

The Aesthetic Intelligibility of Artefacts: Schelling's Concept of Art in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*



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ABSTRACT

The article reassesses Schelling's philosophy of art in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, focusing on its practical philosophy and the concept of the artefact. Often unexplored, this perspective offers a new account of Schelling's early aesthetics, linking aesthetic experience to historical becoming. The discussion begins with an analysis of Schelling's theory of intentional action, followed by a reconstruction of his understanding of artefact. It argues that Schelling integrates both social and material dimensions into his concept of artefacts. The paper then examines Schelling's comparison between artefacts in general and works of art, asserting that aesthetic experience in the context of the *System* exemplifies 'hermeneutic obstinacy'. This characteristic, typical of works of art, correlates with the open nature of historical reality.

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In his *System of Transcendental Idealism*¹ Schelling aims at establishing art as the organon and guiding principle of his early philosophical project. The centrality ascribed to art and philosophical aesthetics in his *System* remains a topic of debate. This paper explores how, according to the *System*, art relates to socio-material reality and practical activity. On a meta-philosophical level, this examination clarifies the relation Schelling establishes between aesthetics and practical philosophy. The contribution aims to demonstrate two key points: first, that Schelling's practical philosophy in the *System* views social norms, which regulate interaction with material reality, as constitutive of intentional action; and, second, that this perspective on human activity informs his view of works of art as infinitely interpretable.

The key concept that I will adopt as a focus is the notion of the artefact. Typically, artefacts are defined as products of human intentional intervention in material reality. Schelling follows this approach but refines it by seeing artefacts as products of human activity organized and regulated by social norms of interaction. He further compares his understanding of artefacts with his account of works of art. In this paper, I interpret this comparison through the *System*'s perspective that works of art are open to infinite interpretation and thus essentially enigmatic, whereas artefacts in general are understood through the practical purposes or functions they serve.

According to my interpretation, the enigmatic nature of works of art bridges Schelling's practical philosophy and his philosophy of art. This connection links his understanding of human activity to his account of artistic productions. This interpretation advances our understanding of Schelling's *System* in three significant ways. First, it develops a reading of the text that is mostly unexplored. Second, it addresses and resolves some interpretative challenges in existing Schelling scholarship. Third, it underscores the relevance of Schelling's early philosophy of art in contemporary aesthetics, especially concerning the material and social facets of aesthetic production and experience.

To contextualize my approach, it is important to consider how Schelling's *System* has been received in scholarly literature. In the last decades, interpretations of German idealism from the standpoint of social ontology, material culture, and practical philosophy have flourished. This trend has also influenced philosophical aesthetics. However, Schelling's *System* has largely remained outside its scope. I contend that reading the text through the lens of social practice and material culture sheds light on one of its core philosophical arguments: an adequate understanding of art is crucial for an adequate understanding of humans, reality, and the human understanding of both.

Many scholars interpret Schelling's early *System* in cognitive terms, suggesting that he understood art and its importance as providing insights into the human mind, nature, and their unity. Guyer characterizes Schelling's approach as cognitivist,²

1 Schelling's works are quoted following Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, 40 vols (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1976–), hereafter: AA. All translations from German are mine, with the help of Peter Heath's rendition of Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism (1800)* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), which I refer to from now on as the *System*.

2 Paul Guyer, 'Knowledge and Pleasure in the Aesthetics of Schelling', in *Interpreting Schelling*, ed. Lara Ostarcic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 71–90. The cognitivist approach, which is perhaps the most prevalent reading of Schelling's *System*, views his account of art through an equally cognitivist interpretation of his concepts of the conscious, the non-conscious, and the unconscious. Examples include: more recently,

positing that art operates primarily as a source of cognition and knowledge. Certainly, the *System* aims at uncovering a common root of intelligibility that binds together the natural world, self-consciousness, and artistic production (AA I/9,1, 323, 328). However, strictly cognitivist interpretations are dangerously one-sided. In the *System*, intelligibility encompasses more than semantic, theoretical knowledge, which involves representations and judgements about natural entities and self-consciousness. Schelling devotes substantial, if not predominant,³ discussions to practical intelligibility, knowledge, and reasoning. Moreover, in the architecture of the *System*, philosophy of art bridges both theoretical and practical philosophy, thereby completing them. A purely cognitivist interpretation must either reconcile Schelling's account of freedom with his theoretical philosophy or abandon the aspiration of a comprehensive account of his early philosophy of art.

However, there are interpretations that emphasize the entanglement of freedom and art in Schelling's early philosophy, particularly tragic interpretations. The leitmotif of tragedy runs through Schelling's writings, denoting the notion of an irresolvable dilemma or conflict between opposing principles.⁴ In tragic interpretations of Schelling's early philosophy of art, this idea becomes central, stressing art's disruptive impact on knowledge, consciousness, and intelligibility in general. Aesthetic experience is considered tragic because it leads to a 'breaking off of all forms of knowledge'.⁵ This breakdown of intelligibility in aesthetic experience is believed to serve a practical, almost emancipatory purpose, liberating individuals from pre-established notions and structures.⁶ Tragic interpretations highlight the link between practice and art, offering a more nuanced reading of the *System*.

The idea that aesthetic experience leads to a collapse of all forms of knowledge and intelligibility could be problematic, especially when examining the connection that Schelling's *System* establishes between art and practice.⁷ While it is plausible that

Andreas Gabler, *Die Kunst in Schellings Systemphilosophie: Vom Organon zum Gegenbild* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2020); more traditionally, Heinz Paetzold, *Ästhetik des deutschen Idealismus* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1983); for a broader exploration, Frederick Burwick, *Mimesis and Its Romantic Reflections* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001); and, more specialized, Lars-Thade Ulrichs, 'Das ewig sich selbst bildende Kunstwerk: Organismustheorien in Metaphysik und Kunstphilosophie um 1800', *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus / International Yearbook of German Idealism* 4 (2006): 256–90.

3 Schelling indicates freedom as 'the beginning and the end' (AA I/9,1, 67) of his philosophy. Furthermore, according to the *System*, epistemic self-consciousness is grounded in practical self-determination. Consequently, since epistemic self-consciousness is a condition for knowledge in general, the latter ultimately grounds in freedom (AA I/9,1, 222–23, 230–31).

4 Lore Hühn, 'Tragik und Dialektik: Zur Genese einer Grundkonstellation nihilistischer Daseinsdeutung', in *Die Philosophie des Tragischen: Schopenhauer – Schelling – Nietzsche*, ed. Lore Hühn and Philipp Schwab (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 19–38.

5 Lore Hühn, *Kierkegaard und der Deutsche Idealismus: Konstellationen des Übergangs* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009). See also Lara Ostaric, 'Nature as the World of Action, Not of Speculation: Schelling's Critique of Kant's Postulates in His Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism', in *Schelling's Philosophy: Freedom, Nature, and Systematicity*, ed. Anthony G. Bruno (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 13–31, and Teresa Pedro, 'Schellings Philosophische Briefe über Dogmatismus und Kriticismus: Eine pragmatistische Relektüre', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 65 (2017): 283–301.

6 Hühn, *Kierkegaard und der Deutsche Idealismus*, 33.

7 I believe this is the case for those readings that attribute to art and aesthetic experience an inherently non-, extra-, or irrational nature. The debate surrounding reason and non-reason in Schelling's philosophy is broad, and it can't be discussed at

aesthetic experience can unsettle established cognitive and behavioural patterns in a manner that catches them off guard, potentially even threatening them, this is not the full picture. Consider artworks that evoke such terror, beauty, or wonder that they defy immediate comprehension, or those that resemble an obscure pun, leaving one in a state of tranquil perplexity. Both scenarios involve an element of unexpectedness, novelty, or otherness unsettling cognitive and behavioural patterns. However, could such phenomena even be described if theoretical and practical knowledge collapse entirely in the presence of art?

Indeed, the fundamental heterogeneity between aesthetic experience and other forms of intelligibility raises a question of why a viewer should be impacted by art at all. While tragic readings might need to address this, I believe that Schelling does not face it. He instead establishes a nuanced connection between practice and practical intelligibility and develops a model for comprehending how artworks fit into the socio-material world of artefacts and operate within it. I will reconstruct this model, commencing with Schelling's account of intentional action (Section II), which underpins his understanding of artefacts. I will analyse his concept of artefacts (Section III) and compare it to his philosophy of art in the *System* (Section IV). The analysis delivers a new account of Schelling's early aesthetics, providing a fresh perspective on its central notion of the enigmatic character of art.

II. INTENTIONAL ACTION IN THE *SYSTEM OF TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM*

To understand Schelling's perspective on artefacts, it is essential to outline their role within the *System's* examination of practice and action. For Schelling, accounting for the capacity of rational agents to deliberately modify states of affairs (AA I/9,1, 37, 230–303) must illuminate the nature of artefacts produced by human activity. Rather than delving into the *System's* complete practical philosophy, I will concentrate on three principles that undergird Schelling's analysis of artefacts: (1) intentional action is linked to goals as practical possibilities; (2) goals possess a normative status; and (3) goals provide explanations for intentional actions.

(1) The *System* operates on the premise that some individuals are intentional agents that can bring about states of affairs according to 'representations' (AA I/9,1, 37). Schelling understands intentional action teleologically: to act intentionally is to aim at possible states of affairs as the goals of one's actions (AA I/9,1, 239).⁸ Schelling argues

length. Notable criticisms include: Rüdiger Bubner, *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), and György Lukács, 'Schellings Irrationalismus', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 1 (1953): 53–102, while Sean McGrath, *The Dark Ground of Spirit: Schelling and the Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 2012), and Jason Wirth, *Schelling's Practice of the Wild: Time, Art, Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), recently re-evaluated Schelling's alleged non-rationalism, also concerning art. Christian Iber, *Das Andere der Vernunft als ihr Prinzip: Grundzüge der philosophischen Entwicklung Schellings mit einem Ausblick auf die nachidealistischen Philosophiekonzeptionen Heideggers und Adornos* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1994), seeks to interrogate the 'dialectics' of 'reason and its other' to distinguish Schelling's philosophy from sheer irrationalism.

8 Schelling also emphasises the temporality of practice; see Giacomo Croci, *Die Konstitution von Subjektivität als Geschichtlichkeit: Im Anschluss an F. Schellings 'System des transzendentalen Idealismus' und M. Heideggers 'Sein und Zeit'* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), and Roswitha Staeger, '... das Ich selbst ist die Zeit in Tätigkeit gedacht': Schellings 'System des transzendentalen Idealismus' als Theorie vorpropositionalen und propositionalen Selbstbewusstseins (Marburg: Tectum, 2007).

that, grounded in this teleological perspective, intentional agents interact with and affect actual states of affairs by aiming at possible states of affairs, thereby engaging with practical possibilities.

(2) Schelling elaborates on this view by stating that intentional action involves comparing and a contrasting between actual and possible states of affairs (AA I/9,1, 239). Additionally to the idea that individuals cannot knowingly pursue states of affairs that are already the case, Schelling underscores the distinction between facts and norms. For intentional agents, goals hold a normative significance. Schelling describes goals as a 'demand' (*Forderung*) for 'realizing' (*realisieren*) specific conditions (AA I/9,1, 240). Using terminology that has become standard in later philosophical discussions of action,⁹ we can assert that Schelling considers intentional action to be described by a goal as the reason for the agent's action. From this perspective, not only do goals constitute teleological explanations of an intentional action; they also provide criteria for correctness that the action can either fulfil or miss. Thus, goals establish norms that guide agents and their actions.¹⁰

(3) Additionally, a key aspect of Schelling's understanding of human activity is that intentional actions are *free*. He argues that goals, which serve as explanations for actions, should not run counter to the essential principle of freedom. Schelling incorporates this requirement into his concept of intentional action by contending that goals can only explain actions if they do not compel agents to achieve the prescribed outcomes. In Schelling's words, the states of affairs aimed for will not be necessarily realized (AA I/9,1, 240).¹¹ For an action to be free, the agent must have access to alternative possibilities.¹²

To summarize Schelling's understanding of practice and action, consider the following example. Imagine Julia, a musician, who plans to drive to the concert hall for rehearsals. By intentionally driving her car to the car park next to the concert hall, Julia relates her current situation – a crossroads with the Schellingstraße – to her goal of parking next to the concert hall. This goal explains why she turns left on Schellingstraße, choosing it as a mean to an end, and serves as a norm for her successful behaviour in current action. However, she is not compelled to park at the concert hall; she could instead drive back home and play video games. Otherwise, her driving would not be free.

So far, I have discussed Schelling's account of individual agency. However, Schelling also holds that intersubjective relations – practical relations with other agents – are constitutive of individual agency. This aspect has received limited attention in existing literature. Schelling presents at least two arguments to underscore its significance. First, he contends that intentional actions cannot be conceived unless the constitutive

9 For example, Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957).

10 Mark Okrent, *Nature and Normativity. Biology, Teleology, and Meaning* (London: Routledge, 2018).

11 Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, 116–17), reads the passage as addressing the impossibility for an agent to obtain awareness of their own will as self-determining. However, I believe that Schelling's focus here is not a semantic awareness of self-determination but rather the conditions for individual agency to engender changes in reality.

12 Schelling had already applied the principle of alternative possibilities in the *System of 1800*; it did not only appear in the *Freiheitsschrift* of 1809, contra Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 95.

role of practical relations to other agents is considered. Second, he claims that, for human agents, true objectivity is not embodied in natural entities but in artefacts, as the latter instantiate relations with other agents.¹³

Schelling introduces the notion of practical relations to other agents to explain that all practical activities are determinate (AA I/9,1, 244). It is important to distinguish between determinacy and determinism or necessitation, as the latter, for Schelling, is not compatible with free actions. According to his definition of determinacy, any given action can be distinguished from other actions because it carries a 'negation in itself' (AA I/9,1, 244). Thus, determinacy implies that any practical endeavour is defined by its distinctiveness from other possible practical endeavours.

An action, like any event, is in some way naturally determined (physically and biologically; AA I/9,1, 241, 269–70). In other words, the determinacy of actions is partially due to natural determination. However, natural determination alone cannot fully explain the determinacy of intentional actions because it only addresses the causal embeddedness of actions in the natural world. From this perspective, for Schelling, natural determination equates to necessitation and determinism (AA I/9,1, 243). Against this backdrop, he emphasizes the need to understand the determinacy of freedom (AA I/9,1, 244), rather than of the unfree components of action.

Consider Julia driving to the concert hall. While the car's mechanics, Julia's physical condition, and other natural factors influence her actions, they do not explain why she chooses to drive to the concert hall instead of returning home to play video games or why she stops at red rather than green lights. Natural constraints allow for all these possibilities indeterminately. Therefore, Schelling contends that only practical relation to other agents explain the determinacy of free intentional action. He writes that individual agency is 'inconceivable [...] unless with my individuality [...] limiting points are not already set to my free activity, [limiting points] which cannot be selfless objects, but only other free activities, that is, actions of intelligences outside of myself' (AA I/9,1, 244.) Individual action must be always already 'exposed to the influence of others [...] and, as it were, opened' (AA I/9,1, 244).

There are two possible interpretations of Schelling's argument: a thick interpretation and a thin one. The thick interpretation posits that Schelling aims to establish a priori that practical relations to other agents must constitute individual agency. This requires that all possible determination of agency consists either of natural causes or of intersubjective relations. In contrast, the thin interpretation suggests that Schelling cautiously explores the hypothesis that determination via practical relations to other agents explains the determinacy of free actions. The thin interpretation appears more plausible considering the text's development, as Schelling introduces intersubjective relations, specifies how these are materially realized, and then tests his hypothesis.

Regardless of which interpretation is chosen, it remains true that Schelling considers relations to other agents essential for individual agency because natural determination alone cannot explain the determinacy of the alternative possibilities available to individual agents. As expressed in the *System*, '[i]t is thus a condition of self-consciousness that I intuit in general an activity of intelligences outside me' (AA I/9,1, 243).

13 Furthermore, it is counterintuitive that the *System* introduces history as an essential element of self-consciousness, as highlighted by Odo Marquard, *Transzendentaler Idealismus: Romantische Naturphilosophie; Psychoanalyse* (Cologne: Dinter, 1987), while neglecting the practical relations that connect and coordinate human agents.

We have outlined Schelling's approach to agency in the *System*. He views intentional action as teleological and assigns a normative role to goals, akin to an instrumental or functional normativity. Additionally, he contends that individual activity is determined by practical relations to other agents. To further understand these relations, we need to delve into Schelling's understanding of the notion of the artefact, discussed in the closing section of his exploration of intersubjective relations (AA I/9,1, 250).

In the following section, I argue that, according to the *System*, practical relations between agents are realized by what I will call a 'socio-material world'. I construe this notion as characterized by two distinct sets of relations and properties: normative relations and material properties. By normative relations I mean socially recognized norms concerning correct or incorrect interaction with states of affairs and their material properties. I contend that Schelling's notion of artefact, or what I will alternatively term 'artefactual reality', aligns with this conception of a socio-material world.

Schelling argues that practical relations between agents require the mediation of a shared world: agents 'who intuited a completely different world would have absolutely [...] no point of contact in which they could meet' (AA I/9,1, 241).¹⁴ This formulation has sometimes been misunderstood. For instance, Suárez Müller interprets Schelling as suggesting that the shared world is a 'metaphysical' substrate that guarantees the coordination of different agents by determining their relations to one another.¹⁵ According to this view, Schelling seems to propose that intersubjective relations are merely additional features imposed upon an otherwise independent natural substrate.

While the reasons for rejecting Suárez Müller's interpretation will become clearer after discussing the concept of artefact, we can already gather some evidence against it. Schelling clarifies his claim that practical relations between agents are mediated by a shared world as follows: '[T]he explanation should not dare to go further, for instance to an absolute principle, which, as it were, as the common focus of the intelligences [...], would contain the common ground of their agreement as

14 Schelling refers to this condition as a 'pre-established harmony of a *negative* kind' (AA I/9,1, 242). While I cannot discuss this notion at length, it's important to clarify that this expression does not advocate for natural or social determinism. Schelling believes that practical relations between agents provide an orientation for individual action by enabling its reorientation (AA I/9,1, 248). Consequently, he cannot conceive of them in deterministic terms, which would also contradict his understanding of freedom (Section II). Thus, I differ from Jindřich Karásek, *Sprache und Anerkennung: Philosophische Untersuchungen zum Zusammenhang von Selbstbewusstsein, Intersubjektivität und Personalität* (Göttingen: V&R, 2011), and his genetic interpretation of Schelling's account of intersubjectivity (pp. 213–33). See also Werner Marx, *Schelling: Geschichte, System, Freiheit* (Freiburg: Alber, 1977), for a critique of genetic readings of the *System*. Furthermore, Schelling acknowledges a discrepancy between the logical symmetry of intersubjective relations and their practical-historical asymmetry, observing that individuals possess unequally distributed possibilities of action (AA I/9,1, 247–48). The idea of a 'pre-established harmony' also points to Leibniz's metaphysics: For more on this, see Mark J. Thomas, *Freedom and Ground. A Study of Schelling's Treatise on Freedom* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2023). While Velimir Stojkovski, *Schelling's Political Thought: Nature, Freedom, and Recognition* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), explores Schelling's concept of recognition in the *System*, it does not extensively cover artefacts and socio-material reality.

15 Fernando Suárez Müller, 'Letztbegründung und Intersubjektivität in der klassischen deutschen Philosophie', in *Die Klassische Deutsche Philosophie und ihre Folgen*, ed. Michael Hackl and Christian Danz (Göttingen: V&R, 2017), 283.

to objective representations' (AA I/9,1, 242). The caution is clear: the shared world is no absolute substrate of agency. What Suárez Müller interprets as a metaphysical footing is actually a reference to the concept of objectivity. Schelling's concept of objectivity goes beyond a mere metaphysical substrate to include intersubjectivity. He asserts, '[o]nly because there are intelligences outside me, does the world become objective to me' (AA I/9,1, 252). Thus, if Schelling does not intend to establish a natural, metaphysical foundation for practical relations between agents, what does his assumption of a shared world amount to?

In reality, Schelling argues that practical relations between agents must be materially realized or objectively mediated. This interpretation is corroborated by his subsequent discussion on the concept of objectivity, particularly under the assumption that an individual's practical relation to the world is determined by their relations to other agents (AA I/9,1, 250). It is at this point that the concept of artefact emerges. Schelling's understanding of artefacts draws heavily from his understanding of individual action. This might initially seem puzzling – why does the concept of artefact conclude his exploration of intersubjectivity, and how are these ideas connected?

Schelling's approach may appear to start from an individual standpoint, as he revisits the notion that individual agents establish a dual relationship with the world they operate in (Section II) and ties it to the concept of object. Schelling writes that objects or states of affairs, when interacted with by agents, always embody the 'concept of a concept' (AA I/9,1, 251).¹⁶ This phrase highlights that agents engage with states of affairs through two simultaneous perspectives. First, the agent must apprehend the object in terms of its actual properties. Second, the agent interacts with the object with regard to the goals they intend to achieve. Through intentional actions, agents engage with actual states of affairs by functionalizing them to their intended purposes. The purpose thus becomes the conceptual framework through which the agent comprehends their present situation. The term 'concept of a concept' encapsulates both the functional aspect inherent in instrumental action and the practical intelligibility of situations presupposed by intentional agency.

Schelling's definition of artefacts corroborates this approach. He defines artefacts as 'concepts of concepts', articulating the speculative phrasing in terms of functional relations, and posits that an artefact 'in the broader sense of the word' is anything that 'has a purpose outside of itself' (AA I/9,1, 251). This definition suggests a strong connection between artefacts and their functions, aligning these functions with an agent's intentions. According to this definition, anything intentionally engaged with by an agent qualifies as an artefact.

At first glance, Schelling's perspective seems to align with Randall R. Dipert's and Lynne Rudder Baker's approaches,¹⁷ which emphasize function and intention as the

16 Schelling's exploration commences by contrasting epistemic and practical relations to the world. He distinguishes between a mere world-relation, or 'production', and another kind, where an 'ideal activity' is accompanied by another 'ideal activity' (AA I/9,1, 251). Mere production stands for epistemic world-relation. In his theory of 'productive intuition' (AA I/9,1, 122–50) and the exploration of its implications (AA I/9,1, 154–202), Schelling primarily addresses epistemological concerns related to the conditions of intelligibility of objects. Conversely, the second kind of production is described in terms of the functionalisation of objects as means to ends (AA I/9,1, 251), echoing his understanding of intentional action (Section II).

17 Randall R. Dipert, *Artifacts, Art Works, and Agency* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993). Lynne Rudder Baker, *The Metaphysics of Everyday Life: An Essay in Practical Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

primary constitutive elements of artefacts. However, Beth Preston¹⁸ critiques such accounts, labelling them as ‘centralized control models’ that neglect intersubjective and systemic interventions in artefactual products. From this viewpoint, it is surprising that Schelling attributes the materialization of intersubjective relations to a mentalistic, individualistic, and intention-focused concept. Does the *System* fall short of its own purposes in this regard? I do not believe it does, but we need to explore this further.

First, let’s consider that Schelling views functions as having a normative status, in line with his ideas about teleology and instrumental normativity (see Section II). Ends establish normative criteria for the correct or incorrect interaction with means. Second, Schelling contends that functionalization norms cannot be understood in terms of purely individual goals (AA I/9,1, 252), a perspective rooted in his claim that free actions are always influenced by practical relations to other agents. With this context in mind, I propose an interpretative hypothesis for Schelling’s understanding of artefacts, and then collect textual evidence to support it. Schelling aims to establish that the norms governing functionalization (correct or incorrect use) constitutive of artefacts do not correspond to individual purposes but are, in fact, social norms. This hypothesis aligns with the textual setup: it would not make much sense for the concept of the artefact to conclude the section on intersubjective relations if artefacts were unrelated to them. We need to delve into the specifics to substantiate this.

The idea that artefacts are constituted by socially recognized norms regarding their proper use implies that a specific community of agents acknowledges certain ways in which particular classes of artefacts should be employed. These norms operate on two levels: (1) identifying a class of artefacts and (2) prescribing how an artefact ought to be used and how an agent should interact with it. Social norms of functionalization are thus constitutive of artefactual reality by orienting actions. Even without direct textual evidence, this interpretation offers several advantages. It elucidates Schelling’s claim that intersubjective relations are worldly mediated: intentional actions are intersubjectively constituted in the sense that individual purposes are guided by social norms of interaction with material circumstances. Furthermore, it provides a rationale for the prominent role assigned to artefacts in Schelling’s conception of agency. Artefactual reality, understood in these terms, secures a twofold determination of agency – according to nature and according to freedom – as artefacts are materially instantiated and socially constituted.

Textual evidence corroborates the hypothesis. Schelling mentions that artefacts present the individual agent with an ‘ideal resistance’ and that, in doing so, they ‘determine [...] to self-determination’ (AA I/9,1, 252). This suggests precisely that artefacts shape individual action not in terms of natural causation but in relation to their freedom – a requirement initially associated by Schelling with practical relations to other agents. Against this backdrop, let’s examine the following passage:

Through the artefact *alone* [italics mine], therefore, intelligence can be pushed towards something that is no longer an object, that is, its own production, but towards something that is far higher than any object, namely towards an *intuition* outside of it, which, because it can never

18 Beth Preston, *A Philosophy of Material Culture: Action, Function, and Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

become something intuited itself, is for [the intelligence] *the first absolute objective item, completely independent of it* [italics mine]. (AA I/9,1, 252)¹⁹

Given that this passage can only be understood by assuming my interpretative hypothesis, it confirms it. If Schelling believed that an artefact was solely constituted by an individual's intentions and goals, he could not argue that it is only through artefacts that an agent is confronted with the existence of other agents. The only way to account for the presence of relations to other agents within an artefact's constitutive elements is to suggest that functionalization norms are not individually generated but rather they represent relations with other agents. This makes it plausible that, for Schelling, functionalization norms are socially recognized norms governing the correct use of artefacts. These norms determine individual agency and identify classes of artefacts.

At this point, we should revisit and expand upon Schelling's initial definition of artefact. An artefact comprises material properties and functionalization norms. The norms are not generated by individual goals but pertain to shared, socially recognized ways of interacting with specific clusters of material properties. Artefacts are clusters of material properties identified by these socially recognized ways of correct interaction and operation. In simpler terms, defining what a car is involves specifying what an agent correctly does with a car.

To summarize this section, Schelling's *System* posits that all intentional actions occur within a world composed of material and natural properties intertwined with socially recognized norms of behaviour that govern how agents interact with different objects and situations. His focus is less on artefacts as specific objects and more on the socio-material mediation of action, emphasizing individual agency within a socio-material world. Schelling holds that an individual's capacity for intentional action relies on continual engagement with and determination by social norms governing interactions with material reality. This condition of human agency is described as an ongoing process of education (AA I/9,1, 248), with the socio-material world shaping the range of alternative possibilities of actions (AA I/9,1, 244).

In this way, Schelling's *System* establishes practical relations between agents as materially realized and constitutive of individual agency and locates human freedom and its realization in the historical, shared world. As the final section will demonstrate, the *System's* aesthetics also relates to socio-material reality, a connection that becomes apparent only after we have acquired a clear understanding of its account of practice and artefactual reality.

IV. AESTHETIC OBSTINACY

Up to this point, my reconstruction has not directly considered the *System's* account of works of art. However, it provides some preliminary insights due to Schelling's theory of artefacts. Works of art are objects, states of affairs, or events with material properties whose intelligibility emerges within socially shared and recognized norms and practices governing interaction with them. Processes like manipulation of materials, curatorial design of spaces, and interpretative discourse are essential to both the production and reception of art and are intertwined with social recognition.

19 Schelling also remarks that objectivity is established only intersubjectively (AA I/9,1, 253).

However, despite the analogies, a central question remains unanswered: how do aesthetic qualities connect with the practical and social intelligibility of artefacts? Given our definition of artefacts, and even considering works of art as a subset of such artefacts, it remains unclear what purposes and functions works of art are meant to serve, or if they have any purpose at all. Works of art may be described as artefacts with an 'obscure' function,²⁰ to the extent that considering them purposeless may be a more promising philosophical approach.²¹ Schelling takes the obscurity or enigmatic nature of works of art seriously, especially in relation to the practical intelligibility of artefacts in general. He considers this obscurity a central feature of his aesthetics in the *System* and its broader philosophical framework (see Section I).

To begin, Schelling makes a seemingly neutral comparison between works of art and artefacts in general by highlighting a shared characteristic: both involve and entail contradictions. However, he distinguishes between them in terms of the nature of these contradictions. Artefacts in general entail contradictions related to external purposes, while works of art are characterized by contradictions concerning the 'very own nature' of the artist (AA I/9,1, 322).

This remark has received limited scholarly attention, but it has not gone entirely unnoticed either. Devin Zane Shaw mentions it, albeit without drawing significant conclusion.²² He interprets Schelling's observation as evidence of Schelling's commitment to the autonomy of art and aesthetic intelligibility from practical relations.²³ However, it is crucial to recognize that the difference drawn by Schelling between works of art and artefacts in general is based on a shared characteristic. Therefore, I propose an interpretation that differs from Shaw's: rather than pure independence, Schelling envisions a peculiar kind of determination or tension in the relation between aesthetic and practical intelligibility when comparing works of art and artefacts in general. The text discusses the independence of works of art from external purposes, which might *prima facie* support Shaw's interpretation. However, Schelling immediately clarifies this independence in a narrower sense, emphasizing the irreducibility of art and aesthetic experience to individual utility or mere pleasure sensations (AA I/9,1, 322), rather than suggesting a complete disconnect of art and practice.

To delve further into the possible relation Schelling establishes between works of art and artefacts in general, let's start by examining their shared feature: contradictions. This statement is somewhat abstract, so we need to expound on its content. As discussed, artefacts in general involve contradictions related to external goals (AA I/9,1, 322). They negate, resist, and determine individual goals by confronting agents with socially shared norms of interactive behaviour. To illustrate this concept, let's revisit my previous example.

Suppose Julia has finished her rehearsals and decides to relax by visiting a new museum. Its collection includes various tools produced in different places and times. During her visit, Julia is intrigued by an unusual object. She assumes it has a practical purpose but cannot comprehend its function. In Schelling's terms, Julia interprets the

20 Dipert, *Artifacts, Art Works, and Agency*, 171.

21 Peter Lamarque, *The Uselessness of Art: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Literature* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2019).

22 Devin Zane Shaw, *Egalitarian Moments: From Descartes to Rancière* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), and *Freedom and Nature in Schelling's Philosophy of Art* (London: Continuum, 2010).

23 *Ibid.*, 160.

object as an artefact with a practical function, but the norms governing its use, which would make it intelligible, are unknown to her. This situation represents a case of 'ideal resistance' (Section III), but in a different way than previously discussed. The peculiar object does not determine Julia's own goals or actions, as traffic lights might. Instead, it 'resists' to the norms of practical intelligibility that Julia has already learned to be determined by.

This addition to Schelling's account helps illustrate what he might mean by 'ideal resistance'. An artefact is ideally resistant when it presents hermeneutic and practical challenges in terms of its interpretation and usage. These challenges can relate to individual goals or to socially recognized norms of usage. This proposal might initially seem a pure exegetical bravado. To substantiate it further, we should seek textual evidence that sheds light on how Schelling discusses works of art in relation to hermeneutic resistance and whether this notion can be linked to the idea of a contradiction concerning the nature of the artist, as he mentioned in the comparison between artefacts and works of art. Let's look for passages that provide a link between works of art and hermeneutic resistance.

Indeed, Schelling attributes an enigmatic character to works of art,²⁴ stemming from their infinite interpretability. He asserts that no finite intellect could ever exhaust the meaning or intelligibility of a work of art. Moreover, Schelling connects infinite interpretability and its coordination of opposites, finite and infinite, to the essential and intrinsic interplay and contradiction pertaining to self-consciousness as such²⁵ (AA I/9,1, 320), that is, to the 'very nature' of any self-conscious being. Thus, he establishes a link between (1) the inherent 'contradiction' found in works of art, and (2) the contradiction that is fundamental to self-consciousness by virtue of (3) the property of an inexhaustible interpretability that endows works of art with their enigmatic quality and resistance to a thorough interpretation. While my reading has veered somewhat from the text in focusing on the hermeneutic-practical resistance typical of artefacts in general, the convergence I just emphasized is unmistakably present in Schelling's writing. It introduces a concept I term 'aesthetic obstinacy', which I believe is key to reevaluating the aesthetics of the *System* by uncovering largely unexplored textual and argumentative connections.

Taking a closer look at the convergence established by Schelling, let me compare it to the analysis of artefacts. Artefacts have been characterized as confronting agents with social norms of interaction that may differ from individual goals or from the norms of interactions within a particular community. Through this 'ideal' or hermeneutic-practical resistance, artefacts determine and orient individual agency within a social and material environment. In the analogy with works of art, the comparison term is a resistance to interpretation.

24 Dieter Jähni, *Schelling: Die Kunst in der Philosophie*, vol. 2, *Die Wahrheitsfunktion der Kunst* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1969), 181–202, emphasises the enigmatic quality of works of art within Schelling's framework yet links it to a discussion of symbol and myth. Similarly, Gabler, *Die Kunst in Schellings Systemphilosophie*, 74–75.

25 Schelling's understanding of self-consciousness includes both conscious and non-conscious activities as irreducible and complementary (AA I/9,1, 63). Works of art relate to the tension between them (AA I/9,1, 39–40). Another interpretive trajectory associates the synthesis achieved by works of art with a broader understanding of the absolute, which transcends and encompasses human consciousness and agency. See Lore Hühn, *Fichte und Schelling oder über die Grenze menschlichen Wissens* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994), and Birgit Sandkaulen, *Ausgang vom Unbedingten: Über den Anfang in der Philosophie Schellings* (Göttingen: V&R, 1990). While some textual references may support this view, the issue can only be settled by a thorough interpretation of Schelling's metaphysics – a task beyond the scope of the present contribution.

What distinguishes the resistance encountered in works of art? When interpreting something as an artefact, even when ignorant of its function, an agent must presuppose some community whose norms render it intelligible. An artefact in general is, by definition, exhaustively intelligible due to social norms of interaction. In contrast, works of art can never be made fully intelligible by any set of social norms. Their infinite interpretability makes them hermeneutically obstinate in the face of any socio-material world and its norms of interaction. Therefore, what distinguishes works of art from artefacts in general is their aesthetic obstinacy, which characterizes their intelligibility against the backdrop of practical intelligibility.

At first glance, this interpretation may appear to contradict the idea that, for Schelling, aesthetic intelligibility is related to practical intelligibility. It may suggest that works of art exhibit a margin of unintelligibility that can never be grasped by social norms of practical interaction, implying aesthetic independence.²⁶ However, aesthetic obstinacy neither does nor can imply independence from the socio-material world and rules of interaction. Instead, it signifies a tension within them. For example, dialogues in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* cannot be said to be entirely independent from dialogical norms, even if they sometimes sound enigmatic compared to those norms. The enigmatic character of art becomes apparent only when confronted with the shortcomings of (finite) interpretation and the norms governing it. Symmetrically, interpretative shortcomings emerge in attempts at understanding something hermeneutically inexhaustible. While direct textual evidence within the *System* supporting the idea that art always relates to socio-material reality and practice is scarce,²⁷ certain passages indirectly make this idea more plausible.

In at least two passages within the *System*, Schelling links the (negative) lack²⁸ of exhaustive determination or interpretation of human agency and self-knowledge to the (positive) realization of human freedom. First, he compares the activity of a plant to human activity. While asserting that both are, in some sense, free, Schelling notes that a plant is 'completely what it has to be', whereas a 'human being is an eternal fragment' (AA I/9,1, 308). Human agents are free by virtue of an inherent incompleteness, unlike organisms that cannot but act in accordance with a natural order that exhausts their possible activities. Second, Schelling's discussion of history and providence highlights the idea that history, the domain of realization of human freedom, must lack a fully determined, once-and-for-all prescribed course of human actions. Interestingly, he uses the example of theatrical improvisation, an artistic practice, to illustrate this point (AA I/9,1, 301). If human actions were exhaustively governed by a set order of practical intelligibility and unchanging norms, they would not be free in the human sense. This background supports the hypothesis that

26 Georg W. Bertram, *Kunst als menschliche Praxis: Eine Ästhetik* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 26–37.

27 To support this argument, a thorough reconstruction of Schelling's concept of self-consciousness in relation to art is necessary, although it cannot be fully developed here. Recall, however, that self-consciousness composes of both conscious and non-conscious aspects and correlates to works of art as infinitely interpretable and enigmatic. This suggests an analogy between the impossibility of exhaustive interpretations of art and the idea that no determinate self-understanding can fully capture self-consciousness. Schelling draws parallels between the interplay of the conscious and non-conscious aspects of self-consciousness and the inherent incompleteness of human self-understanding (AA I/9,1, 328). He also correlates artistic production with a 'self-forgetting' of intelligence (AA I/9,1, 125).

28 On the notion of lack in Schelling's philosophy, see Matt Ffytche, *The Foundation of the Unconscious: Schelling, Freud and the Birth of the Modern Psyche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), and Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996).

incompleteness is connected to human freedom. Textual evidence indicates that, for Schelling, human freedom is characterized by incompleteness, as it can never be made fully intelligible by the norms that guide its realization.

In light of this, the significance of art in Schelling's *System* becomes clearer. Works of art represent a tangible realization and an encouragement of human freedom precisely because they embody and reveal its inexhaustible nature. Just as no set of social norms for practical interaction can fully capture works of art, the same holds true for any material embodiment of human freedom. This means, symmetrically, that a different set of norms for the orientation of human activity – in fact, a different socio-material reality – can always emerge. From this perspective, it is possible to connect Schelling's early aesthetics with his views on history as realization of human freedom. While Birgit Sandkaulen characterizes the *System* as a preliminary stage in Schelling's philosophy of history and emphasizes the negative aspect of art, not explicitly and positively related to history,²⁹ we can, by highlighting the parallelism with artefacts and the link between aesthetic obstinacy and the incompleteness inherent in human freedom, appreciate how Schelling establishes a positive relationship between art and historical becoming. By unveiling the incompleteness of socio-material worlds via aesthetic obstinacy, works of art expose the possibility that historically situated socio-material worlds can be different from what they are, that they can undergo transformation.³⁰

Therefore, aesthetic obstinacy can be construed positively. It aligns with and effectively prompts the inexhaustive, incomplete, and always open nature of human freedom and socio-material reality. This is evident in Schelling's remark that works of art serve as an 'opening', through which 'figures and regions of the fantasy world [...] emerge' (AA I/9,1, 328).³¹ Aesthetic obstinacy highlights the lack in the hermeneutic resources of a historical world, thereby making room for yet another transformation within it, another configuration of human and historical freedom.³²

V. CONCLUSION

Starting with Schelling's account of intentional actions, I emphasized how he views practical relations to other agents as constitutive of intentional agency (Section II). I then examined Schelling's assertion that practical relations between agents are mediated by the shared world, clarifying that this mediation occurs through socio-material networks organized by norms of practical interactions, shared and recognized by situated communities of agents (Section III). Finally, I explored the connection between socio-material reality, understood through the notion of artefact, and works of art (Section IV). In this context, I interpreted the *System's* philosophy of art by

29 Birgit Sandkaulen, 'Das negative Faszinosum der Zeit: Temporalität und Kunst bei Schelling', in *Bild und Zeit: Temporalität in Kunst und Kunsttheorie seit 1800*, ed. Thomas Kisser (Munich: Fink, 2011), 259–72.

30 On Schelling's understanding of transformation, see James Dodd, 'Philosophy and Art in Schelling's *System des transzendentalen Idealismus*', *Review of Metaphysics* 52 (1998): 51–85, Arran Gare, 'From Kant to Schelling to Process Metaphysics: On the Way to Ecological Civilisation', *Cosmos and History* 7 (2011): 26–69, and Bruce Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy: Life as the Schema of Freedom* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011).

31 See Teresa Fenichel, *Schelling, Freud, and the Philosophical Foundations of Psychoanalysis: Uncanny Belonging* (London: Routledge, 2019), 44–45.

32 As in Ernst Bloch's utopian account of art, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1959), 255. See also Jähnig, *Die Wahrheitsfunktion der Kunst*, 198, 314.

focusing on the concept of aesthetic obstinacy, arguing that it reveals the limitations of hermeneutic-practical resources within historical worlds, thereby unveiling the potential for historical transformation. This analysis provides a new perspective on Schelling's *System* as a whole by elucidating the relation between its conception of freedom (realized in history) and its philosophy of art. It accomplishes this by examining the concept of artefact and delving into the *System*'s practical philosophy.

The reading I have presented offers some advantages in comparison to the approaches mentioned at the beginning of this discussion:

1. It elucidates the connection between art and practical intelligibility, accommodating the cognitivist argument that within the *System* art pertains to how humans comprehend themselves and their world. However, it avoids falling into the cognitivist trap of downplaying the role of freedom.
2. It reevaluates the negative role of art concerning practical intelligibility. When examined through the lens of the *System*'s practical philosophy, the enigmatic character of art is not merely opposed to intelligibility. This perspective encompasses the assertions made by tragic interpretation without succumbing to the risk of irrationalism. Humans are unsettled by and take interest in art's enigmas not because of art's otherness against rationality but because they reveal the practical intelligibility of the human world as something susceptible to transformation.
3. It enables a reassessment of Schelling's ideas in the context of contemporary aesthetics, constructing a conceptual bridge to approaches emphasizing the practical, social, or even political importance of aesthetic experiences. According to the *System*, the aesthetic intelligibility of artefacts lies in exposing the deficiencies of socio-material reality, thereby unveiling the potential for historical and structural change.

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