

**Birth of Tragedy:**  
**By Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche**  
**&**  
**My attempt at its Appreciation and Criticism**

~Abu Shahid



[\(Link\)](#)

**Appreciation**

Neitzche in his work, **Birth of Tragedy** presents the dichotomy of Apollonian vs Dionysian art and puts forth his ideas. While discussing them, he does not do so in mere abstractions/concepts but collapses them where Apollonian art stands for '*all the plastic-arts*', arts of imitation, of superficiality, whereas Dionysian artforms are the formless, non-lyrical chorus. While I do not completely digest this simplification and high-handed categorization (please refer to my critique down below); I do completely agree with idea of what they stand for, as placeholders;

*That is to say, I agree when Nietzsche implies, Apollonian art is the art that deludes whereas Dionysian art is the art that liberates. [1]*

The first few sections build on the notion of what the two artforms are supposed to be and how they interact with each other. First off, we are desensitized to what 'cultured-art' is supposed to mean. No; it is not the plays of Shakespeare, or the songs of Freddy Mercury. Infact, having a concept of 'cultured-art' is itself very alien, very superficial, and very naive, while this took me some self-convincing (*some unculturing if you would like*).

One must also have at the back of their heads, a conscious definition of what '**art**' is even supposed to be, as it becomes apparent by reading the first few sections of the book that we have been conditioned to retrieve Apollonian forms of expression when someone mentions the word 'art'. We, by default, think of Apollonian artforms exclusively when thinking of art.

And unsurprisingly, Dionysian forms of expression are labeled as rogue, grotesque, vulgar. He also mentions that through these Dionysian forms of expression the core of life- *the pain and the contradiction*- truly expressed and represented, while Apollonian artforms are pills of cope and pills of seethe. And he beautifully puts it up his writing as:

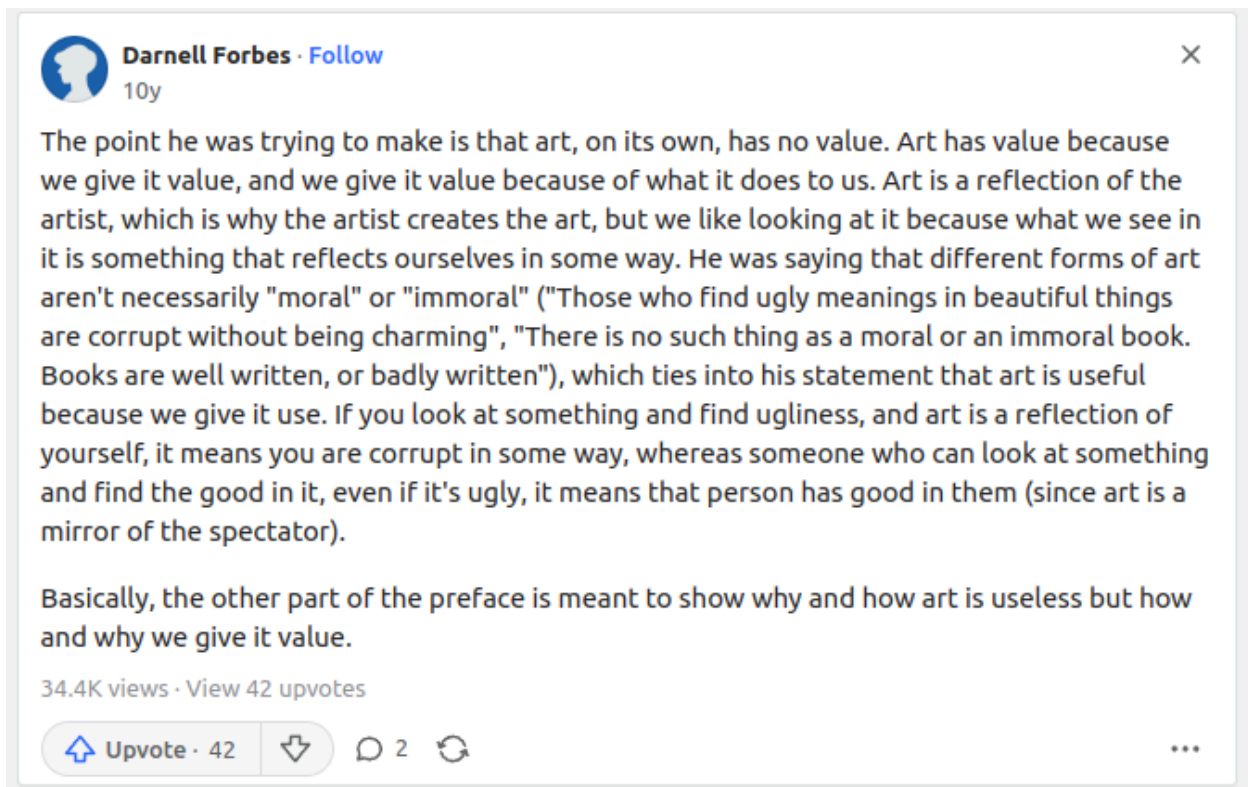
way back to Babylon and the orgiastic Sacaia.\* There are men who from lack of experience or from stupidity turn away in contempt and pity from such phenomena as they would from 'folk diseases'\* with a greater sense of their own good health: but these poor men do not suspect how cadaverous and ghostly their 'health' looks, compared to the glowing life of Dionysian enthusiasts which roars past them.

Under the spell of the Dionysian it is not only the bond between man and man which is re-established: nature in its estranged, hostile, or subjugated forms also celebrates its reconciliation with its prodigal son,\* man. The earth voluntarily gives

He gets us rid of the preconceived-notions of Apollonian art as great; and Dionysian art as lowly. It is through the latter, a man is given access to the **Core**, where he loses **the Self**. He loses his individuality, and his ability to critique/compliment art. At this juncture, he loses his identity of artist or the appreciator or the muse; but himself becomes the part of the art.

Only after grasping this was I able to appreciate what he said about how all *subjective art is mediocre*. Here, I am compelled to connect to what Oscar Wilde meant when he said “**All art is quite useless**”. He, Mr. Wilde, (I feel) is again making the error of exhausting art as only Apollonian art-forms (just as we were doing prior to the ‘*unculturing*’ we underwent while going through these pages).

Indeed in this light, all art is quite useless.



The screenshot shows a Quora post by Darnell Forbes, a user followed by 10 years. The post discusses the value of art, stating that art has no inherent value but gains value from the viewer's perspective. It quotes Oscar Wilde's statement "All art is quite useless" and explains that art is a reflection of the artist and the viewer. The post has 34.4K views and 42 upvotes.

**Darnell Forbes** · Follow  
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The point he was trying to make is that art, on its own, has no value. Art has value because we give it value, and we give it value because of what it does to us. Art is a reflection of the artist, which is why the artist creates the art, but we like looking at it because what we see in it is something that reflects ourselves in some way. He was saying that different forms of art aren't necessarily "moral" or "immoral" ("Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming", "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written"), which ties into his statement that art is useful because we give it use. If you look at something and find ugliness, and art is a reflection of yourself, it means you are corrupt in some way, whereas someone who can look at something and find the good in it, even if it's ugly, it means that person has good in them (since art is a mirror of the spectator).

Basically, the other part of the preface is meant to show why and how art is useless but how and why we give it value.

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(A Quora response to what Wilde meant when he said that line; PS: I share the exact same interpretation)

Approaching Apollonian modes of expression (religion, lyrical music, codified artforms, social beliefs) with intentions of asceticism or spirituality will sooner or later disappoint us, because it is hollow.

Ornament company of Olympian beings spring.

Whoever approaches these Olympians with another religion at heart, in search of moral elevation, even saintliness, disembodied spirituality, glances of compassion and love, will soon be obliged to turn his back on them. There is nothing here to remind us of asceticism, spirituality, and duty: everything here speaks to us of a sumptuous, even triumphant, existence, an existence in which everything is deified, regardless of whether it is good or evil. And so the spectator might stand full of consternation before this

Neitzche does reason out why if Apollonian art is a facade, does it come about to be what it is today. It is because, to live and to have access to that core of pain and contradiction is futile~ *is an irony of sorts.*

He says *while Dionysian art is the ideal form of expression; an ideal enjoyer of Dionysian art should be a dead man.* To escape this paradox, we had to create Gods in our image ~the idyllic shepherd.

*world of the Olympians.* In order to be able to live, the Greeks were obliged to create these gods, out of the deepest necessity: a process which we should probably imagine in the following way—through the Apollonian drive towards beauty, the Olympians' divine reign of joy developed in a slow series of transitions

forth from the thorn-bush. How else could that people, so sensitive in its emotions, so impetuous in its desires, so uniquely equipped for *suffering*, have tolerated existence, if the very same existence had not been shown to it surrounded by a higher glory in its gods. The same drive which calls art into life as the completion and perfection of existence which seduces the living into living on, also brought into being the Olympian world in which

He then leaves us here with an understanding of the dependency of the two artforms~ a yin-yang kind of a relationship and builds from here to talk about theater and the birth of tragedy. And in my opinion, what he said next feels like a natural response; an intuitive chain of thoughts based on what he had discussed previously; which goes to show the profound implication of the same (personally feeling).

### **Critique**

While I, more or less, sooner or later agreed, or came to at least understand where Nietzsche was coming from, when he was talking about the Dionysian and the Apollonian forces, what I am yet to appreciate is the bland generalization and hard categorization of what should be considered as Dionysian and Apollonian.

Plus, I feel in the era of culture-industry and mechanical reproduction, a few of the statements will need rephrasing. Especially considering the new art forms that originated post industrial revolution; or even considering the old artforms which Nietzsche didn't even know existed. Is Bharatnatyam Apollonian? Is Dadaism-Cubism Dionysian? And what is molecular gastronomy? What of the art of making Itr. What about acts of self-pleasure? And will consumption of Apollonian art on psychedelics be considered Dionysian? Or is AI generated dithyrambic music still

Dionysian? Is it Dionysian because it gives access to the **Core**; or does it give access to the **Core** because it is Dionysian. These questions should be taken rhetorically. However, these questions did make me think again about the hard-margins on the categorization that Neitzche places; and what to make out of them in an era of postmodernism.

*...that is to say, ... Apollonian art is the art that deludes whereas Dionysian art is the art that liberates, [1]* should be rephrased to imply: liberating artifacts fall in the realm of Dionysus whereas those of delusion are Apollonian.