



WESTERN AESTHETICS- Hegel's Views And Ideas On 'Fine Arts' And His Gradation Of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

"Real is Rational. Rational is Real" This great quote comes from the great German Idealist Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. He was one of the most influential German philosophers who is read widely even in our contemporary times. In the above quote we clearly understand his philosophy. Here we understand his concept of reality. Like Plato, Hegel too believes that idea is real, in turn, real is rational. Thus whatever can be understood by the use of reason is real. He also says that 'Idea as real reality' can be understood only by application of reason. Anything understood by empirical evidence is not real, rather shadow of real. Hegel is a 'Rationalist', who believes that human emancipation can be realised only by reason.

Keywords: rational, understood, reason, german, understand

Introduction

Hegel has used the concept of 'Dialectics' to show the nature of movement of History. History for Hegel is a movement of 'Absolute Idea'. He has given the three laws of Dialectics:

Unity of opposites: It means in all the things exists its contradiction. Contradiction is a force of history.

Negation of Negation: As per law of history, force negativity gets negated.

Quantity changes into Quality: Changes do not happen overnight, first, quantitative changes take place and it gives rise to qualitative change. It may appear new but it is not entirely new. New has its roots in the old. Once contradiction ends, history ends.

"History is a result of dialectical movement of idea"

"History will end when absolute idea will emerge"

Marx borrows the theory of 'dialectics' from Hegel and applied it to material world. Marx also criticizes Hegel. Marx says,

"Hegel is standing on his head, he has to stand on his feet to understand what is real."

Because for Marx idea was 'False Consciousness.' He believed in the materialistic world.

Now, coming to the importance of Hegel's philosophy in Aesthetics.

For Hegel,

"Art is the manifestation of human spirit."

He also says that art has greater value than nature. This is because there is a human creation, labour and spirit working in art. Thus he reversed the idea that art is merely an imitation of reality. But he gives us the idea that art is much more superior than we think. According to him, 'Beauty in art is superior to natural beauty.' Hegel looks at art for the larger purpose of philosophy. According to him, 'Idea is Spirit'.

For Hegel, fine art is a sensuous expression of spirit. Then he goes on to the gradation of fine arts.

He divides fine arts into three major types:

Symbolic Art:

Here, Spirit is presented in symbolic art. Architecture does this.

Classical Art:

Here, Spirit is presented in a corporeal way as in Sculpture.

Romantic Art:

Here, the physicality is minimalized and mostly spirit dominates as in painting, music and poetry.

Let us discuss this gradation in detail.

Architecture

Architecture, Hegel says is the crudest form of the fine arts. Here he says that architecture consists of the art of constructing temples (Greeks). Architecture means manipulating external inorganic nature (stone) and it is related to spirit. Its material is matter itself (rock). He says that symmetry is not a property of matter, it is done by mind, therefore it becomes an expression of spirit. He goes on to say that one cannot have a complex idea in architecture. Matter used in architecture has limitations. The matter restricts the artistic capacity of the architecture. Therefore, he says that it is symbolic form of art where absolute spirit cannot manifest itself. According to him, architecture has certain uses. It becomes an abode for god, works as an assembly of congregation, protects against the threat of storm, against rain, tempest and wild animals. Then he goes on to say that if architecture goes beyond its defined use it becomes sculpture. He also says that as we go further in this gradation, we can see that the spirit goes on increasing and the use of matter goes on decreasing, which is in line with Hegel's views.

Architecture is the lowest in the hierarchy because it deals with heavy, inanimate matter (stone, wood, etc.). It is closest to symbolic art because it tends to serve a functional or symbolic purpose (temples, monuments) without fully embodying spiritual content.

Then comes sculpture-

Sculpture

Sculpture has somewhat greater freedom than architecture. Hegel's discussion of sculpture in his "Lectures on Aesthetics" is central to his theory of art, especially within the broader context of the classical stage of art, which he views as the highest achievement of art's ability to reconcile spirit and matter. Sculpture, for Hegel, represents a perfect union of the spiritual and the physical, especially in its classical form, most notably in Greek art.

Hegel views sculpture as the art of form par excellence because it deals with the human body, which he considers the highest physical representation of spirit. For Hegel, the human form is the ideal form in which the divine or the spiritual is manifested, and sculpture captures this better than any other art.

In Hegel's words, sculpture "brings the spiritual ideal into sensuous form through the human figure." What this means is that, unlike other art forms that either rely heavily on sensuous material (e.g., architecture) or more abstract means (e.g., music), sculpture balances the material and spiritual by presenting the ideal human body as a manifestation of the spirit.

Sculpture captures the highest material form, the human body, which expresses the spiritual, ideal, or divine in a concrete, physical medium. For Hegel, this union of form and content makes sculpture a high form of art. Hegel emphasizes the importance of material in sculpture. He notes that the medium of sculpture is solid, durable, and three-dimensional, typically stone or metal, which gives sculpture its objective reality. This solidity and tangibility are essential for capturing the ideal form of the human body. He writes:

"Sculpture, by means of durable material, presents a solid and objective expression of the human spirit."

The physical, solid materials used in sculpture (like marble or bronze) create a lasting and objective representation of the human figure. This gives sculpture its power to endure and communicate the ideal, even in its materiality.

In Hegel's view, the classical stage of art achieves a perfect balance between the spiritual content and the physical form, and it is sculpture that exemplifies this best. He writes:

"In sculpture, the spiritual content fully coincides with the external form. The two are perfectly aligned."

In classical Greek sculpture, the inner spiritual essence (the divine or ideal) finds its perfect outward expression in the human form. There is no tension between the inner idea (spirit) and the external appearance (form); they are in complete harmony.

For Hegel, Greek sculpture represents this harmony most effectively. The gods and goddesses in Greek art are represented as idealized human figures, perfectly proportioned, serene, and embodying spiritual ideals like beauty, nobility, and divine grace.

"The gods of Greece appear in sculpture as perfect human beings, in whom spirit is visibly embodied in a beautiful and proportioned form."

The gods in Greek sculpture are not abstract or formless but are depicted as perfect humans with idealized beauty. This is important because, for Hegel, the divine (or the spirit) is best represented through the perfection of the human form in sculpture.

Hegel distinguishes sculpture from painting by pointing out that sculpture is three-dimensional and tactile, while painting is two-dimensional and relies on color. He writes:

"Unlike painting, which only presents appearances on a flat surface, sculpture gives the fullness of reality through three-dimensional form."

In Hegel's view, sculpture gives the spectator a complete and real form—a body that exists in space and can be perceived from multiple angles. This makes it more real and objective than painting, which can only show a surface.

Sculpture, because of its three-dimensionality, has a physical presence that other art forms lack. You can walk around a sculpture and see it from every angle, which gives it a wholeness or totality that aligns with Hegel's notion of the realization of spirit in the material world.

Although Hegel sees sculpture as the peak of classical art, he also believes it has certain limitations. As art progresses from the classical to the romantic stage, it becomes more inward and spiritual, and less dependent on external physical forms.

In the romantic stage, art moves away from the physical perfection of the human form (as seen in sculpture) and begins to focus more on inner emotional life and subjectivity. Hegel writes:

"Sculpture, while ideal in its depiction of the external, cannot express the depths of subjectivity that painting or music can."

While sculpture is excellent at depicting idealized outer forms, it struggles to represent the more complex, internal emotions and spiritual depths that other forms of art (like painting and music) can express. Sculpture is bound by the physical, whereas romantic art transcends it by focusing on the inner life of the spirit.

Hegel's view of sculpture in his "Lectures on Aesthetics" presents it as the quintessential classical art form—one that represents the perfect balance between the spiritual and the material. In sculpture, especially in the classical Greek tradition, the human body becomes the ideal medium through which the spirit is made manifest in the material world. The three-dimensionality, durability, and idealization of the human form in sculpture create a lasting representation of spiritual truths, making it one of the highest forms of art for Hegel. However, as art progresses, the limitations of sculpture become evident, as it cannot fully capture the more complex, subjective spiritual life that emerges in romantic art.

PAINTING

In Hegel's "Lectures on Aesthetics", painting is discussed as a higher form of art in the development of fine arts than architecture and sculpture, but lower than music and poetry. While sculpture represents a balance between spiritual content and physical form in three-dimensionality, painting begins to move away from the heavy materiality of sculpture and introduces more subjective expression. This shift from external material form to inner spiritual life makes painting central to the transition from classical to romantic art in Hegel's aesthetics.

Hegel emphasizes that the medium of painting is two-dimensional and relies on color rather than solid, three-dimensional form. Unlike sculpture, which deals with physical matter, painting involves surface and light, and this shift allows painting to represent spirituality in a subtler, more subjective way.

Hegel writes: "Painting is freed from the three-dimensional solidity of sculpture and instead works with the plane surface. It uses color and light to create form, which gives it greater flexibility in representing the spiritual."

Here, Hegel highlights that painting does not rely on the heavy, solid forms of sculpture, but on the flat surface of the canvas. This allows painting to move beyond the physical, solid representation and gives it the ability to express spiritual and emotional nuances more effectively, using color to suggest depth and meaning.

2. Painting and the Liberation of Spirit from Matter

In Hegel's gradation of the arts, painting represents a significant step forward in the liberation of the spirit from matter. While sculpture is bound to the solid, tangible material of the human body, painting is able to detach from this materiality and focus more on subjective emotion and spiritual depth.

Hegel writes: "Painting, through its two-dimensional form, represents the beginning of the release of the spirit from matter. It spiritualizes its forms through color and light, allowing for greater inner expressiveness."

In this passage, Hegel is saying that painting takes art beyond the constraints of physical reality. The two-dimensionality of the canvas, combined with the use of color and light, allows the artist to convey emotions, feelings, and subjective states in a way that is more aligned with the spiritual nature of human experience, rather than being tied down to the solid form of the body as in sculpture.

3. The Role of Subjectivity in Painting

One of the key aspects of Hegel's view of painting is its ability to represent subjectivity—the inner life of the artist or the subject being depicted. Unlike sculpture, which tends to idealize the human form as an objective representation of the spirit, painting allows for personal expression and individual experience.

Hegel writes: "Painting no longer aims for the mere representation of the objective form, as sculpture does, but instead portrays subjectivity—the inner life of the soul, its emotions, and experiences."

This passage indicates that painting moves beyond the objective idealization of the human form and instead seeks to depict the inner emotional and spiritual life of individuals. It is less concerned with representing perfect physical beauty (as sculpture is) and more focused on capturing feelings, moods, and subjective experiences.

For example, a portrait in painting can reveal not only the outer appearance of a person but also their inner character or emotions through facial expressions, gestures, and the use of light and shadow.

4. The Importance of Color in Painting

Hegel emphasizes the role of color as a crucial element in painting that allows it to express emotion and atmosphere. Unlike sculpture, which relies on solid material forms, painting's use of color creates impressions and can evoke specific moods or feelings in the viewer.

Hegel writes: "Color is the sensuous element through which painting transforms the external appearance into an expression of inner life. Through shades, tones, and contrasts, painting is able to evoke the spiritual and emotional character of its subject."

Hegel highlights how the use of color in painting is essential for expressing the spiritual and emotional dimensions of a subject. Through different shades and contrasts, painting can convey depth of feeling, create a particular mood, and bring out the inner reality of the subject being represented. The spiritual meaning comes through color, which is more fluid and expressive than the solid forms of sculpture.

For instance, the soft, warm tones of a sunset in a landscape painting can evoke a sense of peace or melancholy, while the bold, sharp contrasts of color in a dramatic scene might convey tension or conflict.

5. Painting as a Transition to Romantic Art

For Hegel, painting represents a key transition from the classical to the romantic stage of art. In the classical stage (as in sculpture), the form and content are in perfect harmony; in painting, however, the form begins to take on a more spiritual and subjective nature, which leads to the romantic stage, where the inner life and emotional expressiveness dominate.

Hegel writes: "Painting stands at the threshold of the romantic because it no longer focuses on the external, but instead seeks to represent the internal reality—the subject's emotions, thoughts, and spirit."

Hegel is saying that painting is a bridge between classical and romantic art because it moves away from the strict focus on the external world and the idealized physical form. Instead, it begins to focus on the inner world of the individual—their emotions, thoughts, and spiritual life. This marks the beginning of the romantic emphasis on the subjective, which later art forms like music and poetry fully embrace.

6. The Superiority of Painting Over Sculpture in Expressing the Soul

According to Hegel, painting has an advantage over sculpture in its ability to express the soul. While sculpture is limited by its three-dimensionality and focus on the physical form, painting's use of color, shading, and light allows it to depict spirituality and emotions in a more dynamic and nuanced way.

Hegel writes: "Painting surpasses sculpture in its ability to portray the inner workings of the soul. Through the play of light and shadow, painting can evoke the fleeting moments of thought, emotion, and spiritual depth that sculpture, in its fixed form, cannot."

Hegel believes that painting is better suited than sculpture for depicting the inner, spiritual life of a person. While sculpture is more static and focused on ideal physical form, painting can capture the transitory nature of emotions, thoughts, and spiritual states. The use of light and shadow in painting allows for greater subtlety in portraying the soul's inner life.

Hegel's detailed analysis of painting in his "Lectures on Aesthetics" reveals its importance in the development of art from the classical to the romantic stage. Painting is significant for its two-dimensionality, its use of color to evoke emotions and spirituality, and its ability to express subjective experience. It marks a shift from the idealized physical form of sculpture to a more spiritual and inward focus, allowing art to explore the inner life of the soul. Through painting, art becomes a means to convey the fleeting and subtle nuances of human emotion and spirituality, which makes it an essential form in Hegel's hierarchy of the arts.

MUSIC

In Hegel's "Lectures on Aesthetics", music occupies a higher position in the hierarchy of the arts compared to painting and sculpture. Music, according to Hegel, is a more abstract and spiritual form of art, closer to the pure expression of the soul because it deals with sound rather than physical forms. It detaches from the material world and moves toward the pure realm of spirit, making it one of the most subjective and emotional forms of artistic expression.

For Hegel, music is the purest form of subjective expression, allowing the inner emotional life to be expressed directly without the mediation of physical objects. While painting and sculpture still rely on material forms (color, shape, etc.), music is composed entirely of sound, which is fleeting, immaterial, and ideal for expressing the inner states of the soul.

Hegel writes: "Music, by virtue of its medium, consists entirely of sound, which has no external, spatial existence. It is the most spiritual of the arts because it is free from the material world and directly represents the inner life of the soul."

Hegel points out that music is unique because it does not have a physical, external form like painting or sculpture. It exists only as sound waves, which come and go without leaving a lasting physical trace. This immaterial quality allows music to express the deepest emotions and inner spiritual life of the individual.

2. The Temporal Nature of Music

Hegel emphasizes that music exists in time rather than in space. This temporal nature makes it different from the visual arts, which are experienced as static and permanent objects in space. Music, on the other hand, unfolds over time and is experienced as a progression of tones and harmonies.

Hegel writes: "Music is fundamentally temporal. Unlike the spatial arts of painting and sculpture, music's essence lies in its unfolding through time. It is a progression of sounds and rhythms that vanish once they are played."

Music exists only in time, meaning it is experienced as a sequence of sounds that happen one after another. Once a note or melody is played, it disappears and can only exist in memory. This makes music a fluid and dynamic art form, where the listener experiences the flow of emotions and thoughts over time.

3. Music and the Subjective Spirit

According to Hegel, music expresses the subjective spirit more directly than other forms of art because it is not tied to representing objects in the external world. Music is concerned with the internal emotions, feelings, and moods of the individual. It creates a subjective experience for both the composer and the listener, allowing them to connect on an emotional level.

Hegel writes: "Music belongs to the domain of the subjective spirit. It does not aim to depict the external world but instead evokes the inner emotions and moods of the soul. Through melody, rhythm, and harmony, music gives voice to the subjective life of feeling."

Hegel stresses that music does not represent anything external (like a landscape in painting or a figure in sculpture) but instead focuses entirely on the inner experiences of the soul. The emotional power of music lies in its ability to communicate the subjective feelings of both the composer and the listener, such as joy, sadness, or longing.

4. The Role of Melody, Harmony, and Rhythm in Music

Hegel discusses the importance of the elements of music—melody, harmony, and rhythm—and how they work together to create the emotional and spiritual effects of music. Melody represents the individual aspect of music, while harmony represents the unity or collective aspect. Rhythm, on the other hand, introduces movement and structure into the flow of sound.

Hegel writes: "Melody is the individual line in music, expressing a singular emotion or thought. Harmony, by contrast, represents the unity of different tones, bringing them into a coherent whole. Rhythm provides the structural movement, giving the music its form and direction."

Hegel breaks down the components of music to explain how they contribute to its spiritual and emotional power. Melody is like the voice of an individual, expressing a specific emotion or feeling. Harmony creates a sense of unity by combining different tones and chords, reflecting the interconnectedness of emotions. Rhythm provides a sense of order and structure, guiding the flow of the music and giving it a sense of progression.

5. Music as a Bridge to Romantic Art

Hegel places music within the context of romantic art, where subjective feelings and inner emotions become more important than the external reality. Music represents a move away from the classical focus on balanced

forms and material representations (as in sculpture or architecture) and instead emphasizes inner experience and the individual spirit.

Hegel writes: "Music, as a romantic art, transcends the limitations of the material world. It is not concerned with the ideal forms of the classical arts but instead focuses on the fleeting, emotional states of the soul. In this way, music is the most direct expression of subjectivity."

Here, Hegel connects music to the romantic movement in art, where the emphasis shifts from the external, objective world to the internal, subjective world of emotions. Music is a perfect medium for this shift because it can express the intangible and evanescent qualities of feelings and thoughts without being tied to physical forms. Music is fluid and dynamic, mirroring the changing states of the soul.

Despite his praise for music, Hegel also identifies certain limitations. Because music is so abstract and detached from the material world, it cannot convey the same level of meaning as the more conceptual arts like poetry or philosophy. Music is primarily focused on emotion and feeling, and while it can evoke powerful spiritual experiences, it lacks the precision of language.

"Music, while it gives direct expression to the inner life of the soul, remains limited in its ability to convey concrete meaning. It is a fleeting art, dependent on time, and cannot represent the same depth of thought as poetry or philosophy."

Hegel is saying that although music is powerful in expressing emotions and feelings, it is limited in its ability to communicate specific ideas or concepts. Music's abstract nature makes it ideal for expressing emotions, but it cannot articulate complex philosophical ideas or narrative details as clearly as poetry or other arts that rely on language.

In Hegel's hierarchy of the arts, music holds a high place because of its ability to transcend materiality and focus on the subjective spirit. Music, as a temporal and abstract art form, expresses the inner emotional life in a way that is more direct and fluid than the visual arts. Through melody, harmony, and rhythm, music creates a spiritual experience that connects the composer and the listener on a deeply emotional level. However, Hegel also acknowledges the limitations of music, as its abstract nature makes it less suitable for conveying concrete meaning compared to the more conceptual arts like poetry.

POETRY

In Hegel's "Lectures on Aesthetics," poetry occupies the highest position in the hierarchy of the fine arts. According to Hegel, poetry surpasses the other arts because it combines language, thought, and imagination in a way that expresses both the subjective inner life and objective reality with the greatest freedom and flexibility. Poetry is the most universal of all the arts, and through words and imagination, it can express the richest and deepest ideas of human experience, encompassing the spiritual and emotional life of individuals and cultures.

1. The Essence of Poetry: Thought Expressed Through Language

Hegel writes: "Poetry is the highest form of art because it uses language, which is the most direct expression of thought. While other arts rely on material forms—such as stone in sculpture, color in painting, or sound in music—poetry is pure thought expressed through words."

Hegel begins by explaining why poetry is at the top of his hierarchy. He believes that poetry is the most intellectual of the arts because it uses language to express ideas and thoughts directly, without needing to represent them through material objects. While other arts depend on physical forms like sculpture (stone), painting (color), or music (sound), poetry is unique because it uses words, which directly convey meanings and concepts.

2. The Freedom of Poetry: Imagination and Thought

Hegel writes: "Poetry enjoys the greatest freedom of all the arts. It is not bound by the limitations of space (like sculpture or painting) or time (like music), but can represent anything that the human mind can conceive. The poet's imagination has no limits, and through words, poetry can express the infinite range of human thought and feeling."

Hegel is saying that poetry has more freedom than any other art form. Unlike painting or sculpture, which are limited to what can be represented in space (objects, people, landscapes), or music, which is limited by time (sound passing in a sequence), poetry is boundless. It can describe anything—from physical reality to abstract ideas—because it uses language and imagination, which can express an infinite range of thoughts and emotions. The poet is not constrained by external forms and can give voice to anything the human mind can imagine.

3. The Power of Imagination in Poetry

Hegel writes: “In poetry, the imagination is at its highest level of activity. The poet does not need to physically shape or paint an object but simply evokes it in the mind of the reader or listener through words. The mental image is created not through actual visual forms but through the poetic description, allowing for a deeper engagement with the spirit.”

Hegel highlights that poetry relies heavily on the power of imagination. Unlike visual arts that require the artist to create a physical representation, poets create mental images through their use of language. When reading or listening to poetry, the audience is engaged in the process of imagination, mentally visualizing and experiencing the poetic world. This, for Hegel, creates a deeper connection to the spirit or inner essence of the subject being described, as the focus is more on the idea than on a physical representation.

4. Poetry and the Unity of Thought and Feeling

Hegel writes: “Poetry unites both thought and feeling. It does not merely represent abstract ideas but brings them to life through the imagination, expressing both the intellectual content and the emotional experience in a harmonious form. In this way, poetry achieves a balance between the rational and the emotional elements of human life.”

Explanation: Hegel believes that poetry is unique in its ability to combine both thought (rationality, intellectual ideas) and feeling (emotion, personal experience). Through imagination, poets can take abstract ideas (like love, justice, or death) and make them emotionally vivid and experientially real for the audience. Poetry, therefore, strikes a balance between the mind and the heart, between intellectual reflection and emotional expression.

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