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Disinterestedness and Responsibility

Artwork and Its Possible Place in the Philosophy of Lévinas

In the dissertation I investigated whether in the light of Emmanuel Lévinas' ethical thought, which is based on the *ego*'s infinite responsibility for the *other*, one can give an account of our relation towards artwork. This investigation produced the following results.

1. Lévinas treated systematically the problem of art and aesthetics only in the early phase of his career. His early aesthetics was heavily influenced by the contemporaneous developments of modern art, more precisely by the way in which the materiality of artwork liberated itself from its meaning, and therefore gave place to a criticism of representation. Nevertheless, together with this liberation Lévinas judged the entire phenomenon of art negatively and regarded it as an obstacle in our relation towards the *other*, since artwork dangerously distanced the *ego* from reality. Later, this negative judgment was partially modified: the materiality of sounds, colors and words was interpreted as the moment when the totalizing domination of the world could be resisted. Lévinas considered this resistance proper to modern art, and re-evaluated it in positive terms, since it contributed to the de-stabilization of the *ego* and thus to the welcome of the *other*. In sum, modern art, based on its non-representational nature, was interpreted as ethically more favorable than any other artistic practice. This interpretation was in harmony with the self-understanding of modern art, where its materiality contributed to the full independence and ethical purgation of art.

2. In the dissertation I formulated two major problems with regard to this position.

2.1. Lévinas did not discuss systematically the problem of art in the later phase of his career. This resulted in a hybrid solution, where the negative judgment on art in general was merged with the rehabilitation of modern art. The main focus of his aesthetics was whether there are artistic practices which can be judged positively, and if yes, to what extent they can contribute to the ethical relation towards the *other*. I attempted to show that the secondary literature dealing with the aesthetics of Lévinas preserved this situation.

2.2. The phenomenon of art cannot be narrowed down to the concept of modern art, where the independent aesthetic sphere would become the essence of art. This understanding of art has

been challenged by the “end” of modern art and by the presence of artworks from earlier periods in the museum, not only as aesthetical objects, but also as historical monuments.

3. In view of these problems I envisaged the analysis of a broader concept of art in light of Lévinas’ mature thought. Based on the concept of the *third* developed in the *Otherwise than Being* I showed that although the *ego*’s infinite responsibility for the *other* was the central question for Lévinas, the concept of the *third* addresses the question how and why this infinite responsibility can become limited. This mechanism can be formulated as follows: although the *other* presents an infinite and irresistible claim to the *ego*, the others (the “*thirds*”) by their multiple claims limit this original infinite claim and result in a complex and plural net of responsibilities. The *ego* is torn between the absolute responsibility for the *other* and the shared responsibility for the *others*. This general intersubjective structure can have numerous actual realizations. In the dissertation I highlighted only that the merger of these immediate and mediated claims together with the cultural institutions determining them can open up a rich research field for investigating basic ethical relations. The problem of art is part of this research field. My main question was: what happens to the *ego* marked by these responsibilities when it faces an artwork. How are the ethical responsibilities reconfigured in the context of art?

4. This investigation entailed a consideration of the “definition” of art. In order to provide the analysis with some empirical basis and at the same time to maintain the necessary overview on the material, I focused on the history of the image in Western art from the Middle Ages to the present. Two statements have been formulated on the relationship between the phenomenon of art and the ethics of Lévinas.

4.1. The disinterestedness characterizing art means that, while facing an artwork, the actual and real responsibilities fade and the relationships created by the artwork replace them. In this sense the artwork by its disinterestedness distances the *ego* from its actual ethical context. This disinterested relation is generated by two fundamental mechanisms, one immanent and the other context-dependent.

4.1.1. Immanent disinterestedness occurs when certain features or physical aspects of the image attract the gaze of the viewer, who, therefore, is attached to it and stops thinking about his own life and world. There are two, to some extent contradictory, components of this

immanent mechanism. On the one hand it is not possible to give a universal and all-inclusive definition of these features and physical aspects: anything can generate disinterested contemplation. On the other hand, the history of the image in Western art shows that the main reason for developing a realistic and mimetic paradigm of the image based on three-dimensional perspective was to attract successfully the viewer's gaze. This pictorial paradigm aimed exactly at generating disinterested contemplation, where the pictorial world replaced the viewer's own reality.

4.1.2. Context-dependent disinterestedness occurs when the image (or any other object), although not part of the viewer's actual reality or concerns, does receive attention. Again, a universal and all-inclusive definition of this context-dependent mechanism is not possible, but the objects from the past, which are still with us and being taken care of, are eminent examples. It is a crucial component of the question that this context-dependent mechanism was institutionalized with the creation of art museums in the 18th century.

4.1.3. These two mechanisms of disinterestedness appear always together, but the relative emphasis can vary. In the case of a realistic image presented in a museum, both mechanisms are strong. In the case of a non-representational modern image, the rhythms of colors and lines can contribute to the immanent mechanism, but perhaps here the disinterestedness is more the result of the museum's context. Although the popular movie relies to some extent on the context of the cinema (the movie-theater), disinterestedness is primarily the result of the immanent mechanism of the moving three-dimensional images. In the history of art in the 20th century, a fundamental conflict emerged between the representational and the non-representational image (between the pictorial space and the pictorial surface). The negation of representation simultaneously reached a higher level of pictorial (aesthetic) disinterestedness and a sort of ethical transfiguration of art. This development corresponded roughly to what Lévinas thought about art and the aesthetic. In the dissertation I adopted the position that the non-figurative image has only a relative relevance with regard to the problem of disinterestedness: this image has also an immanent artistic mechanism and it heavily relies on the disinterested context provided by the museum.

4.2. Within this disinterested sphere, a plural and multi-faceted intersubjective field is generated, thus the *ego* does not enter into solitude, but remains part of quasi-social relations.

4.2.1. Perhaps the most traditional form of this interaction is the image representing someone (an icon or a secular portrait) or depicting an event. These images generate relations where the *ego* either faces a distanced or even fictional *other* or witnesses *others* doing something. Popular art relies to a large extent on this mechanism of relating the viewer to fictional *others*.

4.2.2. Modern art and the museum provided a strong criticism of this spontaneous illusionism. Parallel to this they reinforced other features of artwork, which can result also in quasi-intersubjective relations, such as the professional or amateur care for the physical existence of the artwork. Artwork can also be regarded as a trace of the artist or its age, and thus an expression of the past, which reaches the viewer. In this respect artwork can become the vehicle of an intersubjective relation between the *ego* and previously existing *others*. Furthermore, perhaps the plurality and universality of the judgment of taste, where the *ego* necessarily is confronted with the judgments of the others, also shows that the relation to the artwork is not a solitary, but an essentially intersubjective relation.

5. In view of above, the following conclusions can be proposed.

5.1. With regard to the philosophy of Lévinas: the disinterestedness characterizing art is not necessarily negative. By leaving behind temporarily the real responsibilities, the *ego* can participate in less demanding and imposing intersubjective relations. This can lead to a cultural practice, in which the disinterested intersubjective relations of the *ego* can model and temper the insolvability and unavoidability of real responsibilities towards the *other* and the *others*.

5.2. With regard to the relationship between ethics and aesthetics: beyond the theoretical autonomy of the two realms, there may be some fruitful synergies between the ethical relation based on responsibility and the aesthetic relation based on disinterestedness. Instead of judging art by our established moral standards, it is worth perhaps noticing that the immanent features of art and the institutional settings surrounding it create the possibility of various encounters: encounters with images of the *other*, things happening to *others*, fragile objects, colors, lines, brushstrokes becoming traces, expressions or messages. The complex disinterested phenomenon of art makes it into such cultural construct, which in terms of its intersubjective aspects provides an alternative for industrial virtuality replacing reality, and the demanding ethical claim of real responsibilities.