

Chapter 2

Intersections Between Four Phenomenological Approaches to the Work of Art

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Husserl

At the beginning of my essay, let me recall briefly the teaching of Husserl on the work of art. As a matter of fact the problematic of the founder of the phenomenological movement on the topic is narrowly circumscribed. There is no place within his approach for the questions which in the history of German philosophy had worried thinkers like Schiller, Schelling, Hölderlin, Hegel, and later on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, i.e., issues such as: why do human beings produce works of art?; how does their relation to artworks operate among their activities?; did that relation undergo metamorphoses throughout history? etc. Those questions have no place whatsoever in Husserl's investigation which is focused exclusively on the only basic phenomenon taken by him to deserve examination, i.e., *intentionality*.

Intentionality according to Husserl is a fundamental relationship between two poles whose essence can appear to the phenomenologist: an *intentio* and an *intentum*, or a *noesis* and a *noema*. The Husserlian examination of that relationship claims to avoid explanation and genealogy. Its aim is strictly descriptive, but the description at stake is eidetic for it bears upon essences and not upon facts offered to an empirical observation. In its initial purpose it takes as a primordial axis the *Erkenntnislehre*, the theory of knowledge considered not a psychological investigation but as a *transcendental* one because like Kant's criticism it searches for universal and necessary conditions of possibility.

Precisely because it is concerned with essences instead of facts the phenomenological investigation requires a suspending, the famous *epochè*, of the natural attitude as a whole, which means abstaining from the manifold positing of existence

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carried out by common experience on the basis of everyday perception, or by scientific research whatever its objects and methods. Only such generalized suspending allows what Husserl calls *reduction*, i.e. a return to the phenomenon of intentionality and thus an eidetic survey of all the intentional modalities and of their relations.

That twofold discipline of *epochè* and eidetic reduction is a must in order for transcendental phenomenology to become *pure*. It is in the framework of that theoretical project, but so to speak in its margins, that Husserl wrote a few pages on the artwork and our relation to it: a letter sent in 1907 to the poet von Hofmannstahl and a well-known paragraph of *Ideas I*, a book published in 1913. Let me consider those two texts.

At the time he wrote his letter to the poet, Husserl, then professor at the University of Göttingen, was preparing his famous lessons on *The Idea of Phenomenology*, which were an attempt to characterize the specific features of the phenomenological method which had already been used by him though not yet thematized in the *Logical Investigations*.

We find an allusion to those lessons when Husserl writes to von Hofmannstahl: “Intuiting a *pure* aesthetic artwork implies that the intellect abstains from any existential position; it also excludes any stance by feeling and by will since that stance involves such an existential position. Better: the artwork brings us (almost compels us) to a state of pure aesthetic intuition which excludes those existential stances.”

As a result of that exclusion of the existential positions belonging to the natural attitude, the production as well as the reception of the works of art are comparable with phenomenology. In both cases there is access to a *pure* seeing which supposes abstention from all positing of existence and which focuses exclusively on a phenomenon considered *qua* appearing and not *qua* being. The only difference between those two seeings is that the aesthetic one gives rise to a specific enjoyment whereas the phenomenological one gives rise to the discovery of the “meaning” of the phenomena at stake thereby opening the way to “grasping it in concepts”.

In the second text, the famous paragraph 111 of *Ideas I*, Husserl describes the contemplation of a particular work of art: Dürer’s engraving *The knight, death and the devil*. The title of the chapter in which the paragraph takes place is significant: “Problematic of the noetico-noematic structures” (Husserl 1998, pp. 260–262). The title of the chapter indicates that Husserl deals with the contemplation of artworks in the strict limits of the intentional relationship. Moreover the very title of the paragraph – “The neutrality modification and fantasy” – confirms a continuity with the theme insisted upon in the letter to von Hofmannstahl, i.e., the exclusion of all position of existence. According to Husserl, the intentional *Erlebnis* of which the aesthetic contemplation of Dürer’s engraving is a mere instance is an act of consciousness called *Phantasieren*. From an eidetic point of view the act of fantasy is characterized by a neutralisation of all existential position, thereby differing from the perceiving act which posits in a present moment the existence of the perceived and differing as well from the act of remembering which presentifies again but *qua* past what was previously perceived.

To be sure the act called *Phantasieren* is based (*fundiert*) upon perceiving acts such as being aware of the thing “engraving” hanging on the wall, and the perceptual recognition of the shapes of a horse, a horseman, the devil, and so on, but it becomes specifically aesthetic by overcoming the positions involved in those basing acts in such a way that its essence is to focus exclusively upon a fictional scene grouping entities offered “neither as being nor as not-being nor under any other positing modality”. Of course it is allowed to claim that the aesthetic act is referred to a world but only with the proviso that it is a “purely fictional world” differing essentially from the world intended by natural attitude in perceiving acts, emotional acts, cognitive acts, shaping acts and so on. Indeed in all those acts the existence of the world is posited whereas the world to which the aesthetic act is related is intended as purely fictional “without granting to it the seal of being or not-being.”

In its purism the Husserlian description of the aesthetic act is comparable to Kant’s analytic of the judgment of taste in the third *Critique*. Indeed Husserl somehow retrieves phenomenologically the emphasis put by Kant on the play of imagination along with the disinterestedness of the pure judgment of taste. But it should be noticed that Husserl does not seem to retrieve in any way Kant’s teaching, in his “deduction of the pure aesthetic judgments” about the *sensus communis* taken as the ability to take into consideration the views of the others. Moreover Husserl doesn’t seem to retrieve either the teaching of Kant’s “dialectics” about the relation between the Beautiful and the Good.

On the other hand, since Husserl argues in the rigorous framework of an eidetic investigation carried out so to speak *sub specie aeternitatis*, there is no trace in the analysis I have recalled of any attention paid to the research of historians about the links between Dürer and his predecessors or his contemporaries, or about the impact of the famous engraving upon the development of his art.

Heidegger

Against the backdrop of those preliminary remarks I am now in a position to consider advisedly the approach of the work of art by the second founder of the phenomenological movement, Martin Heidegger. His explicit interrogation on the topic emerged only during the thirties, after the publication of his masterpiece *Being and Time*. In that interrogation the notion of *world* plays a decisive role that I would like to elucidate in order to clarify the intersection I am dealing with. But since Heidegger’s insistence on that notion in his reflection on art depends on what he had expounded in *Being and Time*, a writing in which *being-in-the-world* is a central theme, I must recall briefly its problematic which claims to be phenomenological, hence to implement in some way the method discovered by Husserl to whom the book was dedicated.

Heidegger himself in a lecture course on *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* given in Marburg a few months after the publication of the *opus magnum* explains

his own concept of the phenomenological method in the following way: “*For Husserl* the phenomenological reduction which he worked out for the first time expressly in the *Ideas Toward a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (1913), is the method of leading phenomenological vision from the natural attitude of the human being whose life is involved in the world of things and persons back to the transcendental life of consciousness and its noetic-noematic experiences, in which objects are constituted as correlates of consciousness. *For us* phenomenological reduction means leading phenomenological vision back from the apprehension of a being, whatever may be the character of that apprehension, to the understanding of the Being of this being (projecting upon the way it is unconcealed)” (1988, p. 21).

Heidegger’s comparison between him and Husserl is fair as far as methodology is concerned but there is a striking difference between the master and the pupil. The Husserlian reduction excludes all position of Being and its primary aim is not ontological but gnoseological, whereas the Heideggerian reduction is focused on the *Seinsfrage* and its aim is a fundamental ontology. As a result the field to be described is no longer *Bewusstsein* but *Dasein*, i.e., the being for whom to be is a question. The metamorphosis entails that the phenomenological problematic does no longer operate *sub specie aeternitatis* in a realm of pure quiddities. It is deliberately historical for several reasons.

Indeed Heidegger insists that the word *Dasein* does not designate an omnitemporal generality but somebody who *hic et nunc* replies to the question *Who?* Moreover the analytic of the individualized way of Being of the *Dasein* discloses constitutive factors called *existentialia*, such as understanding, discourse, disposition, which operate on two opposite levels: on the one hand, an everyday concern wherein the *Dasein* pays attention to beings other than itself and publicly available to everybody and nobody in particular, to *das Man*, the They; on the other hand the level of care in which the *Dasein* discovers itself thrown in Being among other beings, things and persons, and confronted to the task of taking up its own existence as a project which is its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. Care is essentially finite, because the end of *Dasein*, its own death, determines its projective character. It is also essentially temporal, but the temporality involved is not an infinite stream but rather the ek-static openness of a Self to a finite future towards which it projects itself by retrieving its own past. Compared to the radical Selfhood of care, everyday concern is in a position of fall. Care is authentic, concern is inauthentic.

Finally, the historical character of fundamental ontology stands out in the introduction by Heidegger of a new component of the phenomenological method: deconstruction. The point in deconstruction is to reappropriate in the texts of the entire history of philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche what corresponds to the understanding of Being by *Dasein* and to reject by the same token what blocks or covers up that understanding.

Such deconstruction, which repeatedly favours Greek philosophy, was already carried out by Heidegger in his Marburg teaching before the publication of *Being and Time*. As I have tried to demonstrate in several writings since my book on

Heidegger's Project of Fundamental Ontology, that early teaching which dealt primordially with Greek philosophical texts shows that the antithesis between inauthentic concern for an everyday surrounding world and authentic care for a Self-world is rooted first of all in Heidegger's reappropriation with respect to Dasein of Plato's parable of the cave in which a sharp distinction is made between the common views of the *polloi*, the Many, focused on copies or semblances, and the solitary contemplation of truth by the wise man. It is also rooted in an existential reappropriation upon that Platonist backdrop of the distinction made by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* between several levels of excellence, and more precisely the distinction between the productive comportment called *poiësis*, enlightened by a peculiar know-how called *technè* and the comportment called *praxis* which is the conduct of one's own life in the light of a discernment called *phronësis*. Heidegger reappropriated as well with respect to the human Dasein the Aristotelian analysis of the superiority of the solitary *sophia* pursued by the philosopher upon all type of *epistèmè*. What is the link between all of this and the interrogation of the artwork?

There is almost nothing on the issue in *Being and Time* and in the Marburg lecture courses. Theodore Kisiel (1995) does not even mention the word "art" in the Index of subject matter of his careful analysis of *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time*. Nevertheless it turns out that it is in the wake of fundamental ontology that Heidegger's reflection on the work of art emerged. On close inspection indeed it is possible to realize that the key notions of that reflection appear for the first time expressly in a lecture course given by Heidegger in Freiburg in 1931–1932 and dealing with *The Essence of Truth* on the basis of a reappropriation of Plato's parable of the cave, hence in continuity with a major topic of the Marburg teaching.

The first key notion to be found in that lecture course is the notion of *origin* which is going to take center stage in the essays on the work of art. According to the lecture course freedom means "understanding Being as such". That freedom obtains *Ursprünglichkeit* thanks to "the *decisiveness* (*Entschiedenheit*) of the tie to beings as they are and to the sight of the Being of those beings as it is, what understands itself only as Dasein, moved back in the isolation and thrownness of its historical provenance and future" (Heidegger 1997, p. 60).

The second key notion is the explicit reformulation in existential terms of the Platonic *philosopher-king*, a reformulation which 2 years later will be at the core of the sadly famous Rectoral Address of 1933 on *The Self-Assertion of the German University* (Heidegger 1985).

The third notion concerns the ontological status of *great art*. Heidegger claims that when art is great, as it was the case in Greece, for example in the "great poetry" of Sophocles, it has the capacity to manifest "the internal power of the human understanding of Being, the sight of light". He warns that in order to grasp this, one has to stop "considering the problem of art as a problem of aesthetics" because neither aesthetic enjoyment nor the scholarship of art historians are adjusted to that ontological power (1997, pp. 63–64).

Those three notions establish the parameters of Heidegger's interrogation on the origin of the work of art which was articulated and developed in the murky context of the triumph of National-socialism and which took advantage of that situation to

transfer to the Dasein of the German people the question Who? previously focused on individuals, thereby granting to that broad Dasein the decisiveness and resoluteness previously limited to the individual potentiality-for-Being.

This is what shines forth right away in the first elaboration of that interrogation where Heidegger writes at the very beginning that for him there is “only one thing which matters”: “Namely, in spite of what has been thought and stated for a long time to define the essence of art, to contribute to the preparation of a transformed fundamental position of our Dasein toward art” (1989, p. 5). The possessive adjective used by Heidegger – “our Dasein” – is significant of the broadening of his problematic to the ontological potentiality of a people. But because the decisiveness pervading the text the broadening preserves the antithesis inauthenticity-authenticity which was structuring the existential analytic. That antithesis motivates, for reasons of ontological blindness and fallenness in public and superficial concerns, Heidegger’s disdain for aesthetics and for the work of the art historians. The same antithesis explains why he elevates Greek art to the rank of a paradigm by contrast to the arts created afterwards. He insists accordingly on the ontological power of the basic features of the Greek work of art while detecting an ontological deficiency in what he takes to be the main feature of the western artworks after the collapse of Ancient Greece.

According to Heidegger who argues in ontological terms the Greek artwork managed to combine the setting-up (*Aufstellung*) of a world and the setting forth (*Herstellung*) of an earth. By contrast the posthellenic works of art until nowadays are limited to a mere representation (*Darstellung*). Let me consider the contrast without going into details as I did in my book (Taminioux 2005).

Heidegger claims that the Greek temple around a divine statue was setting up a world as an unfamiliar realm which not only was “more being than any of the tangible present at hand things among which we believe ourselves to be at home in everyday life” but which also had a function of “rejection of the usual presence at hand” (1989, p. 9). That setting up is described by the philosopher, obviously inspired by the chapter on “The Religion of Art” in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a “consecration” which “opens up the holy as holy” (Heidegger 1989, p. 9). Thanks to that theophanic power the world gets a verbal status: it is a “guiding escort” which overcomes from above the familiar character of our everyday surroundings.

The second feature of the Greek artwork, the setting forth of an earth, is no less ontological. The word “earth” used by Heidegger does not designate a stock of raw materials waiting for an elaboration in which their crudeness would vanish; instead of designating a matter waiting for a form, it designates “the inexhaustible fullness” of “a ground which because essentially and always self-sealing off, is an abyss” (Heidegger 1989, p. 11).

Since the world opened up by the artwork is an active disclosure whereas the earth simultaneously set forth preserves its secret, great art is the advent of a “contest” (*Streit*) between an opening and a closing. One could be tempted to consider such a contest as an enigma calling for a persistent meditation, but Heidegger makes clear that for him the resolute selfhood of a Dasein prevails

upon attention to an enigma. Indeed he writes: “Towering up in a world and going back into the earth, the temple opens the There (*Da*) in which a people comes to its own – i.e. comes to the ordaining power of its God”. And the language he uses evokes a conquest: “In the work the There gets won” (1989, p. 12). The swaggering tonality is confirmed by the introduction in the same context of a call to a “decision” (*Entscheidung*): “With this essential determination of the work-being of the work a position is won which makes a decision possible about the widespread and common view of the artwork as *representation of something*” (Heidegger 1989, p. 12).

The rule of the view of art as representation includes the entire history of art in the western world after Greece. In all the stages of that long history the work of art was meant to be the allegorical exhibition, in visible appearances, of a reality which is not to be found in them, either a supersensible reality in the Christian era, or a natural reality visible elsewhere in the modern age. Heidegger claims that during that long rule of representation the fine arts lost the authentic ontological function they had in Greece. In Greece, he says, “the artwork does not represent anything – and this for the sole and simple reason that it has nothing that it should represent” (1989, p. 13) On the contrary, “it wins for the first time the open, the clearing, in whose light being as such encounters us as on the first day or – if become everyday-like – metamorphosed” When Heidegger claims that the traditional privilege of representation depends on a traditional interpretation of Plato’s distinction between the model and the copy it is easy to realize that his criticism of *Darstellung* presupposes his own criticism of the traditional notion of truth as *adaequatio* on behalf of truth as *alètheia*. Indeed what is at stake for him in the contest between world and earth is precisely his own notion of truth as *alètheia*, that is, as a tension between concealment and unconcealment. That tension is meant when he writes that “the essence of art is the setting to work of truth” (1989, p. 16). And in that tension the *Dasein* is involved.

Three quotes suffice to show that the text I am dealing with is in continuity with the previous analytic of *Dasein* and its emphasis on the disclosing project by which authenticity is conquered against the fallenness of everydayness.

First quote. Heidegger writes: “If truth first comes to work with the artwork and in it and is not present at hand anywhere beforehand, then it must become.(. . .) Truth is never read off from what is already present at hand. On the contrary, the openness of what is occurs by being projected. . .” (1989, p. 17) In other words there is no truth without project. And of course there is no project without *Dasein*.

The second quote is focused on the strictly singular historicity of the one who decides to take upon himself to be the “There” of the ontological openness. Heidegger writes the following on the subject: “Who takes upon himself to be this ‘There’? Answer: Man (. . .) if he stands towards Being (*Seyn*) as such. This way of being the There we call history. When man is the There, i.e. is historical, he becomes a people”. And Heidegger insists that “this There itself is never something universal – rather it is at each time this one and something singular” (1989, pp. 19–20).

The third quote is the very conclusion of the essay: “In the questioning about art what is at stake is this decision: Is art essential to us? Is it an origin (*Ursprung*) and

therefore a jump forward (*Vor-sprung*) in our history? A start or only still a supplement that gets brought along as the ‘expression’ of something present at hand and pursued further on for ornamentation and amusement, for relaxation and excitement? Are we in the nearness of the essence of art as origin or are we not? (...) For clarity over who we are and who we are not is already the decisive jump (*Sprung*) into the nearness of the origin. Such nearness alone guarantees a truly grounded historical Dasein as authentic on this earth” (1989, p. 22).

It is obvious that those three signs of ontological decisionism not only prolong with reference to the singular Dasein of the German people the existential analytic of *Being and Time* but also reject the teaching of Husserl who claimed that the work of art demands a purely aesthetic attitude excluding all ontological position and consequently has nothing to do with the project of making history in the monumental sense of an ontological move. Moreover there is no doubt that the engraving of Dürer relished by Husserl is implicitly included among the targets of Heidegger’s polemic against representation.

Arendt

I am now able to consider the approach to the artwork by two thinkers who repeatedly claimed to have their philosophical roots in the legacy of the masters of the phenomenological movement, namely Arendt and Levinas.

I have tried to show in several essays since my book *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker* that Arendt’s analysis of active life and of the life of the mind is to a large extent a reply to the biases and mistakes entailed in the work of Heidegger, her first teacher, by a Platonist celebration of the *bios theōrētikos*.

Hannah Arendt did not hesitate to introduce herself as a phenomenologist insofar as the main issue of her analyses was an unprejudiced description of phenomena. She also claimed to practice a sort of deconstruction but a peculiar one which instead of deriving from the perspectives of *contemplative life* was targeting all its prejudices.

I intend to underscore the divergence between her and Heidegger by paying attention to the reflections on the work of art contained in *The Human Condition*, a book on active life about which she wrote to Heidegger in May 1954 that it owed much to his teaching. But of course this acknowledgment of an intellectual debt does not all mean that she considered herself to be a disciple of the German thinker.

Indeed, already in the first chapter of her book Arendt claims that Plato when he decided, after the trial of Socrates, to grant to the solitary pursuit of contemplative life an “enormous superiority (...) over action of any kind” (Arendt 1998, p. 14), has founded a tradition which “has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself” (Arendt 1998, p. 17) and obliterated the previous excellence of the sharing of words and deeds which pervaded the *bios politikos* of the democratic city.

I have recalled that in Heidegger's fundamental ontology the reappropriation of Plato's celebration of the *bios theorêtikos* entailed an antithesis between everydayness and authenticity with the result that the philosopher alone was truly competent in political matters. As I said that antithesis was maintained in the interrogation on the work of art.

There is of course no avail to search for traces of such an antithesis in Arendt's description of active life, and in her reflections on art in the framework of that description. At the very beginning of the text I have commented, Heidegger writes: "To the public the only relation of the artwork is to destroy it. And the greatness of an artwork is measured by this destructive power" (1989, p. 8) By contrast Arendt in her first allusion to the artwork, in the second chapter of her book, underlines its public character. In her terminology the word "public" refers to an "appearing" which is not a semblance but a reality constituted by "being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves". The work of art is public in so far as the artist has the ability to transfigure in a reality perceived by many people a "private" and solitary experience which without that transfiguration would lead a shadowy existence (1998, p. 50).

But the word "public" in her terminology also designates a second phenomenon, namely "the world itself, insofar as it is common to all of us and distinguished from our privately owned place in it" (1998, p. 52). The phenomenon of the world so understood obviously escapes the Heideggerian antithesis between inauthentic concern with utensils and authentic care. Indeed Arendt insists that in her view the world "is related to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit it", and consequently that "to live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common as a table is located between those who have it in common". The comparison is highly significant, it means that "the world, like every in-between relates and separates men at the same time" and thus "prevents our falling over each other so to speak" (1998, p. 52).

By claiming that the world is a set of artifacts which relates *and* separates those who live in it, Arendt manifests a clear divergence from the teaching of *Being and Time* which considers the surrounding set of artifacts as the realm of the *They* wherein human beings fall over each other, and which opposes to the sense of security offered by that dwelling place the *Unheimlichkeit*, the uncanny essence of the authentic being-in-the-world, i.e., of care understood as strictly singular and separated.

It is to be noticed that Arendt argues the way she does because unlike Heidegger her description is not focused on the pursuit of a solitary contemplation but on the articulations of active life. Indeed, by relating and separating at the same time those who live in it, the world as a public and common habitat turns out to be favourable to an activity which is higher than the work necessary for the fabrication of artifacts. That higher activity called "action" by Arendt is what Aristotle called *praxis*, distinguished by him from *poiësis*, fabrication. In Arendt's description of active life there are three levels of activity: the activity of labour which is conditioned by life, the activity of work conditioned by a world, and the activity of action

conditioned by plurality, i.e., in her language, by the fact that human beings are all alike but all different. According to her description action is an ever renewed sharing of words and deeds, interlocution and interaction, between individuals who, because they are all alike, are able to understand one another, but who, because they are all different, must show who they are by taking initiatives in words and deeds.

In the context of plurality any single human being is considered able to reply on his own to the question ‘Who?’ which is a central question for Arendt as it was for Heidegger, with the basic difference that for her the question is raised by the others whereas for him question and answer occur in the circle of Selfhood since the Dasein confronts authentically who he is in his unique ontological project by replying alone to a call emanating from himself.

The divergence becomes blatant if we compare the two thinkers in their analysis of the relation between artwork and world.

In Heidegger’s analysis the relation is ruled by the antithesis inauthentic everydayness and authentic project. The authentic work of art has the ontological character of an origin, a leap forward missing in ordinary artifacts, and thanks to that leap the singular Dasein of a unique people projects itself resolutely towards its future in a contest between Being and Nothingness.

By contrast Arendt underlines a continuity between artifacts and artworks. In her description the products of the activity of labour are doomed to disappear in human consumption whereas the artifacts produced by the activity of work do not vanish in the devouring cycle of biological life; on the contrary they introduce a tangibility and permanence which are essential to the constitution of the world as a habitat. The works of art increase and protect that lasting tangibility. She writes: “The man-made world of things, the human artifice erected by *homo faber*, becomes a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions, only inasmuch as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use (. . .) If the *animal laborans* needs the help of *homo faber* to ease his labor and remove his pain, and if mortals need his help to erect a home on earth, acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all” (Arendt 1998, p. 173).

Needless to insist on the divergence between Arendt and her former teacher. It is significant that Arendt associates the artworks and the narratives written by historiographers whereas Heidegger relegates those narratives in a superficial *Kunstbetrieb*, art-management blind by definition to the ontological process of monumental history. No less significant is the fact that when Arendt deals with poetry in the same context she recalls that the Greeks held remembrance, *Mnèmosynè*, for the mother of the muses (cf. 1998, pp. 169–170) whereas Heidegger the other way round claimed that the real power of poetry is to open ontologically the future of a people.

Moreover when Arendt criticizes contemporary culture she does not argue like Heidegger in ontological terms, and she does not depreciate the contemporary

artists. Her only point is to warn that the stabilizing function of art is endangered if the triumph of *animal laborans* in mass-society reduces art to sheer entertainment.

Levinas

What about the artwork in Levinas's thought? In 1987 he wrote the following in his preface to the German translation of *Totality and Infinity*: "This book which wants and feels itself of phenomenological inspiration proceeds from a long familiarity with Husserl's texts and from a ceaseless attentiveness to *Sein und Zeit*" (Levinas 2002).

Indeed the debate with both Husserl and Heidegger is a constant feature in Levinas's writings. I would like to show how the debate goes on in the few pages where Levinas deals with the work of art. They are to be found in the first book he published after World war II, *From Existence and existants* (1947), and in an article which came out 1 year later in *Les Temps Modernes*: "Reality and its shadow".

In the foreword to the book of 1947 Levinas warns that his essay anticipates further and broader investigations "devoted to the problem of the Good, to Time and to the Relation with the Other as a movement toward the Good" About those further investigations he writes: "The Platonist formula which sets the Good beyond Being is the most general and emptiest indication orienting them" (2001, p. xxvii).

Right away the debate with Heidegger looms up in those words. Indeed Heidegger in the wake of *Being and Time* had also reappropriated Plato's formula (*to agathon epekeina tès ousias*) but without any ethical connotation for he focused its meaning upon the ontological Selfhood of the Dasein, writing in *Vom Wesen des Grundes*: "The essence of the *agathon* lies in the power of oneself as *hou eneka*" (Heidegger 1973, p. 41). In other words Plato's formula in Heidegger's retrieval of it simply means that the Dasein exists for its own sake. There is a deliberate objection to Heidegger when Levinas writes: "the movement which leads an existent toward the Good is not a transcendence by which the existent raises itself up to a higher existence, but a departure from Being and from the categories which describe it: an 'ex-cendence'" (2001, p. xxvii) In other words Levinas claims that ontology cannot be fundamental since it reduces the Good to Being, thereby obliterating the primacy of ethics. He also rejects implicitly by the same token the Heideggerian antithesis between the inauthenticity of everyday concern and the authenticity of care focused upon Dasein's ownmost existence. At any rate it is significant in this regard that when Levinas describes further on in his book our everyday comportment he underscores what he calls its "sincerity". He writes forcefully: "Our existence in the world, with its desires and everyday agitation, is then not an immense fraud, a fall into inauthenticity, an evasion from our deepest destiny" (2001, p. 44).

However, it would be wrong to infer from the words I just quoted that Levinas discards as null and void all interest in ontology. On the one hand, he expresses what he calls a "profound need to leave the climate" (2001, p. 4) of Heidegger's thought, but on the other hand, he insists that he does not want to return to a

“pre-heideggerian” philosophy and he acknowledges his debt when he writes: “At the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being” (2001, p. 4). By acknowledging that his debt concerns ontology, Levinas suggests that the distinction Being-beings deserves serious consideration. But by expressing his reservation he suggests by the same token that he does not endorse the meaning given to the distinction by Heidegger.

The divergence shines out when Levinas indicates that the purpose of his book is “to approach the idea of Being in general in its impersonality so as to then be able to analyse the notion of the present and of position, in which a being, a subject, an existent, arises in impersonal Being through a hypostasis” (2001, p. 3) All the words of that quote denote a sharp difference.

Whereas Heidegger defines the relationship with Being in terms of ownmost selfhood, Levinas affirms the neutral and impersonal character of Being; whereas the former insists on project, the latter argues in terms of a position; on one side the future prevails, on the other side the emphasis is put on the present; on the one hand the key word is *ek-stasis*, on the other hand it is *hypostasis*.

The divergence is confirmed at the outset of the first chapter of the book when Levinas writes, in a clear opposition to Heidegger: “Existence is not synonymous with the relationship with a world; it is antecedent to the world. In the situation of an end of the world the primary relationship which binds us to Being becomes palpable” (2001, p. 8). Given that Being is primarily anonymous and impersonal, given that Being is first of all the sheer fact that “*there is*”, the primary relationship with Being occurs beneath intentionality and escapes all decision or “struggle for a future” (2001, p. 10). It is an event we can approach by paying attention to phenomena such as weariness and indolence which obviously are neither lived experiences ruled by an intention of consciousness nor modalities of a projective comportment.

When he deals with those phenomena Levinas shows the limits of both the Husserlian and the Heideggerian descriptions. For instance he obviously points out the flaws of Heidegger’s existential analytic when he claims that weariness is a “refusal to exist” (2001, p. 12) and that indolence is felt as “an impossibility of beginning” (2001, p. 13 & 15), a “holding back from the future” (2001, p. 17), a condemnation to the present which indicates that “the future, a virginal instant, is impossible in a solitary subject” (2001, p. 17).

The substitution for the Heideggerian *ek-stasis* of the notion of *hypostasis* means that for Levinas our primary relation with Being consists in staying under the burden of an anonymous “there is.” Such is the background of Levinas’s reflections on the work of art.

Those reflections are developed in a chapter whose title is significant of the divergence I am underlining: “Existence without world”. The title of the section in which those reflections take place – “exoticism” – is no less significant for exoticism here means that the work of art does not belong to the world. About that artistic exoticism Levinas writes: “We can in our relation with the world tear ourselves away from it. Things refer to an inside, as parts of the given world,

objects of knowledge or objects of use, caught up in the system of practice wherein their alterity hardly emerges. Art makes them stand out from the world, extracts them from this belongingness to a subject” (2001, p. 45).

Given the comparative character of my presentation I could say that the guideline of Levinas’s remarks on the exoticism of the work of art is an ontological radicalisation of aesthetics. What does that mean? How does that radicalisation concern Levinas’s relation to his two masters in phenomenology, Husserl and Heidegger?

The answer is provided by a precise analysis of the exoticism he attributes to the work of art. The point is this: the work of art subjugates the spectator or listener under a set of impressions whose impact is such that what is seen or heard is an alterity so strong that it escapes the subject-object relationship which pervades our theoretical or practical dealings with the world.

In other words, the disinterestedness underscored by Kant in his analysis of taste is so to speak maximized by Levinas in such a way that our relation to the artwork becomes a state in which all power of a subject upon a specific object disappears. In our dealings with the world the sense impressions we receive are immediately inserted in an objectifying process that is perception: we perceive things which have specific characteristics and persons responding to a name. By contrast, according to Levinas, “the movement of art consists in leaving perception to rehabilitate sensation”; that movement “instead of arriving at the object gets lost in the sensation itself”, a sensation “detaching the quality from this object reference” (2001, p. 47). As a result sensation returns to “the impersonality of an *element*” (2001, p. 47).

The Levinassian description of that return to sensation is in no way psychological, it is ontological: indeed the standing out of the impersonal element of sensation is an event, the sheerly factual emergence of the “There is” in its “essential anonymity” (2001, p. 53).

In that context Levinas comes to terms either expressly or implicitly with his two masters in phenomenology. He explicitly regrets that Eugen Fink, in agreement with Husserl about this, considers what is depicted by a painting to be a “neutralised and suspended world” instead of acknowledging that it is something which has lost its world-quality, “a reality without world” (2001, pp. 48–49).

As far as Heidegger is concerned, it is obvious that the Levinassian notion of exoticism is the opposite of the Heideggerian notion of a setting up of a world by the work of art. The same opposition is obvious in the rehabilitation of *aisthèsis* which was treated as a superficial factor in Heidegger’s polemic against aesthetics.

The contrast shines forth when, considering the last version of Heidegger’s interrogation on *The Origin of the Work of Art*, a version published after World War II, we compare what he was writing about a modern painting – Van Gogh’s peasant shoes – with Levinas’s remarks on the paintings of his time (abstraction, matterism, surrealism etc.). When Heidegger describes Van Gogh’s painting he does not pay any attention whatsoever to colours, lines, rhythm and shapes, his only point is to find in the painting an illustration of what he takes to be a setting of truth into work, namely the disclosure of the essence of a tool, *reliability* defined a reciprocity between world and earth for a peasant woman.

By contrast, what Levinas salutes in modern painting is the effort to introduce by the mere interplay of lines and colours an elementary spectacle in which the coherence of a world disappears and is replaced by the exhibition of the alterity of the “There is”.

I conclude by pointing out in the article of 1948 on “Reality and its shadow” (Levinas 1987) a confirmation of the contrast I wanted to underscore.

In an allusion to Greek sculpture Levinas observes that the statue of the pagan God displays the stupidity of an idol and manifests an existence which is a mere shadow of reality for it accomplishes the paradox of a petrified “instant lasting without a future” whereas Heidegger conversely was claiming that the statue was more real than anything else and had the power to open a future.

Moreover, instead of opposing like Heidegger one art, the Greek, to the arts of other cultures in which allegory supposedly prevails, Levinas detects in the statues of the Greek gods, the clearest proof of the allegorical nature of all art. Which means that all work of art whatever its cultural origin manifests that all reality is accompanied by its shadow, the shadow of the “There is” in which it gets petrified unless an ethical opening to the others allows a liberation from that petrification.

Further on in the same article Levinas writes forcefully: “The fact that mankind could give to itself an art reveals in time the uncertainty of its continuation.” Since he mentions in that context the teaching of Descartes about the discontinuity of duration, there is no doubt that the quote I just made has to be connected with the conclusion of the article where Levinas claims that without a relation to the others there would be no future, no opening of time. This is of course an anticipation of the ethical developments carried out later in *Totality and Infinity*. But the insistence on the link between time and the other implies a strong objection to Heidegger for whom the opening of time depends exclusively on the Self.

Finally the article of 1948 already suggests that it is the ethical relation to the others, a relation underrated by Heidegger, which introduces above and beyond the mere repetition of petrified instants a diachrony of dialogues, of initiatives, and of responsible choices which justifies the work of the historians of art, disdained by Heidegger, but which forbids to grant to any work a theophanic power.

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