The question of aesthetics has occupied a central position in the development of Jungian thought. There have been several attempts to encapsulate Jung’s approach to this subject (Philipson 1994; Mayo 1995), with the most recent and most comprehensive having been undertaken by Tjeu van den Berk. His professed intent is “to distil a consistent and comprehensive perspective on art for all [Jung’s] contributions” (2012, xi). In the context of the present article, I suggest that such a project perhaps runs contrary to the spirit of Jung’s work. Rather than attempt to pin Jung’s ideas down and insist that they make themselves theoretically coherent, the diffuse presentation of Jung’s thought will be assumed fundamental; the content, that is, will not be considered separable from the form. Furthermore, although a thorough-going analysis of Jung’s life will inevitably turn up certain causative factors, it will be assumed that the questions raised by Jung’s position with respect to art and the field of aesthetics are of an order such that merely personalistic accounts will not suffice to resolve them. A well-reasoned presentation of this sort has recently been offered by Sylvester Wojtkowski, who argues cogently that Jung was suffering from an “art complex” (2012). Wojtkowski’s paper begins with an allusion to the following passage in Memories, Dreams, Reflections, in which Jung recounts his struggles with the inner figure of Salome:

I said very emphatically to this voice that my fantasies had nothing to do with art, and I felt a great inner resistance. No voice came through, however, and I kept on writing. Then came the next assault, and again the same assertion: “That is art.” This time I caught her and said, “No, it is not art! On the contrary, it is nature,” and prepared myself for an argument. (1961, 185–186)

If one reads Jung’s assertion partly as an attempt to position his technique of active imagination in distinction from art, then this assertion also raises questions with respect to the definition of art itself. In fact, the distinction being drawn between art and nature points to a basic tension running through Jung’s psychology. This tension is evident too in the work of James Hillman, who makes reference to the foregoing passage in the course of outlining his vision for an aesthetic psychology (1992, 53). As is well known, Hillman’s emphasis on image has been a major influence in moving the practice of Jungian analysis away from classical interpretation. More recently, Wolfgang Giegerich has mounted a sophisticated response to the archetypal tradition on behalf of thought per se. Jung’s often negatively toned reflections with regard to art and the
aesthetic sensibility, therefore, continue to exhibit deep theoretical relevance for the field at present. To better explore Jung’s position, I would like to consider adopting a more critical stance both toward art and the aesthetic attitude. If, in the desire to appear progressive, one takes “art,” no matter how defined, as an unquestionable good, then one has already decided against Jung, and it only remains to diagnose the quirks of circumstance that might have engendered those elements in his work that are found to be misguided.

In his widely influential paper “The Affirmative Character of Culture,” Marxian critical theorist Herbert Marcuse suggests that the field of art has been ascribed to one side of a fundamental split in Western thought. Marcuse conceptualizes this schism, which he suggests can be traced to Aristotle, as originally having occurred between the necessary and the beautiful. He believes that this split is responsible for the state of affairs in which we presently reside, wherein nature has come to be perceived as lying in absolute separation from culture. One might infer, therefore, that Marcuse is struggling with a related problem to the one implied by Jung, where Jung seeks to assign active imagination to the realm of nature as opposed to art. Marcuse states:

By affirmative culture is meant that culture of the bourgeois epoch which led in the course of its own development to the segregation from civilization of the mental and spiritual world as an independent realm of value that is also considered superior to civilization. Its decisive characteristic is the assertion of a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed: a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realizable by every individual for himself “from within,” without any transformation of the state of fact. (2007, 87)

This passage is reminiscent of Giegerich’s claim that Jung’s “resuscitation of images is reserved for a logically segregated space, cut off from the historical process” (2008, 196). A common accusation leveled at Jung’s psychology, and indeed at analysis more broadly, concerns the question of its value as a force for change in the world. Hillman has engaged sympathetically with this line of criticism (Hillman and Ventura 1992), yet the technique of active imagination upon which he places so much emphasis in his own psychology is itself founded on a principle of abstaining from action. Jung attempts to ground the practice of active imagination and register a transformation in Marcuse’s “state of fact” by way of the act of interpretation. As Jung sees it, the danger of otherworldliness lies in remaining adrift in the aesthetic mode of contemplation:

With a secret conviction that this was art, I could easily have watched the course of the unconscious as I would watch the cinema. If I read a certain book I may become deeply moved by it, but after all, it is all outside myself; and in the same way if I had taken these dreams and fantasies from the unconscious as art, I would have had from them only a perceptual conviction, and would have felt no moral obligation toward them. (Jung 1989, 45)

For Jung, aesthetic responses are governed by the irrational functions of perception. The aesthetic dimension considered in isolation does not constitute a complete human experience because it lacks the reasoning and ethical components native to the rational functions of judgment. Jung’s concern with interpretation signifies a direct critique of the aesthetic mode’s apparent impotence to effectuate change in the world. Resonating with this position, the twentieth-century avant-garde movement developed partly in an effort to reintegrate art into the praxis of life. For Marcuse, however, such an endeavor is problematic. His concern is for the fashion in which art
might enable those aspects of human nature that are not part of our praxis to be included in culture without actually being integrated into everyday experience. The suspicion is that art, even where its ostensible intent is revolutionary, serves the purposes of the established order by normalizing that which lies outside of it: “Art itself appears as part and force of the tradition which perpetuates that which is, and prevents the realization of that which can and ought to be” (Marcuse 2007, 141).

For Marcuse, the status quo is maintained by assigning any revolutionary endeavor to the cultural sphere of imagination. This process can be understood as an expansion of the Marxian notion of reification, the etymology of which implies “thing-making.” In the Marxian tradition, this notion has roots in the idea of commodity fetishism and the tendency of social relationships to assume seeming objectivity in light of their character being determined by a value in the marketplace. As Lukacs puts it, “This rational objectification conceals above all the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things” (1967, ¶25) The tendency is to cause the human subject to fall into a state of basic isolation from life. Indeed, under the conditions of advanced capitalism, all relations assume the character of thingness. Because the technique of active imagination was developed in a sense to rescue the modern psyche from the alienation consequent upon this process, Jung may have been wary that the technique itself might succumb to a similar fate. He could, therefore, be interpreted as having attempted to rescue the practice of active imagination from the kind of reification Marcuse considers in at least two ways: first, by emphasizing the role of interpretation as a means to grounding aesthetic experience, and second, by assigning the practice of active imagination to the sphere of nature in a bid to distance it from culture.

Neither move is entirely convincing. Defining active imagination as a “natural” process seems problematic—it might be argued that this process is, in fact, precisely contra naturum in so far as it figures an attempt to resist instinctual acting out. Meanwhile, by scapegoating the aesthetic realm of experience as the place where nonrelatedness threatens, Jung seems not to adequately account for the fashion in which thought is susceptible to the same danger. Marcuse makes clear that philosophy and theory belong just as much to affirmative culture as do the arts. Mere interpretation threatens to be as ungrounded in praxis as aesthetic experience. In fact, much of Hillman’s response to Jung hinges on the claim that interpretation has the opposite effect from the one intended. For Hillman, the act of interpretation, in so far as it entails moving away from the image, only reinforces the sense of a reification. According to the archetypalist Ronald Schenk, “Jung was struggling with the inadequacy in thought forms carried over from the eighteenth century—that is, rationalism on the one hand versus aesthetics on the other” (1992, 132). Over the course of this struggle, the underlying threat of reification remains apparent. While positing image as primary, this move obviously remains in the domain of the theoretical, even if the intent implied is to move beyond it. Hillman’s response to this problem partly lies in his insistence on soul as a middle-space. In this aspect of his thinking, he leans heavily on the work of Evangelos Christou, who suggests “The principle of the soul is not only independent of all other principles of mind and body, but very probably contains the possibilities of the reunification of these into a higher and more essential unity” (1976, 31). Marcuse, on the other hand, contends that the very notion of soul belongs to the domain of affirmative culture, thus precluding the kind of unification Christou refers to:
The idea of the soul seems to allude to those areas of life which cannot be managed by the abstract reason of the bourgeois practice. It is as though the processing of matter is accomplished only by part of the res cogitans: by technical reason . . . . To the extent that thought is not immediately technical reason, it has freed itself since Descartes from conscious connection with social practice and tolerates the reification that it itself promotes. (2007, 94)

The power Hillman ascribes to image is not native to the present historical moment. In his later psychology, he comes to promote the Greek sense of aisthesis. Hillman defines this term as “that primary aesthetic response” (1992, 47). But primary in what sense? Hillman’s earlier notion of seeing through (1977) can give the impression of a “going beyond” literalism, which, with its emphasis on ideation, relies more explicitly on thought (a path that Giegerich has subsequently followed), whereas his notion of aisthesis puts a heavier accent on aesthetics and portrays the move intended in the sense of a retreat to a prior more “authentic” position. Endorsing such a position, however, might raise the question of whether Hillman is in danger of breaking with his phenomenological commitment to psyche.

Because Hillman’s championing of aesthetics is explicitly founded on recovering an aesthetic sensibility properly belonging to ancient history, it seems questionable from the outset whether this move isn’t in contradiction to other aspects of his thinking. For one thing, Hillman’s espousal of a move away from ego psychology leaves him vulnerable to inconsistent thinking wherever he supposes that one way should be favored over another. The very notion of actively moving away from an ego psychology seems self-contradictory. Hillman writes: “Indeed we must cleave beauty altogether away from art, art history, art objects, art appreciation, art therapy. These are each positivisms: that is, they posit beauty into an instance of it: they position aisthesis in aesthetic events such as beautiful objects” (1992, 41). While Hillman is here responding directly to the problems raised in Marcuse’s paper, one difficulty with this position is that it seems to imply some measure of control over what we find beautiful. Referring to our image-saturated society, Henry Corbin states that “there is above all a reduction of the image. Should it not be said, therefore, that the more successful this reduction is, the more the sense of the imaginal is lost, and the more we are condemned to producing only the imaginary?” (1995, 31). Corbin is not speaking of a devaluation of the image in terms of it being ignored or overlooked, but of an active diminution of its power that occurs as a consequence precisely of its ubiquity. It seems questionable whether this state of affairs is susceptible to being “corrected.” Giegerich thinks not: “You could only return to the anima mundi by ‘fraud’ or by ‘delusion’—or by jest, by game-playing” (1999, 174–175).

If Hillman’s resuscitation of aisthesis does, in fact, point to a culturally felt need, then it still seems muddled to recommend this style of perception as a corrective to what is, in a sense, the tendency that would demand a corrective in the first place. Hillman has spoken of the shadow side of aestheticism (1979, 110), but the more pressing question for his own psychology is constituted in what remains unaddressed in promoting aestheticism. Here the heroic substance of Hillman’s antitheroic project becomes pressingly apparent. By championing aisthesis in theoretical terms, it too is in danger of falling within the domain of affirmative culture. It seems conceivable that the notion of reification running through Marcuse’s paper might be approached in terms of shadow work and related to the role that more consciously attending to dialogic encounter might play in rendering relationships more fluid. In light of the present conversation, however, the notion of
shadow work itself becomes subject to suspicion. Where one knowingly attends to the inferred nature of the unaddressed parts of one’s self—in making this affirmation—it is inevitably the case that by this very gesture something is thrown into unconsciousness. If shadow work suggests a drive toward becoming more consciously responsible, then engaging this process must, in fact, generate an increasing unconsciousness of one’s tendency to do otherwise. Making a conscious effort to recognize this in one’s self is, by definition, impossible, since such a gesture would entail responsibly giving due to one’s own irresponsibility. One only renders a service to the irresponsible parts of one’s self by acting on them naively. No act of self-reflection or ritualistic appeasement (Johnson 1991) can hope to address this, since the nature of self-reflection is constitutionally opposed to it. In like fashion, the notion of a more authentic or primary aesthetic response is, in itself, prone to debar access to such a position since the thought immediately interposes itself between the subject and the experience.

Considering the parallels with his own work, the reference Hillman makes to Marcuse in *Re-Visioning Psychology* is brief. While crediting him for “showing up many of psychology’s assumptions,” Hillman nevertheless maintains that, “he has literalized his tools and cannot see through his own ideas about politics and the archetypal fantasy of Dionysian liberation” (1977, 134). Keeping in mind the subject of reification, this is, of course, a wry irony, but the question might yet be asked whether Hillman himself isn’t susceptible to the same criticism? In fact, one might well imagine that for Hillman, Marcuse’s line of reasoning would be rather troubling given that the revolutionary character of Marcuse’s thought makes claims that constitute a direct challenge to some of Hillman’s basic assumptions. Hillman’s similarly fiery nature may not have taken kindly to the implication that his own work might be critiqued in terms of its normativity. Marcuse suggests: “Culture speaks of the dignity of ‘man’ without concerning itself with a concretely more dignified status for men. The beauty of culture is above all an inner beauty and can only reach the external world from within. Its realm is essentially a realm of the soul” (2007, 92). An avowedly political criticism of this kind cannot be overcome simply by pointing to notions of transforming the world through a reflective awakening of the subject to the environment—even if the notion of a more authentic position might in some sense exist as a possibility, Marcuse’s attitude challenges the claim that such a state might ever be attained if doing so requires that one relies on an aesthetic response that has already been reified as “soulful,” much less on a psychology basing itself on such an experience. In a sense, a psychology of this kind recapitulates the original problem faced by Jung in so far as it interprets aesthetic experience for us (that is, in terms of “soul”), prescribing a correct response, and thus tending once again to the domain of reification. Hillman is forced toward contradiction in preemptive defense of his psychology when he states: “The heart’s work isimaginational thought, even if disguised in philosophies that seem without images and without heart. This imaginative thought can even be disguised in philosophies or psychologies of its own nature, that is, in theories of heart” (1992, 7). Surely this implies that an artfully worded interpretation can, indeed, serve a worthwhile purpose?

Following Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas observes that the rise of modernity signaled a separation of science, ethics, and art, with science rapidly coming to overwhelm and dominate the other two spheres. Under these conditions, and in keeping with Jung’s concern for the perceived
ethical shortcomings of a response that is only aesthetic, the following quote points to the difficulty implicit in Hillman’s attempting to find emancipation in a purely aesthetic attitude:

A reified everyday praxis can be cured only by creating unconstrained interaction of the cognitive with the moral-practical and the aesthetic-expressive elements. Reification cannot be overcome by forcing just one of those highly stylized cultural spheres to open up and become more accessible. Instead, we see under certain circumstances a relationship emerge between terroristic activities and the overextension of any one of these spheres into other domains: examples would be tendencies to aestheticize politics, or to replace politics by moral rigorism or to submit it to the dogmatism of a doctrine. (Habermas 1998, 11)

One begins to sense the distinct possibility that Hillman’s project has not gone far enough in realizing its ostensible aims and remains rooted in a normative position in respect to society. Hillman’s fascinating body of work can be read as an attempt to mediate between the claims of his own revolutionary impulse—this impulse finds expression, on the one hand, as a psychology with soul and, on the other, as a soulful politics. The fundamental problem for Hillman is action. In Giegerich’s view, Hillman’s psychology has not lived up to its own billing and is characterized by the nostalgic desire for a state of affairs that has now passed. Giegerich, as we have seen, accuses Hillman of a form of Platonism entirely in keeping with Marcuse’s argument: “The immunization of the imaginal from the historical process has become inherent in its very form” (Giegerich 2008, 197). By contrast, Stanton Marlan argues that image in our own age has come to be undervalued, therefore Hillman’s attempted revival of aisthesis should be supported (2006, 9). Responding to this argument, Giegerich characterizes Marlan and Jung’s attitude toward the present historical moment as akin to a “Manichean resentment” (2008, 195). He suggests that Jung treats the dominant historical process as though it were pathological and in need of cure. However, by drawing attention to these issues in the manner that he does, Giegerich himself is perhaps in danger of treating Jung’s own “historical process” as pathologically deficient: he calls Jung’s basic stance “regressive.”

The conversation between Marlan and Giegerich draws attention to a curious dimension of the Jungian project, this being its basic relationship to the present moment in history. This question is possibly confused by Marlan’s and Giegerich’s reliance on the notion of a “dominant historical process.” Although Giegerich rightly draws attention to the peculiar nature of this idea (Giegerich 2008, 195), he nevertheless continues to rely on it in mounting his own criticism of Jung. By claiming that Jung’s position is historically regressive, Giegerich necessarily implies that Jung’s attitude lies beyond the preserve of a dominant trend that runs counter to it. All of this concern for historical process, almost as though such a thing could be said to exist in and of itself, is somewhat surprising coming from two archetypalists. There are inconsistencies here: on the one hand, Marlan’s approach is rightly criticized by Giegerich for failing to live up to the archetypal intent of finding soul in the apparent sickness and of following the soul’s logic where it leads; but Giegerich’s position is equally questionable where his apparent acceptance of a dominant historical process fails to attend to what might be considered symptoms of that process. A sickness is only a sickness when regarded from a given position. By accepting the dominant historical process as in some sense pathological and in part supporting it for that reason (195), Giegerich already seems to imply that he takes his own stand outside of it. From the perspective of one who feels at home in this supposed dominant process, however, it is the views of Jungian psychology (to pick one
example) that are liable to appear sick, in which case, by Giegerich’s own logic, the correct response in terms of soul would be to pursue Marlan’s course of reasoning.

Facing the problem of reification encountered by Jung, Hillman’s approach requires that one looks to the past, whereas Giegerich sees a turning back of this kind as delusional. For Giegerich, the tendency implied by the notion of reification is treated as belonging to an inevitable movement in the soul’s life. The conclusions Giegerich reaches are consequent upon Hillman’s particular vision of pathologizing and the particular role of the ego in this process: “Serving soul implies letting it rule; it leads, we follow” (Hillman 1977, 74). While this position has been of tremendous value in dissolving many assumptions of the field, with the rhetorical minimizing of the ego’s function, one inevitably encounters contradictions.

The third-generation Frankfurt school philosopher Axel Honneth has recently revisited the question of reification. Honneth explores how a critical theory that posits reification as a totalizing movement can free itself from this tendency and find a way out of the ideological enslavement that it signifies:

The detached, neutrally observing mode of behavior, which Lukacs attempts to conceptualize as “reification,” must form an ensemble of habits and attitudes that deviates from a more genuine or better form of human praxis. This way of formulating the issue makes it clear that this conception of reification is in no way free of all normative implications. (2008, 100)

This observation reflects that which has been suggested in respect to Hillman’s psychology having a fundamentally normative component as demonstrated in the question of a correct mode of ensouled relationship to the world. In effect, Hillman takes the tendency that would posit health as a norm to which sickness should align itself, and reverses it, claiming that the healthy should normalize itself to the sick. Honneth relates his own argument to Heidegger’s concept of “care.” (See Avens 1984 for an excellent treatment of the many parallels between Hillman and Heidegger.) Like Hillman, Honneth conceptualizes this alternative norm in terms of a style of being in the world that he claims as more primary. Unlike Hillman, however, Honneth also justifies this claim with recourse to the distinctly un-imaginal domain of developmental psychology from which he takes the idea of an act of recognition antecedent to reflection (2008, 114). Ironically, if Hillman’s position in respect of aisthesis is to be defended more adequately, one might be required to step out of an archetypal frame of reference to take recourse in the findings of science. In Giegerich’s view, such a move needn’t be perceived as contrary to the archetypal approach’s intent: “We feel that our well-meaning consciousness must militantly defend the old views and values as an inner possession against the objective facts established by science. But the results of science do have to do with our psyche” (2007, 54). In his own psychology, however, Giegerich is not actually required to make the gesture Honneth does because he advances Hillman’s notion of seeing-through as his basis for thinking the image forward, rather than the notion of aisthesis.

As already noted, the question of actively choosing to pursue a less ego-centered psychology is itself an egoic project. The ego of necessity plays a fundamental role in relativizing its own conditions. Any psychology, in so far as it makes distinctions, brings with it something of the heroic impulse. Hillman’s use of the rhetorical style is one way of moderating this (1977, 213–217),
but clearly it does not circumvent the role of an egoic approach altogether. Consider the following passage from Honneth:

As long as we retain the simplistic conception that every form of detached observation is opposed to antecedent recognition, we do not take sufficient account of the fact that the neutralization of recognition and engagement normally serves the purpose of intelligent problem solving. So instead of allowing the danger of reification to arise wherever the recognitional stance has been abandoned, as Lukacs does, we should orient ourselves in our search towards the superordinate criteria for judging the kind of relation that these two distinct attitudes have to one another. (2008, 127)

The ego is needed as a protector against its own intentions. Hillman’s rhetorical minimizing of ego dynamics results in a lack of explication as to the ways in which what Jung conceptualized as “shadow work” is nevertheless central to his own psychology. By even invoking this by now jaded notion, however, we might recognize the extent of the task set before us: the construct itself threatens to fall victim to the very phenomenon that it seeks to address. Perhaps there are parallels here with the intent of the twentieth-century avant-garde. In much the same way as Jung’s endeavor to address the unconscious suggests an effort to critique the position of the ego, the avant-garde movement began as a self-critical enterprise concerned not simply with questioning the approaches that came before it, but with challenging the institution of art as a whole. This movement failed because the institution found a way of assimilating the avant-garde to its existing framework. Peter Burger suggests that the attempt to reintegrate art into the flow of life was, in fact, self-contradictory in so far as a reintegration of this kind would entail the loss of critical distance (1984, 54). Burger’s observation further underscores the extent to which confrontation with the shadow is an ongoing concern, and not merely a stage in the individuation process. Additionally, it reminds us that an antecedent act of recognition always implies a “less conscious” experience. Thanks to the irresolvable nature of the shadow problem, the conditions for this “more primary” response seem assured.

Working from a Jungian frame of reference, the cry goes out: Ah! But one mustn’t forget the shadow! In similar fashion, the cultural connoisseur exclaims: Ah! But one mustn’t forget Art! Only by taking ourselves less seriously in these statements might we hope to realize the changes they imply. The institution of art undermines the power of art in the same way that the institutionalization of psychodynamic psychology threatens to undermine the psyche. As soon as a given language has become second nature, one is forced to frame things anew or else succumb to the ossification with which the present paper has been concerned. In 1917, as the latter passages of Liber Novus were being composed, Marcel Duchamp was exhibiting for the first time his Dadaist masterpiece, Fountain. It remains unclear what might constitute the more revolutionary gesture: signing a urinal and calling it art, or creating Liber Novus and insisting that it isn’t.

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the problem of reification as manifested in the fields of art and depth psychology. By considering C. G. Jung’s interpretive strategy and contrasting this with the archetypal tradition’s focus on image, the author seeks to outline and expand upon some of the theoretical tensions thus implied. It is suggested that the notion of reification is directly related to Jung’s concept of the shadow, and that the minimizing of ego dynamics within the archetypal tradition may expose certain aspects of this approach to question.

KEY WORDS

active imagination, aesthetics, Wolfgang Giegerich, James Hillman, interpretation, reification, shadow