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MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN PHENOMENOLOGY AND ART¹

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In a letter dated 12 January 1907, written to the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the philosopher Edmund Husserl presents a half-formed analogy between the artist and the phenomenologist. Husserl writes that both the artist and the phenomenologist, in their respective efforts to study the world, share the common attitude of indifference regarding the world's existence; they both experience the world as phenomena. Both the aesthetic and phenomenological intuitions, then, are marked by the departure from the “natural” attitude, the everyday ordinary attitude of taking objective reality for granted. Husserl concludes the thought by describing how the philosopher, with his observations, goes on to produce a critique of reason, whereas the artist simply gathers materials for his art.² This is where the comparison apparently ends.

¹ This is a revised version of a talk given at British Society of Aesthetics Conference in London, UK, September 2010. After presenting this paper, I discovered that Swedish philosopher Sven Olov Wallenstein recently translated the 1907 letter into English and also wrote an accompanying text. My work differs in that Wallenstein offers merely an exegesis of the analogy, whereas I point toward a kind of “metaphysicalization” of art. I would also like to thank Arnd Wedemeyer, Vid Simoniti, and an anonymous reader for their helpful criticism and comments.

² “Sie [Phänomenologie] fordert eine von der ‘natürlichen‘ wesentlich abweichende Stellungnahme zu aller Objektivität, die nahe verwandt ist derjenigen Stellung u. Haltung, in die uns Ihre Kunst als eine rein ästhetische hinsichtlich der dargestellten Objecte und der ganzen Umwelt versetzt.“ Husserl (1994), p. 133.

The import of this passage has always been understood in light of its poet recipient,³ and philosophical scholarship thus far appears to downplay the import of this passage.⁴ However, if we follow Husserl's remark in the letter and presume that the artist, armed with her special intuition that is analogous to the singularly penetrating intuition of the philosopher, goes on to produce art, then on what grounds can we exclude art from getting at the "meaning of the world phenomenon" as much as philosophical phenomenology does?⁵ My proposal here is to try to complete the analogy, to examine the workings of art in terms of Husserl's philosophy. In doing so, I will try to suggest, we can uncover important connections between art and phenomenology, and, in turn, begin to see art itself as a project akin to the Husserlian conception of philosophy.

Though his main project was the development of phenomenology, Husserl, from early on in the process of developing his phenomenology, also often engaged with aesthetics-related topics. In a lecture series given in the winter semester of 1904/5, in which the central question addressed is "Phantasy and Image Consciousness," we find a brief mention of what Husserl calls "aesthetic contemplation."⁶ Aesthetics in this and other early contexts is misleading for our purposes, for these discussions had little to do with art *per se*. Not surprisingly, for our scientist of perception, "aesthetic consciousness" has everything to do with perception; indeed, he defines and continues to define it as the awareness of the manner in which something appears.⁷ However, in the same lecture series, Husserl goes on to discuss another term, "phantasy,"⁸ a term that clarifies the particular fascination the artist holds for the phenomenologist. This mode of perception, in the ordinary sense, denotes some kind of mental ability, the ability to freely imagine unfettered by parameters of reality—in other words, what we might call the power of the imagination. Although here phantasy is presented in the service of the greater discussion on perception, namely phenomenology, this related faculty emerges as significant in its own right. Husserl begins by outlining the main

³ I am indebted to Arnd Wedemeyer for this insight.

⁴ Cf. Lories (2006) and Dastur (1991).

⁵ In the letter, where he makes the analogy, Husserl seems to use the terms 'phenomenology' and 'philosophy' interchangeably; he initially uses the term „Phänomenologie“ but in the course of the same paragraph, switches to „Philosophen“.

⁶ Husserl (2005), p. 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 461.

⁸ The word is *Phantasie* in German; philosopher John B. Brough, in his English translation, keeps the "ph" of the spelling to highlight how this term differs from ordinary fantasy. For this paper, I have adopted this orthographical idiosyncrasy.

features of the ordinary understanding of phantasy, and it is in this discussion that he arrives at the figure of the artist.

What interests us are phenomenological data understood as the foundations of an eidetic analysis that we are going to undertake. What interests us here, therefore, are intentional, or better, objectivating experiences – so-called “phantasy presentations,” often simply termed “presentations,” which we are also in the habit of apprehending under the ambiguous title of “phantasy activity”; for example, the experiences in which the artist sees his phantasy formations, or more precisely, that peculiar internal seeing itself or bringing to intuition of centaurs, heroic characters, landscapes, and so on, which we contrast to external seeing, to the external seeing that belongs to perception.⁹

It is in this ability that Husserl, three years even before his epistolary declaration with which we began, already recognizes what sets the artist apart. He believes that phantasy is particularly well developed in the artist, or better yet, that it is endemic to being an artist that one operates in phantasy.

Resonating with what he later writes to the poet, here Husserl takes the artist and her creative experience to exemplify the sort of “phenomenological data understood as the foundation of an *eidetic* analysis...” (my italics) of the “intentional” or “objectivating” experiences.¹⁰ The possibility of understanding phantasy as essentially a propaedeutic to phenomenology is secured by Husserl’s reiteration of these ideas in his definitive work, the text in which he first properly outlines his phenomenology, the *Ideas* of 1913. Here, he writes, “phantasy... can be so perfectly clear that it makes possible a perfect seizing upon essences and a perfect eidetic insight.”¹¹ Operating “eidetically,” this ability to bring something *immanently* into view will ease us into phenomenological fluency, as it is precisely what gets our mind out of the realm of concrete reality and into a realm where factual actuality is immaterial, the realm of pure ideation.

Such a realm is the domain of phenomenology because the bold project of phenomenology begins its attempt to reexamine and reestablish philosophy by first focusing on the nature of perception and consciousness, focusing in particular on “pure” consciousness. This distillation or “purity” is at the heart of phenomenology

⁹ Husserl (2005), pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹¹ Husserl (1982), p. 158.

and the phenomenological method—the phenomenological reduction. To properly capture every nuance of Husserl’s account of this reduction is beyond the scope of this paper, but for our purposes, we may focus on two aspects of his discussions: how this reduction relates phenomenology to the tradition of transcendental idealism and the implications for understanding phenomenology as a new, *critical* philosophy. This will allow us to come back to the question of art and ultimately, in light of the claims of phenomenology, as the analogy with which we began suggests, to come to understand art *as* philosophy.

Phenomenology begins by reformulating and then addressing the epistemological problem of how subjective psychological experience grasps actuality. To properly examine our experience, Husserl’s suggests that we exclude all that is external to our minds and examine cognition itself. The phenomenological reduction is an invitation to suspend our naïve belief in the “real” world, the world around us. This is the famous “bracketing” of mundane actuality. This is by no means a denial of the world’s existence, but simply the suspension of passing such judgments. Thus Husserl discovers what he calls the “intentional” structure of our consciousness: that reality is “not in itself something absolute... it has the essentiality of something which, of necessity, is only intentional, only an object of consciousness.”¹² In other words, we thusly discover that the world is “for” our consciousness. It is not difficult to see how phenomenology relates to the longer tradition of transcendental idealism, the tradition that came to understand the perceiving subject as the world-constituting subject. However, what is also at stake in Husserl’s project is the connection between the realm of ideas and the real, actual world outside of the subject.

This notion of world-constitution is vital to Husserl’s project but also complicates phenomenology’s reception. For him, phenomenology is only misunderstood if it is taken to be dealing purely with consciousness in the sense of immaterial idealism. However, trying to follow Husserl’s adamant claims, that his transcendental philosophy is not merely another idealism, leads to a paradox, as one of his students and later collaborator, Eugen Fink noticed: how can the empirical ego be, also at once, transcendental? To rephrase in perhaps more quotidian terms: how can someone be simultaneously an empirical, flesh and blood, subject while also being a subject in an immaterial sense, the transcendental subject, who “makes” the world possible at all, a world that “is” only for that transcendental subject? Indeed the very fact that this

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

paradox eludes satisfactory transcription is testament, in part, of the paradox itself as well as the difficulty Husserl faces, defending his phenomenology against accusations of idealism.

I mentioned earlier that we could consider phenomenology as a kind of critical philosophy and this could help us bring these problems further down to earth. By this I want to suggest that we pull phenomenology further away from the pitfalls of idealism, that we understand the phenomenological reduction as simply outlining a method for how we become critical about our everyday experiences. At the risk of diminishing the depth and breadth intended by Husserl when he developed his phenomenology, I am humbly suggesting that the “reduction” could perhaps be understood as a very trenchant “aha” moment. This is one way of making sense of the paradox Fink illustrates.

Husserl himself, toward the end of his 1913 *Ideas*, briefly mentions what he calls the “transcendental clue,”¹³ a notion that he develops further in later texts, particularly in his drafts for the encyclopedia Britannica entry on “Phenomenology” which he was asked to write in the late 1920s. He suggests that phenomenology begins, as it were, by one becoming aware of the transcendental problem, i.e. the problem of world-constitution. In light of this suggestion, the suggestion I am putting forth in what follows is to understand art as a, if not *the*, transcendental clue—the thing that jars our naïve natural mode and propels us into a phenomenological mode in which we realize that we are, while also being empirical subjects made of flesh and blood in a material world, transcendental subjects. In other words, experiencing art is a mode in which we achieve a profoundly critical view of our being in and experience of the world.

Here is one way to think about the connections between art and phenomenology. The kind of reflective mode that is at the heart of phenomenology, at the heart of the phenomenological reduction, shares a consequential correspondence with the kind of reflection generated in an aesthetic encounter. An artwork presents a particularly *puzzling* encounter. Husserl does address the apparent complexity of the perceptual experience in relation to representational art. He defines, for instance, what he calls the “image” consciousness (*Bildbewusstsein*) in this way: in the case of a representational work of art—Husserl takes the specific example of paintings—there appear to be many subjects, or at least what the subject is, is complicated. What we

¹³ *Ibid.*, §150

perceive, according to Husserl, is a complex involving as many as three objects: the physical image (the physical thing made of canvas, paint, etc.); the representing or depicting object (e.g. the *image-of* a vase with sunflowers); the presented or depicted object (e.g. the “actual” vase full of sunflowers).¹⁴ Clearly this is touching on issues of the complexity of an art object as compared with a straightforward everyday object. Of course, as the name suggests, Husserl’s image consciousness has to do, specifically, with how we perceive representational works of art. The discussion here is unrelated to the transcendental problem. However, Husserl is sensitive to the fact that there is something peculiar about art, even at this local level of representational art. Even in a diametrically opposite case, in the case of abstract painting, there is an intricate splitting of perceptual fields. There is a tension between the prominent material presence of the work and the perplexing “abstraction.” And one could say it is precisely this tension that makes the work thought provoking. However, as I will argue, it is not this *ostensible* perceptual puzzle that makes art in general so interesting, indeed critical, to phenomenology.

The radical wager contained in phenomenology is the notion of the transcendental sphere, specifically the notion that it is *concealed* within the empirical sphere. Husserl himself addresses the ostensible paradoxes and complications inherent to suggesting that there is this transcendental sphere, and as we have seen, his student Fink, further develops these concerns by specifically engaging with the problem of how the empirical ego can be at once also transcendental. Fink takes Husserl’s discussion further: while Husserl mentions simply that there are “motivations” that impel an investigation toward the ultimate encounter with the transcendental sphere, Fink makes the stronger claim that there are moments in which the transcendental sphere “flashes out.”¹⁵ It seems, then, that we can understand phenomenology and art to both provide this rupture-like experience, a shift or displacement (*Versetzung*) from our everyday.

If we return to Husserl’s privileging of the artist, we could argue that an art object, precisely by forcing us into its fictional, “phantasy,” world, forces our cognition to become aware of itself in a critical way. In a text from 1918, Husserl writes, “art is the realm of phantasy that has been given form...”¹⁶ and later, in one of the drafts for the aforementioned encyclopedia entry, Husserl goes so far as to say, through phantasy,

¹⁴ Husserl (2005), p. 21.

¹⁵ Fink and Husserl (1995), p. 34.

¹⁶ Husserl (2005), p. 616.

we are made aware of the fact that we are the constituting subjects of various worlds.¹⁷ Although the discussion here deals with the making of art and we are now interested in the reception of art, I believe that we can take Husserl's word and suggest a way in which even the non-artist, by way of being a phenomenologist or at least perceiving with phenomenological sensitivity perceives something as art (as kind of making of art, via how one perceives). This kind of perceptual appropriation suggests a way of completing Husserl's half-formed analogy. A brief thought experiment illustrates how this may occur.

Our case involves a kind of "found art," which is admittedly a limit case, but therefore all the more receptive to the possibility of very ordinary moments demonstrating some kind of phenomenological sensitivity. We are walking down a path, say, at a university campus and encounter a pile of wood. In ordinary circumstances, this pile of wood might have been placed here for a number of reasons: a storm, a gardener, a person who got bored, a old tree that fell and broke in a certain arrangement, etc. Also, normally, one would overlook this pile of wood and concentrate on staying on the path to whatever destination, or perhaps attend to untied shoelaces, or some other mundane activity. In contradistinction to this quotidian attitude, there might be an occasion in which this pile of wood suddenly becomes the focus of one's attention precisely because there is something peculiar about it. One may even jokingly say, look at this "art." Now, what is meant by this utterance? We can think of similar examples besides a pile of wood—it could have been a crushed can of soda, a new can, or bits of concrete. Even in this jocular mode, what is intended by this utterance is precisely that there is something peculiar or eye-catching about the arrangement. Certainly the history of aesthetics has much to say about this, but we are interested in the kind of perceptual event or experience that this utterance marks. It is as though one is jolted into focusing on the appearance of the wood—this would precisely be what Husserl calls the "aesthetic consciousness." But this particular attentiveness, we want to argue, is more than a mere sensitivity to the mode of appearance. Rather it seems that something like the constitution, in the transcendental sense, of the world flashes out. In noticing the pile of wood, suddenly something fundamental about it comes to the fore—the possibility of wondering *how* we came to cognize in the way that we did.

¹⁷ Husserl (1997), p. 169.

This example, though only a sketch, can help us to constellate the three points that can allow us to complete Husserl's half-explained analogy of phenomenology and art—imagination, eidetics, and transcendentalism. The pile of wood, as we have admitted, is a limit case; it was chosen in order to show that even this extremely mundane object (arguably “found art”) contains the power to ignite our imagination. We have seen the immense importance of the imagination for Husserl's phenomenology, but also via eidetics—the realm of pure cognition—to the later discussed transcendentalism. Realizing that we can be the variable subjects of every imaginary world we create, we are already given a glimpse of transcendental world-constitution. The pile of wood in being perceived by us as “art” has drawn us into its fiction and we now live, even for a moment, in its imagined world. This might be a stretch but, along these lines, we could also say that in deeming something an art object (whether on the part of the artist during the process of creation or the viewer in the encounter), an essential critique of cognition is already in play. And because the existential parameters of the “real” world become irrelevant, one is operating with pure consciousness.

In trying to “understand” art, as some would say, we are essentially involved in a critique of our perceptual experience, precisely due to the nature of an aesthetic encounter. Due to this encounter, we begin to wonder, *how* is it that we see such and such feature or dab of color? Art may mirror or mock life, but above all it makes us *question* life. It pushes us out of the natural attitude. The encounter with the pile of wood may intensify our curiosity about the constitution of the wood, the path—simply by providing a perceptual rupture, and momentarily rendering the actual world uncertain and irrelevant, the possibility of questioning life emerges. At last, we can properly suggest that art be understood as Husserl's transcendental “clue.” The motivation toward the transcendental is hinted at within the empirical sphere.

This correlation between art and phenomenology, for which I have been arguing, has a twofold effect. It sketches the beginnings of a complex account of the role of fiction, imagination and free phantasy. And this in turn, as I have emphasized, facilitates entry into the phenomenological mode. Now we can ask, what does this properly suggest about the status of phenomenology, as a critique of cognition it first set out to be? Given the kind of investigation phenomenology is, it makes sense that something like the imagination should be emphasized. It is an invitation to untangle critical thinking from empirical reality precisely in order to facilitate turning its regard toward the fundamental issue of how there is this reality at all. The turning of the

regard toward mental acts cannot itself be a mental act of the same genus precisely if it is to be a phenomenological regard. Everything is put on hold except for that seeing itself—precisely what Husserl means by the empty looking (of the empty Ego). What comes into focus is the *pure* cognition. And we have come to understand this “purity” to mean a pure ideation, precisely due to Husserl’s emphasis on the importance of imagination.

We can now appreciate Husserl’s claim that the transcendental problem of world-constitution is already available to us even in our pre-phenomenological state, because we are coming close to it whenever we create imaginary worlds and recognize ourselves as the constituting subjects of these worlds.¹⁸ Husserl, by privileging art in the way that he does in his letter, not only highlights phenomenology’s particular relationship to reality, which is arguably his main concern, but also suggests a way in which the kinks of phenomenology might be resolved from without, from art. Art is an investigation in its own right and not in competition with philosophy, of world-constitution.

Phenomenology presents a convincing case that the world is truly more than meets the eye. Although it begins as a means of first properly reformulating and then addressing the epistemological problem of how subjective psychological experience grasps actuality, it is not difficult to see how the examination of such a question has implications reaching beyond the domain solely of the theory of knowledge. Cognition is the fundamental pathway between oneself and the world. The concern, then, with the nature of cognition can easily grow into the farther-reaching concern about the condition of the world, of one’s being in the world, and so on. The particular urgency, then, of proposing a method or philosophical practice such as phenomenology is emphasized from its earliest presentations.

The radical claim of Husserl’s phenomenology is that “the” world not only “is” for the subject, as has been argued by the tradition of transcendental idealism—the world “is” in a distinctly *non*-idealist sense while also being something other than a purely spatio-temporally extensive world. Husserl wants to claim that the sense of the world is given to us by our own consciousness. However, because phenomenology takes as its basis pure consciousness, it “necessarily arrives at this entire complex of

¹⁸ Elliott (2004) is an excellent resource for more extensive discussions on the role of the imagination in phenomenology.

transcendental problems in the specific sense, and on that account deserves the name of transcendental phenomenology."¹⁹ The transcendental issue is to make intelligible the correlation between constituting subjectivity and constituted objectivity. As such, phenomenology makes the task for itself of rethinking philosophy itself. The natural world was never annihilated in the phenomenological process, indeed, what it is, was given a deeper sense. Its substance was substantiated. The world is not an idea in our heads, and the encounter with art grounds our imagination in the critical sense, revealing itself as a transcendental clue.

Through pursuing the connection between phenomenology and aesthetics, it seems we have uncovered an important motivation for considering the art of philosophy, and in turn, art *as* philosophy.

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¹⁹ Husserl (1982), p. 209.

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