Cry sorrow, sorrow—yet let good prevail!

So be it! Yet what is good? And who
Is God? How name him, and speak true?
If he accept the name that men
Give him, Zeus I name him then.
I, still perplexed in mind,
For long have searched and weighed
Every hope of comfort or of aid:
Still I can find
No creed to lift this heaviness,
This fear that haunts without excuse—
No name inviting faith, no wistful guess,
Save only—Zeus.

Zeus, whose will has marked for man
The sole way where wisdom lies;
Ordered one eternal plan:
Man must suffer to be wise.¹

THE CHORUS, in Aeschylus' Agamemnon

In a lecture given in 1992 at the École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Castoriadis raises the question of the meaning of art. What is the meaning of the inexplicable moment of pleasure, the je ne sais quoi, we experience when faced with a great work of art? Castoriadis's answer is both illuminating and enigmatic. He suggests that such moments do not disclose a particular meaning, but the being of meaningfulness itself: the 'meaning of meaningfulness and the meaningfulness of meaning.’² In this formulation, artistic representation

has the ability to dethrone the established significations that structure experience and to confront us with the foundational being of meaning that precedes our representational activity. Thus art has a paradoxical reality, for it is both ‘a window into the abyss’ and ‘the creation of a cosmos’; it unveils the abyssal being of meaning and at the very moment it gives form to the abyss.3

The intention of this paper is to identify the philosophical implications of the paradox of art in relation to Castoriadis’s project, giving particular focus to the increasing emphasis he gave to artistic representation toward the end of his philosophical development. I will suggest that his later interest in artistic representation, particularly in his lectures from the mid-1980s and into the 1990s, is not subsidiary to his major works. Rather, in this period Castoriadis identifies the aesthetic as a distinct mode of perception in a way that clarifies and expands his earlier work on the imagination. In particular, this paper will address the extensive role played by the Greek tragedies in the latter years of Castoriadis’s work to develop his understanding of autonomy not simply as self-institution but, paradoxically, as a tradition. Tragedy gives the spectators a critical relation to their tradition, unveiling the chaotic ground of inherited institutions so as to open them for modification. They present antinomic realities in order to disrupt the inherited paths of political reasoning and making epistemic claims, rejecting the possibility of political ‘knowledge’ and revealing that judgment is the only mode of cognition operative in the political sphere, a mode of cognition that is subject to human limitations. Thus for Castoriadis the tragedies have distinct philosophical implications, for they cleave a gap between what Aristotle would later call knowledge (episteme) and practical wisdom (phronesis). From the tragic view, the political project is one of self-limitation whereby each citizen refuses to approach a decision with a pre-determined idea and instead engages in deliberation. Castoriadis returns to the tragedies to retrieve what has been lost in contemporary society: a public institution that orientates its citizens toward the task of self-instituting, a task that does not require us to overcome our limits but to bind ourselves to them.4

4 In recent scholarship Castoriadis’s extensive engagement with art and aesthetics has been largely overlooked. For example, Jeff Klooger’s exposition of Castoriadis’s work in Castoriadis: Psyche, society, autonomy (2009) elucidates the central components of Castoriadis’s corpus while making no reference to art or tragedy. In Castoriadis’ Ontology, (2011), Suzi Adams identifies Castoriadis’s ontological turn with only brief reference to his extensive lectures on the art and thought of ancient Greece. Further, in a recent edition of Critical Horizons (Vol. 13, No. 1, 2012) dedicated to exploring political imaginaries thought the work of Castoriadis, no reference was given to tragedy in order to clarify Castoriadis’s project of autonomous society. While I do not suggest that the neglect of Castoriadis’ work on art undermines these