughly developed. Even more precisely, I want to consider Hegel’s remarks on Christian painting, especially Hegel’s rather astonishing claim that maternal love is the proper content of Christian painting, of painting in general.

As in Hegel’s account of fine art overall, so, too, his account of painting turns on the issue of the appropriateness of artistic form to ideational content. A crucial question, therefore, concerns the relation between the form of painting – above all, painting’s solicitation of a certain kind of looking or beholding which could be called “devotional” or “highly attentive and deeply interested” beholding, but which is nonetheless neither merely entertaining nor appetitive nor scientific – and the content that is thus beheld.

The question is: What *content* is fit to be beheld such that what it *is* gets apprehended by being beheld *thusly*? What calls just to be looked at, attended to in that way? And how does the answer to that question bear – as it must, in Hegel’s view, given the ambitions he pins upon his “science of art” – on broader questions concerning the intelligibility of the world and ourselves?

Of course, almost anything can be looked at. But most things that can be looked at *also* call to be touched, or picked up, or tasted, or smelled, or listened to, or regarded warily, or rolled around in and so forth. So, lots of narrowing down is going to be required, if we are to get a sense for the kind of “appropriateness” of form to content that Hegel has in mind when it comes to painting. For a start, we need to grasp: What is not only essentially *seeable* but above all *beholdable*; that is, capable of sustaining (and needful of) devoted looking – but without also inspiring or soliciting some other sensuous engagement, like eating or grabbing or caressing and so forth?

A very general, but nevertheless helpful, answer to this question adheres, as Plato had already intuited, in the very *form* of image-making, understood as a “mirroring” of reality on two-dimensional surfaces such as walls or canvas (Plat. Rep. 596 d-e). Human-made images inspire beholding – rather than other forms of engagement (appetitive, auditory, tactile)

– just as soon as we grasp that we are looking at the appearance of something and not at the thing itself. The sight of a real banana might inspire me to grab it or eat it; but my appetite is deflected as soon as I understand that I am looking at an image of a banana and not at a real banana. Being in a “real” pastoral landscape might inspire me to unfurl my picnic blanket, just as the sight of a stormy sky might cause me to take cover; but paintings of such scenes – whether Chinese landscapes or Hudson River School paintings – deflect such responses and call only for my looking. Which is, again, just to say, human-made images in all their variety provide an initial answer to the question posed above (What can sustain devoted looking – without also inspiring or soliciting some other sensuous engagement, like eating or grabbing or caressing and so forth?). Any painting – just because it *is* a humanly-made image – is in principle capable of sustaining our devoted looking.

However, this only an insight about the formal property of human-made images. Or, to put it with Plato, this gives rise to the worry that human-made images are *merely* “formal” presentations, dim adumbrations of reality (Plat. Rep. 597 a). If image-making is *the only* answer to the question of what can sustain our devoted looking – that is, if the only answer to this question lies in a certain *form* of human productivity or *poiesis* – then the issue remains merely formal or technical or “aesthetic”. Hegel makes this point at the very beginning of his remarks on painting:

It can occur at once to any critic that not only in Greece and Rome were there excellent painters [...] but that other peoples too, the Chinese, the Indians, the Egyptians acquired fame on the score of their paintings. Of course, owing to the variety of subjects it adopts and the manner in which it can portray them, painting is less restricted than sculpture in the range of its spread amongst different peoples. But this is not the point really at issue [...]. The deeper question is about the *principle* of painting, i.e., to examine its means of portrayal, and therefore to determine what that subject-matter is which by its very nature so precisely harmonizes with the form and mode of portrayal employed by painting that this form corresponds exactly with its content. (LFA: 799, my emphasis)

On the basis of a merely formal account, Hegel is saying, we still do not know what the aesthetic achievement of painting (or image-making) is *for* – what “subject-matter” that form of production makes intelligible. Elsewhere, I have argued that we can consider image-making as the achievement of a heightened awareness of our ways of noticing reality in general. Image-making provides the necessary contrast between being guided by the world and being guided by something else (our imaginative “free as-

sociation”, perhaps). Image-making is thus *also* one way we teach ourselves what is real (Kottman 2019: 123-44). In the *Poetics*, Aristotle had already offered a version of this claim, when he noted that the pleasure taken in “seeing likenesses” is not only the enjoyment of technique or color, but the intellectual pleasure of *learning* – which occurs when we “see” that a likeness is a depiction of “such and such” (Arist. Poet. 1448 b).

Hegel, however, wants to raise the question of painting to a different level of abstraction. For Hegel, the spiritual “need” (*Notwendigkeit*) to which painting responds is connected to another enormous question – What is *looking* for? That is, in order to understanding the fine art of painting, we need to answer something like the following question: What is the *Geistige* need for this devotional form of beholding?

In the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, in his “anthropological” discussion of sight, Hegel offers a preliminary answer to this question when he remarks that, in seeing:

We relate ourselves to things merely theoretically as it were, and not yet practically; for when we see things we leave them alone as a subsistent being and merely relate ourselves to that aspect of them which is of an ideal nature. It is on account of sight’s being thus independent of corporeality proper, that it may be said to be the noblest of the senses. (Hegel 1977: 169)

In the *Lectures on fine art*, Hegel links this anthropological dimension of seeing in general – namely, its affordance of a “merely theoretical” relation to things – to the spiritual need for art in general, since “the sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing” (Hegel LFG 38). (Compare the Heimann: “Herr von Rumohr sagt [145 f.]: Schönheit im allgemeinen Verstand faßt alle Eigenschaften [in] sich, welche den Gesichtssinn anregen, und durch ihn die Seele stimmen und den Geist erfreuen”; 28 – or, again, “Der Gegenstand ist die Natur selbst nur für ideellen Sinn, Gesicht und Gehör”; 35.) And Hegel does so by trying to determine precisely the kind of looking with “theoretical interest” that adheres in the realm of art².

It is useful to recall the basic points Hegel makes in this regard. First, Hegel distinguishes the spiritual need for beholding under discussion here from what he calls “the poorest mode of apprehension, the least ade-

² Hegel’s *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* offers further reason for thinking that Hegel was alive to the view that touch and feeling have a theoretical dimension; see especially the section entitled *Die fühlende Seele*, §§ 403-4.

quate to spirit” – namely, “merely looking on, hearing, feeling, etc., just as in hours of spiritual fatigue (indeed for many people at any time) it may be an amusement to wander about without thinking, just to listen here and look round there, and so on” (LFA: 36). Hegel’s point, I take it, is that one common mode of looking upon the world is characterized by a kind of relaxed interest (or “amusement”) – at such times, whatever is perceived is not felt to be deep interest for the “inner being” of the perceiver. Unlike Kant, there seems to be no place for “disinterestedness” in Hegel’s account of perceptual experience. Instead, Hegel notes a kind of spiritually fatigued, merely amused interest, in which the perceiver is neither gripped by, nor really grasping, the external world.

Second, Hegel notes that another mode of “sensuous apprehension” is “desire” – whereby *Geist* makes the external world “into an object for its inner being” and is “driven, once again in the form of sensuousness, to realize itself in things [...] to cancel this independence and freedom of external things, and to show that they are only there to be destroyed and consumed” (LFA: 36). At such times, “the person” who desires is “caught up in the individual, restricted and negatory interests of his desires” – he is gripped by “external things and related to them” and, thus, “neither free in himself [...] nor free in respect of the external world” (LFA: 36). Desirousness is a mode of sensuous-spiritual existence in which both subject and object are unfree, since they are bound and determined by the interests of desire. Such unfreedom (the interest of desire) is not *opposed* to *Geist* – the unfreedom of desire is not *Geistlos*; rather, it is a spiritual neediness in contrast to which the significance of “freer” relations manifest themselves. As Hegel puts it, “this relation of desire is not the one in which man stands to the work of art [...] he relates himself to [the artwork] without desire, as to an object which is for the contemplative side of spirit alone” (LFA: 36-7). (In the Heimann version, Hegel likewise emphasizes that “art is for theory, for desireless looking”, *die Kunst ist so für die Theorie, für das begierdelose Anschauen*; Hegel 2017: 149). Desirous looking would lean toward, imply a further desire for, touching or tasting or smelling – whereas the work of art solicits contemplation, non-appetitive devotion.

Here, Hegel offers an important twist to a point already made above. If our appetite for bananas is deflected by the perception that we are confronted by a mere appearance or image of a banana, then this is not – as Aristotle held – because we perceive the “mimetic” quality of the image, but rather because “with mere pictures [...] desire is not served” (LFA: 36). Indeed, only when desire is not served can the “contemplative side of

spirit” (including what Aristotle characterized as the “intellectual satisfaction” of seeing images *as* depictions of “such-and-such”) ever come into its own. Moreover, where Aristotle wanted to hold onto desire – albeit in the non-appetitive form of the “desire to understand” that adheres in contemplation, and which explains the special delight we take in the sense of sight – Hegel will speak of “purely spiritual interests” or needs whose satisfaction demands the exclusion of “all desire”³. Indeed, on this very point, Hegel makes a sweeping claim which will be of great important for the present discussion.

The work of art, though it has sensuous existence, does not require in this respect a sensuously concrete being and a natural life; indeed it ought not to remain on this level, seeing that it is meant to satisfy purely spiritual interests and exclude all desire from itself. (LFA: 37)

Among other things, therefore, we will need to determine what on earth can satisfy “purely spiritual interests”, and why such satisfaction demands the exclusion of bonds of desire – *including* the Aristotelian “desire to understand” – as well as what art teaches about our need for *this* kind of spiritual satisfaction. More on this as we go along.

Third: Hegel notes how the kind of seeing which “lets individual things alone” – thus, again, in contrast to both “amused” onlooking and practical desire – involves what he calls “the purely theoretical relation to *intelligence*” (LFA: 37). Think of this as Hegel’s twist on the Aristotelian view, just cited, which links the delight of seeing to the desire to understand.

The theoretical study of things is not interested in consuming them in their individuality and satisfying itself and maintaining itself sensuously by means of them, but in coming to know them in their *universality*, finding their inner essence and law, and conceiving them in accordance with their Concept. (LFA: 37)

This is “the work of science”, in which “intelligence goes straight for the universal, the law, the thought and concept of the object” (LFA: 37). What

³ Aristotle connects the “desire to understand” to the “delight” taken in the senses, especially in the sense of sight. “All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer sight to almost everything else. The reasons it that this, most of all the senses, makes us know [*eidēnai*]” (Arist. Met. 1.1, 908 a 21-7).

distinguishes this scientific (rational intelligence) relation to the external world from amusement or desire is the way in which it relates human beings to things “in accordance with universality” – the universality of the intelligence in its universal relation to the universality of the intelligible. Science, that is, not only turns its back on the immediate individuality of the object, but science also “transforms [the object] from within; out of something sensuously concrete it makes an abstraction, something thought, and so something essentially other than what that same object was in its sensuous appearance” (LFA: 37). This has bearing on what Hegel says about portraiture in painting, as the apprehension of an individual; in contrast to the scientific ambitions of Freudian psychoanalysis, Hegel’s philosophy considers the apprehension of the individual as fundamentally un-scientific – indeed, as one way of distinguishing the need for art from the need for scientific apprehension.

Lastly: “Artistic interest” – to finally turn to our topic – distinguishes itself from the work of science, as well as from amusement and desirousness, by virtue of the *kind* of perception entailed in the making and the perceiving of artworks. 1) Unlike mere amusement, fine art reveals and articulates the intense interests (the *highest* interests) that relate subjects and objects. 2) In contrast to desirousness, fine art manifests these highest interests in ways that “lets the object” persist freely and on its own account – and, thus, show how the grip by which art-makers and art-perceivers are held entails a kind of demand that some things in the world freely persist on their own account. (What *kind* of demand? More on this in a moment.) 3) Unlike science, art “cherishes an interest in the object and its individual existence and does not struggle to change it into its universal thought and concept” (LFA: 38).

3.

These three conditions bear in a special way on the art of painting, insofar as painting “opens the way for the first time to the principle of finite and inherently infinite subjectivity, the principle of our own life and existence, and in paintings we see what is effective and active in ourselves” (LFA: 797). It is difficult to state Hegel’s views on painting economically. But the first thing to be said is that, for Hegel, Christian painting makes visible (makes “shine”) the liveliness of subjectivity as self-relatedness, or “inwardness” (*volle Innigkeit*). Christian painting does this, moreover, by showing something of general-universal significance in its portrayal of

concrete, particular self-conscious, inwardly self-related human beings. For Hegel, Christian paintings attracts our gaze such that we learn something about our own subjectivity; in looking at portrayals of particular human beings posed in particular ways, as well as landscapes or still lifes, we learn something about ourselves as self-consciously self-related (Portraits of animals, too. See Pippin 2018).

Second: Painting makes human self-consciousness *affectively*, compellingly visible – in a “lively” way. That is, minimally, Christian paintings are not mere illustrations of narrative episodes which can be called to mind whether or not they are sensuously apprehended, as if pictorial illustration merely aided such calling to mind. Christian paintings assume no separation between the affective and the theoretical or what is “called to mind”: Whatever is theoretically grasped *is* grasped affectively by the beholder. There is a kind of analogy in Hegel between the relation between an artwork and beholder and a relationship between people – as if the claim made on beholders by artworks were somehow like the claim made by another person, or even just by the presence of another person.

Third: What is sensuously grasped – the subject matter or content – is self-related subjectivity or, more broadly, the human heart, feeling, *Innigkeit*. And Hegel specifies that this self-related subjectivity must result from a withdrawal from external suffering into self-repose. That is, this self-relation appears most fully where a human being overcomes not some external obstacle but some *internal* struggle, such as one’s own hard-heartedness⁴. Hegel calls this achieved self-relation “bliss” – as distinct from “happiness” or “good fortune”, since it also entails broken-heartedness or the shattering of hard-heartedness.

Hegel also refers to this bliss as “religion alone” – “the peace of the individual who has a sense of himself but finds true satisfaction only when, self-collected, his mundane heart is broken so that he is raised above his mere natural existence and its finitude, and in this elevation has won a universal depth of feeling” (LFA: 816). Hegel offers several examples of what he means, including a treatment of Correggio’s Mary Magdalene that would be worth a separate discussion.

⁴ Not, like Hercules, “dragons outside him or Lernean hydras” – that is -- but rather “the dragons and hydras of his own heart, the inner obstinacy and inflexibility of his own self” (LFA: 816).

However – and the thesis is so astonishing that it has yet to receive the commentary it deserves – the paradigm of such painterly bliss for Hegel is the religious love, the passionless love, of Mary for her son, Christ:

As the most perfect subject for painting, I have already specified the [blissful] love, the object of which is not a purely spiritual “beyond” but is present, so that we can see love itself before us in what is loved. The supreme and unique form of this love is Mary’s love for the Christ-child [...] the most beautiful subject to which Christian art in general, and especially painting in its religious sphere has risen. (LFA: 824)

For Hegel, religious or passionless (*leidenschaftslos*) love is the true, ideal subject matter of painting. We could, I think, call it the ideal of parental love, which is what Hegel sees validated in Christian religion, too; namely, in its inversion whereby the privileged adoration of a transcendent God by his “children” is superseded by the adoration of a concrete, imminent child by his mother (LFA: 816-27). Hegel sees this realized in the history of painting, as Christian painting overcomes the iconoclasm according to which the Divine (as transcendent) cannot be represented pictorially, in favor of *seeing*, and being affected by, seeing the Divine as “love reconciled and at peace with itself [...] above all as the Madonna’s love for her child, as the absolutely suitable ideal subject for this sphere” (LFA: 819).

We can begin to see what Hegel means, I think, by considering a few paintings.



Figure 1, *Virgin (Theotokos) and Child between Saints Theodore and George*, sixth or early seventh century, encaustic on wood, 2' 3" x 1' 7 3/8" (St. Catherine’s Monastery, Sinai, Egypt)

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Figure 2, Duccio di Buoninsenga, circa 1300, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City



Figure 3, Da Vinci, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, 1503, Louvre, Paris

In fig. 1, the Christ “child” is presented as a little “man” held forth by his mother in a regal position – such that her relation to him is shown as the bearing of this social-familial legitimacy. Mary’s eyes look to the side, but not at her child – as if indicating the presence of a power “out of the frame” that mediates her relation to her child, as well as their overall relation to the viewer. In fig. 2, Mary’s eyes still look to the side, but because she faces the child – who playfully lifts her veil, in what seems an effort to see his mother’s eyes and regard her expression – our attention falls on how mother and child see each other, rather than primarily on how they position themselves for our viewing. We see Christ looking at his mother, as if *searching for* her gaze, perhaps seeing if she will regard *him*. The form of our looking thus meets with the “content” of a searching gaze *in* the painting. Fig. 3, Hegel suggests (when he singles out Da Vinci and Raphael for praise), shows Mary with “her eye on her child” (LFA: 830) – such that her devoted regard for her child, mirrored in St. Anne’s regard for her daughter (Mary) regarding her child, meets the devotion of our own regard for the painting.

Painting, that is, achieves the presentation of the “divine” as imminent passionless regard for a child, rather than the iconoclastic (non-artistic) adoration of a Divine-transcendent beyond. Gazing devotedly *is* an expression of maternal love, as well as the achievement of a kind of self-relation (in the gazer) – who is able to regard the child (and, analogously, the painting) as a free-standing and independent reality. The inward self-relatedness of Mary, in other words, is presented not only in portraits of her on her own (as in say, Rembrandt’s or Velazquez’s manner of individual portraiture) – but in the depiction of her looking at her child, especially in Italian painting⁵. Moreover, this painterly presentation is not just a mirroring illustration of a practice (of parental love) that already lies outside painting. Rather, the paintings are a matrix for understanding, and hence intervene in, the reality of the love that they depict. Think of how parents often produce and gaze upon photographs or images of their children, not as mere representations to be dispassionately studied, but with a devotion that is dialectically entwined with the practical forms that devotion to children takes.

⁵ Mary is “not self-subsistent on her own account, but is perfect only in her child, in God, but in him she is satisfied and blessed, whether at the manger or as the Queen of Heaven, without passion or longing, without any further need, without any aim other than to have and to hold what she has” (LFA: 825).

It is important to note the extra-artistic, ethical stakes of this. As Hegel points out elsewhere, love as “mutual subjectivity” cannot flourish in modernity unless parents love their children more than children love their parents⁶. Perhaps it is helpful here to note, too, that artists often regard their works as their “children” – and that painting is often figured as a kind of “giving birth” or “labor of love”. These metaphors – for they cannot be literally true (to destroy an artwork may be a travesty, but it is not a murder) – might be taken as a clue to grasping the way in which paintings can demand a form of attentiveness that is significantly akin to the attentiveness required for the devotional love of children, in the sense that beholding fine paintings entails the attribution of an absolute value and passionless devotion to what is beheld. *Lovingly* passionless, not merely disinterested (in Kant’s sense) – without the expectation that the love be “returned” in kind from the artwork (or the child). This, I take it, is also part of Hegel’s critique of the role that disinterestedness plays in Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment.

I asked earlier: What *content* is fit to be beheld such that what it *is* gets apprehended by being beheld *thusly*? What calls just to be looked at, attended to in that way? And how does the answer to that question bear – as it must, in Hegel’s view, given the ambitions he pins upon his “science of art” – on broader questions concerning the intelligibility of the world and ourselves. We now have Hegel’s answer: maternal love, “the object of which is not a purely spiritual beyond but which is present so that we can see love itself before us in what is loved” (LFA: 824).

As noted, Hegel emphasizes that he admires, above all, those works in which Mary “is portrayed in her present love and bliss as she has her eye on her child” (LFA: 830). The artform of painting – in which what calls only for our looking, but not for our touching, is presented as an independent reality to be grasped (theoretically) in our gaze alone – thus meets its proper content, namely an actual form of (parental) love or devotion which is not appetitive, and which manifests itself for Hegel especially as act of looking: Mary’s devoted gaze as depicted especially the masters of the Italian Renaissance.

Let this reconstruction of Hegel’s account of maternal love in Christian painting serve to support at least the following conclusions.

⁶ “On the whole, children love their parents less than their parents love them” (Hegel 1991: 213). For more, see Kottman 2017: 168-9.

First, the spiritual need for looking (for *just* looking) – to which the art of Christian painting is the most adequate response, according to Hegel – concerns not only the theoretical power of seeing in general (for instance, its connection our appetite or our scientific inquiry), but above all the way in which the theoretical power of seeing makes intelligible or apprehensible the free self-related subject: Mary. Second, the self-related subject – Mary – is made apprehensible by the art of painting, by the theoretical deliverances of that practice, with its exclusive artistic focus on seeing: self-related subjectivity would not be thus apprehensible without the art of painting, without fine art. Third, the art of painting achieves this most fully in the apprehension of the practice of maternal love – since, again, Mary’s self-relatedness is apprehended in our beholding of her relation to her child; or (to put the point from the perspective of Hegel’s *Lectures on fine art*) in our apprehension of what the centuries-long tradition of portraying Mary was able to render intelligible about maternal love, over time.

4.

With these conclusions, we are in a position to return to the questions I posed at the outset, concerning the relationship between seeing and touching, and the theoretical-practical-moral stakes of this connection.

One implication of Hegel’s discussion of Mary in Christian painting is that there is a practical aspect to the “maternal” achievement of her self-relatedness: namely, her own apprehension of the independent reality of her child. As we have seen, Hegel claims that this practical aspect concerns the way in which Mary *looks* at her child – not the way that she *touches* him. From a common-sense point of view, this can seem odd; is it even possible to love a child without touching him? Does not the practice of maternal love and care require touching as well as looking? And do not the paintings themselves depict precisely that – I mean, Mary holding or caressing her child?

Hopefully, our discussion thus far can serve to clarify at least part of Hegel’s reasons for emphasizing Mary’s gaze, rather than her touch of her child: The formal demands of fine art exclude touch and privilege the theoretical dimension of seeing. And since, for Hegel, form must entail content, the *beheld* apprehension of Mary’s self-relatedness is achievable only in our seeing *her* beholding her child’s independent being.

There is, so to speak, a wrong or impoverished or diminished or inadequate way for Mary to behold her son – a way of beholding that would miss or fail to adequately grasp her child’s independence, and hence a way in which her *own* self-relatedness would be diminished or stunted or inadequately felt by her. Again, Hegel thinks that this is what the history of Christian painting manifests – as it develops from, say, the *Theotoktos* (fig. 1) to the Da Vinci (fig. 3). But this is *not* because there just “is” a “right way” to look at one’s child – one to which early Christian painters were somehow blind and to which Da Vinci or Raphael were not blind, and hence finally brought to the canvas. Nothing in Hegel’s philosophy of art suggests that he regards the history of art as a series of representations of perennial truths. Instead, the “rightness” of Mary’s maternal gaze with respect to what she gazes upon, namely: her free and independent and loved son – the ethical rightness of her gaze – must be seen by us to be precisely as “right” as the fitness of art’s theoretical reliance on seeing to its own achievement of that which this “theoretical” power of sight makes most urgently intelligible: self-related subjectivity, maternal love.

This is elusive, to say the least. At stake is the way in which our long self-education through the practice of art-making, over time, has entailed a theoretical apprehension which is vouchsafed by its moral-practical implications. After all, at issue is the treatment of a child – of *children* as independent and free-standing – and the corresponding self-relatedness or “bliss” of human subjects in general, starting with Mary. The ethical stakes are embedded *in* the development of theoretical power of seeing, a theoretical power which it is art’s special and exclusive task to apprehend as part of its practice.

I am trying to bring into view ways in which following Hegel’s reflections on Christian painting force us to explode the boundaries between theoretical and moral philosophy. And the stakes, I am suggesting, are as high as can be – theoretically and ethically, which must be what we mean when we say that, “philosophically”, the stakes are high.

5.

In a book which scandalized art historians when it first appeared, Leo Steinberg observed:

The first necessity is to admit a long-suppressed matter of fact: that Renaissance art, both north and south of the Alps, produced a large body of devotional imagery in which the genitalia of the Christ Child [...] receive such demonstrative evidence that one must recognize an *ostentatio genitalium* comparable to the canonic *ostentatio vulnerum* [...] the ostentive unveiling of the Child's sex, or the touching, protecting or presentation of it [...]. (Steinberg 1983: 3)

The “scandal” of Steinberg's extraordinarily well-documented observations, of course, goes to the heart of the issues I am raising here: namely, the way which the devotional looking to which the art of painting calls us necessarily excludes touch.

In saying this, I do not mean merely to repeat Steinberg's observation – *Look! There is touching depicted in these paintings!* I mean to say, instead, that that our inattention or “obliviousness” (Steinberg's word) to the *significance* of the touching, or to the significance of the exposure of the Child's genitals, is enabled not just by critical inattention but by the *form* of painting itself. Because the form of painting does not call *for* touch, or to be touched – and, in fact, calls *not* to be touched, *noli tangere* – the “obliviousness” to the significance of touching and exposed genitalia is not only an “obliviousness” on the part of the beholder: it is essential to the development of the art of painting itself.

A reader of Steinberg might wish to accuse Hegel, too, of obliviousness. After all, Hegel never once mentions the touching or the exposure of the Child in Christian art. Hegel's focus, as we have seen, is on Mary's gaze. Hegel praises Italian art, and Bellini in particular. So, how could Hegel have missed the significance of the exposure and touching on display in Bellini's *Madonna and Child* (see fig. 4) or in Jan van Hermessen's *Madonna and Child* (see fig. 5)? (Then again, one might also want to know how Steinberg could have forgotten Hegel, whom he never mentions in his book.)

However, if my discussion at the outset was not misguided, then such an accusation is unfair to Hegel. The exclusion of touch from the art of painting, on which Hegel insists, means that the theoretical-ethical-practical significance of how we touch each other cannot be adequately apprehended by the art of painting, or indeed by art *überhaupt*. I cite, again, the passage from Hegel's *Lectures on fine art* which serve as epigraph to the present essay:

[...] the sensuous aspect of art is related only to the two theoretical senses of sight and hearing, while smell, taste and touch remain excluded from the enjoyment of art.

Paul A. Kottman, *Noli tangere*



Figure 4, Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna and Child* (1470), Bergamo, Accademia Carrara



Figure 5, Jan van Hermissen, *Madonna and Child* (1543), Madrid, Museo del Prado

The significance of touching and exposure on display in the Christian paintings adumbrated by Steinberg is not adequately apprehensible in the form of painting. Understanding the significance of the touching and exposure of the child, therefore, cannot just be a matter of looking harder or longer at the paintings – or, of doing better art-historical exegesis armed with the right scholarship, as Steinberg supposes. Indeed, it is precisely *this* short-sighted view of art's significance against which Hegel wanted to guard. And, again, Hegel guards against it when he excludes touch from the purview of art, in favor of the theoretical-moral dimension of seeing to which we have been attending.

At the outset, I said that the exclusion of touch, taste and smell from art objects – that is, the importance or meaning of that exclusion – is revealed *in* the exclusivity of art's relation to the theoretical senses of seeing and hearing. The exclusivity of art's relation to seeing and hearing, I said, teaches us something about the relationship between seeing and hearing, on the one hand, and touch, taste and smell, on the other – something which *only* art can teach. Moreover, what painting teaches about touch – by exclusion, in favor of sight – points, precisely, to the significance of the moral-theoretical dimensions of touching and being touched.

What this means is that – although the significance of touching and exposure on display in the Christian paintings is not adequately apprehensible in the form of painting – the fact of painting's inadequacy when it comes, precisely, to the apprehension of the theoretical significance of touching and exposure of children *is* on display.

When he speaks of art's exclusion of touching in favor of seeing, Hegel means – I think – to suggest precisely this: the theoretical significance of touching can only be limned by the manifest inadequacy of the theoretical power of seeing to grasp it. It is that inadequacy which is on display in Christian painting, in art's self-limitation to the sphere of the visual.

6.

This issue of art's self-limitation, I now want to say, tumbles directly into Hegel's thesis on the persistent pastness of art's highest vocation.

If it is part of art's highest vocation to have made sensuously apprehensible the highest concerns, the Divine, then it is also part of art's self-limitation – of art's historical limitations, as well as art's essential limitations – that this sensuous apprehension was (and remains) exclusively visual and aural.

It is commonly assumed in the secondary literature that, by speaking of the pastness of art's highest vocation – in contrast to Religion and Philosophy, the other two dimensions of *Absolute Geist* – Hegel meant to indicate the pastness of a “sensuous apprehension of the Absolute” and the supersession of such sensuous apprehension or “material embodiment” by the “picture-thinking” of religion, and ultimately by the conceptual work of Philosophy. Let Robert Pippin's recent articulation of this interpretation of Hegel stand as representative of it⁷. I hope that the discussion this far can serve to show that such an understanding of Hegel is not only limited, but so limited as to amount to a serious misdirection. By excluding taste, touch and smell from the purview of art, Hegel indicates that at least three *sensuous* modes of apprehension – three sensuous modes of “material embodiment” – cannot, and have not, become “past” along with Art's highest vocation.

My hope is that the preceding discussion has prepared us to consider the following: Only when art's highest vocation is apprehended as a thing of the past can a chief significance of art's exclusively visual and aural character come into view: namely, the inadequacy of art and the visual sphere when it comes to grasping the moral-theoretical significance of touching and exposure, with respect to our highest concerns. Indeed – if my reflections so far are valid enough – then we can conclude that art's self-limitation might help us to apprehend the limitations of visual representations when it comes to apprehending the moral and theoretical stakes of our ways of touching and being touched.

One way to start to pursue some implications of this conclusion would be to say that it is to Hegel's credit that he did not see in Christian paintings what Steinberg saw – namely, depictions of the “meaning” of the touching of the Child. Hegel's view, as I understand it, is something like the contrary: Christian painting – *as painting* – shows *in its formal achievement as well as its content* the significance of *just* looking without touching. And painting binds the significance of this exclusivity to our highest concerns (the very *meaning* of how looking at one another implies our recognition and treatment of one another) at a level at which the intelligibility of our independ-

⁷ This is, for instance, the way in which Robert Pippin frames his objections to Hegel's “pastness of art” thesis. Pippin's contests Hegel's belief that “*Geist* (self-reconciling spirit) does not require a material embodiment to be fully realized *Geist* [...] [because it] is not motivated by anything essential to Hegel's account and represents a misstep, not an inference consistent with Hegel's overall project” (Pippin 2013: 22-23).

ence and self-relatedness is at stake in *both* how we see and touch one another.

And yet I would have wanted more from Hegel.

For, I think it also follows from this discussion – or, so I am trying to argue – that art not only excludes touch from its purview, and thus does not teach us the moral-theoretical significance of touching and being touched: It follows further from art’s self-limitation that artworks *cannot* adequately apprehend the moral-theoretical significance of touch. And *that* itself is also crucial to what art teaches us about the moral-theoretical dimension of devotional looking, about art’s highest vocation, about looking without touching. Art teaches us that art cannot – that *seeing without touching* cannot – teach us how and with what implications the highest concerns are morally-theoretically apprehensible in how we touch each other.

This self-limitation of art is also essential to art’s historical development, to its historical character, its pastness.

7.

This can be stated the other way around, via currently pressing questions about we can call the pornographication of our visual culture. If artworks – *qua* visual – were somehow able to teach us how and with what implications our highest concerns are morally-theoretically apprehended *in* how we touch each other, then we should be able to say something about would that lesson *look* like.

Might it look like the paintings to which Steinberg draws out attention? As Steinberg never tires of reminding us, lots and lots of such paintings were produced in the Christian Europe. Thousands of them.

Then again, are there millions of such images? Who makes them? And for whom? And with what implications? In September 2019, the New York Times reported that forty-five million images on children being sexually abused circulated online in the past year alone, more than double the previous year⁸.

These facts and questions seem to me to open many paths for further reflection. Let me conclude by outlining two:

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/09/28/us/child-sex-abuse.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=D00A7CA6FB7CEE7E148C799D33CE86EC&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>

A) A burgeoning proliferation and circulation of visual depiction of the touching or treatment of children would evince continuing possibilities for art's highest vocation *only* if one thinks that the production or beholding of such images can somehow be a sensuous mode of apprehending of the Divine. I have provided reasons, with Hegel's help, for believing that this cannot be the case.

How firm are these reasons? Do we, for instance, have a convincing account of the implications of the production and circulation of such images for our "highest" self-understanding (in Hegel's sense)?

I argued above that, when Hegel speaks of art's exclusion of touching in favor of seeing, Hegel meant to suggest that the theoretical significance of touching can only be limned by the manifest inadequacy of the theoretical power of seeing to grasp it. It is that inadequacy which is on display in the highest achievements of Christian painting, in art's self-limitation to the sphere of the visual, at least in Hegel's view. Can we then say that Hegel offers a kind of negative account of the sorts of images of touching (in the same tradition of Christian painting) whose proliferation Steinberg discusses? For instance: does Hegel's emphasis on the depiction of Mary's gaze, in a painterly form that solicits our gaze, allow us to comprehend a significant difference between the achievements of Da Vinci (fig. 3) against, say, the Bellini (fig. 4) – and in ways which would require us to debate the significance of the van Hermessen (fig. 5).

What could assure us that these paintings do not visually depict something like the opposite of maternal love – a depiction of abuse, in other words? Do visual forms of expression develop resources, from within, for distinguishing between the depiction of love and the depiction of abuse? What do these paintings, finally, make intelligible about the psychological experiences or *Innigkeit* of mother and child? Can Hegel help us differentiate between the (allegedly) highest achievements of human art in showing us the Divine, and the ongoing proliferation of potentially profane or pornographic display, whether in the history of Christian painting or in contemporary visual forms?

It is far from clear that the answer to this could be "yes".

B) Such questions bear not only on our understanding of Hegel or of art history; they bear upon our contemporary self-understanding in general.

For instance, it strikes me that those who would defend the idea that art's highest vocation is not past – that it continues in film, say, or in contemporary forms of visual expression – would need to account for cinematic or visual depictions of treatment of children, especially. That is, it seems to me that Hegelian-inspired defenders of an ongoing "high vocational" need

for the visual arts in the contemporary world would have to provide an account of *how* contemporary forms of visual expression – films, drawings, photographs – that depict the physical treatment of children by adults, (to say nothing for the moment of the treatment of adults by adults, or of animals) make intelligible (or fail to make intelligible) some “content” about that treatment that would require or legitimate or demand such visual-aesthetic works.

For the moment, let us set aside what most people would reasonably regard as obviously profane, criminal and morally unacceptable images – the sorts of images referred to in the NY Times exposé⁹. Consider, instead, a film like *Kid with a Bike* (*Le gamin au vélo*, 2011) by the Dardenne Brothers, whose films are admired by academic philosophers of many stripes. We can, I think, safely assume that this film was made with the noblest of moral and aesthetic intentions. Indeed, the filmmakers tell us that they were inspired by the “real-life” story of an 11-year old boy in Japan, who fell into a life a crime after having been traumatically abandoned by his father – and that they wanted to imagine how such a child, having suffered such a trauma, might nevertheless come to lead a life of greater flourishing¹⁰.

Nevertheless, the Dardenne Brothers’ film – which is visually innovative, carefully scripted and filmed – depicts the suffering of the young protagonist at the hands of adults, including a scene in which his father definitively sends him away and in which the boy responds to this trauma by physically abusing himself. Many, including Hegelian-inspired critics, have defended the significance of this film; Pippin, for instance, argues for the value of the Dardenne Brothers work by suggesting that its formal-visual innovations make intelligible some “psychological” features of the world that would not be available without such modernist experiments¹¹. (Pippin’s argument is

⁹ Such a setting-aside begs all kinds of questions, of course. One is put in mind of the US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous phrase, “I know it when I see it” – used in 1964 to describe his threshold test for obscenity in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. In explaining why the material at issue in the case was not obscene and could not be censored, Stewart wrote: “I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description [‘hard-core pornography’], and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But *I know it when I see it*, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that”.

¹⁰ The relevant portion of the interview to which I am referring is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcj46qz_Hgc

¹¹ Here is Robert Pippin: “[The Dardenne Brothers’] style, like many radical innovations in modernist art, is historically indexed, not a mere aesthetic experiment. The assumption is that something about the world as we now understand it would be falsely or not credibly

akin, of course, to Hegel's view that painting manifests the "inner life" of individuals, as discussed above.)

Without contesting the descriptive veracity of Pippin's thesis directly – that is, granting that the "psychology degree zero" of a traumatized boy is somehow "credibly represented" by the Dardenne Brothers in such a stylistic visual form – we might still wonder about Pippin's normative claim: *Why*, after all, does this content – the psychological experience of a suffering child – "demand" *that* visually depicted form? Do we *really* need to *watch* what the Dardenne Brothers show us, in their stylized film, in order to apprehend the "psychology" on display in the boy's reaction to being abandoned by his father? Is that visual form really what that content (psychology degree zero) "demands", in order to be made intelligible?

It seems to me highly questionable, for instance, to conclude that – in coming across a child crying, or abusing himself, in the wake of having been abandoned by his father – one should take out one's camera and start filming, in order to understand better what the child is going through. Or, that one needs to subsequently hire a young actor to mimetically "recreate" the scene visually and audibly, and then film or record *that*, in order help eventual viewers to better understand the boy's psychological state¹². Is recourse to the visual or aural medium of film *really* what this "content" (the psychology degree zero at issue) "demands" (as Pippin puts it) in order to be made affectively intelligible at all?

Moreover: How might we adjudicate whether a film's visual form, or the practice of filming and watching films as such, successfully or adequately

represented if pictured in traditional realist narrative form. Some aspects of such a lived world, especially what are traditionally thought of as psychological aspects, *demand* such stylistic innovations" (Pippin 2015: 765, emphasis in original. This essay is reprinted in Pippin 2019).

¹² There might be a moral imperative to record testimony to injury – by picking up a camera, or taking pen to paper, or other some other means. The Sonderkommando photographs from Auschwitz come to mind. And the neo-realist films of Roberto Rossellini, for instance, might be regarded as retaining or distilling the affective force of such an imperative. While the Dardenne Brothers owe a clear debt to neo-realism and to documentary film, and while they "situate" their films in a specific time and place, *Kid with a Bike* is nevertheless a narrative, scripted film, not a testimonial record of a particular historical trauma. That is, the Dardenne Brothers' depiction of general social conditions of harm or injustice – often lauded by their philosophical admirers – is presented with a clinical or technical precision that bespeaks cinematic self-awareness, to my eyes, rather than the raw urgency of a moral imperative to testify to what is unfolding before their eyes for future generations.

understands the boy's psychology? That is, do we have a clear way of discerning when a film adequately meets those demands instead of, say, gratuitously exploiting a child's suffering?

If we lack scientific criteria for deciding this question – that is, if we have to fall back on our critical judgment of particulars (as Justice Potter Stewart, or Immanuel Kant, have it) – then, we must ask again: Whence the normative force of any claim that filmed depictions of suffering are “demanded” for the sake of making intelligible of certain psychological realities?

The fact that this last question is the same one that Hegel himself confronted in his treatment of Kant in the “Deduction of the true concept of art”, leads me to believe that we should think anew about how satisfied we are with the answer – 250 years after Hegel's birth.

How satisfied are we with the inheritance of our visual culture, and with what it shows us about who we think we are?

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