The romantic concept of genius is the foundation stone of the modern and postmodern concept of the “fineness” of fine art. Without it the ability of the fine art institution to create its canon of “great artists” and the capacity of the art market to sell faeces and urinals as precious objects would collapse. But at the same time this concept is insidious because it focuses on the least significant aspect of art: its supposed “fineness”. In order to understand the concept of genius, which has insinuated itself into the popular unconscious, we need to take a look at the phenomenon of romanticism which arose in late 18th-century Europe and had a very significant impact upon art of the 19th century, which in turn laid the foundation for 20th century modern and postmodern art.

Early romantic painting of the late 18th and early 19th century is singularly unimpressive apart from isolated instances such as William Blake, J. M. Turner, and Caspar David Friedrich. Nineteenth century realist painting is a much more substantial and coherent genre. Realism also feeds into the evolution of the first small step towards abstraction that was Impressionism. Impressionism is naturalistic in the sense of being an attempt to represent the “innocent eye” but it was simultaneously the first shift away from representation towards a visual language of pure expression. Enhanced texture and colour sowed the seed for the metamorphosis of Impressionism from naturalism into the romantic expressionism of post-impressionism epitomised by Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin.

Post-Impressionism lacks the stylistic coherence of Impressionism but this can be explained in terms of its more extreme experimental nature. It is also the case that we do not think of major impressionists such as Renoir or Pissarro in terms of genius—although Monet is certainly outstanding. Rather, it is when we turn to postimpressionism that we discover the first monumental genius of modern Art: van Gogh (see Heinich 1996). It is giant geniuses such as van Gogh and Picasso who serve to define fine art as a valid endeavour in the communal imagination. In this sense the romantic concept of genius possesses a sociological function serving as a justification for avant-gardist experimentation that would otherwise be scorned. And this is precisely the point made by Renato Poggioli in Theory of the Avant-Garde (1968) when he connects romanticism with avant-gardism. But I would like to be more precise than Poggioli by specifying the romantic concept of genius as providing a fundamental bridge between romanticism and 20th century fine art.

The romantic notion of genius was given its earliest extended elaboration in Edward Young’s (1683-1765) “Conjectures on Original Composition” (1759) where we find the characteristic focus of romanticism on genius as an internal state of nature. And against the background of the pervasive influence of romanticism in the 19th century we can begin to understand Impressionism as a congruence between external (landscape) and internal nature (emotive response to an expressive visual style).

In his critique of Conjectures Irving Babbitt picks out key phrases such as: “Some [geniuses] are pupils of nature only, nor go further to school.” and “Many a genius probably there has been which could neither write nor read.” (Babbitt 1919: 38). Both phrases are particularly relevant to fine art due to its non-linguistic status. Perhaps this explains why the concept of genius has enjoyed greater longevity in the non-linguistic arts. Significantly, the first attack on the notion of genius came in literary theory in the form of Roland Barthes’ “Death of the Author” (1968). In other words it was a very long time before an effective repost to the notion of genius could be formulated and even then it was so thoroughly intellectual that the art market could happily ignore it.

Young’s definition of romantic genius represents an apotheosis of raw nature that Babbitt observes gave rise to the interest in so-called “primitive” art. We see this in the romantic turn away from the classicism of the Renaissance towards the Gothic and the appropriation of African art in cubism and German expressionism (which also championed the art of children and the mentally ill, as did surrealism). Babbitt provides an interesting explanation for this development when he notes that: “This exaltation of the virtues of the primitive ages is simply the projection into a mythical past of a need that the man of the eighteenth century feels in the present—the need to let himself go. This is what he understands by his ‘return to nature’.” (ibid.). In the context of Babbit’s analysis “letting himself go” means rebelling against the constraints of institutionalised traditions such as Christianity, classicism etc. Babbitt continues:

What the genius wanted was spontaneity, and spontaneity, as he [sic] understood it, involves a denial … [of] the doctrine of imitation. According to [the rationalist] Voltaire genius is only judicious imitation. According to [the romantic] Rousseau the prime mark of genius is refusal to imitate. (Babbitt 1919: 34).

And fundamental to the distinction between Voltaire’s concept of genius and that of Rousseau is that one stresses conscious reasoning whereas the other points to a non-conscious source of inspiration. Significantly, Babbitt later specifies what the term “imitation” referred to in the romantic period: “the classical and the Christian” (Babbitt 1919: 36), which explains very clearly the fundamental shift that early romantic art effected away from the paradigms of Renaissance and post-Renaissance art. The romanticist proscription against imitation also adds another causative factor for the gradual evolution away from realism towards proto-abstractionism in art in the second half of the nineteenth century. The connection with romanticism is reinforced by the fact that it was the romantic movements of postimpressionism, symbolism, Art Nouveau and Jugendstil that laid much of the groundwork for the evolution of early 20th-century abstraction.  
It is also in Young’s “Conjectures on Original Composition” that we encounter a delineation of the notion that art should be new and original: another fundamental defining feature of fine art in the modern and postmodern periods. In 1759 Young observed:

An original … rises spontaneously from the vital root of genius; it grows, it is not made; imitations are often a sort of manufacture, wrought up by those mechanics, art and labor, out of preëxistent materials not their own. (in Babbitt 1919: 37)

Originality is the solution to the problem of imitation and becomes a defining feature of art from Impressionism onwards: as is exemplified by the explosion of isms that characterises fine art in the first half of the 20th century. Even when art turns against the romantic ideology of originality—as it appeared to be the case in the postmodern appropriationist movement that dominated art during the 1980s—the force of its reaction only serves to emphasise the depth and longevity of the impression of the romantic concept of originality upon the popular imagination.

The source of Romantic genius is nature and as such it is to be opposed to conventional culture and society which are typically resistant to the genius due to the fact that bourgeois social institutions generally prefer conformist mediocrity and emotionally stable functionaries. A true genius does not succumb to “society’s conspiracy against the truly great man [sic]”.[1] In this declaration we see what Herbert Drieckmann portrays as the specific contribution of the major Enlightenment philosopher and writer Denis Diderot (1713-1784); namely, the “transition from the conception of genius as mere talent to the conception of the genius as an individual” (in Verba 1993: 95) [emphasis added].

Enlightenment and Romanticism are usually portrayed as antithetical: one espousing reason and the other emotion. But although Diderot is framed as a leading Enlightement figure his text Le Neveu de Rameau (Rameau’s Nephew), written 1761, cannot be reduced to rationalist aesthetics. Cynthia Verba (1993) shows that while Diderot generally believed that emotion should be controlled by reason in the creative process Le Neveu de Rameau provides a sketch for romantic genius. It is significant that the classicist and seminal figure in early romanticism J. W. Goethe (1749-1832) both translated Le Neveu de Rameau into German and organised its initial publication 1805.

Le Neveu de Rameau is an alleged dialogue between someone we suppose is Diderot and a putative nephew of the 18th century French composer and music theorist Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764). The dialogue turns to the subject of genius and Verba suggests that Rameau’s nephew effectively becomes a paradigm for a specifically romantic concept of genius. She reports that Herbert Dieckmann “explains that Diderot’s new concept of genius ‘presupposes that the influence of the emotional faculties upon the mind is not only admitted or acknowledged, but recognized as leading to a higher level of cognition.’” (Verba 96) [emphasis added]. Implicit in this comment is a resonance between Le Neveu de Rameau and the Freudian unconscious. And this resonance is not entirely anachronistic due to the fact that, as will be indicated below, the idealist philosophy that paralleled romanticism in the arts in many ways provides a prelude to the Freudian unconscious.

Continuing her analysis of Le Neveu de Rameau Verba notes that—like the pioneer of romanticism Jean-Jacques Rousseau— “Diderot’s underlying theme is that the model from nature must be the voice of passion, since of all the arts, music is ‘the most violent’. If the expressive content is energetic and strong, then the expressive means need only be a simple and direct expression of that content.” (Verba 96-97).

Verba notes a significant degree of sympathy in Le Neveu de Rameau towards the pathetic genius and this, evidently, was also Goethe’s interpretation, given his translation and publication of Diderot’s text. Moreover, according to David E. Wellbery in the “Age of Goethe”, the concept of genius in the time of Goethe was defined as that which: “does not create according to prescribed rules, above all doesn’t imitate; the genius is closely tied to nature” (Wellbery 1996: 121). Herein are arrayed the three fundamental premises of the romantic concept of genius foregrounded in Young’s Conjectures.

The romantic concept of genius stems from an exploration of inner nature that is one of the principal characteristics of early romanticism that has enduring importance to fine art not only in the 19th century but throughout the 20th century. The Freudian unconscious, for example, which had a massive impact upon 20th-century cultural theory, can be understood as a continued exploration of the landscape of inner nature begun by romantic poets, artists, and philosophers.

Turning from a psychological to a sociological perspective, the romantic concept of genius can be also understood as an attempt to formulate a sense of identity in the midst of the social upheaval evident in the second half of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century. The sources of this upheaval have been noted: the decline of religion, the rise of scientific rationalism and the bourgeois materialism of the Industrial Revolution. The notion of genius is an idealised humanism, a hyperbolic elaboration of the Enlightement, post-Kantian, focus upon a self liberated from subservience to a higher power (church or monarch).

Terry Pinkard notes that “Kant identified enlightenment with ‘man’s release from his self-incurred immaturity … the inability to use one’s understanding without the guidance of another.’” (Pinkard 2002: 19). Where the “guidance of another” is clearly code for the patriarchy of church and court. The romantic idea of genius, therefore, is both a symptom of a crisis of identity and a response to a new freedom of expression.

   
And in his remarkable study The Unheroic Hero in the Novels of Stendhal, Balzac and Flaubert, Raymond Giraud provides another dimension which is the deeply divided bourgeois psyche. On the one hand the typical 19th century artist is born a bourgeois and yet rejects the materialism implicit in bourgeois morality looking, instead, for a “something else” which is fundamentally understandable in terms of the framework of the dying aristocratic and Christian cultures. Giraud quotes the romantic poet and essayist Heinrich Heine commenting on artistic life in Paris in the early 19th century during the Restoration:

The tragic poet needs to believe in heroism, but that is entirely impossible in a country dominated by a free press, representative government and the bourgeoisie. . . . The diminution of all greatness, the radical annihilation of heroism, these things are above all the work of that bourgeoisie that came into power in France through the fall of the aristocracy of birth. In all spheres of life that bourgeoisie has caused its narrow and cold shopkeeper’s ideas to triumph. It will not be long before every heroic sentiment and idea will get to be ridiculous in France, if indeed they do not perish completely. (in Giraud 1957: 48)

But in the wake of the death of aristocratic and Christian values it was possible for the romantics to reinvent the “something else” that bourgeois capitalist-materialist culture ignored. The German idealist philosophy that ran parallel with romanticism can be understood as such an endeavour. In a study of such philosophy Pinkard observes that the early idealist philosophers engaged in a phenomenological exploration of self-consciousness that led to the claim that: “underlying … ordinary reflective self-knowledge must be some kind of nonreflective, even pre-reflective self-knowledge” (Pinkard 2002: 138). This self-knowledge was an intimation of the nature within; portrayed, crucially, as something not reducible to an object in a manner akin to the way in which science reduces nature and human nature to an object. Pinkard does not make the connection with the concept of “unconscious mind” explicit, but the distinction between “ordinary reflective” (i.e. conscious) and “pre-reflective” (not conscious) is certainly implicit. In his history of psychodynamic psychology, Henri F. Ellenberger is more explicit noting:

No less basic to … [the romantics] was the notion of the unconscious. This word no longer meant St. Augustine’s forgotten memories or Leibniz’s “unclear perceptions,” but was the very fundament of the human being as rooted in the invisible life of the universe and therefore the true bond linking man with nature. (Ellenberger 1970: 204)

An implied notion of an “unconscious mind” is certainly intrinsic to the romantic theory of genius and in his study of Freud Peter Gay makes the romantic legacy of the Freudian unconscious clearer when he observes:  
Poets and philosophers had been speculating about the notion of mental activities beyond the reach of awareness; a century before Freud began to occupy himself with the unconscious, romantics like Coleridge could speak of “the twilight realms of consciousness,” while Goethe, that romantic classicist, had found the idea of depths beyond depths in the psyche supremely attractive. In his Prelude, Wordsworth had celebrated the deep recesses in his heart as the realm in which he dwelt with pleasure. “I held unconscious intercourse with beauty,” he wrote. “Caverns there were within my mind which sun / Could never penetrate.” (Gay 1998: 368)

According to the romantic mythology the especially sensitive artistic soul possesses elements of divinity. From a sociological perspective, therefore, the romantic myth of genius can be understood in terms of a surrogate religion for the first generations of artists who were left bereft of church or aristocratic patronage and also adrift from the bourgeois culture into which most of them were born.  
The myth of individual genius was powerful and pervasive, it was the fundament of the religion of art and meant that in the wake of the collapse of patronage in the 19th century the creative individual could have total confidence in themselves and survive even without recognition. The perfect exemplars of the outsider genius would be Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin both of whom died recognised only by their peers. But, crucially, the concept of genius also meant that fine art could become more autonomous, it did not need to be defined in terms of a productive role in society, such as the roles provided by the Church and court.

It is also the case that by the second half of the 19th century painting was released from the task of representing everyday middle class life– which essentially describes most 19th-century realist painting. And the reason for this particular liberation was the viral proliferation of photography.

The ultimate victory of the evolution of romanticism into avant-gardism in modern art was the development of abstraction. Here, again, the romantic concept of genius provides further explanation due to the fact that it was fundamentally opposed to the imitation of nature on the basis that genius did not express itself in terms of an imitation of the external appearance of nature but rather an expression of the mysterious creative power of nature within the unconscious human psyche.

This notion that fine art should represent something profoundly inner rather than something superficially outer is absolutely fundamental to understanding the modern concept of fine art. It is also fundamental to understanding postmodern art due to the fact that conceptualism (Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Beuys) carries on the project of representing the Idea: the mysterious creative process within. Indeed even the postmodern focus on surface and simulation (Baudrillard) entails an implicit melancholic concept of a spiritual depth now lost entirely in the wake of the victory of consumerism.

Artists who pursued the genre of bourgeois realism in the 19th century were assured of being able to sell their work. It was when artists became overly experimental as was the case for van Gogh and Gauguin, that problems arose. Despite the best efforts of van Gogh’s art dealer brother, Theo, the bourgeois clientele were unable to understand the work. In contrast, after an initial struggle for existence the Impressionists had two dealers vying for their wares: first Paul Durand-Ruel, from 1870, and then the younger Georges Petit, from 1878 onward (Jensen 1994; Fitzgerald 1995).

   
But despite, or perhaps even because of, such lack of interest van Gogh and Gauguin were sustained in their passionate experiments by the myth of genius. Conversely, the lack of interest in their work amongst educated bourgeois collectors can be explained on the basis that the romantic concept of genius had not sufficiently penetrated the bourgeois psyche. By the time of Picasso the situation was entirely different and the romantic myth of genius became tool whereby dealers could “explain” the strangeness of creative products such as Cubism. As soon as it came of age, in the early 20th century, the avant-garde was commodified. The rise of the avant-garde is inextricably intertwined with the maturation of the commerical gallery system: one cannot survive without the other. Only the mystique of genius casts a veil over the underlying commodity status.

It is also the case that the victory of romanticism that was the acceptance of experimental art by the informed and implicitly “sensitive” bourgeois consumer occurred within a cultural context, the turn of the 19th century, in which people were gradually becoming appreciative of radical transformation. As Marx and Engels noted in the Communist Manifesto published in February 1848:

The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionising the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. … Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned …

The turn away from reality in late 19th and early 20th century fine art was also supported by developments in romantic and idealist philosophy. One of the most remarkable legacies of 18th philosophy was the assertion that the “thing-in-itself” which is to say “the real” can never be apprehended directly except through the mediation of fundamentally ideational representation (see the discussion of Schopenhauer below). Thus Kant noted “things are given to us as objects of our senses situated outside us, but of what they may be in themselves we know nothing; we only know their appearances, i.e. the representations that they effect in us when they affect our senses” (Kant 1953: 45)

Kant’s sober, formalist Enlightenment philosophy became quickly transformed via interpretation into quasi-spiritual metaphysics by the idealist and romantic philosophers who followed. Kant’s claim that the thing-in-itself was inaccessible was amplified to the point where the external world almost appears unnecessary–everything the artist needed was within psyche. For example, the idealist philosopher J. G. Fichte (1762-1814) advised “Attend to yourself: turn your attention away from everything that surrounds you and toward your inner life—this is the first demand that philosophy makes of its disciple.” (in Gottlieb 1983: 70) Here we have another reason why there was a turn towards the inner rather than the outer.

Through the course of the 19th century the romantic focus on the mysterious “something” hiding behind a facade of reason became increasingly hyperbolic culminating in Schopenhauer’s concept of Will which informed Nietzschean philosophy. Nietzsche’s writings in turn influenced the surrealist philosopher Georges Bataille whose theory of transgression became fundamental to the formation of poststructuralism in the late twentieth century. Suzanne Guerlac comments:  “So powerful was the impact of Bataille upon the Tel Quel generation that the difference between structuralist and poststructuralist thinking itself was officially characterized in terms of Bataille’s distinction between restrained and general economies.” (Guerlac 1997: 12).

We have therefore, and this is central to the argument presented in this book, a line of evolution of aesthetics can be traced back to romanticism and which fundamentally remains romantic despite attempts to distinguish itself from romanticism. This is an important point to make because it reveals that attempts by fine art to become “socially relevant” are constantly hampered by this romantic heritage which ineluctably reduces all attempts to be “political” into various modes of aestheticism, including so-called “anti-art” and anti-aestheticism.  
From the standpoint of idealist-romantic theory Schopenhauer’s notion of Will is remarkable because it crystallises a romantic notion of evolution that stands in stark contrast to the scientific version published in 1859 in the form of Charles Darwin’s The Origin of the Species. The notion of Will describes the spirit of nature in terms of an anthropocentric metaphor of incessant yearning and striving.

One could compare Schopenhauer’s Will with Kant’s definition of beauty via the beautiful phrase “purposesiveness without purpose”. Will is such a significant notion that it deserves to be considered in some depth without, however, engaging in an exegesis of Schopenhauer’s philosophy. Will is that ineffable something—a meta-linguistic something—that we supposedly all know is there but which eternally eludes us. Schopenhauer was also the philosopher of love. And this significant sociologically because as religion has been totally demolished during the course of the evolution of modernity only love has remained as a common experience that bears any resemblance to spirituality.

Schopenhauer’s point is precisely that the experience of love enables us to become conscious of psychic force of nature within us that is Will. It is quite a beautiful philosophical notion, but Will is sublime as well as beautiful in the sense of being a force of nature that possesses a cruel as well a compassionate side: a facet that Nietzsche famously elaborated, and which Bataille pushed even further via a theory of the sacred as excremental and sadistic.

But to refer to Schopenhauer’s Will as a “force of nature” is misleading. Will is not the kind of force of nature that Newton explored or that any other scientist could possibly explore. This force of nature is available only to an enhanced personal consciousness. Will has a will of its own, it is not subject to the control of the ego and it cannot be objectified, or examined, or analysed in any way. Schopenhauer referred to it as the thing-in-itself that transcended the world as representation.

Representation is meant here in the philosophical sense put forward by rationalist and idealist philosophy which came to the conclusion that what we actually perceive is not the thing-in-itself but a mental representation. Rather than explain this in historical philosophical terms I would prefer to explain the notion in contemporary scientific terms which should be clearer.

When raw sense data enters into the brain from eyes, ears, nose, skin,  proprioceptors (bodily position and movement) and nociceptors (pain), the torrent of real-time data is subjected to extremely sophisticated unconscious information-processing that effectively reconstructs not only the external world but also our sense of own body. The myriad discrete impulses that flow into the brain become organised and synchronised so that when we see our finger reaching out to touch a solid surface a sensation of solidity and resistance is perfectly synchronised with observation of the position of the finger. All of our sensations of our body and the world around us are ultimately a construct of the brain. There is no “innocent eye”, or at least if there is it nothing like the retinal patterns imagined by Impressionism. If our neurological processing was disrupted sufficiently that consciousness could come closer to the raw sensory input it would be “one great blooming, buzzing confusion” as the philosopher-psychologist William James (1842-1910) put it.

Our world is created by complex unconscious inferential (cognitive) processes that form a representation which we perceive in consciousness as mind, self, body and world. This is what Schopenhauer referred to (philosophically not scientifically) when he formulated the concept of “the world as will and representation”. The representation is the Matrix-like virtual reality of conscious perception whereas the Will is the reality that lies beyond that illusion, it is the ultimate essence. From an idealist-romantic point of view the representation created by the brain is a post-Judeo-Christian conception of God. From a scientific point of view it is a machine or, more accurately, a supercomplex arrangement of machines within machines within machines (Minsky 1986; Dennett 1996).

And here we come to the essential mission that romanticism offers to the fine artist in the absence of a social role comparable to that provided by church and courtly patronage: the highest goal of fine art is to represent the unrepresentable.

Schopenhauer’s aesthetics focused on music as the highest of all the arts because it came closest to evoking Will due to the fact that it is both the least representational of the arts and the one that is most immersive: connecting body and mind, obviously we could also include dance. Vision, in contrast, is intrinsically about subject/object distantiation whereas hearing is closer to touch. Light is metaphysical, whereas sound is physical and more able to overcome the illusory distinction between inside and outside (both of which are mental representations). We can see how seriously artists took Schopenhauer’s hierarchy, especially with regard to Wassily Kandinsky’s approach to abstraction as visual music (see Concerning the Spiritual in Art [Ueber das Geistige in der Kunst], 1911).

The next major step after the notion of Will developed by Schopenhauer was Nietzsche’s philosophy where the Schopenhauerian Will was translated into the notions of “art-drive”, sex drive and the “will to power”. Indeed Nietzsche’s emphasis upon sexuality provides a link between the romantic theory of genius and the Freudian unconscious which takes romanticism into the twentieth century via surrealism and, later, poststructuralism.

The Freudian psychoanalysis has not been considered to be scientific for some time. And the reason why is because he does not really treat the unconscious mind as a mechanism; he treats it as if it were a being. A being he referred to as das Es (the it, or Id). The Freudian unconscious serves to reinforce and amplify the romantic theory of genius keeping it alive via the impact of Freud on surrealism and poststructuralist French theory.  Despite the poststructrualist foregrounding of textuality (which implies a “death of the author”) there is also a latent romanticism as is evident when we find a major contemporary philosopher such as Jacques Derrida contemplating issues such as the “nothingness” out of which inspiration arises, Derrida writes:

This universe articulates only that which is in excess of everything, the essential nothing on whose basis everything can appear and be produced within language; and the voice of Maurice Blanchot reminds us, with the insistence of profundity, that this excess is the very possibility of writing and of literary inspiration in general. Only pure absence—not the absence of this or that, but the absence of everything in which all presence is announced—can inspire, in other words, can work, and then make one work. …The pure book, the book itself, … must be the “book about nothing” that Flaubert dreamed of …. Rousset shows us the extent to which spirits as diverse as Delacroix, Balzac, Flaubert, Valery, Proust, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and many others had a sure consciousness of this. A sure and certain consciousness, although in principle not a clear and distinct one, as there is not intuition of a thing involved.To these voices should be added that of Antonin Artaud, who was less roundabout: “I made my debut in literature by writing books in order to say that I could write nothing at all. My thoughts, when I had something to say or write, were that which was furthest from me. I never had any ideas, and two short books, each seventy pages long, are about this profound, inveterate, endemic absence of any idea. These books are I’Ombilic des limbes and le Pese-nerfs.” The consciousness of having something to say as the consciousness of nothing: this is not the poorest, but the most oppressed of consciousnesses. It is the consciousness of nothing, upon which all consciousness of something enriches itself, takes on meaning and (Derrida 1978: 7-8).

Although genius may have shifted into the domains of textuality and “differance” in writings of philosopher’s such as Derrida, this shift has not filtered through into general consciousness, and passages such as the one above are easily read as a paean to genius. The extension of the romantic concept of genius deep into the 20th century is also evident in the fact that a substantive intellectual critique of genius did not occur until Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” (1977 orig. 1968) published just over two centuries after Young’s Conjectures. What is perhaps most significant is that Barthes’ argument against originality was considered extremely radical in the world of fine art in the 1980s: a century after the birth of romantic post-impressionism.

Such is the sway possessed by the romantic concepts of genius and originality. And it is also the case that Barthes’ argument is a pinprick compared with the profound impression made by the romantic myth of genius not only on fine art but on the collective consciousness. Barthes’ analysis points to the intimate relationship between the concept of originality and the idea of genius, in addition, he reveals the mythological power informing the myth of genius when he makes use of term “author-God”—which we can easily paraphrase as the “artist-God”. As long as this myth survives, so will fine art.

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