

IMAGES AND SHADOWS: LEVINAS AND THE AMBIGUITY OF THE AESTHETIC

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Levinas's comments on art appear contradictory. On the one hand, he criticizes art as being disengaged from ethical concerns and constituting a possibility of moral evasion; on the other hand, he engages quite closely and in a supportive fashion with some art, such as Paul Celan's poetry. Interpreters commonly argue that only one of Levinas's conceptions of art, either the affirmative or the negative, represents his true attitude towards art. In this article the author seeks to make both statements compatible with each other and thus relevant to Levinas's conception of art. She focuses on his essay 'Reality and Its Shadow', where art is diagnosed as an ambiguous phenomenon. She argues that full understanding of the ambiguity of art demands that Levinas's different statements about art are considered together; only thus can the complete picture of the ambiguity emerge. Furthermore, it turns out that the very same feature which makes art open to misunderstanding – namely, its precarious materiality – also allows an artwork to sustain itself and to be revived. Art reveals a shadow, withdrawal, or resistance that belongs to reality itself.

Bilder und Schatten: Levinas und die Ambiguität des Ästhetischen

Levinas' Bemerkungen zur Kunst scheinen widersprüchlich: einerseits kritisiert er die Kunst für ihr Losgelöstsein von ethischen Belangen und dafür, dass sie eine Möglichkeit schafft, dem Moralischen auszuweichen; doch setzt er sich gleichzeitig intensiv und befürwortend mit einigen Kunstwerken auseinander, so zum Beispiel mit der Dichtung Paul Celans. Interpretieren meinen in der Regel, dass nur eine von Levinas' Konzeptionen von Kunst – die befürwortende oder die negative – seine wahre Haltung zu Kunst repräsentiert. In diesem Artikel versucht die Autorin, diese beiden Positionen zu vereinbaren und so als für Levinas' Konzeption von Kunst relevant zu interpretieren. Sie stellt den Essay „La réalité et son ombre“ (engl. Reality and Its Shadow) in den Mittelpunkt, in dem Levinas die Diagnose stellt, Kunst sei ein zweideutiges Phänomen. Die Autorin argumentiert, dass ein vollständiges Verständnis dieser Zweideutigkeit von Kunst ein Zusammen-Lesen von Levinas' verschiedenen Aussagen zur Kunst erfordert; nur so zeige sich das Gesamtbild der Ambiguität. Außerdem stellt sich heraus, dass es die gleichen Charakteristika sind, welche die Kunst einerseits für Missverständnisse öffnen – nennen wir vielleicht die prekäre Materialität von Kunst – und andererseits dem Kunstwerk erlauben, sich zu erhalten und belebt zu werden. Kunst enthüllt einen Schatten, Entzug oder Widerstand, der wesentlich zur Wirklichkeit selbst gehört.

'The poem goes toward the other,' Levinas states in his essay on Paul Celan.¹ And as it goes towards the other, it proves Heidegger's philosophy of art wrong, so Levinas seems to claim; it shows that speech does not emerge from an

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Paul Celan: From Being to the Other', in idem, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 41. Hereafter: PC.

impersonal language, but reaches across from me to the other, like a handshake. When Celan states that he 'cannot see any basic difference between a poem and a handshake',² Levinas discerns in this statement a gesture which he describes as the 'entrance of the beggar into the "house of being"' (PC, 40). Rather than leading us, with Heidegger, into language as the 'house of being', the poem would lead us beyond being, to an 'otherwise than being' (PC, 46).

To be sure, the situation is more complex. Not only is Levinas's criticism of Heidegger always puzzling, leaving us to wonder whether Levinas is intentionally misreading some of Heidegger's statements (when he, at the same time, appears to have a profound understanding of Heidegger). But even more mystifying are Levinas's comments on art. Levinas criticizes art and artworks in several texts, such as *Totality and Infinity*³ and the essay, 'Reality and Its Shadow'.⁴ Art lacks the immediacy of the ethical encounter with the Other. By way of its sensuous character, it diverts us from our ethical responsibility, and by way of its multiple meanings and layers it provides a possibility for evasion. At the same time, there are several essays in the collection *Proper Names* where Levinas turns not only to Celan, but also to Proust and other authors, detecting a proximity to his own thought. Even with respect to visual art, Levinas singles out two artists, the abstract painter Jean Atlan and the sculptor Sacha Sosno, whom he takes to be part of an endeavour akin to his ethical philosophy.⁵ Yet it is too much to presume that only those few and no other artists would create artworks free from the problematic aspects of art, which will be discussed below.

Interpreters thus face the difficult task of giving more weight either to Levinas's criticism of art or to his positive interpretation of art, although most authors who discuss art in Levinas exhibit a tendency to focus on his positive remarks. They emphasize his discussion of poetry in *Proper Names* and elsewhere to conclude, with the help of some affirmative statements from other texts, that Levinas appreciates the significance of art in general.⁶ Yet Levinas's critique

² Cited by Levinas in PC, 40.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). Hereafter: *TI*.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', in idem, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 1–13. Hereafter: RS.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Jean Atlan et la tension de l'art', in *Cahier de l'Herne: Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Catherine Chalié and Miguel Abensour (Paris: Herne, 1991), 509–10; and idem, 'On Obliteration: Discussing Sacha Sosno', trans. R. Cohen, *Art & Text* 33 (1989): 30–41.

⁶ For example, Edith Wyschograd, 'The Art in Ethics: Aesthetics, Objectivity, and Alterity in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas', in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak

of visual art, of works of art, and of the ethical irresponsibility of art is so vehement that it cannot be neglected or denied. Silvia Benso's article on art in Plato and Levinas appears in many ways sympathetic to the reading that I would like to propose here.⁷ But Benso does not explore the problematic side of art in detail, especially where the precarious status of works is concerned.

The diagnosis of an ambiguity inherent in art which Levinas proposes explicitly in his essay 'Reality and Its Shadow' has the advantage that it allows us to acknowledge both sides of Levinas's conception of art rather than declaring one of them to be insignificant. If there is an essential ambiguity at the core of art, Levinas's different statements about art need to be considered together because only in this way does the full picture of this ambiguity emerge. It will turn out that the very same features which make art open to misunderstanding and self-enclosure sustain the artwork and allow it to be revived and interrupted by criticism. Levinas's presentation is thus not 'self-contradictory',⁸ but reveals instead the complex nature of art. Furthermore, the diagnosis of ambiguity extends throughout Levinas's work such that it cannot be claimed that Levinas 'moves from disapproval to intimate appreciation' of art.⁹ Despite some shifts and transformations, Levinas's basic position concerning the ambiguous character of art stays in place from 'Reality and Its Shadow' to *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*.¹⁰

Overall, it is not my intention in this article to examine Levinas's treatment of specific writers and artists, but to explore his general reflections on art and the nature of the artwork. To my mind, it is difficult to reach a coherent conclusion when countering Levinas's scepticism about art with specific examples which he excludes from the criticism.¹¹ My article is also concerned with the philosophical rather than religious aspects of Levinas's thoughts on

(London: Routledge, 1995), 137–50; Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999); Gerald Bruns, 'The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas' Writings', in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 206–33.

⁷ Benso comes to conclude that 'at the core of art is a fundamental ambiguity' which shines forth in the difference between 'aesthetics' and the 'aesth-ethic'. Silvia Benso, 'Aesth-ethic: Plato, Levinas, and Art', *Epoche* 13 (2008): 163–83.

⁸ Robert Eaglestone diagnoses a 'self-contradictory antipathy to art' in Levinas; see his *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 176.

⁹ This is the summary which Seán Hand provides at the end of his otherwise very helpful chapter on art in Levinas: *Emmanuel Levinas* (London: Routledge, 2009), 78.

¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981, orig. pub. 1974). Hereafter: *OB*.

¹¹ As it is done, for example, in Daniel Charles, 'Éthique et esthétique dans la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas', *Noesis*, no. 3 (2000), <http://noesis.revues.org/index12.html>.

art. The religious aspects of art and especially the question of image prohibition have been investigated elsewhere.¹² Such a distinction between philosophy and religion seems justified also on the basis of Levinas's own separation of his philosophical from his religious, Talmudic writings.

I. THE SHADOW OF REALITY

In 1948, Levinas published the essay 'La réalité et son ombre' in *Les Temps modernes*.¹³ In this text, Levinas develops his theory of art more explicitly and in more detail than in his main works. Even though we are dealing with an early text, his principal theses here remain valid throughout his life; 'Reality and Its Shadow' prepares the more critical view that Levinas proposes in *Totality and Infinity*. And *Otherwise Than Being* refers back to the early article in a supportive fashion (*OB*, 199, n. 21/192¹⁴). Moreover, 'Reality and Its Shadow' explicitly diagnoses the ambiguity of art. Levinas points to several dangers inherent in art, but at the very moment when we have identified him as a prototypical Platonist, he complicates his claims, pointing out that art actually responds to certain ambiguities in reality itself and does justice to these more than any other human enterprise.

In order to elucidate the ambiguity of art, some suitable themes from the text will be selected here and related to Heidegger's phenomenological reflections on art.¹⁵ While Levinas does not think that art reveals a truth, Heidegger describes art as accomplishing exactly this. In his essay, 'The Origin of the Work of Art',¹⁶ Heidegger shows how art sets truth to work. The essence of a work of art is to disclose the very being of an object, which means to disclose what that object really is. What happens in a work of art is thus truth in the sense of unconcealment. This disclosure of truth takes place in a twofold movement: 'setting up a world' and 'setting forth the earth'. 'Setting forth the earth' is

¹² For example, David Gritz, *Levinas face au beau* (Paris: L'éclat, 2004); Françoise Armengaud, 'Faire ou ne pas faire d'images: Emmanuel Levinas et l'art de l'oblitération', *Noesis*, no. 3 (2000), <http://noesis.revues.org/index11.html>.

¹³ This journal was edited by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and others; in 1959, Merleau-Ponty publishes an article of his own which discusses the topic of shadows: 'The Philosopher and his Shadow', in idem, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159–81.

¹⁴ The first number refers to the page of the translation, the second to the page of the French original.

¹⁵ The idea that Levinas's reflections on art in 'Reality and Its Shadow' respond to Heidegger's account of art is corroborated by Eaglestone (*Ethical Criticism*, 101–10) and Hand (*Levinas*, 69–75).

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in idem, *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–56. Hereafter: OWA.

Heidegger's attempt to conceive of the traditional creation of a work of art from its material. In the work, the material does not vanish, but comes forth as if for the first time. The massiveness and heaviness of the stone, the brightness of colour, and the sound of the tone appear as such. Both aspects of the artwork will be explicated at appropriate points in what follows.

According to Heidegger, 'truth is not present in itself beforehand, somewhere among the stars, so, as then, later on, to find accommodation among beings' (OWA, 36). This statement might be directed at Plato, who, even though he does not claim that the Forms are to be found among the stars, assumes that they exist 'beforehand', and that their existence is not dependent on a setting-to-work.¹⁷ When Levinas strives to determine the nature of art, he refers to Platonic Forms in order to contrast them with art and to situate art elsewhere. Art is usually described as a disengagement from the world, Levinas recounts; but disengagement need not mean 'to go *beyond* [*au delà*], toward the region of Platonic ideas'. Instead, there is a *disengagement* on the 'hither side [*en deçà*]' (RS, 2–3/126), where hither side connotes the sphere of sensibility. So far, the contrast that Levinas sets up clearly resembles certain Platonic distinctions, where the Form of the bed is situated on one side, the image of the bed on the other side of the actual, wooden bed.

For Levinas, art does not lead us beyond, but to the hither side of being. This means that art does not present truth. Cognition provides truth, by way of concepts that 'grasp' reality. It is rare to hear Levinas talk about the power of cognition and concepts. On the basis of Levinas's suspicions regarding cognition in later texts,¹⁸ we may refrain from regarding art as inferior on account of its inability to 'grasp' the object. Yet two things need to be kept in mind before proceeding to the more affirmative determination of art: for Levinas, 'art does not belong to the order of revelation', nor does it belong 'to that of creation' (RS, 3/127). Art is not a revelation; it does not reveal the truth. But why is art not creation? As it turns out, art does not create anything, but only brings to the fore what is already latent in reality. Art does not create, but resembles. For Levinas, even modern and contemporary art are based on resemblance, forming images of reality; even abstract art still has its point

¹⁷ We cannot enter into a discussion here of the interesting differences between Plato's and Heidegger's understanding of truth, which Heidegger discusses in 'Plato's Doctrine of Truth', in idem, *Pathmarks*, trans. Thomas Sheehan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 155–82. Heidegger shows how Plato moves from an account of truth as unconcealment to truth as correctness; truth takes on the character of a comparison between the existent Forms and that which comes to appear.

¹⁸ For example, the chapter 'Truth Presupposes Justice' in *TI*, 90–101.

of departure in reality. There are, however, important differences between classical and modern art, which Levinas acknowledges, as we shall see.

If art is neither revelation nor creation, what is it? It is exotic and outside the world (RS, 2/126); there is a certain strangeness at work in it. Heidegger had also emphasized the peculiar relationship between an artwork and the world. The world in phenomenological terms is a nexus of references, where one thing points to the next (the hammer points to the nail, the nail to the wall, and so on). The artwork does not fit this nexus of implications; it is not 'in' the world, but 'sets up' a world. There is an entire world opened up in an artwork and this world might make me aware that we are generally moving in worlds without being aware of it. It is part of the revelatory power of art to provide this awareness.

Levinas describes the relation between art and reality (or the 'normal world') differently. He also realizes that art alienates us and interrupts the usual course of things, and he also describes this interruption by way of a doubling, but this 'double' has a Platonic form: it is a shadow. Shadows, in the allegory of the cave, are the lowest form of reality. The prisoners in the cave, who have not yet undergone the process of education and elucidation, see nothing but shadows; and once someone has been freed and dragged up out of the cave into the sunlight, he will first only be able to see shadows, even before seeing images of things in the water.¹⁹ At the same time, the shadow belongs to the object and helps us to access it. Whenever we see anything at all, there will also be a shadow.

Levinas's point is that art focuses on shadows, but by doing so, it brings to the fore what is already present in reality itself: 'Reality would be not only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be its double, its shadow, its image' (RS, 6/133). There is a duality within reality itself; reality is 'what it is and it is a stranger to itself, and there is a relationship between these two moments' (RS, 6/133). What is this strangeness within reality, and how can the claim that reality always produces its own shadow or image be made plausible? Levinas does not give us a straightforward interpretation, which is not surprising since a shadow can only be approached indirectly. But he does provide important clues: within reality, there is a withdrawal, a delay, a tendency to escape; this withdrawal creates a doubling. Reality is not fully accessible to us, but flees from us. While it may be desirable to give a unitary account of this withdrawal, I believe that the withdrawal has several facets, all of which point to a still

¹⁹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in idem, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 516b.

deeper withdrawal. On the one hand, the withdrawal might have a temporal sense. Everything is constantly in flux, and I will always arrive a little bit too late. There is always the object as it is now, and the object as it has just been. Art enters into this doubling and tries to freeze the moment, attempts to capture the smile of the *Mona Lisa*, in Levinas's example, and preserve it for ever. By doing so, however, it will only get hold of the past, and not of reality in its actuality and presence.

On the other hand, there are experiences of withdrawal which are not as immediately temporal. I may have the impression that something in the object eludes my examination. Heidegger thematizes this withdrawal under the heading of 'earth': The earth shatters every attempt to penetrate it, for instance, by measuring it – and yet the earth can appear, in the work of art. When I try to scrutinize a piece of rock by breaking it up it, by describing it in terms of weight, colour, consistency, and so forth, I shall nevertheless have the impression that something in the whole rock escapes me, and that it escapes me all the more the harder I try to put my finger on it (OWA, 24–25). There is the rock that is accessible and measurable, and there is a shadow of the rock, inaccessible and withdrawn, yet essential to what the rock is.

Heidegger's concept of earth bears certain similarities to the elemental in Levinas's philosophy. The discussion of 'Element and Things, Implements' (*TI*, 130–34/103–8) emerges in the context of his reflections on enjoyment; we shall therefore return to this theme in the next chapter. By analyzing what he calls 'bathing in the elements', Levinas wants to offer a critique of Heidegger's claim that our most primordial relation to the world is determined by our handling of tools or equipment. Heidegger's analysis, Levinas maintains, is forgetful of the elements, and also of enjoyment.²⁰ Levinas could have lamented that Heidegger does not consider the body in *Being and Time*,²¹ but rather than diagnosing this systematic absence, he takes the more phenomenological approach of starting from those (bodily) experiences that are neglected in Heidegger's analyses.

In contrast to things, elements are 'non-possessable'. The examples Levinas gives are 'earth, sea, light, city' (*TI*, 131/104). Why not 'earth, water, fire, air'? Levinas wants to describe the way in which we experience the elements first and foremost. Our most important experience of being 'steeped in' the elements is our dwelling place or domicile. This dwelling place, even if often

²⁰ In a laconic remark, Levinas states: '*Dasein* in Heidegger is never hungry' (*TI*, 134/108).

²¹ This lack has been pointed out by others before, and it has been investigated most recently by Cristian Ciocan, 'The Question of the Living Body in Heidegger's Analytic of *Dasein*', *Research in Phenomenology* 38 (2008): 72–89.

referred to as 'property', is not in the first instance a property; possession is a secondary and derivative relation to it. And what makes the place a dwelling place is not first and foremost a set of walls, a house or an apartment, but rather the location — the city, as Levinas says, or the area, the streets I walk, the stores and cafes I visit. All of these are indeed non-possessable, even though some of them may have their owners. In that sense, these phenomena resemble the Heideggerian earth which remains concealed and yet grounds our dwelling.

Other phenomena of strangeness and withdrawal within reality can be found. Though every philosopher describes these in slightly different terms, the underlying realization is the same: in a given phenomenon, not everything comes to appearance, and that which does not come to appearance can only be described indirectly, if at all. This withdrawal can be understood in temporal or material terms, or as a combination of these, or maybe even as something that resists such categorization. In order to give any precise description of it, one would have to drag it out of the shadow into the light, as it were, and such a shadow is no longer a shadow.²²

But art manages to show this shadow to us, to present the duality within reality, and it even manages to problematize the relationship between reality and the stranger within it. It does so by focusing on materiality in a specific way, where materiality is closely tied to the withdrawal. When we deal with normal, everyday things, their materiality usually remains hidden, while art emphasizes materiality as such.²³

If art succeeds in showing something that is intrinsic to reality, but normally remains out of sight, might we not conclude that art has some revelatory power for Levinas after all? It seems that art does indeed reveal something about reality; but it does so in a more obscure fashion than through concepts. In the light of Levinas's later philosophy, it becomes easier to see that the problem for art is not ultimately its lack of concepts, but its detachment from ethics. Even if art reveals that there is a strangeness within reality, does this really

²² Wolfgang N. Krewani (*Emmanuel Levinas: Denker des Anderen*, Freiburg: Alber, 1992) describes the shadow mostly temporally, whereas Bruns ('Art and Poetry') interprets it in terms of materiality. According to my interpretation, these possibilities do not exclude each other, but present different instances of reality's withdrawal. Armengaud correctly stresses that a shadow names a phenomenon of doubling which is non-reciprocal ('Faire ou ne pas faire d'images', 24). There can be different aspects to such a doubling, but the shadow names in any case the hidden, evasive dimension.

²³ Rancière describes the resistance or withdrawal revealed by art in somewhat similar terms when he notes that the image (according to the 'aesthetic regime in the arts, which was constituted in the nineteenth century') is not a translation of a thought, but 'a way in which things themselves speak and are silent', and that this silent speech of things also involves 'their obstinate silence'. See Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Eliot (London: Verso, 2007), 13.

present a major concern for us compared to the stranger who is calling upon us? Does not art, like traditional philosophy, focus on ontology rather than ethics?

Its ethical aspect, or rather its lack thereof, is indeed the most precarious aspect of art for Levinas. He thematizes this problem when he considers the ambiguity of the aesthetic.

II. THE AMBIGUITY OF ART

Levinas writes that at certain times one can only be 'ashamed' of artistic enjoyment, 'as of feasting during a plague' (*RS*, 12/146). A few years after the publication of 'Reality and Its Shadow', Theodor W. Adorno maintained that writing a poem after Auschwitz was barbaric.²⁴ Although Adorno's statement concerns predominantly the artist (whereas Levinas speaks about artistic enjoyment), the two statements appear to express a similar idea. At the most general level, such a rejection of art is motivated by two concerns. The most obvious is that there are times when something else is called for, whether straightforward action or political reflection, rather than artistic contemplation. Second, art has a tendency to make the horror appear less horrible, to aestheticize it and turn it into something beautiful.

This assumption, however, has rightly been questioned.²⁵ While art does not present a historical event in its immediate horror, it might well be able to capture something that no newspaper report, no historical account, nor even the testimony of a witness could capture. A work of art might draw us into it, then, to reveal something that we would have been unwilling to approach and acknowledge otherwise. Paul Celan's 'Death Fugue' (*Todesfuge*) might be described as beautiful, but certainly not in any harmless, unreflective fashion. For Levinas, the face or the call of a prisoner from a concentration camp always reveals more than a drawing or poem which is, admittedly, open to misunderstanding. But this leads us to the very centre of the problem: how shall we memorize the horror if nothing other than the present expression of a living person, coming to the aid of his or her own speech, counts? The most important danger in Levinas's scepticism concerning art and history is that it limits the possibilities of commemoration. Before we turn to this problem and also consider Levinas's solution, we need to explicate the ambiguity of art.

Levinas describes the ambiguity as follows:

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft', in idem, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10 (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 1998), 30.

²⁵ Adorno, for example, later abandons his own statement.

[Art's] value then is ambiguous — unique because it is impossible to go beyond it, because, being unable to end, it cannot go toward the *better*. It does not have the quality of the living instant which is open to the salvation of becoming, in which it can end and be surpassed. The value of this instant is thus made of its misfortune. This sad value is indeed the beautiful of modern art, opposed to the happy beauty of classical art. On the other hand, art, essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion [*d'évasion*]. (RS, 12/145)

Levinas here connects the ambiguity of art to its strange temporal character: On the one hand, art seems fixed, locked up in the moment, without a future; the work of art is complete, no improvement is possible. On the other hand, art provides a dimension of irresponsibility; it allows us to flee from the world and in that sense it opens up a future: a future of (ir)responsibility in the literal sense. Levinas claims that art frees us by inviting us to the silence of non-reflection.

The ambiguity of art is thus connected to the question of time as well as to that of beauty. Levinas is sceptical of art because it freezes the moment and has no future. In particular, it lacks a future in the Levinasian sense, where the future connotes surprise and the possibility of absolute newness. A work of art repeats itself, and will always repeat itself in the same fashion. It would actually be possible to define art through its inherent repetition. Art is not necessarily immobile, for a movie or a video installation can be a work of art. Some moment in the film may actually surprise me — but it will do so only once. Even though a work of art may involve movement, the course of things will not change, but will repeat itself when I approach the work again.²⁶ Hence Levinas attributes to art a 'lifeless life' (*une vie sans vie*) (RS, 9/139).

Modern art recognizes the sadness of the frozen moment, whereas classical art celebrates 'happy beauty'. What distinguishes modern art is predominantly its attitude towards beauty. Classical art, for Levinas, is guilty of idolatry: it takes beautiful images, which are inevitably idols, and admires them, whereby they acquire a higher status than reality. The beauty of classical art covers up the shadow (RS, 8/137). Such idolatry, if Levinas's description were right, would indeed invite the spectator to be irresponsible and to turn away from real life. 'Modern literature, disparaged for its intellectualism (which, nonetheless goes back to Shakespeare, the Molière of *Don Juan*, Goethe, Dostoyevsky), certainly manifests a more and more clear awareness of this fundamental insufficiency of artistic idolatry' (RS, 13/148). This passage makes it obvious that modern literature in Levinas's sense does not have to stem from a specific historical era. Modern art is an art that reflects back on itself and questions its own tasks and

²⁶ Interactive art or installations that involve elements of chance might be exceptions here; but even then it is questionable whether I may be radically surprised.

procedures. It is an art that entails irony. Modern artworks are not beautiful in any straightforward sense. If they are beautiful, they reflect on it and possibly employ beauty to evoke shock and alienation (as in Andy Warhol's aesthetically pleasing electrical chairs). Due to this self-reflective attitude, modern art could be described as philosophical art (which leads to the charge of intellectualism), though not necessarily in Levinas's sense of philosophy.

The kind of art that Levinas is weary of is art that entails the message 'Do not speak, do not reflect' (RS, 12/146). Even though it is questionable whether any work of art really delivers this message (given that art, if it is true art, invites interpretation, despite the fact that it may block off any simple attempt at it), Levinas's distinction between a more self-reflective and a less self-reflective art is plausible.²⁷ Yet Levinas seems to assume that there is an art that serves pure enjoyment and it becomes obvious in his other works that he connects such art with rhetoric. Works that serve political propaganda and merely appeal to our sense of enjoyment should perhaps not be called art, but propaganda or flattery. Yet Levinas is right to point out that the delimitation of art against kitsch, rhetoric, propaganda, or flattery is not at all easy, and that a clear line can hardly be drawn.

Art is thus ambiguous because it invites irresponsibility and escape while also being able to capture the misfortune and sadness of the moment. In the light of our previous considerations, we may describe another dimension of art's ambiguity: art discloses something about reality – namely, the shadow of strangeness within it; but by alerting us to ontological questions, art may distract us from the importance of ethics. Art in itself is not ethical; rather, it has a tendency towards self-enclosure, as it were. This hermetic tendency of the work can either be used to manipulate an audience or, in kitsch, to open a dimension of evasion, an alternative, less complex world that allows us to forget about the actual world.

The ambiguity in the work of art is linked to its materiality: that which enables an artwork to exist is at the same time that which limits it. A work of art is not a pure idea; it has a body. What Plato says about every *logos* (namely, that it has a body²⁸) holds for every work in general. It is more difficult to see this with respect to music; yet here too we are dealing not merely with a conceptual idea, but with a structure or nexus of sounds. Although he does not explicitly

²⁷ According to Levinas, Sosno's sculptures manage to break the silence of art ('On Obliteration: Discussing Sacha Sosno', 39). Yet as I have indicated above, it seems more fruitful to consider the artists singled out by Levinas not as exceptional, but rather as indicative of certain possibilities which art in general harbours.

²⁸ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in idem, *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 264c.

say that artworks have a body, Levinas rightly points out that statues or sculptures are the paradigmatic artworks.

While it seems more accurate to speak about the materiality of a work of art rather than its 'body', the term 'body' captures two essential features of the work of art. The work has a capacity to rest in itself and it speaks to our senses. These two characteristics constitute the work as a work (rather than, for example, as a philosophical idea) and at the same time they impose limitations on the work. The work's independence or ability to rest in itself provides it with the peculiar power to 'speak' in the absence of its creator, or, more precisely, without even pointing to a creator. Yet this same feature also allows for misuse. While some artworks which are generally appealing lend themselves to abuse more easily than others, it cannot be excluded that such abuse would be inflicted upon any work. This is the kind of ambiguity that needs to be endured and examined rather than eliminated.

To say, secondly, that the work speaks to our senses is a somewhat problematic formulation since it might relate the artwork too closely to the recipient and could easily be mistaken for an empiricist account of art. The Levinasian term 'enjoyment' more accurately captures what is at stake here. Despite the fact that we do not enjoy art in the same reductive (and consumptive) fashion that we enjoy food, there is a hedonistic moment to art which makes it richer or more multi-faceted than, say, logical formulas. The artwork has a body and it speaks to us as embodied beings. We see, hear, or touch the work of art, whereas we only 'see' a philosophical idea in a metaphorical sense.

While its bodily nature lends special capacities to the work of art, it also restricts art's powers. Art is fragile; it can be destroyed. In a certain sense, artworks are finite like human beings. At the same time, works are potentially infinite; they are not mortal like ourselves. A temple can exist for several thousand years and a piece of music can be performed again and again. But both can also be undone in a moment, by an earthquake or a fire which would destroy any trace of the temple and burn the last copy of the musical score.

Artworks have these features because they are works, where the artist stands back, leaves the work to its own devices and does not come to its support — just as Socrates describes the situation of a written work in the *Phaedrus*. Yet Levinas offers a solution to this dilemma: *criticism*. The critics of art 'revive' art, as it were. Criticism 'integrates the inhuman work of the artist into the human world', and even manages to detach it 'from its irresponsibility by envisaging its technique' (RS, 12/147). The solution is convincing in its simplicity — at least to a certain extent. Art criticism offers a future to the artwork because the criticism as such is not predictable; it is an open dialogue that is instigated by the work.

The critical dialogue as such is certainly reflective. It is far removed from pure enjoyment, and every attempt at irresponsibility (and pure aestheticism) is open to being questioned and critiqued. Art and art criticism belong together; criticism redeems some of art's 'silence' and we, attempting to listen to the work, should also listen to the critic.

The question arises, however, as to whether we wish, and whether we should, leave art to the art critics? Is Levinas trying to say that the work's susceptibility to misunderstanding calls for an educated critic who has learned to 'read' the work? His remarks about how criticism focuses on techniques and on the figure of the artist point in this direction. But at the beginning of the essay Levinas indicates that criticism should not be confined to a group of specialists:

Criticism as a distinct function of literary life, expert and professional criticism, appearing as an item in newspapers and journals and in books, can indeed seem suspect and pointless. But it has its source in the mind of the listener, spectator or reader; criticism exists as a public's mode of comportment (RS, 1/124).

This line of thought, which Levinas unfortunately does not take up again at the end of the essay, would make it possible to rehabilitate art, as it were, if it is considered in tandem with criticism — where criticism connotes a general mode of comportment towards art. It may be helpful to hear 'criticism' literally as 'critique' or *crinein*, as cutting and distinguishing, and in that sense, as interrupting. Critique does not strive to put anyone or anything down, but to consider a work from a differentiating perspective. When Levinas says that criticism 'integrates the inhuman work of the artist into the human world' (RS, 12/147), he seems to be referring to the peculiar moment at which art becomes finite, as a part of our human world, and simultaneously infinite, inspiring endless criticism and discussion. It is in this sense that artworks have a future, despite being complete. But does criticism revive the work almost against or despite the work's tendency towards self-enclosure, or does the work at some level invite the criticism? A closer examination of the artwork's character as a work is called for, one which will lead us beyond 'Reality and Its Shadow'.

III. WORK AND WORLD

Since Levinas's inclination to dismiss the artwork for its work character becomes even stronger after 'Reality and Its Shadow', especially in *Totality and Infinity*, it seems worth sketching briefly some of the work's characteristics. Levinas claims that the work 'does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue', despite the 'social or material causes that interrupt it' (RS, 2/126). A major determination of the work is its completeness, and due to this wholeness, it cannot instigate

any beginning. It seems as if the work itself would not make any significant contribution to the dialogue of the critics; but in that case criticism would appear disconnected and potentially arbitrary. Instead, the work itself needs to contain the potential for instigating the dialogue about it, and thus also the potential to sustain its own future.

It seems that Levinas's blindness to the power that artworks have to extend into the future is connected to his dismissal of the ability of an artwork to rest in itself, without pointing back to the artist – a dimension of the artwork which is very important for Heidegger. While Levinas acknowledges the ability of the work to stand by itself, he sees nothing positive in it. Rather, he dismisses this dimension by saying: 'the will withdraws from its work, delivering it over to its fate' (*TI*, 297/274). In fact, what enables the painted image to extend into the future in relative independence is its material side. Granted, this material side needs to be reconsidered and described in a new way, as Heidegger attempts to do under the heading of 'earth'; but Levinas, in his early work, forecloses such reconsideration, accusing Heidegger of a 'faint materialism' (*TI*, 299/275).²⁹

In opposition to the traditional emphasis on vision and the panoramic view of the world as spread out and accessible — an emphasis which Levinas also finds in Heidegger —, Levinas emphasizes the importance of speech and expression. Whereas one might expect artworks to count as expressions, Levinas writes: 'From the work I am only deduced and am already ill-understood, betrayed rather than expressed' (*TI*, 176/151). Why does Levinas discard works so vehemently? For him, there is a direct line that leads from works to politics and, more specifically, to tyranny. Works are the medium of the State; they provide the objectivity that is requested in the political realm. They can in themselves stand in the open, public space, while the one who brought forth the work is absent and does not have to take responsibility. 'The State which realizes its essence in works slips toward tyranny and thus attests *my absence* from those works' (*TI*, 176/151).

When Levinas considers politics left to itself, we encounter a situation similar to that of the work of art as left to itself and therefore prone to misunderstanding. Levinas maintains that works in the political realm conceal rather than showing anything. This sounds surprising at first. When works are being openly exhibited,

²⁹ Levinas not only disagrees with Heidegger concerning art, but also concerning technology. As Levinas explains in his article 'Heidegger, Gagarin, and Us' (which is discussed in relation to art in Benso, 'Aesth-ethics'), we could actually applaud the way in which technology leads us into homogeneous space and detaches us from our rooting in family, race, tribe, and so on. 'Heidegger, Gagarin, and Us', in idem, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 233.

they are accessible to everyone. How can this process be conceived as one of hiding rather than display? For Levinas, display and hiding are not opposed to each other. Something might well be placed entirely on display while that which is essential in it remains hidden.

Whether a work of art speaks to us does not depend on its accessibility; the question is rather whether a work of art will be revived or not. In 'Reality and Its Shadow', Levinas suggests that criticism can accomplish this revival. In *Totality and Infinity*, he states: 'The word alone — but disengaged from its density as a linguistic product — can put an end to this absence' (*TI*, 177/151). But this option, presented in a single sentence in the midst of a passionate critique of all works, remains rather weak and obscure. It certainly evokes the same questions that I raised regarding the suggestion that criticism is a solution: would it not be necessary to admit that the work itself has more than a random connection to such dialogue? In the text 'The Trace of the Other', published two years after *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes the work in terms of radical generosity: 'A work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same'.³⁰ Linking this movement of non-return to the story of Abraham, who forbids his servant even to return his son to the point of departure, Levinas writes: 'A work conceived in its ultimate nature requires a radical generosity of the same, which in the work goes unto the other' (*ibid.*). Taking the work seriously in its nature means that an act of absolute generosity is required of the one who sent the work out into the open, delivering it over to the other. It lies in the nature of the work that it cannot be taken back, modified, or renounced.

One might wonder at this point whether Levinas changes his attitude towards art when, in *Otherwise Than Being*, he gives more space to the past as well as to politics. If we consider the development of Levinas's position regarding artworks for a moment, it becomes obvious that his standpoint in *Totality and Infinity* is the most critical one. In 'Reality and Its Shadow', Levinas is in two minds as he emphasizes the ambiguity of art. *Totality and Infinity* rejects visual art because of the arguments raised against vision and against works. *Otherwise Than Being* does not take a clear stance, and in that sense returns to the ambiguity of art again without thematizing it as such. In this late work, there are few remarks about art overall, and art does not seem to play a role in the line of reasoning or the structure of *Otherwise Than Being*. Yet art has a unique ability in relation to language; it helps to remind us of the verbal

³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Trace of the Other', in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 348.

character of language, of language as happening or occurrence. 'And the search for new forms, from which all art lives, keeps awake everywhere the verbs that are on the verge of lapsing into substantives' (*OB*, 40/52). Levinas continues with ideas that can be read as a belated acknowledgement of Heideggerian insights: 'In painting, red reddens and green greens [...]. In music sounds resound; in poems vocables, material of the said, no longer yield before what they evoke' (*ibid.*). These formulations are so similar to the description of the earth in Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art'³¹ that there seems to be an implicit re-evaluation of Levinas's previous distancing of himself from Heidegger's alleged materialism. Art, although located in the realm of the said, can alert us to the distinction between saying and said because it exposes the said as a said.

The distinction between the saying and the said belongs to the most difficult areas of Levinasian philosophy.³² In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas compares the 'said' to an 'oracle' (*OB*, 5/6). This comparison is instructive, especially if we are thinking of ancient Greek oracles. When Socrates, in the *Apology*, recounts how his friend Chaerephon learns from the Delphic oracle that Socrates is the wisest man, Socrates at first does not want to believe it.³³ By talking to politicians, poets, and craftsmen, he realizes that he is indeed wiser since he knows that he does not know. The oracle's statement is thus ambiguous since it could be read as referring to a body of wisdom, which Socrates clearly neither has nor values. In order to understand the statement, Socrates had to explore it through dialogues with others.

If the said appears in the form of statements in the widest sense, what then is the saying? It is proximity, it is 'pre-original'; and it makes all language possible (*OB*, 29/6–7).³⁴ When it comes to the saying and its relationship with the said, Levinas requires us to think a complicated configuration. The saying is in some sense 'prior' to the distinction between the saying and the said, but at the same time it is a component within this distinction. The 'prior' saying is not an origin from which the distinction emanates; it is pre-original and an-archival. It is the primordial proximity which makes origins possible. The relationship between

³¹ Heidegger writes: 'The rock comes to bear and to rest and so first becomes rock; the metal comes to glitter and shimmer, the colors to shine, the sounds to ring, the word to speak' (*OWA*, 24).

³² For a helpful discussion, see Bernhard Waldenfels, 'Levinas on the Saying and the Said', in *Addressing Levinas*, ed. Sean Nelson, Antje Kapust, and Kent Still (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 86–97.

³³ Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *idem, Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 21a.

³⁴ As an example of a saying without a said, a limit case, Waldenfels suggests 'the extreme case of crying: crying, when one is in pleasure or pain, in joy or sorrow, has no sense and does not follow any rule' ('Levinas on Saying', 89).

the saying and the said, finally, should not be conceived as a dichotomy, but as a flickering or oscillation of meaning.³⁵

What does this mean for the character of works which, by way of being works, have, it seems, turned the saying into the said? In a striking passage about books, Levinas states that books 'are interrupted, and call for other books and in the end are interpreted in a saying distinct from the said' (*OB*, 171/217). Interpretation, he suggests, is a saying rather than a said (even though it may be manifested once again in a said). Interpretation establishes connections, between books and between people; thereby, it interrupts the said. Interruption is very important for Levinas since it disturbs and shakes up self-enclosure. Everything that has a tendency to be static, fixed, and hermetically closed off needs to be interrupted – be it politics, a book, or philosophy. If a saying enters into the said, such an interruption occurs.³⁶

But does it not follow from Levinas's argumentation that all books are always interrupted, simply by being read, so that we do not need to be concerned about the work's tendency towards self-enclosure? Does Levinas renounce his criticism of works? If anything, Levinas has shown that every book *can* be interrupted, not that it will be. Is there anything special about Levinas's books? Is it plausible to say that they invite interruption more than traditional books? The unique features of Levinas's writings, which many readers find peculiar (repetitions, numerous references to philosophy and literature, cross-references within the texts), could be unravelled as such openings for interruption. Maybe what some readers perceive as Levinas rhetorical style, despite all his criticism of rhetoric, is in the final analysis an attempt to engage the reader and solicit interpretation.

Yet the poem, so Levinas appears to argue in 'Paul Celan: From Being to the Other', holds a special position. As Celan alerts us to the affinity between a poem and a handshake, the poem is revealed to be 'a saying without a said' (*PC*, 40). It is somewhat surprising that Levinas now attributes a special role to

³⁵ *OB*, 152/194; see Jean Greisch, 'The Face and Reading: Immediacy and Mediation', in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (London: Continuum, 1991), 76.

³⁶ In the chapter from which the above passage is taken, Levinas investigates in particular the possibilities of interrupting philosophy. The chapter can be read as an indirect response to Derrida's 'Violence or Metaphysics' or to anyone who would ask whether a Levinasian philosophy is possible. Is it possible to write a book about philosophy's totalizing tendencies without this book being itself totalizing? Levinas says that it is possible to write a book that accomplishes this task because the book will be interrupted. Such an interruption occurs as the book is interpreted. It also happens because someone reads the book and listens to what is said in it. 'This reference to an interlocutor permanently breaks through the text,' because the interlocutor 'is situated outside the said that the discourse says' (*OB*, 170/216–217).

poems, given that this is exactly the move Heidegger undertakes in 'The Origin of the Work of Art'.³⁷ This surprising proximity might be one of the reasons for Levinas to distance himself so explicitly from Heidegger in this essay on Celan. Levinas not only rejects Heidegger's idea of the earth (which, as we have seen, might in the end nevertheless be related to Levinas's idea of a shadow), but he also ridicules the complementary notion, the world, in 'The Origin of the Work of Art'. He finds Buber's categories of dialogue, which emerge in Celan's speech *The Meridian*, more appropriate than 'portraying poetry as opening the world, the place between earth and sky' (PC, 42), and, in relation to Celan's Judaism, Levinas speaks of an 'expulsion out of the worldliness of the world' (45). While the concept of world certainly figures prominently in Heidegger's reflections on the artwork, Levinas is also hinting here at the prominent role of world within Heidegger's philosophy as a whole. Levinas, in contrast, claims that the face of the Other signifies 'outside of every order, every world'.³⁸ In the ethical encounter with the Other, the world from which he or she comes is not only irrelevant, but can even be a distraction, perhaps inviting me to renounce my responsibility or deny hospitality.

It may, however, be Celan himself who provides the line that leads from the Heideggerian world to the Levinasian concept of responsibility: 'Die Welt ist fort, ich muss Dich tragen' – 'The world is gone, I must carry you'. This line, the last line of a poem from the collection *Atemwende* (*Turn of Breath*) is interpreted by Jacques Derrida in *Rams*. Derrida explains how death each time means the end of a world, of a unique world tied to the singular Other.³⁹ Phenomenologically more revealing than my own death is thus the death of the Other. While the world becomes irrelevant in anxiety before death, the death of the Other means that I can experience a world's disappearing. This experience can perhaps best be described in terms of mood; but it is neither an experience of anxiety nor, strictly speaking, an experience of suffering.⁴⁰ Rather, this experience is determined by sorrow, mourning, or a melancholy that has become 'infinitely aggravated' by death, as Derrida points out (*Rams*, 135).

³⁷ Heidegger states that all art is in its essence poetry, in the literal sense of *poiein* as creation, and furthermore: 'If the essence of all art is poetry, then architecture, the visual arts, and music must all be referred back to poesy' (OWA, 45).

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Meaning and Sense', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 96.

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue; Between Two Infinities, the Poem', in idem, *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen, trans. Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 136–63. Hereafter: *Rams*.

⁴⁰ Levinas is right to alert us against Heidegger, in *Time and the Other*, to the significance of suffering for understanding our corporeal being-in-the-world.

As the world of the Other disappears, it leaves its traces. It imposes a responsibility on me, the responsibility to carry or bear the Other. Yet this responsibility not only emerges with the death of the Other; it is present throughout life because the death of the Other is always a possibility. To be sure, this is not how Levinas would describe the situation; but he refers to the vulnerability of the Other who exhibits a quasi-null physical resistance to murder (*TI*, 198/173). It appears to be essential to Levinas's philosophy – perhaps due to the phenomenological heritage – that the call of the Other immediately has ethical consequences (because it calls me into question) and that the infinite vulnerability of the Other imposes an infinite responsibility. There is no need or possibility here to derive an 'ought' from an 'is'; rather, a full description of the fact of my being called into question is already ethics (*TI*, 43/13).

For Levinas, there is no recourse to world involved in this connection between question, response, and responsibility, or between vulnerability and responsibility. In order to intimate how there is, in the relationship to the friend, the 'origin of ethics itself', he suggests that 'by reversing the order of the propositions in Celan's line *Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen*, and by inserting an *if ... then* between them, we have something that resembles the very origin of ethics itself in the interruption of the world and all its ethical codes'.⁴¹ Or, as Derrida puts it: 'If (where) there is necessity or duty toward you, if (where) I must, myself, carry yourself, well, then, the world tends to disappear' (Rams, 158). But Derrida does not simply and violently suggest reversing the order of Celan's statement – to the effect that the world would disappear in the ethical moment; he tries to show that the statement can be read in both directions, as it were. The death of the Other, actual or possible, means an end of the world, imposing the responsibility on me to carry the Other; and at the moment when I do so, when I bear this responsibility, the world will be irrelevant. This is the world which Celan's line has opened up: the world opened up by the Other, the world shown to 'me' by 'you', the world which immediately harbours an ethical moment of carrying the Other, carrying responsibility.

The extreme case of such responsibility is substitution; and it is at the beginning of the chapter on 'Substitution' in *Otherwise Than Being* that Levinas quotes Celan: 'Ich bin du, wenn ich ich bin' – 'I am you when I am I', from the poem 'Lob der Ferne' ('Praise of Distance'). I am you when I am I because I am already you or rather, you already me. Because of this fundamental otherness in the same, the poem and the handshake can go towards the Other. Like a saying which, even when transformed into the said of a book, will in the end be

⁴¹ Michael Naas, 'The World Over', *Radical Philosophy Review* 8 (2005): 129.

interrupted by another saying. Such transformations and interruptions of said and saying are possible due to the ambiguity of art. This ambiguity comes about because it is the same 'body' of the artwork that allows it to sustain itself and reach out while also creating the danger for the artwork to become encrusted and close in on itself. The concept of ambiguity introduced by Levinas allows exploring the possibilities and limitations which are essential to art. Said and saying, materiality and proximity, belong together because reality is not only what it is, but is also 'its shadow, its image'.

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