CHAPTER 4

VISIONARY ARTISTIC REBELLION: RIMBAUD, DE SADE, AND THE PROGRESSION FROM CHAOTIC CREATION TO CONSCIOUS PARTICIPATION

His body! the dreamed-of liberation, the collapse of grace joined with new violence!
All that he sees! all the ancient kneelings and the penalties canceled as he passes by.
Arthur Rimbaud, The Genie

Ever since Socrates and Plato (Ferrari, 2000) first proclaimed their fear of the ability of visionary art to expand the imagination, and declared the threat it posed to order, politics, and, accordingly, to Plato’s ideal republic, Western philosophical thought has struggled with the balance between these two realms of life.¹ In the modern era, Rousseau (1750/1993) and others have echoed Plato’s view that art can be destructive to politics. The Romantic tradition formed in reaction to the domination in modern culture of a viewpoint that favored order as the ultimate goal. The dominant belief was that this goal could be reached only through the reason and science that the Enlightenment Movement and the French Revolution had brought to the forefront of modern intellectual and moral life. Provocative thinkers like Rimbaud and de Sade presented a clear need for individuals to confront their irrational selves. They argued that our instinctual emotions and desires are a source of important knowledge, both about ourselves and about society. They both recognized that many experiences can never be fully explained or understood through reason. Only by denying the language of reason can we become truly free. Without the constraints of the inherent order and limited vocabulary of reason, experiences can be felt with abandon, rather than understood with the tools of our societal-based learned rationality. This chapter explores the value of knowledge borne of the instinctual
and the sensual, as well as argues for the value of providing more access to such creative knowledge.

Art, I have been arguing, continues, and should actively be supported in this, to move out of its assigned spaces of museums, galleries, symphony halls, and theaters, in order to inject its knowledge into the public spaces of our everyday lives. There are at least two primary considerations in this task. First, an expanded definition of visionary art holds that it is the product of the dialectical relationship between sensuousness and rationality. The core spirit of rebellious art consists in a dialogue between our emotions and senses, on one side, and reason and reflection, on the other. Second, are the characteristics of “visionary” art and its potential as a transcendent force within individuals and as a progressive force in society. The general acceptance of mass opinion, and of popularly supported accounts of experiences, prevents rather than enables vital knowledge of human universality and vulnerability. The recognition of a whole universe of which we are but one part is necessary to the desire to participate in community and in politics because it alerts us to our own susceptibility to a variety of human ills and reminds us that those dangers are common to all.

In the creation of art, the intention, and the process of reflection that the artist experiences, is equal in importance, if not more so, to the aesthetic result. To look only at the end product of artistic expression is to miss the emotions and intentions that lie in the complex web of intersecting gazes involved in any artistic interaction. Art is not merely a material end product of creativity and skilled craft; it is also not simply that which is aesthetically pleasing or entertaining. These are two connected but distinct points. The first regards the importance of the artistic process (versus the result), beginning with the idea. The second refers to the transcendent properties of art and hints at the societal dangers of mainstream art. What connects these two points is the role of ideas and imagination in art-making.

Much of Plato’s (Ferrari, 2000) philosophy focused on the difference between appearance and reality. He felt that all art was appearance and provided escapism from the reality of reason and knowledge, and thus also from politics. Among his many differences with Plato, Aristotle (1996) believed that art can serve a healthy function in society as a unique, and thus valuable, form for the expression of ideas and emotions about everyday realities. This classic debate on the value of art in society has been elaborated by many thinkers in modernist conceptions of the aesthetic as the beautiful (Novalis, 1798/1997; Schiller, 1794/2004), and then the sublimely transcendent, and in postmodernism’s confrontation with this understanding of aesthetics, keeping in mind the constraints and