

## NOETIC VALIDITY IN AESTHETIC INTERPRETATION

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*ABSTRACT. Can an explanatory theory of the subject be an appropriate means to understand what it is to live a moment of meaningful form in art – to which corresponds what I shall call ‘the figural experience’? Isn’t such a theory, in spite of its critical and relativist impulse inexorably inclined to impose a set of pre-conditions that are incompatible with the nature of the experience itself. And vice versa what is the relevance of any phenomenologism when it comes to understand the subjective formation of knowledge? In order to answer these questions I critically refer to several classic phenomenological challenges on Kant’s transcendentalism (Critique of Pure Reason), from Merleau-Ponty’s work on perception (Phenomenology of Perception) to the aesthetics of Dufrenne and Sartre (respectively Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience and Psychology of the Imagination). From this ensues the following argument. The subject imposes different frameworks when approaching the figural from various view-points. It is by understanding the motivations behind the subject’s position that the particular nature of objective knowledge that may be established can be explained or analysed. The validity of such a stance seems however to be restricted to ‘objectifying subjectivities’, and it may well become irrelevant to understand the subject’s attitude while experiencing artistic sense in all its disruptive and unexpected dimension. In this light, a descriptive noetic approach would complete the task in a more faithful manner. The question is therefore not about the possibility of an explanatory theory of the subject, but its appropriateness, and subjectivism should thereby be replaced by an ethical theory of the subject.*

*KEY WORDS: subjectivity, meaning, phenomenology, experience, Merleau-Ponty*

*RESUME: Validité Noétique dans l’Interprétation Esthétique – Une théorie explicative du sujet peut-elle être le bon moyen pour comprendre ce qu’est, dans sa dimension vécue, le moment où la forme artistique se met à signifier – ce à quoi correspond ce qu’il est convenu d’appeler “l’expérience figurale”? Une telle théorie n’est-elle pas encline, malgré ses aspirations critiques et relativisantes, à imposer un ensemble de conditions préconçues, lesquelles sont incompatibles avec la nature de l’expérience même? Et inversement, quel est l’à-propos de tout phénoménologisme, dès lors qu’il s’agit de comprendre la formation subjective de la connaissance? Afin de répondre à ces questions, il se doit de se rapporter de façon critique à plusieurs ouvrages classiques de phénoménologie, qui ont remis en cause le transcendantalisme de Kant (Critique de la Raison Pure), allant des travaux de Merleau-Ponty sur la perception (La Phénoménologie de la Perception) aux esthétiques de Dufrenne et Sartre (Phénoménologie de l’Expérience Esthétique et L’Imaginaire, respectivement). L’argumentation est la suivante. Le sujet impose diffé-*

*rents cadres lorsqu'il aborde le figural à partir de tel ou tel point-de-vue. Ainsi, comprendre les motifs qui se cachent derrière le positionnement du sujet permet d'expliquer ou d'analyser la nature propre de la connaissance objective. Une telle approche ne semble néanmoins se justifier que dans la limite des "subjectivités objectivantes", ce qui ne saurait s'appliquer à une compréhension de l'attitude du sujet dont l'expérience du sens dans l'ouvrage d'art a lieu en tant que rupture, et de façon inattendue. C'est en cela qu'une approche descriptive noétique aboutirait plus fidèlement à une telle compréhension. Le problème n'est donc pas de remettre en cause la possibilité de l'explication théorique centrée sur le sujet, mais plutôt son à-propos. Le subjectivisme devrait alors laisser la place à une théorie éthique du sujet.*

*MOTS CLE: subjectivité, sens, phénoménologie, expérience, Merleau-Ponty*

*Special motives are required to make the theoretical attitude possible ... (Husserl)<sup>1</sup>*

Can an explanatory theory of the subject be an appropriate means to understand what it is to live a moment of meaningful form in art – to which corresponds what I shall call ‘the figural experience’? Isn’t such a theory, in spite of its critical and relativist impulse inexorably inclined to impose a set of pre-conditions that are incompatible with the nature of the experience itself.

To subsume the event of meaning in art to pre-established modes of thought, to be engrossed into the question of its possibility by confining it to a set of prerequisite subjective conditions, would be to behave like Narcissus who Juno wisely condemned to fall in love with his reflected image for ignoring Echo, his loving nymph. Echo’s voice would still be there, somewhere, telling us to spend more time with her image. Narcissus on the contrary can only see himself, immutably. He cannot be transformed by the Other, he cannot be told any message as he only sees what he expects. This Other, needless to say, is here the work of art. There is no moment of meaningful form for the one who finds in the image the confirmation of a system.

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<sup>1</sup> Husserl Archiv B 1 32, Nr 17, trans. D. Moran in *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 183. The original version is in the unpublished Husserl-Archiv text in Louvain:

‘Es gehören besondere Motive dazu um theoretische Einstellung möglich zu machen, ...’.

Any anticipation is an act that transforms art into a means or a relevance, and such a subjectification runs the risk of imposing its own image on what is perceived. However, the mistake would be as well to ignore reflections on what is happening on the side of the perceiver during such an experience. Any ‘theory’ of the subject that aims to be as faithful as possible to the experience itself must relinquish its mastering and a priori features. This is what a mere description of the perceiver’s attitude strives to do. It preserves the vital inter-dependency between noesis and noema without establishing a hierarchical relationship of causality. This means that the very conception of theory of the subject in the sense of explanation becomes for such an undertaking irrelevant.

At this point it is worth noticing what may appear as being one of the most extraordinary paradoxes of contemporary Western culture. Far from having overcome the question of subjectivity when it comes to understanding the formation of meaning in art, the Western world has radicalised the same subjectivity into various forms of self-centered relativism. This has led to the postmodern implosion of the subject, which has very often produced unfaithful and therefore disrespectful attitudes when it comes to relate to the work of art, or simply when the artist relates to the world. The modern mastering subject has been replaced by the postmodern denigrating agent, or to put it differently the objectifying subject has given way to the subjectifying subject. And the question becomes, how can the role played by the perceiver during the moment of meaningful form in art be worked out without denigrating that of the Other, or to put it more adequately, that of the Thou (viz. ‘you too’)? This is once again what a description of the ‘figural attitude’ can provide, making thus the very conception of subjectifying subjectivity unacceptable. The argument here is therefore not only against any theory that seeks to recover in the subject the nature of artistic experience, but also when subjectivity is expressed by negation in the form of self-addressed deconstructionism. Neither constituting nor self-constituted consciousness allows for one of the essential features of artistic experience to take place, that is to say our considerate relationship to the disruptive Thou.

Constituting consciousness is precisely what Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* most famously rejects. (Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* and Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* are his targets, but also the rationalisms of Leibniz and Spinoza). The dominant subject does not open

any world but presupposes it, and we end up with a subject-related set of rules for meaning in its phenomenality to be possible. The nonsense of such an approach pre-constructing what has to be experienced in its immediate and unexpected dimension is self-evident. The subject cannot be before the world that it pretends to grasp, because it cannot be disengaged from the environment in which it lives – the subject is always situated. Neither should it use its cognitive capacities to determine what the world is like, as if human beings were pure disembodied consciousness. The subject should not be treated as ‘beyond’ its embodied, finite life if one is to avoid this transcendence giving shape and structure to meaningful experience. This would be to reinvent an intellectualistic dualism running from Plato to Descartes, Kant and beyond. The ideal of a pre-constructed world goes against any notion of human involvement in what is experienced. To define in a Kantian manner a set of a priori rules which makes the phenomenon possible is not conceivable. The idealist subject is as disembodied as ‘mentalistic’. It presents itself in clear opposition to what it seeks to know, viz. the ‘object’.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant’s aim in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (ed. & trans. P. Gruyer & A.W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) is to show how the subject, with its a priori (necessary and universal) characteristics can know the world. Knowledge is conditioned by the combination of two a priori: the capacity for sense-experience (‘intuition’), and the possession and capacity to apply certain ‘concepts’ (causation, existence etc.) appropriately to that experience. These concepts or ‘categories’ are necessary for the subject to have access to the knowledge of the world – they are imposed by the subject’s ‘understanding’. Kant argues for a synthesis of different experiences of the same object (experiences which occur chronologically in space) in order to have the knowledge of this object. It would be nonsensical, for Kant, to have the experience of something without implicitly having available the principle of causation (for example), because one would not be able to establish links between several temporal events whose synthesis should lead to the understanding and the knowledge of what is experienced. But where, for Kant, this notion of a priori categories aims to show how knowledge is possible, for Husserl it only contributes to define the essential structures of experience. To put it this way: Kant uses these subjective features in order to show how knowledge is possible. Husserl only ‘describes’ the essential structure of experience. Kant on the contrary sees the subject imposing structures on its experience of the world which then appears as we must know it. For Kant, we must understand how we arrange and impose the categories in order to become aware of the kind of knowledge we can have of the world. Kant’s known world is perceived by the subject as an independent external world. Unlike Husserl, Kant is in a

Of course this criticism of the ‘pure subject’ is not restricted to Merleau-Ponty. Sartre in *The Transcendence of the Ego* questions Husserl’s notion of the pure ego when it comes to working out the notion of experience. The problem of the primacy of the subject’s consciousness is also a feature of the first part of *Being and Nothingness*, where the notion of ‘being’ is introduced to replace that of idealistic significance of the object. Like Merleau-Ponty, Sartre rejects Husserl’s transcendental idealism by describing the experiences of subjects embodied and involved in the world, at a particular time. In fact, according to Merleau-Ponty, Sartre’s differentiation between ‘in-itself’ and ‘for-itself’ (reflective consciousness) also implies some degree of intellectualism by tending to transcend the particular temporal dimension of our relationship to the world. The ‘for-itself’ cannot give access to the ‘pre-reflective’ nature of consciousness that characterises a truly engaged and embodied experience. A phenomenologically described world is bound to change in time precisely because of the temporality of any subject involved in the world, and it is this mutating characteristic that a faithful philosophy of experience must address. Although Sartre acknowledges the temporality of both subject and world, Merleau-Ponty contends that the distinction between for-itself and in-itself prevents the former from taking this mutating dimension into account, that is to say the embodied aspect of experience or the living-in-the-world. In other words, bearing such a dichotomy is no more than a form of intellectualism that must be avoided at all cost.

The same difficulties are encountered when one uses predetermining factors in the spectator in order to work out the moment of meaningful form in art, and this without any reference to the specificity of the artistic experience itself. The constituting subject pulls out from the immediacy of meaning with the purpose of defining it, and cognitive capacities are used to determine what the moment of meaningful form is like. This kind of approach will always run the risk of disengaging the spectator from what is experienced. While for Merleau-Ponty there is a problem when knowledge is removed from sensory-experience, for us there are questions to ask when the phenomenal nature of the figural in the form of disruption of the already

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way attracted to ‘a form’ of objectivism (in fact the things ‘in themselves’ – the noumena – cannot be known).

known, or creation of the yet-to-be-known is not taken on board. The estranged dimension of meaning cannot be pre-figured by the subject. There is no figural attitude for the intellectualist in the sense that Merleau-Ponty understands it – only a figuring attitude. To confine perception to an interpretative, judgmental process that excludes the sensory dimension or the pathos of what is experienced cannot be satisfactory. To apply a set of preconceived rules in order to define what the moment of meaningful form is would transform the unexpected into the expected, presentation into representation, a shared event into a confirmation for-us. There is certainly an active dimension in the figural attitude but this activity cannot, and therefore should not attempt to originate the unexpected. Although the perceiver is the home of the event of meaning, the former must remain available to such a phenomenon for it to happen at all.

Objectifying approaches and their corresponding frames of mind, which seek to read artistic configurations in terms of forms, set of signs, manifestation of the unconscious, representations of class, of gender divisions, or of a historical period, must become aware of what they bring onto the work of art in the light of what remains elusive because of its unexpected nature. To be alert to what is pre-conceived in the subject has obvious ethical consequences: it awakens us to what cannot and therefore should not attempt to capture in the moment of meaningful form, i.e. its astonishing dimension. An explanatory and consequently disembodied theory will always overlook this essential aspect of artistic experience. For this reason it is only by adopting a ‘letting-be’ attitude or by being available to the Thou, as respectively Martin Heidegger and Gabriel Marcel would have it, that we will become more faithful and respectful to the phenomenal nature of art.

However, is this to suggest that we have to give up any investigation of what is happening on the side of the spectator during the ‘actual’ experience of the moment of meaningful form? Certainly not, but only an un-forceful and thus descriptive approach to the figural attitude will be as close as possible to the experience of the unexpected and eventful nature of meaning. Indeed, any explanatory strategy as to the subject would establish the latter as the origin of such an experience when in fact no room is left for a separation between subject and object, and when we are left with a witness and an event.

A theory of the subject acquires all its significance when it relates to an

object as it must be known, as it is explained or analysed from a particular view-point such as, for example, form, gender, the unconscious, the political or historical. Nevertheless, the same strategy becomes inappropriate when one tries to grasp, or rather communicate, the object-less phenomenon of meaning. It does not make much sense to reflect on the conditions that would make the unexpected possible; nor to undertake a methodology of objectifying approaches in order to figure out the phenomenal nature of the moment of meaningful form as it must be known. This is of course also what Merleau-Ponty challenges when referring to Kant's notion of 'a priori' and his attempt to establish how knowledge is possible.<sup>3</sup> For the latter there is no contingency but a necessity – the principle of causality for instance, which conditions our experience of the world. Kant's transcendentalism is based on objective presupposition against which Merleau-Ponty argues because of the contingent nature of the relationship between concept and experience.<sup>4</sup> Of course, one could argue that the former's critical subjectivism finds its *raison d'être* when relating to objects of knowledge, whereas the latter's argument is justified but only with regard to what it strives to highlight, i.e. our pre-theoretical condition as being-in-the-world. This problem of appropriateness of argument is also what we face when it comes to reflecting on the nature of the experience of meaning in art.

The question of subjectivity and its a priori conditions must be addressed in the light of recognisable categories such as form, the unconscious, gender, the political and so on, in other words what constitutes the world of 'objectivity'. But when it comes to dealing with the contingency that brings together spectator and work of art, or artist and world, the very conception of a priori conditions for particular categories to be recognised proves to be not only irrelevant, but also overpowering. The moment of meaningful form

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, for Merleau-Ponty, the 'a priori' should be replaced by 'contingency': 'The unity of the senses, which was regarded as an a priori truth, is no longer anything but the formal expression of a fundamental contingency: the fact that we are in the world – the diversity of the senses, which was regarded as given a posteriori ... appears necessary to this world ...; it therefore becomes an a priori truth ... The a priori is the fact understood, made explicit ...; the a posteriori is the isolated and implicit fact.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. Colin Smith, London: Routledge, 1992), 221.

<sup>4</sup> See Merleau-Ponty, 'Sense Experience' (ibid.), 207-242.

reveals its nature precisely by disrupting what is pre-established, conditioning, or a priori in the subject. It constitutes a subject-less experience as it 'happens' to the human agent who must be available for it. Its possibility cannot therefore be objectively known according to such or such a frame of mind. No epistemology can conceive the phenomenal nature of artistic meaning as it must be known. Rather, the figural disrupts what we already know and can only be differentially explained – after hand, according to various subjectively established categories. This leads us to reject the assumption that we should go back to the subject in order to explain the essence of a moment of meaningful form in art. Any attempt that seeks to retrieve causes in the subject's mind, or even in the object of perception establishes by the very nature of its method a hierarchical relationship between the former and the latter. In fact, to be rigorous, descriptive accounts do not fully overcome the problem either, but they are at least more faithfully part of the experience, to the point that the figural attitude itself could be understood in terms of an un-communicated descriptive stance. No intellectualisation of interpretation or psychology of perception can do justice to the moment of meaningful form in art. Under no circumstances should a noetic description become a theory of the subject, if one is to think of artistic experience as a relationship between subject-less availability and disruptive event.

In another context this is precisely the basis on which Mikel Dufrenne in his *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* criticises Roman Ingarden, for defining the role of 'signification' in the literary work of art by separating the word from what it signifies. There is on the one hand 'rational meaning', and on the other the reader's attitude which is framed according to a system of 'strata'.<sup>5</sup> For Dufrenne it is when signification is conveyed within the word, for instance in poetry, that the 'aesthetic' literary work distinguishes itself from the ordinary text. This is also what brings music close to poetry,

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<sup>5</sup> For an insightful account of Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art* (trans. R.A. Crowley & K.R. Olsen, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973) and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (trans. R.A. Crowley & K.R. Olsen, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), see Shusterman, Richard. 'Ingarden, Inscription and Literary Ontology', *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* Vol. 18, No. 2 (May 1987): 103-119.

and to any form of art whose disruptive nature discloses a certain meaningful ‘opacity’.<sup>6</sup> And the same lack of awareness is argued against Waldemar Conrad for whom an object becomes ‘aesthetic’ only when the spectator finds the right way to perceive it, for example in a certain light or from a particular angle for a sculpture, at a precise distance for a painting, with an appropriate way of moving for architecture, and so on. It becomes a disembodied ideal object, which disappears as soon as there is no adequate perception or performance any more, and which reappears in the right conditions.

Their approaches not only work against Dufrenne’s notion of ‘aesthetic experience’, but they also close the door to a number of vital concepts such as disruption, revelation, or availability. They cannot conceive the phenomenality that a moment of meaning can trigger, and whose sensuous dimension is lived in its uniqueness as it surprises, transforms, and enriches the one who is willing to take a considerate attitude. Idealism would approach meaning in terms of signified conveyed by signifier, begetting thus not only a separation between the medium and what is represented, but also between the object of representation and the means by which this object is represented, that is to say consciousness itself. The experience of the moment of meaningful form in art entails on the contrary an aspiration towards a unity between mind, meaning and medium. In fact, the term that Dufrenne uses to describe the work of art ‘aesthetically perceived’, viz. the ‘aesthetic object’ is to this extent misleading. In experience subjectivity tends to disappear to make the objecthood of what is perceived an unwelcome concept. No entity stands against the perceiver whose attitude can only be partially transgressed by means of description.<sup>7</sup> There should be no question of ‘intellec-

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<sup>6</sup> Quoting De Schloezer in his study on J.S. Bach:

‘The musical work is not a sign for something else but signifies itself. It is what it says to me, its meaning being immanent within it. And the meaning exists as embodied, not as signified, in the work’. B. De Schloezer, *J. S. Bach* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Dufrenne’s ‘aesthetic object’ is supposedly about a unity that brings ‘together both the signified and the signifying elements in the work’. Mikel Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (trans. S. Casey, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 214.

tual object' that would correspond to the subject's frame of mind or preconceived categories.

As a matter of fact both Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty pledge in their own ways against the same thing: intellectualist approaches lead to disembodiment. The 'being' of Dufrenne's 'aesthetic object' is potentially already there although waiting for the 'subject' to actualise it in a sensuous manner, in perception itself.<sup>8</sup> When for him the potential 'aesthetic object' is the 'work of art' in its objective dimension, for Merleau-Ponty 'objective reality' is the potential 'perceived world', or to put it differently the 'invisible world' is the potential for the 'visible world' to be. This surely should imply that the relationship between subjectivity/objectivity and the experiential nature of meaning is one of complementary difference, triggering thus the genuine issue of appropriateness of approach to adopt depending on what is to be, respectively, retrieved in the object of consciousness or discovered from what is experienced. It is at this point that what one may call an ethical hermeneutics could prove to be invaluable.<sup>9</sup>

Now, the clear inadequacy of the intellectual attitude cannot be resolved either by relying on mere imagination as this would inexorably lead to another form of idealist and therefore disembodiment. For Dufrenne this constitutes a noticeable weakness in Sartre's aesthetics, in spite of the latter's efforts to bring what is perceived with what is imagined together.

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<sup>8</sup> For Dufrenne,

'the being of the aesthetic object is not the being of an abstract signification. It is rather, the being of a sensuous thing which is realized only in perception' (ibid.), 218.

<sup>9</sup> The conception of ethical hermeneutics should invoke really a meta-ethical mode of inquiry. As A. C. Grayling puts it:

'Ethics is the study of theories about moral values, and the concepts we use in identifying and asserting them. An important distinction is required here: a theory which prescribes how we should live is called a "first-order" or "normative" morality. Reflective inquiry into assumptions, concepts, and claims of such first-order moralities is often called "metaethics" ' (A.C. Grayling, *Philosophy: A Guide through the Subject* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5.

Indeed, for Sartre the aesthetic is neither a mental representation nor a thing in itself; neither belonging to the psychological world nor to the real world.<sup>10</sup> The ‘real physical’ element (the paint, the bronze, or the video screen as a material) is negated by perception to give rise to the ‘unreal aesthetic’ element (the significance or what is represented). The work of art becomes an ‘analogon’ (the real as perceived, the colours, textures, or sounds), which is arranged in such a way that the spectator’s imagination makes it appear as a meaningful form. Aesthetic experience has then and certainly very much to do with a fortunate association between the perceived and the imagined, but it remains nonetheless a disembodying separation between the one and the other – the same separation that Merleau-Ponty sees happening between the ‘in-itself’ and the ‘for-itself’.<sup>11</sup> For Sartre the ‘essence’ of aesthetic experience is a matter of imagined subject-matter in its contingent relationship with perceived form. Any form aesthetically perceived is the mental recreated representation of some-thing that belongs to the objective world. A true phenomenological move would on the contrary acknowledge the embodied nature of the relationship between object and subject in aesthetic experience. Dufrenne’s approach for example is to conceive the referred object, whether real or ideal as being neutralised to the point that his ‘aesthetic object’ becomes bracketed. Thus, instead of letting imagination correspond with an external subject-matter for the experience to be meaningful, it is rather from the work of art itself that meaning emerges with the necessary presence of the perceiver. It would then be fair to talk about a subtle conjunction of ‘representation’ and ‘expression’, an ‘expressed meaning’ that is neither imagined, unreal, or represented.

In fact, Dufrenne himself is not truly faithful to the phenomenal nature of aesthetic experience. The very concept of ‘aesthetic object’ is a contradiction in terms, if the work of art aesthetically perceived is understood as being a

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<sup>10</sup> See Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Psychology of the Imagination* (trans. H. Barnes, London: Routledge, 1995). And for a critical point of view: Bossart, W. H. ‘Sartre’s Theory of the Imagination’, *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (January 1980).

<sup>11</sup> As Dufrenne puts it: ‘the relation between a real and an unreal thing cannot be the essentially contingent connection between the perceived and the imagined. The relation must be the connection between the sign and signification’ Dufrenne (1974, op. cit.), 203.

constituting part of an embodied experience. Objectifying approaches must be in tune with what is sought after, as much as any phenomenology must be in harmony with what is dealt with. In this sense the recent postmodernist argument against the foundational nature of phenomenology can only be justified when the latter is used for the wrong things, when it becomes a systematising abstraction. An ethical eclecticism for a concrete philosophy is of course what is here beginning to be drawn, echoing perhaps what Paul Royer-Collard and Victor Cousin amongst others attempted to do in another context in another time.<sup>12</sup> Previous examples of pre-conceived and conditioning frames of mind that make the experience of the moment of meaning in art possible or contingent in a disembodied manner, are clear cases of systematising abstractions. Another obvious example is psychologism. Figurality understood as lived, noticeable and therefore disruptive meaningfulness is one of the constituents of a particular type of experience, which in turn is always the experience 'of' something. This is an aspect that explanatory subjectivism such as psychologism can only ignore, simply because no account is taken of the 'thing perceived'. One ought to recognise that the subject's psyche remains a necessary and yet insufficient condition for the event of meaning in art to be understood.

When Merleau-Ponty maintains that philosophy should be concerned with description and not explanation or justification it is Kant's concept of 'a priori' that is targeted. But what is also questionable in the former's argument, is not to have acknowledged the appropriateness of a critical theory of the subject that lies in its ability to disclose the conditioning factors in our quest for objective meaning. Admittedly, for these factors not to become determinant one ought to start from the object in order to look into the subject, or, to put it differently, it is when the transcendental method becomes

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Royer-Collard and Victor Cousin were the main representatives with Théodore Jouffroy of the so-called eclectic movement in French philosophy in the first half of the nineteenth century. They were strongly influenced by François-Pierre Maine de Biran although the idea of 'choosing out' (in Old Greek *eklegein*) beneficial dimensions from various systems was fully developed by the formers. See for instance P. Royer-Collard, *Les Fragments Philosophiques de Royer-Collard* (Paris, 1913); V. Cousin *Fragments Philosophiques* (Paris, 1826); and *Du Vrai, du Beau et du Bien* (Paris, 1837); T. Jouffroy *Mélanges Philosophiques* (Paris, 1833); and *Nouveaux Mélanges Philosophiques* (Paris, 1842).

transcendentalism that a theory of the subject becomes inappropriate. As is well known, this last point constitutes one of the fundamental differences between Husserlian methodology and the Kantian critique.

No ethical eclecticism of course is possible without becoming aware of the particular ‘theoretical lens’ that we are using. In other words there would be two stages: reflexivity, and application. During the first stage the subject reflects on the ‘a priori’ conditions that make something be perceived as it is, and during the second stage the same subject applies the method according to its relevance. This is perhaps how a harmony between method of investigation and investigated object can be reached. The theoretical lens must be highlighted as a preconception that may or may not suit what is imported from the moment of meaningful form. If one is to objectify meaning in art, one ought to be aware of the implications of the corresponding subjectivity. How could for instance formalism be a relevant ‘lens’ that would do justice to the so-called figural experience when the latter implies a fusion of form and content? What would be the positive adequacy of structuralism when it comes to doing justice to the conception of moment of meaningful form, understood as disruption of a structured systems of signs? When critical, psychoanalytical, and historical explanations and analyses can provide useful objective accounts of the significance of art, they would be wrong to confine understanding to the preconceived specificity of their subjectivity by ignoring the ‘special motives’ behind. More paradoxically, this applies not only to accounts that tend to reduce the matter to the experiential nature of our relationship to meaning in the name of description, or even better phenomenologism, but also to recent attempts to systematise the deconstruction and therefore disclosure-by-negation of subjectivity itself. In all cases we are dealing with untimely forms of abstraction, which have forgotten the need to look at themselves in order to realise what they potentially miss in the Other. Any mode of ‘constitutive consciousness’, even the most unsuspected ones such as phenomenologism and deconstructionism should strive to recover their motives to let the imported meaning be considered. A subjectivism that reflects on its will to power ought to be ethical.

Once again it would be misleading to think that the need to bring to light the variety of theoretical lenses in use including the brain itself, would be justified in order to determine what could be known. Have we ever witnessed somebody wearing glasses, taking them off and looking at them in

order to figure out what can be seen through them? Such a situation is too absurd for words. It would however make perfect sense to look at the glasses to figure out the way things are seen. Formalism, political theory, or psychology, is a lens used with the intention to correct perceptual relationships, to focus on particular angles, or to make initially unsuspected dimensions appear. They all strive to retrieve themselves in what is perceived and create the same 'distance' between subject and object that Merleau-Ponty condemns. It goes without saying that the greater the distance the more corrective the lenses will be, and the more in need we will be to know how correcting they are and what are their modes of operating.

The case of the experience of the meaningful form in art highlights the problem. Regardless of how informative a disembodied theory of the subject can be, it should take care of the spatiotemporal difference that separates itself from the actual experience of meaning precisely in order to avoid the temptation of becoming determinant. The various frames of mind previously mentioned call for a critical philosophy of the subject, not because of their objective partiality, but because of their inability to grasp a priori the meaningful phenomenality or eventful dimension of the figural. Even Sartre's aesthetics, which ascribes to imagination the power to negate the material world for the mind and the analogon to meet contingently, can be accused of ignoring that vital moment of embodiment on which any subjective attitude depends.

Critical reflexivity is certainly required for the subject to be aware of its potentially projective nature, but also and above all of what it cannot grasp by means of objectification, bringing thus a vital ethical dimension into the question of how to think the subjective attitude. It goes without saying that the very notion of subjectivity entails its corresponding object of knowledge, and the one who undertakes a critique of the former is already outside the experience of the moment of meaningful form itself. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that there is only a difference in degree between the subjectivity involved in experience and the one at work in explanation or analysis – a point that perhaps Dufrenne could have made to justify the term 'aesthetic *object*' for something that is perceptually *experienced*. As a whole the question remains the same: a theory of the subject must be appropriate. When objectifying forms of subjectivity require critical reflexivity for ethical purposes with regard to the phenomenal, what may be called experiential

subjectivity asks for an account as close as possible to experience itself, i.e. a phenomenological description of what is happening on the side of the subject during the moment of meaningful form.

More concretely and at a methodological level, the subject imposes different frameworks when approaching the figural from various view-points. It is by understanding the motivations behind the subject's position that the particular nature of objective knowledge that may be established can be explained or analysed. The validity of such a stance seems however to be restricted to 'objectifying subjectivities', and it may well become irrelevant to understand the subject's attitude while experiencing artistic sense in all its disruptive and unexpected dimension.<sup>13</sup> In this light, a descriptive noetic approach would complete the task in a more faithful manner. The question is therefore not about the possibility of an explanatory theory of the subject, but its appropriateness, and subjectivism should thereby be replaced by an ethical theory of the subject.

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<sup>13</sup> The disruption applies to the breaking of evaluative choices. To experience a moment of meaningful form in an art gallery or a museum challenges our way of seeing things in our ordinary life. It makes a 'special case' out of certain aspects of the world that we take for granted. It 'brackets' certain elements such as medium, form, colour, expression, emotion, idea, appearance, and by doing so it renews and enriches our way of being in the world.

