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The European Society for Aesthetics

Department of Philosophy

University of Fribourg

Avenue de l'Europe 20

1700 Fribourg

Switzerland

Internet: <http://www.eurosa.org>

Email: secretary@eurosa.org

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The Monstrous Nature of Art — Levinas on Art, Time and Irresponsibility

Martine Berenpas*
Leiden University

ABSTRACT. In this paper, I investigate Levinas' conception of the work of art as the movement away from reality. To Levinas, art is deceptive and dangerous because it offers a form of escapism that interferes with man's responsibility for the Other. I will focus on Levinas' early work in which he unfolds a remarkable discussion of contemporary art. The first part of the paper will concentrate on Levinas thoughts on the nature of art as a stoppage of time. To Levinas, art is caught in the instant and can never become anything more or less than it already is. In the second part of this paper I will focus on aesthetic pleasure and how Levinas argues that the pleasure art gives is a form of escapism which interferes with moral responsibility. I conclude that Levinas condemns art primarily because it is caught in the moment and can never transcend it. Art exposes the *il y a*, which is the meaningless void of pure being. Levinas conceptualizes the present as the instant at which being emerges from being in general. The present arises through the event of the hypostasis in which an existent assumes its existence. To Levinas, the work of art is a standstill which is unable to synthesize the instant with the present and cannot take a position. The specific nature of art is that it realizes "the paradox of an instant that endures without a future." For Levinas, the eternally frozen instant accomplished in art is something monstrous. Not only because art is not able to take up the future and obscures reality rather than enlighten it. Furthermore, Levinas argues that art offers us a form of escapism and gives us the illusion to escape from our infinite responsibility to the other. In his elaboration of time, Levinas asserts a future that cannot be anticipated by a present. The significance of such a future is however derived from an ethical commitment to the other which is already imposed. For Levinas, the call for responsibility is made possible because the other gives us the future and speaks to us. Levinas' analyses of the other shows us the realm of a world of initiative and responsibility. It also shows us why Levinas conceives art as irresponsible: art moves in the world of shadows and remains captured in the anonymous moment. Art as such is a dimension of evasion or escapism in which, due to its stoppage of time, we can free ourselves from the future and thus from the moral responsibility to the other.

*Email: m.berenpas@umail.leidenuniv.nl

1. Introduction

The question whether art is related to morality has been a life long debate since the beginning of philosophy of aesthetics. Immanuel Kant is by foremost the philosopher who thoroughly investigated the relation between aesthetic beauty and morality. Kant argues in his third Critique - *The Critique of Judgment* - that it is 'always the mark of a good soul' to take an interest in natural beauty. To Kant, it indicates that there is a moral tendency to harmony between nature and moral freedom. In the same section however, Kant denies that this moral tendency is related to artistic beauty. To Kant, artistic beauty has no relation to morality. Art is not able to encourage us to be moral responsible subjects.

In this paper, I would like to investigate the relation between art and morality once more by discussing the phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas has extensively written on art and the artwork and gives a very interesting interpretation of the significance of art.

Levinas is primarily known for his philosophy of the Other and his search for something which cannot be understood in terms of being. Levinas localizes this radical alterity in the relation to the Other. The Other precedes and transcends our individual existence and is beyond being. To Levinas, we have an infinite responsibility to protect the radical alterity of the Other. To ensure the sacredness of the other, Levinas localizes the origin of moral responsibility in the relation to the Other.

Levinas' philosophical thoughts are not limited to the relation to the Other. Levinas has written as well on literature, music and art. There are countless references to poets and writers in Levinas' work. His admiration for the poet Celan for example is very clear throughout his work, and there are countless other references to the visual and cinematic arts.

In this paper, I will focus on illuminating Levinas' thoughts on art as a movement away from reality. I will primarily focus on clarifying the ambivalent attitude Levinas has towards the work of art. Levinas shows his admiration for art but at the same time condemns art calling it 'an idolatrous object' that is 'moral irresponsible'. I argue that Levinas' attitudes to art are related to his project of giving priority to ethics as first philosophy.

The paper is divided into two parts; in the first part I will focus on Levinas' interpretation of art as 'exotic' and art's relation to time. To Lev-

inas, the artwork has ‘deworlded’ the objects it represents, stripping them from their contextual meaning. Levinas argues that art is ‘saturated’ and an ‘object which is caught in the instant’. When an artist finishes his work, the artwork can never become anything more or less than it already is. As such, art is the infinite repetition of a particular moment.

Because art is an infinite repetition of the anonymous (meaningless) moment, it can’t transcend itself and relate to the present or the future. Art is a powerless medium that only reveals the *il y a* or pure being but fails to act upon anything. To Levinas, art represents ‘something less than the object’ because it ‘returns to the impersonality of elements’.

In the second part of the paper I will focus on art’s relation to moral responsibility. In discussing Levinas’ focus on the alterity of the Other and the moral call the other imposes on us, it becomes clear why Levinas classifies art as ‘irresponsible’. The nature of art is monstrous because it offers us a form of escapism; an escape from our world and as such an escape from our infinite responsibility to the Other.

2. Art and its Relation to Time

Aesthetics involves the inquiry into human feelings with regard to the beautiful as evoked by nature and art. Aesthetics is not only focused on the subjective aesthetic experience, but investigates as well the specific characteristics of the artwork.

The nature of the artwork has been extensively investigated in phenomenological philosophy. Most important contribution is Heidegger’s *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in which Heidegger argues that art can be a genuine resource for philosophical thought.

Levinas as well has written extensively on art in one of his earlier works, *Existence & Existents* (1947). Levinas discusses art in relation to time and morality and argues that art is a form of ‘exotism’; a movement away from reality, which reveals existence without a world.

Levinas calls art ‘exotic’ because art is able to make objects stand out from the world. The artwork extracts the objects from their belongingness to a subject and presents the radical alterity of the objects. For Levinas, the primal function of art is to “furnish an image of an object in place

of the object itself.” (Levinas, 2001, p. 46). Art is able to present objects disengaged from their subjective purposes and forces us to thematize these objects in a different way.

Art is able to do so because it is a movement away from reality rather than illuminating it. Art reveals the objects as they are; it returns to the impersonality of elements. The reality that art presents is ambivalent, because this reality does no longer refer to our inwardness. For Levinas, the artwork is a ‘grasping and releasing’ and a ‘representing and not-representing’. The artwork reveals the ambivalent nature of the exotic reality, which Levinas calls ‘the world’s shadow’.

The exotic character of art is that it is able to reveal the radical alterity of the objects, or as Levinas calls it, ‘the monstrous materiality of experience’; the *il y a*. The *il y a* is not the fear of nothingness or death, - as in Heidegger-, but the fear of pure being. The *il y a* is a formless void; a frightening neutrality devoid of meaning.

To Levinas, art shows us the doubleness of the world. Our ordinary world is the reality which has meaning and signification through our purposes and desires. There is however a world which has its existence apart from our intentions and is meaningless because it is pure being.

Art exposes pure being and is a movement away from reality. Art reveals the impersonality of the elements; or ‘the nakedness of the materiality of experience’. As such, it can be said that art is able to reveal pure being and reveals the absolute: “An artwork is more real than reality and attests to the dignity of the artistic imagination, which sets itself up as knowledge of the absolute.” (Levinas, 2001, p. 46).

Levinas’ admiration for art seems however to change during his later work. In a later essay dedicated to the status of art, titled *La Réalité et son Ombre*, Levinas seems to be more critical to the status of art. In this essay, Levinas classifies art as “the insurmountable caricature in the most perfect image” (Levinas, 1978, p. 4).

To Levinas, art’s ambivalent status has its origin in its troubled relation to time. Art is a representation of an object and a ‘standstill’ or a ‘statue’. An artwork is an image of completion and saturation that will never be anything more or less than it already is: “The completion, the indelible seal of artistic production by which the artwork remains essentially disengaged, is underestimated - that supreme moment when the last brush

stroke is done, when there is not another word to add to or to strike from the text, by virtue of which every artwork is classical.” (Levinas, 1978. p.2).

When an artwork is completed, it is full and saturated and is as a consequence closed off time. Art is not only a revelation of matter in the very fact of the *il y a*, but is also a movement away from reality and a ‘stoppage of time’. The moment the artwork is finished is the moment in which the artwork stops time and becomes a statue. For Levinas, art is nothing more than an infinite repetition of the moment.

For Levinas, being is accomplished by the very stance of an instant. In taking a position, being is assumed, becomes a presence and present, and overcomes the meaningless void. The *il y a* is an impersonal form; the anonymous void of pure being. For Levinas, being conscious is to move away from the *il y a*. Subjectivity is a master of being, which means taking a position and assuming being as one’s own. In assuming being and taking a position, one moves away from the *il y a* and becomes presence or present. The infinite repetition of the anonymous moment is thus overcome by assuming being.

Art is however not able to overcome the anonymous moment, because art cannot make a stance. For Levinas, consciousness comes out of rest, out of the unique relationship with a place. The present is ultimately tied to this characteristic of consciousness; taking a position means being present. Essentially for consciousness is an inwardness, the ability to retreat and relating to that which is outward.

Art however appears in its turn as the covering of an inwardness and a presentation of a worldless reality. The artwork is cut off from reality and presents the “naked elements, simple and absolute, swellings or abscesses of being.” (Levinas, 2001, p.51).

The artwork expresses the reality’s shadow by exposing the naked materiality of experience. As such, art is not able to act upon anything or initiate anything because it cannot take a stance. Art cannot reveal anything more than the nakedness of pure being.

3. Art and Ethical Responsibility

Levinas argues that art is ‘more real than reality’, because it is able to expose the *il y a*, in which objects are presented in their elementary form.

Art reveals the alterity of the world, or the world's 'shadow'.

Throughout his work, Levinas is primarily focused on giving priority to that which is radically different than being and cannot be grasped or thought of in terms of being. Levinas strongly criticizes Western metaphysics of neglecting 'otherness' and 'alterity' and accuses the tradition of a totalitarianism. For Levinas, Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the other; "where the other, in manifesting itself as being, loses its alterity." (Levinas, 2008, p. 348). Levinas' search is a search to reveal that what is 'otherwise than being'.

Art is able to expose the radical alterity of the world. As such, it is understandable that Levinas is interested in the artwork which is able to reveal pure being or the *il y a*. If art is able to reveal the *il y a*, it might be as well the medium through which the *otherwise-than-being* can be revealed.

Levinas is however ambivalent to the value of art. In *Existence & Existents* (1947) he seems to praise art's ability to reveal the *il y a* and seems to value the imagination of the artist who is able to reveal the 'nakedness of the world' and is able to "integrate it into our world." (Levinas, 2001, p. 49).

In an essay dedicated to art, titled *Reality and its Shadow* (1948), published only a few years after *Existence & Existents*, Levinas seems to have a total different attitude to the status of art. In this essay, he rather condemns art, calling it an 'idolatrous object' and resenting its 'monstrous nature' (Levinas, 1978, p. 12). To Levinas, art is wicked because it escapes from the call for responsibility: "This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility. The poet exiles himself from the city [...] there is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague." (Levinas, 1978, p.142).

These are serious accusations which Levinas makes against art. Levinas claims that art is problematic because it diverts one from one's responsibilities in the world. In order to understand this claim, it is necessary to focus on Levinas' conception of aesthetic pleasure. For Levinas, the attempt to elevate mankind above reality needs to be seen as a form of escapism and a way to shield oneself from one's moral responsibility to the other.

In *De l'Évasion*, one of Levinas' first essays, he writes on the nature of escapism and the need to flee away from reality. Inspired by Sartre's

analysis of *La Nausée*, Levinas investigates the confrontation of man with the horrid of being and his tendency to escape the senseless void of the *il y a*. Levinas condemns escapism seeing it as a movement away from what it means to be a conscious being. Furthermore, the pleasure that escapism offers is deceptive and inauthentic. The pleasure of escapism is to Levinas “nothing more than a being caught in the instant.” (Levinas, 1982, p. 26).

Art and escapism are related in the sense that theaesthetic pleasure art gives is essentially a form of escapism or evasion from reality. I would even go further and argue that to Levinas, the pleasure art gives us is dangerous and monstrous because it offers mankind an escape from his infinite responsibility to the other.

For Levinas, moral responsibility is derived from a commitment to the other which is already imposed. To Levinas, the Other precedes my existence and precedes being (and hence the *il y a*) and as such is able to impose moral responsibility on me before I come into existence.

Ethical discourse comes from beyond the visual, beyond being and has its origin in the relation to the other. The relation to the Other is primarily ethical because the other has a face. The face is not something visual, but it is an *epiphany*, a trace of something which cannot be understood in terms of being.

To Levinas, the radical alterity of the Other, - or the trace as he calls it-, is a “movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.”(Levinas, 2008, p. 348). For Levinas, the other comes without mediation and without context and signifies only himself. But it is also a relation; a relation to a presence that never has been there and is otherwise than being. Because the Other transcends everything, it opens the future for us.

Levinas’ construction of the future that synthesizes the present, the past and the future, is derived from Descartes’ idea of God as the infinite being, which idea contains more than the finite thinker can account for. Levinas hence argues that the future is given to us by the relation to the Other.

The present is conceptualized by Levinas as the instant in which being emerges from being in general. The present arises through the event of hypostasis in which an existent assumes its existence by taking a position. In his elaboration of time derived from Descartes’ *Meditations*, Levinas

asserts a future that cannot be anticipated by a present. It is through the relation to the Other that we are able to transcend the present and relate to the future.

Levinas' turn to the Other opens the 'ungraspable future', which is beyond my finite time. What Levinas is looking for is an opening of a messianic future that would in itself be open-ended and has an ethical grounding. Important to notice is that on several occasions, Levinas points to the face of the Other as being a trace of God. The thinking of the unthinkable opens a 'future that cannot be fulfilled and a past that was never present'. This revelation of the radical otherwise than being, has for Levinas an ethical connotation. To Levinas, moral responsibility precedes any 'objective searching after truth', and is conceived as the origin for communication, truth and knowledge. Ethics is for Levinas that *prima philosophia* par excellence.

Levinas analysis of the other who imposes moral responsibility upon us by transcending the present and giving us a future, shows why Levinas is troubled by the nature of the artwork. In Levinas' phenomenology, art is seen as the medium the least capable of acting upon reality or transcending the anonymous moment revealed by the *il y a*. Art is primarily a movement away from meaning and signification and a movement away from presence.

The pleasure that art gives us is furthermore troublesome. The pleasure the artwork offers is nothing more than a 'concentration on the instant'. This kind of pleasure is shallow and inauthentic and can be classified as a form of escapism. The movement away from reality disables furthermore the possibility to overcome the anonymous moment and taking up being.

The escapism art offers is an opportunity to slip away from reality and to retreat from the world. To Levinas, escapism paralyzes the subject, withholding him from his ethical responsibility to the other. This makes art and idolatrous object which is monstrous, deceptive and irresponsible.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed Levinas' philosophy of art in relation to time and morality. I focused on clarifying Levinas ambivalent attitude towards

art, showing his admiration at one side and condemning art on the other side as 'monstrous' and 'irresponsible'.

For Levinas, art can reveal the naked materiality of experience, or the *il y a*. Art is 'exotic' because it can make objects stand out and reveal existence without a world. Art is able to integrate the exotic into our world by covering or concealing inwardness. The *il y a* is exposed as 'being in general' which is anonymous and resists a personal form. Levinas defines art thus as a movement away from reality; a 'deworldling' or the world's 'shadow'.

Art is not something which can clarify or explain anything of our world. Rather than enlighten it, it obscures and conceals it. When an artwork is finished, it will never be anything more or less than it already is. As such, it is closed off from time and is nothing more than an infinite repetition of the anonymous instant. Art seeks thus to draw out of the light and to deform the world, breaking with the continuity of time.

For Levinas, time is the inner structure of subjectivity. The event of hypostasis in which an existent takes up existence as one's own, produces presence and present. The present is a situation in being where there is not only being in general, but a particular being; a subject. Art can never relate to such a present, because it disengages from reality and as such cannot make a stance because it conceals the inwardness that is necessary to take up being.

To Levinas, art seems to reveal absence rather than presence; the artwork presents the meaningless void of pure materiality; the 'shadow' of the world that is disengaged from subjectivity. Art cannot transcend the anonymous instant and relate to the present and is stuck in the the meaningless void of the *il y a*.

Levinas localizes meaning and signification in the event of the hypostasis. By becoming present, by taking a stance, being is assumed and this creates the inwardness that is a prerequisite to master being. To Levinas, art is thus powerless, because it cannot act upon being.

To Levinas, the subject is however in some way powerless as well, because the subject is not able to transcend presence and relate to the future. Transcendence in Levinas is always the desire for something else, - for something radical different than being. It is the relation to the Other which gives us the future and gives us the opportunity to alter our actions.

Redemption and forgivingness has its origin in the relation to the Other. The relation to the Other is therefore classified as 'ethical'.

The Other who is the radical alterity who bears a trace of God in the epiphany of the face, is the origin of moral responsibility. The moral responsibility to protect the alterity of the Other is a call that precedes my existence and hence transcends being. The infinite demand for moral responsibility is an infinite call to protect that which is radical different than being. It is the face of the other who says to me: you shall not kill. My duty to respond to the Other suspends everything; even my *droit vitale*.

The moral responsibility to the Other is infinite, beyond being and undeniable. However, escapism offers us a deceived way of fleeing from reality and conceals our moral responsibility.

The problem of art is that it offers a retreat from the world and a slipping away from the present. The artwork offers a way to escape from reality, an escape from ourselves and a 'stoppage of time'.

Theaesthetic pleasure art gives us is monstrous because it offers us a way to retreat from the world and to experience the nakedness of the elements. But at the same time art keeps us away from reality and conceals our infinite responsibility to the Other. It is not that art can suspend our infinite responsibility to the other, because the radical alterity precedes being and thus the6 as well, but it conceals it; it covers up our inwardness, our subjectivity and our power to act upon reality. As such, art is monstrous and irresponsible as 'feasting during a plague'.

It seems thus that art indeed reveals something about reality, but it does so in a very concealing and obscuring way. Art's problematic nature lies for Levinas however in its detachment from ethics. Even the most horrendous event that is represented by art can give usaesthetic pleasure, something which is to Levinas who survived the Holocaust, indeed 'monstrous'.

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