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Bergson and Levinas on the Time of Art

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Katherine Graham

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Katherine Graham

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts Degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

**Edward S. Casey – Thesis Advisor
Distinguished Professor
Department of Philosophy**

**Megan Craig – Second Reader
Professor
Department of Philosophy**

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

Abstract of the Thesis

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Katherine Graham

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Emmanuel Levinas and Henri Bergson have two very different approaches to the topic of aesthetics. Yet both have made unique contributions to the philosophy of art, and, specifically, to questions surrounding the temporal nature of art. This project attempts to read these two thinkers together over the question of the time of art. In doing so, this paper aims to discover whether art has its own kind of time, distinct from both the objectively measurable time favored by science, and the variable, subjective time vividly described by both Levinas and Bergson. This exploration will also seek to discover what, if indeed art is found to occupy a distinct temporal zone, artworks can tell us about existence more generally.

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1. General Overview on the Intersections of Time and Art in Bergson and Levinas

Time can be a tricky thing. Our experience of time does not always necessarily correspond with the way we think about time, or so contend Levinas and Bergson. That is, we often tend to assume, as is suggested by science, that time is co-extensive with space, that it is a homogeneous medium, and that it is objectively measurable. This is also known as “clock-time.” In opposition to this, Levinas and Bergson both suggest that this view captures nothing of the reality of subjective time as lived in experience. Levinas is interested in discontinuous time, whereas Bergson is insistent upon the absolute continuity of time. We will look into these two distinct conceptions of time in more detail, but the important thing to note at the moment is that these two thinkers’ different conceptions of time come to a head over the topic of art.

Though Levinas was not primarily a thinker of time, he made some very strong claims about it, and specifically in relation to the threat that art poses to its continuity, in his short, dense essay on aesthetics, “Reality and Its Shadow,” published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1948. On the other hand, time was one of Bergson’s primary themes. His views on the matter, as laid out in his early work *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, originally written as a dissertation in 1888 and published one year later in book form, permeate all his later writing. He does not, however, like Levinas offer a direct discussion on art of any real length, but he does have an aesthetics nevertheless. For in many ways Bergson’s thought precedes in a manner that reflects his philosophy, as a progression whereby each new idea flows out of and contains the previous while equally informing the next, almost as though it were the

elaboration of one long thought with specific plot points along the way. It is from this that we must draw out and piece together Bergson's remarks on art, that we may come to see his compelling perspective on the matter.

Again, the collision between Bergson and Levinas relative to their respective views on time is brought into focus over the topic of art. In "Reality and Its Shadow," Levinas plainly states that since Bergson, the continuity of time has been accepted as the essence of duration, but that really, an instant can stop. Through his analysis of art Levinas attempts to demonstrate this, and further, not only does art prove there are no guarantees of the continuousness of time, but art itself is just this stoppage of time, an instant frozen outside of time. Is Levinas right? The matter is left open and unresolved. So we must look to Bergson's philosophy on both time and art in order to see what response may be in order. It is our view that, in taking this confrontation as a starting point and reading Bergson and Levinas together on the question of time in art, or art in time, or rather art-time, that we will uncover far more agreement between the two than ever it seemed. This may lead us to find a third-way between the two viewpoints, which is to say, to discover something new about art and temporality. Might art have its own unique kind of time, and if so, what is it like, and what does it have to show us about existence more generally?

2. Levinas on the Movement of Art Outside of Time

In “Reality and Its Shadow,” Levinas claims that art belongs neither to the order of revelation or creation, does not shed light on anything but rather obscures, and promotes disengagement over responsible action. He writes, “The most elementary procedure of art consists in substituting for the object its image. Its image, and not its concept. A concept is the object *grasped*, the intelligible object. Already by action we maintain a living relationship with a real object; we grasp it, we conceive it. The image neutralizes this real relationship, this primary conceiving through action.”¹ On one level Levinas is speaking out against the doctrine of 'art for art's' sake, which he claims places art on a pedestal above reality and affords the artist a princely status, absolving one of his duties to his fellow man.

However, the break the image inserts in our grip on the world results in a much more serious disengagement with the world than it being a simple matter of art having some sort of lofty status. Levinas asks us if indeed all disengagement with the world is a form of going outward, going beyond, towards something like the Platonic realm. Or, rather, “Can one not speak of a disengagement on the hither side – of an interruption of time by a movement going on the hither side of time, in its 'interstices'?”² We can see, then, that indeed this is going to be much more serious. For Levinas, going beyond is a movement directed at communicating with ideas and striving toward understanding. Art stands directly opposed to this movement by casting us into a realm of obscurity and darkening the horizon of meaning. Art is non-dialectical, its aim just one of *not*

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1989), 138.

² *Ibid.*, 132.

understanding. How so? By not actually referring to anything real that the intellect may lay hold of, and by pointing away from reality.

As Levinas puts it, “Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow.”³ The way this actually happens has to do with how, as stated above, the most basic procedure of art is to substitute in the place of something an image of it. This, as we will see below, is not limited to the plastic arts, but holds true for novels, theatre, and cinema as well. The image stands in lieu of the object, but no conceptual accompaniment attains to it. Because it offers nothing for our mental powers to engage with, our relationship to it is founded in passivity. Art imposes itself upon us, or put another way, we do not consent to it. This means for Levinas that all images are musical, and we should pause here to elaborate in what sense.

According to Levinas, because an image does not engender a conception, like science does for example, we do not bring any initiative to it. He invokes the term rhythm to illustrate what he means, but clarifies that rhythm here does not mean what we commonly think of as something like an internal order governing the poetic, so much as the way the poetic order affects us. By poetic order Levinas is referring to those “closed wholes whose elements call for one another like the syllables of a verse, but do so only insofar as they impose themselves on us, disengaging themselves from reality.”⁴ And they impose themselves on us regardless of whether we choose to assume them or not, which means that rather than entering into an agreement with the rhythmic order of the poem, our lack of consent becomes inverted into an involuntary participation.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Thus, “Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative, or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it. The subject is part of its own representation. It is so not even despite itself, for in rhythm there is no longer a oneself, but rather a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity.”⁵ In order to conceive of this we can think of it quite literally, like swaying to the music, or taping our foot, literally unintentionally, to the beat of a song. We are acting automatically in these instances, acting despite ourselves, and this is the way in which we become caught up and swept off by rhythm, and the way in which it puts to sleep consciousness’s active powers, reverting them into an involuntary participation.

Again, while Levinas acknowledges that rhythm holds a privileged place in music (where it achieves a total deconceptualization of reality in that sound is the quality most detached from the source it emanates from), he insists all images are nevertheless likewise musical. This is because images function similarly to music by sweeping away our conscious powers of restraint and nowise offering up to us anything for conceptually based thought to engage with. The musicality of images is therefore based on the neutralization of the intellect via the detachment of images from the world of real objects actively grasped. In order, however, to understand just how this procedure works, we still have to discern just why it is that concepts never accompany images, which is to rejoin our previous line of inquiry into the unreality introduced by an image.

This is to ask: how is it that an object, through its representation as an image, is converted into something other than itself, namely a non-object? For one, Levinas says an image does not stand for things in the same way as a symbol, sign, or similar signifier.

⁵ Ibid., 132-133.

This is because art's mode of reference is totally unique to it. Images refer to their objects by resemblance. This establishes a very different mentality in us regarding images, as opposed to signs, in the manner in which thought attempts to move through them to the content they direct us to behind. After all, signs are purely transparent, and in no way count for themselves. Contrarily, an image does count for itself, but not in the sense that it is an independent reality that merely resembles whatever its original was. Rather, it constitutes a sort of contingent reality, at best, and a netherworld, at worst.

For we should take resemblance "not as the result of a comparison between an image and the original, but as the very movement that engenders the image. Reality would not be only what it is, what it is disclosed to be in truth, but would be also its double, its shadow, its image."⁶ To understand how something can be not only what it is but also its image, we can start with ourselves, for this applies to us as well. We appear. We are what we are, but we also wear our own face. We are always both ourselves and our image, and this relationship between ourselves and our image is resemblance. Put another way, we resemble ourselves.

In this way, resemblance functions on a deep level in the world. However, the case of images is different from our own personal form of self-resemblance in that images do not stand for things, do not resemble a real being behind them, like our faces do. In fact, they perform precisely the opposite function. Images do refer to their objects by resemblance, and in art, images are represented. But here the representation is not at all a re-presenting the object so much as a signifying of its absence. The elements perceived in a painting for example, areas of color, chunks of paint, are like what Levinas

⁶ Ibid.

calls the 'old garments' of the represented object. They serve only to insist on the absence of the thing, which must be absent in order for the work to be present in the first place.

So a man depicted in a painting, or a classical Greek statue, serves not just to refer us to a thing through its resemblance to it, which is already an impoverished mode of referral, but it also serves to point out that the thing it is meant to refer to, a man, is not there. Whatever reality some thing may have is rendered meaningless once it is represented. It is as though the object of an image is actually dissolved in the painting or, as Levinas puts it, a thing becomes “disincarnated in its own reflection. The painting then does not lead us beyond a given reality, but somehow to the hither side of it.”⁷ It is in this regard that art functions as a sort of symbol in reverse. A symbol stands for something, whereas art stands for no-thing.

Thus images perform a sort of double-binding on reality. Images of represented objects still refer to their objects, but to their non-presence. Our mode of conceiving through action is here stopped dead in its tracks. We do not grasp the object. There is not a one-to-one relationship taking place, as is the case with symbols, but a doubling of things. There are the real versions of things, which exist properly in illuminated reality, and then there are the images of things. Once these images are represented, the link between an image and its referent is severed, inverted into a pronouncement of the very lack of the thing. Thus represented images give us nothing of reality, but only of its flipside, its shadow. Thus, “the painting then does not lead us beyond the given reality, but somehow to the hither side of it.”⁸ Yet as reversed a symbol as art may be, it still manages to penetrate all the way to our inner lives.

⁷ Ibid., 137.

⁸ Ibid., 136.

For while Levinas refers to the binding or doubling up of reality by its own image as reality's shadow, he insists this shadow nevertheless finds its way to the light and to thought itself. For, as was discussed above, everything bears its own image on its face, all of reality, indeed all of being. Non-truth is not some leftover of truth with no real, proper place in being, but is characteristic of being itself, insofar as there are images, and thus resemblances, in the world. Which there are. "The sensible is being insofar as it resembles itself, insofar as, outside of its triumphal work of being, it casts a shadow, emits that obscure and elusive essence, that phantom essence which cannot be identified with the essence revealed in truth."⁹

Therefore, though an image is essentially a neutralized version of an object, it is not recognized independently as such, and then subsequently determined to differ from a sign or symbol *because* it resembles its original, but rather the neutralization enacted by images *is just this resemblance*. But then this is not the end of the story, for things are not looking all that grim yet. So far, Levinas has basically just presented us with some strange ways that art produces a class of things which have no meaningful referent and so form only a shadow of reality. Yes, there is an ethical challenge put to art in that it does not promote meaningful engagement with the world, but the possibility that it could has not been entirely foreclosed on just yet.

We are yet to see just what characteristic of art is so unpleasant that Levinas uses words like terrifying and horrifying to describe it. We are inquiring about time here, and this is just what it comes down to. In the final portion of Levinas's essay, we see that the consequences of the tendency of images, through representation, to bring something

⁹ Ibid., 137.

unreal into the world, find their ultimate end in time. Art, we find out, occupies a different temporal dimension than everyday things in the world, and it isn't pretty.

Actually, it is rather inhumane. Levinas calls it the *Meanwhile*.

Classical Greek statuary aimed at ideal forms. It went for perfection. But it was futile. No matter what level of perfection a statue achieves, it can never cover over itself entirely. "The insurmountable caricature in the most perfect image manifests itself in its stupidity as an idol. The image *qua* idol leads us to the ontological significance of its unreality. This time the world of being itself, the very *existing* of a being, is doubled up with a semblance of existing."¹⁰ Now we are getting serious, as it becomes a question of the very resemblance of existence itself. And Levinas suggests that to say an image is an idol is to also to say that, though as we saw art sweeps us up in its rhythmicity, in the final analysis, every image is plastic, every artwork equivalent to a statue. In what sense? In the way in which artworks stop time, or rather delay time behind itself. For this is the ultimate way in which art seals things off from the life world.

A statue, according to Levinas, realizes the paradox of an instant in so far as it perpetually endures but with no hope for a future. Its duration is not really an instant in the sense of an infinitesimally small elemental of duration, or a moment of duration, and neither is it a single instant reproduced over and over at every instant of duration. Rather, it has its own unique quasi-eternal duration. And this does not have only to do with the physicality of the artwork as a thing that endures permanently, in a museum for example.

As Levinas explains it

Within the life, or rather the death, of a statue, an instant endures infinitely:
eternally Laocoon will be caught up in the grip of serpents; the Mona Lisa will

¹⁰ Ibid.

smile eternally. Eternally the future announced in the strained muscles of Laocoon will be unable to become present. Eternally, the smile of the Mona Lisa about to broaden will not broaden. An eternally suspended future floats around the congealed position of a statue like a future forever to come.¹¹

And so it has a life, it was given a life by the artist, but it is a life that cannot go past the instant it is in. It will never reach its own future which looms just ahead of it. The artwork undergoes a certain death in completion whereby its life, reduced to that of an eternal, immobile instant, begins. It is neither totally dead nor properly alive; it's like a zombie. Its life is lifeless. And the worst part is, it can never complete the task of taking on a present, because it can never take on the fundamental characteristic of a present, which is to pass, to fade away.

Because it cannot take on a present, the artwork's instant is anonymous and impersonal, and because it is impotent to force the future, the artwork's pseudo-present is fate itself. For fate, says Levinas, has no place in life. Neither does the work of art, as that which cannot act, cannot achieve a second and final death, and can never attain a future. This is the tragic and nightmarish quality which attends to the work of art, the horrible nature of its existence. Levinas writes, "And here too we should compare art with dreams: the instant of the statue is a nightmare. Not that the artist represents being crushed by fate – beings enter their fate because they are represented. They are enclosed in their fate but just this is the artwork, an event of darkening of being, parallel with its revelation, its truth."¹²

This is the way in which art represents a falling movement out of time and into its hither side. This is also why even though it appears that time is introduced into images in

¹¹ Ibid., 138.

¹² Ibid., 139.

the case of the non-plastic arts, such as music, movies, and literature, they do not actually break the fixity of images. Characters in a novel are still subject to this same fate, as they will act out the same things indefinitely. This is not due to the narrative, a contingent fact exterior to the characters, but due to the fact that just like images, their being resembles itself, thus doubling upon and immobilizing itself. Therefore the characters in novels are like prisoners within them, as their history continues to go on but with no progress made toward a future. What takes place in a novel, then, or in the theater, brings about a situation exactly akin to that of the plastic arts, to the image. This fixity is totally different from that of concepts according to Levinas, which offer reality to our mental powers and initiate life. We will return to Levinas's conception of concepts a bit later, but let us now conclude on the temporality or lack thereof of belonging to works of art.

Summing up, Levinas writes, "Since Bergson it has become customary to take the continuity of time to be the very essence of duration. . . . We on the contrary have been sensitive to the paradox that an instant can stop. The fact that humanity could have provided itself with art reveals in time the uncertainty of time's continuation and something like a death doubling the impulse of life."¹³ Levinas likens it to Niobe's punishment (as we recall, in ancient Greek mythology Niobe was punished for being prideful by having all her sons and daughters killed by Apollo and Artemis, respectively, so she wept and wept and eventually was turned into stone and continues crying to this day. She is a stone that weeps eternal). Thus art is the petrification of a single instant in the very heart of duration.

¹³ Ibid., 140.

Now, is this true? Or is there perhaps something more to Bergson's notion of time that complicates the matter far beyond the way Levinas presents it? In order to know, we have to begin by examining Bergson's ideas¹⁴ about time to come to see just what Levinas is arguing against and how it plays back on Levinas's claims. Secondly, we will have to look to what role art plays in Bergson's philosophy in order to draw out some conclusions over this whole question of the nature of art-time.

3. Bergson's Approach to Time and an Investigation into his Aesthetics

It takes a very different approach to address the topic of art in Bergson than in Levinas. For as has been mentioned, while Levinas is very pointed and direct in his remarks on the topic, Bergson offers no such similarly concise discussion on the matter. Though his early work "Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" offers some artistically minded reflection, most of the work remains to be done on our part to uncover what is there about the experience, nature and place of art for Bergson. For there is definitely a lot there, enough to lead Susanne Langer, for example, to assert that Bergson is "the artist's philosopher *par excellence*."¹⁵ But again, Bergson's aesthetics are bound up with his thought on the whole, so we would do well to begin with his conception of time and work it out as we move along.

¹⁴ There is a great deal of difficulty surrounding ways to appropriately discuss what Bergson has to say about time. For it is always misleading to use phrases like 'Bergson's concept of duration' or his 'ideas about time' because for Bergson we do not come to know what he is talking about through intellection, but rather through intuition, something to keep in mind.

¹⁵ Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*, (New York: Scribner, 1953), 114-115. It is important to note that Langer meant this literally, that Bergson is an artist's philosopher and not a philosopher of art.

It is in his early work *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, originally written as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Paris in 1888 and published in book form the following year, that Bergson really lays down the foundations for all his later thought. It is here that we are presented with Bergson's profound notion of duration and with his initial diagnosis of our tendency to confuse the unextended with the extended, and thus to think of space and time as mixed together when in reality they are separate and distinct. Thus it is from working through this early work that allows one to most fully grasp the claims in Bergson's significantly later book *Creative Evolution*, where the fullest expression of what we hope to show serves to complicate Levinas's assertions emerges. So what about time and space then are we failing to see?

In the preface to *Time and Free Will*, Bergson writes that, "We necessarily express ourselves by means of words and we usually think in terms of space."¹⁶ This is a way of going about things that is important for practical, social life, and is necessary for science. However, it also inevitably results in language rendering the same discontinuity between our mental states as we do for material objects in space. This is an inaccurate rendering of reality that is nothing more than what we consider common sense, again for practical purposes, but which ignores what Bergson calls the 'natural attitude.' To overcome it, we have to reassess the mixed up notion handed down by Kant of time and space as co-extensive. If this separation does not take place, then everything can be measured mathematically, by science's objective "clock-time" which we remarked upon in our introduction, and subjective states would possess little legitimacy outside this.

¹⁶ Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F.L. Pogson, (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), ix.

Specifically, if time and space were indeed mixed up such as we think of in an everyday way, then our changing psychic states, which of course vary over time, would also vary spatially (i.e. more or less of a feeling, a common, but ultimately misleading way of speaking as Bergson will demonstrate), and therefore possess an extensive character that is quantifiably measurable. But conscious states do not admit of measure. Bergson wants to show that we do not experience psychic states by matters of degree, variably up and down a scale of magnitudes, but as change, as juxtaposed differentiation. Thus the time of consciousness does not occupy a unified homogeneous medium but its different states, though successive, remain heterogeneous. Bergson describes this as a qualitative multiplicity. Grasping the nature of this multiplicity, how it is truly a more accurate assessment of our psychic lives, and how Bergson is able to demonstrate it, is therefore key to understanding duration.

The best way to go about this is to begin, as Bergson does, with the intensity of psychic states. For with psychic states, as mentioned above, we readily go about thinking that we feel more or less sad, more or less happy, more or less anxious, etc. If we can grasp that what we do not feel more or less of the same thing, but an all together new feeling at every instant, we can come to terms with our passage through various psychic states as a qualitative rather than quantitative progress. Where we think we experience the growth and diminution of conscious states, in reality we experience temporal heterogeneity as a multiplicity. This holds for sensations, feelings, efforts, and all manner of conscious states both self-sufficient and related to an external cause. However, Bergson suggests that intensity is easier to define in terms of self-sufficient states.

Here we encounter 'states of the soul' as Bergson calls them, such as joy, sympathy, desire, sorrow, and aesthetic emotion. A desire, for example then, may begin modest, and then slowly become a deep passion, spreading little by little, permeating a bigger number of psychic elements until suddenly it colors everything, and nothing strikes you any longer in the same way as it did before. Having a crush on someone is a good example of this. But of course reflective consciousness abhors this because it always wants clean-cut distinctions, things that are easily expressible, and things with well-defined outlines, easily perceivable in space. This is why it will suggest that a desire will have gone up a scale of magnitudes when what is really going on is change, change, and more change in the quality of the feeling.

The feeling of pity also provides a great example of the way in which what seems to be a quantitatively increasing feeling is really a passage through different and unique states, or in Bergson's terms, an increasing intensity as qualitative progress. In pity, we first put ourselves in the place of others, feeling their pain, but we also feel a natural aversion to pain, so then we feel a need to help out our fellow man. But true pity really consists not in our fear of pain, but in our desire of it. This is because in situations where we pity, we feel as though Nature is committing some great injustice, and we do not want to be seen as complicit with her, so we aspire downwards, and this ultimately results in a feeling of humility. The reason this is such a good example then is because really, none of these emotions has a totally direct relation to its neighbor, but on the whole constitute pity. Thus is the psychic differentiation at the root of the qualitative progress of a feeling.

Aesthetic emotion provides another, and Bergson suggests the best, example. In aesthetic emotion it may seem as though the progression of new elements increase the

magnitude of our fundamental emotion when in reality it is the very nature of the feeling that is changing. Crucial to all of this is the way in which psychic states interpenetrate one another and thereby the way in which each new state contains the previous one, ad infinitum. And so each successive state is entirely new and is heralded by its predecessor just as it heralds its successor. To understand this, we can look to Bergson's simple and wonderfully illustrative example of the feeling of grace. It is worthwhile to here reproduce Bergson's remarks in full here. He writes

At first it is only the perception of a certain ease, a certain facility in the outward movements. And as those movements are easy which prepare the way for others, we are lead to find a superior ease in the movements which can be foreseen, in the present attitudes in which future attitudes are pointed out and, as it were, prefigured. If jerky movements are wanting in grace, the reason is that each of them is self-sufficient and does not announce those which are to follow. If curves are more graceful than broken lines, the reason is that, while a curved line changes its direction at every moment, every new direction is indicated in the proceeding one. Thus the perception of ease in motion passes over into the pleasure of mastering the flow of time and of holding the future in the present.¹⁷

Additionally, these movements subjected to musical accompaniment would allow us to anticipate even better yet the movements of a dancer and so to feel almost as though we control them. The regularity of the rhythm and the patterns in a composition open a channel of communication between us and the dancer and as our anticipatory powers grow stronger, act like invisible threads by which we imagine we control his or her movements. Now a type of physical sympathy has become present, and in analyzing the pleasure of this sympathy, one finds that it derives from a perceived affinity with moral sympathy (recalling the feeling of pity and the progression of simple states which constitute the fundamental emotion). Thus it is this final stage, which the previous stages

¹⁷ Ibid., 11-12.

have merged into after having greased the wheels for it so to speak, which lies at the heart of grace's attractiveness.

So here we have another example of an increasing intensity, this time of aesthetic feeling, resolved into a number of different feelings, “each one of which, already heralded by its predecessor, becomes perceptible in it and then completely eclipses it. It is this qualitative progress which we interpret as a change of magnitude, because we like simple thoughts and because our language is ill-suited to render the subtleties of psychological analysis.”¹⁸ This qualitative progress operates in a similar way as it does for deep-seated psychic states when it comes to sensations, both affective and representational.

With these we typically render a similarly illegitimate translation of the unextended into the extended and mistake quality for quantity, often by associating the intensity of a sensation with the magnitude or quantity of its cause. Because they track along similar paths, no in-depth analysis of the conscious states that involve physical symptoms need go on here, so long as from the examples examined above we are able to grasp that increasing intensity of psychic states have no meaningful spatial relation. Concluding on the matter, Bergson writes, “The idea of intensity is thus situated at the junction of two streams, one of which brings us the idea of extensive magnitude from without, while the other brings us from within, in fact from the very depths of consciousness, the image of an inner multiplicity.”¹⁹ This inner multiplicity, which again every psychic state, be it self-sufficient or related to an external cause, consists in and which is always only qualitative, is, again, crucial to Bergson's notion of duration.

¹⁸ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹ Ibid., 173.

We might here ask, if conscious states are varied but non-measurable, what then is a non-numerical multiplicity anyway? According to Bergson, a number is simultaneously a collection of units and a single thing. Its unity is that of a sum, a synthesis of its parts which can be considered separately and individually. However, this idea of number implies more than the mere representation of itself and its units. A number is not just a collection of units, but a collection of identical units (or at least units presumed to be identical in the act of counting them). Bergson suggests we think of a flock of sheep. When we want to know how many sheep there are, we de-emphasize their individual characteristics in favor of what is common to them in order to answer not what are all these individual sheep like, but how many of these things, sheep, are there? (“We place ourselves at two very different points of view when we count the soldiers in a battalion and when we call the roll.”²⁰)

So in one sense a number implies a multiplicity of like units. Yet they still must differ from each other in some regard, or else they would merge into one, and it would be impossible to enumerate them. This necessary element of differentiation is spatial, that is, that each sheep occupies its own position in space, thus they form a flock. Even if we depart from the actual sheep and focus only on the idea of the sheep, we find that on the one hand we have to hold them all in mind in one image, placing them next to each other in ideal space, or we think of a single sheep fifty times over. But picturing the sheep individually and successively would still never get us to the idea of fifty sheep, but only of one. For it is necessary in order for the number to continue increasing that we hold in

²⁰ *Time and Free Will*, 76.

mind the previous images and set them beside each new unit we picture, and “it is in space that such a juxtaposition takes place and not in pure duration.”²¹

We can assert that 12 is half of 24 without thinking either number. But as soon as we do want to picture number in general to ourselves, not just figures or words, we rely on extended images. We typically fail to see this because we tend to count in time rather than space, as in if we count from 1 to 50, we tend to think we have counted only in duration, and while we may have counted moments of duration, it will only have been by means of points in space. For as Bergson writes, “It is certainly possible to perceive in time, and in time only, a succession which is nothing but a succession, but not an addition, i.e. a succession which culminates in a sum.”²² So while in reaching a sum, we take in a series of different units, each must remain in passing to the next, as though in a waiting room, to be added to those to follow. There are no waiting rooms in duration, where successive moments of time have a life wholly independent of space.

Every idea of number implies a visual image in space. Or, put slightly differently, space is the material the mind uses to build up number. We take things in space, units with distinct outlines, and isolate them only to re-join them with others, from whence they can be added or divided, broken up in any way. Again, we can think of the example of a flock of sheep, homogeneous yet spatially distinct. All things in space are essentially like this. For their commonality is not that they are all sheep, but rather it is their very materiality. All material things are localized in space. In this regard we can only consider their multiplicity to be quantitative. Because things in space are juxtaposed (in space, itself a homogenous medium), they are enumerable. Units in space can therefore

²¹ Ibid., 77.

²² Ibid., 79.

be added or broken up because we are able to perceive their multiplicity simultaneously. But this is not the only kind of multiplicity there is.

There are, to be precise, two types of multiplicity according to Bergson. Conscious states are multiple in an entirely different way than material objects which, as just discussed, can be counted in space. For conscious states are, as we saw, unextended and non-juxtaposed. Because they are not in space we cannot count them quantitatively, and they do not add up to anything, in the sense of a sum or totality. They are total at every moment. Psychic states do not grow and diminish, but rather change. Each new state contains the previous one just as it itself will be contained by its successor. Again recalling the example of the feeling of pity, there is not one psychic state traversing an extensity as it grows more intense, but rather a sequence of totally heterogeneous states in a progression of successive interpenetration which is, as it must be, a purely qualitative process. This is a process of unfolding which is not just emblematic of characteristic feelings or sensations, but of the general multiplicity of all conscious states.

If we think that conscious states are somehow set side-by-side each other like a discrete multiplicity, this is only because reflective consciousness is retroactively imposing a form of spatial representation onto our psychic lives in order to lay hold of it for scientific purposes for example. It has nothing to do with pure duration, and, though perhaps a practical one, is what we might call an artifice of thought. For if psychic states really were side-by-side, distinct and enumerable, then human time would be nothing *but* space. In reality, pure duration – opposed to the abstract, artificially constructed conception of “clock-time” – is an unceasing flow, a processes of continual becoming. Vividly, Bergson describes attempts to make extensity out of duration and conceive time

as a homogeneous medium as expressing only the ghost of space haunting reflective consciousness.

“Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assume when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former state.”²³ There is no real separation between former and present states apart from artificial constructions of thought because of the flow and permeation of psychic states into one another. Feelings, sensations, ideas, all move in a succession without distinction. Every state of consciousness contains within it each previous state it has passed through, and this informs the uniqueness of every moment of duration. A profoundly significant conclusion to be drawn from this, which we will explore in more depth below, is that one cannot therefore ever pass through the same conscious state twice. And so pure duration is radically heterogeneous, it is continuous, and it unfolds temporally as an unceasing becoming.

As was mentioned earlier, *Time and Free Will* is really where Bergson puts forth his philosophy, or at least the core of it, and his later work can be seen not so much to further develop it as to apply its themes to new problems. *Creative Evolution*, the extremely successful book which ushered in an era of frenzied interest in Bergson’s work, is just such an example of this. This has a lot to do with the need for the above in-depth analysis of duration. We, however, will primarily be focusing on the first part of the first chapter because it is here that Bergson makes some of his most fully formed, powerful, often elegant, and for our purposes applicable, remarks on the matter.

²³ Ibid., 100.

The opening lines of the book read, “The existence of which we are most assured and which we know best is unquestionably our own, for every other object we have notions which may be considered external and superficial, whereas, of ourselves, our perception is internal and profound. What, then, do we find? In this privileged case, what is the precise meaning of the word 'exist'?”²⁴ In setting about answering this, Bergson proceeds by restating, if more dramatically, the conclusions of *Time and Free Will*, framed now within the broader context of the question of life itself. Though his remarks that we can draw out meaningful consequences from, as pertaining to our encounter with works of art, are scattered throughout these pages and are somewhat infrequent (for there is also much discussion going on here about erroneous conclusions of sciences like math and physics, biological problems, micro-organisms, and the like), they are rich, and convey the momentum of his thought itself.

First off all, Bergson reiterates that feelings, ideas, and sensations are undergoing change at every moment. And also that duration is not a process of replacing one instant for another, in which case there would be nothing but the present, when in reality there is a past, our past, which persists in the present, and is prolonged in the future. Thus, “Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances.”²⁵ Or, described in slightly more detail, “My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing – rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow.”²⁶ This gives us a helpful way of picturing to ourselves what we are talking about with

²⁴ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, (New York: Random House, 1964), 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

duration. (If needed. For according to Bergson, we could also always come to know duration by casting aside the conventions of 'common sense' hoisted upon thinking in the name of convenience and practicality and simply intuit ourselves back into the flow.)

An interesting note is worth making here, intimating the sort of back and forth between Bergson and Levinas to come. Having just supplied the snowball analogy, Bergson continues with, “Still more is this the case with states more deeply internal, such as sensations, feelings, desires, etc., which do not correspond, like a simple visual perception, to an unvarying external object.”²⁷ We can see Bergson's point, that the more deep-seated a psychic state and the less dependent on a material cause, the more will it grow within us as it spreads and permeates ever more of our consciousness. (Consider the way a state of mind spreads when, as was discussed, you just cannot get someone off your mind versus accidentally looking into the sun, in which case we have simply to look away, and the burning in our eyes will slowly diminish.) Now, let us consider art to be one of these unvarying external objects (though of course no one considers art to be merely this, as art does not exactly share the same status as just any given material object in the world.)

But let us momentarily think of it like this in order to make a point. After all, Levinas presents art in basically this way, only with a sinister twist. Not only is it utterly unvarying, as well as fundamentally disengaging, but is basically a temporal nightmare as well. This analysis within our analysis also gives us a chance to look at some of Levinas's remarks on aesthetics from the very early text *Existence and Existents*, published a year prior to “Reality and Its Shadow.” There are, here, indications of how

²⁷ Ibid.

Levinas's thinking just prior to his essay led to the conclusions of his later treatment of art, and these significant rumblings also serve to further illuminate Levinas's notion of a regrettable loss of self in aesthetic experience.

It is generally agreed that we perceive works of art, that perception underlies or grounds aesthetic experience. However, in the chapter in *Existence and Existents* titled "Existence Without a World," Levinas claims that our perception of art becomes so eclipsed by the sensation it engenders in us that perception is pushed aside, there is no room for it in the picture, and is therefore rendered at best secondary to sensation. For according to Levinas, things in the world refer to an inwardness in us as objects of knowledge, objects of use, useless objects, etc., and art makes things stand out and apart from the world (in this regard) which actually renders them no longer related to a subject. Perception we see undergoes a similar transformation.

Levinas discusses how the world is given in perception as sounds, colors, words, and the like, which refer to the objects they cover over. For example, sound as Levinas describes it is the noise of an object, just as colors adhere to the surface of things, and words harbor meaning and name things. Through this type of signification, out rightly objective, perception transcribes things on a second level, a subjective level, so that in perception the exterior elements of things are not just what they are, but refer to inwardness as well. Contrarily, "The movement of art consists in leaving the level of perception so as to reinstate sensation, in detaching the quality from this object reference. Instead of arriving at the object, the intention gets lost in the sensation itself, and it is in this wandering about in sensation, in *aisthesis*, that produces the esthetic effect."²⁸

²⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978), 47.

Sensation here leads neither to an object or a subject and figures in art as a ‘new element.’ That is, the sensible qualities that constitute an art object refer only to themselves, and this “is the very event of sensation qua sensation, the esthetic event.”²⁹

What we have been describing, then, is basically a hijacking performed by sensation of meaningful relations between us and the world. Just as we saw in our earlier analysis of “Reality and Its Shadow,” in aesthetic experience our mental powers are put to sleep, though we can of course exercise them in reflecting on the experience. But in the aesthetic event, we are swept up and carried off by sensation, but to nowhere.

Bergson, we recall, said that aesthetic experience provided a good example of what seems to be a fundamental emotion growing as an increasing magnitude, when really the very nature of the emotion is changing. Now, Bergson also suggested the snowball that is our conscious life grows more as it were relative to whether our psychic states are self-sufficient or induced by that 'unwavering material object', which is to say, self-sustaining psychic states are more influential on our inner life than those whose cause is external to us. It is then, almost as though Levinas is presenting us with a correlative view, only in a much more extreme form. For not only is the external object of the work of art less influential on our psychic lives, but we are hardly even aware of ourselves in the experience of it.

For Levinas, art takes over and we are no longer steering our own mental ships, just drifting. Art does not influence so much as lull us. In our experience of art we are too busy wallowing in sensation to actively engage with both the external world and our own internal processes. Yet according to Bergson, representative sensations produce no

²⁹ Ibid.

less a qualitative progression in us than thoughts and feelings. When we look at art something is happening. If works of art are hermetically sealed off from the life world, how is it that under their influence we experience constant psychic flux? (Although change is constant in duration, Bergson demonstrated that aesthetic feelings are especially potent in this regard, as the example of the feeling of grace demonstrated. And this is not because it is the only good example, but the simplest – wonder, anxiety, sublimity, et al. would work as well.)

Perhaps this has to do with just what Levinas finds problematic in art, that images do not refer to things in a manner like symbols, but as symbols in reverse, refer only to pure absence. Thus no movement toward anything other than the image is engendered, and so reason and conceptual analysis are disengaged in the experience of art. If Levinas is right on this, then we can see why for Bergson aesthetic feelings constitute important instances of the reality of inner qualitative multiplicities and the continual process of becoming that is our psychic life. For it is precisely the type of thinking that art discourages according to Levinas that for Bergson breaks up the stream of reality and severs us mentally from its flow. Indeed, Bergson himself had already acknowledged Levinas's claims as to art's tendencies to put our critical faculties to bed (and it seems reasonable to think Levinas was influenced by Bergson's remarks on the matter in writing “Reality and Its Shadow”), however, it is the consequences of this process that are in question for each. Specifically, it comes down to how concepts function.

Bergson writes, “The object of art is to put to sleep the active or rather resistant powers of our personality, and thus to bring us into a state of perfect responsiveness, in which we realize the idea suggested to us and sympathize with the feeling that is

expressed.”³⁰ For Bergson, this operation simply serves to create a sort of openness to the work of art. But there is more to it than just the subduing of aspects of our personality to prevent our preconceived notions from rendering us less receptive to what artworks have to say. In addition, this process works on our faculties to form notions at all, though not in an aggressive or paralyzing way, and Bergson likens it to a weakened form of hypnosis. He then discusses the way that in music, rhythm suspends the typical flow of our sensations and ideas, which get caught up in its to and fro and are in turn dictated by it. This results in a sort of self-forgetting which allows art to impress feelings on us rather than suggest them to us.

Further, Bergson suggests that, “The plastic arts obtain an effect of the same kind by the fixity which they suddenly impose upon life” and, “While the works of ancient sculpture express faint emotions which play upon them like a passing breath, the pale immobility of the stone causes the feeling expressed or the movement just begun to appear as if they were fixed forever, absorbing our thought and our will in their own eternity.”³¹ This is obviously very similar to what we got in “Reality and Its Shadow,” where we saw Levinas move from presenting the rhythmic influence of the arts over us to an analysis of the cemented nature of images. But again, Levinas presents something of a more extreme version, as the movement begun by Laocoon does not simply *appear* as fixed for ever, but indeed *is* fixed forever, doomed to endure this immobile instant for all eternity. So while Bergson and Levinas differ in their approach – Bergson's analysis stemming from art's influence on us generally, not necessarily from an analysis of images per se – there is a strange sort of consensus over the way in which art coerces our critical

³⁰ *Time and Free Will*, 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

capacities, which lose themselves in aesthetic experience, and it is in the conclusions that each thinker draws from this that dramatic differences arise.

For Bergson, concepts, though they have their uses, have nothing to do with the vitality of life. In his short preface to *Time and Free Will*, translator F. L. Pogson sums up Bergson's views on the matter well, writing, "Concepts break up the continuous flow of reality into parts external to one another, they further the interest of language and social life and are useful primarily for practical purposes. But they give us nothing of the life and movement of reality."³² For Levinas, it is just the opposite. When discussing the immobile fixity of images, we again quote his statement that, "Such a fixity is wholly different from that of concepts, which initiates life, offers reality to our powers, to truth, opens a dialectic."³³ The disengagement with reality engendered by art results in an evasion of responsibility that can only be course-corrected through criticism, which Levinas says speaks frankly and through concepts, and which restores conceivable, meaningful relationships between us and things.

What we have here then is, again, a similar starting point which leads in two radically different directions and results in a very dynamic interplay between Levinas and Bergson on the matter. Bergson suggests that aesthetic feeling provides one of the best examples of the qualitative progress of psychic life not only for purposes of explanation, but as lived and felt. And he suggests that conceptually based thinking offers a misleading picture of reality, one where time is incorrectly viewed as a measurable homogeneous medium, and reflective consciousness retroactively inserts breaks into the constant stream of becoming, essentially rendering it lifeless, where life is vitality and

³² Ibid., vi.

³³ "Reality and Its Shadow," 139.

change. Part of Levinas's problem with art is that by not actually referring to real things, we never leave the realm of the sensuous in our experience of it, thus it offers nothing to conceptual thought. This, therefore, is exactly why aesthetic feelings are profound multiplicities. Conceptual thinking makes no threat on their unceasing succession. One psychic state flows right into another, and when we experience the feeling of grace it is just that we are not thinking of, but sensing deep within us, what is to come.

Thus Levinas and Bergson both agree and disagree on the matter in an odd way. If you think there is something right about concepts as a movement toward life, you may not think art is a good place to seek your answers, and if you think there is something wrong about concepts as a movement away from life, you might find art is a good place to mine for truth in existence. This of course is not the end of the story, however, as all it suggests is that there is something going on here with art, some strange aspect that we have not yet discerned. We know that it is up to something, but how does it offer itself up to two so diametrically opposed positions? We must move forward in our analysis and attempt to uncover in what other ways Levinas's and Bergson illuminate and complicate each other's remarks. After all, Levinas did claim that his analysis of art led to the conclusion that Bergson was wrong, and an instant can stop. Can it? We are yet to see.

4. The Challenge Duration Presents to the Instant of the Work of Art

As we saw earlier, like a wave that never breaks, duration is a process of continual accumulation. There is an important consequence to be drawn from this,

mentioned already briefly, is that we can never experience the same thing in the same way twice. Because consciousness swells as it advances, it is impossible for it to ever re-pass through the same state. Each state of mind encompasses all previous states, and so each will be uniquely new, and this is an irreversible process. As Bergson says, “From this survival of the past it follows that consciousness cannot go through the same state twice. The circumstances may be the same, but they will no longer act on the same person, since they find him at a new moment of his history.”³⁴

Therefore, for example, when I go visit my favorite museum to look at all the great art I really like, none of it in reality looks exactly how I remember it looking to me. It may superficially seem to be based on appearance alone, but just as my personality changes without ceasing, so the art does not strike me in the same way. I am not the same person. Even within the continuity of a single viewing of one painting, still it will cease to appear to me in the same way at every moment. In discussing motionless external objects in general, Bergson remarks, “The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless the vision I have of it differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant older than the other.”³⁵

Because we are here speaking about the question of inner change in relation to the view of the external world, and so before pressing on with our analysis, we have to discuss what makes art different from everything else. Well, not exactly that, there is not really room for that here. Specifically then, we want to know this: if everything we see strikes us differently from one look to the next, what is different in the effect between

³⁴ *Creative Evolution*, 8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

say, a chair across the room, or my cup of coffee, and an artwork. That is, we are attempting to challenge Levinas's assertions over the frozen quality of art. If we succeed in demonstrating that there is some sort of back and forth relationship between art and us that results in some life being breathed into artworks, what will prevent us from not also saying that we breath life in to chairs and sofas by looking at them? This is the aspect of differentiation we are after.

There are actually many different ways to approach this question. For one, art is said to constitute a world which we enter into in the experience of it. We say 'the world of the work' of De Chirico is often brooding and vaguely sinister, of Bosch dark and fantastic, and of Koons kitchy and playful, and we are drawn into these worlds when we view their works. We do not speak of the world of the sandwich in a similar way. But a world is made of both time and space. According to Bergson, time is not extended into space. According to Levinas, artworks have fallen out of time. How do they succeed in creating worlds we can enter into then? It can only be by means of a collaboration with us, a co-creation between their materiality and our temporality. Now, there is not room here to develop this speculative point, but it does mark out a potential course of argument.

Another revolves around the notion that we complete the work of art by viewing it. An artwork that is never seen is said by some to be not a work of art proper yet, and only through the gaze of the spectator does the artwork become fully realized. This is a similar type of co-creation as the previous example, but instead of opening up space for a world within the world, on this level, the co-creation is of the artwork's characteristic aspect, being a work of art. Again, more analysis would be required here. This is just to

suggest another way in which one could discuss the unique intertwining between us and art amidst our more general relations with external objects. And of course there are many other things we could point to in this regard. Art and people face each other in a way not much else does because art annexes certain images from the world and represents them to us, as Levinas's analysis pointed out.

Again, because art renders images from reality, it performs a stoppage of time, freezes something in its essence, and offers it up to our gaze. It is, therefore, the way we encounter and interact with art that gives it an inseparable part of its nature, apart from its materiality. The chair in the corner does not need anything from us to be what it is and to properly exist in the world. Though it may not be a functioning chair until I sit in it, its existence is not necessarily threatened if I do not. According to Levinas all things, all being, wears its own face on its face. Things are both what they are and their image. The chair is the chair and the look of the chair, whether we decide to sit on it or not. Art is not like this because the image it renders of an object, which is already itself and its image, performs a double-binding on the thing and thus comes to stand for the absence of the thing, a negation of its presence. This is why the image has fallen out of the life world and out of time. Thus art requires a special form of rehabilitation back into the movement of life if it is ever to be freed from its fate of an existence confined to an eternal interval. Only we can affect this change, and from Bergson's analysis of duration, we see how this is possible, or rather, how we are already partaking of this process in all our experience of art.

As was discussed above, Bergson calls attention to the way in which consciousness can never pass through the same state twice, and so no object ever strikes

us the way as it did before. Thus every time we encounter the same work of art, thought it may look similar in its outward qualities, it will also be totally new to us. And if it is a work we are encountering for the first time, it will be a totally unique aesthetic experience not simply because we have not seen this thing before, but because every encounter with art prior to this moment has participated in shaping our consciousness and is carried along by it so that each new encounter is totally novel. Art also represents a privileged case of this feature of our mental lives because our encounter with it is so unlike our other everyday encounters with the world (save for maybe certain encounters with nature, a question for another inquiry).

This is because when we look at art, we dwell with it, enter into its world, and allow it to speak to us in a way we do not with most ordinary objects. It bypasses that level of consciousness that seeks out the practicality of things while reaching deep within us. And the deeper within our consciousness something penetrates, the more will it spread and color a broader range of our psychic states. But in order to suggest that our relation to art somehow unlocks it from its immobility, we must ask, what makes this a two-way street? Well, it is simply that this process is based in perception, and also, that it is not contained by it.

We perceive what is happening in a work of art. To stick with Levinas's examples, the Mona Lisa is about to smile because we perceive her as about to smile. She is not objectively about to smile, as though there were an infallible, eternal truth in her expression that were verifiable fact. In a world without people to sense something enigmatic in her expression, it would not be enigmatic. She is mysterious *to us*. That is what gives her her mysterious quality. Laocoon does not strain, he strains in our

perception of him straining, without which he is a large block of stone in a weird shape. So through perception we lend something to the artwork, that thing which makes it what it is. Of course, this does not mean at all that it is not up to the artwork to say whatever it wants to us. Because we have these perceptive faculties bound up with consciousness, we are fundamentally open to the work of art and what it suggests to us.

This is part of the nature of the two-way street between us and art, and part of why art is really never impossibly frozen. Because fundamentally we can never have two entirely similar aesthetic experiences, works of art will always be new for us, and if they are always new for us, then something about them has changed, even if the change took place in us. This is not something we come to know in the abstract, but rather we simply experience it everyday when we revisit a painting we like which we have seen many times. We are never bored by it, we still want to go back, to look, to let it do its thing for us, because we are somehow always captivated anew by it. (And captivation is something very different from 'held captive.')

And because the relationship between us and artworks is a deep weave, it is therefore not possible for works of art to be locked out of time. We move, so they move – art lives in us.

This process is even further compounded when we leave the level of perception for that of reflection. For there does seem to be something about Mona Lisa's smile that cannot be reduced to perceptual parameters. It trails off the canvas and we attempt to follow. 'What could she possibly be thinking about?' we think to ourselves. What was according to Levinas fixed in place forever carries off to somewhere in our heads, to thought, imagination . . . Thus here again we find a case of a certain movement not only on a sensuous level, but as movement in mind, a movement that may continue long after

we have departed from the portrait. Thus if art is like a symbol in reverse, it is still pretty effective, and though it may refer to the absence of a thing, that thing, though perhaps not real in an existent sense, still has life for us.

So where does that leave us? Art does move for us, and because this source of movement is in the artwork itself, the change is always relocated back into the artwork, constituting a positive feedback loop of living change between art and us. But this is a sort of conditional movement, and there is yet something insurmountable in Levinas's powerful assertions on the artwork performing a stoppage in time on itself. In our analysis so far, art kind of moves, and kind of does not, which can only mean yet again that there is a quality to art unlike anything else which is yet to be determined. To try to see what, and to at last draw some conclusions about the temporal nature of art, we must look to what both Levinas and Bergson take to be the place of art in relation, or compared to, life in general.

5. Bergson and Levinas on Art and Life in General: Conclusions

For Bergson, life takes action. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson presents a dense analysis of the difference between matter, representation, and image, of the functioning of memory in perception, and of our interaction with matter. An important point to draw from these discussions for the present analysis is that, essentially, life takes action. We slice out sections of reality because our bodies function on a principle of utility, so we have to choose what to focus on relative to its practical function for bodily action, a process based in deep, bodily memory and in habituation. This also means consciousness

must suppress aspects of reality which are not of immediate functional interest. Bergson writes, “Our representation of matter is the measure of our possible action upon bodies: it results from the discarding of what has no interest for our needs, or more generally, for our functions.”³⁶

Thus there is a sort of screen between us and reality that only things which seem functionally relevant pass through. This notion plays a key role in the one explicit discussion of any length that we get from Bergson on art, from his work “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.” Here, Bergson offers a more poetic rendering of the above view. He writes, “Between nature and ourselves, nay, between ourselves and our own consciousness, a veil is interposed; a veil that is dense and opaque for the common herd, – thin, almost transparent, for the artist and the poet. What fairy wove that veil? Was it done in malice or in friendliness? We had to live, and life demands we grasp things in their relations to our needs.”³⁷ So what we hear and see of world is only what arises as a beacon for conduct, as our senses are ever performing a practical simplification of reality in order to draw out those aspects that are meaningful to us as acting beings.

We classify things according to their use, and then perceive this classification over the colors and shapes of things. This process is compounded by language, for Bergson claims that words only take note of the most everyday, commonplace aspect of things, stepping in between us and the thing, mediating. And a word would therefore mask the thing from us were it not for the fact that the thing were already concealed by

³⁶ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer, (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 38.

³⁷ Henry Bergson, “Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic,” trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, (New York: Macmillan, 1914), 151.

the veil, the necessity of which makes the word arise in the first place. Therefore there is something about reality that is truly ineffable, and speech was not made to express it. But art was.

According to Bergson, art brushes aside the veil between us and reality, bringing us face to face. He writes, “What is the object of art? Could reality come into direct contact with sense and consciousness, could we enter into immediate communion with things and with ourselves, probably art would be useless, or rather we should all be artists, for then our soul would continually vibrate in perfect accord with nature.”³⁸ In a way, art would be redundant if we were in direct contact with reality. But we are not. However, occasionally nature does fail to rivet perception to action so strongly, and gives us artists. The artist's perception is more detached from need. Bergson says he or she sees and loves color for color and form for form.

That is, artists come closer to perceiving things as they are, the veil between them and reality is thin to the point of near transparency, such that they see closer to things in what Bergson calls their native purity, and not just what must be perceived distinctly for practical life. And they record and deliver this vision to us, so that we might see the world anew too. Thus, “Art is certainly only a more direct vision of reality.”³⁹ Levinas, we contend, agrees. When we begin putting the pieces together, we see that his vision of art is not so radically different from Bergson's, but is actually very similar. (Specifically, the *function* of art is similar, it is in what we see as a result that their real differences arise.) This is because for Levinas, too, there is a reality lurking behind that of our immediate experience.

³⁸ Ibid., 150.

³⁹ Ibid., 157.

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas contends that opposed to Heidegger's notion that Being is always the Being of a being, there is such a thing as being in general, or existence without, or prior to, individualized existents. Consciousness takes up this anonymous and impersonal existence, marks a stance within it, instituting for itself a here and now. As Levinas puts it, "Are we not, then, obliged to see in very difficulty we have of understanding the category according to which Being belongs to a being in the mark of the impersonal character of Being in general? Does not Being in general become the Being of "a being" by an inversion, by that event which is the present?"⁴⁰ To act is to take on a present. In this way, art brings us close to, up to the edge, of a face to face encounter with existence in general. For does art not encourage disengagement and inaction according to Levinas?

Because art furnishes images of things that do not refer to things themselves but to pure absence, images fall out of the life world of existents and lapse back into being in general. To reiterate, bound, frozen and immobile, images are impotent to force the future, and because they cannot act, can assume no present. Thus an impersonal, halted form not of life, but only of existence in the most general sense, is what we come up against in our encounter with art. The veil is again thin here.

For both Bergson and Levinas, there is no way to step outside of ourselves to see in an immediate way the world in general which is behind, or prior to, or the grounding of, our individual experience of the world. As Levinas puts it, before the curtain has even risen, we already find ourselves actors on the stage of being. And so for Levinas, it is something like a veil in reverse. Between anonymous existence and individuated

⁴⁰ *Existents and Existence*, 3.

existents, art interposes itself as a reminder of that primordially general being out of which we have arisen and taken a stance. And is it not just this functioning as a symbol in reverse that for Bergson means art can actually get us to things that consciousness is too thick to make it through to. For both thinkers, there is no way for consciousness to, through itself, access its pre-reflective origins. But they are there, nevertheless. And consciousness is itself the very thing, for better or worse, that stands between us and the general existence of things in their most basic forms.

For Levinas, communion with these forms would be, plainly, inhuman. For Bergson, it would constitute something like an ultimate reckoning with ourselves, though it is not clear that for Bergson this would be a purely joyous experience and that there would not be some residual melancholy to it. He writes, “Deep in our souls we should hear the strains of our inner life's unbroken melody, – a music that is oftentimes gay, but more frequently plaintive, and always original.”⁴¹ Now, all this talk of a form of experience inaccessible to consciousness proper is really very ambiguous, and necessarily so. It is, after all, unknowable to reason.

Yet for Levinas and Bergson, there is some truth revealed through art about it. To reiterate, it is for Levinas that the continuity of time is by no means guaranteed. For Bergson, it is that it is possible to draw closer to an immediate contact with reality – constituted on the one hand by extended space, the material, and on the other, time as pure duration, the progressive flow of mind as unceasing change and becoming. The question of whether one is right or wrong in their value judgments, whether art is 'good' or 'bad', is here secondary. At last, we want to see what conclusions can be drawn from

⁴¹ “Laughter,” 150-151.

the consensus between the two over the manner in which art displays something of pre-personal, that is, pre-conceptual, existence. How does art do this?

For one, it is evident that as humans, we represent a movement from the general to the specific. Art moves in the opposite direction, from the specific to the general. Simply stated by Bergson, “Art is about life in general.”⁴² Thus art moves us toward a direct contact with true reality in a way in which it is very difficult or impossible for consciousness, already distinct within the larger world stage, to discover. Perhaps Proust said it best. “The great quality of true art is that it rediscovers, grasps and reveals to us that reality far from where we live, from which we get farther and farther away as the conventional knowledge we substitute for it becomes thicker and more impermeable.”⁴³ We are ready to restate our question for the final time: what does this say about the temporal nature of art?

It can only be that art is held between two times – between the time of sheer materially and the time of the subject. As we saw above, for both Bergson and Levinas, a certain rhythmic quality of art puts to sleep the active and resistant powers of the mind thereby impressing itself upon us. It is frozen and has bound part of life in images represented, indeed, stopped a segment of life in its tracks, yet it moves within us in ways totally unique to it because we are in a dynamic relation with it. Art is both immobile and active. Levinas basically said as much in “Reality and Its Shadow,” writing, “The value of images for philosophy lies in their position between two times and their ambiguity.”⁴⁴ We had thought we would take the opportunity of writing this essay to

⁴² *Creative Evolution*, 164.

⁴³ Marcel Proust “The great quality of true art . . .,” in *The Great Quotations*, ed. George Seldes (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1960), 575.

⁴⁴ “Reality and Its Shadow,” 142.

expound upon this statement, only to discover that it meant so much more than Levinas had intended. The value of images' position between two times is universal.

Let us clarify the preceding paragraph a bit. Art is not between the time of the external, physical world and the time of the individual because as we saw according to Bergson, there is no time in space, there is only time for consciousness, despite what science would have us believe. Thus art is still between two times, only that one of them is not time. This is compatible with Levinas's claims in *Existence and Existents* that for consciousness, sometimes time weighs heavy and feels drawn out, such as in states of indolence and fatigue, not because time is different for the subject than for the world of objects, but because time is subjective.

Art then stands between the objective and subjective worlds, and the question of objective verses subjective is one of time, not space, for everything is in space. But we experience time. It is why we are not objects. Time is our medium, not space, and together with space, we constitute a world, one we cannot unconstitute. Just as consciousness screens the world so that we are never in full communion with it, art too performs a similar function, only it mediates in reverse. It is the ying to consciousness's yang.

Thus art, between two times, which is to say between time and no time, can show us something of reality we would never otherwise see. We are driving around the world and time is our vehicle and reflective consciousness its engine. When driving down the road – especially the highway but really any type of driving will suffice – all the world is going by in a blur except what is directly pertinent at the moment, like a bend in the road, stop lights, oncoming traffic. Art takes a picture out the window, offers us a snapshot of

what is not immediately grasped by us but is nevertheless there. Thus by offering up a snapshot of reality, it allows us to come into direct contact with those colors for their colors and forms for their forms which are always swirling all around us.

It was necessary to read Bergson and Levinas together to draw out this notion, and it is why Bergson and Levinas read so interestingly and, through their discord, harmoniously together. Levinas is right, with art, an instant can stop, and it does, an image becomes suspended outside of time. But so too was Bergson right that this brings us closer to communing with the totality of existence. For both, there is something true to be seen in art that consciousness cannot independently express to itself. And while an instant can stop and fall back into the realm of being un-illuminated to mind, it can only stop *to us*, for us to see something through it, and so it is also in part a movement back toward ourselves. We should, then, rephrase part of the analogy above. Art is not these snapshots taken out the window, these are individual artworks, art itself is the window.

Because art is held between two distinct spheres, the external, objective order and the internal, subjective order, and we are always enmeshed in both, through art we can see more deeply one or another side of things. Depending on where you stand, you might see into the living heart of all things, or to the barren prairie that life comes to construct its dwelling upon. Or ultimately, both. For it is not the case that vision never stops with the artwork itself and is always directed elsewhere. But once it arrives at the sculpture, painting, etc. already it perceives both a stoppage in time and a correlated movement back toward itself. Art is both dense and transparent in this way. It is what it is at its surface, and it is see-through. For a window is fundamentally neither in nor out of the house, but part of the frame which distinguishes the inner from the outer. Our frame is

the everyday world in which we live, and we, or rather those artists amongst us, built this window into it so we could occasionally see in and out if we wanted to.

There can, therefore, be no ultimate pronouncement made about it. On the one hand, we cannot say for certain what the nature of our contact with art will be like in any given encounter with art. After all, if it were something knowledge could predict, art would be redundant. Because consciousness is always already trafficking in concepts, art will always present us with something new, insofar as it moves in just the opposite direction. And on the other hand, there is something generally unpronounceable about art and our experience of it as we have developed it. For language as we saw categorizes existence, whereas art speaks without words.

So though this paper has attempted a discussion of art as both temporal and non-temporal and therefore as a window onto true reality, we cannot, of course, come to grasp this through words on a page. But not all discussion of such things must be only an attempt to articulate the unarticulable. Words, thoughts, dialectical reasoning, still make meaningful pronouncements on aesthetic experiences and play a uniquely important role in discussing the most basic functions of art. That is, analysis, both before and after and in an ongoing manner with interactions with art, can re-open us up to certain aesthetic possibilities where the dominant thought of science of the world as objectively measurable and mechanistic, and where the demands of practical life, have foreclosed upon them. But it can do no more.

Here, we have attempted through analysis to draw out the conclusions of two great thinkers, though different in their aims, who offer much more on art than it is generally assumed, and through their unique insights, to see the profundity of art anew.

And what we found is something that, again, words cannot express. But that in itself teaches us its own important lesson, which is that if words and critical inquiry reach their limit prior to the experience of art anyway, then art does not require us to bring all that much to our encounter with it. Certainly it is not essential that we have any specialized knowledge of either philosophy or aesthetics (although that may greatly enrich our initial experience upon reflection). Art is for everyone. All we have to do is put ourselves in front of it and see what we see.

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