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Hermeneutics and Art

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Surviving Hiroshima: An Hermeneutical Phenomenology of *Barefoot Gen* by Keiji Nakazawa[1]

Abstract

In this paper, I present a philosophical analysis of the famous manga series, *Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no Gen*) by Keiji Nakazawa, which is the author's quasi-fictional memoir of his childhood as an atom bomb survivor in Hiroshima, Japan. Against the backdrop of larger issues of war and peace, Gen's family struggles with his father's ideological rebellion against the nation's militaristic rule, leading to the family's persecution. The story then chronicles the cataclysmic effects of the bomb, and the fates of Gen and other survivors as they live through the aftermath of the detonation and the hardships of the American occupation. My framework for critique follows Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology, which applies the descriptive method of phenomenology to cultural texts.

Key words

Paul Ricoeur, manga, graphic memoirs, comics, sequential art, hermeneutical phenomenology, *Barefoot Gen*, Hiroshima, Keiji Nakazawa, autobiography

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[1] Paper presented at the 2015 national conference of the Philosophical Association of the Philippines, "Doing Philosophy in the Philippines," held at Casa San Pablo in San Pablo City, Laguna, Philippines, on May 8-10, 2015. The sections of this paper pertaining to Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology and the formal elements, issues, and theories related to comics have been excerpted from my unpublished research project sponsored by the University Research and Coordination Office of De La Salle University.

In this paper, I present a philosophical analysis of the famous manga series, *Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no Gen*) by Keiji Nakazawa, which is the author's quasi-fictional memoir of his childhood as an atom bomb survivor in Hiroshima, Japan. Against the backdrop of larger issues of war and peace, Gen's family struggles with his father's ideological rebellion against the nation's militaristic rule, leading to the family's persecution. The story then chronicles the cataclysmic effects of the bomb, and the fates of Gen and other survivors as they live through the aftermath of the detonation and the hardships of the American occupation.

My framework for critique follows Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology, which applies the descriptive method of phenomenology to cultural texts. In particular, I adopt a Ricoeurian way of reading sequential art or comics, in order to bring out the existential issues that uniquely arise from Nakazawa's account and the medium he chose to use. Indeed, comics has come a long way from its initial association, in the public mind, with humor or lowbrow entertainment. The rise of the "graphic novel" over the past several decades is proof of the maturity of the form. Today, the burgeoning field of comics studies encompasses a number of scholarly anthologies, respected journals, conferences, and academic courses.

Academic approaches to works of sequential art include literary criticism, linguistic analysis, and semiotics. Philosophers have also taken a stab at issues pertaining to the form of comics, or its ethical or ontological contents. What I intend to do is offer a way of reading comics through Ricoeur's synthesis of phenomenological description and hermeneutic interpretation. I aim to show the relevance of this approach to reading or interpreting comics, i.e. to the problem of how comics makes meaning and its implications for the nature of consciousness. For Ricoeur, and contra Edmund Husserl, we can only aim for an interpretation, rather than a pure description, of the objects of consciousness. Understanding the meaning of the world thus entails understanding the meaning of one's life in one's cultural and historical contexts. Through a Ricoeurian approach toward comics, using *Barefoot Gen* as a source text, the paper aims to engage with the peculiar amalgamation of the visual and the verbal so often found in cultural texts – and which is most evident in comics.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology

Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) was one of the early French translators and scholars of Edmund Husserl. Compared to Husserl's other existentialist critics such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur does not enjoy quite the same stature or following. In the area of phenomenological hermeneutics, his influence is similarly eclipsed by that of Hans Georg Gadamer.

One reason for the relative neglect of Ricoeur's rich insights may be the dialectic progression of his thought. He was not given to a dramatic uncompromising stance toward polarizing issues, but tended to make the best of both worlds, so to speak. As Ihde[2] (1971, 14) notes in his prescient summation of Ricoeur's methodology, written in the middle of the philosopher's career, "The general strategy of opposing two sides of a polarity leading to a limit concept becomes a major tactic of Ricoeur's thought."

On one hand, Ricoeur acknowledges the importance of the phenomenological *epoché* in exposing the errors of the natural attitude, or of objectivist or scientific paradigms. On the other hand, he also points to the limitations of extreme subjectivism in Husserl's stance, introducing hermeneutics as a corrective to phenomenology. The result is a hybrid approach that lends itself not so much to other philosophers' critique as to extra-philosophical applications.

Another reason why Ricoeur seems to be less popular than other hermeneutical phenomenologists is that his major projects tend to be open-ended, and he would move from one topic to another not so much by logical necessity as by "infamous" detours[3]. His first major concern was the philosophy of the will, to which he applied his teacher Merleau-Ponty's work on the phenomenology of perception. Then in his related study of the nature of evil, he took a linguistic turn and investigated the role of symbols in the making of meaning. Thereafter he pursued issues concerning time and narrative, memory, intersubjectivity, justice, political philosophy, and ethics[4]. Consequently perhaps, Ricoeur's ideas

[2] D. Ihde, 1986. *Hermeneutic Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. USA: Northwestern University Press.

[3] D. Pellauer, *Ricoeur: A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York 2007, p. 42.

[4] G. Madison, "The Interpretive Turn in Phenomenology: A Philosophical History", [in:] *Between Description and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Turn in Phenomenology*, ed. A. Wiercinski, Toronto 2005, pp. 32–33.

have a wide applicability, not the least of which is in the analysis and interpretation of sequential art. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on his hermeneutical phenomenology, a method of interpretation that takes off from a critique of Husserl's idealism.

Ricoeur tempers Husserl's premise that essences could be directly intuited, by introducing the significance of textual mediation. He thus attempts to bring phenomenology and hermeneutics together (hermeneutics, which arose from the science of biblical interpretation, developed separately from phenomenology). Ricoeur was not the only one to do so; both Heidegger and Gadamer also emphasized the key role that language plays in our understanding of concrete experience. These three thinkers thus represent the "interpretive turn in phenomenology"[5].

The value Ricoeur put on interpretation derived from his insight that "the symbol gives rise to the thought"[6]. He found that the phenomenon of evil could only be understood indirectly through a critical engagement with our myths about it[7] (Simms 2002, 32–33). His linguistic turn after *The Symbolism of Evil* led to his interest in Freud – to psychoanalysis as a kind of hermeneutics of the psyche – and to his critical engagement with structuralism, which he took to task for its atemporal and objectivist bias[8]. Toward the latter part of his career, Ricoeur developed a theory of textuality and discourse, which saw the world itself as textual and human beings as constantly engaged in interpretation[9].

In "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" (1975), Ricoeur sketches the possibility of an alternative both to the objectivism of the natural attitude and the subjectivism of Husserlian idealism. The main insights presented in this piece, in particular that phenomenology presupposes hermeneutics and vice versa, underpin Ricoeur's abovementioned writings in the theory of interpretation, exemplifying his own approach to concretizing the *meanings* of being. The article evinces two theses: (1) "What hermeneutics has ruined is not phenomenology, but one of its interpretations, namely its *idealistic* interpretation by Husserl himself…." and (2) "Beyond a mere opposition, there exists between phe-

5 Ibidem, p. 27.

6 P. Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, New York 1967, p. 352.

7 K. Simms, "Chapter 4: Metaphor", [in:] *Routledge Critical Thinkers*, 61–77. n.p.: Taylor & Francis Ltd/Books, 2002. Literary Reference Center, EBSCOhost [accessed: 1.11.2014].

8 D. Pellauer, op. cit., pp. 44–57, *passim*.

9 K. Simms, op. cit., p. 31.

nomenology and hermeneutics a mutual belonging which is important to explicate"[10].

Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology is particularly applicable to the interpretation of texts produced after what Mitchell[11] calls the "pictorial turn." With the proliferation of the visual in media, a philosophical lens for critical analysis becomes important, in that the visual cannot be explicitly reduced to a logical proposition. Its meaning can even be subliminal and often controversial. It can also be laden with ideological assumptions, as for example when feminists critique certain works of art as having been produced through the male gaze[12]. Sequential art or comics, as a genre of visual art, can be meaningfully elucidated by a hermeneutical phenomenology that pays attention to its formal elements – e.g. imagery, timing, framing, etc. – as these relate to the expression of concrete human experience. It is to this subject that I turn in the next section.

Comics: Formal elements, issues, and theories
On definitions

Let us start with the word "comics" itself. It suggests levity; after all, its singular form, "comic," functions as an adjective that describes something humorous[13]. In the context of American culture, comics connotes a superficial or low art form. If you consider the history of the English language, however, Harvey[14] argues that the term "cartoon" is more precise than "comics." The former derives from the Italian word *cartone* which means card – after the designs etched on sheets of cardboard that are then transferred onto walls or cloth, as a preliminary study for the final work. Cartooning only attained the sense of the comical through the drawings of American newspaper cartoonists, first published in Sunday

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[10] P. Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and hermeneutics", *Noûs* , 1975, IX, p. 85. JSTOR. Web. 16 Jan. 2015.

[11] W.J.T. Mitchell, "The Pictorial Turn", [in:] *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago 1994, p. 11.

[12] See: J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London 1972.

[13] R. Harvey, "Describing and Discarding 'Comics' as an Impotent Act of Philosophical Rigor", [in:] *Comics as Philosophy*, ed. J. McLaughlin, Jackson 2005, p. 16.

[14] Ibidem, p. 25.

magazine supplements in New York in the 1890s, which were primarily meant to entertain and elicit humor[15].

Nowadays, "comics" can refer to a wide range of literary forms, not all of which are funny or trivial, and many of which may feature mature, abstract, and highly intellectual content. Despite its misleading connotation of humor, the term remains in widespread use. For this reason I use it interchangeably with "sequential art," whose more scholarly sense calls attention to comics' formal elements and relationship with other art forms. "Sequential art" has been popularized by Will Eisner, whose prodigious work in the American comics industry during its inception contributed to its evolution, in both style and content, toward the complex medium that it is today.

Given the broadness of "comics," it is necessary to mention the more nuanced terms that fall under its umbrella. Comics is a catchall term for a static print or digital medium primarily characterized by the mix of verbal and visual components, which can refer to the comic strip, the single-panel cartoon or comic spot such a *New Yorker* cartoon, comic books, and graphic novels. Finally, one more special term needs to be explained, namely "manga." Manga is simply the Japanese term for comics, and refers to the specific style of comics made in Japan. Manga's processes of production and cultural reception differ markedly from those of English-language comics, as will be explained in detail in a succeeding section.

Will Eisner: A poetics of comics

Many introductory books comprehensively discuss the formal elements of comics, such as Eisner[16], McCloud[17], Bongco[18], Saraceni[19], and Groensteen[20]. All works are scholarly, although the first two enjoy the

[15] Ibidem, pp. 23–24.

[16] W. Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, Florida 1985.

[17] S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, New York 1993.

[18] M. Bongco, *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero in Comic Books*, New York and London 2000.

[19] M. Saraceni, *The Language of Comics*, New York 2003.

[20] T. Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. B. Beaty, N. Nguyen, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi 2009; idem, *Comics and Narration*, trans. A. Miller, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi 2015.

most authoritative status; they are cited by every other introductory book on the comics form. Not only are they pioneering, but they are also written by comics practitioners themselves. Eisner in particular shaped the development of the graphic novel. His works mark the boundary between the early incarnation of American comics and the more serious and variegated forms that are studied by scholars today. McCloud's book, though unique in that it is itself entirely rendered in comics form, essentially elaborates on Eisner's insights and theses. The following discussion will present Eisner's framework for understanding comics as sequential art.

Eisner discusses at least five formal elements, providing examples from his own work to illustrate each one. In this way, his book *Comics and Sequential Art* becomes a poetics of comics, an artistic manifesto, an instructional manual, and a guide for criticism all at the same time.

One element is *imagery*. Eisner[21] observes that words and images, the two major "communicating devices" of comics, have a single origin. Letters started out as pictographs, and the Chinese art of calligraphy demonstrates the stylistic dimension of writing itself[22]. Even key images in comics may be based on a basic symbol; for example, the "worship symbol" as an Egyptian hieroglyph and a Chinese character mimics the posture of an individual kneeling and praying. The symbol, when fleshed out as an image, is infused with specific emotional qualities depending on the lighting, atmosphere, and other verbal and visual amplifications[23]. He notes,

> By the skilled manipulation of this seemingly amorphic structure and an understanding of the anatomy of expression, the cartoonist can begin to undertake the exposition of stories that involve deeper meanings and deal with the complexities of human experience.[24]

In keeping with words and images as a unitary phenomenon, images themselves can function *as* words. Examples include postcards being used as verbal/visual devices to frame a story, and onomatopoeic words such as "bang!" functioning as images[25]. Images may also be presented

[21] W. Eisner, op. cit., p. 13.
[22] Ibidem, p. 15.
[23] Ibidem.
[24] Ibidem, p. 16.
[25] Ibidem, pp. 17–19.

without words, as in the case of a pantomimic sequence, an artistic feat that presumes a relative sophistication on the part of the reader in interpreting inner feelings[26].

A second element is *timing*. Eisner[27] waxes philosophical as he describes time as an essential structure of human experience, which in itself makes it a key element in the art of comics. The panel (sometimes also referred to as the frame or box), the caption, and the speech balloon may all serve as time indicators; the panel more so in that it contains the action and hence illustrates the duration of an event. More panels indicate compressed time[28].

A third element, related to the previous one, is *framing*. Just as time or duration is integral to human experience, perception occurs in frames or episodes. A comics panel freezes "one segment in what is in reality an uninterrupted flow of action"[29]. The reader's imagination fills in the empty space between panels, called the gutter.

The element of framing in comics invites comparisons to theater and cinema. Like the theatrical stage, a comics frame presents a scene populated by actors or characters[30]. But unlike the cinematic frame which is the product of technology, the comics frame is part of the creative process itself[31]. Recording a scene and editing a video require more mechanical intervention than comics paneling, in which the narrative illustration is edited in the artist's mind and then rendered directly on the page. A key difference of comics from live action media is that, given a static page around which the eye can freely roam, the comics artist has less power over the audience's perceptual experience. Thus, the panel becomes a "medium of control" that directs the reader's manner of viewing scenes[32]. This control may be exercised in several ways.

First, the panel embodies the artist's choice of focus: the full figure of a character may be shown, as opposed to medium or close-up. When only a sequence of heads is shown, it is presumed that the reader imagines the rest of each figure outside the borders[33]. As a slice of reality,

[26] Ibidem, p. 24.
[27] Ibidem, p. 25.
[28] Ibidem, p. 28.
[29] Ibidem, p. 39.
[30] Ibidem, p. 89.
[31] Ibidem, p. 38.
[32] Ibidem, p. 40.
[33] Ibidem, pp. 42–43.

the panel may also adopt different perspectives – e.g. a worm's eye view or a bird's eye view – which may convey a sense of alarming nearness or objective distance, respectively[34].

Second, the page itself may be utilized as a meta-panel; it can function as a full frame in the case of the splash page, or divided into different-sized or -shaped boxes which are themselves determined by the timing and rhythm of the action[35]. The rich examples taken from Eisner's *Spirit* series attest to the range of his artistic style and the exciting possibilities of the comics page.

Finally, the artist can play with panel borders as narrative devices. For example, a wavy border can serve as a past time indicator while a cloudlike one suggests a thought or a memory. A jagged frame conveys an emotionally charged situation; a long panel provides the illusion of height; a panel out of which a character bursts can magnify the sense of threat[36]. A panel outline can be absent entirely to suggest unlimited space, whereas the opposite – confinement – can be conveyed by using a doorway as a panel edge[37].

A fourth element is *expressive anatomy.* Eisner[38] considers the human form the most universal image in the arsenal of the comics artist, citing its historical importance in culture from ancient cave paintings and hieroglyphics to professional acing to the art of deciphering body language in pop psychology. Gestures and postures are meaningful the world over, and facial expression in particular is a "window to the mind," or indicator of personality[39]. To prove his point, Eisner[40] provides a detailed analysis of a short artistic exercise in which a ghetto denizen – sporting a headband and shabby clothing – enacts scenes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* on a rooftop in New York. Despite the unusual combination of Shakespearean language and ghetto atmosphere, emotions are genuinely rendered through the character's gestures, postures, and facial expressions. The essence of *Hamlet* is retained.

A fifth and final element is *writing.* This encompasses not just the production of words, but more importantly, the bigger picture of crea-

[34] Ibidem, p. 90.
[35] Ibidem, p. 80.
[36] Ibidem, pp. 45–46.
[37] Ibidem, p. 47.
[38] Ibidem, pp. 100–103.
[39] Ibidem, p. 109.
[40] Ibidem, pp. 112–121.

tive authorship: idea conception, image arrangement, sequence construction, and dialogue composition[41]. In view of this expanded definition, Eisner[42] notes,

> [...] there is therefore no choice (in fairness to the art form itself) but to recognize the primacy of the writing. In doing so, however, one must then immediately acknowledge that in a perfect (or pure) configuration the writer and the artist should be embodied in the same person. The writing (or the writer) must be in control to the very end.

In actual practice, however, comic book production may entail the collaboration of writers, pencillers, inkers, letterers, and colorists. If the writer and artist were different people, the process may follow two steps: first, scriptwriting (which lays down the story idea, narrative, and dialogue, and possibly some artistic direction); and second, the artist's interpretation of the script. Despite not being the writer herself, the artist may deviate from the script and take a hand in storytelling. For example, she may choose to omit narrative that can be demonstrated visually, or she may enlarge a sequence of panels in the service of timing[43].

Talking points for an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art

There are several areas in the multidisciplinary field of comics studies that are of special interest to the hermeneutical phenomenologist. The studies I cite below come from diverse disciplines such as autobiography studies (on comics and the autobiographical subject), cognitive science (on comics and theory of mind), and sociology (on comics and popular cultural memory). Comics studies encompasses a vast amount of literature and the theories I present here have been selected on the basis of their relevance to certain aspects of Ricoeur's method. My aim is to trace the intersections between the unique features of comics and the intersubjective meanings that can be derived from historical lived ex-

41 Ibidem, p. 122.
42 Ibidem, p. 127.
43 Ibidem, pp. 132–133.

perience – i.e. the main concern of hermeneutical phenomenology. I end with a list of critical questions to ask toward a Ricoeurian interpretation of sequential art.

El Rafaie's[44] work on the autobiographical subject of graphic memoirs (i.e. autobiographical comics) resonates with Ricoeur's hermeneutic critique of phenomenology. Autobiographical comics first proliferated via the underground comix movement of the 1960s, which was conducive to "confessionals" that addressed all manner of taboo subjects[45]. This comics genre is characterized by serious or heavy themes drawn from real life; a highly stylicized autobiographical "I"[46]; and the absence of a clear boundary between memory and fiction. In her exhaustive study, El Rafaie lists three theses about how comics artists produce the "I" of graphic memoirs. These involve (1) embodiment, (2) temporality, and (3) authenticity:

> […] the requirement to produce multiple drawn versions of one's self necessarily involves an intense engagement with embodied aspects of identity, as well as with the sociocultural models underpinning body image. The formal tensions that exist in the comics medium – between words and images, and between sequence and layout, for instance – offer memoirists many new ways of representing their experience of temporality, their memories of past events, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Furthermore, autobiographical comics creators can draw on the close association in Western culture between seeing and believing in order to persuade readers of the truthful, sincere nature of their stories[47].

In underscoring shifting modes of embodiment in the graphic representation of the self in comics, El Rafaie's analysis echoes Ricoeur's caveat that self-knowledge, from the point of view of hermeneutical phenomenology, remains doubtful. The distantiation between the narrating and narrated selves occurs through the artist's graphic interpretation of her own changing body – an hermeneutics of body image, if you will. Meanwhile, El Rafaie's observations about the unique way that the comics medium allows the memoirist to render past, present, and future affirm the

[44] E. El Rafaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*, Jacson 2012.

[45] Ibidem, p. 36.

[46] M.A. Chaney, "Introduction: Graphic subjects", [in:] *Critical essays on autobiography and graphic novels*, ed. M.A. Chaney, Wisconsin 2011, PDF e-book, p. 7.

[47] E. El Rafaie, op. cit. p. 4.

phenomenological description of time offered by Merleau-Ponty and discussed by Ricoeur. Such a phenomenology of time indicates a movement toward historicity. This is evident as the graphic memoir, an account of its subject's unique experience of temporality, itself becomes an artifact or text of history and is eventually liberated from authorial intention. Finally, El Rafaie's conclusion about authenticity recalls Ricoeur's rejection of the direct intuition of essences in phenomenology. Authenticity in comics hinges on the principle that believing someone's story entails seeing the facts for oneself, for example through drawn images. But the images are not the things themselves. In place of direct intuition, Ricoeur suggests that there is always a textual mediation – e.g. the text of comics – between consciousness and meaning.

Another study, Zunshine's[48] work on the various ways that comics presume and cater to the viewer's instinct for mind-reading, is relevant to hermeneutical phenomenology. Mind-reading here does not pertain to psychic ability, but to the theory of mind, i.e. a principle in cognitive science. The nature of the human mind is such that it assumes or imagines a consciousness similar to its own when confronted with the behaviors and activities of others. Zunshine[49] writes that it is the theory of mind that makes our pleasure possible in various cultural activities, such as reading novels, watching ballet, attending the theater, participating in team sports, and – last but not least – viewing graphic narratives (Zunshine's terminology for comics). Studies show that someone who has little to no theory of mind, such as a sufferer of Asperger's Syndrome, cannot appreciate complex narratives involving social situations, i.e. texts that demand a high level of "sociocognitive complexity"[50]. For example, appreciating what's at stake in the plot of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, a classic novel of manners, requires an awareness of subtext. Subtext is not immediately discernible in the literal content of characters' conversations or in the causal relations between events in the story. To truly understand a work like *Pride and Prejudice*, the reader must first attribute feelings, desires, aspirations, and the like to the main characters, even and especially if the story is not told from these characters' point of view.

[48] L. Zunshine, "What To Expect When You Pick Up A Graphic Novel", *Substance: A Review Of Theory & Literary Criticism*, 2011, 40.1. Literary Reference Center. Web. 25 Dec. 2014.

[49] Ibidem, p. 116.

[50] Ibidem, p. 118.

Fiction, and graphic novels in particular, typically deal with third-level sociocognitive complexity or higher[51]. In her analysis of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Tragicomic*, Zunshine[52] identifies several levels of complexity: the self trying to read other characters' minds (first level), as narrated by the author or comics artist (second level), who also reflects upon the scene as a memory from the perspective of the present, i.e. the time of writing (third level). Graphic narratives or comics are distinctive in their relationship with the theory of mind, because they are

> artifacts that coordinate text and images so that the information about people's feelings that we get from looking at their body language elaborates, contradicts, or otherwise complicates the verbal description of their feelings.[53]

Thus, a special way of reading or interpreting comics is in order, and hermeneutical phenomenology – in light of Zunshine's insights about the theory of mind – may be the most appropriate method. Hermeneutical phenomenology shares with cognitive science an anti-solipsistic stance. It presumes intersubjectivity given the nature of consciousness as an activity that is always other-orientated; or, in Ricoeur's hermeneutical reading of Husserl, consciousness is always meaning-oriented. In the phenomenological reduction, the question of existence is bracketed, thereby dissolving the problem of skepticism (about the world, about other minds). Hermeneutical phenomenology goes one step further and *interprets* the existence of other people through engagement with texts. An hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art therefore takes heed of the sociocognitive complexity involved in understanding the motivations of characters, which may entail careful attention to the subtext of word-image juxtapositions.

A final study that is relevant to a Ricoeurian interpretation of sequential art is Kukkonen's[54] work on the relationship between comics and popular cultural memory. The study takes off from Jan Assman's

[51] Ibidem, p. 120.

[52] Ibidem, p. 121.

[53] Ibidem, p. 116.

[54] K. Kukkonen, "Popular Cultural Memory: Comics, Communities And Context Knowledge", *NORDICOM Review*, 2008, 29.2, pp. 261–273. Communication & Mass Media Complete. Web. 25 Dec. 2014.

idea of collective memory, which includes (1) the communicative memory of living people, and (2) cultural memory which is embedded farther back in history. The idea of cultural memory is extended to *popular* cultural memory in relation to comics. Popular cultural memory has three dimensions, namely: the social, which pertains to the audience; the material, which refers to media texts; and the mental, which relates to codes and conventions. These dimensions, taken together, account for the ways in which identity is concretized over time, as in the case of fan communities; as well as the capacity of certain narratives to be constantly reconstructed, as in the case of the many versions of fairy tales[55].

The study contributes to a new understanding of comics in two ways. First, it shows how audience communities are created through a globalized and intercultural process of media consumption, so that, for example, the appreciation of samurai fiction for is no longer limited to Japanese readers[56]. Second, it delineates the interaction between text and context knowledge, as in the case of Hansel's story from the graphic novel series *Fables* by Bill Willingham. Here, the character of Hansel appears in 17th-century America as a serial killer in Puritan garb. Images exert a special "power of appeal" on memory, eliciting remembrance of earlier texts[57]. This is why the appearance of a familiar character in an iconic costume has an instant impact. The context knowledge of the reader is derived from membership in an audience community that has been exposed to various iterations of "Hansel and Gretel," as well as history lessons about witch persecutions in New England.

The significance of the cultural dimension of lived experience is a key assumption of hermeneutical phenomenology. Ricoeur's innovation on Husserl is to stress the interpretative –as opposed to purely descriptive – role of phenomenology in making sense of experience. Historical interpretation takes the place of universal description, although nothing new is created *ex-nihilo*. This is because texts, in the form of, for instance, Kukkonen's "popular cultural memory," predate the individual reader and shape her context knowledge.

The foregoing survey of relevant literature from comics studies reveals three main points of intersection between sequential art and hermeneutical phenomenology. The first concerns the narrative construc-

[55] Ibidem, pp. 261–264.

[56] Ibidem, p. 265.

[57] Ibidem, p. 264.

tion of the autobiographical subject, or how comics reveals the ontology of the self who tells the story. (While this aspect serves the interpretation of the graphic memoir, it is also applicable to comics generally, inasmuch as comics writers and artists bring their autobiographical selves into their work, to varying degrees.) The second concerns the way that comics situates the story of the individual against her cultural and historical contexts. The third concerns the portrayal of intersubjectivity as integral to meaning and action in comics. To flesh out a Ricoeurian method of reading comics, I will set Eisner's five formal elements of comics against these two axes of interpretative criteria. The matrix below summarizes the sorts of critical questions we may ask toward an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art:

Formal elements	Axis of autobiography	Axis of intersubjectivity	Axis of history and popular culture
Imagery	Are there any icons, shapes, or symbols used recurrently to signify the narrating self? How do such imagery convey the narrator's representation of her body? How is a history of the self rendered through familiar icons, shapes, or symbols? How do these contribute to the authenticity of the narrator's testimony?	What iconic shapes, symbols, or images are put to use in portraying the interaction between characters? Are word-images (e.g. postcards, missives, posters, onomatopoeic words, etc.) employed in illustrating relationship dynamics? What familiar body postures or shapes derived from ancient symbols are depicted to convey different types of social relationships?	What sociocultural contexts do familiar icons, symbols, and signs evoke? Are any of them specific to a genre or to a community? What changes, if any, occur in these familiar images over different historical periods? How do the artist's background and identity (race, class, sexual orientation, gender, age, religion, etc.) influence, if at all, his or her artistic style?

Formal elements	Axis of autobiography	Axis of intersubjectivity	Axis of history and popular culture
Timing	How do the changes in the narrator's body image convey duration? What formal devices are used to indicate the protagonist's experience of time? Are certain scenes extended or compressed in terms of their significance to the storyteller? How does timing in the narrative relate to the truthfulness of the account?	How are characters' changing perceptions of themselves and of one another depicted over time? How are the characters' experience of duration – interminable, slow, quick, lightning-fast, etc. – shown with respect to their various interactions? How are changes in the self and one's perception of others conveyed through introspection, imagination, and anticipation?	What conventions specific to the sociocultural setting of the story affect the depiction of duration? How is historical time rendered in the page? Are there any historical events referenced, and if so, how do they affect the timing of the narrative?
Framing	What experiences of the author loom large as a result of formal choices in framing? How is the narrator's body image portrayed variously in scenes framed as a recollection, fantasy, or anticipation? How is framing used in the service of authenticity in storytelling? Are hallucinations and false or unreliable accounts marked in the choice of panel border style?	How are the characters' perceptions of each other and of themselves framed in the story? Are any scenes framed as a character's thought, memory, speculation, fantasy, narration, etc.? How do the size, shape, and size of the individual panels relate to the status or situation of each character?	Are there any historical or culturally specific events, persons, or ideas that are focused on or shown through distinctive paneling devices? How does the type or style of panel borders relate to the social and historical setting? What culturally specific characteristics or concepts are evoked by the utilization of the page as a meta-panel? What cultural or social messages, if any, predominate in splash pages?

Formal elements	Axis of autobiography	Axis of intersubjectivity	Axis of history and popular culture
Expressive anatomy	What type of body image is revealed by the narrator's facial expressions, affectations, movements, and the like? How does the represented body change over time? What is the degree of actual resemblance between the narrator-character and the author-narrator? What does this signify in terms of the author's self-representation?	How do the characters' facial expressions, gestures, and body postures reveal how they feel about themselves and others? Do the characters' physical appearances vary based on point of view? How are the physical attributes of characters depicted in remembrance, introspection, fantasy, or imagination? Are the characters shown to communicate through body, in addition to verbal, language? If so, what does this body language say about the nature of their relationships?	What messages about race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, religion, nationality, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity are conveyed by the portrayal of the body? What ideological assumptions, if any, are conveyed or critiqued through the depiction of facial expressions, gestures, body postures, and body shapes? Are there any cultural stereotypes that are reinforced or debunked?
Writing	What can be deduced about the protagonist or narrator based on the tone or style of storytelling in the captions? How does dialogue contribute to the representation of the narrator's self? Is the story presented as an authentic testimony or otherwise?	What can be deduced about the characters' relationships with each other through the caption narration and dialogue? What main theme or idea is offered about self and other? Is the story pessimistic or optimistic about human relationships?	What central theme, issue, or argument is presented in the story? How is it related to the historical and cultural contexts of the work? Do the captions and dialogue serve as a historical or cultural critique? How does creative collaboration affect the central theme, idea, or argument?

The story of Gen

Barefoot Gen: A Story of Hiroshima by Keiji Nakazawa is a 10-volume *shōnen* manga series chronicling the life of a boy, Gen Nakaoka, who sur-

vives the bombing of Hiroshima. His name alludes to "the basic composition of humanity"; it is also the first half of the Japanese word *genso*, which means chemical element[58]. The series narrates not just Gen's experiences on the day of the bombing and its immediate aftermath, but also how he and his remaining family coped in the succeeding years as *hibakusha*, or literally, "those who were bombed"[59].

Although it is a work of fiction, *Barefoot Gen* is inspired by real life events. Nakazawa was six years old on the morning of August 6, 1945, the day that the American B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* dropped a 10,000-pound uranium bomb over Hiroshima, Japan. He was at school, and his proximity to a wall which collapsed and sheltered him from the worst of the blast saved his life[60]. Unfortunately his father, younger brother, and older sister were to die under the rubble of their house. His pregnant mother survived, and heard the dying screams of her husband and son as she failed to save them from the firestorm that eventually engulfed their home. Nakazawa's other brother, who had been evacuated out of town, also survived. His mother gave birth later that day, to a newborn girl who will die from starvation in a month's time.

Decades later when he was a successful manga artist, Nakazawa was moved to share his bomb experience after his mother died. The triggering event was his enraged discovery, upon her cremation, that there was very little bone left in her remains. Most of it had disintegrated over the years as a result of radiation[61]. Thereafter, he began drawing "atomic bomb manga." His first attempt was a single-issue noir detective story entitled "Pelted by Black Rain," published in 1967[62]. Works dealing with other topics followed this, and he returned to the subject in 1972 with a single-issue nonfiction work, "I Saw It," which was part of an autobiographical series by manga artists[63]. Thus, by the time the first issue

[58] K. Nakazawa, *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, ed. and trans. R.H. Minear, London 2010.

[59] L. Cameron, M. Miyoshi, "Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the World Sixty Years Later", *Virginia Quarterly Review 81*, Fall 2005, no. 4, p. 27. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost [accessed: 7.05.2015].

[60] K. Nakazawa, *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, op. cit., p. 34.

[61] Ibidem, p. 152.

[62] Ibidem, p. 154.

[63] K. Takayuki, "*Barefoot Gen* and 'A-Bomb Literature': Re-recollecting the Nuclear Experience", trans. Nele Noppe, [in:] *Comics Worlds and the Worlds of Comics: Towards Scholarship on a Global Scale (series Global Manga Studies, vol. 1)*, ed. Jacqueline Berndt,

of *Barefoot Gen* was published in *Shōnen Jump* magazine in June 1973[64], the artist had already revealed traces of his testimonial narrative in previous works.

Barefoot Gen may be divided into two parts: The first follows the Nakaoka family's struggles in prewar and wartime Hiroshima and how some of them survived the bombing and its aftermath; the second shows an older Gen reconciling himself to the deaths of his loved ones and leaving Hiroshima for Tokyo to become a professional cartoonist[65]. Only the first four volumes of the collected series were originally serialized in *Shōnen Jump*; the rest were published in public education magazines[66].

Nakazawa's story achieved considerable popularity, spawning a TV cartoon series, a live action film, and an animated film[67]. However, it was not until the 1990s that it gained widespread recognition outside Japan, after the English translation work initiated by Project Gen. This volunteer organization was founded in 1976 "as a result of an encounter between Japanese participants in the Continental Walk for Disarmament and Social Justice and Americans eager to learn about *hibakusha* experience"[68]. Nakazawa's masterpiece was both a harrowing testimony by an atom bomb survivor and a powerful argument for peace. According to Szasz and Takechi,

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Canada 2010, p. 253, [online] http://imrc.jp/2010/09/26/20100924Comics%20Worlds%20and%20the%20World%20of%20Comics.pdf [accessed: 7.05.2015].

64 K. Nakazawa, *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, op. cit., p. 163.

65 F.M. Szasz, I. Takechi, "Atomic heroes and atomic monsters: American and Japanese cartoonists confront the onset of the nuclear age, 1945–80", *The Historian*, 2007, 4, p. 748. Academic OneFile, EBSCOhost [accessed: 7.05.2015].

66 T. Lamarre, "Manga Bomb: Between the Lines of *Barefoot Gen*", [in:] *Comics Worlds and the Worlds of Comics: Towards Scholarship on a Global Scale (series Global Manga Studies, vol. 1)*, ed. J. Berndt, Canada 2010, p. 265, [online] http://imrc.jp/2010/09/26/20100924Comics%20Worlds%20and%20the%20World%20of%20Comics.pdf [accessed: 7.05.2015].

67 R.H. Minear, "Introduction", [in:] *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, ed. and trans. R.H. Minear. London 2010, p. viii.

68 Ch. Hong, "Flashforward Democracy: American Exceptionalism and the Atomic Bomb in *Barefoot Gen*", [in:] *Comparative Literature Studies*, 2009, p. 127. JSTOR Journals, EBSCOhost [accessed: 7.05.2015].

> Excluding Art Spiegelman's two-volume cartoon story of the holocaust, *Maus* – which was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize in 1992 – no American comic book publisher has produced any counterpart to *Barefoot Gen*[69].

In 2010, the artist's prose autobiography, interspersed with new illustrations and excerpts from *Barefoot Gen*, was published. It revealed striking similarities between his own life and the scenes dramatized in the fictional manga. At the end of the book, Nakazawa[70] expressed his plans to travel to places such as Chernobyl, Nevada and Three Mile Island, Bikini Island, Auschwitz, and Nanjing, and to write about his experiences in "further installments" of *Barefoot Gen*. Unfortunately, cataract forced him to cancel this project in 2009[71]. He died from complications due to lung cancer on December 19, 2012.

An hermeneutical phenomenology of *Barefoot Gen*

In this section, I will be applying the critical questions I identified earlier, which represent the intersection between the formal elements of comics according to Eisner[72] and the key features of Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology. I hope to present a critical reflection on Nakazawa's manga that is based on a new theory of comics interpretation, one that emphasizes the autobiographical, cultural and historical, and intersubjective dimensions of lived experience.

I group my remarks into three main themes: (1) resilience and rebirth through a proverbial baptism of fire; (2) the evils of war and militarism; and (3) the human being's capacity for violence against others, including the other side of that capacity – unconditional love.

The first theme is clearly expressed by the symbol of wheat, which appears on the first page (see figure 1). Gen, his younger brother Shinji, and his father are standing over the family's small field of wheat months before the bombing of Hiroshima. The captions of the first two panels read,

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[69] F.M. Szasz, I. Takechi, op. cit., p. 750.

[70] K. Nakazawa, *Hiroshima: The Autobiography of Barefoot Gen*, op. cit., pp. 171–172.

[71] "Barefoot Gen's Nakazawa Drops Sequel Due to Cataract", *Anime News Network*, 2009, [online] http://www.animenewsnetwork.com/news/2009-09-15/barefoot-gen-nakazawa-drops-sequel-due-to-cataract [accessed: 7.05.2015].

[72] W. Eisner, op. cit.

> Wheat pushes its shoots up through the winter frost, only to be stepped on again and again. The trampled wheat sends strong roots into the earth, endures frost, wind and snow, grows straight and tall and one day bears fruit.[73]

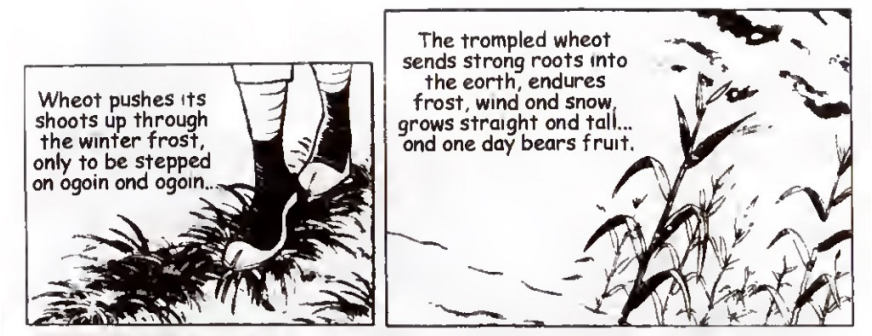

Figure 1. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

The first panel shows a pair of child's feet treading on young shoots of wheat; this is followed by an image of rows of wheat stalks standing tall, shown from the perspective of the ground, emphasizing their height and solidity. Later in the story, because of Gen's father's vocal criticism of the war effort, the Nakaokas are ostracized as traitors in their village, and their wheat field is vandalized[74]. But although it takes years to grow again, the wheat does reappear, and is in fact one of the last images in the closing pages of the last volume.

Like this hardy plant, the Japanese before, during, and after World War II also endured enormous violence and destruction, but emerged from the experience renewed. Japan's military ambitions were crushed and their nation humbled when American atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Hiroshima alone, more than 140,000 people perished and 70,000 buildings leveled. An area of four square miles from the epicenter of the detonation was almost completely obliterated. But fifty years after, during the height of *Barefoot Gen's* international

[73] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1, with an Introduction by A. Spiegelman, San Francisco 2004, p. 1.

[74] Ibidem, p. 86.

popularity, Hiroshima was a thriving city once more and it had become an advocate of global peace and nuclear disarmament[75].

Indeed, *Barefoot Gen* is the story not just of the individual characters, but also of the Japanese people themselves. Japan is known as the land of the rising sun, its flag featuring a red circle on a white background. This association is emphasized by the sun as a dominant symbol, which appears more than twenty times in the first two volumes alone. Lamarre considers this image as evidence of *Barefoot Gen*'s darker undertones, in direct opposition to the characters' "cuteness," an influence of Osamu Tezuka's Disney-like style:

> The darker modalities associated with gekiga appear... in the recurrent image of the sun that punctuates the manga without reference to the story's actions or characters' emotions. The sun is a thoroughly perplexing evocation of the power of the bomb, the emperor (his mythic status of descedent of the sun goddess), the passage of time, and the fecundity and brutality of the natural world, all of which collectively perplex the manga in their figural coincidence[76].

The sun tells the reader whether it is morning, noon, late afternoon, or dusk. Its ubiquity and highly variable appearance heighten the sense that days are passing quickly. Sometimes, it underscores the interminable hardships that the characters are going through. At other times the disc hangs ominously in the sky, usually preceding a cataclysmic event in the story.

In some places it evokes hope and exuberance, as in a two-page spread (figure 2) where Gen, having found some food during the aftermath of the bombing, boards a riverboat on his way back to his mother and newborn sister[77]. The sun is depicted in an unusual way here, large, shaded, and half-covered by dark clouds. At the center of the spread is Gen aboard the boat, which is bobbing on churning waters. The sun, about to set, glows in the upper right corner of the page while its rays extend to the horizon, toward Gen. The triumphant tone of this illustration is all the more striking as the previous page shows Gen's depart-

[75] T. Gup, "Up from Ground Zero: Hiroshima", *National Geographic 188*, August 1995, 2, pp. 82–92.

[76] T. Lamarre, op. cit., p. 291.

[77] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, with an Introduction by A. Spiegelman, San Francisco 2004, p. 125.

ing feet leaving imprints on the shore, which is strewn with skeletal remains. In spite of the evidence of death that he walks through, he sails across the river under the day's last defiant light.

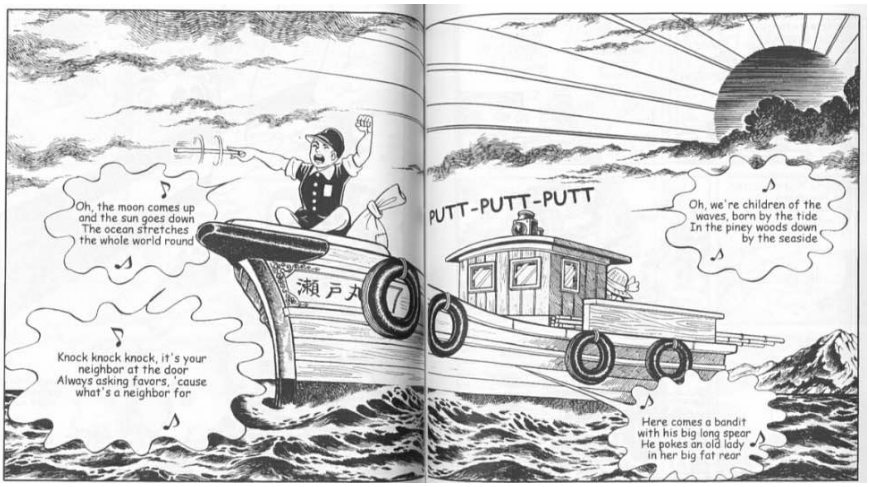

Figure 2. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

Apart from the wheat and the sun, another important symbol of resilience and rebirth is the element of fire. The immense heat released by the bomb caused conflagrations, which razed everyone and everything that were left. The following historical account describes hell on earth:

> The bomb exploded over the city with a brilliant flash of purple light, followed by a deafening blast and a powerful shock wave that heated the air as it expanded. A searing fireball eventually enveloped the area around ground zero, temperatures rose to approximate those on the surface of the sun, and a giant mushroom cloud roiled up from the city like an angry gray ghost.[78]

In *Barefoot Gen*, there are horrific splash pages of a burning horse[79] and of victims running from the flames, while the heads and limbs of people pinned under their houses are shown in the foreground[80].

[78] M.J. Hogan, "Hiroshima in History and Memory: An Introduction", [in:] *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, ed. M.J. Hogan. New York 1999, p. 1.

[79] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 256.

[80] Ibidem, p. 271.

These are not the only places in the story where fire appears prominently. In the second volume, Gen helps his neighbor, Mr. Pak, cremate the latter's father. Gen discovers that the human body, as it goes up in flames, curls up like fish on a grill[81]. A few pages later, he strikes out for the location of his old house in order to retrieve the bones of his father, brother, and sister. As he digs through the charred ruins, he relives their last moments, trapped and screaming for help as fire consumed them. Eventually, Gen finds and gathers their bones and skulls. Testimonies like Nakazawa's – as they could only have been made by those who lived through fire, like the fabled phoenix – attest to the paradoxical nature of this element as the force of both destruction and recreation. Fittingly, the first volume ends with the image of Gen's newborn sister (figure 3) – delivered on the day of the bombing – being help up triumphantly against a backdrop of fire and smoke[82].

[81] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 173.
[82] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 284.

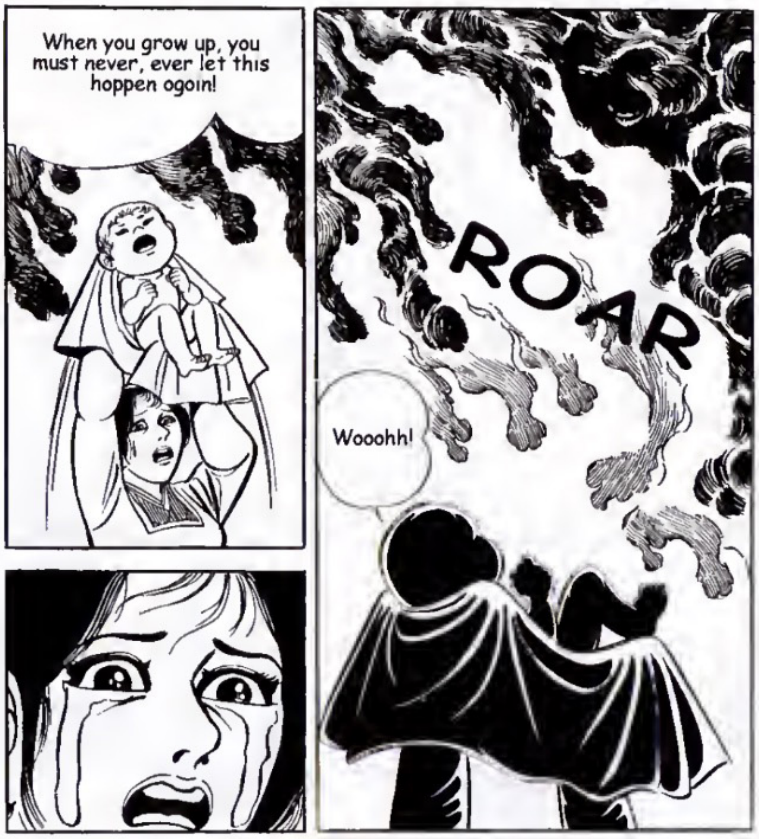

Figure 3. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

The second theme, the evils of war and militarism, is explicitly conveyed through narration and dialogue. The story is a forceful critique of the people's conformity to the Japanese imperial system and its single-minded appetite for war. In the opening chapter of the first volume, Gen's father argues with the trainer during a civilians' spear drill. Before walking out, he states,

> America has more resources than Japan does. A small country like Japan can only survive by foreign trade. We should keep peace with the rest of the world. Japan has no business fighting a war! The military was misled by the

rich. They started the war to grab resources by force, and drew us all in…. You're all sick with war fever! This war is wrong![83]

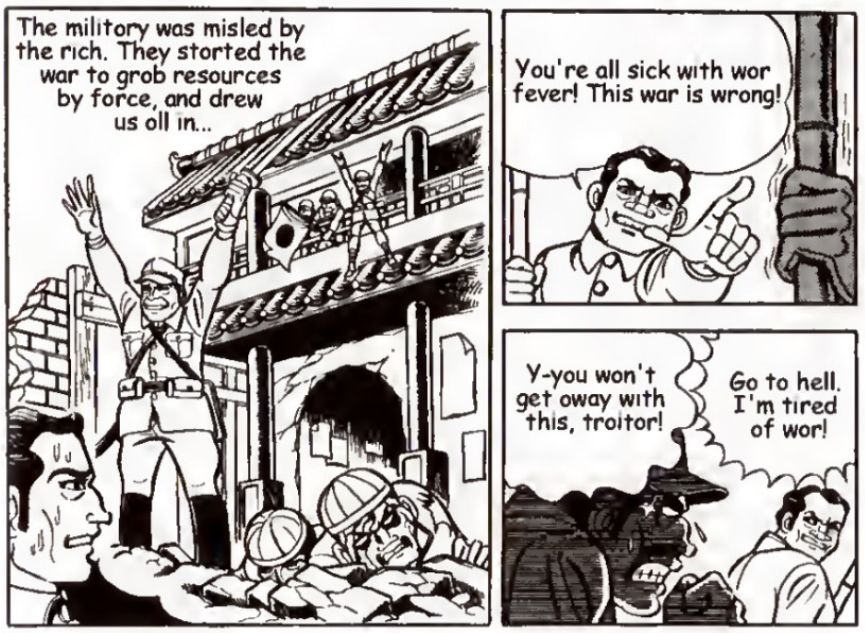

Figure 4. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

This ideological thesis permeates the first volume and is validated in several ways. The first is through the persecution of Gen's family in their community, especially after his father is arrested as a political dissenter. The pernicious groupthink that Gen's father has denounced becomes evident as storekeepers refuse to sell them food, other children taunt Gen and his siblings for being traitors, and Gen's sister is falsely accused of theft at school. Another way in which the anti-war message is reinforced is through the story of Gen's older brother, Koji, who survives to join the Japanese navy. However, at the naval base, he encounters a belligerent drunk – a senior officer who later reveals that he is condemned to die as a kamikaze pilot, a fate he is dreading. A few pages later, as Koji arrives at a training center, the narration reads,

[83] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 13.

> The prep pilot courses held at Naval Air Corps bases throughout Japan recruited boys age 15 to 17 who dreamed of flying and wearing the smart seven-button uniform. As the war neared its end, each class boasted nearly 3,000 volunteers. Used like so many human bullets, their young lives were snuffed out one after the other.[84]

But the manga's most obvious argument against war is the portrayal of its cumulative effect on the populace: Gen and his siblings are depicted as constantly starving. People live in fear of air raids. And of course, the bombing of Hiroshima unleashes unimaginable suffering on those who have not been killed instantly in the explosion. These hardships related to the nuclear experience are at the heart of Nakazawa's work as a *hibakusha* testimony.

The humanist and pacifist message of *Barefoot Gen*, however, is criticized by Hong[85] as being infected with "American exceptionalism," or an implicit support for "an American-sponsored democracy-to-come premised on US military intervention." The manga was produced more than three decades after the conclusion of World War II , long after the Japanese themselves had denounced their former leaders and blamed them for their hardships. Thus, the critical tone of the story, set at a time before this national attitude fully crystallized, exemplified an anachronistic "flashfoward reading" of the bombing as a necessary evil[86]. Moreover, the manga as a medium for mass entertainment transformed the "testimonial comics image" into a "prosthetic memory" that erased historical differences and failed to truly take the US to task for its atomic bombing of Japan[87].

I disagree with Hong's reading for two reasons. The first is that *Barefoot Gen* should be read in the context of its predecessor, "Pelted by Black Rain" (1966), whose hero, Jin, is an assassin targeting Americans who are trading weapons in the black market. According to Szasz and Takechi[88], this manga "presages all the qualities that would later go into *Barefoot Gen*, and its no-holds-barred accusations against the Americans are boldly stated." Situating the story in terms of Nakazawa's atomic bomb manga oeuvre shows that it condemns all those responsible for

[84] Ibidem, p. 162.

[85] Ch. Hong, op. cit., p. 128.

[86] Ibidem, p. 139.

[87] Ibidem, p. 145.

[88] F.M. Szasz, I. Takechi, op. cit., p. 747.

any possible nuclear apocalypse, and the US is not an exception. Second, if *Barefoot Gen* is read in relation to the literature of war manga in Japan, its subversive message becomes more conspicuous. The genre of war manga in Japan may be broadly divided into two periods: the late 1950s to the late 1960s, characterized by a hegemonic narrative that valorized Japan's military past; and the late 1960s to late 1970s, which saw an increasingly critical attitude toward the heroic war narrative, re-envisioning the war years as disastrous[89]. *Barefoot Gen* falls squarely into the latter, and its denunciation of Japanese militarism and the imperial system may not be the product of an incipient "American exceptionalism" so much as of historical circumstances.

To reduce the political message of the story to a simplistic allegiance to the democratic values of a mightier nation is to obscure the uniqueness and complexity of *Barefoot Gen*, a testimonial manga that challenges pat dualisms about responsibility for war. Its takes an unflinching look at the misery of kamikaze pilots, long dismissed as brainwashed drones through a Western lens; the social persecution of anybody critical of the imperial system; and the dehumanizing treatment of forced laborers from Korea. Japan's hands are not clean, indeed. On the other hand, the atomic bomb itself, created by American scientists and dropped by an American plane on military personnel and civilians alike, is a reflection of the source nation's unmitigated power and aggression. It unleashed a violence directed at military personnel and civilians alike, Japanese and non-Japanese, including American prisoners of war. After Gen and Shinji paint big black P's on the roof of their house, which they have noticed the American POWs doing with their buildings, Gen says, "Now our house won't get hit by enemy planes!"[90]. The reader gets a sense of the futility of this effort. After all, it is known that the bomb will obliterate practically all of Hiroshima and kill or severely injure everyone on it.

This brings us to the third and last theme: the human being's capacity for violence against others (as well as its anti-thesis, unconditional love). *Barefoot Gen* is unquestionably a violent story and a story about violence, on both facetious and fundamental levels. On one hand, the casual way that characters hit, slap, shove, wrestle, stab at, bite, or otherwise try to physically harm others may be easily explained by the conven-

[89] E. Nakar, "Framing Manga: On Narratives of the Second World War in Japanese Manga, 1957–1977", [in:] *Japanese Visual Culture: Explorations in the World of Manga and Anime*, ed. M.W. MacWilliams. New York 2008, pp. 178–191.

[90] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 178.

tions of *shōnen* manga, a genre aimed at young boys and which frequently feature "'fascination for war-related items,'" "'the striking prevalence of depictions of violence,'" and "'the main characters' resolute fighting for their beliefs'"[91]. Indeed, the slapstick quality of the many instances of abuse – which occurs as frequently between intimates as between strangers – is a familiar trope in boys' manga and anime, such as *Dragon Ball, Slam Dunk*, and *Naruto*, to name a few. On the other hand, *Barefoot Gen* also depicts a form of violence that manifests itself in technological and institutional ways. I find this of more interest from an hermeneutic phenomenological point of view.

An overt example is the use of the atomic bomb itself against the unsuspecting population of Hiroshima – a historical event depicted in a work of fiction with considerable testimonial authority. Nakazawa[92] brings home the human toll of this catastrophe by juxtaposing long views of depopulated images delineated with clinical precision (a fleet of bombers planes preparing for flight, Enola Gay cruising over the city and dropping "Little Boy," the resulting cloud – see figure 5), and stark images of personal suffering (people with melted faces and skin, or impaled by tiny glass shards; the streets strewn with debris). This parade of grotesqueries continues in the second volume as Nakazawa[93] depicts rotting corpses floating in the river, their bellies popping open with putrid gas; maggots hatching from inside open wounds; people being burned alive under the ruins of their houses. Such images challenge any abstract rationalization of the use of the atomic bomb under any circumstances.

Aside from its incarnation through nuclear weaponry, this dehumanizing violence also occurs through the mechanism of social institutions such as the military state and the culture of deification that revolves around the Emperor. The line between individual choice and social coercion is blurred, as when an entire village turns against its members who are perceived as traitors[94]; young boys are pressured into sacrificing their lives for the military cause[95]; and the Japanese are encour-

[91] T. Lamarre, op. cit., p. 265, quoting Itō and Omote.

[92] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., pp. 241–258.

[93] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, op. cit., p. 50.

[94] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., pp. 14–58.

[95] Ibidem, pp. 96–99.

aged to kill themselves rather than surrender to the occupying army[96]. Thoughtless hatred, borne of constant sociocultural reinforcement, is directed not just against critics of the war but also and especially against American prisoners. The Japanese pelt the latter with stones through their barbed wire enclosure, accusing them of having killed their family members. As Gen and his father witness this, the parent counsels the child, "Those Americans have families just like we do. War just makes people hate each other, kill each other…."[97]. After the American prisoners are themselves destroyed by the bomb, villagers curse and throw stones at a burnt American corpse[98].

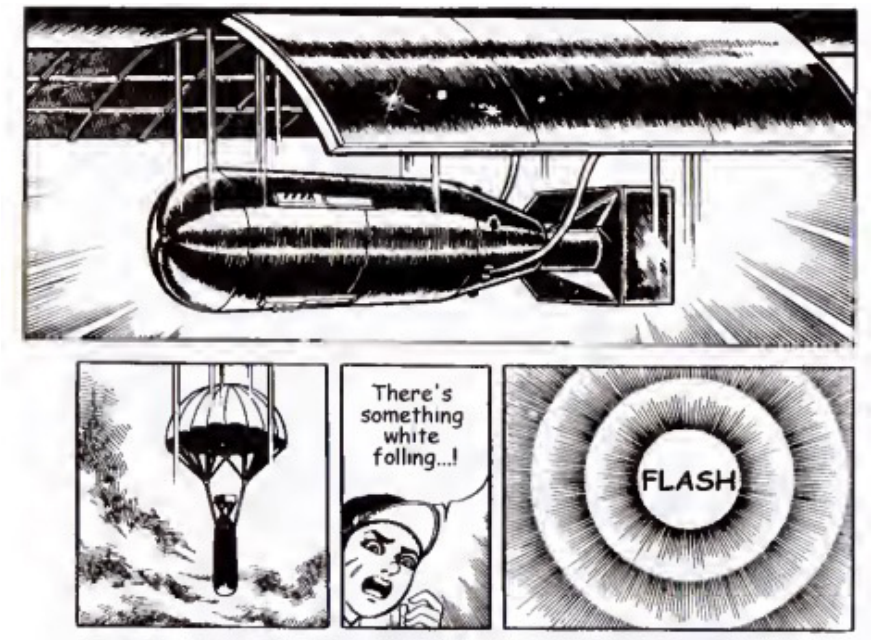

Figure 5. Image © Keiji Nakazawa. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

This methodical erasure of the other, the metaphysical violence against his or her personhood – which, philosophically, also goes by the name of "evil" – is attributed to the logic of war. Counterbalancing this, however, are instances of one character reaching out to others in what

96 Ibidem, pp. 108–109.

97 Ibidem, pp. 166–167.

98 K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 22–23.

can only be described as unconditional love. Gen's father tearfully salutes his son Koji even as the latter leaves to serve in a war that the father detests[99]; Mr. Pak, the Nakaokas' Korean neighbor, give them money for food when he himself is no better off[100]; Gen gifts Shinji with a prized toy battleship despite their personal differences[101]; and Gen tries to convince Natsue – a girl whose face is horribly disfigured by the blast – to keep on living[102]. The message seems to be that, even in the face of the most inconceivable suffering and evil, humankind is not without redemption. This notion brings the foregoing reflections to a full circle with *Barefoot Gen*'s iconic image of the wheat – a main source of staple food for the Japanese – the symbol of revitalization through adversity.

Conclusion

In this study, I have endeavored to show that a philosophical treatment of comics, a medium that has reached the peak of its maturity, has the potential to offer us new ways of thinking about ourselves and our relationship with the world. There have been many significant philosophical studies of comics, aiming primarily to (1) provide a philosophical discussion of the subject matter of comics; (2) apply philosophical concepts to narratives and themes in comics; (3) show how insights from comics could contribute to existing conversations about traditional philosophical problems; or (4) resolve puzzles related to the comics form by way of conceptual analysis. My special concern has been to outline and substantiate a way of reading sequential art – specifically, comics in its modern form – through Paul Ricoeur's method of hermeneutical phenomenology. To my knowledge, Riceour's interpretive method has yet to be applied to works that feature the special interaction of word and image, such as comics.

The framework of reading comics that I have provided relates Ricoeur's method to the formal elements of sequential art as theorized by Will Eisner. In keeping with the linguistic or hermeneutic turn that

[99] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 1., op. cit., p. 118.

[100] Ibidem, p. 186.

[101] Ibidem, pp. 226–241.

[102] K. Nakazawa, *Barefoot Gen: A Cartoon Story of Hiroshima*, vol. 2, op. cit., pp. 65–106.

Ricoeur represents in the phenomenological tradition, I focus on three relevant aspects of comics production and representation: autobiography, intersubjectivity, and history and popular culture. I have identified questions along these axes of interpretation that are relevant to ask in regard to imagery, timing, framing, expressive anatomy, and writing.

Despite its focus on these formal elements, an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art is not reducible to formalist criticism, since it also purports to contribute to our understanding of human existence. On the other hand, it also not reducible to an existentialist reading, especially because existentialist themes in comics – e.g. the self-other relation, death, the meaning (or lack thereof) of life, spirituality or transcendence, and the like – tend to be obvious and self-explanatory. Instead, the method looks into how these specific themes are conveyed through the unique meaning-making of the medium. As it makes use of cultural texts in order to interpret the structures of human consciousness, an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art is also primarily an hermeneutics of comics, a way of interpreting comics through the lens of being.

In regard to Keiji Nakazawa's biographical *Barefoot Gen* manga series, the method may be applied to elucidate on symbolic imagery as wheat, the sun, and fire, as these convey the message of resilience and rebirth through catastrophe. In addition, through the interpretive axis of culture and history as it intersects with the formal element of writing, the reader may appreciate the pacifist message of Nakazawa as a survivor of the atom bomb. This message is an unequivocal rejection of war, embodied in large part by the bomb itself and Japan's own culture of militarism. Since the proximate causes and ideological agenda behind the bombing of Hiroshima are contested issues, the hermeneutical phenomenology has been augmented with historical footnotes. However, a detailed unraveling of the relevant controversies is beyond the scope of the paper, and so it is limited to an analysis of Nakazawa's necessarily subjective presentation of this period in history. Finally, focusing on the axis of intersubjectivity as it intersects with the formal elements of expressive anatomy and narrative, it is possible to identify the ways that *Barefoot Gen* reveals the dual capacity of human beings for violence and unconditional love. The incidents that Nakazawa sketches reveal the fascinating range of human interactions, especially during wartime. The medium of manga showcases this in a particularly effective way through the visual pantomime of expressive anatomy and gesture.

Thus, an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art reveals key insights about the human condition. Among the many possible philosophical treatments of comics, it uniquely pays attention to the meanings that arise from the interaction between the verbal and the visual. Though it is not my concern here, the method can conceivably be applied to other narrative media that combine words and pictures, such as film, television, and theater.

In conclusion, Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology can make unique and specific contributions to the philosophy of sequential art and comics studies more generally, through its best features as a method of interpreting or reading comics. This paper is an attempt to provide a rigorous philosophical approach to the analysis of sequential art that draws from the twin traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics. While these traditions have been applied to the visual arts, they are rarely, if at all, brought to bear on comics. As an artistic medium, comics – with its peculiar combination of word and image – has the potential to provide new insights concerning topics that are of special interest to hermeneutes and phenomenologists. These include:

- How the interaction between text and pictures creates meaning;
- How existentialist themes (e.g. death, freedom, intersubjectivity, transcendence, the meaning – or lack thereof – of life, etc.) are communicated in comics form;
- The various ways that the self can be represented in the medium;
- How time is experienced in and through comics;
- How sequential art draws from and intervenes with historical and cultural sources;
- How moments, contexts, situations, time periods, reveries, and other units of experience are framed, broken down, or opened up in comics; and
- How canonical philosophical texts may be put in conversation with popular cultural narratives, which augment, affirm, or argue against the canon.

Existing philosophical analyses of comics focus on the content of the story, which makes the analyses themselves indiscriminate given the many forms that comics narratives can take (motion pictures and novelization, to name a couple of examples). However, there is a need to focus on the specificity of the medium in its interpretation, and hermeneutical phenomenology provides a set of adaptable heuristics to achieve that. While other ways of reading comics are apropos in light of their own ob-

jectives, the method outlined here may be used in conjunction with these other ways. Employing the "Critical questions to ask in an hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art" (see Table 1) *is only the starting point*. The answers derived can and should be used to add to, complement, enhance, or even argue against, existing readings. After all, a key strength of Ricoeur's[103] interpretive paradigm is its concern with the world's "unfolding layers of meaning," which have now taken a pictorial turn. Finally, perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of an hermeneutical phenomenology of the Ricoeurian variety is its focus on the meaning-generating relation between consciousness and the world, as lived in embodied existence. As applied to comics, this approach brings Being down to earth, as it were, at an extremely popular level. It may thus be used in teaching and popularizing philosophy, especially in regard to its more obscure and abstract precincts. Just as anyone can appreciate sequential art, so too can anyone with the willingness to read and understand get into a philosophical frame of mind, or make philosophical inquiries.

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[103] P. Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and hermeneutics", op. cit., p. 101.

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Is the Hermeneutic Interpretation of Art Erotic? A Reader of Gadamer Responds to Sontag's Challenge

Abstract

The object of the article is to assess whether the concepts of erotica and the erotic can be identified with the hermeneutic interpretation of art as understood by Hans-Georg Gadamer. The starting point of the discussion is Susan Sontag's essay 'Against interpretation', in which the concept of the erotic interpretation of art is outlined and which culminates with the author setting up a deliberate opposition between the erotics of art and hermeneutics. The present article is an attempt to present the issue of the eroticism of hermeneutic interpretation on the basis of Sontag's essay, and thus a response to the provocation contained in this essay. In the final part of the text, another possible approach to the issue of the postulated eroticism of hermeneutics is presented.

The first part of the present article is devoted to explaining what Sontag means when she writes about the erotics of art and hermeneutics. The next part will demonstrate the connections and similarities between the concept of erotic art presented by Sontag and Gadamer's concept of the hermeneutic interpretation of art. In the third part of the article I present Gadamer's proposition and answer the question of whether the hermeneutic interpretation of art can be erotic. The final part of the article is devoted to invoking additional arguments for linking erotics and hermeneutics, followed by a summary.

Key words

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Susan Sontag, hermeneutics, erotics of art, interpretation

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'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'[1] – this is the unexpected conclusion of Susan Sontag's famous 1964 essay 'Against interpretation'[2]. The article provoked me to pose a few basic questions and to undertake an attempt to find answers to them. In the present article I ask: what, in Sontag's approach, is the meaning of an erotic approach to art? Is the distinction between hermeneutics and eroticism justified? And can hermeneutics be erotic? In the present article I consider the following issues:

– how the phrase 'erotics of art' should be understood in the context of Sontag's essay, and
– whether the erotics of art must indeed replace the hermeneutics of art, that is, whether the hermeneutics of art is opposed to and has little or nothing in common with the erotics of art (as understood by Sontag, and with reference to the broader philosophical tradition).
– If, however, the hermeneutics of art could also be erotic, what would that mean? In other words, what is the hermeneutic interpretation of art and on what might its eroticism depend?

At the same time I emphasise that, based on the cited essay (the question of the interpretation of art) as well as the specific nature of hermeneutic reflection, by *the hermeneutics of art* I understand *the hermeneutic interpretation of art*, and by *the erotics of art* something that might be called *the erotic interpretation of art*. In addition, I explain that in writing about the hermeneutics of art, I refer to the position of Gadamer, which I regard as the most current and complete example of contemporary hermeneutic theory concerning artistic activity. In this article I intend to show that the opposition proposed by Sontag is extremely dubious overall, and completely unjustified with respect to the hermeneutic philosopher from Heidelberg. I also wish to show that the hermeneutic interpretation of art in Gadamer's terms is an activity which can be defined by the word *erotic* – of course, only after I have established the scope of meaning of that concept. I will list and briefly discuss the arguments for my own position.

[1] See: S. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, [online] http://shifter-magazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/ Sontag-Against-Interpretation.pdf [accessed: 10.06.2016].

[2] Sontag's essay was written in 1964 but appeared in 1966.

The Erotics of Art According to Susan Sontag

Sontag presented her views on the phenomenon of interpretation (and, indirectly, the erotics of art) in the form of an essay in a manner attractive to readers, light and free, rich in metaphor and figurative comparison (e.g. 'Like the fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities'.[3]). This is the language of theoretical expression, appealing to the feelings and emotions of readers through the language employed, as well as directly, through indicating the presumed feelings associated with the viewing of art, e.g. 'interpretation of this type indicates a dissatisfaction (conscious or unconscious) with the work, a wish to replace it by something else'.[4] At the same time it is also imprecise language, devoid of academic exactitude and confusing. The formulation 'erotics of art' appears for the first time at the end of the text, where it resonates strongly, even though the meaning of this term is explicitly explained neither before nor afterwards. The reader can only guess that what Sontag is opposing to the interpretation of art comprises what she understands as its erotics. The essay is dominated by a formulation designating the approach to art, dominant in contemporary culture, which Sontag is criticising; she calls it, simply, 'interpretation'. This 'interpretation' is very narrowly understood; that is, as Sontag herself explains, '[b]y interpretation, I mean here a conscious act of the mind which illustrates a certain code, certain "rules" of interpretation'.[5] The interpretation about which Sontag writes, then, is in principle nothing more than translation.[6] Sontag seems to subsequently identify interpretation, thus understood, with the hermeneutics of art and to set up erotics as its opposition. Unfortunately, as in the case of erotics, Sontag does not explain why this interpretation is identified with hermeneutics. Nor does she indicate which form of hermeneutics she has in mind here, nor to what hermeneutic tradition she is referring to. Sontag therefore carries out a series of simplifications and generalisations.

Despite these reservations, I will now attempt, for the purpose of analysis of the concept of hermeneutic interpretation, to reconstruct the meaning of the term 'erotics of art' in Sontag's terms. Taking her negative state-

[3] S. Sontag, op. cit., p. 4.

[4] Ibidem, p. 6.

[5] Ibidem, p. 3.

[6] Ibidem.

ments on the subject of how not to regard art as a point of departure, I will identify an intrusive, hypothetically contradictory element associated with the postulated 'erotic' approach. The final paragraphs of the essay, moreover, contain some of Sontag's positive statements regarding the desired theme, that is, the erotic method of viewing art, to which I will also refer.

The erotics of art takes as its subject the work as a whole rather than the separate elements of content and form. This means that the form of art, in this approach, is decidedly appreciated, which does not mean, however, that the content ceases to have any significance. Sontag clearly states that development and more accurate descriptions of the form and appearance of works are necessary, as well as descriptive rather than normative terminology for these procedures. But she adds that considerations of content should meld with those of form.[7] Erotic procedures, in her opinion, appreciate and disclose 'the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it'.[8] The erotics of art should thus indicate proceedings outside the rules, free, spontaneous and individual, not contained within the boundaries of any universal code. It is reasonable to ask at this point what procedures are to be discussed here: for example, a purely intellectual recording and analysis of what has been viewed, or a creative translation of what has been perceived from pictorial into descriptive language, or perhaps a game of associations, in which the work is only the point of departure? Unfortunately, we find no answers to these questions in Sontag's essay. We read instead that the erotics of art is intended to serve the work exclusively, rather than goals external to it. Nor should the activity of the viewer lead in any way to the destruction of the work – and here also we are condemned to speculate what, according to Sontag, 'destruction of works of art' is and what it is not.[9] Perhaps this refers to forgetting or degrading the works, to belittling their value through ignoring their form and content or through lax and effortless viewing and consideration. It is certain, however, that in order not to destroy art, the erotic approach is necessary – that is, one distinguished by the delicacy and mindfulness manifested towards the viewed and appreciated object. Erotic interpretation of a work is associated with expression of respect for what is available to the senses. Thus characterised, the reception of art must simultaneously be associated with a specific con-

[7] Ibidem, pp. 8–9.

[8] Ibidem, p. 9.

[9] Ibidem, pp. 4–5.

ception of the processes of understanding artworks. As we know, this cannot be understanding in the sense of interpretation within Sontag's narrow perspective, that is, exclusively a translation. Must it therefore be understanding beyond the conceptual, beyond language? This answer suggests itself here, but it seems excessively radical, and therefore unjustified. Sontag excludes translation from the area of erotic activities (described thus: 'The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really – or, really means – A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?'[10]); however, she says nothing about other forms of expression. The translation referred to here is a simple, basic form of viewing-understanding, devoid of inventiveness. Human cognitive abilities are greater and more complex, something which has long been expressed in art. Is it difficult, then, to imagine erotic writing or speaking? Less than a decade after Sontag's essay, Roland Barthes presented the answer to this question in his famous work *The Pleasure of the Text*, in which he convincingly presented an 'erotic' method of reading, writing, and speaking about art.[11]

The erotics of art, in the analysed approach, is undoubtedly associated with feelings, with the sphere of human sensitivity (Sontag writes: 'We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more'[12]). Does this statement conflict with the postulate cited above of an approach to a work which distinguishes and emphasises its formal aspects? It may seem that the emotional perception of a work is primarily related to the content of art, that is, a more or less, for better or worse, specific message included in the work. If this were true of popular intuitions, it would be all the more worth following Sontag's postulates, which are linked to a way of understanding human perception that deviates from tradition. To get closer to Sontag's intentions, one must discard thinking about 'thinking' in exclusively intellectual and visual terms, as a controlled activity associated with distance from the subject and intended to achieve specific, quantifiable, and so-called objective results.

The erotics of art means, in Sontag's view, direct experience of the work as what it simply is, as what exists independently in front of the viewer. Sontag states clearly that our culture's problem is 'hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capability'[13] and that the interpretation associated with this culture poisons human sen-

[10] Ibidem, p. 3.

[11] See: R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller, New York 1975, pp. 3–67.

[12] S. Sontag, op. cit., p. 10.

[13] Ibidem, p. 4.

sitivity. The erotic approach is to serve as the remedy: a kind of activity associated not with subordination, or, more properly, mastery of the experienced object, but with the recognition of its individuality and expression of this recognition. A work of art in this approach is to be exclusively an artwork, not a utilitarian object, not a something needed for a something-else, e.g. 'for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories'.[14]

Seemingly also important in grasping Sontag's position is the concept of transparence, which, she writes, 'is the highest, most liberating value in art – and in criticism – today'.[15] And further on: 'Transparence means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are'.[16] How is one to understand these metaphorical remarks? What might these transparent works and interpretations be? A few lines later, we read about the obviousness that accompanied ancient art and is now disappearing, as well as the clarity that once accompanied a sensory experience. Transparence, clarity, obviousness – it seems that, by invoking these concepts, Sontag is calling attention to the fundamental problem of modern art – the same problem hermeneutics is concerned with, i.e. the problem of universal lack of understanding of artworks on the part of the ordinary (i.e. non-qualified) viewer, and hence the problem of inaccessibility (and thus incomprehensibility) of art and its increasing elitism. The author calls for transparence, clarity and obviousness, which, for her, means fighting for works of art and our experience of them to be 'more, rather than less, real to us'.[17] And moreover, a well-conceived interpretation of art (i.e. in an erotic interpretation) is, in her opinion, a question of showing and discerning that a work simply exists, and also, possibly, of understanding as well *how* it exists. It cannot be a question only of inquiring what the work means. The eroticism of art is a kind of theoretical proposition, intended to provide a remedy for the problems associated with the perception of contemporary art. According to this American intellectual, we need erotics 'to see more, to hear more, to feel more'.[18] Understood thus, the aesthetic experience has little in common with disinterested viewing and pleasure according to Kant's model.

Sontag's article fails to present any exhaustive and rigorous theoretical propositions that might include a description of new tools to be

[14] Ibidem, p. 6.
[15] Ibidem.
[16] Ibidem, p. 9.
[17] Ibidem, p. 10.
[18] Ibidem.

used to improve the reception of contemporary art. Rather, the article is a collection of free insights which, though interesting, are often general, vague, and no longer very original. Moreover, many of Sontag's formulations demand substantiations which are not to be found in the article. Surprising is the almost complete omission of the viewer of art, i.e. any accounting for and description of the potential influence of the viewer on the choice of a certain interpretation rather than another, a certain understanding of a given work rather than another. Sontag's considerations are worth recalling, however, as they indicate a specific problem connected with art and indicate quite clearly the direction in which a solution is to be sought. The erotics of art, according to Sontag, constitutes, first and foremost, the complexity of this approach, which is not merely conceptual, linguistic, or emotional, but takes into account and describes the multifaceted nature of the human method of cognition, and thus also of the human experience of art. A similar understanding of human perception characterises and distinguishes Gadamer's hermeneutics. As we know, the author of *Truth and Method* is critical of the forms of rationality established in European tradition. Even Gadamer's predecessors, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Peter Yorck von Wartenburg, identify notions of reason, rationality, knowledge, science, and objects of cognition prevailing in European culture which are, in their opinion, inconsistent with human understanding. Hermeneutics proposes such a very different model of rationality that it is sometimes called a modern form of irrationalism. Arguments in favour of this statement are provided by basic hermeneutic assumptions. These include, among others, assertions about human finitude and historicity; the circular structure of understanding; the linguistic nature of human reason; the positive role of superstition and anteriority and the necessity of cultural, social, and historical contexts; a concept of practical reason and practical philosophy; and a concept of truth which is neither objective nor subjective.

This American intellectual's essay appeared in 1966, whereas Gadamer published his magnum opus *Truth and Method* in 1960 (though he continued to develop the reflections presented in this book into the 90s). Therefore these researchers presented their theoretical propositions at nearly the same time. Although Sontag concludes her considerations by presenting a decisive opposition between hermeneutics and erotics, I would like to identify and briefly describe the clear similarities be-

tween Sontag's remarks on a desired approach to art and Gadamer's remarks on the subject of hermeneutic interpretation.

Gadamer, Sontag and the Concept of the Erotics of Art

The analysis of Sontag's essay presented above constitutes a contribution to the discussion on the theme of the eroticism of hermeneutic interpretation. This, in my opinion, is a reasonable undertaking, because recalling Sontag's article in the context of contemporary hermeneutic reflection leads to emphasising the latter's potential in terms of its relevance and universality. The alleged opposition, which Sontag expresses rather sharply, assumed to prevail between eroticism and hermeneutics (as if between modern and ossified thought) applies to hermeneutics only within a narrow range, i.e. within the meaning of the old, traditional hermeneutics. However, the strong similarities between the approaches to art presented by Sontag and Gadamer (the latter being one of the most important contemporary philosophers dealing with hermeneutics) show, in my opinion, hermeneutics in a more current and contemporary form. The problem associated with the viewing of modern art which Sontag points out in her essay has not yet been resolved. In this article I wish to emphasise, *inter alia*, that the author of *The Relevance of the Beautiful* also attempts to respond to the challenges posed by the latest art. In a wider context (exceeding the scope of this article) I am interested as to whether his answers are merely theoretical digressions, inapplicable to the field of actual artistic practice, or whether they possess practical value. Sontag and Gadamer are astonishingly similar in terms of the direction of the solutions being sought. But whereas Sontag presents only the draft, in the form of a free paraphilosophical essay, of a proposal for a new way of interpreting art, Gadamer, in a number of other works, develops and constructs a comprehensive philosophical theory. Therefore, I treat Sontag's essay exclusively as a kind of introduction to the discussion on the eroticism of hermeneutic interpretation, while the main subject of my discussion is Gadamer's reflections.

It is worth noting that Gadamer referred to Sontag's article in an article of his own, 'The Artwork in Word and Image: "So True, So Full of Being!"', first published in English in 2007. In the opinion of the Heidelberg philosopher, Sontag, in her work, accurately pointed out weaknesses of the contemporary and most widespread method of interpreting art. Gadamer also correctly stated that, in his opinion, the general approach

to artistic works was not properly linked with basic scientific methodology, and as such prevented a given work from being fully presented. Moreover, according to Gadamer, Sontag pointed out with equal accuracy that proper presentation of a work should mean that it should 'appear in its own light'.[19] This is one of a number of her comments which correspond to the hermeneutic approach.

It should be noted here as well that Sontag's and Gadamer's methods of constructing theoretical statements are similar in certain respects. Gadamer uses metaphor and formulates judgments with a high degree of generality as readily as the American intellectual, and, like her, employs a light, colourful style eschewing scientific accuracy and precision. I am unable to settle here what might be meant by the phrases 'the luminousness of the thing in itself' or 'to appear in its own light'; I can only point out their metaphorical nature and ambiguity. I will return to the issue of the 'luminousness' of artworks in the section on Gadamer's views on interpretation.

The considerations presented by Sontag in the essay 'Against interpretation' concerning the contemporary way of viewing art – which renders proper presentation of works impossible and denies their viewers actual experience of them – are consistent with the views of Gadamer on the poor state of contemporarily formed aesthetic consciousness and the results of this approach.[20] Gadamer, like Sontag, deplores the relationship – devoid of respect, delicacy, and sensitivity – of the contemporary viewer to art. And, like Sontag, he points out that the consequences of this cannot be positive, because interpretation carried out in this manner impoverishes reality and the work itself, reducing it to specific finite content. Even more surprising, then, is the American scholar's declaration: 'In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art'.[21]

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[19] See: H.-G. Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image: 'So True, So Full of Being'", trans. R.E. Palmer, [in:] idem, *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writing*, ed. R.E. Palmer, Illinois 2007, p. 219. For the German version of the article, see: H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Lesebuch*, ed. J. Grondin, Tübingen 1997. Along with his insights on brightness, the luminousness of art, and interpretation, Gadamer rightly invokes the figure of Martin Heidegger, who had stated much earlier that 'every interpretation must overlucidate' [in:] H.-G. Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image...", op. cit., p. 219.

[20] See: "Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804)", [in:] C. Lawn, N. Keane, *The Gadamer Dictionary*, New York 2011, pp. 85–86.

[21] See: S. Sontag, op. cit., p. 10.

It is difficult, of course, to explicitly determine why Sontag sets up such an opposition, which could be justified only if we were to combine the hermeneutic approach with the principles of biblical exegesis and legal hermeneutics, or with traditional models of interaction – psychological, historical, immanent – with text. In these cited approaches, interpretative efforts aim at the establishment of a single correct explanation. Sontag seems to adopt this rather narrow, colloquial, and simply mistaken conception of hermeneutics. While it is fully understandable, and probable, that Sontag simply did not manage to read *Truth and Method* before writing her essay, she certainly should have been familiar with the writings of Heidegger. The way in which she used the term *hermeneutics* demonstrates, unfortunately, either ignorance regarding hermeneutic reflection or conscious use of the most basic meaning of the term to strengthen her own message. Regardless of the reasons for her approach to the issue, Sontag's statement is provocative, because Gadamer's proposition (like those of other hermeneutists) are far from the conclusions cited above, which are not accepted today. What is more, at certain points Gadamer's hermeneutic proposition is close to what the American scholar writes about interpretation – which may mean that the hermeneutics of art is simultaneously its erotics.

In Gadamer's hermeneutics, there are repeated references to the necessary sensitivity of viewers, as well as the harmfulness of the methodological (in the sense of the scientific method) approach applied to the interpretation of artistic creations. Moreover, one can state that Gadamer's proposition is close to Sontag's approach in two more important respects, as demonstrated and described by Arthur Danto in one of his essays, namely in his specific view of anti-intellectualism and literariness. About Sontag and the work 'Against Interpretation', Danto wrote that she

> […] is here an anti-intellectual, stating that the work gives us everything we need to know about it, on the condition, however, that what we seek is a literary experience: we just have to pay attention to the work. According to this understanding of interpretation, the artist is definitely not in a privileged position.[22]

[22] A.C. Danto, "Ocena i interpretacja dzieła sztuki", [in:] *Świat sztuki. Pisma z filozofii sztuki* [*The world of art: writings from art philosophy*], ed. and trans. L. Sosnowski, Cracow 2006, p. 172. [Originally: A.C. Danto, "The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art", [in:] idem, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York 1986].

I identify the anti-intellectualism cited by Danto with the manner in which Sontag conducts her theoretical reflections, the literariness with the nature of aesthetic experience – and we find, in my opinion, both in Gadamer as well. There is no space in the present article for a precise analysis of this issue; I note only that what I have in mind here is the expanded concept of rationality which occurs in Gadamer's hermeneutics as well as the nature of hermeneutic interpretation in his approach, i.e. an activity just as creative as literature itself and one which, in addition, often makes use of the same means and figures as literature does.

When contact with art is described in terms of eroticism, it is impossible not to link it to the sphere of feelings and emotions, and consequently impossible not to see it as a dynamic, variable, but also individual experience. The erotics of art must therefore be a potent and poignant experience. And in this context it must be emphasised that when Gadamer differentiates art from all unscientific, so-called humanistic, experiences, he indicates precisely the intensity of the experience of viewing a work of art. He writes that art has an exceptionally strong impact on its viewers, because it moves and stimulates them, addressing, as it were, each of them individually. In *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics* we read that a work 'says something to each person as if it were said especially to him, as something present and contemporaneous'.[23] Later, we read that, moreover, that when we view art 'as an encounter with the authentic, as a familiarity that includes surprise, the experience of art is experience in a real sense'.[24] I think, taking this perspective into account – when speaking of 'experience in a real sense', about an 'encounter', about the idea that a piece of art 'says something […] as if it were said especially to him' – that the identification of hermeneutic interpretation as erotic should not surprise us.

Of course, aesthetic experience in the hermeneutic approach is connected, as we know, with understanding, with grasping the sense or the truth of a work, and, as such, it is an intellectual activity. However, one must bear in mind the expanded concept of rationality employed by Gadamer, as mentioned above. When we read in the writings of the Heidelberg thinker about experiences of authenticity and the obviousness associated with aesthetic experience, as well as the contemporaneity and

[23] H.-G. Gadamer, *Aesthetics and Hermeneutics*, p. 3, [online] http://thinkingtogether.org/rcream/archive/old/S2005/127/gadamer.pdf [accessed: 10.06.2016].

[24] Ibidem.

timeliness of every such experience or the inexhaustibility of artworks, I think it is reasonable to suppose that the word *erotic* may help us to correctly grasp his thought. In seeking the causes of the exceptionally strong influence of art on its viewers, we find ourselves as well on the trail of the 'eroticism' of art and aesthetic experience. This is not without reason, since Gadamer proclaims in his works the currency and relevance of beauty, as well as the relevance of questions about art.[25] Art is able to influence its viewers so powerfully because it is beautiful, and beauty, as we know from Plato, attracts the eye, creates love and desire, begetting the desire to know (which is also acknowledged as a form of possession) what appears to us as beautiful.[26] I will return to this issue in the final part of the text.

Hermeneutic Interpretation of Art

According to the hermeneutic approach, a work of art achieves real or legitimate existence only in the private experience of the individual, i.e. when, as a result of an encounter with a work of art, the viewer begins a special game: the game of understanding what has been viewed, heard, or felt. It is precisely this game between the viewer and the work that is identified in hermeneutics as interpretation. In none of his works does Gadamer state directly how to conduct this game; he offers no precise guidance on how to interpret artworks, how to describe, analyse, or understand them, or how to experience them.[27] Nonetheless, the philosopher maintains that he is trying to lead viewers of artworks to another, fuller experience of art. In his 'Introduction' and 'Foreword to the Second Edition' in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer explains that his goal is not to con-

[25] See: H.-G. Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful", [in:] idem, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. N. Walker, ed. R. Bernasconi, Cambridge 1986, pp. 3–53.

[26] On the nature of Eros as presented by Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, see: D.L. Roochnik, "The erotics of philosophical discourse", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, April 1987, 4, 2, pp. 117–120.

[27] The word *experience* is not used here casually, but belongs, as we know, among the basic concepts of Gadamer's hermeneutics and also pertains to the phenomenon of interpretation; the experience of art, which relies on a specifically conceived interpretation, is in fact an exemplary hermeneutical experience. See: "Experience", [in:] C. Lawn, N. Keane, op. cit., pp. 47–48.

struct a research method for the humanities on the model of the scientific method.[28] Such an attempt would indeed, in his opinion, be doomed to failure. Hermeneutic interpretation is too complex, subtle, individual, and hence also changeable, to be determined and exhausted by means of one specific set of rules. This does not mean, however, that we cannot speak of such things as hermeneutic method or hermeneutic interpretation. In his work, Gadamer formulates a series of hints and guidelines which, taken together, constitute a picture of specific methods and interpretation.

Interpretation in the hermeneutic approach is, therefore, neither an additional procedure supporting or developing cognition, nor a kind of purely intellectual exercise, but is rather the right – because it is the only possible – way of being a cognising human being. In other words, it is the human way of experiencing the world, natural, inherent, perhaps even instinctive. It is thus impossible, in this kind of interpretation, to distinguish between understanding and application.[29] Understanding, interpretation, and application constitute a uniform hermeneutical process, the aim of which is experience of the truth.[30] Understood thus, interpretation itself becomes one of the most important concepts in philosophy; what is more, it takes on an ontological character, since, like hermeneutic understanding, it is itself a way of being human. Interpretation therefore defines both a human being, as one who interprets, and the entire reality of his or her life, which can be known only through the process of interpretation.

Interpretation, understood in this way, cannot lead to finite and final results. Thus hermeneutics states that there is neither a first nor last,

[28] See: H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, eds. and trans. J. Weinsheimer, D.G. Marshall, New York 2004, pp. XX–XXXIV. [Original: H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1960].

[29] See: "Understanding and Interpretation", [in:] C. Lawn, N. Keane, op. cit., pp. 148–153.

[30] The notion of hermeneutic truth is a topic for a separate, extensive discussion for which there is unfortunately no place in the present article. For selected articles on this topic, see: B. Wachterhauser, "Getting it right: relativism, realism and truth", [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. R.J. Dostal, Cambridge 2002, pp. 52–78; J. Grondin, "Gadamer's Aesthetics. The Overcoming of Aesthetic Consciousness and the Hermeneutical Truth of Art", [in:] *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. M. Kelly, New York–Oxford 1998, vol. 2, pp. 267–271; F.J. Ambrosio, "Dawn and Dusk: Gadamer and Heidegger on Truth", *Man and World*, 1986, 19, pp. 21–53; A. Ergüden, "Truth and Method in Gadamer's Hermeneutic Philosophy", *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, Spring 1988, 8, 'Interpretation and Hermeneutics', pp. 6–19.

a most important, most accurate, or most appropriate interpretation of a given item, issue, or artistic product. Subsequent interpretations constitute an element of a larger system, and interpretation itself signifies process or movement; it is an experience that takes time. Worthy of note is Gadamer's emphasis on the idea that, while artworks do not lend themselves to an arbitrary approach, it is possible and desirable to evaluate the accuracy of their interpretations. However, how such an assessment is to be carried out, and what criteria it is to be based on, is already a separate (and quite problematic in light of Gadamer's writings) matter.

The purpose of the interpretation of art is to reach the truth of a given artwork. This truth does not equate, however, as we know, to the achievement of a finite and objective result. In principle, we know very little more about this truth and are able to say or write even less. It must be like this, because interpretation in Gadamer's approach is itself a way to experience the world, and as such is historical and finite – and hence on a human scale – and can be neither objective nor subjective. As we read in *Truth and Method*:

> The experience of art acknowledges that it cannot present the full truth of what it experiences in terms of definitive knowledge. There is no absolute progress and no final exhaustion of what lies in a work of art. The experience of art knows this of itself.[31]

A well-conceived interpretation in hermeneutics is linked with the actual experience of art. Therefore such an interpretation cannot rely first and foremost – or exclusively – on explanations of the meaning of a work of art for oneself or for others. It is, rather, a personal experience linked to cognitive effort and emotional reception of the work. The alienation and distance characterising the consciousness of modern man shaped in the spirit of modern science are replaced here by the experience of belonging and participation.[32] Gadamer also speaks in this context about the disappearance of the noticeable and usually impassable gap existing between one human being and another, between a human being and a work of art, between a human being and the truth. And this means, in his view, that thanks to the ef-

[31] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 86.

[32] For more on the experience of alienation of aesthetic and historical consciousness, see H.-G. Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" (1966), [in:] idem, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. D.E. Linge, Berkeley–Los Angeles 1977, pp. 3–17. [Original: H.-G. Gadamer, "Die Universalität des hermeneutischen Problems" (1966), [in:] idem, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 2, 1986, pp. 219–231].

forts undertaken in interpretation, 'you and I are no longer trapped in our differences'.[33] It is worth emphasising that hermeneutical interpretation, if expressed in writing or speech, must necessarily bear the hallmarks of the 'private' world of the interpreter-viewer, yet simultaneously transcend his or her subjective horizon. Therefore creative involvement, inventiveness, and the interpreter's own contribution should, in my opinion, be regarded as indispensable elements of hermeneutic interpretation.

Let us reiterate that hermeneutic interpretation understood in the spirit of Gadamer must differ from interpretations and descriptions of works defined as expert, academic, or aspiring to objectivity, precision, or full compliance with the material accumulated on a given theme. As cited by Paul Ricoeur, an individually understood belief or will is required for, and enables, all understanding. Accordingly, the French philosopher also stated (and, in my opinion, this can also be applied to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics) that what is rather barbarously called the epistemology of interpretation 'seeks a return to naivety [since, as he added] we may have lost the original naivety of those who proclaimed the great myths, but in interpreting we seek critical naivety, which uses a whole arsenal of means and methods of exegesis so that what the original, fundamental language preached might speak and exist'.[34] Gadamer wrote in this context about good will, as being necessary and making an appearance wherever understanding is sought, and thus wherever an attempt is made at interpretation.[35] When speaking about the will, is it reasonable to enquire about the source of its stimulation, the reason for its appearance? Eros, love, desire – these certainly constitute one possible answer.

In referring specific statements on the topic of interpretation to the problem, basic in terms of aesthetics, concerning the mode of existence of works of art, we come to the conclusion that they gain their own existence precisely in interpretation – or through interpretation, in the

[33] H.-G. Gadamer, P. Ricoeur, "Konflikt interpretacji" [The conflict of interpretations], trans. L. Sosnowski, [in:] *Estetyka w świecie* [World aesthetics], Vol. IV, ed. M. Gołaszewska, Cracow 1994, p. 61.

[34] P. Ricoeur, "Konflikt hermeneutyk: epistemologia interpretacji" [Hermeneutic conflict: an epistemological interpretation] [in:] idem, *Egzystencja i hermeneutyka* [Existence and hermeneutics], Warsaw 1975, p. 83.

[35] See: H.-G. Gadamer, "Text and Interpretation", trans. R. E. Palmer [in:] idem, *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. R. E. Palmer, Evanston, Illinois 2007, p. 172. [Original: "Text und Interpretation", [in:] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 2, Tübingen 1986, pp. 330–360].

course of interpretation. R. E. Palmer, too, writes in this way about the hermeneutic understanding of art in his introduction to Gadamer's article 'The Artwork in Word and Image: "So True, So Full of Being!"'. In it, we read: 'Here we see the hermeneutical character of Gadamer's thinking about art. It is in the interpretation that the work has its being'.[36] How these statements should be understood (i.e. whether we are talking about the existence of a work of art in general or about its existence or non-existence in the minds of viewers) and what consequences may arise from this approach are extremely interesting issues, well worth considering. However, because they exceed the scope of the present article, I leave them unresolved here.[37]

Summing up the above characterisation, I will mention the following features of hermeneutic interpretation which, in my opinion, serve to define the word *erotic*. Comparing Gadamer's reflections with the views of Sontag, it can be said that: (1) hermeneutic interpretation cannot be reduced to a set of rules or to a certain pattern; (2) it is, moreover, as in Sontag, a free, dynamic, and variable process; (3) it is equally an individual, private, and complex experience; (4) furthermore, it is an experience involving the intellect and emotions of the recipient; (5) moreover, hermeneutic interpretation, like erotic interpretation in Sontag's terms, equally serves the full presentation, and even the existence, of the work; (6) as in the work of the American intellectual, remarks on light and illumination in the context of the presentation of works of art appear as well in Gadamer's work.

The last point that I mentioned, concerning how to characterise the issue of eroticism of the experience of art, leads the present considerations beyond the context of 'Against Interpretation' towards a broader philosophical tradition. In the final and concluding part of the article, I would like to briefly introduce the issue of the erotics of art in connection with the concept of beauty and the Platonic concept of Eros, with

[36] H.-G. Gadamer, "The Artwork in Word and Image…'", op. cit., p. 193.

[37] In the context of this topic, i.e. the link between interpretation and the existence of a work, it is worth analysing Gadamer's remarks concerning the hermeneutic identity of works of art. While the philosopher devoted only a few pages of 'The Relevance of the Beautiful' to this issue, yet he formulated a number of important statements. See: H.-G. Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful", op. cit., pp. 25–31.

reference to an interesting article by Daniel L. Tate, published in 2015 under the title 'Erotics or Hermeneutics'.[38]

'I Say That I Understand Nothing Other Than *Ta Erotika*' (Plato, *Symposium*, 177D8)

Gadamer emphasised the uniqueness and primacy of beauty in relation to hermeneutic issues, including the concept of rationality and understanding contained therein and the manner of existence and influence of art. The final pages of *Truth and Method* concerning the universal aspect of hermeneutics are, in fact, devoted to beauty, as well as light and brightness.[39] Important in this context is Gadamer's 1974 essay, 'The Relevance of the Beautiful'. Writing about beauty, Gadamer points out that it attracts a human being directly and immediately by virtue of the light that is present within it. The nature of the human soul is such, therefore, that it yearns for and directs itself towards beauty. The philosopher also explains that beauty needs nothing beyond itself in order to present itself; beauty is directly visible. Beauty exists in the same way as light, which means as well that its radiance is intrinsic. Beauty that manifests itself in something sensual – e.g. in a work of art – makes that sensual thing better, meaning more clearly visible. What is more, beauty is not confined to the realm of the exclusively visible, because it is also a vehicle for the appearance of good and truth. In beauty, the sphere of the conceivable is articulated. This relationship between the illumination of beauty and the clarity of what is understandable guides hermeneutic concepts. The hermeneutic experience, a prime example of which is the experience of art, partakes, according to Gadamer, of the same nature as the experience of beauty. This means, among other things, that the truth revealed in interpretation demands to be acknowledged without scientific proof. Furthermore, what penetrates to the viewer during this experience is seen in some sense as obvious, i.e. as unquestionable. Thus, this approach to the experience of art transcends what is logically conceivable.

The linking of beauty with cognition and its identification as a source of cognitive curiosity make express reference to the Platonic tradition

[38] D.L. Tate, "Erotics or hermeneutics? Nehamas and Gadamer on beauty and art", *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, 2:1, pp. 7–29, DOI: 10.1080/20539320.2015.11428457.

[39] See: H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., pp. 469–484.

and to the appearance therein of love at beauty's side: erotics.[40] Issues regarding the significance of the Platonic interpretation of the concepts of beauty (*kalon*) and love (*eros*) in relation to Gadamer's hermeneutics have been exhaustively presented and developed by Daniel Tate in the article mentioned above. The author argues there in favour of developing or supplementing Gadamer's considerations in terms of the position of Alexander Nehamas, who 'revives the Platonic view of love as the "passionate longing" for the beautiful that, he claims, better characterises our engagement with art than the idea of "disinterested pleasure"'.[41] Recalling and developing the position of Plato on the subject of Eros leads to a better understanding of the nature of both beauty itself and experience thereof, and may also help us to attain a fuller grasp of the hermeneutical experience of art. The latter task seems still valid and current today, for what Gadamer writes about the hermeneutic interpretation of art transcends simple and traditional approaches.

There is no space in the present article for a precise reiteration and analysis of the considerations of Tate, which would indeed constitute unjustified translation and repetition. My intention here was to raise the issue of the erotics of art in the context of hermeneutic reflection and to attempt to link erotics with hermeneutics based on an analysis of the concepts of hermeneutic interpretation. I have achieved these objectives in the previous sections. The modest task of the present article was also, among other things, to show that the issue of the hermeneutic interpretation of art has not yet been fully developed and discussed. I have attempted to indicate those elements of Gadamer's reflections which, in my opinion, demand explanation and development (given that, after all, according to the hermeneutic approach, the former always must of necessity involve the latter). Could it be, then, that it is erotics that stands in need of hermeneutics – since, precisely, 'love […] elides any easy distinction between the sensual and spiritual, between the desire to possess and the passion to know – just as beauty cannot be captured in distinctions between what is and what appears'?[42]

[40] On the meaning of the term 'erotic' in reference to the Platonic tradition see: D.L. Roochnik, op. cit., pp. 117–129.

[41] D. L. Tate, op. cit., p. 7.

[42] Ibidem.

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"Epistemological Reading": Stanley Cavell's Method of Reading Literature[1]

Abstract

Not many readers will recognize *Disowning Knowledge: Seven Plays of Shakespeare* by Stanley Cavell as either a piece of philosophical writing or literary criticism, so it may be useful to ask what method Cavell uses to read literature, what are the main features of his approach, and whether he has a coherent view on what reading literature means. I examine Cavell's interdisciplinary eclecticism, the feature which makes his work so original, and I describe his moving away from the British and American analytic tradition in which he was trained to other sources of inspiration, especially Thoreau. I also stress the important fact that Cavell does not avoid autobiographical motifs in his writings, the style of which derives to some extent from the Jewish tradition of storytelling. In his writings Cavell declares his adherence to an ahistorical approach, maintaining that in a sense philosophy is trans-historical. In many of his books the central issue is the challenge that skepticism poses, and he endeavors to make a convincing case against it. Although Cavell's work covers a broad range of interests, including tragedy and literature, as well as Romantic poetry, Shakespeare, Henry James and Samuel Beckett, I try to answer the question of why his analyses of skepticism in literature focus especially on the works of Shakespeare.

Key words

Stanley Cavell, method of reading literature, literature, skepticism, literary criticism, analytic philosophy

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Many authors, for example Graham Bradshaw and Millicent Bell, have discussed Shakespeare's skepticism.[2] Given this context, it is worth asking what makes Stanley Cavell's book *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*[3] particularly eye-opening and inspiring. Which method of textual interpretation does he use – or has he developed his own method? If that is the case, what should we call this method? Can we assume that it is an original way of employing hermeneutics in postmodern discourse, or is Cavell perhaps using a close reading method, as developed from the hermeneutics of ancient works?

As many critics claim, Cavell challenges the dichotomies of analytic philosophy and continental philosophy,[4] theories of literature and philosophical commentary, and philosophy on the practical aspects of life as opposed to philosophy as a purely academic exercise. However, I would not fully agree with those who present him as highly successful and appreciated in his intellectual endeavors. In my view, Cavell is paving a path of his own which is leading him away from mainstream philosophy and various literary theories. His eclecticism is astonishing, yet is he truly interested in answering the questions that most modern scholars ask themselves within their disciplines? Instead, has he not constructed his own method, writing – and thinking – across various approaches, topics and disciplines? Doesn't his approach vary depending on what he is reading? In his work on Shakespeare and poetry he encourages his readers to rethink topics like the role of the author, the act of reading as a process, the relationship between literature and philosophy, as well as the relationship between ordinary language, literary language, and

[2] M. Bell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*, Yale and London 2002; G. Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism*, Brighton, 1987; H. Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne. Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet*, Oxford 2002; R. Strier, "Shakespeare and the Skeptics", *Religion and Literature*, 2000, 32; B. Pierce, "Shakespeare and the Ten Modes of Scepticism", *Shakespeare Survey*, 1993, 46; A. Gilman Sherman, "Disowning Knowledge of Jessica, or Shylock's Skepticism", *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900*, 2004, 44. For the cultural context of skepticism in Shakespeare's times, see "Skepticism in Shakespeare's England", Shakespearean International Yearbook 2 (2002).

[3] S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, Cambridge 2003.

[4] D. Rudrum claims that "Cavell's philosophy succeeds in accommodating the 'ordinary language' tradition of J. L. Austin and Ludwig Wittgenstein with the 'continental' tradition from Kant to Derrida and the American tradition of thought represented by Emerson and Thoreau." D. Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, Baltimore 1974, p. 1.

performative utterances. In addition, he questions the status of literary characters, the meaning of characters and words themselves, the role played by ethics and politics in literary study, and the role played by autobiography in the process of writing and reading. Doesn't that sound like the representatives of many theoretical schools? However, an attempt made to classify Stanley Cavell as a representative of any of these schools would be rather unconvincing. Therefore, I agree with David Rudrum, the author of an inspiring book about Stanley Cavell titled *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, when he writes:

> For an academic reader Cavell is thus difficult in a disconcerting way. In a nutshell, if Cavell's writings on literature show us anything, it is that no serious student of either literature or philosophy can rest on the laurels of a predefined theoretical or methodological approach to his or her subject. Insights into texts from either field are not to be gained by bringing ready-made answers to them. In this respect, Cavell is emphatically not a literary theorist, and if readers of this book hope or anticipate that its task is to expound some kind of "Cavellian theory of literature" or "Cavellian literary theory," they will be – and quite possibly deserve to be – disappointed: such terms are vapid oxymorons.[5]

Cavell himself acknowledges his debts to materialism, deconstructionism, feminism and new historicism, but at the same time he writes: "I want to be able to encounter the Shakespearean corpus with a free mind."[6] However, a free mind seems to imply ignorance. In fact, it is quite the opposite. In his writing, he also draws on a liberal selection of motifs, argumentation and questions derived from various disciplines. His writing is also broadly influenced by his experience of art. As he says himself, he "seeks to reconcile the discipline of traditional academic philosophy with a range of other humanistic disciplines, including psychoanalysis, film, music, the arts, and, above all, literature."[7] This large field of interests makes him one of the most versatile and original American philosophers of our time.

If, according to the aforementioned critics, Cavell is so successful in his intellectual reconciliations, why is he constantly being ignored by lit-

[5] Ibidem, p. 4.

[6] S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 1.

[7] Ibidem.

erary scholars, film experts, and literary theorists? Why is he neglected in most discussions held among Shakespearian scholars?[8] Is this so, as Rudrum suggests, because of his declared lack of one particular approach? Rudrum observes that while literary theories claim the need to translate or adapt the idioms, hypotheses and thoughts of particular thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Lacan or Bakhtin into a method of reading various literary texts, Cavell seems to manage his close reading without a specific jargon. Neither does he appear to deem it necessary to construct a Derridian, Foucauldian, or Bakhtinian literary theory. Nor does he develop a specific theory of his own, a "Cavellian" literary theory.[9] Even when he uses some of their textual strategies, his reading cannot be defined by them. He has a strategy of his own. Cavell calls his reading "epistemological," and frames it in the terms of "new literary-philosophical criticism."[10] I shall now describe the main features of this method.

Cavell's Hermeneutics

There are at least two main features of Cavell's method of thinking. First, he distinguishes between intuition and hypothesis, and refers to his own thinking as an instance of intuition. Both intuitions and hypotheses require – each in their own way – what we could call confirmation or continuation. While a hypothesis requires evidence, intuition requires not so much "evidence" as a kind of understanding.[11]

Secondly, in each of his essays Cavell concentrates on the philosophical concerns that a given text evokes. He stresses that he is not illustrating any philosophical problems with examples derived from – in this case – Shakespeare:

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[8] See D. Rudrum: "Cavell's writings on literature have been neglected, or at any rate underappreciated, by literary critics and theorists." Also Michael Fischer, the first to address Cavell's "neglect by American literary theorists." See also Garrett Stewart's remark: "some of the most passionate and commanding essays on literary aesthetics and literary value to be found anywhere in the postwar critical canon," D. Rudrum, op. cit., p. 4.

[9] Cf. ibidem, p. 3.

[10] S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*? *A Book of Essays*, Cambridge 1976, p. 110.

[11] Cf. S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 4.

> The misunderstanding of my attitude that most concerned me was to take my project as the application of some philosophically independent problematic of skepticism to a fragmentary parade of Shakespearean texts, impressing those texts into the service of illustrating philosophical conclusions known in advance.[12]

Stanley Cavell's writing is an extraordinary example of a peculiarly constructive and creative engagement of philosophy and literature.

> I become perplexed in trying to determine whether it is to addicts of philosophy or to adepts of literature that I address myself when I in effect insist that Shakespeare could not be who he is – the burden of the name of the greatest writer in the language, the creature of the greatest ordering of English – unless his writing is engaging the depth of the philosophical preoccupations of his culture.[13]

He studies authors ranging from Thoreau to Beckett to explore "the participation of philosophy and literature in one another."[14] Asked by Borradori if he considers himself a writer or a philosopher, Cavell answers:

> There's no question in my mind that my motivation, ever since I can remember, has been to write. In music, it was to write. When music fell apart for me, it's not exactly that I thought the writing I did was bad. I felt it wasn't anything I was saying, just something I had learned to do. The road that took me to philosophy was an attempt to discover a way to write that I could believe.[15]

No wonder, then, that the fundamental question Stanley Cavell explicitly poses at the end of *The Claim of Reason* (and also implicitly in *Disowning Knowledge*), is "can philosophy become literature and still know itself?" Although Cavell obviously distinguishes between philosophical

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12 Ibidem, p. 1.

13 Ibidem, p. 2.

14 Idem, *In Quest of Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago 1988, p. 12.

15 G. Borradori, "An Apology for Skepticism", [in:] eadem, *American Philosopher. Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, Chicago, p. 129.

criticism and literary criticism, he would probably not apply this distinction to his own writing. However, he does note that every philosophy produces criticism directed against other philosophers, or against common sense in general[16].

As Cavell tells us in *The Claim of Reason*, his aim is "to help bring the human voice back into philosophy."[17] But what does this mean specifically? Since his encounter with J.F. Austin, to whom he dedicates an extensive description in *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*, Stanley Cavell has gone deeply into analytic philosophy, the so-called "philosophy of everyday use," as demonstrated in various interviews. Frequently, Cavell underlines that his thinking concerns the evaluation of everyday life and ordinary language. Austin himself made an enormous impression and exerted a lasting influence on the young Cavell, both in their encounters during his stay at Harvard as visiting professor, and also through his books, particularly in *How To Do Things with Words*. Cavell was also fascinated by Austin's withdrawal from an attempt to construct an ideal language and his "quest of the ordinary;"[18] and finally, by Austin and Wittgenstein showing that some problems in philosophy come from misunderstandings of the language of everyday use. If we treat analytic philosophers as completely absorbed by the search for precision in formulating problems, Cavell would undoubtedly count as one of them. On the other hand, if Scott Soames is correct in emphasizing the clarity of the intellectual approach of a given philosopher, then Cavell, with his original and complicated, apparently flexible syntax and sentence structure, diverges very considerably from the clarity and precision that are the epitome of the claims of analytic methods.

Cavell on Shakespeare

Although Cavell never shirks his responsibility for his own words, some parts of his analysis of Shakespearean texts included in his *Disowning Knowledge* seem provocative, as he intentionally engages the reader in

16 Cf. S. Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, p. 152.

17 This is how Cavell describes his main aim in *A Claim of Reason*: "If I had had then to give a one-clause sense of that book's reason for existing it might have been: 'to help bring the human voice back into philosophy.'" S. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy. Autobiographical Exercises*, London and Cambridge, Massachusetts 1994, p. 58.

18 See idem, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, op. cit.

his process of thinking, never directly presenting the meaning he is invoking. This is how he puts it:

> In looking for words for Shakespeare's interpretations of skepticism I may well from time to time, in my experimentation, speak incredibly or outrageously. For me this is no more serious, though no less, than making a mistake in computation – if the words do not go through they will simply drop out as worthless. My aim in reading is to follow out in each case the complete tuition for a given intuition (tuition comes to an end somewhere). This has nothing to do with – it is a kind of negation of – an idea of reading as a judicious balancing of all reasonable interpretations. My reading is nothing if not partial (another lovely Emersonian word). Yet some will take my claim to partiality as more arrogant than the claim to judiciousness.[19]

Therefore, in many passages of *Disowning Knowledge*, Cavell's writing shifts from the level of direct statement to the level of indirect suggestion. Not only is his interpretation presented as one possibility, but it also opens up a new horizon of potential readings of those lines that he finds particularly interesting and meaningful.

Cavell seems to owe his own mode of expression, structured within the frame of suggestion rather than statement, mainly to his father and his stories told of and by rabbis, as well as the mystic tradition in Judaism, in which Cavell's main mentor is Gershom Scholem. The other source of Cavell's inspiration in this respect is Thoreau and his book *Walden*. If we take a closer look at the structure of Cavell's sentences, we find that the syntax is highly convoluted and the message is far from completion, as if he were engaging in a constant search for the right word and tone of "voice" (a very important term for Cavell). Usually, the reader finds that Cavell meditates on the text/book as a whole, rather than on its themes, inviting us to do the same.

Cavell returns to several books that have had a long-lasting strong influence on him. His reading list, as Michael Fischer, his first biographer, puts it: "seems disappointingly short and well-worn (who hasn't already read *Walden* or the 'Intimations Ode'?)."[20] Instead of reaching for a new text, going onto paths not yet explored, Cavell usually encourages us to read well-known texts such as *King Lear*, *Othello*, or *Walden*, but in a new

[19] Idem, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 5.

[20] M. Fischer, *Stanley Cavell and Literary Skepticism*, Chicago 1989, p. 7.

way, with an open mind, in order to see the real meaning of those words, to discover them for ourselves. We find that frequently we can read his meditative remarks on several different levels. The following sentences are an example:

> Yet I find I do not believe that a father can fail to know the origin of his son's voice, however at variance their accents. How can I doubt it when I might summarize my life in philosophy as directed to discovering the child's voice – unless this itself attests to my knowledge that it is denied, shall I say unacknowledged?[21]

What Cavell calls a "child's voice" means something different for each reader. Instead of rational discourse, we encounter a question. Since Cavell does not hesitate to put episodes from his autobiography in his essays, we can find that his father, the best teller of Yiddish stories in their circle of immigrants, greatly influenced Cavell's writing in many ways. We often have the impression that like his father, Cavell leaves us with a meaningful ending: "now it is going to be up to you, Rabbi, to decide which rabbi you agree with."[22]

It seems that Cavell has incorporated some of Thoreau's paradoxes of reading and writing from his book *The Senses of Walden*. As he says, it is all about "letting ourselves be instructed by texts we care about."[23] We could thus easily mistake and treat some of Thoreau's intuitions as Cavell's:

> If there is not something mystical in your explanation, something unexplainable to the understanding, some elements of mystery, it is quite insufficient. If there is nothing in it which speaks to my imagination, what boots it?[24]
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> First of all a man must see, before he can say. Statements are made but partially. Things are said with reference to certain conventions or existing institutions, not absolutely.[25]

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[21] S. Cavell, *Pitch of Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 38.

[22] Ibidem, p. xiv.

[23] S. Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary*, op. cit., p. 53.

[24] H.D. Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, Boston 1906, v. 3, ch. 3, p. 156; [online] https://www.walden.org/library/the_writings_of_henry_david_thoreau:_the_digital_collection/journal [accessed: 9.06.2016].

[25] Ibidem, v. 3, ch. 2, p. 85.

> So far as thinking is concerned, surely original thinking is the divinest thing.[26]

Hence, Cavell is obviously under the influence of the interpretative school of thought in which intuitions are the foundation for understanding; in which "little common things" are the most important, and the focus is not on an analytical understanding of individual elements in our field of vision, but on their mutual relationships. Of course, this is not a hermeneutic understanding – indeed quite the opposite. Thoreau accuses this understanding of a lack of hermeneutic wealth.

Thoreau seems to be the one who reassures Cavell in what he himself calls "a lifelong quarrel with the profession of philosophy."[27] As we find in *Walden*:

> There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust. It is to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically.[28]

That is the essence of philosophy of everyday life and it seems this is exactly why Cavell is considered to be a post-analytic, not an analytic philosopher. Some of his accusations against analytic philosophy are that it has no relevance to everyday life and human concerns; its jargon, its exclusionism; its intelligibility only to a small number of experts; its lack of interest in the rest of the humanities, which is incomprehensible for those who do not understand the analytic language; a lack of interest in other philosophical discussions apart from analytic philosophy; its narrow-mindedness; and that it is a trend that isolates itself off from the history of Western philosophy and from the history of other philosophical traditions.[29] These charges do not apply in any way to Stanley

[26] Ibidem, v. 3, ch. 2, p. 119.

[27] *TOS Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes*, Chicago 1984, p. 31.

[28] H.D. Thoreau, *Walden or Life in the Woods and On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, New York and Toronto 1960, p. 14

[29] These were formulated by Jee Lo Liu, Alexander Nehemas, Neil Levy and Hilary Putnam. Jee Lo Liu, "The Challenge of Teaching Analytic Philosophy to Undergraduates", *Expositions*, 2015, 9.2, pp. 88–98. See also A. Nehamas, "Trends in Re-

Cavell's work. Typical for Cavell's "out of box" thinking is his asking the same questions as Martin Heidegger in "What Is Called Thinking?" Thus the "what philosophy is all about" issue is central to Cavell's writing.

Soames writes that analytic philosophy has "an implicit commitment–albeit faltering and imperfect–to the ideals of clarity, rigor and argumentation" and that it "aims at truth and knowledge, as opposed to moral or spiritual improvement . . . the goal in analytic philosophy is to discover what is true, not to provide a useful recipe for living one's life."[30]

Stanley Cavell instead seems to be taking a position that to acquire real knowledge, moral or ethical, one must move beyond syllogistic reasoning and standard argumentative prose. This is how he describes what philosophy is for a young man:

> When you go to college, for some people philosophy can happen early – it inevitably happens early, but you don't recognize it. That is, questions of the sort of: "What was the first thing in existence?" Or, "What is God?" Or, "Is there a best life for me to lead?" Or, "What is love?" So you may stay up all night asking yourself these questions, and you may not call it philosophy. And when you get to college you learn that there's a name for this. And then if you seek out the people who know this name and who are talking these things, it turns out, empirically – certainly, this is not a theoretical answer – that those are the people whose conversations you want most to

cent American Philosophy", *Daedalus*, 1997, 126.1 (*American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines*).

[30] S. Soames, *The Dawn of Analysis*, Princeton, New Jork 2003, pp. xiii–xvii; S. Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1, Princeton, New Jork 2003, p. xv. However if we take another feature of analytic tradition, such as focusing on small issues and thoroughly rethinking them, instead of thinking within a philosophical conceptual system, Cavell definitely concurs with the assumption that it is worth starting from one verb or from one short sentence, examining it and trying to extrapolate its meaning. "There is, I think, a widespread presumption within the tradition that it is often possible to make philosophical progress by intensively investigating a small, circumscribed range of philosophical issues while holding broader, systematic questions in abeyance. What distinguishes twentieth-century analytic philosophy from at least some philosophy in other traditions, or at other times, is not a categorical rejection of philosophical systems, but rather the acceptance of a wealth of smaller, more thorough and more rigorous, investigations that need not be tied to any overarching philosophical view." Ibidem, p. xv.

> participate in. That is a way to discover this, which means you need to be exposed to these things one way or another. That's a way to test it.[31]

Literature, particularly poetry, seems to be Cavell's main inspiration. As many critics convincingly point out, Cavell's reading of literature does not have much to do with the analytic method of reading the text as just the text. In his literary interpretations, for example of Shakespeare's plays, Cavell constantly infuses his reading with his own philosophy, with his way of thinking, and – finally – with his autobiography. Not only does he regard himself as a reader in a quite original way, but he also likes to think of the characters in the play as particular people, much like the ones we encounter in ordinary life. Cavell is aware of the ongoing discussions among Shakespearean scholars: whether the reader should treat Shakespeare's text as an extended metaphor, or as a dramatic poem in which rhythm and symbols are fundamental for the play; whether the characters in the play are a poetic vision and not human at all;[32] or whether the meaning of the plays is conveyed in the characters through the written or spoken words, hence whether the characters are realistic psychologically. However, Cavell challenges the discussion itself:

> The most curious feature of the shift and conflict between character criticism and verbal analysis is that it should have taken place at all. How could any serious critic ever have forgotten that to care about specific characters is to care about the utterly specific words they say when and as they say them; or that we care about the utterly specific words of a play because certain men and women are having to give voice to them?[33]

As Gerald L. Bruns observes:

> Cavell's hermeneutics is a species of romantic hermeneutics, in which to understand means to understand other people, and not texts, meanings or even intentions. In other words, for Cavell, hermeneutics always leads to an understanding of the other *as* the other. This process runs in both directions:

[31] W.M. Cabot, *A Philosopher Goes to the Movies. Conversation with Stanley Cavell*, Conversations with History series, Berkeley, online: http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Cavell/cavell-con0.html [accessed: 9.06.2016].

[32] L.C. Knights, "How many children had Lady Macbeth", [in:] *Hamlet and other Shakespearean Essays*, Cambridge–London–Melbourne 1979.

[33] S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 41.

> Cavell also feels as if he was being understood by the writer whose work he is currently studying, as if that relationship was present and alive.[34]

Cavell says:

> The experience of reading the *Investigations* was comparable to what had happened when I read Freud's lectures on psychoanalysis. I had the impression that this person [Freud] knows me, that this text knows me.[35]

We therefore see here a specific empathy, always framed at a specific moment in someone's life. On many occasions during his lifetime Cavell tried to read *Walden* but did not succeed until he was in his forties, discovering it as a text in an absolutely personal way. As he recounts, he reads *Walden* as he would read himself in a different time and in a different life.

Cavell does not hesitate to put these confessions into his narratives. On the contrary, he finds them most important and truly significant for the reader. He stresses the fact that he tries to find his own voice in a strictly personal, not scholarly, style of writing. This seems to be his main intellectual goal. In *A Pitch of Philosophy* he declares:

> I propose here to talk about philosophy in connection with something. I call the voice, by which I mean to talk at once about the tone of philosophy and about my right to take that tone; and to conduct my talking, to some unspecified extent, anecdotally, which is more or less to say, autobiographically.[36]

The Trans-historical Approach

Cavell freely uses the motifs, tropes and themes of various literary and philosophical traditions and underlines his own trans-historical approach. As he says in an interview with Borradori:

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[34] G. L. Bruns, "Stanley Cavell's Shakespeare", *Critical Inquiry*, Spring 1990, 16, 3, p. 621.

[35] G. Boradori, "An Apology for Skepticism", [in:] eadem, *American Philosopher, Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, Chicago 1994, p. 129.

[36] S. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 3.

> … in a philosophical sense, Nietzsche certainly was responding to Emerson, and that's what interests me most. It is the same empathy. Thoreau says, "I am the ancient Egyptian and Hindu philosopher." Now, philosophy in this sense is trans-historical. Or, at least, it gets transfigured throughout history.[37]

Using this methodological assumption, the question arises of how this functions in Cavell's approach to Shakespearean texts. Can we put aside the historical background of this Elizabethan playwright, can we analyze his puns and his characters as if they were elements of a play by a modern author? Of course we can't. Here we are confronted with a kind of experiment. When Cavell is sharing with us his intuition that the advent of skepticism, which we can find in *Meditations* by Descartes, is already "in full existence" in Shakespeare,[38] he provokes us to read *Othello* and *King Lear* (and many other plays) in a new and refreshing way. It is almost redundant to say that it's an ahistorical approach. Compare the dates – Shakespeare lived from 1564 to 1616 (his main tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* were written before 1608), while *Meditations on First Philosophy* appeared in 1641. So Cavell's approach to the subject would definitely be challenged not only by traditional Shakespearean scholars but also by representatives of New Historicism, a paramount trend in Shakespeare studies since the 1980's.

Overcoming Skepticism

As I have already observed, Cavell's ideas focus on skepticism, which seems to be his intellectual obsession. It is in the context of skepticism that Cavell analyzes philosophers and writers as diverse as Emerson, Montaigne, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, and Freud. It is skepticism serves as the point of departure for his insightful and original analysis of some of Shakespeare's darkest tragedies. In the process, Cavell sheds light on the problem of "groundlessness" – one of his key terms – important not only in the context of the motives of the characters in Shakespeare's plays, but also in his analyzes of contemporary poetry. Cavell does not make use of the ideas of the aforementioned philosophers in a typical way. In-

[37] G. Borradori, op. cit., p. 132.

[38] S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 3.

stead, he shows us that their thinking illuminates some of the most profound and apparently incomprehensible of Shakespeare's metaphors concerning perception (and the so-called "problem of other minds").

Cavell says that in an earlier phase of skepticism, before Shakespeare, the main issue was how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; in what he calls "the Shakespearean version of skepticism" we come across the suggestion of an answer to the problem of how to live at all in a groundless world.[39]

In his interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Cavell claims that according to Wittgenstein true knowledge is beyond our reach. This is the case whenever a word is used outside its proper context, its language game. Do such words have the power, as Cavell claims, to counterbalance an overwhelming groundlessness? The idea seems to be this: Skepticism affirms "unknowableness from outside," as Cavell's motto reads.[40] Simon Critchley points out that Cavell's skepticism is his life *praxis*: "I live my skepticism," says Cavell.[41] We could even say that his skepticism has more in common with the skepticism of the Ancients, in a kind of existential epoch, than with the strictly epistemological modern skepticism.

Is the skeptic right to point out that there are always reasonable grounds for doubt? According to Cavell, the answer to this question should be "yes," although he wonders why this is so: is skepticism biologically determined? Cavell uses gender discourse, asking if skepticism could also be determined by gender. The male characters of *King Lear*, *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* seriously doubt if their children are really theirs and the woman they love really requites their love. Cavell formulates the following questions, which he then leaves unanswered: "Is what he calls ontological doubt something typical for men, but not for women? Are women capable of putting everything, especially their own maternity, into question despite the strong biological bond they develop as mothers?" As usual, Cavell does not answer these questions, but stresses an aspect that is usually not considered – perhaps we might speak not of men and women, but of the masculine and feminine aspects of the human character?[42]

[39] See ibidem, p. 3.

[40] Ibidem, p. 29; and many parts of idem, *Must We Mean What We Say*?, op. cit.

[41] S. Cavell, *Claim of Reason. Wittgenstein, Scepticism, Morality and Tragedy*, Oxford 1979, p. 437.

[42] Cf. S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 16.

Why Shakespeare

In his sonnet *On Shakespeare* written in 1630, John Milton remarks that faced with his work, we, his readers, are in "wonder and astonishment" and that we are the ones who have built "a life-long monument" to the poet. Milton calls Shakespeare's verse "Delphic lines." If we put aside the typical 17th-century panegyric formulation of "wonder and astonishment," we see that the sonnet reveals something very important. By using the term "Delphic lines" Milton points to the multiple interpretative choices faced by any reader of Shakespeare. His works are full of philosophical riddles – *gnomai* – that not only provide an intellectual and aesthetic treat but also provoke us to re-think ourselves and our way of looking at the world. Most importantly for Cavell, they also challenge us to reconsider the meaning of the words we use, and what we call knowledge and acknowledgment.[43]

Let me quote a few lines from Shakespeare that strike Cavell as especially provoking: "Is this the promised end? Or image of that horror?"[44] "To be or not to be"[45] "A tale told by an idiot"[46] "Look down and see what death is doing"[47] "Then must you find out new heaven, new earth."[48] After such words, says Cavell, there is no standing ground of redemption. "Nothing but the ability to be spoken for by these words, to meet upon them, will weigh in the balance against these visions of groundlessness."[49]

If words indeed are – as Cavell claims – pregnant with meaning, then in the case of *King Lear*, for example, their meaning will remain only potential, hidden and nascent. Both Shakespeare and Cavell consider the problem of the emptiness of the words with which we address the OTHER. Cavell presents a very sophisticated analysis of the way Shakespeare's

[43] "Acknowledgment" is another term of crucial importance for Cavell. Its special nature derives from the fact that according to Cavell it is through the "acknowledgment" of a person as herself that she is able to overcome her skepticism at all.

[44] "Kent: Is this the promis'd end? Edgar: Or image of that horror?" W. Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act III , sc. v, 309–310 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, Leicester 1991, p. 941.

[45] Idem, *Hamlet*, Act III , sc. i, 57 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 887.

[46] Idem, *Macbeth*, Act V , sc. v, 17–28 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 868.

[47] Idem, *The Winter's Tale*, Act III , sc. ii, 145–146 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 336

[48] "Then must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth." *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Act I , sc. i, 18 [in:] idem, *Complete Works*, op. cit., p. 977.

[49] S. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge* , p. 19.

language functions in the poet's thought world. He attempts to show not only the arbitrary way in which words "slice up" and falsify our relation with other human beings and with ourselves (as we can observe in *Hamlet* or in *Richard II*), but he also tries to show the way our confidence in words gradually undermines our sensitivity to our real experience.

Cavell suggests that it is exactly in this sense that we could call *King Lear* a philosophical drama. What is most important for Cavell in this tragedy is the idea of missing something, not understanding what seems to be obvious. Apart from the main protagonist of *King Lear*, Cavell also considers characters from Shakespeare's other dramas: *Othello*, *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. What he finds interesting about these plays is that they seem to embody (but not illustrate) some powerful intuition that was first grasped by Shakespeare and emerged in the development of modern philosophical tradition as the problem of skepticism. In an interview with Borradori, Cavell defines skepticism as follows:

> Skepticism is the denial of the need to listen. It's the refusal of the ear. Skepticism denies that perfection is available through the human ear, through the human sensibility. This is what Wittgenstein calls the "sublimation" of our language. We are all too human. Skepticism as a search for the inhuman is a search for a means to the perfection of the ear, to the extent that the ear is no longer required to listen. It is the denial of having to hear.[50]

Skepticism is the denial of the need to listen, because if we cannot know whether the world exists, we cannot know whether the other exists, and whether they have the same feelings as we, or whether they have any feelings at all. Cavell gives us various opportunities to fully realize the extent of the challenge posed by skepticism. Let's take a closer look at a passage from *The Claim of Reason*, in which Cavell analyzes an example suggested by Wittgenstein. Someone else has a toothache but we can't be sure that the person is not faking:

> And then perhaps the still, small voice: Is it one? Is he having one [toothache]? Naturally I do not say that doubt cannot insinuate itself here. In particular I do not say that if it does I can turn it aside by saying, "But that's what is *called* having a toothache." This abjectly begs the question – if the-

[50] G. Borradori, op. cit., p. 133.

> re is a question. But what *is* the doubt now? That he is actually suffering. But in the face of *that* doubt, *in the presence of full criteria*, it is desperate to continue: "I'm justified in saying; I'm almost certain." My feeling is: There is nothing any longer to be almost certain about. I've gone the route of certainty. Certainty itself hasn't taken me far enough. And to say now, "But that is what we call having a toothache," would be mere babbling in the grip of my condition. The only thing that could conceivably have been called "his having a toothache" – his actual horror itself – has dropped out, withdrawn beyond my reach. – Was it always beyond me? Or is my condition to be understood some other way? (What is my condition? Is it doubt? It is in any case expressed here by speechlessness.)[51]

Cavell argues that we can see here that skepticism expresses itself as some form of a denial of an existence shared with others, which for Cavell means principally a denial of the human. Particularly in his reading of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, Cavell takes into account "an interpretation that takes skepticism as a form of narcissism."[52] Othello, who regards himself as a "perfect soul," wants something that is impossible to possess. As Cavell says, "He cannot forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding, her captain's captain."[53] Othello is an ideal example for Cavell, since as a skeptic, he is searching for certainty, for "proof." That search finally becomes a form of madness. Cavell treats this desire to know for certain and beyond all doubt as a neurotic symptom. He analyzes the possibility of a direct psychoanalytic interpretation of skepticism and recognizes this desire in every Shakespearean play that he studies.

Summary

Cavell suggests that we can learn how to overcome skepticism by looking at what is required to love, trust, or simply acknowledge the existence of another person. Because we cannot know for sure that the world exists, we ought to conclude that "the world is to be accepted, as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged."[54] There-

[51] S. Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, op. cit., p. 70.

[52] Idem, *Disowning Knowledge* , op. cit., p. 143.

[53] Ibidem, p. 136.

[54] Ibidem, p. 95.

fore he considers literary works such as the plays of Shakespeare as part of the ongoing discussion in modern philosophy about the nature and limits of human knowledge.

According to Cavell, despite the claim made by new criticism, it is impossible to teach anyone to read poetry – either in the literal sense of knowing how to make it sound good, or in the metaphorical sense of being able to interpret it. So he does not give us any tools or a vocabulary that could be useful in analyzing the puns, riddles and metaphors. Heidegger, whom Cavell quotes so often, claims that thinking may be much the same as wandering.[55] We are invited to accompany Cavell in his experience of reading. He does not aspire to be transparent or fully coherent. While he questions the existence of "correct interpretation" or rather asks the rhetorical question what that might be and whether works of literature are to be used as evidence of correct/incorrect interpretation – he makes us active partners in his writing. For his readers "many directions are thereby opened…"[56]

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[55] Cf. M. Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking", [in:] idem, *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell, San Francisco 1977, p. 386.

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L'art comme présentation chez Gadamer. Portée et limites d'un concept[1]

Abstract

The notion of presentation (*Darstellung*) is a key concept of *Truth and Method* and of Gadamer's hermeneutics as a whole. It has however many levels of meaning that this article seeks to sort out: presentation as 1) performance, 2) interpretation, 3) revelatory epiphany and 4) participation (festival). The aim of this article is to show how this strong conception of presentation makes it possible to understand the unity of *Truth and Method* and to grasp the non relativistic intent of its important theses on interpretation and language: in both cases, interpretation (or the linguistic expression) must be understood as the unfolding of meaning that stems from the work or the thing itself.

Key words

Gadamer, presentation, performance, interpretation, participation, epiphany

I

La thèse que j'aimerais défendre ici est que le concept métaphysique de présentation (*Darstellung*) que l'on trouve dans *Vérité et méthode* représente l'une des clefs de tout l'ouvrage. Il s'agit cependant d'une notion qui reste assez discrète dans *Vérité et méthode*, car elle ne fait l'objet d'aucun chapitre distinct, ni d'aucune analyse directe, comme c'est le cas, par

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exemple, pour des notions comme celles de jeu ou des concepts directeurs de l'humanisme (*Bildung*, sens commun, jugement et goût). Aussi le concept a-t-il été assez peu étudié dans la littérature secondaire[2]. Dans ce qui suit, je me propose donc de faire ressortir son sens et sa portée dans l'économie de l'œuvre afin de montrer qu'il s'agit bel et bien d'une des clefs qui permet d'en comprendre l'unité.

Le terme de *Darstellung* pose, il est vrai, un léger problème de traduction, mais sur lequel je ne m'appesantirai pas trop. Dans sa traduction, Pierre Fruchon le rend par « représentation »[3], alors que le traducteur anglais lui préfère le terme de « *presentation* »[4]. Mes préférences vont aussi vers cette traduction de *Darstellung* par « présentation », parce que l'idée de « représentation », quoique pertinente dans certains cas, renferme des connotations qui sont un peu étrangères à celle de *Darstellung*, notamment celle d'une « nouvelle présentation » ou d'une « présentation bis » qui serait une simple reproduction ; elle pourrait aussi évoquer l'idée d'une « représentation mentale » (laquelle serait une *Vorstellung* en allemand), étrangère également à l'idée de *Darstellung*. Aussi met-elle peut-être trop l'accent sur l'idée de « suppléance » (l'allemand parlerait ici de *Vertretung*), essentielle pour Gadamer pour ce qui est du tableau ou du portrait, mais qui ne vaut peut-être pas pour *toutes* les présentations artistiques. En réalité, ni les notions de représentation, ni celle de présentation n'arrivent à rendre parfaitement l'idée allemande de *Darstellung*, dont la construction est à l'évidence différente : elle évoque

[2] Une remarquable exception : l'ouvrage de M.A. González Valerio : *El arte develado. Consideraciones estéticas sobre la hermenéutica de Gadamer*, Barcelone 2006.

[3] Voir la note explicative de Pierre Fruchon dans la traduction H.-G Gadamer, *Vérité et méthode*, Paris 1996, pp. 120–121.

[4] Voir, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Second Revised Edition, translated by J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, New York 1990, p. 103. La traduction espagnole parle tantôt de « manifestation » (*manifestación*) : *a traves de ellos* [*los jugadores*] *el juego simplemente accede a su manifestación* (*Verdad y metodo*, trad. Ana Agud Aparicio Salamanca: Ediciones Sigueme, 1977, 10. Edición, 2003, p. 145), tantôt de *representación* (ibidem, p. 161 : « *es parte del poceso óntico de la representación, y pertenece esencialmente al juego como tal* » = GW I, p. 122 : « *Es ist ein Teil des Seinsvorgangs der Darstellung, und gehört dem Spiel als Spiel wesenhaft zu* »). Le traducteur italien, Gianni Vattimo, parle aussi ici de *rappresentazione* (*Verità e metodo*, Milano 1983, p. 148 : « *esso è una parte del processo ontologico della rappresentazione e appartiene essenzialmente al gioco in quanto gioco* »), mais risque parfois celui de *pro-duzione* (p. 133 : « *Das Spiel kommt durch die Spielenden lediglich zur Darstellung* » est traduit par « è il gioco que si pro-duce attraverso i giocatori »).

un « placer devant » (*dar-stellen*), un « déployer là », où l'accent repose d'abord sur l'activité du *stellen*, d'un « placer », d'un « (se) déployer », voire, sur un ton plus familier, d'un « en mettre plein la vue », puis sur un déploiement qui se donne sur le mode d'une « offrande » (c'est le sens du « *dar* » que l'on retrouve dans la *Dargabe*, l'offrande, le *Darreichen*, le « remettre à » ou la *Darbietung*, la « prestation »). On pourrait à la rigueur entendre dans ce « *dar* » de la *Darstellung* un *Da-stellen* au sens fort que Heidegger et Gadamer reconnaissent au « *da* » : le *Da-sein* est « là » un peu comme l'œuvre d'art s'offre « là » pour Gadamer, et sur le mode d'un jeu autonome qui attire ses spectateurs, ou mieux, ses participants, dans son orbite.

La grande idée de Gadamer tout au long de *Vérité et méthode* est que c'est un tel déploiement émanant de l'œuvre elle-même qui opère en toute interprétation digne de ce nom. De fait, la meilleure traduction de *Darstellung*, la traduction la plus philosophiquement évocatrice en tout cas, serait celle d'*interprétation* : toute interprétation est pour Gadamer le déploiement du sens de l'œuvre et de la vérité, qui se présente toujours ici et maintenant devant nous, tout en jaillissant de l'œuvre même. Aussi y a-t-il plusieurs formes d'art où leur « présentation » se confond avec leur interprétation. Cela se produit notamment dans les arts de la scène, lesquels serviront d'ailleurs de modèle à Gadamer.

Or, l'intuition qui porte toute l'esthétique de Gadamer est que cette *Darstellung*, ce « déploiement qui se présente », est constitutif du mode d'être de *toute* œuvre d'art. Rien de surprenant dès lors à ce que ce soit dans le cadre de l'esthétique de la première partie que l'on trouve les développements les plus importants consacrés à la notion de *Darstellung*. Mais ce sont justement ses leçons qui doivent nous aider à comprendre les thèses de la deuxième et de la troisième partie sur la vérité, la compréhension et le langage. Seulement, dans le cadre de l'esthétique (qui n'en est pas une, bien entendu, car l'esthétique n'est pas qu'esthétique pour Gadamer ; nous ne reviendrons pas ici sur cette critique de la « conscience esthétique »), le terme de *Darstellung* comporte plusieurs dimensions essentielles, qui ne sont pas toujours expressément distinguées chez Gadamer, mais qui peuvent l'être, s'il est vrai que la tâche classique de l'analyse est de décomposer les éléments qui constituent un concept. C'est à cette décomposition que j'aimerais maintenant m'attaquer.

On peut assurément se demander si tous ces éléments peuvent cohabiter sous l'égide d'un seul et même concept, mais il importe d'abord, je crois, de distinguer les éléments avant de s'interroger sur la légitimité

de leur rassemblement. Je donnerai à ces dimensions des noms un peu « profilants », voire exagérés, mais qui visent justement à donner plus de relief aux nombreuses facettes de la *Darstellung* gadamérienne. Pour des raisons d'espace et de temps, je me limiterai à la sphère artistique, mais tâcherai de dire quelques mots en conclusion sur l'application de cette conception de la *Darstellung* à l'activité plus générale de l'interprétation et de la mise en langage du sens.

II

1) Le terme de *Darstellung* comporte d'abord, et d'une manière très évidente, une dimension de « *performance* » ou d'accomplissement. Gadamer appuie ici son concept de présentation sur le cas exemplaire des arts de la scène, ceux que l'on appelle en anglais les « *performing arts* ». Ce sont, en effet, des arts qui exigent d'être (re)présentés, ou joués, par ce que la langue française a le génie d'appeler des « interprètes ». C'est ce qui se produit (« pro-duit », pourrait-on écrire en s'inspirant de la tradition de Vattimo, la *Darstellung* comme *pro-duzione*) dans la danse, le ballet, le théâtre ou la musique. Un ballet qui n'est pas dansé ou une musique qui n'est pas jouée ou chantée n'en sont pas vraiment. Or, il est essentiel de noter ici que c'est l'œuvre elle-même qui requiert cette performance interprétative. Si cela est crucial pour Gadamer, c'est que l'interprétation ne représente pas ici une activité qui viendrait se « surajouter » à l'œuvre et son sens, elle en décrit plutôt le mode d'être essentiel : une pièce de théâtre doit être jouée sur scène (il est bien sûr aussi possible de la lire, ou de lire les notes d'une partition, mais toujours en pensant à leur mise en scène possible). Cela aura d'importantes conséquences pour la compréhension gadamérienne de l'interprétation et des sciences humaines. Ainsi, l'interprétation du philologue ne sera pas considérée comme une activité « reproductrice » de second ordre qui tâcherait de réactiver un sens qui existerait avant elle, dans la *mens auctoris* de l'auteur qu'il faudrait re-présenter, non, l'interprétation sera comprise comme l'actualisation première et véritable du sens de l'œuvre, sans laquelle ce sens n'existerait pas.

Cela apparaît bien sûr plus évident dans le cas des « arts de la scène », que l'allemand appelle des *transitorische Künste* (entendons des arts qui exigent une activité « transitive ») ou des *Darstellungskünste* (« arts de la présentation »), l'anglais des *performing arts* et que le français peut aus-

si appeler, en une traduction géniale, car elle donne raison à la thèse de Gadamer, des « arts d'interprétation ». Ici, il est tout à fait permis de dire qu'il n'y a pas d'oeuvre d'art sans présentation (ou représentation).

Or, chez Gadamer, le concept de *Darstellung* entendu au sens de la « performance » déborde les seuls arts de la scène pour caractériser le mode d'être de toute forme d'art. L'une des tâches, ou des prouesses, de la première partie de *Vérité et méthode* sera d'ailleurs de montrer que toute espèce d'art appelle un accomplissement particulier, lequel serait constitutif de son mode d'être. Ainsi, dans les arts de la parole (*literarische Künste*), cette performance se trouverait accomplie par l'activité de la lecture, conçue comme interprétation du sens par le lecteur. Dans les arts plastiques, cette performance de la présentation sera réalisée par la contemplation du tableau ou de la sculpture. Dans les deux cas, estime Gadamer, on peut dire que l'œuvre d'art n'a pas d'être sans cette performance du spectateur ou du lecteur au sens large.

Gadamer n'a pas dressé comme Alain un « Système des beaux-arts » (1920), mais on peut dire que sa conception des différentes formes d'art se trouve régie par un concept de *Darstellung* qui peut varier selon les types d'art, mais qui repose sur l'idée que toute forme d'art requiert une certaine « performance ». Cette distinction n'a rien de canonique, mais on peut distinguer trois grandes formes d'art : les arts de la scène, ceux de la parole et les arts plastiques.

Type d'art	allemand	anglais	Type de présentation
Arts de la scène (théâtre, musique)	*Transitorische Künste*, *Darstellungskünste*	*Performing arts*	Interprétation = *Darstellung*, Vorstellung
Arts de la parole, arts littéraires (poésie, littérature)	*Wortkünste*	*Literary arts*	« Darstellung » : lecture, écoute
Arts plastiques (peinture, sculpture, architecture)	*Plastische Künste*, *Baukünste*	*Figurative arts*	« **Ausstellung** », exposition

On peut associer à chaque forme d'art un type particulier de « présentation », ou de mise en oeuvre. Si la présentation entendue comme performance décrit d'abord l'interprétation d'une pièce par des « acteurs » (danseurs, chanteurs, etc.) dans les arts de la scène, elle renvoie plutôt à une activité de lecture dans le cas des arts de la parole (activité

qui existe aussi, il faut bien le noter, dans les arts de la scène, car ceux-ci sont aussi « interprétés » ou lus par des spectateurs). Cette présentation se retrouve également dans les arts plastiques, mais vient s'y ajouter l'idée d'une présentation des œuvres pour un public, qui se produit dans ce que l'on appelle en français une « exposition » et en allemand une *Ausstellung* : une peinture ou une sculpture sont faites pour être exposées.

Il est assurément permis de se demander s'il est permis de fondre ces différents types de présentation (savoir 1. la mise en scène, 2. la lecture et la contemplation) en un seul concept. Mais l'important pour l'instant est seulement de mettre en relief la dimension « performative » de la *Darstellung* gadamérienne, étayée sur les arts de la scène.

III

2) En parlant de la lecture, nous avons déjà effleuré la « seconde » dimension déterminante de la *Darstellung*, sa dimension *interprétative*. Il va de soi, bien entendu, qu'il y a déjà de l'interprétation dans la présentation comme « performance » (1), accomplie par des artistes, mais la *Darstellung* se cheville, en son deuxième moment constitutif, à l'interprétation des œuvres par ses spectateurs et ses lecteurs. C'est que la *Darstellung* d'une œuvre d'art incarne toujours pour Gadamer une présentation *pour quelqu'un*, qui en vient alors à interpréter l'œuvre telle qu'elle l'affecte (qu'il en soit conscient ou non). Il n'y a pas de présentation artistique, soutient Gadamer, sans que celle-ci ne soit une présentation à ou *pour* quelqu'un, qui se trouve évoqué au datif de la donation à…: *jemandem stellt sich etwas dar*. Le terme de *Darstellung* désigne ici à l'évidence autre chose que la seule « performance » de l'œuvre par des artistes, il se fusionne avec l'interprétation de l'œuvre par un lecteur, qui lit ou écoute une pièce. Et chez Gadamer, cette activité représente moins une opération du sujet interprétant qu'une action (*Wirkung*, depuis le *Werk*) de l'œuvre sur lui. C'est l'œuvre qui l'entraîne dans son univers, son rythme, sa « réalité supérieure ». La performance de l'œuvre (par des interprètes) et son interprétation (par des lecteurs) en viennent ici à se confondre. Gadamer en tire un parti important : l'interprétation n'est pas une coloration subjective qu'un interprète viendrait ajouter à une œuvre, elle décrit davantage l'action de l'œuvre sur lui, mais c'est pour Gadamer dans cette action, et uniquement à travers elle, que le sens de l'œuvre en vient à se réaliser.

Ainsi, d'après Gadamer, le « sens » d'une œuvre n'existe que dans cette interprétation. Il s'agit toutefois d'une idée assez problématique : peut-on, en effet, confondre le sens que l'œuvre a pour moi et le sens de l'œuvre elle-même ? Cette fusion est assurément essentielle à la notion gadamérienne de *Darstellung* (et, bien entendu, à celle d'une « fusion des horizons »[5]), mais elle m'apparaît difficile à soutenir, car elle tend à réduire l'œuvre à telle ou telle présentation particulière. Peut-on dire, par exemple, que les interprétations de Platon proposées par Natorp, Cherniss et Krämer sont des présentations équivalentes et tout aussi légitimes de l'œuvre de Platon ? Cela m'apparaît très problématique. On ne peut guère parler « d'équivalence » dans l'interprétation que lorsque l'on a affaire à de hauts niveaux de virtuosité en art, comme lorsqu'il s'agit de comparer une symphonie de Beethoven dirigée par Furtwängler, Boehm ou Karajan. Ici, il est sans doute permis de dire que l'œuvre est à chaque fois présente et de manière différente, mais l'interprétation philologique reste soumise à d'autres normes d'adéquation. On peut y voir l'aspect le plus problématique de la conception gadamérienne de la *Darstellung*, et de son herméneutique bien entendu.

IV

3) La troisième composante essentielle de la *Darstellung*, et peut-être sa plus essentielle, concerne sa fonction de *révélation*. On pourrait parler ici de sa dimension épiphanique, ontologique ou « aléthéique ». C'est que la présentation d'une œuvre d'art n'est pas seulement une performance accomplie par un artiste (1) ou une interprétation réalisée par quelqu'un (2), elle est une présentation *de* quelque chose. Si la présentation pour quelqu'un peut être dite sa « présentation en aval », la présentation de quelque chose correspond à ce que l'on pourrait nommer la « présentation en amont ».

L'œuvre d'art incarne, en effet, toujours pour Gadamer la présentation de quelque chose, d'une vérité ou d'une réalité. L'œuvre d'art me donne à voir et à découvrir quelque chose. Mais il ne s'agit pas de quelque chose qui pourrait être vu indépendamment de l'œuvre d'art, estime Gadamer, car seule l'œuvre m'ouvre un accès à cette vérité. Gadamer dira

[5] Voir à ce sujet mon essai sur « La fusion des horizons. La version gadamérienne de l'*adaequatio rei et intellectus?* », dans *Archives de philosophie*, 2005, 68, p. 401–418

alors que la présentation de la chose dans une œuvre d'art incarne la présentation la plus réelle de cette chose, lui procurant l'équivalent d'un surcroît d'être (*Seinszuwachs*) et de luminosité. En présence d'une œuvre d'art bien réussie, écrit souvent Gadamer, on peut seulement s'écrier « *so ist es* », « il en est bien ainsi ». C'est le sentiment qui peut nous envahir devant la toile Guernica de Picasso, une pièce de Molière ou un roman de Kafka. En fait, toutes les œuvres d'art en constituent des exemples pour Gadamer.

On en trouve aussi des exemples, je crois, dans des formes un peu moins nobles d'art comme la photographie ou la caricature. En forçant le trait, une caricature peut révéler la réalité la plus caractéristique d'une personne ou d'une situation, celle qui reste. De même, il est des photographies dont on peut dire qu'elles réussissent à cerner l'essence d'une situation ou d'un personnage (je pense ici à la photographie bien connue d'Einstein tirant irrévérencieusement sa langue ou au célèbre « Baiser » de Doisneau). Mais face à une photographie moins bien réussie de quelqu'un, on dira « ce n'est pas toi », « ce n'est pas lui ». Belle expression ! Car il est évident qu'il s'agit bel et bien de la personne en question, mais dont la photographie n'a pas réussi à cerner l'essence.

Gadamer ne craint d'ailleurs jamais d'utiliser le terme d'essence dans ce contexte. La présentation de l'œuvre d'art vient toujours révéler l'essence de quelque chose (et n'est sans doute une œuvre d'art qu'à ce titre). C'est ce qui amène Gadamer à associer l'œuvre d'art à une prétention de *connaissance* et de *vérité* : l'œuvre d'art me fait connaître ou, mieux, reconnaître une réalité qui resterait inaccessible sans cette révélation ontologique, épiphanique, accomplie par l'œuvre et sa surabondance de luminosité (« *Lichtzuwachs* », pourrait-on dire).

Gadamer le montrera en mettant en évidence le surcroît d'être que le portrait confère à un monarque ou une personne d'autorité. Le monarque exerce d'office une fonction de représentation (ici la traduction de *Darstellung* par « représentation » est peut-être meilleure, sans être indispensable) et que l'œuvre d'art rend en représentant le roi dans ses fonctions de représentation, avec ses habits somptueux, la hauteur de son regard et l'assurance de son maintien. Ici, dira Gadamer, l'œuvre d'art, en représentant le roi, l'empereur ou le cardinal, s'adosse à la fonction de représentation de la personne elle-même, mais que seule l'œuvre d'art parvient à exprimer dans tout son éclat ou sa distinction.

La question critique qui pourrait se poser ici est celle de savoir si cette dimension épiphanique de la *Darstellung* vaut pour toutes les formes

d'art. La question se pose surtout pour l'art abstrait, *a fortiori* pour ces œuvres d'art moderne qui renoncent expressément à présenter ou à représenter quoi que ce soit et qui, pour marteler le clou, se donnent parfois comme titre : « sans titre ». Qui ou quoi se trouve alors présenté ? À quoi un surcroît d'être se trouve-t-il octroyé ? Gadamer répondrait sans doute que ces œuvres opaques (si tant est que l'on puisse parler d'œuvres, elles y renâclent d'ailleurs souvent), en étant exposées (*ausgestellt*) et dès lors présentées, appellent un effort d'interprétation de la part du spectateur (la dimension interprétative de la *Darstellung* entre ici en jeu) qui s'avisera alors d'une nouvelle réalité, découverte par l'œuvre, disons, pour faire court, celle de « l'absurde opacité de notre monde ».

Ce serait une bonne réponse, mais la question demeure : une œuvre d'art est-elle toujours la présentation épiphanique et essentielle de quelque chose ? À mes yeux, la question se pose tout spécialement pour la musique, même « classique » : que représente, à proprement parler, une œuvre musicale ? Renvoie-t-elle toujours à une réalité extra-musicale qui en recevrait un surcroît d'être ? Il est frappant de constater, à cet égard, que Gadamer ne parle que très peu de la musique dans *Vérité et méthode*, et dans toute son œuvre en général[6]. On touche ici à l'une des limites de son esthétique et de sa conception de la *Darstellung*.

V

4) Un quatrième et dernier aspect de la *Darstellung* peut être souligné. C'est la dimension que l'on peut appeler « *festive* » ou participative de la *Darstellung* artistique. Elle se rattache assurément aux dimensions déjà évoquées, la performance, l'interprétation et l'épiphanie, mais elle vient souligner que l'œuvre d'art n'est jamais refermée sur elle-même, car elle implique toujours une temporalité propre et une participation, qui l'apparente à un *happening*, voire un rituel. Une œuvre d'art nous fait sortir de la réalité quotidienne, elle marque un temps d'arrêt qui ressemble à

[6] S'agissant de cette fonction « épiphanique » de l'œuvre d'art, il est une question que l'on peut ici se poser : pourquoi Gadamer ne reconnaît-il pas d'emblée cette distinction à la science elle-même? N'est-ce pas aussi sa fonction que de nous révéler l'essence des choses et de la nature? En quoi, par exemple, une représentation (*Darstellung*) artistique de la Lune ou du corps humain est-elle plus révélatrice ou plus originaire qu'une analyse scientifique (laquelle peut être hautement esthétique!)?

une fête. On assiste à un concert ou une pièce de théâtre avec d'autres, comme s'il s'agissait d'un événement rituel ou sacré. De même, on se recueille sur un tableau ou un poème qui invitent à la méditation ou la contemplation. Le fait de participer à un colloque pourrait en être un autre exemple, dans la mesure où ne s'y produit pas seulement une présentation de *papers*, mais aussi une communion à une communauté de recherche. En un mot, la présentation de l'œuvre d'art incarne un événement (*Geschehen*) qui nous entraîne dans sa fête. Avec Kierkegaard, Gadamer parle de « contemporanéité » pour caractériser cette temporalité propre à l'œuvre d'art[7] : nous sommes pris par l'œuvre, nous en faisons partie et en sommes métamorphosés, comme par l'esprit d'une fête qui nous ravit.

Se découvrent dès lors au moins quatre grandes dimensions de la *Darstellung* gadamérienne, sans doute imbriquées les unes dans les autres, mais que l'on peut distinguer : performative, interprétative, épiphanique et festive. Si l'œuvre d'art n'a d'être qu'à la faveur de sa présentation, cela veut dire que l'œuvre doit être 1) accomplie (c'est-à-dire jouée par des comédiens ou des interprètes), 2) interprétée (lue par des spectateurs), 3) éprouvée comme une révélation et 4) qu'elle se déploie comme une fête qui nous imprègne de son atmosphère ou de son aura[8]. Cette conception veut rendre justice au mode d'être de *toute* œuvre d'art. Il est tout à fait permis de se demander, dans un esprit critique, si Gadamer a raison de le soutenir. C'est en ce sens que les cas-limite de l'art abstrait et de la musique ont été ici évoqués. On peut également se demander si ces composantes peuvent tenir en un seul concept. Est-il juste de voir dans l'interprétation d'une œuvre par des artistes qui jouent une oeuvre et l'interprétation de cette œuvre par un lecteur un seul et même phénomène ? Cela est loin d'être sûr.

Mais j'aimerais surtout faire voir, en terminant, en quoi cette conception appuyée de la *Darstellung* s'avère capitale pour les réflexions de Gadamer lui-même sur la compréhension et le langage dans la deuxième

[7] Alors qu'il s'agit, bien sûr, pour Kierkegaard d'une temporalité religieuse ou éthique, et qui n'est justement plus esthétique. Gadamer radicalise d'une certaine manière la pensée de Kierkegaard en disant que cette temporalité esthétique n'est jamais une affaire purement esthétique.

[8] Le dernier Gadamer s'inspirera parfois de cette idée d'aura empruntée à Walter Benjamin. Voir notamment, H.-G. Gadamer, « Le mot et l'image – autant de vérité, autant d'être » (1992), dans *La philosophie herméneutique*, Paris 1996, p. 192.

et troisième partie de *Vérité et méthode*, où la *Darstellung* apparaît sans doute plus effacée, nommément, tout en continuant d'être essentielle.

VI

La seconde partie de *Vérité et méthode* est dominée, comme chacun sait, par les notions de *Wirkungsgeschichte*, d'application, de tradition et de préjugé. Ce sont là des aspects du travail interprétatif qui avaient été assez « dévalorisés » au sein de l'herméneutique du XIXe siècle, au nom de l'objectivité. Pour cette herméneutique, la tâche essentielle de l'interprète serait de recréer le sens originel de l'œuvre, sens qu'il risquerait cependant de déformer s'il ne suivait pas une méthodologie précise. Il va de soi qu'une telle re-production du sens originel ne peut avoir lieu si l'on est victime de ses préjugés, d'une tradition, d'une *Wirkungsgeschichte* et si l'on applique à une œuvre les normes et les attentes du présent. En un mot, l'interprétation risque d'être viciée si elle n'est pas disciplinée par une méthode dont la vertu est de mettre en suspens les préjugés d'un interprète. Gadamer défend, pour sa part, une tout autre conception de l'interprétation, qui insiste non pas sur le potentiel « dénaturant » de l'application, mais sur son rôle constitutif dans le processus de formation du sens. L'interprétation ne désigne donc pas pour lui la re-production d'un sens qui existerait sans elle, elle est bien plutôt l'accomplissement de l'œuvre elle-même (au sens d'un génitif subjectif), requis par l'œuvre elle-même. Ici, c'est la dimension « performance » de la *Darstellung* qui le guide : une œuvre qui n'est pas jouée (« exécutée ») par un interprète n'en est pas une. Aux yeux de Gadamer, il va de soi que cette présentation ou interprétation s'effectue non pas en rupture, mais en continuité avec le travail de l'histoire, la tradition et les préjugés de l'interprète, car ce sont eux qui permettent à une œuvre de parler à une époque et de déployer son sens. Mais l'accent porte, il faut y insister contre les lectures trop subjectivistes ou « nietzschéennes » de Gadamer, sur le fait que c'est *le sens de l'œuvre* qui est à chaque fois présenté, et non les préjugés ou le point de vue de l'interprète (il reste alors tout à fait justifié de parler d'une interprétation déformante, trop modernisante ou trop marquée par l'idiosyncrasie de l'interprète ou du metteur en scène). Il s'agit donc pour Gadamer de mettre en valeur l'interprétation comme un moment essentiel à la concrétisation du sens qui est requis par l'œuvre elle-

même et qu'il ne faudrait pas voir comme un ajout « subjectif ». Ici, c'est la conception de l'art comme présentation qui lui sert de guide.

Cette conception fait bien sûr problème, comme nous l'avons vu : va-t-il de soi que l'interprétation doive toujours être vue comme une émanation de l'œuvre ? Cela est loin d'être toujours évident. Pensons ici à ces mises en scène très modernisantes des opéras classiques qui semblent davantage vouloir provoquer le spectateur contemporain que rendre justice à l'œuvre originale. La question concerne aussi, comme a l'a noté, les sciences humaines : est-il permis de voir dans les interprétations contradictoires de Natorp, Cherniss et Krämer des présentations qui sont requises par l'œuvre de Platon elle-même ? C'est là un débat de fond qui est inséparable de la réception critique de l'œuvre de Gadamer et qu'il faudrait reprendre ailleurs. Tout ce qui importait dans le présent contexte, c'était de faire ressortir l'importance de la conception gadamérienne de la *Darstellung* dans cette conception de l'interprétation déployée dans la seconde partie de *Vérité et méthode* : l'œuvre n'a d'être que dans sa présentation, et dans sa présentation actuelle, mais sans que cela n'implique un subjectivisme, car c'est l'œuvre qui exige d'être présentée pour que son sens se dégage.

VII

Le rôle de la présentation est encore plus subtil dans la dernière partie de *Vérité et méthode*, consacrée au langage. Si ce rôle est plus secret, il n'en est pas moins fondamental. Toute la troisième partie de *Vérité et méthode* lutte contre une conception instrumentale du langage qui en ferait un signe de la pensée, un signe qui ne servirait qu'à désigner des réalités qui pourraient à la limite être pensées sans lui. Gadamer stigmatise ici le nominalisme de la pensée moderne, mais qui imprégnerait selon lui toute la pensée occidentale sur le langage depuis Platon[9]. Pour le nominalisme, les mots ne sont que des noms ou des signes créés par la pensée (ou une culture, peu importe) pour dénoter des réalités, lesquelles sont toujours des choses individuelles et spatio-temporelles. Les concepts généraux (que la pensée médiévale appelait des universaux) ne sont alors

[9] Sur cette conception instrumentale qui équivaut pour Gadamer à un oubli du langage, voir mon étude « L'universalité de l'herméneutique et de la rhétorique : Ses sources dans le passage de Platon à Augustin dans *Vérité et méthode* », *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 2000, 54, n° 213, pp. 469–485.

que des « noms » abstraits qui renvoient ultimement à ces réalités individuelles : ainsi, le concept abstrait d'arbre n'existe pas en soi, il rassemble sous un vocable commun toutes ces réalités individuelles où l'on peut reconnaître les traits distinctifs d'un arbre. Au vu de cette conception, le langage n'est donc qu'un instrument de la pensée, un mode de désignation qui vient se surajouter aux choses. Elle présuppose ainsi un rapport instrumental, voire technique, de la pensée aux mots et aux choses.

À cette conception du langage comme signe et instrument, Gadamer oppose, assez discrètement, une autre vision du langage, directement inspirée de sa conception de la *Darstellung*. Selon Gadamer, les mots ne sont peut-être pas d'abord des signes, mais des images (*Bild*), ou des copies (*Abbild*), voire des « icônes » (du grec *eikôn*) des choses. Gadamer souligne fortement l'opposition entre les deux conceptions, sans manquer de souligner à quel point elle est malaisée à penser : « Le mot n'est pas seulement signe. En un sens difficile à saisir, il est bien, lui aussi, quelque chose qui tient presque de la copie (*Abbild*). »[10] On sait que Gadamer aperçoit dans la conception nominaliste du langage comme signe « une décision d'importance historique qui commande toute notre manière de comprendre le langage »[11], mais qui ne rendrait nullement justice à son être véritable. L'antinomie entre le signe et l'image est donc fondamentale, mais elle reste peut-être sous-développée dans l'ultime

[10] Voir *Vérité et méthode*, Paris 1996, p. 440; GW I, p. 420 : « *Das Wort ist nicht nur Zeichen. In irgendeinem schwer zu erfassenden Sinne ist es doch auch so etwas wie ein Abbild* ».

[11] *Vérité et méthode*, p. 437 (GW I, p. 418) : « La question qu'il est légitime de poser, celle de savoir si un mot n'est rien d'autre qu'un pur signe ou s'il a cependant en lui-même quelque chose de l'image (*Bild*) [conception qui est celle de Gadamer], est fondamentalement discréditée par le *Cratyle*. Une fois poussée à l'absurde la thèse selon laquelle le mot est une copie, la seule possibilité est, semble-t-il, qu'il soit un signe. Voilà ce qui ressort – sans être particulièrement mis en relief – de la discussion négative du *Cratyle* et ce que consacre le bannissement de la connaissance dans la sphère intelligible; en sorte que le concept d'image (*eikôn*) est dès lors remplacé par celui de signe (*semeion* ou *semainon*) dans l'ensemble de la réflexion sur la langue. Ce n'est pas seulement une modification de vocabulaire technique; ce changement exprime au contraire une décision d'importance historique, qui commande toute notre manière de penser ce qu'est le langage et qui a fait époque. Qu'il faille explorer l'être véritable des choses « sans les noms » signifie précisément que l'être propre des choses ne livre comme tel aucun accès à la vérité – même si toute recherche, question, réponse, enseignement et distinction, ne peut naturellement pas avoir lieu sans le secours de la langue. »

partie de *Vérité et méthode*. C'est que Gadamer s'applique davantage à détruire la conception nominaliste du langage qu'à élaborer sa propre conception du langage comme image (*Bild*).

C'est ici que la conception gadamérienne de la *Darstellung* peut nous aider à combler le silences de la troisième partie. C'est qu'elle reconnaissait déjà une importance privilégiée à la notion d'image et sa « valence ontologique »[12]. Par valence ontologique, il faut entendre cette idée que c'est l'image qui confère à ce qu'elle représente un « surcroît d'être » en le laissant apparaître dans toute sa vérité[13]. On se souviendra ici de la portée épiphanique de la *Darstellung* : l'image, ou le tableau (*Bild*), n'a pas moins d'être que ce qu'elle (re)présente et dont elle est la copie (*Abbild*), elle en a *plus*. Elle peut même être vue, souligne Gadamer, s'inspirant d'une magnifique terminologie néoplatonicienne, comme une « émanation du modèle »[14]. L'image juste et pleine procède de son modèle, mais le fait aussi apparaître dans sa vérité, comme pour la première fois. On pourrait alors dire que les images sont plus les choses que les choses elles-mêmes, car ce sont les images qui restent et qui s'imposent. Ici, la dimension qui l'emporte est l'aspect révélation, épiphanique, de la *Darstellung*.

C'est en ce sens qu'il faut également penser l'être du langage pour Gadamer, comme une émanation des choses (et non de la pensée). Lorsque nous parlons, nous ne nous servons pas de « signes » créés par l'entendement, nous parlons directement des choses telles qu'elles se manifestent en langage. Et cette « manifestation des choses » est à entendre au sens

[12] Voir *Vérité et méthode*, pp. 152–162 : « La valence ontologique de l'image (*Bild*) ».

[13] *Vérité et méthode*, p. 159 (GW I, p. 145) : « La représentation (*Darstellung*) demeure donc essentiellement reliée au modèle qui en elle se représente. Mais elle est plus qu'une copie. Le fait que la représentation soit une image – et non le modèle lui-même – n'a pas une signification négative. Il s'agit non pas d'un simple amoindrissement d'être, mais au contraire d'une réalité autonome. Ainsi, la relation entre image et modèle se présente d'une façon fondamentalement différente de celle qui se vérifie dans le cas de la copie. *Ce n'est plus une relation unilatérale*. Le fait que l'image ait une réalité propre implique en retour pour le modèle que ce soit dans la représentation qu'il se présente. Il s'y représente en personne. (…) Mais quand il se représente ainsi, ce n'est plus là un processus accessoire, mais quelque chose qui appartient à son être propre. Toute représentation de ce genre est un processus ontologique et apporte sa contribution à la dignité ontologique de ce qui est représenté. Par la représentation, il acquiert, pour ainsi dire, un *surcroît d'être*. La teneur propre de l'image est ontologiquement définie comme émanation du modèle. »

[14] Ibidem.

d'un génitif subjectif comme automanifestation : les choses viennent d'elles-mêmes au langage. Mais le langage leur confère aussi un surcroît d'être, car ce n'est qu'en se mettant d'elles-mêmes en langage que les choses ont pour nous un « être », une réalité, une présence : toute réalité est pour nous celle qui est parvenue à se dire en langage. Gadamer n'insiste pas ici sur la « schématisation » du réel qu'opérerait alors notre pensée en « découpant » le réel de telle ou telle manière (il s'agit plutôt là d'une conception qu'il dénonce vigoureusement et qu'il assimile à la conception du langage comme « forme symbolique », propre à Cassirer et plusieurs autres), il met plutôt l'accent sur la révélation ontologique que prodigue le langage, sur l'automanifestation des choses en langage[15].

C'est ainsi que la conception gadamérienne de la *Darstellung*, de l'art comme présentation, peut nous aider à comprendre le sens de la thèse sans doute la plus célèbre, mais en même temps la plus mal comprise, de *Vérité et méthode*, à savoir que « l'être qui peut être compris est langage ». Cette thèse veut dire que le langage ne doit pas être pensé comme une schématisation de la pensée qui nous ferait voir l'être de telle ou telle manière. Non, c'est l'être qui est langage, au sens où c'est le langage qui en déploie l'intelligibilité et en « présente » le sens. Le langage relève ainsi de l'être, il en procède comme d'un modèle, mais sans lui, nous n'aurions aucune expérience de l'être, ni de quoi que ce soit. Ainsi, l'être est essentiellement langage, c'est-à-dire *Darstellung* ou présentation, une présentation toujours renouvelée, à interpréter, à découvrir et à laquelle nous participons instamment.

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[15] Sur la portée ontologique, souvent mal comprise, de la pensée de Gadamer, voir mon étude « La thèse de l'herméneutique sur l'être », dans *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 2006, n° 4, pp. 469–481.

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Harsh Poetry and Art's Address: Romare Bearden and Hans-Georg Gadamer in Conversation

Abstract

This essay centers on Romare Bearden's art, methodology, and thinking about art, and likewise explores his attempt to harmonize personal aesthetic goals with sociopolitical concerns. Following an investigation of Bearden's work and thought, we turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's reflections on art and our experience (*Erfahrung*) of art. As the essay unfolds, we see how Bearden's approach to art and the artworks themselves resonate with Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness and his contention that artworks address us. An important component of Gadamer's account is his emphasis on the spectator's active yet non-mastering role in the event of art's address – an event that implicates the spectator and has the potential to transform him or her. As we shall see, Gadamer's notion of aesthetic experience sharply contrasts with modern, subjectivizing aesthetics, as it requires not only active participatory engagement, but it also brings about a transformed "vision" and understanding of one's self, others, and the world. In closing, we return to Bearden in order to explore how his art unearths a crucial activity of our being-in-the-world. I call this activity "un-fabricating one's world" and discuss how it expands and enriches Gadamer's account.

Key words

Gadamer and art, critique of aesthetic consciousness, Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics, Romare Bearden, Bearden's montage technique, art and social construction, participatory aesthetic engagement, art's address, the event of art

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I. Introduction

Like many African American artists of his day, Romare Bearden created artworks birthed and nurtured in struggle – a struggle both to subvert racialized stereotypes and images and to achieve his artistic ideals. Bearden's complex understanding of both the individual and the community, as well as the artist and his or her relationship to the art-historical tradition, plays an integral role in the development of his own artistic style. Conversely, Bearden's search for his artistic voice was deeply tied to his notion of social identity, culture, and art history as dynamic, hybrid social constructions. In order to enter into Bearden's world, we begin with an examination of his art, methodology, and thinking about art, and likewise explore his attempt to harmonize personal aesthetic goals with sociopolitical concerns. Following an investigation of Bearden's work and thought, we turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's reflections on art and our experience (*Erfahrung*) of art. As the essay unfolds, we see how Bearden's approach to art and the artworks themselves resonate with Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness and his contention that artworks address us. An important component of Gadamer's account is his emphasis on the spectator's active yet non-mastering role in the event of art's address – an event that implicates the spectator and has the potential to transform him or her. As we shall see, Gadamer's notion of aesthetic experience sharply contrasts with modern, subjectivizing aesthetics, as it requires not only active participatory engagement, but it also has the potential to transform one's "vision" and understanding of one's self, others, and the world. In closing, we return to Bearden in order to explore how his art unearths a crucial activity of our being-in-the-world. I call this activity "un-fabricating one's world" and discuss how it expands and enriches Gadamer's account.

II. Bearden's Art: Subversive Hybridity and "Harsh Poetry"

Critical theorists, philosophers of race, and literary authors have analyzed and depicted the experiences of black people in racialized contexts as an ongoing experience of absence. That is, to be black in a white world is to be rendered invisible and muted – to be treated socially and politically as if you did not exist or did not exist as a human being worthy of respect, civic rights, and mutual recognition. Conversely, theorists have

analyzed blackness as an over-determined, fixed presence. In this understanding, the presence of a black body is magnified and perceived in advance as dangerous, criminal, or sexually deviant. Under this (white) lens, black bodies must be constantly surveilled, hemmed in, monitored, and segregated. Either way, blackness is scripted by dominant (white) discourses in ways that blacks find demeaning, false, and in need of re-formation and re-narration.

One encounters this type of personal and communal identity re-narration in the works of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Aime Césaire, Franz Fanon, W. E. B. Dubois, and many others. The quest to find one's (black) voice often involves a strategic or subversive intertextual performativity.[1] That is, the subjugated writer or artist engages the dominant tradition through serious study of its stylistic practices and masterpieces. The artist, as it were, dwells with the tradition and in many cases acquires a genuine appreciation for its exemplary works. However, the goal is not mere imitation or assimilation; rather, he or she seeks both to make his or her "mark" upon the tradition and – as a black artist working within a racialized context – to affirm the value and beauty of black difference. Given that black artists in America have historically created from a subjugated position, their works not only proclaim the significance of black difference, but also they challenge and seek to expand and even overturn the hegemonic discourses, values, and practices of the society and art tradition in which they live and work.

One finds multiple strategies and even conflicting ideologies concerning how a black artist ought to approach the Western art tradition. At one end of the spectrum, many black intellectuals, including Bearden, criticize certain expressions of *Négritude* and the Black Arts Movement for their latent and at times blatant essentialism and for the constraining demands such positions placed upon black artists.[2] At the other end, there are, presumably, black artists who assimilate or seem to wholly adopt Western artistic styles. Of course, this either/or framework is overly simplistic and does not account for the historical stages through which oppressed

[1] On finding one's voice as an intertextual act, see L.S. Glazer, "Signifying Identity: Art and Race in Romare Bearden's Projections", *Art Bulletin*, 1994, 76.

[2] On the Black Arts Movement, see L. Neal, "The Black Arts Movement", *The Drama Review: TDR*, 1968, 12. *Négritude*, of course, is a complex notion found in multiple expressions and has undergone numerous conceptual inflections. For an example of Senghorian *Négritude*, see L.S. Senghor, "Negritude", *Indian Literature* 1974, 1/2.

groups move as they seek to redefine their social identity. Thus, the framework implied here is merely intended as a heuristic tool enabling us to understand Bearden's challenge and how he viewed himself in relation to the relevant aesthetic and sociopolitical discourses of his day.

Like other black artists Bearden sought creative ways to foreground black difference in his artistic creations. However, his desire was neither to essentialize blackness, as was often claimed of the *Négritude* movement, nor to become a social polemicist at the expense of his art.[3] In other words, Bearden sought to find an aesthetically rich and complex way to express his love for his community and his concern for its just treatment and social flourishing. Ralph Ellison aptly describes Bearden's aim as a search for a particular technique and method that "would allow him to express the tragic predicament of his people without violating his passionate dedication to art as a fundamental and transcendent agency for confronting and revealing the world."[4] Bearden's love of art and its rich history moved him to study the techniques and works of many different artists and styles. For example, he drew heavily from the methods of 17th century Dutch masters such as Pieter de Hooch and Johannes Vermeer as well as from 20th century Cubists painters. He was especially intrigued by Pablo Picasso's use of the collage technique in the second phase of Cubism often called "Synthetic Cubism." Here not only do we have the typical multi-perspectival presentation of images calling into question a static, fixed, and singular account of a subject matter, but also a new way of constituting the image itself. As Richard R. Brettell explains, in the collage technique of Synthetic Cubism, "the image is constructed not only with painted (or drawn) lines and patches, but also with pasted elements from popular visual culture: wall-paper, sheet music, posters, newspapers, theatre tickets, and other flat urban refuse. The idea that the image is a synthesis of pictorial elements, some of which are hand-made and others of which are borrowed, makes it clear that the representation is not only artificial, but also essentially flat."[5] By lingering with these diverse artists and imitating their styles and techniques, Bearden was preparing the "ground", so to speak, for the emergence of his own unique, hybrid style that combined representational and non-representational

[3] See, for example, R. Bearden, "Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings", *Leonardo*, 1969, 2, pp. 11–19, esp. 18.

[4] R. Ellison, "The Art of Romare Bearden", *The Massachusetts Review*, 1977, 18, p. 673.

[5] R.R. Brettell, *Modern Art 1851–1929*, Oxford 1999, pp. 34–35.

techniques and allowed Bearden to harmonize his high artistic yearnings with his passion for social justice and desire to articulate the complex reality – both harsh and beautiful – of black life in America.

III. Bearden's "Three Folk Musicians" and Social Construction

In Bearden's works we encounter an amalgam of European and African formal influences whose subject matters often combine symbols, rituals, and mythic elements associated with African American history and experience in both its Southern and Northern expressions.[6] The resulting synthesis is clearly modern yet it radiates a distinctively *black*-modern identity. For example, in his 1967 collage, "Three Folk Musicians", Bearden combines Cubist formal elements with his own collage and montage techniques.[7] The content of the work focuses on three African American folk musicians adorned in brightly colored clothing – clothing that unites black rural and urban life as symbolized by the figures donning both overalls and berets. The musician on the left and the one in the center are pictured with guitars, and the musician on the right – the one wearing overalls – holds a banjo, an instrument believed to have been introduced to America via the slave trade. Many of the musicians' facial features and parts of their hands have been cut out from newspapers and popular magazines such as *Ebony* and *Life*. Of particular interest are the guitar players' hands. Both guitarists have one hand that is significantly larger than the other, and the hands have clearly been taken from different images. The disproportionally inflated hand was perhaps used in order to dignify manual labor and to counter stereotypes regarding the value of African American cultural contributions.[8] That is, the same hand that labors physically also

[6] In works such as "Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism, 1964", Bearden superimposes fragments of an African mask on one of his prominent figures, thus drawing upon not only Western but also African influences. Picasso, of course, also turned to African art for inspiration and as a way to challenge and expand the Western artistic tradition.

[7] Bearden's work, "Three Folk Musicians", can be viewed at the following website: http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2004/10/15/arts/15KIMMCA03ready.html.

[8] See also, K. Mercer, "Romare Bearden: African American Modernism at Mid-Century", [in:] *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies*, eds. M.A. Holly, K.P.F. Mox-

creates beautiful music on the guitar. Moreover, the work suggests that the mundane and the artistically beautiful are not two separate realms where the latter serves as an escape from the former; instead, beauty is found and created in and through the mundane with all its difficulties, injustices, and incongruities. Lastly, Bearden's creative appropriation and development of Cubist collage techniques for his own purposes is an excellent example of the strategic "intertextual" performativity mentioned earlier. Bearden found a way beyond the assimilationist/essentialist (false) dichotomy through the notion of dynamic hybridity that is embodied in the very materiality of his works and illustrative of how he understands both art and the social construction of identity.[9]

Furthermore, Bearden's collage technique allowed him to express his sociopolitical concerns while simultaneously fulfilling his high artistic aims. Once again Ellison elegantly sums up Bearden's achievement: "His mask-faced Harlemites and tenant farmers set in their mysterious, familiar, but emphatically abstract, scenes are nevertheless resonant of artistic and social history. Without compromising their integrity as elements in plastic compositions his figures are eloquent of a complex reality lying beyond their frames. While functioning as integral elements of design they serve simultaneously as signs and symbols of a humanity which has struggled to survive the decimating and fragmentizing effects of American social processes. Here faces which draw upon the abstract character of African sculpture for their composition are made to focus our attention upon the far from abstract reality of a people. […] Here, too, the poetry of the blues is projected through synthetic forms which, visually, are in themselves tragi-comic and eloquently poetic. A harsh poetry this, but poetry nevertheless."[10]

Not only does Bearden fuse different aspects of African American life and history, but he also presents a complex view of social construction and agency. Specifically, our individual lives are both constituted by others – depicted visually in the artwork through the collage assemblage of various body parts of others forming the bodies of each individual musician – and (re)formed through the artist's creative fashioning of him- or herself in relation to others. In addition, through his use of symbols

ey, Williamstown 2002. As Mercer explains, the "stylistic exaggeration that Bearden gives to human hands" was an insight that he "appropriated from socialist realism's concern with the dignity of manual labor", ibidem, p. 41.

[9] On Bearden's art as a working out of "hybrid modernity", see also K. Mercer, op. cit.

[10] R. Ellison, op. cit., p. 678.

of African American life and history – the overalls signifying life in the rural South, the beret signifying urban life in the North (the beret was a popular fashion trend during the Harlem Renaissance), the banjo, and the emphasis on creative activity via music-making – Bearden subverted white discourses demeaning black life and culture and foregrounded black difference as vibrant, complex, and worthy of respect. As Glazer puts it, "in *Three Folk Musicians*, Bearden [… emphasizes] the difference and distinction – in short, the presence – of black creativity."[11] By bringing various fragments together to form a unified whole, Bearden's abstract art presents us not with a world detached and disconnected from our own, but paradoxically with a truer and in many ways more concrete view of ourselves and our world.

By lingering with Bearden's work – meditating on the materiality of the montage's torn images, varied textures (from glossy magazine pictures to fibrous newspaper), intentionally distorted proportions, and fragmented yet unified scenes – we are confronted with the complexity and "harsh poetry" of the real world. Yet at the same time, the work presents something new – possibilities yet unrealized in our present social reality; consequently, it shows us a different way of seeing our world, ourselves, and others. Accordingly, Bearden's art calls us to re-envision our world and to seek to live in accord with our (now) transformed and presumably more accurate understanding. As Ellison observes, Bearden's art helps us to see "that which has been concealed by time, by custom, and by our trained incapacity to perceive the truth. Thus it is a matter of destroying moribund images of reality and creating the new."[12] If we answer its call, art has the power both to correct and transform our vision, showing us not only what is "out of joint", but also calling us to a truer, more just way of being-in-the-world with others. As we shall see, Gadamer's view of art's transformative power has much in common with Bearden's understanding of art. Let us turn to discuss Gadamer's critical engagement with modern aesthetics as well as his constructive contributions.

[11] L.S. Glazer, op. cit., p. 413.

[12] R. Ellison, op. cit., p. 674.

IV. Gadamer's Critique of Aesthetic Consciousness and Aesthetic Differentiation

Throughout his career Hans-Georg Gadamer was critical of a modern, subjectivized notion of aesthetics, whose source he traced to Kant's third Critique and which he claimed was radicalized by Schiller and the German Romantics.[13] A corollary of this subjectivized aesthetics is a stance toward art that Gadamer calls "aesthetic consciousness." With the rise of aesthetic consciousness, art and reality are set against one another.[14] Art becomes a means of escape from reality or, as the saying goes, the real world. As Gadamer observes, "[b]eauty and art give reality only a fleeting and transfiguring [*verklarenden*] sheen [*Schimmer*]. The freedom of spirit to which they raise one up is freedom merely in an aesthetic [subjective] state and not in reality."[15] Gadamer finds this separation of art and reality to be not only misguided philosophically but also untrue to our experience of art and art's address. Here an appeal to Bearden's art is apropos. As we saw earlier, Bearden's collages were not disconnected from reality and the concrete realities of life-in-this-world. Rather, given the dominant society's distorted depictions of African Americans, they help us to see such distortions for what they are and call us to a truer vision of the world in all its beauty and harshness. If alienation is encountered, it is the alienation found in the social realities of the world itself – realities manifest through contemplating Bearden's artworks; it is not – as aesthetic consciousness would have it – the result of having to awaken from a momentary aesthetic rapture only to return unchanged to the real world.[16]

[13] See, for example, Gadamer's discussion of Kant's subjectivization of aesthetics in *Truth and Method*, pp. 42–100. Hereafter, *TM.* [*Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 48–106. Hereafter, *WM*.] For a critique of Gadamer's reading of Kant's aesthetics, see M. Fleming, "Gadamer in Conversation with Kant: Aesthetics and Hermeneutics", [in:] *Gadamer's Hermeneutics and the Art of Conversation*, International Studies in Hermeneutics and Phenomenology, Bd. 2, ed. Andrzej Wiercinski, Münster 2011.

[14] Of course, one could also discuss the contrast between art and reality in ontological terms. Gadamer deconstructs the traditional Platonic notion of art as twice removed from what truly is (i.e. Ideas/Forms).

[15] H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, p. 83. [*WM*, p. 88].

[16] For a similar point about art and art's play as a transformative power in this world, see H.-G. Gadamer, "The Play of Art", [in:] *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. N. Walker, ed. R. Bernasconi, Cambridge 1986, esp. 130. Hereafter, *RB.* [H.-G. Gadamer, „Das Spiel der Kunst (1977)", [in:] *Ästhetik und Poetik I:*

As a site of complex social, cultural, and symbolic meaning, art has the power to initiate a transformation of horizons. Through our attentive engagement and response to art's address, we arrive at a more accurate understanding of ourselves and our world. Participating in the event that art is and answering its address is *not* a private experience concerned primarily with one's personal feelings or subjective pleasures. Our ability to respond to art's claims presupposes a communal grounding in language, tradition, social practices, and cultural narratives – all of which condition and inform, in Gadamer's language, the "substance" of our subjectivity.

Here it is instructive to turn to what Nicholas Davey describes as Gadamer's development of a *hermeneutical* aesthetics. As Davey explains, Gadamer's re-thinking of aesthetics strives to liberate aesthetics from "subjectivism, to ground aesthetic claims to truth in the inter-subjective participatory structures of language and tradition, and to legitimise art's claims to 'truth' against those who would have scientific reasoning monopolise the gateway to truth."[17] Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics, in other words, upholds the legitimacy of art's cognitive significance, which requires a reconfigured model for understanding "subjective response and what comes to expression within it."[18] In short, for Gadamer to follow the path of subjectivized aesthetics is to relegate art to its own autonomous realm, which effectually denies art's capacity to communicate truth. Art is then deprived of its "natural" place in the world and its intimate connection with human life and experience. Art becomes an object to be analyzed, used, and even commodified. As such, its a-lethic movement is no longer in play; we are left with majestic, yet muted markings, silent symbols divested of their transformative power.

This brings us to Gadamer's critique of aesthetic consciousness and its attendant act, aesthetic differentiation. In aesthetic consciousness, one understands the artwork as an aesthetic *object* (not as a participatory, meaningful "event"). That is, through an act of aesthetic differentiation, one abstracts the work's moral and cognitive aspects and focuses solely on the

Kunst als Aussage, Gesammelte Werke Band 8. Auflage, Tübingen 1993, bes. 92. Hereafter, *GW* 8.] See also, N. Davey, "Hermeneutics and Art Theory", [in:] *A Companion to Art Theory*, eds. P. Smith, C. Wilde, Oxford 2002, esp. p. 442.

[17] N. Davey, *Unfinished Worlds: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics, and Gadamer*, Edinburgh 2013, p. 23.

[18] Ibidem.

aesthetic qualities of a work.[19] As Gadamer explains, rather than making judgments on the basis of content, aesthetic differentiation purports to distinguish between the "work proper" or its "aesthetic quality as such" and "the extra-aesthetic elements that cling to it, such as purpose, function, the significance of its content."[20] Moreover, such judgments are grounded in one's subjective aesthetic experiences (*Erlebnisse*) with the result that the self as subject stands over against the work as object, alienating the work both from its world and that of the spectator. In short, aesthetic differentiation "distinguishes the aesthetic quality of a work from all the elements of content that induce us to take up a moral or religious stance [*Stellungnahme*] towards it, and presents it solely by itself in its aesthetic being."[21]

Gadamer also associates a certain approach to history with aesthetic consciousness, viz. simultaneity. Rather than acknowledging the cultural significance, historical shaping, and purpose of an artwork (while attempting to integrate its meaning with one's own present world and self-understanding), simultaneity erases historical difference by gathering works of every historical epoch into a collection. Thus, with the dominance of aesthetic consciousness we see the rise of "special sites for simultaneity" such as the museum and concert hall.[22] We might update and expand Gadamer's list and also highlight the commodification and technological reproduction of art via mass-produced fine art prints, records, CDs, and other contemporary venues for "experiencing" music such as Pandora and Spotify. Although important differences exist among these examples, in each case the artwork readily becomes a dehistoricized, moveable object available for one's momentary aesthetic experience, use, and purchase. Of course, Gadamer's point is not to call us to return to some nostalgic past – itself an impossibility – nor to deny the power of art in contemporary settings (such as the museum and concert hall) to address and potentially transform us. Rather, as Jean Grondin observes, Gadamer traces the history of aesthetic consciousness, showing it be a distinctively modern development that arose in response to modern science's colonization of truth.[23] This, as it were, genealogy of aesthetic

[19] H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, p. 85. [*WM*, p. 91].

[20] *TM*, Ibidem. [*WM*, edb.].

[21] Ibidem [*WM*, edb.].

[22] Ibidem, pp. 86–87. [*WM*, p. 92].

[23] See, for example, J. Grondin, "Gadamer's Aesthetics: The Overcoming of Aesthetic Consciousness and the Hermeneutical Truth of Art", [in:] *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, Vol. 2, ed. M. Kelly, New York–Oxford 1998, see esp. pp. 267–269.

consciousness is undertaken for the purpose of his larger project, viz., to reclaim art's truth and to expose the loss that results from disconnecting art from our experience (*Erfahrung*) of self, world, and others. In short, Gadamer is reclaiming art's transformative power.

As a counter to aesthetic differentiation, Gadamer proposes what he calls "aesthetic *non*-differentiation", which rejects the divisions imposed by aesthetic consciousness and unites form and content. Here the notion of a "pure work" is shown as an abstraction that fails to do justice to our experience of art as an ongoing presentation or enactment of some meaningful content. By denying the artificial separation of aesthetic qualities and the work's moral and cognitive significance, Gadamer simultaneously opposes historicism and the over-subjectivization of aesthetic consciousness that mutes art's address. As Gadamer explains, "[t]he inseparability of form and content is fully realized as the nondifferentiation in which we encounter art as something that both expresses us and speaks to us."[24] Here he calls us back to our experience (*Erfahrung*) of art's address as that which has the power to confront us, thereby expanding and recalibrating our understanding of our world and ourselves. Art's address and truth is not unleashed via an act of abstracting the formal qualities of art or focusing solely on the technical mastery (or lack thereof) of a musician's performance or a painter's use of symmetry and proportion. Rather, we must linger with the work, allowing ourselves to "hear" its address as we learn to "speak" its language.

Recall, for example, Ellison's commentary on Bearden's collages, in which we encounter "mask-faced Harlemites and tenant farmers" who confront us with a social history of a particular people who "struggled to survive the decimating and fragmentizing effects of American social processes."[25] By lingering with Bearden's collage and allowing it to speak to me, I begin to understand not only something important about the social history of African Americans, but also I am called to reflect on my own world and to consider, for example, the social inequalities that continue today, and how I might challenge present racialized and other unjust practices and discourses. The work's truth summons me to live out the reality of my communal existence and to acknowledge my solidarity with others. By participating in the event of art my former (and perhaps even distorted)

[24] H.-G. Gadamer, "The Relevance of the Beautiful. Art as Play, Symbol, and Festival", [in:] *RB*, p. 51. [„Die Aktualität des Schönen", in *GW* 8, p. 141.]

[25] R. Ellison, op. cit., p. 678.

way of seeing others is challenged and re-formed. Here Gadamer's emphasis on the communal dimensions of aesthetic experience contrasts sharply with modern aesthetics' stress on the subject's individual (in particular, pleasurable) reaction to a particular work. Given that one's subjectivity is historically, culturally, and socially shaped, we should expect that eminent works such as Bearden's – works that present a subject matter in an especially poignant and unprecedented way – will speak not only to me but to others likewise shaped. In short, art's nature as event requires the active participatory involvement of subjects conditioned by already established (yet always dynamic) hermeneutical horizons. Such participation involves a purposed being-present-with-the-other – an *ecstasis* in which, as Davey puts it, "subjects are drawn out of their sense of singularity and are forced to recognize if not yield to the collective dimensions of their being."[26]

Lastly, the materiality of Bearden's collages – from the torn edges and varied textures of the amalgamated figures to the juxtaposition and conjoining of the African masks with African American symbols – plays an important role in art's address. That is, not just *what* is represented but also *how* it is represented speaks art's truth and facilitates the development of a subject matter. That the figures are (re)constructed of torn (and already socially constructed photographic) images rather than simply painted with smooth, sharply defined lines "says" something about the experience of African Americans in a racialized context. The photographs of African Americans were no doubt shaped in some way – whether taken by white or black photographers – that is, by a white gaze that includes, among other things, the dominant culture's ideas of beauty, success, sexuality, and so forth. By tearing these images from their context in a particular magazine and reconstructing them with African masks, berets, and other meaningful symbols, Bearden communicates a polysemous message about the struggle both to expose and dislodge unjust depictions of African Americans and to re-present them more accurately.

To summarize, in stark contrast to the dualism of aesthetic differentiation, Gadamer's notion of aesthetic non-differentiation unites inextricably form and content – after all, this is how we experience art, as a gathered unity that speaks to us in and through an exceptionally poignant arrangement of symbols, textures, figures, and sounds. Specifically, art is an instance of what Gadamer calls linguisticality (*Sprachlichkeit*). Although this notion is often misunderstood, linguisticality consists in the

[26] N. Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*..., op. cit., p. 47.

speculative capacity of words, symbols, bodily gestures, images, musical sounds, and the like to communicate meanings beyond themselves. Thus, linguisticality is a broad concept that encompasses significantly more than verbal or written language. As Gadamer makes explicit in an interview with Jean Grondin, "Language in words is only a special concretion of linguisticality."[27] So here we return with a clearer understanding to Gadamer's claim (with which Bearden would agree) that art addresses or speaks to us. Art speaks to us not through words or by being translated into words or reduced to propositions; rather, art's material content, given its art-ful arrangement of symbols, figures, colors, and sounds, all of which arise from and are shaped by broader historical and cultural horizons, communicates something meaningful. Moreover, these broader horizons of meaning make possible the work's (particular) meaning and can in turn influence and (re)shape the horizons from which it emerges. In short, what Gadamer claims about the speculative capacity of words applies equally to artworks, since both are instances of linguisticality. Both words and artworks carry with them "the unsaid" of multiple horizons of meaning – horizons that both transcend the particular words or work in view and make possible their communicative address. Davey nicely encapsulates Gadamer's notion of the speculative dimensions of *Sprachlichkeit:* "The speculative capacity of a word mirrors or reflects the horizon of meaning that its sense depends on. […] When Gadamer speaks of an artwork or poem 'bringing forth' a world, what is brought forth is not a world *ex nihilo* but that unexpressed world which prefigures the possibility of all speaking."[28]

V. Gadamer On Participatory Aesthetic Engagement, Self-Understanding, and Tragedy

As the previous sections have indicated, for Gadamer art is a communal, dynamic, and revelatory event requiring the spectator or auditor's active participation. It involves a call and response, or to use Gadamer's terms, an interactive dialogical "play" between the work and the interpreter. As an other, the work calls out to us – revealing, bearing wit-

[27] H.-G. Gadamer, "Collected Works and Their Effective History", p. 420.

[28] N. Davey, *Unfinished Worlds*…, op. cit., p. 145. See also, H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, p. 458 [*WM*, p. 462].

ness – and as Bearden's art confirms, it demands a response from those who have ears to hear. This emphasis on art's otherness and its capacity to communicate truth allows Gadamer to develop what we might call "participatory aesthetic engagement." Here the spectator is drawn into the event of art through a decided act of being-with the work as other. In order to attend to the work in this way, the participant must lose herself in the work, as one loses oneself in a captivating conversation, a ritual celebration, or a religious ceremony.[29] This type of self-forgetting is positive and productive, as it has the potential to increase one's self-understanding which, for Gadamer, is always a self-understanding in relation to others and one's world and is thus conditioned by communal practices, traditions, and discourses. As Gadamer explains, "Self-understanding always occurs through understanding something other than the self, and includes the unity and integrity [*Selbigkeit*] of the other. Since we meet the artwork in the world and encounter a world in the individual artwork, the work of art is not some alien universe into which we are magically transported [*hineinverzaubert*] for a time. Rather, we learn to understand ourselves in and through it…"[30] As we saw earlier in Gadamer's critique of aesthetic differentiation, here too his emphasis on the participatory, event-character of art speaks against the subject-object division of modern aesthetics. Just as the participant does not control the game or the religious ritual but instead is drawn into its life, spirit, and being, so too with the event of art. Rather than approach it as an object to be controlled, we approach it as an other whose message calls out to us and is worthy of our attention. As we open ourselves to its world, we come to see our world in a different light.

Here I want to return to Bearden's montage technique in order to underscore one final connection with Gadamer's reflections on art and its ability to communicate and disclose truth through its artful materiality. In Bearden's act of gathering given photographic images of African Americans – images conditioned by the racialized discourses of his

[29] For Gadamer's discussion of the concept play, see *Truth and Method*, esp. pp. 101–110. [*WM*, pp. 107–116]. For a helpful discussion of play as medial, see J. Sallis, "The Hermeneutics of the Artwork", [in:] *Hans-Georg Gadamer: Wahrheit und Methode*, ed. G. Figal, Klassiker Auslegen 30, Berlin 2007, pp. 45–57, esp. pp. 50–51.

[30] H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, p. 97. [*WM*, 102]. For an extended discussion of self-understanding and self-forgetting, see Gadamer's essay entitled, "On the Problem of Self-Understanding", [in:] *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. D.E. Ling, Berkeley 1977, pp. 44–58.

day – and then tearing them into fragments, and reassembling them into a unified whole, he engages in a double act of negation and affirmation. As Kobena Mercer observes, this interplay of negation and affirmation allows Bearden to unite his artistic explorations with his sociopolitical concerns. Bearden's "cut or the paper tear" became both "a stylistic signature and a mark of critical discrepancy between different regimes of representation."[31] On the one hand, we have the negative moment wherein Bearden de-constructs and annuls the stereotypes of black Americans as found in the photojournalism of the 1930s.[32] Here African Americans are depicted as despondent, passive, impoverished, and culturally bereft. On the other, we have the affirmative moment wherein Bearden reconfigures his subjects as active, communal, creative, and possessing a mysterious depth.

To illustrate the point more specifically, I turn to Bearden's famous montage painting, "The Dove"[33] (1964), in which he creatively and strategically re-presents Harlem's inhabitants. As one views the work, one is drawn into a neighborhood alive with movement: some people are coming, others going, while others sit to smoke and gather their thoughts. Amidst the figures pieced together from disparate photographic fragments of various proportions, a unified whole emerges. Upon closer inspection, we see that nearly all of the "pieced-together" individuals are placed in such a way that they touch at least one other person. At the center of the painting we find a man gazing contemplatively out of an entryway. A white dove – traditionally a sign of peace – perches on the ledge above him, apprehensively eyeing a *white* cat prowling on the sidewalk below.

The fragmented images, multiple perspectives, and rich textures point to a complexity, depth, and reality that both exceed and annul the hollowness of the original photographic images. Yet these images and symbols have histories. The familiar white dove qua symbol of peace juxtaposed with a prowling *white* (rather than "unlucky" black) cat – both placed in a predominantly African American neighborhood during a time when racial strife was particularly elevated – simultaneously draw upon already established discourses, traditions, and meanings and

[31] K. Mercer, op. cit., p. 39.

[32] On the photojournalism of the 1930s and how it negatively depicted American Americans, see K. Mercer, op. cit., esp. p. 40. See also, L.S. Glazer, op. cit., esp. pp. 421–23.

[33] Bearden's work, "The Dove", can be viewed at the following website: http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/show_fullscreen.php?item=17b_1&desc=The%20Dove%2057.

bring them to bear on present social realities. That is, the work gathers together familiar symbols and creates new associations, which "speak" to us both meaningfully and powerfully.[34] Again we see that art's address and ability to communicate truth presupposes a prior acquaintance with meaningful symbols, traditions, and practices, which condition and inform our present engagement with the work.

Lastly, Bearden's art not only embodies a unified view of form and content but also shows how shared or enduring aspects of human experience can be communicated through particular works whose contents are historically specific. As Ellison explains, through Bearden's presentation of black life and experience in America, we are confronted with "something of the universal elements of an abiding human condition."[35] In an essay entitled, "Rectangular Structure in My Montage Paintings", Bearden himself echoes Ellison's point. First, he describes how his process of fracturing and integrating hands, eyes, and other fragments from preexisting materials into a different pictorial space transforms and transfigures the originals, freeing the previously fixed images for new life and expression. Reflecting further on his work, Bearden writes, "often something specific and particular can have its meaning extended toward what is more general and universal but never at the expense of the total structure."[36]

These considerations offer a perfect segue to Gadamer's thoughts on how tragedy affects and implicates the spectator. For Gadamer, our experience of the artwork, like that of the festival or ritual, involves the spectator's ecstatic and active participation. The engaged participant enters into dialogical play with the work, wherein the work's message, meaning, and truth is integrated and applied in the present. Gadamer calls this mode of interacting with the work "contemporaneity", which starkly contrasts with the simultaneity of aesthetic differentiation. In the former notion, the engaged participant *achieves* contemporaneity – which, as Gadamer explains is "a task for consciousness and an achievement that is demanded of it."[37] That is, the spectator or auditor must in-

[34] This is not to claim that what I have described is the *only* possible meaning of the work. The artwork's ontology is dynamic and its possible meanings are forever in excess of particular interpretations at any give time. Likewise, its communal event-character indicates that multiple interpretations are always possible.

[35] R. Ellison, op. cit., p. 676.

[36] R. Bearden, op. cit., pp. 291–300, here p. 298.

[37] H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, p. 127. [*WM*, p. 132].

tentionally and creatively bring the world and message of the work to bear on her world. Gadamer continues, "[f]or it is the truth of our own world – the religious and moral [*sittlichen*] world in which we live – that is presented before us and in which we recognize ourselves."[38] Like Bearden, Gadamer affirms that truths and shared, enduring aspects of the human condition can be communicated through a work's particular content. If one lingers with a work and attends to its message and the truths it embodies – such as our need for genuine recognition, our longing for justice in the face of inequity, our human proclivity for ritual, and the complexity of our social realities – these truths can be meaningfully brought to bear on one's present world.

This kind of active spectatorial (or perhaps better, participatory) involvement is exemplified by one's encounter with tragic drama. For Gadamer, Aristotle's thoughts on tragedy are exemplary and are still applicable today. According to Gadamer, that Aristotle includes the effect on the spectator in his definition of tragedy is a significant contribution to "aesthetic" theory. Gadamer develops Aristotle's insight in his own emphasis on the spectator's participatory engagement as an essential feature of art's ontology. When a spectator truly enters into a tragic drama, he or she does not "stand aloof" but actively participates in the event, affirming the overwhelming and disproportionate consequences emerging from a particular course of action. As Gadamer explains, "[t]he spectator recognizes himself and his own finiteness in the face of the power of fate."[39] To participate in this way is not to "affirm the tragic course of events as such, or the justice of the fate that overtakes the hero."[40] Rather, it is to come to see that we all experience, take part in, and suffer as the result of decisions and actions – some of which we have no control over – and that such actions have tremendous consequences for us, our loved ones, and our communities. To be affected by the work in this way and to achieve contemporaneity with its claims is to grow in self- and world-understanding; it is to be awakened to the reality of the "harsh poetry" of the human condition.[41]

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[38] Ibidem, p. 128. [*WM*, p. 133].

[39] H.-G. Gadamer, *TM*, p. 132. [*WM*, p. 137].

[40] Ibidem.

[41] On tragedy, contemporaneity, and spectatorial participation, see also, J. Grondin, "Truth of Art", pp. 46–48. Grondin brings these themes together nicely when he states: "Tragedy, emblematic of all art, always implies a confrontation with yourself.

VI. Conclusion

Bearden's art and thought, as we have seen, shares several continuities with Gadamer's reflections. For both Bearden and Gadamer, artworks are not silent objects confined to their own time and place; rather, they call out to us and await a response. They invite us to linger with them and require that we listen to their "poetry" and translate their message into our world. For both, the materiality and particularities of a work are essential aspects of a work and play an important role in its communicative address. As we highlighted, Bearden's message is not only communicated through the poignant arrangement of meaningful symbols and figures, but also through the *meaning*-ful tears, cuts, and various textures of his collages.[42] Yet the particularity and historical conditioning of the work is no barrier to its speaking in the present and confronting us with difficult truths about justice, tragedy, and the shared concerns of our human condition.

Before closing, I want to mention briefly one final aspect of Bearden's work that is consonant with Gadamer's thought but also enriches it. In Bearden's works we encounter the complexity and depth of social realities and human being-in-the-world-with-others. Not only would Bearden agree with Grondin's statement that for Gadamer art "induces a transfiguration of the real, in the revelatory sense of the word",[43] but he would also add that art's transfiguring of the real often requires a simultaneous act of dismantling negative and harmful images informed by social narratives, discourses, practices, and traditions. That is, in order to transfigure the world so that we might see it with "new eyes", art must at times disavow and deconstruct the distorted images that have been taken as true, natural, and real. Bearden's art does just that (and more) and thus opens a space for what we might call "de-fabricating-the-world."

In other words, Bearden's work not only presents us with a world and its inhabitants, but it also challenges us to think differently about that world and our relation to it. Here Bearden's art, so to speak, "lives" in the in-between. On the one hand, the painting draws us into the life and experiences of African Americans in Harlem in the mid-twentieth century.

The spectator finds himself led back to his own reality, to the tragedy of destiny and of existence", ibidem, p. 48.

[42] Of course, one would not truly enter into the work if one merely focused (formally or abstractly) on the materiality of the work and/or concerned oneself only with the artist's technique.

[43] J. Grondin, "Truth of Art", p. 43.

Such an experience was, as the fragmented figures and torn edges suggest, one of struggle, pain, and difficulty. On the other hand, the inhabitants exhibit a depth, beauty, and communal energy, all of which speak against the dominant discourses and negative stereotypes of black Americans at that time. Thus, the work confronts us with an already-not-yet testimony (*Aussage*) and invites us to enter into the not-yet (here the de-fabricated and re-fabricated depiction of African Americans as creative sociopolitical and cultural contributors worthy of respect and equal opportunities for human flourishing).

The "gap" between present social reality with its negative views of African Americans and the work's truer depiction suggests that (in at least some cases) the work is proleptic. That is, the more complete or transformed social reality that the artwork embodies, although not fully realized, is nonetheless, in some small way, present now. For example, Bearden's collage confronts the viewer with the complexity, profundity, and creativity of African Americans – a message based on his own witness of and interactions with black communities. However, given the extensive and entrenched racialized social world in which Bearden lived, a new and truer way of seeing black Americans was not yet a present reality, but only a future hope. Thus, in Bearden's double movement of negation and affirmation, an important activity of our being in an "out-of-joint" world is revealed: the activity of de-fabricating and dislodging distorted images and narratives that have become sedimented and are hence taken as true, natural, and even necessary.

It is precisely here that Bearden's art offers a valuable supplement to Gadamer's account by expanding it in ways that help us better understand ourselves, others, and the social realities that we make and by which we are made. Gadamer, like Heidegger, speaks often of world-building and how this process is ongoing. Although both acknowledge our thrownness and facticity and regularly deconstruct and reinvent traditional philosophical concepts, neither foreground the need for "de-fabricating one's world" – that is, the need to expose and re-form oppressive discourses and practices that constitute social worlds. Consequently, by bringing Bearden's approach to art into conversation with Gadamer (and Heidegger) and allowing his works to reveal their truth (*aletheia*), we discover a fundamental activity of our being-in-the-all-too-human-world, viz.,"world-de-fabricating." Here the conflictual relationship is truly conflictual, and, unlike Heidegger's description of the *polemos* between world and earth, this world-to-world strife is not only

discordant but injuriously out-of-tune.[44] What is fixed in place through racialized discourses and practices becomes rigidly fixed. The resultant racialized world creates a context in which the dominant group is empowered and thrives, while the subjugated group(s) is either exploited or denied opportunities for human flourishing. Whatever setting forth occurs in the construction of a racialized world is a setting forth into concealment with detrimental and often deadly consequences. In short, in Bearden's act of un-fabricating the world, the hiddenness of the truth is neither the result of Being hiding itself (Heidegger) nor our human finitude (Gadamer). Rather, it has everything to do with something having gone awry in the human heart, which then, through our collective discourses and practices, takes on a life of its own. Thankfully, art's truth has something to say to that as well.

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Metaphysical cognition in hermeneutic interpretation: remarks on Grzegorz Sztabiński's *The Writing of Nature – Transcendence III*[1]

Summary

The article contains a hermeneutic interpretation of the art of Grzegorz Sztabiński, a contemporary Polish artist creating drawings, paintings and installations. It starts with definitions of transcendence, hermeneutic interpretation, metaphysical cognition, and artistic installation. The main section is comprised of descriptions and interpretations of the artist's works, created throughout his career, including his own comments and those of his critics, especially in relation to the cycle *Pismo natury – Transcendencja* [The Writing of Nature: Transcendence]. The text explains how the artist finds the signs of writing to be traces of transcendence concealed in nature and how the relationship between the artwork and the place is used to build the new contexts of each exposure (serving always to discover the transcendence). Finally, the game of models of distinguishing the object of metaphysical cognition is described and in conclusion the metaphysical cognition discovered in the hermeneutic interpretation of an artwork is found as a way of being in the world proposed by art.

Key words

hermeneutic interpretation, metaphysical cognition, artistic installation, nature, trace

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[1] The article was inspired by Grzegorz Sztabiński's *The Writing of Nature – Transcendence III*, an exhibition at Otwarta Pracownia [Open Studio] in Cracow, which opened 10 June 2016.

Preface

It is the aim of the present article to discuss a contemporary attempt to uncover the transcendence hidden in traces present in the world. Concentrated observation of such traces in nature may lead to reflection on the secret scripture organising the presence of metaphysical signs around us. As such scripture or writing is hardly visible or readable, it requires a special observer and interpreter. The article asks whether an artist can find traces of metaphysics present as writing in nature, as one particular artist, Grzegorz Sztabiński, suggests in the titles of his works. Can we find only observation in his works, or hermeneutic interpretation as well? Are such works helpful in finding these traces and showing them to viewers interpreting these works? Are the viewers brought any closer to metaphysical cognition thanks to their interpretation of an artwork? Perhaps my interpretations below can answer these questions.

The question of transcendence

Grzegorz Sztabiński is a contemporary artist working in the media of drawing, painting, and installation. In his works, the focus is placed on their semantic determinants: the decision behind employing a particular medium, particular materials and tools, the place and time of display, and, finally, the role of the constructed image and the words used.[2] His works provide food for thought; they invite reflection, as do the exhibitions within which they are presented. Sztabiński's exhibitions, original concepts conceived by the artist himself, become akin to installations (with drawings and paintings as parts thereof).

In their ambition to present complex meanings, Sztabiński's installations and authorial displays share a great deal with Conceptualism, although they seem to move beyond concentration on art as such.[3] In his comment on the exhibition that inspired my remarks, 'Everything re-

[2] On installation art and its definition see: G. Dziamski, *Sztuka u progu XXI wieku* [Art on the threshold of the twenty-first century], Poznan 2002, pp. 175–184; G. Sztabiński, "Sens sztuki instalacji" [The meaning of the art of installation], *Format*, 1998, 3–4 (28/29), pp. 2–4.

[3] On the Conceptualists' opposition to art's function of expressing content other than that related to art see: J. Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy", [in:] *Conceptual*

sults from my own encounter with the place and that of my works',[4] the artist points to the role of the interplay between the work and its context. At the same time, the air of mystery which inextricably arises when the viewer confronts Sztabiński's exhibitions (which is often mentioned by their creator) further accentuates the necessity of making multifaceted and unavoidably subjective attempts at understanding his works, attempts that perhaps surpass the artist's intentions (which, in any case, might be mysterious to him as well). If 'attempts at understanding' are defined as above, then my explanation of the 'complex meanings' of Grzegorz Sztabiński's installations and exhibitions, that is, the type of food for thought they provide, their meaning, elucidation of which is the actual purpose of this article, must of necessity employ a method of hermeneutic interpretation that posits consideration of the context and moves beyond identification of the author's intention.[5]

For the purpose of this text I assume that such hermeneutic interpretation of installations and exhibitions aims to explain and understand – that is, to determine – the meaning of a perceived structure through linguistic description (translation into language and text) and to identify elements that carry symbolic meanings (juxtaposed then to form metaphors); to evoke intellectual and emotional reactions; and, finally, to induce metaphysical experiences. The last-named objective may prove to encompass ultimate meanings that submit only partly to linguistic understanding, for they transform understanding into metaphysical cognition – cognition that concerns transcendental features of being.[6]

An overt suggestion to the viewers to direct their interpretation towards the transcendent can be found in the title of Grzegorz Sztabiński's exhibition, where, for the third time in the series, the artist directly refers to the word *transcendence.* Although he leaves it intentionally unclear whether he under-

Art: a Critical Anthology, eds. A. Alberro, B. Stimson, Cambridge and London 1993, pp. 158–178.

[4] Quoted from an email sent to the author, 23 June 2016.

[5] See for example: F. Chmielowski, "Hermeneutyczny wymiar podstawowych pytań estetyki" [The hermeneutic dimension of the basic questions of aesthetics], [in:] *Estetyki filozoficzne XX wieku* [Philosophical aesthetics of the twentieth century], ed. K. Wilkoszewska, Cracow 2000, p. 95.

[6] Cf. M.A. Krąpiec, "Metafizyczne poznanie" [Metaphysical cognition], [in:] *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii* [Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy], [online] http://www.ptta.pl/pef/pdf/m/metafizycznep.pdf [accesed: 16.06.2013].

stands it 'in the ontic or common sense of the word (e.g. as an ordinary transition of the status of one place towards something different)',[7] transcendence will be understood in this article as tantamount to the metaphysical, as a dimension 'above and beyond' reality, an infinite realm of ideas and, ultimately, as the Absolute, whose dimensions can nevertheless be penetrated by empirically experienced reality.[8] Traces of such penetration can be cognised, investigated, and understood (e.g. by means of intuition and observation of nature, 'its empirical experience', which will prove important in the case of the art discussed below) if one comes to realise the transcendent aspects of being, the transcendentals (such as Being, Unity, Truth, Goodness, Beauty…), that is, when one engages in metaphysical cognition (accepting also one's own ultimate impotence in the face of the Mystery).

This way of thinking about interpretation and metaphysical cognition evokes an idealistic tradition. For instance, Schelling suggested that art itself is 'an emanation of the Absolute',[9] whereas an artwork is a real presentation or objectification of the ideal Absolute, which means that artistic activity can present and manifest what cannot be understood through rational scientific thinking. In this way, art is 'the route to an

[7] Quoted from an email sent to the author, 23 June 2016.

[8] Transcendence is commonly defined as 'going beyond ordinary limits, being beyond the limits of all possible experience and knowledge, or the universe or material existence', (*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [online] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transcendent, accessed: 13.07.2016). In this article, metaphysics is understood as 'rationally valid and intellectually verifiable cognition of the world existing in reality (including the affirmation of the Absolute Being), aimed at discovering the ultimate cause of its being, whose traces human reason finds in empirically available objects'. Cf. M.A. Krąpiec, A. Maryniarczyk, "Metafizyka" [Metaphysics], [in:] *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii*, [online] http://www.ptta.pl/pef/pdf/m/metafizyka.pdf [accesed: 21.03.2016]; A. Maryniarczyk, "Transcendentalia" [Transcendentals], [in:] *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii*, [online] http://www.ptta.pl/pef/pdf/t/transcendentalia.pdf [accesed: 16.06.2013]. In this article, I will be considering the transcendent (metaphysical); however, I will not be following Immanuel Kant's distinction between the transcendent (being beyond the reach of experience) and transcendental (related to the *a priori* cognition rather than to the object of cognition).

[9] F.W.J. von Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, ed. and trans. D.W. Stott, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p. 19.

understanding of what cannot appear as an object of knowledge',[10] and may also be a philosophical tool.

This tradition was transformed in hermeneutics, which is important for this particular article. Heidegger, who was critical of the established understanding of metaphysics, saw art – which is always poetry – as offering a disclosure and an opening in the 'midst' of being, giving us the power to 'name the gods' and stretch 'above our heads, up in another world' – he saw poetry 'as the proclamation of world in the invocation of God'.[11] On the other hand, the 'being' of the work of art was itself essentially metaphysical.

Symbol 'alludes to beauty and the potentially whole and holy order of things,'[12] says Gadamer concerning the need for completeness of the *symbolon*, the poetic tool essential for art. Beauty, the whole, and order are strictly the objects of metaphysical cognition. Joyful and festive celebration of the community of all participants of art in 'the mystery' which 'lies in this suspension of time' and 'represents a genuine creation',[13] are also the traces of metaphysics present in the reality.

While 'the understanding' was the basic way of being-in-the-world for hermeneutics, interpretation of art and its poetry seems to be a hermeneutic way of finding metaphysical traces in reality, or a mode of disclosing and revealing the level of metaphysical ideas.

Therefore, hermeneutic observation of nature, resulting in the discovery of metaphysical traces in reality and then in the transformation of such traces into art, may present a specific way to follow these traces and consequently to disclose the level of ideas in metaphysical cognition.

The 'observation of nature' mentioned above is also referred to in the title of the exhibition, which contains the phrase *The Writing of Nature.* Taken as a guideline in the hermeneutic interpretation of the installation and exhibition, it enables the discovery of yet another dimension

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[10] A. Bowie, "Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [online] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schelling/ [accessed: 11.01.2017].

[11] See: M. Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, [in:] idem, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, ed. and trans. A. Hofstadter, New York 1975, p. 70; idem, *Holderlin and the Essence of Poetry*, [in:] *Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry*, ed. and trans. K. Hoeller, Amherst 2000, p. 65; idem, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. W. Brogan and P. Warnek, Bloomington 1995, p. 109.

[12] H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, trans. N. Walker, London 1986, p. 32.

[13] Ibidem, p. 60.

of hermeneutic interpretation present in Grzegorz Sztabiński's art. Discovering this dimension is equivalent to explaining the meaning of his art (which is the particular purpose of this article, in which hermeneutic interpretation is treated as an explanation of the meaning of particular installations and exhibitions, as well as the broader senses and goals of his art). As it happens, the artist himself also attempted to interpret or discover the meaning, but his interpretation involved nature – observing it, searching it for 'intellectually verifiable' traces of transcendence (e.g. 'Being' or order), and exposing these traces in an artistic structure that is perceived as image and interpreted verbally (in yet another interpretation, or in the next stage of interpretation) by the viewer.

Naming transcendent features of being, that is, the transcendentals, consists of establishing tools that serve metaphysical cognition. Meanwhile, the discovered trace of the presence of the transcendent can be seen as 'the aspect of things that is the object of research and which is identical with being' which occurs when the object of metaphysics is being distinguished.[14] It seems that if we recognise the value of such tools and accept the presence of the trace as an object of metaphysical cognition, indicated by the artwork, then taking an accurate cognitive stance towards the work, as well as towards transcendence accepted in its metaphysical form, will require us to apply hermeneutic interpretation. Ultimately, this perspective (as this article manifests) may employ tools belonging to metaphysical cognition in order to, for instance, identify the presence and role of 'Being' in an artwork where the artist followed his metaphysical intuition and traced transcendence hidden in nature. The 'Being' uncovered in the process of interpretation may lead us to an answer regarding the nature of the Mystery.

This would occur in opposition to common opinions that posit hermeneutics as a substitute for metaphysics, as well as to some theoreticians' arguments against Idealism and their concentration on the world and its history.[15] Significantly, such an approach fails to account for Heidegger's recognition that the metaphysical cannot be avoided or for his attitude to poetry (described above), whereas Gadamer acknowledged how art reveals the highest universal values, and, thus, the transcendent (clearly present in poetry, or in the 'afterlife' and persistence of classic

[14] On the subject of 'distinguishing the object of metaphysics', see M.A. Krąpiec, A. Maryniarczyk, "Metafizyka", op. cit.

[15] See, for example, P. Bytniewski, *Metafizyka hermeneutycznej interpretacji* [The metaphysics of hermeneutic interpretation], [online] http://www.ptta.pl/index.php?id=symp_str_6 [accesed: 11.06.2016].

patterns).[16] In this article, I will attempt to show how directing the hermeneutic interpretation of an artwork towards transcendence (that permeates both art and nature and leaves traces of this penetration) may lead to metaphysical cognition, to identification of the transcendentals, and to distinguishing the object of metaphysics.[17]

Grzegorz Sztabiński: the contemporary artist in relation to transcendence hidden in nature

Grzegorz Sztabiński, artist and philosopher, is gifted with intuition and sensitivity to metaphysical traces, which renders him capable of interpreting nature in which these traces are hidden, as well as expressing this interpretation in art. This is despite the fact that, in the eyes of a contemporary human being, nature, the starting point for his works, is ordinary, everyday, and obvious. It is useful, yet easily exhaustible. Usually, it is appreciated, yet it is often threatening, in a simple but effective manner or as a 'sublime horror'. It can be used, conquered, or controlled. It can be financially exploited. It is obvious that nature is there.

However, it is not so common for a philosopher and artist who seeks to access this everyday occurrence to find signs of metaphysical ideas and who intuitively senses transcendence hidden in nature. In Grzegorz Sztabiński's early works, the geometrical rules he seemed to impose on nature (repeated in subsequent stages of his work) were attempts to identify traces of the perfect order, a universal model, a metaphysical pattern whose reading is neither merely a result of inspiration by shapes formed by nature nor an attempt to rationally approach data collected by the senses, but which stems from a cognitive intuition of metaphysical design and order of things inherent in the world and perceived as a composition of phenomena with inherent rules.

Order, model, pattern, rule – these seem to be fundamental aspects of geometrical forms present in *Logical Landscapes*, made in the 1970s and 80s, in which the artist showed how mimetic treatment of 'natural'

[16] See for example: P. Dybel, *Granice rozumienia i interpretacji. O hermeneutyce Hansa-Georga Gadamera* [The boundaries of understanding and interpretation: on the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer], Cracow 2004, pp. 314–337, 415.

[17] This is my own proposition, although it follows the general thesis that hermeneutics refers to 'the tradition of approaching values as transcendentals' and belief in their connection and organic interdependence; see F. Chmielowski, op. cit., p. 92.

landscapes in drawing and painting was insufficient for the apprehension of the rules of existence and attempts to understand them.

Forms that preserve traces of past *Landscapes* were again recalled, in a purer, more synthetic manner on grey-brown or light green canvases exposed in a regular rhythm on the walls of Cracow's Otwarta Pracownia [Open Studio] gallery in 2016, marking yet another stage in Grzegorz Sztabiński's work.

Meanwhile, this early stage in the artist's development already contained a question that invited interpretive reflection and a search for the transcendent. Initially, it seemed paradoxical: is nature, with freedom as its essence, subject to form as an ordering power? However, the alogical logic of the paradox – so pronounced in the early *Logical Landscapes*, with its reformulation of the figure of the tree according to geometrical figures that are, in any case, suggested by the shape of the tree even if they seem to be imposed on that shape or inserted 'under' it – is, indeed, the metaphysical order, the cosmos that imposed order onto chaos – a transcendent order, belonging to the primary and finite rules of existence, somewhat opposed to the sense of paradox and incompatibility of ideal and rational geometry with 'picturesque', irregular, unconstrained, and dynamically changing nature.

Wandering: relationality

At the preceding stage of his work, paradox and conclusions about 'incompatibility' led the artist to distortion and imbalance, which he readily acknowledged.[18]

However, in time, the resulting state of confusion, as Grzegorz Sztabiński referred to his investigations, led to a discovery whose processual actuality can be seen in his recent works and is supposedly illustrated (not literally) in the passage through the consecutive rooms of the exhibition at Otwarta Pracownia.

Initially, this involved the discovery of relationality, which may uncover, from 'between different kinds of reality',[19] what is transcendent

[18] Cf. G. Sztabiński, "Lata osiemdziesiąte" [The 80s], [in:] *Retrospekcja. Grzegorz Sztabiński. Obrazy, rysunki, instalacje* [Retrospective. Grzegorz Sztabiński. Paintings, drawings, installations], Łódź 2007, p. 49.

[19] S. Marzec, "Malarstwo jako wizualna refleksja" [Painting as visual reflection], [in:] *Retrospekcja*, op. cit., p. 93.

in them. For if the artist retained 'belief in the existence of reality that is more than merely a product of piling up rhetorics',[20] yet he still believed in transcendence inherent in space, revealed by relationships, and also expressed with the symbols of tree, cross, and hexagram, which were featured in ink drawings containing layered forms made (with carbon paper) in the 1980s – symbols that were to resurface later on, subtly developing their ambiguous references to metaphysics by including triangular and pyramidal forms in the exhibition at Otwarta Pracownia.

Thanks to interpretation, which plays a crucial role here, religious symbols that are part of the order of things discovered through the relational overlapping of layers of carbon on paper, construed as both uncovering and resulting, opened doors to transcendence that meant being both beyond and above, but also to the type of reality where sublime metaphysical sacredness is revealed gradually (temporally and in consecutive layers of experience and cognition) as something permanently inherent in memory, spiritual elevation, and prayer, as well as in sacrifice, pain, suffering, humiliation, loneliness … It is revealed in human perseverance in and towards them, which hermeneutic interpretations often emphasise.[21]

A multiplicity of meanings enables interpretations to reveal new layers of works, along with their relationship with and their permeation by the transcendent order of things, almost willingly submitting to being expressed through a seemingly infinite number of rhetorics. In any case, the rhetorics proved to be countable, unlike transcendence, which is infinite, even though we can become acquainted with its real, concrete, finite, and countable traces. Nevertheless, we never get to know the Mystery, which has always featured in interpretations of Grzegorz Sztabiński's art. This way, the impression of its being explicable in terms such as 'relationality', which can then be treated as one of the rhetorics,[22] should include the word *almost*.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] See: e.g. J. Ratzinger, "Kto mnie zobaczył, zobaczył także i Ojca" [Whoever has seen me has seen the Father] (J 14,9). Oblicze Jezusa w Piśmie Świętym [The face of Jesus in the Scriptures], [in:] idem, *W drodze do Jezusa Chrystusa* [On the way to Jesus Christ], trans. Father J. Merecki S.D.S., Cracow 2005, pp. 33–43.

[22] See: S. Marzec, p. 93 and N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. S. Pleasance and F. Woods, Dijon 2002.

Wandering: repetition

Later, the artist's 'wanderings' led him to discover memory, which, in preserving the past, preserves traces. There are also repetitions possible because of the memory. Repetitions that reveal the transcendent: memory itself (for we remember what we intend to repeat), time (for we repeat that which has already taken place), and identity (for something repeated, though it is just like the earlier event, is not the same). However, it was not merely for the sake of such universal categories that the artist repeated his own motifs in *Self-Citations*, for repetition, a trace of metaphysical activity as such, reveals the transcendentals primarily by being. Through being repetition, it is and 'belongs to the moment that is infinity'.[23] *Is* will prove a very important term in relation to the described works.

Nevertheless, recollection as such has not lost any of its meaning over time, for it endures and penetrates Grzegorz Sztabiński's art, in particular his exhibition at Otwarta Pracownia. This exhibition contains retrospective repetitions of geometrical motifs, symbols, and self-citations, as well as developing the 'writing of nature', which emerged most recently (but still some time ago) in a clearly announced relationship with transcendence. It is noteworthy that the presence of works at the exhibition in three different rooms illustrates both the process of moving through consecutive stages in the artist's practice and the transcendent order inherent in his development and art understood as a complete process. It also manifests hermeneutic faithfulness to the task he posed for himself and continuously recollected, faithfulness to a task as relevant as a promise.[24] The task remains: to capture, through art, the ungraspable transcendence. This confirms the exhibition as a complex work that constitutes a uniform iconic statement.

[23] Cf. E. Jedlińska, "Sublimacja myśli. Myśl sublimująca. Spotkanie ze sztuką Grzegorz Sztabińskiego" [Sublimation of thoughts. Sublimating thought. An encounter with the art of Grzegorz Sztabiński], [in:] *Retrospekcja*, op. cit., p. 100.

[24] Cf. P. Ricoeur, *O sobie samym jako innym* [Oneself as another], trans. B. Chałstowski, Warsaw 2005, pp. 33–34, 190–191, 233 and introduction: M. Kowalska, "Dialektyka bycia sobą" [The dialectics of being oneself], pp. XI, XX, XXXIII.

Exhibition: Pismo natury – Transcendencja III [The Writing of Nature – Transcendence III], Otwarta Pracownia Gallery, Cracow, 10 June 2016.

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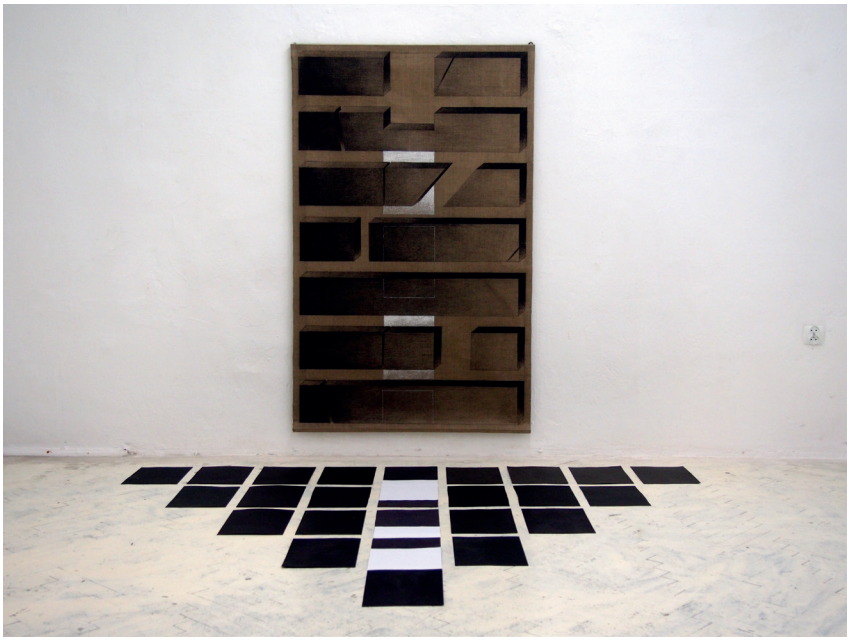

Exhibition: Pismo natury – Transcendencja III [The Writing of Nature – Transcendence III], Otwarta Pracownia Gallery, Cracow, 10 June 2016.

The writing of nature

In *The Writing of Nature*, Grzegorz Sztabiński searches for, collects, and arranges fragments of wood and dry branches – tree parts he has always liked to observe and study – and reads them for traces of transcendence, inscribed in nature as in a book, or as in cave paintings or hieroglyphs. He keeps them, intuitively reading the alphabet of the Mystery hidden in nature. Outstretched branches, pieces of timber, forming everyday picturesque or functional wholes and quite unnoticed in their complete forms, are now 'isolated' and made independent, each spread out on an individual surface in the shape of a geometrical figure. The artist repeats and changes the symbolic, black or white geometric background of isolated parts of writing, and leaves free spaces in between signs required for syntax. It is for the sake of order where transcendence is being realised, although this order is not finite and hence we can only sense it intuitively.

The Writing of Nature, deciphered and developed from 1993 on, is a manifestation of such intuition. Regardless of the place, condition of matter, and time of events, Grzegorz Sztabiński transcends the weakness of works and the ordinariness of everyday reality, enabling innumerable traces of infinite transcendence to be synthesised into particles of writing, signs that later recall transcendence and bring it to the surface, emerging at successive exhibitions as autonomous signs that construct new, artistic statements – statements formulated in an installation, in a work of art, in a medium seemingly separated from nature, yet, indeed, making use of nature and, as it happens, enabling the capture of the transcendent aspect of nature. Thus, nature interpreted by the artist acting upon his intuition reveals its hidden transcendence, which permeates and organises it, and provides at the same time a trace of metaphysics.

Finally, art encourages the viewer of the work and exhibition-as-work to investigate and interpret 'the writing of nature'. Art presents 'the writing of nature', whose synthesis into signs serves to open up a different reality and its order, which is a fleeting foundation of creation, organisation, connections and disconnections, binding and liberating. Interpretation suggests that the capacity of writing to connect means that it can impose ties as well. It can wrap itself around us with lines, symbolically present in the installations; lines that tie, combine, tightly adhere, save, but also press painfully, captivate…

Transcendence called by its name

In the most recent presentations of the series *The Writing of Nature*, in which the word 'transcendence' features in the title, organised after the presentation of 'tying and 'binding' writing at the Marienkirche in Frankfurt in 2014 (in a temple – a place most fitting for posing questions on the possibility of epiphany, questions about an opening up to transcendence), the artist moved his work to an unspecified, transitory', abandoned building in Frankfurt. He inquired whether the writing of nature, with its transcendent capabilities of opening and connecting, justifying its interpretation as a book of meanings, would also fill that 'non-place', allowing it not only to re-connect, but also to open up – to reveal the traces that can be hidden even in what seems to be emptiness, loneliness, or the irrelevant presence so typical of contemporaneity.[25] The artist asked whether this writing would continue and whether it would be transcendent. The answer contained the final conclusion that the art present in such a way that it demands to be noticed and reflected upon, to be confronted in a meaningful relationship with others who also want to experience it, restores, more than anything, the significance of existence. It also confirms it in the rules of writing, regardless of how difficult they are to grasp, regardless of simplifications imposed by art – art that offers food for thought, provokes reflection, and works as a catalyst for interpretation, but which ultimately, however, merely *is* there.

Perhaps Cracow's Otwarta Pracownia gallery links the two Frankfurt locations. Seemingly austere and challenging, it is also open to being filled, working as a venue for art and for those who want to encounter works of art, other people, and in this way themselves as well, and, finally, to discover the meaning of being. The latter is effected in the encounter with an interpretation of an artwork, the ultimate goal of which, just like the ultimate goal of writing, should be to uncover the transcendence that permeates the work, the place, artists, and viewers alike: transcendence stemming from the word *is*. By offering a place for art that emphasises the role of relationality as well as presence, Pracownia turns out to be a place for an epiphany of a transcendent meaning of being.

[25] On abandoned, undomesticated spaces with no relationality despite their presence (typical of postmodernity or supermodernity), see: M. Augé, *Non-Places. Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. J. Howe, London and New York 1995, pp. 75–114.

The viewer of the exhibition *The Writing of Nature – Transcendence III* initially notices works executed in the medium of drawing and painting on linen, unprimed and unframed, austere, 'natural' canvases. Placed upon them are stereometric triangular forms, executed with distinct contours and subdued colours. Their cut forms, their sharp angles directed upwards, point to what is 'above', evoking the mystical symbolism of triangles, pyramids, and crosses, as well as clasped and outspread hands. Much like a uniform white belt running along the canvas like an unmoved and all-penetrating rule, they recall once-appreciated symbols. The belt is most typically found among cuboids that populate other canvases as well, painted in a horizontal pattern (again with a 'break', with the use of fading black and white), or placed horizontally in space, in the form of a block (wrapped with a symbolically binding rope), inviting reflection on order and power. These cuboids exist in spite of everything, contributing to the whole structure of the exhibition, which contains the consequences of *Logical Landscapes* and of relationality, though its axis is introduced by *The Writing of Nature* and its installation features.

Ultimately, looking at this series enables one to draw the conclusion that the artist, by installing *The Writing of Nature* in various spaces, seems to employ artistic iconic and spatial elements as tools for hermeneutic interpretation conducted to reach an epiphany. First, he uses them in his own interpretation that uncovers the transcendence of writing hidden in nature; when he presents the results of his own interpretation, they become a catalyst whose meaningful presence (which breaks with the lightness of non-relational presence) helps transcendence to reveal itself. Transcendence penetrates the writing, nature, and each of the discussed places. Artistic elements merely 'help', for the artist always leaves it to free will to connect signs into words, sentences, and statements, and to read the context. He knows that the will realises its potency by repeating the given order. The order which is there, however, may also escape cognition; alternatively, it is given in order to be known metaphysically, which is the purpose that art is meant to serve.

The game of models of distinguishing the object of metaphysical cognition

The 'writing of nature', which Grzegorz Sztabiński's artistic installation attempted to decipher, seemed initially only an intuitively sensed as-

pect in a metaphysical abstraction; when understood as an ideal order it seems to momentarily change into an unavoidable, transcendent factor. Meanwhile, 'the discovery and isolation of necessary and common (transcendental) factors'[26] typifies the method of separation in establishing the object of metaphysical knowledge. However, this takes place within an artistic installation, an artwork, or within an exhibition that proves to be a complete installation work. In its momentary perception, a work of art allows for such a reading, such an interpretation, to last only momentarily, for then a rather metaphysical abstraction returns, the treatment of writing as an aspect, as a trace of universal order, perhaps its reflection, perhaps its realisation …

It turns out, then, that perhaps it is in the artwork and in its interpretative perception that the game of the models of distinguishing objects of metaphysical cognition is revealed, which increases the need for hermeneutic interpretation and is revealed in this kind of interpretation. The game corresponds with the poetic nature of the paradox of 'artificial' and ordering writing and untamed ('natural') nature. Therefore, in his experience of this cognitive game and poetic qualities, the viewer is provoked to perform interpretation in two different ways. At the same time, these ways reveal various aspects of relationality in art, which was so intensely investigated by the artist at an earlier stage of his career.

In the discussed exhibition of Grzegorz Sztabiński's work, the cognitive game, linked with the poetically sensitive act of interpretation, seems to conclude the search for the rules of writing in nature, as well as for the writing's ultimate existence. Admittedly, because we are dealing with art and because a cognitive game and process of hermeneutic interpretation take place, an impression of capturing the Mystery in the ungraspable infinity is produced, with the naturally alogical logic of reading the unreadable. However, it turns out that such an interpretation, this form of capturing and reading, typifies attempts at gaining metaphysical knowledge, which Grzegorz Sztabiński's art clearly manifests. Ultimately, it proves to be an attempt to read the non-cognisable meaning of the word *is*, inherent in nature and penetrating innumerable traces, places, and connections.

[26] M.A. Krąpiec, "Metafizyczne poznanie", op. cit.

Metaphysical cognition and interpretation

The described revelation of the transcendence of writing hidden in nature stands in contradiction to the Kantian argument that 'the understanding does not draw its (*a priori*) laws from nature, but prescribes them to it'.[27] Instead, it proves that hermeneutic interpretation conducted by an artist with metaphysical intuition may work as a tool of metaphysical cognition. Hermeneutic interpretation, therefore, which rests in the work of intuition, in finding traces of metaphysics, in uncovering transcendence, and in seeking metaphysical cognition, presents itself as a notion invested with metaphysical meaning.

At the same time, within the artist's installation and exhibition, a hermeneutic circle (which bears a curious resemblance to the artist's wanderings, repetitions, and recollections) is effected, for once writing as an order inscribed in nature is presupposed, it is discovered and realised in various paintings, installations, exhibitions, and places, and then the artist goes back to the hermeneutic prejudice,[28] one concerning writing – the order, the being, the meaning hidden in things – the meaning of the primary and ultimate rules of being.

This confirmation of the prejudice, on the other hand, is to be discerned and discovered in the interpretation of the artwork by a viewer who experiences the game of models of distinguishing objects of metaphysical cognition. Sztabiński interprets nature and provokes interpretation of an artwork in which he himself has interpreted nature, so that a metaphysical cognition occurs, so that the meaning of the word *is* is understood.

Metaphysical cognition as a mode of being in the world

Transcendence cannot be seen. Grzegorz Sztabiński's works confirm, however, that one can approach it through metaphysical cognition. Such an approach is taken by the artist, led by metaphysical intuition, who finds through his hermeneutic interpretation traces of metaphysics, for instance in the transcendent order of nature, which can be defined as its writing.

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[27] I. Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, trans. G. Hatfield, Cambridge 2004, p. 72.

[28] On the notion of hermeneutic prejudice [*Vorurteil*] see: H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer, D. G. Marshall, London 2004, pp. 267–298.

It is discovered as a transcendent order not only through sensory experience and rational cognition, but also through the interpretation of nature in art and, ultimately, through opening up an artwork (which interprets nature itself) to interpretation.

In this way, the viewer of the work also takes on the challenge of interpretation. First, he or she interprets the work, and then, encouraged by its reception, where art points to the intuitions and traces of metaphysics, also takes up an interpretation that discovers the transcendent order of nature, previously predicted and confirmed by the artist. In this way the rule of the hermeneutic circle is realised, and, at the same time, hermeneutic interpretation confirms its metaphysical being, for it suggests an approach of metaphysical cognition, one which has to be taken towards transcendence.

Grzegorz Sztabiński's installations confirm that the appropriate approach towards transcendence is to take up the task of metaphysical cognition and accept it as an appropriate way of being both in nature and in the world.

Conclusion

In the art of Grzegorz Sztabiński, his conceptual reflexivity appears to correspond and synergistically co-operate with hermeneutic interpretation. Perhaps this is because the artist includes the poetic sensibility in his observations and artistic practice, and, as a result, in observing and interpreting nature, sees signs of transcendental scripture appearing in surprisingly different spaces. Sztabiński recognises traces, signs, and writings, and transfers them into artistic installations; then he plays with different modes of metaphysical cognition. Such a cognitive game, linked with the poetically sensitive act of interpretation, makes both the artist interpreting nature and the viewer interpreting the artwork look for universal metaphysical sense. The viewer wants to follow the traces, to adjust them, and to connect them into a unified whole, as in Gadamer's *symbolon*. Sztabiński seeks to be close to the Mystery and to the Absolute beginnings of the writing of nature in order to decide about its existence, its 'is', its 'being', and its order, as if the writing was an emanation of the Absolute – requiring, however, a revelation in the artwork and its interpretation, so that it might turn into what Gadamer referred to as celebration. Idealism, which derives its tenets from hermeneutics,

seems to exceed the conceptual rigor of the installation. On the other hand, the artist is aware that ultimate cognition of the Mystery is impossible. Nevertheless, his art may suggest that not only understanding, but also orientation towards metaphysical cognition, through interpretation may be the best way of being in the world proposed by art.

Translated by Karolina Kolenda

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The Work of Art in the Times of Late Modernity by Gianni Vattimo

Abstract

The paper describes the situation of art works in the times of late modernity by presenting Gianni Vattimo, one of the most important representatives of modern hermeneutics. Art's historical narrative has collapsed due to civilisational transformation – mainly thanks to the invention of technological means for the mass reproduction of images. Two of the primary traits of art works from a traditional perspective – originality and authenticity – have nowadays been undermined. Vattimo calls this phenomenon 'an explosion of aesthetics'.

Key words

Vattimo, modernity, explosion of aesthetics, reproduction, post-historical art

Contemporary philosophy has attempted to define the crisis of modernity in many ways. One of the most interesting approaches to this issue is the conception of Italian thinker Gianni Vattimo, who in his major work *The End of Modernity* diagnoses the twilight of a modern cultural narrative based on the paradigm of science. On the one hand modernism has proved merely to be echoes of the past; on the other, we are not used to hearing anything else.

In his description of late modern reality, Vattimo uses the Heideggerian term *Verwindung*, which can be understood as farewell, resignation or

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distortion[1]. The modernist narrative identified the material world as a homogeneous substance, whose arché might be discovered, analysed and then 'translated' into the language of science. Each version of a scientific description could have been replaced with another one more actual and therefore more credible. As Vattimo notes: "modernity is in fact dominated by the idea that the history of thought is a progressive 'enlightenment', which develops through an ever more complete appropriation and reappropriation of its own 'foundations'. These are often also understood to be 'origins', so that the theoretical and practical revolutions of Western history are presented and legitimised for the most part as 'recoveries', rebirths or returns"[2]. Always when we retreat from modernity as a narrative, we separate from it, and transform it at the same time. Thinking in terms of *Verwindung* simultaneously represents a certain tradition and engages a creative, ambiguous dialogue with the past; which might sometimes be ironic. By dint of deconstruction and hermeneutics we can discover new versions of well-known narrations about us and the world we live in. According to Vattimo's perspective, thinking and ontology became weakened in the post-metaphysical era of philosophy in late modernity. Reality lost its substantive nature, because we can reach only its interpretation, which initiates a return process: it impacts both the subject and the object.

A specific relevance can be noticed between the notion of art and the modernist worldview. At the moment the theocentric paradigm collapsed in European culture, man began to explore nature with a strong belief in the power of his own reason; something that had been limited by the authority of the Church for many centuries. The same applies to the creation of aesthetically valuable objects: they are no longer brought into existence for almighty God, but because of the author's will serving himself or to art for its own sake[3]. Both phenomena – the domination of art as an historic narrative and scientific worldview – function approximately from the advent of the Renaissance to the 20th century, as has been noted by, e.g., Hans Belting or Arthur C. Danto[4]. The end of their reign is a part of the collapse of grand narratives.

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[1] See: G. Chiurazzi, "The Experiment of Nihilism. Interpretation and Experience of Truth in Gianni Vattimo", [in:] *Between Nihilism and Politics. The Hermeneutics of Gianni Vattimo*, eds. S. Benso, B. Schroeder, New York 2010, pp. 21–24.

[2] G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, trans. J. R. Snyderm, Cambridge 1988, p. 2.

[3] See: H. Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. E. Jephcott, Chicago 1997.

[4] See: A.C. Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton 2014.

The death of art is one of many different 'events' that occur to the post-metaphysical subject. Vattimo warns us against understanding the idea of the death of art as a strictly defined fact. It is impossible to establish exactly when art ended because this notion does not relate to the actual exhaustion of humankind's creative potential as one might expect. Andy Warhol's exhibition 'The Personality of the Artist', which took place in 1964 at the Stable Gallery in New York and which became the direct impulse for Danto to formulate his conception of the end of art, was only a symptom of the global phenomenon sensed and described by many thinkers at the same time. Vattimo notes that the death of art is "an event that constitutes the historical and ontological constellation in which we move. This constellation is a network of historical and cultural events and of the words which belong to them, at once describing and co-determining them"[5].

As the category of art emerged at the decline of the Middle Ages from the sphere of sacrum, which penetrated every field of human activity, so it now becomes absorbed once again by a different, still impossible to define, 'absolute'. The post-historical[6] work of art in contrast to its purely modernist predecessors surrenders its own autonomy. Instead of striving to fulfil aesthetic criteria, which would provide it with a place in a gallery, a museum or any other socially established institution, it exceeds or invalidates the traditional value system. Vattimo calls this phenomenon an 'explosion' of aesthetics'[7]. From this moment art starts to transcend its own limits more than ever before; especially the borders of its own disciplines. Performance, land art, street theatre: these are just a few examples of the post-historical generation of hybrids that successfully replaced their pure genre predecessors. The source of their success is, e.g., the ability to adjust to new circumstances, but also the capacity to influence their own surroundings. An example of such creative coexistence might be the political murals painted by British street artist Banksy, which always stay in a reflexive relationship with the place where they appear. The picture of a hole in the wall separating the Gaza Strip from the rest of the world, through which one can see a paradisiacal beach, is not only an ironic commentary on the Middle East conflict, but also an aesthetic manifestation of the hope for finding a solution to

[5] G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, op. cit., p. 53.

[6] 'Post-historical': the way Danto used this term – 'after the collapse of historical narrative'.

[7] G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, op. cit., pp. 53–54.

this horrifying situation – perhaps not by political means, but because of art. In opposition to the romantic idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the post-historical synthesis of disciplines takes place in an uncontrolled, hard to predict, sometimes self-contradictory manner. Art is far from meeting the rigid criteria of aesthetics that are the result of current trends or a manifesto. Rather, it focuses on the materialisation of a certain sense using all the required means, techniques and strategies that can help achieve its aim.

One of the consequences of the explosion of aesthetics is the undermining of two fundamental values of art: authenticity and originality. The rapid development of technology has enabled the reproduction and distribution of works on a scale that Gutenberg would not have dared dream of. This, which used to be an effect of hard work and supernatural talent, has nowadays become a privilege for everyone. In the era of post-historical art, the artist's strict relationship to his work is not a necessary condition for creation. Due to technologies that enable unlimited reproduction, art is less and less identified with the medium or sensory impressions caused by it. The work of art leaves the world of matter and enters the sphere of meaning. In this way it loses its unique quality that separates it from the rest of the objects belonging to the order of everyday reality; as Walter Benjamin noted: "One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalise by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence"[8].

Benjamin, whose writings were often used by Vattimo as the basis for his own research, saw a great danger in the phenomenon of reproduction not only in the categories of aesthetics but also in ethics. A work detached from its author easily succumbs to manipulation; in the same way that it can happen with a quotation taken out of its original context, which might adopt a new, unexpected meaning, sometimes contrary to the intentions underlying the text. This is especially noticeable in the case of recording the performing arts. The author-performer is insep-

[8] W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", trans. H. Zohn, [in:] *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. C. Cazeaux, London and New York 2000, pp. 324–325.

arably bound to its work, because a person on stage uses mainly itself to embody the desired meaning. In view of the unity of time and place inherent to the theatrical situation, the spectator receives the message as it is constructed by the author-performer. What will happen further with it is a matter for the audience's interpretation. In the case of a movie or recorded performance there is space for the intervention of third parties. We know from Eisenstein's experiments that, because of film editing, one picture may have several different meanings depending on the adjacent pictures. As an artistic medium, theatre provides the performer with the possibility to lead the spectator's attention more independently, and has a greater impact on the processes of associations occurring in the spectator's consciousness. In this situation the actor has a more precise influence on the overall reception of the work being at the same time its subject and object. Cinematography limits or totally rejects this prerogative, reducing the performer to the function of an element in a message that someone else utters. In this case, responsibility for the work's ultimate formation belongs with the director, film editor, producer or whomever obtains access to the recording.

One of Benjamin's most prominent writings, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, was published in the 1930's, when the spirit of the times was saturated with the threat of burgeoning totalitarianism. The climate of that time can especially be sensed in Benjamin's musings about the propaganda usage of images. At some point, when the image can become the property of anyone able to operate the required technology, the meaning of the work might easily be transformed, e.g., as happened on the one hand with Andy Warhol's pop art or on the other with agitprop. In the case of fascist parties, the main object of manipulation was the architecture and sculpture of ancient Rome. Historical forms and symbols taken out of their original context and put in a new one serve the ideological purposes of a political group. "The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values. All efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war. War and war only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale while respecting the traditional property system"[9]. The aestheticisation of politics was a phenomenon relevant to the politicisation of art, which became a domain of communism in the Soviet Union. As

[9] Ibidem, pp. 336–337.

long as art was attached to the concepts of authenticity and originality, it remained safe in its own world. Unearthed from the foundations of tradition it became easy prey for propagandist manipulators.

According to Vattimo the omnipresence of mass media led to the decentralisation and dispersion of control structures. Contrary to what was said by Adorno and Horkheimer, telematics disenabled the consolidation of authority. The emergence of new communication channels, primarily including the opening and constant expansion of cyberspace, contributed to an explosion and proliferation of points of view. As a consequence one consistent narrative becomes displaced by the contamination of interpretations. The same thing happened to the dominant form of subjectivity, which succumbed to diffusion in the discursive chaos. "If, in the world of dialects, I speak my own dialect, I shall be conscious that it is not the only 'language', but that it is precisely one among many"[10].

However the adjustment to the circumstances of neoliberal capitalism caused some major damage to the ethical aspect of the aesthetic layer of modern society. The mass reproduction of images turns works of art into commodities that can be bought at shopping centres. Nowadays images are consumed as food products. According to the rules of capitalism free market expansion happens at the expense of quality. This refers to the observer's perspective as well. In the past, limited access to art forced the viewer to take a longer and more thorough examination of a work, something that resembled a meditation in allowing one to feel the aura of an object. Whereas now on a mass scale we see an opposite approach to the visual aspects of our culture: contact is brief, and instantaneous. The question of what may be hidden under the surface of an image becomes neglected in the frame of everyday perception. After the collapse of grand narratives art lost its religious-contemplative attribute, something Benjamin anticipated. Conversely, however, bidding farewell to the cult of aura provided potential receivers with unlimited access to high culture, which for centuries was unavailable to the majority of the population due to economic and social reasons.

An example of the creative usage of mass reproduction technology might be the case of '*Sztuczne fiołki*' (Eng. 'Artificial Violets'), which is a series of comic rebuses published on the Internet[11]. The basis for each image is a recognisable work of art (mainly European figurative paint-

[10] G. Vattimo, *The Tranparent Society*, trans. D. Webb, Baltimore 1992, p. 9.

[11] See: https://pl-pl.facebook.com/SztuczneFiolki [accessed: 4.07.2016].

ing), which is complemented by an ironic comment referring to the current political situation. One of the rebuses was made on the basis of Edgar Degas' *The Bellelli Family*. In it we see a middle-class family in a Biedermeier living room, where the youngest daughter asks her father why Jesus was crucified. He answers: "for offending religious feelings". Another example could be the image of Byzantine Christ, deploring Polish neo-fascist organisations. The relation between such a picture and the original painting is equally interesting and ambiguous. One may see in this strategy an instrumentalisation of art that can be compared to those mentioned above. However, the author of '*Sztuczne fiołki*' openly admits that he uses classical paintings to express his own, as he calls it, leftist point of view, which seems to be quite popular among other Internet users[12]. Nevertheless there is no political agenda or any other social project that would be forced through the works of art used by the author of '*Sztuczne fiołki*'. Rather, it becomes an aesthetic platform for people who share the same type of visual sensitivity, sense of humour and have the particular intellectual predispositions necessary to decode a single rebus. Another aspect of this project worth noting is its educational impact. Classical works of art receive a second life, in front of a hundred thousand viewers. Although it might be uneven compensation for the loss of Benjamin's aura, it is good to ask about the influence of any other more conventional strategy for promoting high culture by state institutions.

Deliberate transgression of the rules of authenticity and originality became one of the creative strategies in the post-historical epoch. This may give unexpected and fascinating results at times, as can be seen from the story of Han van Meegeren, one of the most prominent forgers in history[13]. The Dutch artist demonstrated an enormous predisposition towards painting from childhood. However, his career was halted by the unflattering comments of critics, who mainly accused him of lack of originality. As revenge van Meegeren decided to test their competence and began to falsify Dutch masters' paintings. It is worth noting that he not only counterfeited existing works, but also prepared new ones, which were intended to be discovered under mysterious circumstances after

[12] See: *Mam w sobie duże pokłady wściekłości*, an interview with the author of "Sztuczne fiołki", [online] http://wyborcza.pl/1,75248,15498803,Sztuczne_Fiolki__Mam_w_sobie_duze_poklady_wscieklosci.html [accessed: 4.07.2016].

[13] See: F. Arnau, *The Art of the Faker: Three Thousand Years of Deception in Art and Antiques*, trans. J. M. Brownjohn, London 1951.

centuries of latency. One of van Meegeren's greatest successes was the painting *Supper at Emmaus*, which was accredited to Vermeer. Critics proved the authenticity of this canvas unanimously. After various transactions the painting was finally shown at the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam, where it became the main attraction at an exhibition organised for Queen Wilhelmina in 1938. The newly-discovered painting drew everyone's attention. The forgery was revealed only in 1945 when the allied forces found some canvases hidden by the Wehrmacht in a mine situated 50 km from Salzburg. There were works by Botticelli, van Dyke, Velázquez and Vermeer's *The Woman Taken in Adultery*. The investigation led to van Meegeren, who chose to admit to the fraud instead of being sentenced for collaboration with the Third Reich. The lawsuit took place in 1947, and as a consequence he was sentenced to a year in prison.

Since that moment, interest in original van Meegeren works has increased highly, along with their price. The paradoxical success of the all-time forger lies in the fact that *Supper at Emmaus* still hangs in the Boijmans Museum. With, however, a small difference: the painting was relocated to the contemporary art section. The irony of this story manifests, i.e., in the fact that that lack of originality, of which van Meegeren was accused at the beginning of his career, became the reason for his fame and – warranted or not – a place in the history of European art.

Supper at Emmaus shows that perhaps the work of art understood as an object gifted with a unique aura might not be the most important element of an aesthetic situation. According to Vattimo, the work of art is not a material structure that can be localised in time and space. As is explained in Heideggerian ontology – the work of art is not an object; it is an occurrence that is closer to Gadamer's play than Cartesian substance. It is a process that remains under the influence of everyone who is concerned with it, and its aim is to create circumstances of non-discursive experiencing of truth about the world in which it emerges. Every test for implementing this experience in language might function only as its interpretation. Understanding the sense of *Supper at Emmaus* by van Meegeren as a work of art demands knowledge of the context of its origination. It seems that in the world of art it is not so important how it is done, but what it can say about the world it comes from.

The reception of post-historical art exceeds the conception of a work of art as an artist's statement or an experience of a particular aesthetic value. Of course both aspects should be considered as important elements of an artwork, but they are not always located in its centre. The

work of art becomes a lens through which we can observe ourselves, and the world that we are immersed in. The omnipresence of images provokes radicalisation of the strategies for reaching out to the observer, what Benjamin defined as Schock, which is understood as dislocation from the fixed patterns of everyday reality. In his opinion this function was fully accomplished by the Dadaists, but cinema also, by dint of advanced image processing, is able to achieve this effect. Vattimo sees a convergence of this category with the Heideggerian term *Stoß*, which is understood as the impetus triggered by a work, bringing someone into a state of fear and awareness of the finiteness of his being*14*. Juxtaposition of these two distinctions reveals a need for and the possibility of existential experiencing of art in a time of advanced technicisation. Its reception must therefore exceed the formula for a one-sided reading out of the author's intentions or for contemplating particular aesthetic values. In a society of constant communication a much higher priority seems to be the temporary space of tension between the observer and the author of a work. By dint of this circumstance the subject is provoked into a permanent oscillation between the version of oneself thus far reached and the proposition realised due to encounter with the Other.

A work of art is a composition of reality such that it allows us to transgress the spectrum of everyday experience. Aesthetic qualities in their so-called natural state are somehow distracted. By virtue of artistic composition they become condensed and sharpened, allowing the observer to discover new aspects of reality that are usually overlooked. As Vattimo notes: "to rediscover the truth of art cannot even remotely mean to 'prosify' poetry, to derive statements from pictorial works, and so on. Less banal are those positions that insist on the truth of the work as, in Heidegger's words, an 'opening of a world'"[15]. Vattimo understands the "notion of the work of art as the 'setting-into-work of truth'"[16]. One of its most fundamental aspects is that one cannot *a priori* define the rules of its preparation. Each time it needs to be rediscovered and then, based on specific examples, we can reconstruct the artist's principles and priorities. In the triad artist-work-art the last element is the final effect of a process that happens each time from the beginning. "Where and how does art occur? Art – this is nothing more than a word to which

[14] See: G. Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, op. cit., pp. 45–61

[15] G. Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation. The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. D. Webb, Cambridge 1997, p. 67.

[16] G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, op.cit., p. 61.

nothing real any longer corresponds. It may pass for a collective idea under which we find a place for that which alone is real in art: works and artists"[17]. Every epoch needs to elaborate its own apparatus, which will be used to describe the works produced at that time.

According to what has been written above we can see two major aspects to the death of art: a) works of art have become less autonomous and substantial than they were until the arrival of modernism; b) the mass media play an increasing role in shaping the world of art. The consequence of these phenomena is the aestheticisation of reality as described, e.g., by Wolfgang Welsh[18]. The image of our world is extensively mediated and filtered by the Internet and other channels through which we receive information. This unexpected global circumstance has shaped a new way of perceiving, which Vattimo calls 'distracted perception', after Benjamin[19].

The traditional model of perception demands a real information correlate, a fact that could be taken as unquestionable. Unfortunately, verification of what comes to us by the media would have to become an aim for its own sake, something like a life calling, which involves all existence. Much more comfortable, and de facto in these circumstances the only possible solution, is acknowledging the conglomeration of virtual information as the only image of reality that is given to us. Perhaps this is the moment when Nietzsche's 'prophecy' about the true world becoming a fable has just materialised[20].

One of the most important distinctive qualities of the post-historical epoch is the lack of possibility for a revolutionary breakthrough. Of course, this does not mean that in the world of mass production of images changes do not occur; quite the contrary. They do, more than ever before, but have lost their fundamental meaning. As Vattimo notes: "Human capability to order nature through technology has increased and will continue to increase to such a point that, even while ever-newer achievements have become possible, the increased capability to order and arrange simultaneously makes them ever less 'new'. In a consumer society continual renewal (of clothes, tools, buildings) is already re-

[17] M. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", trans. A. Hofstadter, [in:] *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. C. Cazeaux, London and New York 2000, p. 80.

[18] See: W. Welsch, *Undoing aesthetics*, trans. A. Inkpin, London 1997.

[19] G. Vattimo, *The End of Modernity*, op. cit., p. 61.

[20] See: F. Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols or How One Philosophizes with a Hammer", [in:] *Portable Nietzsche*, trans. W. Kaufmann, London 1977, p. 485.

quired physiologically for the system simply to survive. What is new is not in the least 'revolutionary' nor subversive; it is what allows things to stay the same"[21].

According to the strategy presented by Vattimo – mainly in *The Transparent Society* – the activities of the subject in the late modernity should be more focused on those things that are local and temporary, leaving solid metaphysical foundations behind as an historical concept. Against enlightenment aspirations about discovering universal truths we should listen intently to what is accessible here and now. A path that might be especially interesting and important for further research in the field of aesthetics seems to be the role ascribed by Vattimo to art. In the process of discovering oneself and creating the space of common encounter with the Others, artistic creation manifests more resistance to the structures of authority, which are easily reproduced by every political project. Moreover, art emphasises those aspects of subjectivity that have been marginalised by rational paradigm. Imagination, taste and affects can turn out to be much more useful in the struggle with the mechanisms of oppression rather than intellectual constructions. The end of grand narratives, especially metaphysical thought, provokes a search for new solutions that are more practical, verifiable over a shorter period and accessible to individuals with highly differentiated identities. By acknowledging the limitations and complexity of this situation we may begin the unpredictable journey of discovering new forms of being among the Others, in which art may have an especially important role.

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Hermeneutics and Poetics: Gadamer on the Poetic Word

Abstract

Despite Gadamer's sustained engagement with poetry throughout his career, evidenced by his numerous publications on modern German poetry, his contributions towards a poetics have gone underappreciated. In this essay I argue that a poetics can be drawn from his work, a poetics hermeneutically attuned to the poetic word as the true word, as the privileged site where the being of language as an event of unconcealment comes to language. Indeed, what is at stake for Gadamer in the poetic word is the hermeneutic understanding of language as the medium of phenomenological self-showing. The paper further outlines the salient features of hermeneutic poetics by highlighting, elaborating and integrating five basic traits of the poetic word as an event of language. First, because language itself appears in the poetic word it is *language bound*. Second, gathering itself into the unity of a linguistic configuration the poetic word is *self-standing*. Third, *listening to* the language of the poem the reader enables what is said to come forth. Fourth, where this occurs the poem achieves a unique presence simply by virtue of its *being-said*. In this way, fifth, the poetic word preserves our familiarity with the world by *bearing witness* to its nearness.

Key words

Gadamer, hermeneutics, poetics, language, art

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Despite his assertion of the universality of hermeneutics, Gadamer holds that the entire effort of his thought has been "directed toward not forgetting the limit implicit in every hermeneutical experience of meaning."[1] The engagement with poetry that Gadamer sustains throughout his career is, I believe, emblematic of this effort. This is evident, for instance, where he finds that the poetry of our time has reached the "limits of intelligible meaning."[2] Here he is responding to the hermetic tendencies of modern lyric poetry which seems to resist our attempts to understand it. The hermeneutical challenge this presents concerns the way that meaning is withdrawn and even withheld by the very language of the poem which brings it forth. Such poetry draws us to the limits of intelligibility where the poetic word elicits an interplay of meaning and its concealment which seems to foil the effort of understanding that it nevertheless prompts. By exposing us to this limit lyric poetry in particular opens hermeneutics to a distinctive experience of language and being. Gadamer's poetics attends to the poetic word as attesting to such an experience.

Yet modern lyric only heightens what, for Gadamer, is characteristic of the poetic word – namely, "the inseparability of the linguistic work of art and its original manifestation as language."[3] For it is in the language of poetry that language itself comes to appearance in an essential manner.[4] The privilege granted poetry has to with the hermeneutic understanding of language as an ontological event – that is, with the mysterious power of language to bring something to presence within the open relational context of the world that it holds open. It is this power of language to call something forth from its concealment that Gadamer finds epitomized in poetry. Summoned by the language of the poem, what is

[1] H.-G. Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, ed. R.E. Palmer, Evanston 2007, p. 162; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2: Hermeneutik II*, Tübingen 1993, p. 334.

[2] H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, ed. R. Bernasconi, Cambridge 1986, p. 9; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8: Ästhetik und Poetik I*, Tübingen 1993, p. 100.

[3] H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 134; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 235.

[4] This underscores the extent to which Gadamer follows the path of Heidegger's encounter with poetry. For Heidegger too poetry lets the essence of language appear: "Language itself is poetry in the essential sense." M. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, eds. and trans. J. Young, K. Haynes, Cambridge 2002, p. 46.

spoken about comes to stand there in the openness of its unconcealment. Hence, following Heidegger, he seeks to reclaim for poetry this original power of language in its productivity as *poiesis*, as a bringing forth that affirms the poetic word as a mode of truth as unconcealment (*aletheia*).[5] As the "true word," the language of the poem subverts our ordinary relation to language as a means of communication. We no longer dispose over language; rather, language disposes over us. By altering our customary relation to language, poetry makes possible another, more original, experience with language. But attending to the language of poetry in its appearance as language requires not just reading but listening.[6] Attuning itself to the saying of the poem, such listening responds to the event of language that takes place there. In this event we find ourselves addressed by what is said in the poem and responsible to what comes to presence there. Reminiscent of Heidegger, Gadamer conceives the encounter with poetry as a genuine experience in which we enter into an event of language and submit ourselves to its claim.[7] What we experience in the language of the poem is the profound intimacy of the world we inhabit as our own. Attesting to the nearness of the world, poetry reminds us that it is by language that we belong to a world at all.

It is important to note that Gadamer's poetics remains phenomenological as well as ontological. It is phenomenological in that it describes the essential features of the poetic word as those emerge from the encounter with it. This confirms the hermeneutic emphasis on practice. His poetics is, in large part, a hermeneutic reflection on the practice of interpreting poetry. Here Gadamer draws on his many decades as a serious reader of poetry, especially of modern German poetry. Indeed, the many pieces on Goethe, Rilke, Hölderlin, George, Celan and others gathered in the *Gesammelte Werke* testify to his long experience with poetry. His poetics is also ontological in that it offers an account of the poetic word as

[5] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader…*, op. cit., p. 143; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 46. In "Discourse Language, Saying, Showing" Wrathhall provides an illuminating account of Heidegger's notion of language as world-disclosive. Moreover, he tracks Heidegger's path to "originary language" by enlisting Heidegger's interpretation of (George's) poetry. See M. Wrathhall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 119–155.

[6] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader…*, op. cit., p. 182; p. 182; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9: Ästhetik und Poetik II*, Tübingen 1993, p. 352.

[7] M. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. P.D. Hertz, New York 1971, pp. 57–58.

an event of language that is, at once, an event of being. Here he proceeds in the wake of Heidegger's later thought which itself leads through a selective reading of German poets – most notably, Hölderlin – that forges an ontological approach to poetry as an event of unconcealment. Like Heidegger, Gadamer's concern springs from a sense that the essential achievement of language (the disclosure of world) has been concealed and forgotten.[8] It is in view of this predicament that he turns to poetry to find attestation of the power of language. The distinction of Gadamer's poetics lies in the way that it holds together these two aspects: referring the ontological claims for the poetic word to the discipline of phenomenological description, his poetics grounds the phenomenological account of the experience of poetry in its ontological aspect as an event of language. However, Gadamer neither pursues a poetizing thinking nor binds the import of the poetic word to a tale of two beginnings. This perhaps allows his hermeneutic approach to poetry a broader reach than Heidegger's while reaffirming "the ontological vocation of poetics."[9]

In *Truth and Method* he already grants poetry preeminence, even though the topic receives scant attention there.[10] However, Gadamer's further philosophical reflections on the poetic word are scattered

[8] For both Gadamer and Heidegger, poetry retrieves the originary understanding of language as an ontological event which discloses world from its prevailing condition of concealment. So even while Gadamer resists Heidegger's history of *Seinsvergessenheit*, the forgetfulness of being, his hermeneutics nevertheless proceeds from a deep sense of *Sprachvergessenheit*, the forgetfulness of language. See R. Coltman, *The Language of Hermeneutics: Gadamer and Heidegger in Dialogue*, Albany 1998, pp. 67–68. So despite Gadamer's reluctance to follow Heidegger's flight into poetizing thinking, he nonetheless asserts the priority of poetry in the hermeneutic retrieval of language as an event of being.

[9] I invoke here the title of Vattimo's essay "The Ontological Vocation of Poetics in the Twentieth Century." See: G. Vattimo, *Art's Claim to Truth*, ed. S. Zabala, trans. L. D'Isanto, New York 2008 (1985), pp. 29–56.

[10] Gadamers asserts "the preeminence of poetry" In Part Three of *Truth and Method* where he addresses the speculative dimension of language. Inhabiting "*die Mitte der Sprache*," the midst or middle of language, enables what is said to resonate with the whole of what remains unsaid. This reflects the "speculative structure" of language as the dynamic movement of revealment and concealment. Gadamer grants preeminence to poetry because the speculative dimension of language attains a special intensity there. He will continue to invoke this understanding of language in his later reflections on the poetic word. H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised, eds. and trans. J. Weisenheimer, D.G. Marshall, New York 1989, pp. 452–469; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1…*, op. cit., pp. 460–478.

among numerous essays and lectures published across the several decades after the appearance of his magnus opus. Moreover, no one of them provide a definitive, much less comprehensive, statement of his understanding of the poetic word. Typically they focus on certain aspects of poetry while giving short shrift to others discussed more fully elsewhere. And even where the same aspect is revisited in several essays they often address it from various perspectives, sometimes deploying different terms to convey it. To sort out these diverse discussions, highlight the most salient topics and integrate them into a more complete account is the principal purpose of this essay. To this end, I argue that a poetics can be elicited from Gadamer's hermeneutics by attending to the basic traits of the poetic word that emerge from his work.[11] Further, I intend to outline such a hermeneutic poetics by elaborating upon these basic traits which I mark by the expressions "language-bound," "self-standing," "listening-to," "being-said," and "bearing witness." (1) By affirming its own linguistic being the poetic word remains, in a distinctive way, *language-bound*. (2) As a linguistic configuration the poetic word is *self-standing*, that is, it exhibits the unity of a work that it stands in its own right. (3) Standing for itself the poetic word invites the reader to tarry with it, *listening to* the language of the poem so that what is said there comes forth. (4) What comes forth in the lingual event of the poetic word thereby achieves a unique presence simply by virtue of its *being-said*. (5) What is said in the poetic word preserves our familiarity with the world by *bearing witness* to its nearness. So while the initial section establishes the distinctive relation of poetry to language, the following three sections set forth Gadamer's complex understanding the poetic word as an event of language and the final section highlights the essential achievement of the poetic word understood as such an event.

[11] Although reference is occasionally made to Gadamer's poetics, I am aware of no study that sets forth his hermeneutic reflection on poetry. For instance, despite the title of a recently published book by John Arthos, one finds there no sustained discussion of Gadamer's engagement with modern poetry or of a hermeneutic poetics that might be drawn from it. So while it contains much of value in understanding Gadamer's hermeneutic approach to art, the book's subtitle is perhaps more descriptive of its intent. See J. Arthos, *Gadamer's Poetics: A Critique of Modern Aesthtics*, London 2013.

Language-Bound: The Irreducibility of Language in the Poetic Word

Gadamer asserts that in poetry "the unity of sound-quality and meaning that characterizes every word we speak finds its ultimate fulfillment."[12] He elaborates this claim by distinguishing between language in its ordinary use and the language of poetry. In its everyday use language "points to something beyond itself and disappears behind it."[13] Ordinarily words are used to refer to something else, to some feature of the world to which they point. In terms familiar to phenomenology, such reference indicates the intentional element of language. As speakers and hearers we too are directed toward what is pointed out so that language conceals itself even as it bears us toward the world. Because language ordinarily recedes into its referential function, Gadamer characterizes speaking as the most "self-forgetful" act we perform.[14] In the poem, however, the words that address us are not overtaken by the intention of the speech act only to be left behind. With poetry, to the contrary, language does not disappear into signification; instead it appears in a distinctive manner.[15]

The claim that language itself appears in the poem is fundamental to the hermeneutic understanding of the poetic word, a claim that Gadamer compactly conveys in the formula: "poetry is language-bound."[16] I submit that the poetics which emerges in his work can be construed as a sustained reflection on the meaning of such a claim. In fact, his reflections on poetry can be seen, in part, as a hermeneutic response to the radical thesis of modern poetry that the poem is a creation of language; that it is, as Mallarme insists, made of words.[17] Gadamer explicitly rec-

[12] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

[13] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 67; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 19.

[14] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 107; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2...*, op. cit., p. 198.

[15] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 181; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 352.

[16] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

[17] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan:"Who Am I and Who Are You?" and Other Essays*, eds. and trans. R. Heinemann, B. Krajewski, Albany 1997, p. 2.

ognizes the import for modern lyric of Mallarmé's project of developing a "pure poetry" in which the musicality of the poetic word is intensified to a very high degree. Here a poem emerges from the rhythmic structuring of the sound quality of the words. By heightening the musicality of poetry modern lyric shows how the sensuous dimension of language is capable of creating a web of associations that build up a poetic configuration wherein words acquire a sonorous resonance that would be concealed by their function as mere signs. In a poem, Gadamer says, "not only does the word make what is said present; it also makes it present in the radiant actuality as sound."[18] The poetic word thereby affirms its own being as language.

If Gadamer nevertheless treats "pure poetry" as an "extreme case" this is because he holds that, even where the sonority of the poetic word is intensified, "it still remains a question of the musicality of *language*."[19] His point is that the language of a poem is not just sound but also sense; that is, as language it must mean something. Even in modern lyric, where poetry approaches the limit of intelligibility, the poem still asks to be understood. This bears on the way in which the language of poetry acquires both density and unity in the poem. As Gadamer observes, "[t]he unity of form that is so characteristic of the poetic work of art […], is sensuously present, and to this extent cannot be reduced to the mere inten-

[18] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader…*, op. cit., p. 182; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 352. Gadamer privileges sonic over graphic qualities in poetry. "In no way can the written sign insinuate itself as an equal partner into the delicately balanced relationship of sound and meaning that constitutes a poem. Whatever cannot be heard in the inner ear of the reader, whatever does not serve the rhythmic structure of sound and meaning in the shape of the poem, has no actual poetic existence" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue: Essays in German Literary Theory*, trans. R.H. Paslick, Albany 1994, p. 132; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 283). Derrida would no doubt contest such privileging of the phonic over the graphic and connect it with the related privileging of speech over writing along and the valorization of word, meaning, being and truth that, in his estimation, constitutes "logocentricism." Derrida's short essay on "Mallarmé" provides a relevant introduction to his different reading of poetry. See J. Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. D. Attridge, New York 1992, pp. 110–127. J.M. Baker, Jr. provides a divergent interpretation of Gadamer's engagement with Mallarmé and Hegel and the speculative in poetry in "Lyric as Paradigm: Hegel and the Speculative Instance of Poetry." See *The Cambridge Guide to Gadamer*, ed. R. Dostal, Cambridge 2002, pp. 143–166.

[19] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 134; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 235, italics original.

tion of meaning." Yet in the very next sentence he affirms that even this presence bears "an intentional element that points to an indeterminate dimension of possible fulfillments."[20] Hence Gadamer speaks of the "peculiar tension" generated in the poetic word "between the directedness to meaning inherent in discourse and the self-presentation inherent in its appearing."[21]

This tension between the sonorous and the significant is the source of the characteristic indeterminacy of poetic language. On the one hand, the language of the poem is not consumed by its signifying intention but demands to be brought forth in its linguistic appearance. On the other hand, the elements of language which poetry shapes have a meaning by which they refer beyond themselves. The poetic configuration arises from this tension in which the network of sounds give depth and resonance to the emerging sense of the poem while the sense gives direction and coherence to the resounding words. This relational context created by the linguistic configuration of the poem strips the words of their ordinary referential function and yet grants their reference to what comes to presence in the poem.[22] Refusing reduction either to intentional meaning or to meaningless sound, the poem instead conveys a unity of meaning in and through the sensuous configuration of language it forms. Here language is disclosive, not just denotative; it is productive of meaning, not just reproductive; it reveals something not otherwise presentable, rather than referring to something already present.[23] Thus the presentation that takes place in the poem is, at once, its self-presentation as language.

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[20] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

[21] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 182; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 352.

[22] In "The Relevance of the Beautiful" Gadamer appeals to the symbol in order to address the distinctive reference of artworks: as with the symbol, the poem secures the very presence to which it refers. (See H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., pp. 31–39; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., pp. 122–130.) The poem as a work of art – i.e., as a configuration of language – is discussed in the following section.

[23] The language of the poem thereby exhibits a "self-reference" or "coming back to itself." (H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 151; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 53.)

For this reason, Gadamer asserts that "poetry is language in a preeminent sense."[24] What is at stake here is the hermeneutic understanding of language as the medium of phenomenological self-showing, as the site for the self-presentation of being. This aspect is heightened in the poem where language presents or shows itself in the very manner by which it presents something, thereby showing what it means.[25] So while the unity of musicality and meaning is characteristic of every word we speak, it becomes especially prominent in poetry where the dimensions of sound and sense are brought inextricably together. In modern lyric poetry the fusion of these two dimensions attains "an extreme point" where they become quite indissoluble. For this reason the lyric poem presents an "identity of meaning and being" that confronts us with an "unconditional case of untranslatability."[26] Here the sound and sense of the words are so inseparably interwoven that the poem cannot be translated without loss. On the one hand, such untranslatability implies that the language of poetry exhibits an irreducible indeterminacy that poses an insurmountable limit to any claim to translate it without remainder. On the other hand, it also implies the poetic word is inexhaustible such that the poetic word always holds in reserve other possibilities of meaning. In fact, the self-showing instigated by the poem is, as we shall see, a complex movement of revealing and concealing in which the linguistically configured meaning both emerges from and withdraws into the poem. So the point is not that the indeterminacy of poetic language obstructs the emergence of meaning; it is rather that this emergent meaning cannot be abstracted from the language of the poem. In this distinctive sense poetry is language-bound.

[24] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 106; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 71.

[25] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, eds. D. Misgeld, G. Nicholson, trans. L. Schmidt, M. Ross, Albany 1992, p. 73; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 362.

[26] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 111; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 76.

Self-Standing: The Configuration of Language in the Poetic Word

"The language of poetry," Gadamer asserts, "comes to stand in its own right."[27] In poetry language stands for itself; that is, poetry is distinguished from ordinary language by the way in which language comes to stand as a configuration (*Gebilde*). Where language comes to stand in the poem it does not disappear into the meaning of what is said as with ordinary discourse. In its usual function, Gadamer says, "language never stands for itself" but rather "stands for something" to which it refers. Here the word "does not simply stand for itself; in fact, it does not stand at all, but on the contrary passes over into what is said."[28] By contrast, the language of poetry stands by itself, bearing its own authority within. Striving to understand a poem one is directed neither to the author's intention nor the reader's, but rather to the poem itself. "We are wholly directed toward the word as it stands." Standing there the poem is independent of both reader and poet. "Detached from all intending, the word is complete in itself."[29]

Here Gadamer adopts Heidegger's discussion of the work-being of the artwork in terms of its *Insich(selbst)stehen*, its way of standing-in-itself.[30] The German denotes independence or autonomy, meanings which Gadamer appropriates. But, like Heidegger, he also exploits its more literal meaning characterizing, for example, the happening of the work as its *zum-stehen-kommen* ("coming-to-stand") or speaking of the work's *dastehen* ("standing-there"). At issue here is a phenomenological description of the ontological event in which the artwork comes to be. In *Truth and Method* he discusses this event as "the transformation into structure" (*die Verwandlung ins Gebilde*) whereby something acquires the ontological status of an artwork.[31] In poetry it is through language itself that the

[27] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 67; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 19. The German reads: *"Abgelöst von allem Meinen ist it ganz, ganz Wort*!"

[28] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 132; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 233.

[29] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 107; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 72.

[30] M. Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, op. cit., pp. 1–56 (especially 19–22) .

[31] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., pp. 110–119; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1: Hermeneutik I*, Tübingen 1990, pp. 116–126. As Arthos points out, "the

poem acquires the status of a *Gebilde*, a structure or configuration that "stands" in its own right. In fact, the ontological distinction of the poem consists in its "forming a self-standing linguistic configuration."[32] Gadamer refers to such linguistic configurations variously as "autonomous," "genuine," and even "eminent" texts where "language stands on its own" or "brings itself to stand."[33] Deploying a textile metaphor, he describes the text as a woven texture in which language itself "holds together in such a way that it 'stands' [there] in its own right and no longer refers back to a more authentic saying."[34] Standing in its own right the text provides an authentic saying that neither appeals to the author's intention for its meaning nor refers to the external world for its validation.

But how does the language of poetry hold together so that it comes-to-stand as a poetic configuration? Gadamer's reply draws on his conception of the poem as a *Gebilde*. Briefly, it is through the shifting balance of sound and sense in the poem that it acquires the structural unity of form and meaning proper to it as a linguistic configuration. He both asks and answers the central question here. "What does this tell us about the ontological constitution of poetic language? The structuring of sound, rhyme, intonation, assonance, and so on, furnishes us with the stabilizing factors that haul back and bring to a standstill the fleeting word that points beyond itself."[35] The structuring accomplished by these linguistic elements comprises what might be called the "compositional unity" by which the flow of discourse is stabilized and the poetic word comes to stand in its own right as a text or work. By virtue of its compositional unity, "the dimensions of sound and sense are inextricably woven together."[36] The more tightly these dimensions are interwoven in the poem, the more dense its texture and the more resonant its

phrase *Verwandlung ins Gebilde* has to be taken as one unseparated concept." While he rightly emphasizes this as a dialectical relation, I would add that it carries the force of an ontological event. See J. Arthos, op. cit., p. 13.

[32] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 129; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 429.

[33] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 37; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2...*, op. cit., p. 508.

[34] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 142; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 145.

[35] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 134; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 235.

[36] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 111; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 76.

meaning. In such cases no word can substitute for another without loss to both the coherence of the poetic configuration and the richness of the poem's meaning. Especially in contemporary poetry, where the syntactic means at the disposal of language are used very sparingly, individual words gain in presence and disclosive power. Hence Gadamer characterizes poetic composition (*dichten*) in terms of compression (*verdichten*), as largely a matter of intensification and condensation.[37]

As a linguistic art poetry also takes advantage of the fact that "[w]ords are not simply complexes of sound, but meaning-gestures that point beyond themselves."[38] However, unlike everyday language which recedes behind that to which it refers, poetic language "shows itself even as it points."[39] Thus the compositional unity achieved by the transformation of language into a poetic structure simultaneously accomplishes (what one might call) an "intentional unity" through which its meaning-intention points us in a certain direction.[40] At one stroke the poetic *Gebilde* establishes a unity of form that achieves a unity of meaning. This implies that one cannot extract the meaning-intention of the poem from the sensuous structure in which it is embodied. As a consequence, that meaning cannot be captured in another – above all, conceptual – discourse. Instead the meaning of the poem is only available through the composition of its linguistic *Gebilde*. Inversely, the sensuous structure of the poem finds its proper weight and balance from its meaning-intention; "the sound quality of poetry only acquires definition through the understanding of meaning."[41] Moreover, as a unity of meaning the poem has its own intentionality apart from that of its writer or reader such that "it asks to be understood in what *it* 'says' or 'intends.'"[42] So what the reader seeks to understand is just the meaning-intention of the poem itself

[37] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit, p. 135; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 434.

[38] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 21.

[39] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 67; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 19.

[40] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 72; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 23.

[41] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 21.

[42] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 26; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 17 (italics added).

as that comes forth in the poetic composition. The poem thereby exhibits both a unity of form (the compositional unity achieved by the fabric of sound and sense woven into a poetic configuration) and a unity of meaning (the intentional unity by which the poetic configuration points in a direction of meaning) each of which is mediated by the other.

It is the complex unity of such a unique linguistic configuration that justifies his use of the singular "word" to designate the poem despite its being comprised of many words. Yet Gadamer recognizes that the unity of the poetic word does not underwrite a univocal meaning; to the contrary, the polyvalence of the poem ensures an indeterminacy of meaning. Indeed, by loosening the constraints of logic and syntax contemporary poetry enriches the associations of sound and sense. "It is as if the disunity of the words and parts of speech increases the potency of the elements of the utterance, such that they say more and radiate in more directions than they could in taut syntactical wrapping."[43] However, this can render the linguistic unity of the poem itself quite tenuous. Gadamer realizes that this poses a challenge for any reading which seeks to comprehend a whole emerging from the shapes of sound and fragments of meaning offered by such poems. He nevertheless insists that the successful poem still exhibits a "framework of coherence" – that is, "a tension-laden framework of sound and meaning" mediated with "the text's unified orientation of meaning (*einheitliche Sinnmeinung*)."[44] Hence he rejects the demand that poetry abandon meaningful speech in favor of sound shapes, holding instead that speech always retains a unity of sense.[45] Indeed, he maintains that the precise significance of a word can only be determined by "the unity of a figure of meaning formed by the speech."[46] This is true even where, as in modern lyric, the unity offered

[43] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., p. 135; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 434.

[44] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., p. 136; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 434.

[45] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 135; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 236. Gadamer insists that even lyric poetry can never completely detach itself from intentional language; a strictly "nonobjective poetry" would be utter gibberish. "Language as the medium and material of expression can never fully emancipate itself from meaning" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 21).

[46] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., p. 129; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 429.

by a figure of meaning remains dark, cracked and brittle. For Gadamer, wherever a poem succeeds a linguistic unity emerges that gathers the polyvalence released by its syntactic indeterminacy into a direction of meaning that distributes the semantic weight of its elements in a way that strengthens the poetic configuration. "The more intimate one is with the poetic conjoining (*Fügung*)," he writes, "the richer in meaning and the more present the word becomes."[47]

Listening-To: The Completion of Language in the Poetic Word

Already in *Truth and Method* Gadamer argues that the transformation into structure requires the participation of the spectator. We have seen that only when the words which comprise the poem come to stand in their own right do they acquire the status of a poetic *Gebilde*, that is, an autonomous linguistic configuration that provides an "incomparable and untranslatable balance of sound and meaning upon which a reading is built."[48] We now add that this happens only when the reader is engaged by what the poem says. In fact, the poem does not come to stand without our being addressed as readers; both are ingredient in the event of language that takes place in the poem as a work of art. This surely motivates Gadamer's own commentary on Celan's poetry, entitled *Who am I and Who are You?* Like the "I" that occurs in these poems, he finds the "You" pronounced in a direct, yet uncertain and changing way. So while the You is clearly the addressee, it remains undetermined who You (and I) are. "The address has an aim, but it has no object – other than perhaps whoever faces up to the address by answering."[49] This is doubtless the situation of every work of art: it addresses itself to another who responds by answering – that is, by taking up the challenge of understanding and thereby completing the work. But Celan's poems express a deep concern, even an anxiety, about reaching the You to whom they are addressed. Nonetheless, Gadamer contends, the poem only occurs where

[47] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., p. 73; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 362.

[48] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., p. 147; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op.cit., p. 443.

[49] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., p. 69; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 385.

such address takes place. As readers our responsibility is to respond by listening to what it says.

Here Gadamer understands the work of art from its temporal being as event. He holds that the artwork is never something finished or completed but is always underway as an open-ended, intransitive movement that is "not tied down to any goal."[50] This sets up a dialectical tension between the work's closedness and its openness. On the one hand, as a meaningful whole, it has the structure of a completed work that presents a "closed world." Therein lies the poem's sovereignty as a configuration that stands independent of the poet's intention as much as the reader's. As a structure that stands in its own right, the poem is "lifted out of the ongoing course of the ordinary world" and "enclosed in its own autonomous circle of meaning."[51] On the other hand, the work is essentially incomplete insofar as it remains open toward those to whom it is presented. So however much the work presents a world closed within itself, it is nonetheless open toward the spectator in whom the work achieves its meaning. Thus, for Gadamer, "openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play" precisely because "[t]he audience only completes what the play as such is."[52]

Gadamer therefore finds that the movement of play best describes the mode of being of the work of art. Just as the game only properly exists when it is being played, so too the work only comes forth when it is being performed. For "play appears as the self-movement that does not pursue any particular end or purpose as much as movement as movement,

[50] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 22; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 113.

[51] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 124; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., p. 133. In the "Epilogue" to his commentary on Celan Gadamer emphasizes this point with respect to poetry. "Indeed, the closed unity of meaning of a poem is so stringent that it scarcely allows itself to be redefined by a larger context [...]" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 145; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 441).

[52] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 109; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., p. 115. Margolis is suspicious of such talk of completing the artwork, insofar as it suggests a uniquely correct interpretation that would "complete" the work. See J. Margolis, *What After All is a Work of Art?*, University Park 1999, p. 82. Gadamer here draws upon Ingarden's phenomenological account of active reading as a "concretization" of the literary work in which the reader imaginatively fills out the formal structures of the text in a manner that Ingarden considers cocreative. See: R. Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. R.A. Crowley, K.R. Olson, Evanston 1973.

exhibiting, so to speak, a phenomenon of excess, of living self-presentation [*der Selbstdarstellung des Lebendigsein*]."[53] Released from any origin or end outside itself, the work of art remains open to the only completion proper to it – the performative enactment that accomplishes its self-presentation. The open-ended quality of the work therefore requires one who, responding to the work, is drawn into its movement, enabling the work to present itself. For Gadamer, then, "the genuine reception and experience of the work can exist only for the one who 'plays along,' that is, one who performs in an active way himself."[54] In other words, the enactment by which the work achieves completion requires the involvement of the spectator who takes part in the work. This in turn means that the spectator is no longer an observer but a player – that is, one who participates in the work's self-presentation. Only through the spectator's participation does the artwork as such come into being.

This applies to poetry as well where participating means reading the poem. Yet reading requires patient listening to the poem so that what is said there can come out. Such attentive listening requires both a receptivity to being addressed by the poem as a singular offering of meaning and an active engagement with the directions of meaning that it opens up.[55] For Gadamer, "the poem speaks better and more authentically through the listener."[56] In fact, he is insistent on this point: "It must not only be read, it must also be listened to – even if mostly with the inner ear."[57] To ask what the poem says is to listen toward the "completion of meaning" ("*Sinnvollzug des Wortlaufs*") at which the text aims.[58] So it is crucial that the reader complete what the poem itself says, so that it is the poem – and not just the interpreter – that speaks. The reader must

[53] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 23; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 114.

[54] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., pp. 25–26; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 116.

[55] Davey's discussion of "aesthetic attentiveness" provides an illuminating account of the hermeneutic conception of aesthetic experience as both passive and active. See N. Davey, *Unfinished Worlds: Hermeneutics, Aesthetics and Gadamer*, Edinburgh 2013, pp. 65–102.

[56] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 144; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 46.

[57] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 182; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2...*, op. cit., p. 352.

[58] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 72; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 387.

listen so that the "ideality" of the poem becomes audible for the inner ear where sound and sense are one.[59] Listening in this manner one understands the polyvalent meaning of individual words as mediated by the poetic configuration which draws them into a unified intention. Gadamer therefore asserts that "the significance of a word is determined only by the unity of a figure of meaning formed by the [poetic] speech."[60] He recognizes that this task is all the more difficult with modern lyric where the relative lack of syntactic determinacy creates fissures in the poetic configuration that result in a greater ambiguity of meaning in the poem as a whole. Nevertheless, "the polyvalence of the words is determined in completing the meaning of the [poetic] speech and permits one significance to resound and others to simply resonate."[61] This completion of meaning is the task of reading. In Celan's poetry Gadamer finds that the word choices invoke a network of connotations whose "hidden syntax" can only be discerned from the linguistic configuration of the poems themselves. For every interpretation ultimately aims at "making visible the unity of meaning which befits the text as a linguistic unity."[62] Only then does the ambiguity and indeterminacy stirred up by the poem become truly understandable.

Gadamer's account attests to his focus on the language of poetry as "the medium by means of which language is bound back to its own or inner resounding."[63] He emphasizes the role of rhythm which deploys a range of syntactical means to achieve a palpable balance between the

[59] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 290. Gadamer associates the autonomy of the poetic (or literary) text with its ideality. For an autonomous work "any reproduction – even on the part of the author or reader – contains an inappropriate contingent moment." He underscores this point: "Every speaker of a 'text' knows that no possible vocal realization – not even his own – can ever completely satisfy our inner ear. The text has acquired an ideality that cannot be obviated by any possible realization" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 146; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 148).

[60] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., p. 129; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 429.

[61] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit.; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit.

[62] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., pp. 127–128; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 428.

[63] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader…*, op. cit., p. 149; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 52.

movement of meaning and the movement of sound.[64] A thick network thereby emerges enabling the individual words to cohere into a meaningful whole. What comes forth through this coherence Gadamer, invoking Hölderlin, calls "tone" (*Ton*). The tone of a poem holds throughout the linguistic configuration and joins its elements together. Where this tone pervades the poem a coherence prevails, allowing the listener to detect "instances where discordant notes arise" that detract from the mood it creates.[65] Reading the poem is thus a matter of listening to its tone, of attuning oneself to the underlying concordance that emerges from the poem's basic mood. Only by listening can one attend to how the individual words cohere to bring out the unique quality of the poem's being-said. Where the words are stated concretely and precisely within the poem, the corresponding precision of understanding is what provides the real standard of measure. When understanding succeeds "[e]verything in the text tightens up, the degree of coherence is unmistakably increased, as well as the overall coherence of the interpretation."[66] In such understanding one experiences that "attunement" (*Stimmung*) to the text which by which the "rightness" (*Einstimmung*) of an interpretation is confirmed.

Our encounter with poetry thus involves a different experience with language, one in which we experience the appearing of language *as* language. Undergoing such an experience we are taken up into an event of language that surpasses the intentions of both reader and writer. The poem is not merely an object to be understood, but "a phase in the fulfillment of an event of understanding."[67] The event of language that occurs in this encounter no longer allows us to take a position outside as an observer; rather we are called into the event as a participant. The poem, Gadamer says, "holds to itself" (*an sich hielte*), thereby "inviting the reader or hearer to tarry, and impelling the reader or hearer to become a lis-

[64] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader…*, op. cit., p. 149; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 53.

[65] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader…*, op. cit., p. 150; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 52.

[66] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., pp. 144–145; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 441.

[67] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader…*, op. cit., p. 173; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2…*, op. cit., p. 345.

tener more and more."[68] Tarrying with the poem we are drawn into the web of sound and sense created by its linguistic configuration. Listening to the poem we find ourselves engaged by what addresses us there and responsible to let it come forth. In this way the reader performs the poem, fulfills it so that "it comes out."[69] Summoned by the text we are called to respond; responding to the text we are answerable to it, responsible to what it says. This is the heart of the hermeneutic experience of poetry as an event of language. Caught up in this event we are, as it were, cast outside ourselves. Here it is no longer a matter of simply deciphering the meaning of the poem, but of responding to what appears there. For this reason the poem is not merely to be read, it must listened to. By listening one takes responsibility for letting the language of the poem speak as language. Such responsive listening requires attuning oneself to the language of each poem, listening to the tone that resounds within this unique configuration so it comes to presence through the sonorous self-presentation of language in the poem.

Being-Said: The Presence of Language in the Poetic Word

"The poetic word is 'itself' in the sense that nothing other, nothing prior, exists against which it can be measured. And yet there is no word which does not exist beyond itself; that is, there is no word which, beyond its polyvalent significance [...], does not yet also constitute its own being-said [*Gesagtsein*]."[70] Gadamer's formulation here is as enigmatic as it is provocative. The poetic word is "itself" in that it does not refer beyond itself to a reality or intention external to it that would authenticate the poem. And yet the poetic word exists "beyond" itself insofar as what it says is brought to presence simply by virtue of its being said. Poetic

[68] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 183; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 2...*, op. cit., p. 353.

[69] Risser provides an important discussion of tarrying (*Verweilen*) as the performative enactment that enables the work to take place (*Vollzug*). See J. Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other: Re-Reading Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Albany 1997, pp. 203–206.

[70] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 130; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 430. For a discussion that focuses on temporality of tarrying see D.L. Tate, "In the Fullness of Time: Gadamer on the Temporal Dimension of the Work of Art", *Research in Phenomenology*, 2012, 42/1, pp. 92–113.

saying (*Sage*), Gadamer avers, "is a saying that says so completely what it is that we do not need to add anything beyond what is said in order to accept it in its reality as language."[71] In fact, the ontological distinction of the poem as an artwork consists in this identity of meaning and being wherein the presence of what it intends is achieved. "Thus poetic language stands out as the highest fulfillment of that revealing (*deloun*) which is the achievement of all speech."[72] The poetic word thereby enables language to appear as language – that is, as an event of unconcealment by which something comes to presence.

Here too Gadamer follows Heidegger who sees in poetry a way of speaking that lets the essence of language present itself. And yet, in a significant departure from his mentor, Gadamer recasts the essence of language as a speculative relation that is epitomized by poetry. In the poetic word language manifests itself as an ontological event which exhibits the dynamic structure of being as a revealing-concealing movement, thereby opening a space, a "*Da*," within which something is brought to presence. The poetic word thus speaks as word by both coming forth and holding back, enacting a relation between what is said and what is not said that comprises its being-as-saying. The language of poetry thereby "makes audible what is in fact not said, but rather presupposed as an expectation of meaning, and indeed awakened by the poem."[73] The poem thereby holds together what is said with what is not said in a unified meaning that breaks forth from the midst (middle) of language. In this regard poetry intensifies the "living virtuality of speech" that Gadamer discerns in the event of language.[74] So when he speaks of the revealment and concealment of meaning as a dynamic interplay that constitutes the complex presence of the poetic word, this interplay reflects the speculative structure of language. Yet even where the withholding of meaning obscures a poem's unity of intention, as occurs in modern

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[71] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 110; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 75.

[72] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 112; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 76.

[73] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., p. 131; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 430.

[74] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op.cit., p. 465; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., 473 .

lyric, this is how the poem reveals meaning.[75] Simply by virtue of its being-said the poetic word offers a meaningful presence that is brought forth through the poem as a revealing-concealing event. Gadamer calls such being-said a "statement" (*Aussage*) by which he understands poetry as a "saying-forth" (*Aus-sage*).[76]

We have seen that the language of poetry does not point to something else by reference to which its meaning would be fulfilled. Instead the fulfillment of which Gadamer speaks is the unique presence achieved in and by the poem. This presence (which includes absence) neither requires nor receives authentication from the reality of the world that lies "outside" the poem. Indeed, "the [poetic] word finds its fulfillment precisely by refusing external verification of any kind."[77] This is the import of Gadamer's claim that the artwork constitutes itself as a "self-sufficient structure (*Gebilde*)" such that "it is, so to speak, its own measure and measures itself by nothing outside it."[78] Any direct reference to reality is effectively suspended by the poetic *Gebilde*. Gadamer even appeals to Husserl's eidetic reduction – which "brackets" the experience of reality – in order to clarify how, by its transformation into (linguistic) structure, the poem "is capable of canceling or forgetting any reference to reality that discourse normally has."[79] By bracketing any positing of reality the poem spontaneously accomplishes the phenomenological epochē. "The poetic word suspends the positive and the posited as that which might serve to verify whether our statement corresponds with what lies outside."[80]

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[75] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., p. 167; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 452. Where interpretation encounters opacities within the meaning-intention of the poem, this signals the poem's withholding of meaning. Steiner astutely observes that the resistance experienced in reading is a mark of the poem's "otherness." Even where our understanding of a poem deepens into intimacy, he says,"a certain reserve persists." See G. Steiner, *Real Presences*, Chicago 1989, p. 176.

[76] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader…*, op. cit., p. 139; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 42.

[77] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., pp. 110–111; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 75.

[78] H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 111; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1…*, op. cit., p. 117.

[79] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 163; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 194.

[80] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful…*, op. cit., p. 112; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8…*, op. cit., p. 77. Ricoeur makes this same point when he argues that the ab-

By virtue of this spontaneous bracketing of reality the poem is capable of self-fulfillment. To grasp how the poetic word can be "self-fulfilling" ("*Selbsterfűlling*"), it helps to recall the phenomenological analysis of truth as the intuitive fulfillment of those intentions wherein something is merely meant. Where something is intended in its absence Husserl speaks of "empty" intentions that are "filled" when the thing intended is encountered in its "bodily presence." Such fulfillment occurs as the coincidence of what is intuitively given with what is emptily intended. A phenomenological experience of truth occurs where the intuited corresponds with the meant. Husserl's analysis enables Gadamer to retain the connection between intuition, presence, and existence evoked by the language of poetry with the experience of truth in which the poem is fulfilled.[81] But he deviates from this analysis because the poem cannot be conceived as an "empty" intention which must be "filled" by something given from outside the poem. The poetic word is instead *self*-fulfilling precisely because the intuitive fulfillment of what is said in the poem comes forth from its very being-said. This marks the limit of intentional analysis in regard to poetry. As Gadamer notes, "the poetic configuration does not intend something but rather is the existence of what it intends."[82] The poem thereby gives to itself the very intuition which fulfills it; it is, he says, a "self-giving intuition" ("*selbstgebende Anschauung*").[83] In poetry it is language that discloses what presents itself there; in such self-giving intuition lies the truth of the poetic word. "The word is true in the sense that it discloses, producing this self-fulfillment."[84] Where it evokes the singular presence by which it produces its own fulfillment the poetic word is true, that is, true *as* word. The truth of the poetic word

olition of ostensive reference to given reality is the condition for the possibility of a non-ostensive reference to the world of the text. See P. Ricoeur, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans and ed. P.B. Thompson, Cambridge 1981, p. 141.

[81] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 21.

[82] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 113; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 77. On this point Gadamer approvingly cites Günther Eich: "The true language seems to me to be that in which word and thing coincide" (Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan...*, op. cit., pp. 130–31; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 430).

[83] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 163; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 194.

[84] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 112; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 76. Also see J. Risser, op. cit., p. 191.

thus lies in itself; it 'says' what it 'means' and "whatever shows itself [to be] what it is, is true."[85]

In poetry, then, we encounter the true word. It is the language of the poem itself that makes possible the intuitive fulfillment of its meaning. Even as the words bear a unity of meaning by which they point beyond themselves, enabling the poem to intend something, that meaning is nonetheless "secured and sheltered in the ordered composure of the [poetic] configuration."[86] For this reason, Gadamer claims that the artwork is "more than the mere manifestation of meaning" and this "additional something" he calls its "facticity." The very "fact" of the poem's appearing in this particular configuration is decisive. Consequently there is no question of surpassing the language of the poem toward comprehension of its meaning by concepts. Like all works of art, the poetic word "resists pure conceptualization."[87] The irreducibility of the poem's linguistic manifestation to conceptual comprehension is just the other side of the indeterminacy of its meaning. This indeterminacy is not merely a matter of the polyvalent meaning of the poem's words; it further implies that the meaning drawn forth from the linguistic configuration of the poem is simultaneously drawn back into it. This is borne out by the resistance of poetry to translation which underscores the extent to which it is the language of the poem that secures the presence of what appears there. Thus the privilege Gadamer accords poetry is thus based on the inseparability of what becomes present in the poem from its self-presentation as language.[88] Due to its distinctive way of being bound to language, the poetic word "embodies and vouchsafes its meaning."[89] For Gadamer,

[85] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 108; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 73. In fact, just as Gadamer spoke of the ontological valence of the image in *Truth and Method*, he speaks of "a valence of being [*Seinsvalenz*] resident in the word" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 152; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 54). By virtue of its being-said the poetic word undergoes an increase of being.

[86] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 34; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 135.

[87] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 37; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 128.

[88] In *Truth and Method* Gadamer discusses the inseparability of presentation and presented in the artwork as the "principle of aesthetic non-differentiation" (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 116; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 1...*, op. cit., p. 122).

[89] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 37; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 128. In this respect, the language of poetry compares to "the

the poem's facticity affirms its singularity as "a unique manifestation of truth whose particularity cannot be surpassed."[90]

So when Gadamer says that in poetry the word speaks authentically as word, as true word, he means that "the word as word is not only disclosure but must [...] be hiding and sheltering."[91] In such a word there occurs a revealing-concealing event in which something comes to presence and yet is drawn back into the sheltering being of the word from which it comes forth. The "authentic" word is not therefore a mode of propositional discourse in which something true is said; rather it has to do with the "word" in its most authentic sense, "a word that speaks, a telling [*sagend*, saying] word."[92] In poetry the word as word speaks more tellingly than anywhere else for it is there that the true being of the word is fulfilled in its "being-as-saying." As such a saying the poetic word is a statement (*Aussage*) in that it speaks forth (*Aus-sage*). The true word stands for itself and – we now add – speaks for itself. When the poem speaks it says something, but in such a way that "what is said in the saying is completely there."[93] In "the coming-forth of the word" something comes forth in the poem. Gadamer asks – and answers – the question: "What is it that is there [...] when the *Aussage* takes place or happens? I think it is self-presence, the being of the 'there' [*Sein des 'Da'*]."[94]

On this basis we better understand why Gadamer relates poetry as a saying (*Sage*) to the original meaning of myth. Like myth, poetry seeks a shared saying, "a saying that possesses absolute reality simply by vir-

language of gesture;" both are embodied meanings. Like gesture, what the poem expresses is "there" in the poem itself such that the whole being of the poem lies in what it says. The poem also resembles gesture inasmuch as it is at once "something wholly corporeal and wholly spiritual." Yet, again akin to gesture, every poem is "opaque in an enigmatic fashion" such that "[i]t holds back as much as it reveals" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 79; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 328).

[90] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 37; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 128.

[91] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 136; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 40.

[92] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 137; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 40.

[93] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 147; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 50

[94] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 148; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 50.

tue of its being said."[95] What Gadamer emphasizes about myth is the act of telling and the act of naming. Myths are believed only as long as they are told and retold. In this sense "all poetry is mythical, for like myth, the credence we give to it depends on this saying."[96] But poetic "saying" is also closely connected to "naming" as an invocation that calls into presence.[97] For Gadamer, poetry restores to language this original possibility of naming as calling into presence, albeit a presence caught within the tensive play of revealing and concealing characteristic of the speculative structure of language as an event of being. The poetic word thus reclaims the original capacity of language to call into presence simply by virtue of its being-said. He even adopts the word *parousia* to describe this power of poetry. "*Parousia* means nothing more than presence – and presence through the word, only through the word, and in the word, is what we call a *poem*."[98]

Bearing Witness: The Nearness of Language in the Poetic Word

Poetry is "myth," that is, a "Saga" that attests to itself by virtue of its being-said. The poetic word is thus a statement, a saying-forth, that bears witness.[99] Here, however, poetry is not conceived as the transmission of myth; it is not the retelling of a traditional story. That such a mythical world no longer exists provides the assumption behind Gadamer's question: "where in our unromantic world is such a 'Saga' requiring no attestation?" This framing of the question invokes Hegel's concept of the romantic as the final stage in the historical unfolding of art in accordance with his thesis declaring the pastness of art. For Hegel, "romantic art" encompasses the entire history of art and poetry in the "Christian Era"

[95] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 22.

[96] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 70; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 22.

[97] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 135; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 235.

[98] H.-G. Gadamer, *Literature and Philosophy in Dialogue...*, op. cit., p. 171; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9...*, op. cit., p. 305, italics original.

[99] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 110; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 75.

which embraces "the magnificent humanistic-Christian unity which we call the Western tradition of our culture."[100] Gadamer understands the "end" of romantic art declared in Hegel's thesis to indicate the dissolution of this mythical tradition, bound by Greco-Christian thought. If art now finds itself in an "unromantic" world, this means that poetry can no longer secure its legitimacy with the recitation of an extant mythos. Nor can poetry convincingly invoke the myths which once conveyed our experience of the world. This is the present predicament of poetry that Gadamer confronts in "The Verse and the Whole." This predicament confronts poets today with a unique challenge: "How can the path of the poet be taken as a path to the whole, when the whole is so different and so alienated from the verse[?]"[101] Although verse that would seek to revive that mythical tradition today would surely ring false, he insists that poetry remains a recitation of truth. Even today poetry must reaffirm its age-old vocation of invoking the whole of our experience of the world within which we encounter ourselves. Poetry that takes up this vocation responds to the continual demand for return and self-communion that confronts us as human beings. In Gadamer's terms, the task of poetry today is to supersede this alienation of verse from the whole by renewing the whole in the verse. He believes that this is still possible in the lyric poetry of our time. "In the end, its pure lyrical power is proven not by transmitting a mythical inheritance but by creating its own mythopoetic incantation."[102] In this way lyric poetry "fulfills the law of its genre" – namely, "to be a whole of sound and meaning that does not tell us a saga but does tell us how we are." [103] As a self-authenticating saying, lyric is its own saga. No longer conveying mythical narratives, lyric poetry brings forth its own pres-

[100] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., p. 87; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 252.

[101] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., p. 86; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 251. Heller expresses a similar assessment of the predicament of modern poetry. "The notorious obscurity of modern poetry is due to the absence from out lives of commonly accepted symbols to represent and house our deepest feelings." (E. Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought*, New York 1975, p. 282.)

[102] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., p. 89; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 255.

[103] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., p. 89; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 255.

ence. Where such *parousia* occurs "the world as a whole – and the whole of our world experience – has become present." [104]

Lyric thus retains the possibility of "capturing and retaining the whole in the poetic word."[105] It is precisely as a whole of sound and meaning that the poetic word affords us an experience of the whole of our world and of ourselves within that whole. What is brought forth in verse relates us to the world as whole. As used in our ordinary interaction with objects language dissimulates our relation to the world. By suspending the reference to such objects the language of poetry reveals what ordinarily remains hidden – namely, our originary belonging to the world. So while verse refers to our experience of the world as a whole, it does so by revealing our being-in-the-world prior to the relation of subjects and objects. The relation of verse to the whole is rather a speculative relation in which we are mirrored back to ourselves. Listening to the poetic word we are taken up into the work which situates us within our world. The language of poetry thereby affords us an experience of the whole in which we return to ourselves. For Gadamer, however, this "is always a return to what we have been allotted, i.e. a return to the whole in which we are and [to] who we ourselves are." Here he appeals to *nomós* as the most profound symbol for this basic human task. However, *nomós* is not just law and the order created by human beings; beyond this "*nomós* is the allotted [*Zugeteilte*], the measure [*Mass*]."[106] Like Heidegger, Gadamer sees in poetry a measure-giving in which we make our own what is most proper to us – that is, what is both possible and necessary for us. Listening to the poetic word is a matter of learning how to submit to this measure. Dwelling with the poetic word in this manner Gadamer calls "living in poetry." Living in poetry we experience the whole by "adhering to what has been allotted to us, i.e. the *nomós*, whatever it may be."[107]

It is a fundamental tenant of philosophical hermeneutics that language grants our access to a world. If, as Gadamer maintains, poetry is language in its preeminent sense, then the poetic word brings the world toward us in its familiarity. Citing Hegel he describes such familiarity as "feeling at

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[104] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., p. , 90; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 256.

[105] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., p. , 89; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 255.

[106] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., pp. , 90–91; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 256.

[107] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., p. 91; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 257.

home in the world." This feeling of familiarity indicates how the world surrounds and supports us, even though it remains forever nonobjective and so never emerges into the light of reflective consciousness. It is, above all, the shared world of linguistic experience that provides the element in which we live and feel at home. Gadamer characterizes the essence of this familiarity as "nearness." It is the distinction of poetry that it enables us to experience nearness as such. "A genuine poem," he asserts, "allows us to experience 'nearness' in such a way that this nearness is held in and through the linguistic form of the poem."[108] But the poetic word does not simply continue the process of *Einhausung*, of making ourselves at home in the world. "Instead it stands over against this process like a mirror held up to it. But what appears in this mirror is not the world, nor this or that thing in the world, but rather this nearness or familiarity itself in which we stand for a while."[109] While it is through language that we have a world in which we feel at home, it is in poetry that we experience its abiding nearness. For Gadamer, the truth of the poetic word consists in its creating a "hold upon nearness (*Halten der Nähe*)."[110]

Standing within the nearness afforded by the poem we may discern the measure appropriate to our experience of the world. Bringing forth the nearness of the world, the poetic word "bears witness to our own being."[111] As such it is a "true word." A word that fails to testify to the nearness that binds us together bears false witness. In his reading of Celan's poetry Gadamer calls this a "*Mein-Gedicht*," a poem wherein I fail to address You. Such a poem is a "false creation of language" that "gives a false oath and is a 'noem' ('*Genicht*')," a poem that comes to naught de-

[108] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 114; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 78.

[109] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 115; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 79.

[110] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 154; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 56. In his study of Celan Ziarek underscores the other's proximity in distance. While Gadamer places greater emphasis on the nearness of the you than on the distance of the other, he would surely agree that Celan's poetry is not a representation of the other but rather a happening where the address of the You takes place. See K. Ziarek, *Inflected Language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness – Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan*, Albany 1994.)

[111] H.-G. Gadamer, *Relevance of the Beautiful...*, op. cit., p. 115; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 8...*, op. cit., p. 79.

spite appearing to be a linguistic configuration.[112] Finding a path to the "true word" is the challenge that faces poetry today, as always. But this task is made all the more difficult by the myriad ways in which our common language has been confiscated as a means of communication, thereby muting the more originary dimension of language. Here Gadamer addresses the plight of world withdrawal that accompanies the forgetfulness of language that has overtaken us. Like Heidegger, Gadamer finds in the more profound poetry of our time a heightened experience of the forgetfulness of language where the ontological dimension of language comes to presence as withheld. When the "right word" refuses itself, the poet experiences a profound *Sprachnot* to which the poem bears witness. Indeed, where the word that would speak the sharing of a common world is not given, such poetic attestation acquires urgency. The search for the right word, even – and perhaps especially – where it withholds itself, attests to the poetic vocation of retrieving the disclosive power language in a shared saying that would enable us to experience the world's nearness. Yet the *Sprachnot* of poetizing does not simply reflect the *Sprachvergessenheit* of thinking; it rather intensifies the need of finding the word that would bring the being of language to language.

In order to stabilize linguistic configurations today in a way that will stand fast amidst the flood of informational chatter that rushes over us, Gadamer observes that poets must deploy "sharper provocations and forms of resistance" than in times past. This situation vindicates the extremity of hermetic poetry even when it appears all but impenetrable. At the risk of unintelligibility modern lyric draws deeply – even desperately – on the resources of language to renew our sense of familiarity in a world where we may no longer feel at home. In their efforts to attest to the nearness of the world, poets today find it increasingly necessary to dismantle our ordinary relation to language as communication in order to reclaim the originary power of language as *poiesis*. While this predicament prompts Gadamer to ask "have poets fallen silent?," he believes they have just become more discrete, requiring their listeners to attend all the more closely to what is quietly being said in the poem amidst the din of amplified voices. For "only the quietest word still confirms the communality and therefore, the humanity, which you and I find in the word."[113] In Celan's poetry, Gadamer finds

[112] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., p. 124; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 426.

[113] H.-G. Gadamer, *On Education, Poetry, and History…*, op. cit., p. 81; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 366.

a poetic word that bears fraught witness to the fragile intimacy of You and I. Where such intimacy is discretely brought to language the nearness of the world still achieves a shared saying, if only to mark its absence. Even in these "destitute times," Gadamer avers, poetry seeks the true word that would be binding upon us, a word that, standing for itself, would vow for you and I. "In this sense the poem which must be written today seeks to be an 'irrefutable witness' – but only as a poem."[114]

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[114] H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan…*, op. cit., p. 163; idem, *Gesammelte Werke 9…*, op. cit., p. 449.

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The hermeneutics of the image – sensual appearance of sense

Abstract

The task of the hermeneutics of the image is to grasp the sensual emergence of meaning, to describe the conditions of its forming and the possibilities for its understanding. Gottfried Boehm suggests an answer to the question about sensual sense and formulates the most important aspects of the potential for creation of meaning. This potential is rooted in iconic difference, which manifests itself both through the liberating power of contrast and as a relation between the part and the whole – that is, a relation between transitions, or consecutiveness, and the simultaneity of the image. Sensuality, which organises and articulates the pictorial meaning, remains unseen, even elusive – "empty" – though it drives the play of difference and oscillation.

Key words

hermeneutics of the image, Boehm, iconic difference, iconic thickness, simultaneity, aesthetic non-differentiation.

The first reaction to a painting's visual impression is often to define its subject and historical and symbolic content. In iconology, the next stages in the interpretation procedure are recognition of the state of affairs and definition of their background: historical, mythological, biblical, etc. An image presents itself not through sentences and judgments, rather it brings to light visual forms, which can be named, although a name is not

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enough. If they are something more than illustrations or rebuses (whose solution can become exhausted of their linguistic meaning), images carry a sensuality that cannot be eliminated, a sensual potential to create meaning.

The task of image hermeneutics – which was formulated by Gottfried Boehm – is to grasp the sensual appearance of sense, to determine the conditions of its forming and the possibility of its understanding. It is this difference from linguistic meaning – which cannot be radical – that requires hermeneutic thinking. At the same time, the description of the emergence of sensual sense requires phenomenological sensitivity, which enables focusing on pure visibility. This modified approach allows an understanding of the image as a sphere where meaning is created.

The aim of this paper is to describe the sensual potential of creation of meaning, presented by Boehm in relation to Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory, and to complete this perspective using Georges Didi-Huberman's analysis. This potential is rooted in iconic difference, which manifests itself both through the liberating power of contrast and as a relation between the part and the whole – that is, a relationship between transitions, or consecutiveness, and the simultaneity of the image. Sensuality, which organises and articulates the pictorial meaning, remains unseen, even elusive – "empty" – though it drives the play of difference and oscillation.

Aesthetic non-differentiation

Focusing on the sensual aspects of appearance requires the apprehension of the image as a whole; as a unity of content and visuality, without abstracting the formal and the material, significant and symbolic, the presented and the presentation.

Elements depicted on the surface of the canvas appear through their visual attributes and are fulfilled in their appearance. In essence, the specificity of the image is the unity of being and phenomenon: being becomes phenomenon through painting[1]. Boehm refers to Hans-Georg Gadamer's category of aesthetic non-differentiation, which claims that in the hermeneutical experience of its sense, a work of art is inseparable

[1] G. Boehm, "Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes", [in:] *Die Hermeneutik und die Wissenschaften*, Hrsg. H-G. Gadamer, G. Boehm, Frankfurt am Main 1978, p. 451.

Fig. 1. Johannes Vermeer, *The Lacemaker* variation by Aleksandra Dudziak

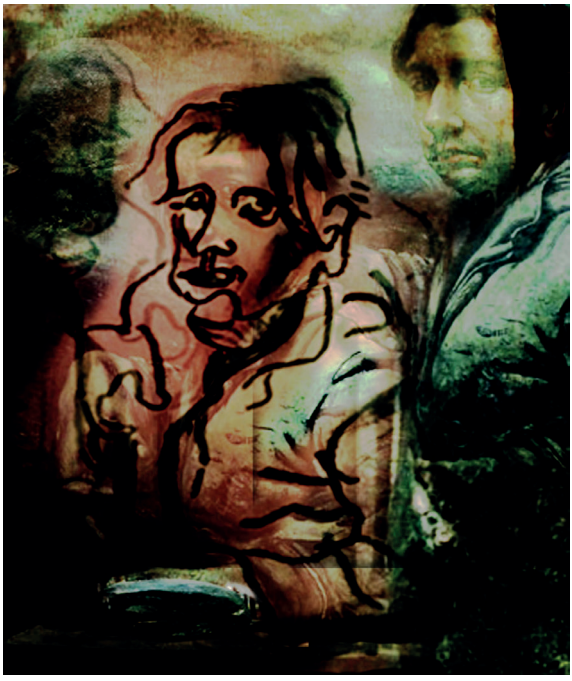

Fig. 2. Giorgio de Chirico, *Self-portrait* variation by Aleksandra Dudziak

Fig. 3. Edouard Manet, *The Spanish Singer* (or *The Guitar Player*) variation by Aleksandra Dudziak

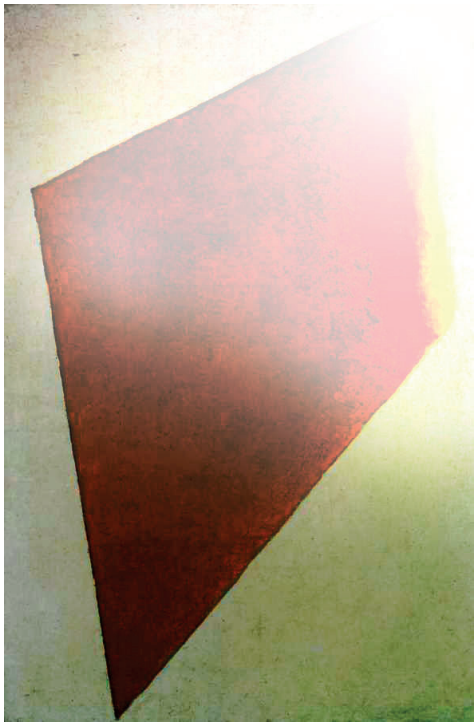

Fig. 4. Kazimir Malewicz, *Suprematic painting 1917* variation by Aleksandra Dudziak

from its non-aesthetic elements. The experience of sense is in unity with the formal, the semantic, the subjective and the cultural[2].

The Gadamerian postulate of aesthetic non-differentiation means that the separation of what is presented from its presentation is secondary and does not correspond with the hermeneutical engagement in the process of understanding a work of art. The same applies to the method used in creating a work of art, e.g. painting and acting, and the concept on which the work is based.

The unity and sense of the work of art are revealed in a simultaneous presentation of meaning and becoming-present within the presentation, together with the circumstances in which the work is being shown – all this is a part of the work's being. The work of art fulfils itself in bringing forth meaning (setting up a world) and thus achieves presence and sense. The sensuality of the work allows for the presentation and brings forth certain aspects of being that were previously unseen, it allows its original presentation. A painting as a work of art is part of the event of being that occurs in its presentation[3].

However, the function of the sensuality of the pictorial is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is constitutive for presentation of being in its individuality and uniqueness and is involved in this being through presenting these (an image is not a sign and is not destined to be self-effacing)[4]. On the other hand, as the medium is superseded – it does not become thematic, but the work presents itself through and in it[5]. Experience of sense is the basic experience of art.

Understanding fulfils itself in an engaging dialogue; in recognition of this question a work of art is the answer – in its actualisation. Gadamer, when analysing Velázquez's horses, explicates the meaning of the painting by confronting the image of a childhood rocking horse with the emperor's commanding and watchful gaze. All this is possible through the sensuality of the work of art, the figural apprehension of certain attributes, in the confrontations between colours and shapes. Perceiving the interaction of all these elements united in one sense is – according to Gadamer – the importance of seeing. He argues that questions about the accuracy of the horses' representation or Charles V 's physiognomy

[2] H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinscheimer, D.G. Marshall, London–New York 2004, pp. 73–74.

[3] Ibidem, p. 115.

[4] Ibidem, p. 134

[5] Ibidem, p. 118.

are pointless[6]. But how to create the emperor's commanding gaze without presenting the facial expression in appropriate relations of lines and colours? It is the game of those elements (i.e. shape, colour, representation of physiognomy) that allows the reading of meaning. Gadamer is opposed to too much formalism but does not analyse the function of the sensual in a work of art and in the creation of sense.

This matter is analysed by Boehm, who emphasises the unity of sensual appearance and creation of being in aesthetic non-differentiation.

The image is a palette of colours arranged into the visibility of the phenomenon. It is its own demonstration and, as a result, a painted object cannot be separated from the way it was painted. The way it is shown is the phenomenon itself and, in this sense, the image is characterised by the unity of being and phenomenon. The image is a process of presenting[7]. Sensuality – understood as givenness of being in its concreteness and visuality – is the constitutive element of the image and has inexhaustible potential to create meaning.

Iconic difference

Visual and non-visual attributes (which can be seen through a pictorial medium) depicted in a painting are presented through concrete juxtaposition: attributes, colours, lines, forms and background. The basic relationship is contrast – objects appear in visual contrast through the impact of pictorial elements.

This is how iconic difference works. It allows the painter to differentiate, distinguish, bring forth. One of its first names is line: that which di-

[6] H.-G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. N. Walker, Cambridge 1986, p. 30.

[7] Boehm also refers to the Heideggerian understanding of the work of art, which allows him to consider the image as a process, a being, which has a temporal dimension. This is what brings forth the view and sense through its own articulation and exposition. As Heidegger said: "the temple work, in setting up a world, does not let the material disappear; rather, it allows it to come forth for the very first time, to come forth, that is, into the open of the world of the work. The rock comes to bear and to rest and so first becomes rock; the metal comes to glitter and shimmer, the colours to shine, the sounds to ring, the word to speak" M. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", [in:] *Off the beaten track*, trans. J. Young, K. Haynes, Cambridge 2002, p. 24. Therefore, paint takes shape and saturation in contact with different paint, it brings forth a certain visibility, an occurrence of a given phenomenon.

vides, defines a space and separates the two parts, while at the same time connecting them. It places them opposite each other and does not allow them to fall apart. The line as a rift-design (*Riss*) from the descriptions of Martin Heidegger (*reißen*, draw a line), is both tension and compatibility, it defines the belonging of what is separated: "The rift carries the contestants into the source of their unity, their common ground[8]". It brings forth by closing, in other words, it draws and closes the shape in a given view (at the same time establishing the view) and sets the figure.

The line is a strictly pictorial way of bringing forth – as such, it does not exist in real life, there is no line of the horizon, the landscape, there is no contour of apples, but the line is implied. Maurice Merleau-Ponty could add that the line is a result of the meeting between what is seen and who is seeing, that it is the effect of corporeal and perceptual engagement in the sensual, visible world. The line in a painting, as the unseen, is a gesture that shows the relationship between visible beings[9]. First of all, it sets directions and relationships, changing the dynamics of image depending on the angle of deflection – it trespasses on the neutrality of the white canvas, introducing a difference and a play of sense.

Iconic difference makes it possible for the figure to be brought forth out of the background – as the outline or the border of colours. What has emerged becomes a point of intensity, a point of *concentration*, i.e. a *focus*, against the background, which is an ambiguous, unidentified (non-identifying) field. The latter is a condition for the possibility of drawing out a figure. It brings both figure and painting into light.

That difference – in *Gestalt* psychology – draws out the figure and the background: the figure always appears in the background as a distinct element, as a configuration of directions, shapes and sizes, which create some order. The guitarist in Édouard Manet's painting (*The Guitar Player*) is an example of a clear horizontal-vertical figure. The face of the guitarist stands out against the background: the light colour of his face, of his head-scarf, of the front of his shirt showing from under his jacket, create the main axis of the painting, which is balanced by other light elements painted around the lower part of the guitarist. The *focus* of the face is the strongest, because of the contrast between the dark background, in which the dark hat and jacket are hardly visible, and the light

[8] Ibidem, p. 38.

[9] M. Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", [in:] *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. G. Johnson, trans. M. Smith, Illinois 1993 pp. 139–149.

face, shirt and light-coloured hand, which is almost lit up by the white cuff, thus drawing our attention to the guitar. The guitar is the dividing line between the top and the bottom of the painting and also what connects them.

In the lower part of the painting the contrast is less distinct, there are more lines, shapes and colours. The strongly articulated figure stands against the empty ground, and, similarly, the face and the shirt, the hands and the fingerboard, the shoes and the still life are islands of heightened activity on a secondary level of the hierarchy. The various *foci* tend to be seen together as a kind of a constellation; they represent the significant points of intensity and carry much of the meaning[10].

The points of intensity create a clear composition of appropriate placement, similarity and difference of colours. The combination of simple elements can be seen through separation. Thus, similarity becomes a power that attracts separated figures and creates order – "comparisons, connections, and separations will not be made between unrelated things, but only when the setup as a whole suggests a sufficient basis[11]". This means that figures have to be arranged according to the relationships of shapes, colours, directions and sizes, and separated by "between-space". Boehm reverses Arnheim's claim that similarity is the initial condition for the recognition of difference, and argues that it is difference and separation that are the conditions for noticing similarity. This is the fundamental function of iconic difference – creating the possibility for recognition and apperception.

Boehm refers to Leonardo da Vinci's words about seeing landscapes in blotches on walls, to emphasise the meaning of iconic difference in perceiving figures[12]. The painter taught his students to recognise figures in blotches on walls and to look for visual order on these walls – so as to see the iconic difference. According to Boehm this is the iconic potential of imagination[13].

The process of appearance and the crystallisation of form was presented by Kazimir Malewicz in the painting *Suprematist painting* (1917/8)

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[10] R. Arnheim, *Art and the visual perception*, Los Angeles–London 1997, p. 77.

[11] Ibidem, p. 79.

[12] L. da Vinci, Leonardo, *Traktat o malarstwie*, trans. M. Rzepińska, Gdańsk 2006, p. 154.

[13] G. Boehm, "Der stumme Logos. Elemente einer Bildwissenschaft", [in:] *Jahrbuch des Wissenschaftskollegs zu Berlin*, Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin 2001/2002, p. 205.

with a yellow quadrangle. In it, an unevenly-coloured, asymmetrical yellow quadrangle can be seen. It reveals itself in the top right-hand corner of the painting and smoothly transitions from the white background to the strongly outlined figure with sharp edges in the bottom left-hand corner. The two left edges are outlined with dark chalk, which emphasises the contrast within the figure as well as between the edges and the background. The axis of the figure is tilted towards the bottom left corner of the painting. The lower corner of the figure almost touches the edge of the canvas, overbalancing the opposite corner. The figure seems to have pierced the canvas. The thrust was so strong that it cracked the quadrangle and shattered its right side, thus blurring the border with the white of the background. The blurred effect softens the destructive character of the thrust. The event of the painting could also be perceived as the background engulfing the figure.

Edgar Rubin formulated the basic rules of the figure's emergence from the background (*Visuell wahrgenommene Figuren. Studien in psychologischer Analyse*). The figure is usually smaller than the background – this is often an inspiration for the pictorial experiments that both Arnheim and Boehm recall (e.g. *Yellow Relief over Blue* by Ellsworth Kelly from 1991 or the painting *Prometheus strangling the vulture* by Jacques Lipchitz from 1936). Attempts to reverse the relationship are not simple and as a figure the background escapes the eye. The density of an assigned area is helpful in figuration, whilst the reverse – the combination of a multi-chaotic background with a simple smooth figure – gives the impression of immateriality. Fields that are symmetrical and convex more easily become a figure. Concave elements, according to Arnheim, will be perceived more as a background, e.g. as a hole in the figure. The relationship between the top and the bottom has also a figurative importance; it is more common to perceive the figure at the bottom. In this respect, colours have different potentiality (e.g. blue vs. red). All these forces define one another and together determine figuration. Rubin shows that the relationship between the figure and the background is ambiguous and therefore reversible.

Identification of objects and figuration itself require an interspace of blurred and ambiguous content. This space is a vast continuum, which brings to light the figure and the relationships between figures and the whole painting. Through emptiness and ambiguity, iconic boundaries give space for drawing out the figure and for organising the painting as a collection of related elements. This is a paradox of iconic thick-

ness. These elements, which cannot be attributed to a particular figure of meaning, organise figuration and allow the explication of sense: "This impossibility of utterance which is not capable of describing the intensity of the phenomenon and breaks down in it, (...) exposes what is pictorially the thickest[14]". Emerging from this vagueness, being becomes a phenomenon, a sensual particularity that is always given within the context of its appearing. The interchangeability of meaning of the background and figures, and the importance of their difference were the main points of Georges Didi-Huberman's analysis of the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* by Pieter Bruegel. He analysed a small part of the painting, in which Icarus's legs are protruding from the foaming waves and his floating feathers are presented. They are – as white spots – indistinguishable, and only the background, in this case the ship and the water, allows us to distinguish them from one another, to recognise the feathers and identify the character and the story. The title of the painting and knowledge of the myth also play an important role in the process of recognition.

Iconic boundaries (of lines and colours as interspaces) not only allow for the emergence of the figure, but also for the transition between the figure and the background, as well as between the figures[15]. They delimit and connect. The transition suggests possible directions for the gaze, reveals the connections and tensions, and possible spatialisations and temporalisations in subsequent experiences of the image. Iconic boundaries allow the manifestation of the sensual sense. Paul Cézanne, having discarded the rules of perspective, created paintings in which, through transition, it is easy to move between figures and background. What is near and what is far become interchangeable. In this way, colours organise the composition and the unfocused gaze captures the contours that were formed in all the transitions[16].

[14] G. Boehm, *Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes*, op. cit., p. 463.

[15] G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, trans. J. Goodman, Pennsylvania, 2009, pp. 239–240.

[16] M. Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne's Doubt" [in:] *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. G. Johnson, trans. M. Smith, Illinois 1993, p. 6.

Simultaneity

The image is open to a multiplicity of experience due to simultaneity. Simultaneity does not imply stopping the course of time, grasping the most important moment of a story; nor is it an element of a linear chain suspended between retention and protention. It is, rather, a cramming, a densification of possible configurations of time, their pulsations. As Boehm noticed, simultaneity is accumulated potentiality, which is fulfilled in transitions and borders.

Rudolf Arnheim presents similar intuitions: "actually, the order of a picture exists only in space, in simultaneity. The picture contains one or several dominant themes to which all the rest is subordinated. This hierarchy is valid and comprehensible only when all the relations it involves are grasped as being coexistent. The observer scans the various areas of the picture in succession because neither the eye nor the mind is capable of taking in everything simultaneously, but the order in which the exploration occurs does not matter"[17].

Simultaneity opens many paths for the possible experience of the dynamics of the shape. It organises all elements as part of the whole, which both determines and changes them[18]. Their unity organises the simultaneity of the image: "the simultaneity of different directions of sense establishes the form in which the transition happens between border contrasts[19]". It is the unity of all transitions, unity established in relation to the whole pictorial system of the phenomenon that emphasises the contrast and harmony between the internal elements. This unity works like a hermeneutic circle, understanding the parts through the work of art as a whole and the work of art as a whole through the parts. It also means that the content of the painting cannot be fully expressed on the grounds of simultaneity.

From Boehm's point of view inexhaustibleness of sense is based in multiplicity and thickness. According to Gadamer, who also uses the term inexhaustibleness of sense, this is related to the inexhaustibleness of possible questions that can be asked by the viewer, who is always

[17] R. Arnheim, op. cit., p. 376.

[18] "A composition is nothing other than an exact law-abiding organization of the vital forces, which, in the form of tension, are shut up within the elements", ibidem, p. 92.

[19] G. Boehm, *Zu einer Hermeneutik des Bildes*, op. cit., pp. 162. 461 [trans. K. Weichert]

a part of culture. The interpreting audience actualises the sense of the work of art through questions and hermeneutic dialogue. The visual dynamics of sensuality are only the medium through which we can find different meanings, depending on the situation the interpreting audience is in. Sensuality does not seem to be playing an important function in this context.

Boehm, on the other hand, focuses on the dynamics between the parts and the whole, which are characteristic of the image. He emphasises the relationship between simultaneity and consecutiveness in which the act of seeing is performed: "if, as interpreting viewers of images, we accept the obvious hermeneutic condition of the connection between the part and the whole, then the function of what has not been articulated becomes obvious[20]". That which has not been articulated allows us to draw out the recognisable elements of a painting. Understanding takes place in the transition from unverbalised thickness – which gives the viewer the possibility to notice elements on the horizon of the whole – to consecutive development of particular meanings and differentiation of one element from the other. Simultaneity is a scenario of multiple viewings, which allows for endless merging of elements.

Sensuality as the Other

The dynamics of the visual, as a meaning-generating process is not exhausted in a single sense, it exceeds it. This seething potentiality of colours unassigned to any figure, of borders and contours and of the background, allows the gaze to oscillate in the transitions. The potential of this ambiguity and multivectorality was performed in the self-portrait of Giorgio de Chirico (1924–5); the more we look at the figure, the more it melts into the background and becomes ambiguous. It allows us to see Giorgio as a painter, historical figure, painted sculpture and a sculpture in the process of creation – a person turned into stone. The artist emerges from his art, understood as a process. He provokes many different interpretations. "The painting does not ascertain, but it presents, shows, interprets that person in many aspects simultaneously[21]". The meanings

[20] G. Boehm, "Bildsinn und Sinnesorgane", [in:] *Ästhetische Erfahrung heute*, Hrsg. J. Stöhr, Köln 1996, p. 164.

[21] G. Boehm, *Der stumme Logos. Elemente einer Bildwissenschaft*, op. cit., p. 211.

coincide and we can only express them in separate sentences, often contradictorily.

These tangles do not create an unambiguous, finished object, but rather one that is open – in its ambiguity – to different interpretations and possible paths for glances. This way, the simultaneity reveals the coexistence of all possible alternatives. It extends a network of relationships and transitions before the viewers. This paradoxical transition, this iconic thickness of emptiness, which allows for multiple readings, remains elusive. It may – through its articulation – even disrupt the experience of the image. Georges Didi-Huberman tracks this pictorial disruption and deconstructs the history of art, mainly with regard to Erwin Panofsky – he tries to speak about rupture, about what is visual and what is illegible in presentation, about the moment of seeing, but not perceiving, which confronts the viewer with his lack of knowledge and opens him to the sensuality of the image.

Didi-Huberman relates what is legible and visible to semiology in art theory, which is based on three categories: visibility (potential of the shapes to be recognised as objects), legibility (potential of the object to be associated with a certain myth, history, topic or narration) and invisibility (when the image indicates or symbolises a metaphysical idea)[22]. Perception of presentation is, first, a recognition of elements and allegory, and second, it is an intuitive synthesis based on the acquired knowledge of topics and concepts contained in the literary medium. To synthesise, therefore, is to recognise the multiplicity of sensuality in the idea, in the topic, or in history – in Panofsky's symbol. Visuality, however, does not manifest itself in the visible or the legible. Although it allows them to appear (as the background allows the figure), it may distort them, encroaching upon the independence and robustness of the figure. It is the place of rupture – the Other of the sense in sensuality. The hat in Johannes Vermeer's painting *Girl in a red hat* is an example. The title, the location and the volume of the object indicate that it is indeed a hat; but instead of a regular hat, there is something else, something billowy – the irrational expansion of red paint[23]. The more the viewer watches the hat, the more alien and different it becomes, yet still, it can be nothing else but a hat.

[22] G. Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 15.

[23] Ibidem, p. 182.

A similar thing happens to threads in *The Lacemaker*. The image seems to be obvious in terms of iconography. It shows a girl making bobbin lace. All axes and lines, the girl's gaze and hands are directed at the sewing, which, however, remains invisible. In the foreground, as if on a pillow to the left of the girl, appear red and white lines, or splashes, which introduce opacity to the reading of the image. It is red and white paint, of a ragged, blurred shape, a blot of paint left alone, the play of a wandering brush, "a blaze of substance, colour without a fully controlled limit[24]". It is a sensual whimsy, an accident, a disturbance. However, it is just a part of the picture; using the mimetic context, one can assign to it the form of thread, but it is rather an uncontrolled phenomenon of painting. The thread and the hat, like many other examples (e.g. the building wall in *View of Delft*, or the background wall in the fresco *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico), are symptoms of sensuality – thickness, texture and colour of paint that exceed the shape they have been assigned to. Once spotted, this defines the space in the painting through a disruption and resembles what is unseen in the image, but which at the same time builds this image and releases its dynamics.

In *Confronting Images*, Didi-Huberman shows another side of figuration: visual otherness in visibility, the necessity of the non-sense and the power of defiguration. Boehm suggests that iconic thickness and sensuality defy unequivocal explication, but he focuses mainly on the meaning-generating aspect of images. However, Didi-Huberman looks for places where meaning is disturbed and demonstrates how the image's sensuality is fated to defy sense. These two perspectives look at the image from two different sides and thus complement each other.

Summary

The image's sensual power to generate meaning emerges with the first line, outline or border, which evoke a rich variety of relations of disconnection and connection, belonging, balance, tension. This is the first function of the iconic difference, which is revealed in contrast – distinguishing, differentiating, specifying, determining. Thus emerge the figure, the view, the landscape amidst shape and colour: they can be perceived thanks to the imaginative potential of iconic difference.

[24] Ibidem, p. 252.

The image fulfils itself as a whole. It is a process of presenting by transitions, oscillations, directions; which appear in the simultaneity of the image. The difference works between the consecutive and the simultaneous – the contemporaneity of all possible alternatives. This seething potential is made possible by the iconic thickness – non-differentiation, non-assignment, emptiness or remaining unseen. As the iconic thickness is emphasised, so it becomes misapprehended and can even lead to a rupture in the presentation of the figure. Thus, sensuality emerges against the legible background as a symptom. The creative force of the sensuality of the image lies in the radically incomplete comprehensibility – it becomes a place of re-determination and oscillation. It is a process.

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