

THE ETHICS OF THE FACE IN ART: ON THE MARGINS OF LEVINAS'S THEORY OF ETHICAL SIGNIFICATION IN ART

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In 'Reality and Its Shadow', Levinas dismisses knowledge as a whole from art. This has deep implications for the ethical. The aesthetic event has nothing to do with the ethical event – art does not seem to hold a place for ethical knowledge. This situation is problematic with respect to the conflicting phenomenological evidence (as beholders or readers we have extensive ethical experience) as well as with respect to Levinas himself, who occasionally relies on works of art in his ethical phenomenological analyses. My article aims to fill in the blank spaces by finding a place for the ethical in Levinas's model of ethical signification in art. To start with, I elaborate on the notion of ethical experience (falling short of the ethical *event*) by way of László Tengelyi's work on time-art and his conversation with Levinas. Next, I turn to Levinas's portrayal of the insomnia of art, where the traces of such an experience can be located in the ebb and flow of consciousness, in the vicinity of the anonymous event, and on the way to the critical articulation of this event. In the second part of the article, I try to capitalize on this genetic model of ethical knowledge with reference to the faces of art. I attempt to show how in the in-depth experience provided by film (for example, in Herbert Ross's classic, *Play It Again, Sam*) faces come alive and signify. Rather than tying them in with the sublime, I argue for a limited yet undeniable presence of exteriority in the faces of the movie.

I

I.1. THE ISSUE OF ART WITH AN ETHICAL APPEAL IN LEVINAS

In what follows, I shall attempt to find an answer to an important dilemma of Levinas's 'aesthetics': art with an ethical appeal. His generally apprehensive attitude towards the aesthetic (well known from the 1948 essay, 'Reality and Its Shadow') should imply a rejection of art that could be taken to run an ethical agenda akin to his own.¹ Yet that is precisely what seems problematic. Levinas's provocatively critical take is most difficult to accept when it concerns art that seems to be in the service of a similar ethical vocation. One wonders why transmitting the ethical in art should be judged as inadequate in alterity ethics.

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¹ Levinas's texts tend to give way to a rather uninviting reading of the arts. As he says in his art essay: 'There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague.' Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987), 12. Hereafter: *RS*.

Why exactly can the call addressed by the Other, in which Levinas is so deeply interested, not come to the fore in a work of art?

In a sense, it is not difficult to answer these questions. Even a reader only vaguely familiar with these passages could easily produce a number of definitions, one-liners, from Levinas's texts (for example, art being exotic, not part of the world; art calling for participation, to be merely *among* things; and art providing aesthetic enjoyment that charms and frees the subject) on account of which the weaknesses of art conveying ethical phenomena are readily perceptible. Whatever is offered in the ethical output of the arts, it will occasion a serious modification of the ethical as surfacing in the face-to-face; as such, it is no surprise to see ethical art fall below the bar. Arguably, the limitations of art are to be felt chiefly at the metaphysical level. Apart from the undeniable advances of the aesthetic reduction (regularly investigated by aesthetically oriented phenomenology), it also has clear drawbacks. As Richard Cohen argues, art's capacity to exhibit the world concretely and step up against the abstractions of conceptual thought (hailed by Bergson and Merleau-Ponty) will nonetheless imply an ethical closure for Levinas. On this view, the totalization inherent to Western thought is not relieved but, in a certain sense, even amplified in the aesthetic. In place of the theoretism of scientific cognition, there is indeed a return to the life-world but in such a way that an abstraction from ethical life is maintained.² Art is home to a temporally and semantically closed world dominated by the image and resemblance. Levinas's basic claim is that the spectacle covers an ersatz reality³ with ersatz time and space in as much as things are not given in a fully real fashion, in their ethical concreteness, but in an aesthetic mode where their true source (language, alterity, and ethics) is covered over.⁴ Art provides a seemingly autonomous, self-enclosed entity, the *appearing* phenomenon, which is actually 'a congealed form from which somebody has already withdrawn'.⁵

² Richard Cohen, 'Some Reflections on Levinas and Shakespeare', in *Levinasian Meditations* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 150–53.

³ Richard Cohen, 'Uncovering the Difficult Universality of the Face-to-Face', in *Levinasian Meditations*, 244–45.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Transcendence of Words', trans. Seán Hand, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 148.

⁵ Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 98. Hereafter: *TI*. Levinas's point is that the being of the phenomenon can be reasonably compared to *pure spectacle*, having the appearance of a sovereign entity, which nevertheless cannot be maintained on its own. He seeks to demonstrate that phenomena reach their fullness, that is, they are ultimately invested with sense, only in language, in the signification coming from the Other (*ibid.*). Even though they are not deduced from the Other, that Other is the basic principle of phenomena (*ibid.*, 92).

On this basis, it is fair to say that art thrives on the *shadows* it casts of reality – an ethical handicap essentially tied to plasticity and never to be overcome, according to Levinas. Art as plasticity will always come off badly in any comparison with the face; one's relationship with a work simply cannot be compared to one's relationship with the face.⁶ The incapacity of art, essentially complete and self-contained, to match the irreversible transcendence of the Other (that he or she is placed unambiguously above me) seems indubitable. The call addressed by the Other to me is incomparable to anything else: this is a weighty insight, discouraging further attempts to find true alterity in a work of art.⁷ Levinasian ethics (to be understood not so much as a study of right and wrong as precisely this underlying relation with alterity preceding and motivating everything, including appearance, thought, truth, and justice) and art seem simply not to match. One might not want to consider the implications of introducing the founding situation of ethics into an environment that is characterized by a lack of ethical concreteness. Surely, something of the sharpness of the situation will get lost, the Other's inexorable appeal addressed to me – providing an example of the 'degradation or erosion of the absolute' that Levinas speaks about on account of art, in 'Reality and Its Shadow' (*RS*, p. 8).

⁶ Levinas's definition of art is heavily influenced by Sartre's problematic, in which the engagement of prose is contrasted with the disengagement of other arts, including poetry. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Fretchman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 10–22. The basis of this distinction is the immateriality, transparency, and success of the communication of prose-writing as opposed to the impermeability and defeat of communication in the other arts, where materiality (for example, paint, sound, the sonority of words) stands out. Although the meaning of the work is not uninteresting, it is first and foremost the thing that the artist is engaged with; his or her aim is to present significations (not to express them, which is the prose writer's business). In Levinas, this emphasis on the reification of the image unfolds into an all encompassing theory of plasticity: all art is characterized by the completeness of materiality and is, ultimately, plastic (*RS*, pp. 2, 8). Levinas goes against the distinction given to prose, and extends the defeat to all the arts, including prose (though making a few concessions in this respect to modern literature at the end of the essay). Levinas thus seems to be in conversation with Continental aesthetics and the German aesthetic tradition (as far as Sartre's problematic and the special rights granted to prose in it has clear Hegelian overtones, not to mention the obvious links between Levinas's insights on the temporal structure of the sculptural, 'the meanwhile', and Lessing's 'pregnant moment' in the statue of Laocoön.) In my use of the word 'art', I implicitly refer to this framework of eidetic thinking on the various forms of art as having more or less an inclination for openness as regards plasticity. (For both Sartre and Levinas, there is an issue of the openness of art – be it the openness for engagement that prose enjoys in Sartre or, in Levinas's view, the openness that modern literature may enjoy as it manages to interpret its own images – which is about the openness, fluidity, and dynamism of expression, in a word, ethics.)

⁷ Guy Petitdemange, 'L'art, ombre de l'être ou voix vers l'autre?', *Revue d'esthétique*, no. 36 (1999): 90; Péter Bokody, 'Érdeknélküliség és felelősség' [Disinterestedness and responsibility] (PhD thesis, Eötvös Loránd University, 2011), 4–8.

I.2. THE ETHICAL CAPACITY OF TIME-ART

That said, I do not think that the ethical should be expelled from art; even in Levinas's ethical phenomenological context, there is a strong need to thematize ethical encounters. After all, we have extensive ethical understanding of the arts. Even if this does not apply to all art works and is highly dependent on the conditions that a given work is embedded in, the ethical framework of art seems undeniable. Levinas raises the bar undoubtedly high by basing ethics on the irreversible transcendence of the Other; still, it is implausible that this move would disqualify en bloc the ethical performance of the arts – including, for instance, Rodin's sculpture with its idiosyncratic pedestals, in which Levinas himself seems to locate the (ethical) event of position, a key moment in hypostatic manifestation.⁸

Here reference could be made to certain currents in contemporary phenomenological thinking which address this mismatch between art and ethical transcendence and seek to deal with it in ways that may leave some room for, among other things, ethical experience. I have in mind particularly László Tengelyi's noteworthy project on the novel. As he argues in the beginning of his 'Phenomenology of Time and the Time-Novel',

literary narratives are not simply vehicles of new figures of thought, they are also sources of agitating, sometimes distressing but, in spite of everything, mostly joyous, or even blissful moments in life. However, fiction is not just *belles-lettres*; it does not only have to do with beauty but truth as well. But truth may take the same form in fiction as in life: that of *experience*. Whereas one *learns* truth from scholarly works, one *experiences* it in fiction, as well as in life. These experiences are not simply depicted and expressed in fiction; one *gains* them, while reading e.g. a novel.⁹

Tengelyi pays tribute to the novel (particularly, works by Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, and Virginia Woolf) mainly because, in his view, it functions as a transmitter of genuine experiences that are otherwise rare in everyday life; the novel, as it were, gives access to a realm covered over in inherited concepts

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1978), 70. For more on this point, see my essay 'The Transcendence of Words', *Levinas Studies* 10 (forthcoming). Further evidence of the ethical capacity of art can be found in Levinas's frequent reliance on literary examples, such as Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, where Levinas sees Desire, not satisfied but deepened by the desired, confirmed. See Emmanuel Levinas, 'Signification and Sense', in *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 30. In this article, I will frequently return to this reading of Dostoyevsky.

⁹ László Tengelyi, 'Zeitphänomenologie und Zeitroman', in *Erfahrung und Ausdruck: Phänomenologie im Umbruch bei Husserl und seinen Nachfolgern* (Dordrecht: Springer 2007), 305; Eng. trans. 'Phenomenology of Time and Time-Novel' (unpublished manuscript), 1.

and perspectives.¹⁰ It is, arguably, the capacity of literature to provide *eminent experience* that is emphasized by Tengelyi as a way of going against the habitual reflexes and practices of everyday life, 'under which [...] we do not surmise anything else'.¹¹ Tengelyi wants to go even further than Ricoeur, who is the source of his research programme: in the intuitive wealth of this type of time-art he sees an opportunity to revise or improve the phenomenological analysis of temporal experience and locate spontaneous emergences of sense – something wholly new – in the temporalization of consciousness.¹²

My intention is to elaborate on this attractive possibility, which is opened up in Tengelyi, of locating this eminent experience and, on account of that, even the ethical in the truth experienced in fiction. Could Tengelyi's refined narratives not grasp the ethical event? In search of the selfhood of the self, he excavates in Mann's *The Magic Mountain* certain subsidiary forms of experience, minute resonances in the soul, which are very difficult to integrate into the unification of the temporal course of life. He calls them 'bays of alterity'.¹³ Seeing these manifestations of heteronomy, it is perhaps not unwelcome to locate ethical alterity at least on the margins of Tengelyi's work.¹⁴

Yet before I address this point, it may be worth briefly reviewing the objections that could be raised, in a Levinasian vein, almost automatically against the mere idea of such a project. Prior to considering the ethical potential of the time-novel, and as a way of cautioning, it is important to recall that Levinas follows a markedly different path here: he precludes any access to the event in the situations of the time-novel. Regarding time, the novel is only capable of providing a rudimentary account of the temporalization of the existent, losing the freedom of the flow. This is no surprise since actual being is only doubled up in a semblance of being, in the image. Narration feeds on *resemblance*, whereby the characters attain a certain fixity and slackness that is very different from their actual being in ethical concreteness, open to conceptuality and dialectic. ('The characters in a book [...] can be narrated because their being resembles itself', *RS*, p. 10.) This certainly does not mean

¹⁰ Ibid., 305–7; 1–2.

¹¹ Ibid., 306; 2. Tengelyi refers to Jean-François Marquet, 'Proust, la fête inconcevable', in *Miroirs de l'identité: La littérature hantée par la philosophie* (Paris: Hermann, 1996), 173.

¹² Tengelyi, 'Zeitphänomenologie und Zeitroman', 313–14; 'Phenomenology of Time', 7.

¹³ Ibid., 317; 9.

¹⁴ 'The very existence of such bays of alterity calls into question all attempts to fix the precise sense of the selfhood of one's self once and for all. This observation permits [one ...] to conclude that a one-sided orientation towards the temporal course of life is unable to resolve the delicate problem of how selfhood and alterity are related to each other in life.' Ibid.

turning a blind eye to the temporal advances and the magic of the psychological novel; yet it does mean denying that the *eidos* of time (even as a model) could be achieved in any way there. Indeed, 'Reality and Its Shadow' invites us to recognize the novel's own time, the novel being 'a unique way for time to temporalise' (RS, p. 10).

I have already touched upon these limitations of images, as seen from the Levinasian ethical perspective. It might be a good idea now to look at what the ersatz of time in novels consists in. To understand the uniqueness of the time of the novel, it is best to refer to the *sculptural* with which 'Reality and Its Shadow' characterizes the time of art. Levinas's assumption is that, ultimately, every artwork behaves as a sculpture, that is, it implies a stoppage of time, where a quasi-eternal duration holds sway, a weird, dead instant enduring infinitely, without forcing the future. Laocoön – to use Levinas's example – will be eternally seized in the grip of serpents. In Levinas's early non-formalistic, existential reading of time, this 'future forever to come' (RS, p. 9) means the instant's failure to do its job: it cannot assume something, evanesce, and become present. The future announced in the flexing muscles will never become present. As such – goes the Levinasian argument – we are looking at an impersonal and menacing instant. And perhaps, as Levinas suggests, this metaphor of the sculptural is not limited to the plastic; rather, it extends all the way to the temporal arts, their time-structure being equally plastic in the final analysis. Beyond a doubt, the time-novel provides an exceptionally wide interval – and in this sense it might be more 'alive' than its closely defined counterparts in the plastic arts – but, again, without a real future, strictly speaking. Levinas uses the term *meanwhile* to get hold of this curious temporality disconnected from eternity in time-art: it is in an interval, however wide and complex, that the work lies immobilized. There is closure despite the temporal unfolding; it is as though a 'whole set of facts were immobilized and formed a series' (RS, p. 10). As Levinas argues, the characters of a novel are described between two well-determined moments; they are committed to the same thoughts and actions.¹⁵ Levinas sees the 'plasticity' of history taking effect, time being transformed into images. He expresses his concern that 'time, apparently introduced into images by the non-plastic arts such as music, literature, theatre and cinema, does not shatter the fixity of images' (RS, p. 10).

¹⁵ It is interesting to see (action) film described as the greatest example of ontological closure, despite its promise to resist best of all the genres and forms of art encapsulation into the sculptural. Film action may well mask a frozenness of the screen, as is insightfully suggested in Reni Celeste, 'The Frozen Screen: Levinas and the Action Film', *Film-Philosophy* 11 (2007): 15–36.

We find ourselves *on the hither side of time*, with freedom reverted into necessity and fate.¹⁶

These Levinasian critical insights look quite serious, to the extent that they may deter one from thinking time and ethics through these sophisticated narratives as it is suggested in Tengelyi's work. Yet it would be a mistake to get caught up in these difficulties. Tengelyi's work responds to this challenge; it appears to run its programme on experience gained in novels precisely in response to these limitations of art with respect to the event.

The above analysis of the time of art was meant as an appetizer to the main insight here – namely, that, according to Tengelyi, artworks, despite their falling short of the event, function as outstandingly rich sources of experience. In other words, his point about the ethical performance of time-art is very much an argument for the practice of art that manages to provide a right of entry to an eminent experience in spite of the structural restrictions of the particular work. As he aptly points out in dialogue with Levinas,

The realm of what may be lived and experienced is, as a matter of fact, broader than the realm of what is, strictly speaking, *narratable*. The 'hermetic magic', which is, according to Thomas Mann, characteristic of literary fiction, consists, however, precisely in making perceptible by narration what cannot be properly narrated. What cannot be narrated falls into various kinds. *L'inénarrable*: this term designates in Levinas the primordial event of ethics, the experience of being obliged to answer a claim of the Other. But the vast area of what cannot be properly narrated encompasses also the gift of creative ideas, the prosperity of desire and love, the torture of repentance, and the grace of conversion. The scope of the notion is not even exhausted by these examples. One of the proper elements of narration, time, is a further candidate for being called non-narratable. However, even time belongs to those 'objects' the experience of which is gained in literary fiction [...].¹⁷

¹⁶ This plasticizing of time in the rhythm of images (the events losing their freedom, following a certain direction, and forming situations) has a lot to do with the optics of art, which, in Levinas's view, completely misses ethical reality. It is perhaps here that the greatest challenge is addressed to projects aspiring to discover a certain depth of sense in prose as is done in Tengelyi and the aesthetically oriented phenomenology behind him. Having access to the tiniest resonances in sense formations in novels is disqualified because of the vision used in works of literature: the inadequacies inherent to the exteriority of the inward. 'We think [...] that an exterior vision – of a total exteriority, like the exteriority in rhythm we have described above, where the subject itself is exterior to itself – is the true vision of the novelist. Atmosphere is the very obscurity of images. [...] Even the psychological novelist sees his inner life on the outside, not necessarily through the eyes of another, but as one participates in a rhythm or a dream. All the power of the contemporary novel, its art-magic, is perhaps due to this way of seeing inwardness from the outside' (*RS*, pp. 10–11) For more on this point, see Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Other in Proust', in *Levinas Reader*, 162–63.

¹⁷ Tengelyi, 'Zeitphänomenologie und Zeitroman', 309; 'Phenomenology of Time', 3–4.

It appears that the issue of the pre-eminence of the event over and against art is at the very centre of Tengelyi's thinking. Likewise, the ethical event: his scheme has pride of place for Levinas and the incommensurability of the ethical. Even if the ethical *event* of one's exposure to another's appeal is never fully matched, the ethical *experience* provided by artworks seems unquestionable. To put it in Levinasian terms: even if the encounter itself is, strictly speaking, not narratable in a plastic work,¹⁸ there may well be an ethical experience of the Other's transcendence surfacing in the reception of those works. That is what is so impressive about the arts: they manage to convey experiences (including ethical ones) that they lack in their internal structure. Time-art (which for Tengelyi is literature, though perhaps film could also be included here) is capable of 'making perceptible [...] what cannot be properly narrated'.¹⁹

I.3. FROM THE EVENT TO THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ETHICAL

To answer the question raised above, Tengelyi's trusted narratives are meant to grasp the *experience* and not the *event* of the ethical. The point is that one does not learn about this event in a scholarly manner but by living and experiencing it, since the event is, in essence, not depicted but made perceptible in works of creative imagination. This should qualify as a fair description of the ethics of time-art. I find Tengelyi's position quite favourable, for it does face the limits of art in a seriously Levinasian vein, while making concessions to their ethical performance. In a sense, this position could be taken – even if unintended – to be a quintessentially *permissive ethical-critical stance*, to be welcomed by those who take seriously not only the critical ruling of the aesthetic but also the course the aesthetic takes on the way back to the world, its reintegration into ethical transcendence.

I shall maintain this point even though, as far as the backbone of Levinas's critique is concerned, this position may not offer much development. The experience Tengelyi outlines over and against the event is, arguably, still stuck in the freedom of spontaneity and not exempt from totality, which is why

¹⁸ Tengelyi is most probably referring to this passage regarding the *l'inénarrable*: 'Proximity is a difference, a non-coinciding, an arrhythmia in time, a diachrony refractory to thematization, refractory to the reminiscence that synchronizes the phases of a past. The unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration. The relationship with him is indescribable in the literal sense of the term, unconvertible into a history, irreducible to the simultaneousness of writing, the eternal present of a writing that records or presents results.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 166.

¹⁹ Tengelyi, 'Zeitphänomenologie und Zeitroman', 309; 'Phenomenology of Time', 3–4.

it can hardly constitute a step forward in the Levinasian context.²⁰ Tengelyi's ways of doing phenomenology only confirm this point: even though cognizant of the ethical, it primarily cultivates an aesthetic-phenomenological ideal, in service of the manifestation of life. The motivation behind his investigations, the search for the spontaneous emergence of sense, is Merleau-Ponty's wild Being and not an ethical-religious transcendence. A project motivated by this transcendence will, on the contrary, follow a track prescribed by an *invested freedom* (*Tl*, p. 84) and go against the aspect of art that promotes ontological violence and contributes to the conquest of Being. Along these lines, the experience of the ethical promoted by Tengelyi seems to offer nothing novel: despite the apparent success of the experiences of our exposure to alterity which we gain in fiction, it is about a shadow ethics with *shadow encounters*, rooted in the poverty of imagination.²¹ To reiterate what I said in the introduction: apparently, any attempt to moderate the censure of art will be disqualified by making reference to the *tall order* of Levinas's ethics – namely, the prerequisite to respect what is intolerable for thought and not expose it to comparison and fixing. Art as structure, experience, and immanence simply cannot match the conditions of ethical transcendence, the movement beyond being. But this does not mean that one should dismiss ethical experience as described by Tengelyi. His work has undeniable benefits; in its ambiguous relations with Levinas, it can help stretch the tight confines of Levinasian aesthetic thought. By moving the stress from the event to the experience with respect to

²⁰ Levinas's critique of the aesthetic is very much a critique of freedom: a critique levelled against a 'glorious spontaneity' (*Tl*, p. 84) whose excessive powers need to be curtailed. This bias comes to the fore in a more tangible form in the so-called *temptation of temptation* as developed in his religious writing. Levinas pinpoints a basic condition of Western man, who is eager to try everything, for whom the temptation that tempts the tempted turns out to be essentially not pleasure but the ambiguity of the situation and the possibility implied therein for the Ego to retain its liberty. See Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Temptation of Temptation', in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 34. The phenomenon is about simultaneously being outside and participating – the tempting is temptation itself. This naturally includes the temptation of knowledge and the aesthetic of art. Levinas is giving a critical reading of human freedom in as much as the self for him is accomplished not in an eternal adventure (in Ulysses' journey, where the tempted ego can 'listen to the song of sirens without compromising the return to the island', *ibid.*, 33) but in responsibility.

²¹ This might apply to cases such as the one in *Crime and Punishment* which Levinas remarks on (briefly mentioned above), where the narrator sees insatiable compassion in the eyes of Sonia Marmeladova looking at Raskolnikov in despair. There and then, in the spectator's seat, one can have an experience of pure Desire: uplifting yet lacking the essential characteristics of the event that will actually make the Desired 'hollow me, nourish me with new hungers'. Levinas, 'Signification and Sense', 30.

the ethics of art, light is thrown on certain processes in the signification of art which are otherwise not directly revealed to us in Levinas's writing. It fosters the understanding that reception, in all its complexities, does indeed entail ethical insight, though with a difficult ontological standing, comprising the *experience* of an *event* that is not itself given in the work. What exactly does it mean to experience the ethical? One wonders if Levinas would allow for such a midway position. To better understand this version of *the ethical as implied in immanence*, one has to acquaint oneself with Levinas's complex picture of ethical signification in art. Upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that Levinas has room for such an ethical experience in his portrayal of the 'consciousness' of art, poised between the anonymous event and the critical verbalization of this event.

I.4. THE ETHICAL EVENT, THE AESTHETIC EVENT, AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ETHICAL IN ART: LEVINAS'S ACCOUNT OF AESTHETIC 'CONSCIOUSNESS'

Concerning the critical verbalization of the anonymous event, it has to be kept in mind that it carries an important function: the critical *discourse* over the work (for example, on the way home from the theatre, discussing the book with my partner over a cup of coffee) is supposed to reverse the ethical closure of the aesthetic and reintroduce the immanent structures into ethical transcendence available in real-life encounters. Rather than panoramic Being fostered by the ostentation of the aesthetic, Levinas goes for radical heterogeneity and sees it re-established in the activity of criticism. The ethical openness lost in the completion of the aesthetic is achieved in the critical engagement with art, in my failing attempts to gather the 'contents of the experience' in the challenge of the face-to-face. To this end, the aesthetic gives way to an *ethical event in* – and not over and against – *art*. The reader should be attentive to the hidden riches of Levinas's proposition at the end of his art essay on the 'value of images for philosophy' (*RS*, p. 13) to be grasped by interpretation, on untruth being the source of ethical truth. Rather than taking Levinas's point about philosophical criticism as a quasi-Platonic step, as it were, 'correcting' the 'unruly' impersonal core from the outside, one should recognize its potential: the critical act finalizing the course of phenomenization in art. It is, arguably, in discourse about the work of art with an Other that the work is realized in its ethical fullness in as much as the saturated wealth of image-sense is finally articulated in significations. As Levinas argues in 'Reality and Its Shadow', criticism 'has its source in the mind of the listener'; it is felt in an 'irresistible need to speak' (*RS*, p. 1). The practice of art does not end with solitary reception; rather, it expands to the embedding of the work in

inter-personal communication. Here, perhaps, lies the creed of an ethically critical understanding of art.²²

What about that which precedes critical discourse, before the transcendence of words takes effect? Considering that the job of criticism is to finalize the phenomenon, giving it a finishing touch in ethical concreteness, questions arise concerning the foundations. Concerning solitary reception, the key word is definitely anonymity; Levinas's contribution to phenomenological aesthetics is marked, above all, by his rendering of the aesthetic in the realm of the *ilya* (there is), qualifying it as an inaccessible *aesthetic event*. His ethical critique is heavily based on linking irresponsibility with our rhythmical participation in the spectacle, where 'the whole situation and all its articulations are in a dark light, *present*' (RS, p. 4). In many ways (particularly in modern painting) this is a brute and impassive presence staging an insomniac state of mind. One is held watching, absorbed in the 'rustling of the unavoidable being'.²³

With novels and films, the situation is more complex than this. The point, if one continues with Levinas's argument, is that none of the ways of escape is *properly* given for the insomniac of time-art. Certainly, one enjoys similar liberties here to those of the thinking subject in as much as one has the capacity of living a temporal unfolding, raising distinct instants, in a sense breaking and suspending the ubiquity of Being in a work. Bare presence is not necessarily oppressive in the appeasement provided by time-art (see RS, p. 12). The shadow might not directly manifest itself; in certain cases it is covered over.²⁴ Even so, this is only an ersatz

²² This is also why, it seems to me, Levinas can speak of art in contradictory – simultaneously positive and negative – ways. While he likes to criticize art, he constantly relies on it to express his philosophical points (making references, for example, to Rodin, Shakespeare, the classics of Russian literature, and Proust). Behind this curious phenomenon lies a thesis on the essential ambiguity of art. This thesis is to be understood mainly in phenomenological aesthetic terms (emphatically not as a thesis on the confusing 'ambiguity' of art): while Levinas denounces the aesthetic in art, he champions art properly understood, the home of ethical plenitude. For more on this, see my 'Transcendence of Words'. For other instances of his emphasizing the essential ambiguity of art and the critical reintroduction of the aesthetic into interpersonal communication, see Petitdemange, 'L'art, ombre de l'être', 88–93; Tanja Staehler, 'Images and Shadows: Levinas and the Ambiguity of the Aesthetic', *Estetika: The Central European Journal of Aesthetics* 47 (2010): 123–43; and Cohen, 'Some Reflections' and 'Uncovering the Difficult Universality'.

²³ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 61. The translator renders the verb *veiller* as 'to watch' and 'watchfulness'; I follow his choice of words here. (Later on, he uses 'wakefulness' and 'night watch' for the noun *la veille*.)

²⁴ Levinas mentions classical art as an example in which the caricature of being is corrected, (classical) beauty being able to absorb its shadow. This suspension of our exposure to brute Being is of course only temporary: the perfection of an image, Levinas argues, only reinforces its 'stupidness as an idol' (RS, p. 8). My point is that something similar is happening in time-art, where the dissimulation of the caricature is maintained in highly sophisticated narratives creating the illusion of time reproduced.

time with an ersatz subject posited, providing no lasting refuge: these limitations of *the meanwhile* were discussed above with respect to the temporality of the novel. They will sooner or later come to the fore in the intentionality of the work, as the insomniac side resurfaces despite the comforts of the work. One suddenly realizes one's exposure to the presence of the spectacle: that I am, to use Levinas's words, 'the object rather than the subject of an anonymous thought'. The *ilya* returns in the form of a bad dream (see *RS*, p. 4), just like in the unexpected illuminations that dawn on one who suddenly awakens in the darkness of the cinema or to the printed words on the pages of a book, in acts of sobering up, in which the impersonality of the event, as it were, slaps one in the face. We become aware that, in our fascination, we are facing the 'universal fact of the *there is*, which encompasses things and consciousnesses'.²⁵

One cannot overemphasize the importance of these insights (borrowed from Levinas's reading of vigilance in *Existence and Existents* and applied here by me, somewhat boldly perhaps, to his reading of art). On account of them, there is a lot to learn about the unfolding of anonymity in time-art. In this case, concerning the spectator's suddenly sobering up and bewilderment, it becomes clear that the mute receptive phase is not entirely dominated by anonymity, since there is an abrupt split at the heart of impersonal presence, which gives rise to the ethical in the long run. There is a phase of disinterestedness with higher levels of alertness: consciousness steps up before the picture topples over onto it.

Following Levinas's indications, it has to be understood that in these flashes of confusing insight one is already detached: one becomes aware (*prends conscience*) of what has preceded this by stepping back from the realm of anonymity.²⁶ One is no longer participating in the spectacle when having an experience (Levinas's choice of word) of being an object of anonymous

²⁵ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 61. Regarding its historical context, Levinas seems to connect to the tradition of disinterestedness (Kant) and spectatorship (Schopenhauer and Bergson); by laying the emphasis on the encounter with pure Being in art, he arguably gives these strands of thought an existential-metaphysical spin. On his connections with Kant, see Jacques Taminiaux, 'Intersection between Four Phenomenological Approaches of the Work of Art,' in *Fenomenología y Hermenéutica: Actas del I Congreso Internacional de Fenomenología y Hermenéutica*, ed. Sylvia Eyzaguirre Tafrá (Las Condes: Universidad Andrés Bello, 2008), 27–28.

²⁶ Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 63. I am reading the text closely; all the following quotations are from the same page.

thought. As Levinas reminds us, the 'ebbing of consciousness'²⁷ is necessary to reflect on this depersonalized state. Apparently, a subsequent phase is required in order for the *il y a* – by definition counter-representational, impossible to bring back into the unity of consciousness – to appear. Indeed, the main issue here is the emergence of an event where there is no real consciousness whatsoever, only anonymity; there is no experience proper belonging to someone. As he says on the same page, 'In this anonymous nightwatch [*veille* ...] I am completely exposed to being [...]. In key moments, there is literally no subject reading the book or watching the film: it is not *my* event. It is no exaggeration to argue, in concert with Levinas's description of *the night*: 'it watches'. The only way I can have an experience of being an object and become conscious of this anonymous state is when, as Levinas emphasizes, the I appears on the scene, detached from anonymity as a result of a movement, and a distance is created. The stranglehold of this strange state 'has already been loosened, in spite of the annoyance or pain which can persist, the moment that I can take these states as happening to me, that when I catch sight of a subject for them'.

If we can believe Levinas here, the intimate course of reception entails not only the inaccessible aesthetic core but also *a minimal form of subjectivity in wakefulness (veille)* tearing into the anonymous and providing shelter from it.²⁸ The ego, swept away in front of the *there is*, must appear on the scene. As such, it founds the foregoing aesthetic event and initiates the ensuing ethical event on the horizon. It seems that one cannot give an exhaustive account of aesthetic 'consciousness' in Levinas by merely making reference to participation in anonymous Being and by recognizing the phenomenological potential of criticism, of critical discourse ethically concretizing the phenomenon. There is a crucial moment linking these two phases in the emergence of meaning.

²⁷ Ebbing (*reflux*) clearly stands for the receding part of the tidal change, away from us, back to the sea, which might seem to contradict the importance attributed to this move of appearing in consciousness. Yet, Levinas's point is precisely that by reflecting impersonal vigilance in the ebbing of consciousness, consciousness necessarily abandons the impersonal core. Other than gaining, there is also the sense of losing something in this genetic process of manifestation – which might explain the preference for 'ebb' and not 'flow' (*flux*) here. As for Levinas's genetic sensibilities, it might be best to quote him: 'Our affirmation of an anonymous vigilance goes beyond the *phenomena*, which already presupposes an ego, and thus eludes descriptive phenomenology. Here description would make use of terms while striving to go beyond their consistency [...]. A method is called for such that thought is invited to go beyond intuition. We can be more or less close to this limit. In certain awakenings of delirium, in certain paradoxes of madness, we can surprise this impersonal "consciousness" into which insomnia sinks.' Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 62.

It is important to bear in mind that this story on the sudden emergence of attentiveness and consciousness's separation from Being is at least as much about the awakening of the work of art as the awakening of the viewer. Other than my 'safety', the focus here is on the birth of the ethical. Responding to the anonymous aesthetic event, and registering it, and then heading towards the discursive articulation of the event in critical activity, this intermediary plays an important role in the ethical signification of art (of which Levinas's portrayal seems, I think, accurate but heavily understated).²⁹ It is as though ethical knowledge, excluded from the tightness of the image, should take effect already in reception, to be articulated by criticism later.³⁰ Keeping in mind that, according to Levinas's model, the closure of the aesthetic is ethically liberated in the critical discourse, one may duly suspect that there lies at least an ethical moment in the mute receptive phase: a saturated image-sense, as it were, forcing its way towards articulation and ethical concreteness.³¹

Otherwise, it should be inferred that the faces of art are understood merely as aesthetic entities and reception is exempt from substantial ethical insight (a rather shaky thesis for Levinasians and non-Levinasians alike). One would have to work with the difficult hypothesis that the critical articulation of the work is carried out in a ground-breaking fashion, as it were, cracking the capsule of a uniformly anonymous event and introducing ethics into a sphere with no traces of transcendence whatsoever.

It is certainly not difficult to find artworks to substantiate this point. A number of films, for instance, provide an opportunity to study not only the rudimentariness but also the hidden advances of the ethical experience of the encounter. I shall

²⁹ It is, in this respect, indicative that, in the second section of the art essay (where he describes our rhythmical captivation, and, to this end, gives his account of aesthetic consciousness), Levinas talks about a 'passage from oneself to anonymity' (RS, p. 4).

³⁰ 'Reality and Its Shadow' was written with the intention of, among other things, challenging 'the contemporary dogma of knowledge through art' (RS, p. 2), by which Levinas primarily targeted the engagement attributed to prose writing by Sartre in *What Is Literature?*, 7–37.

³¹ It is, possibly, in such a critical-philosophical intervention (where the written text is meant to trigger discourse) that Levinas sees metaphysical Desire confirmed in Dostoyevsky's novel. Liberated from the confines of the aesthetic event, the critic now understands the point in the narrator's choice of words; he realizes that the narrator of the novel speaks about 'insatiable' – not 'inexhaustible' – compassion in Sonja's eyes. He moves from the inarticulate experience to the event of the ethical in describing the encounter as follows: 'As if the compassion that goes from Sonia to Raskolnikov were a hunger that Raskolnikov's presence nourished beyond all saturation, by increasing that hunger, infinitely.' Levinas, 'Signification and Sense', 30. With these words, Levinas brings to light an ethical insight that persists only in a reduced fashion in the fascination induced by images. He articulates and concretizes something that was, if you like, 'merely' lived through and experienced.

now discuss how the *unnarratable*, the primordial event of ethics, is actually made perceptible in films, such as this one, with a high concentration of faces.

II

II.1. ETHICAL EXPERIENCE IN FILM: NEED VERSUS DESIRE

I am watching Herbert Ross's *Play It Again, Sam* (1972). This film has a very special opening: Allan Felix (played by Woody Allen) is at the cinema, sitting in the dark, watching the closing scene of *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942). In other words, there is a film in the film. Allan is utterly moved. He is staring at the screen in absolute awe, his jaw has dropped (fig. 1). In a way, there is nothing surprising about this; his amazement with this classic – its main characters and the drama of it – is easy to understand: *Play It Again, Sam* is about a small, neurotic guy and his difficulties with finding a partner in life, while the Bogart of *Casablanca* (playing the character of Rick Blaine) serves as an idol and also a guide in his adventures with women. Allan, the nerdy film critic, desperately wants to behave like the *film noir* hero (cool and domineering) and find love.

But this may not be the whole story. Even if the film on the whole revolves around certain unfulfilled *needs* of the main character, a lot more is at stake: the viewer is invited to look beyond the conventional desire-scheme in the opening scene. The plot of the film definitely hinges on the satisfaction of Allan's sexual cravings and his self-realization as a man; it would, however, be a mistake to ignore the presence of other – in this case moral, metaphysical – qualities. I am, of course, referring to a basic Levinasian category: it is perhaps not far-fetched to discover an insatiable and dis-interested Desire *on the fringes* of these opening frames. The Levinasian theory of need versus Desire substantiates



Figure 1: Allan watching *Casablanca*. *Play It Again, Sam*, directed by Herbert Ross, 1972.

such a complication. This phenomenon has to do not so much with the plot, providing insights in its sudden twists and turns, as with one's basic disposition to faces in the film. Long before the viewer becomes acquainted with the story and gets an idea of where it is going, he or she is exposed to a challenge that presumably belongs to another order of phenomena. Prior to the emergence of the Woody Allen character with its parodical existential problematic and burlesque, there is an exposure to something wholly other taking effect. In other words, I am not trying to give a Levinasian reading of a Woody Allen movie (which would no doubt verge on the comical). My intention is simply to indicate that, before the usual hermeneutic cycles of the film unfold, there is a possibility that the hidden but all the more fundamental appeal of the face will come to the fore in these opening frames. There is a phenomenological moment, outside the whirlpool of meanings, which is essentially ethical.

As Levinas emphasizes, most of our desires and loves are not pure, and, in saying this, he is working his way towards a *Desire on which all other need rests* (*TI*, p. 33). This primordially of Desire with respect to need can be well demonstrated with respect to time. As Levinas sees it, the temporality presupposed by the labouring body, whose goal is to become a *me* in the very midst of the *other*, is actually not maintained in the desire scheme of a *conatus* temporarily satisfying and then recreating itself. However paradoxical it sounds, the time of the life of the existent is ultimately given in metaphysical Desire for the exterior, setting out an 'uncharted future before me'.³² It is the broader metaphysical setting that, as it were, enframes the economy of the ego and sets it in motion (keeping in mind that the movement will ultimately surpass the level of egoism and head towards the Other). There is, as anyone can experience it in the 'strange desire of the Other' (*TI*, p. 179), an attraction opening up that clearly does not coincide with need and is situated beyond the scope of satisfaction or unsatisfaction. Desire qualifies, in Levinas's poetic terms, as 'a hunger that nourishes itself not with bread but with hunger itself' (*TI*, p. 179). *Somewhere on the margins*, this hunger is also tangible in *Casablanca* and its intertext from the 1970s.

That it is not entirely inadequate to detect the presence of metaphysical Desire in *Play It Again, Sam* is confirmed by the lengthy and direct encounters with the face, which are provided at the beginning of the film. The position of

³² 'Let us again note the difference between need and Desire: in need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one's teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me. Indeed the time presupposed by need is provided me by Desire; human need already rests on Desire. Need has thus the time to convert this *other* into the *same* by labor.' (*TI*, p. 117)

the viewer(s) comes into focus: both Allan captivated by the difficult break-up of the love affair of the screen heroine and hero and the actual viewer confronted with the reflections of *Casablanca* in Allan's grimaces are exposed to detailed and long-lasting shots of the face. Not only the fuzzy film critic but also me, the real critic, watching *Play It Again, Sam* (seeing the actions of the film reflected in Allan's glasses, the muscles of his face twitching, reacting with great sensitivity to what is playing on the screen) gets intimidated. At times, it feels like we are inundated by this spectacle of faces. In these intimate encounters, in the close-ups of the embracing Ingrid Bergman (playing Ilsa Laszlo) and Humphrey Bogart (fig. 2) or the enchanted Woody Allen, the viewer might easily get the sense of witnessing something momentous. Something numinous, a persistent but ineffable presence, perhaps of a higher nature, comes to the fore in the opening scene. In these moments, we are looking at the screen attentively, and yet *what we are looking at is not what we can see*.

From a Levinasian angle, it could be argued that all these manifestations of facial activity induce a movement towards a yonder, a metaphysically desired other, 'something else entirely' (TI, p. 33). Behind the voluptuousness to be satisfied lies an absolute Desire, the object of which is invisible and, as Levinas puts it, does not fulfil the Desire but deepens it. While need springs from the emptiness of the subject, Desire does not: it originates from its object, being an 'aspiration that the Desirable animates' (TI, p. 34). On coming into contact with these faces, a certain exigency surfaces in the viewer's consciousness. The spectator (be it Allan or the actual viewer) is challenged by an element of transcendence, which is nevertheless part of a larger course of the search for truth, except that this truth is by definition unattainable, the union of the known and the knower, and thus totality, never being realized (TI, p. 60). One does not acquire anything definitive at the sight of these faces, yet one has a sense of having learnt

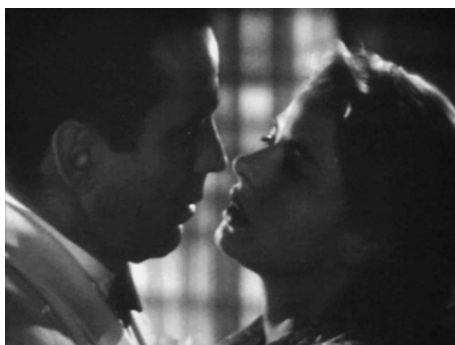


Figure 2: Bergman and Bogart in *Casablanca*. *Casablanca*, directed by Michael Curtiz, 1942.

something. Although neither the source nor the content can be named, there is growing certainty that one is taking part in an event of knowing in which truth arises. More precisely, there is a sense of being taught, as the feeling of being handed something down certifies. Presumably, this is what is happening in the reception of this film, with the strange and ineffable presence, a call of sorts addressed to the viewer, taking effect in it.³³

In this respect, another good example is the famous piano scene of the 'proto-film', *Casablanca*, in which Ilsa suddenly appears at the bar and asks Sam to play 'As Time Goes By' again, against the will of Rick (fig. 3). The viewer is presented with an equally detailed long-shot on Ilsa, in which her radiating presence comes to the fore. One wonders what exactly this phenomenon consists in. To a large extent, the aesthetics of the setting (the atmospheric elements of the bar, such as the lamp in the corner, and the way these are effectuated in the black-and-white film), plus her outfit, with the glimmering brooch and earrings, are accountable for the elevation one feels in Bergman's company. Still, it would be a major simplification to ascribe it all to these elements. Is it her beauty that



Figure 3: The 'Play It Again, Sam' scene from *Casablanca*.

³³ Here I am discussing the ethical relation in art mainly in terms of Levinas's mature work, with the face and Desire as the centre of attention. Naturally, the same could be done in the language of his later work, hinting at some kind of proximity unfolding in spectatorship. As Michele Aaron argues with respect to the viewer's encountering others, especially their suffering on the screen, 'The other's pain is both a commonplace of cinema but also something that we are always implicated in, not only as consumers but also as consensual parties in the generation of characters' suffering for our own entertainment. Spectatorship is not ethically interesting but intrinsically ethical.' Michele Aaron, *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On* (London: Wallflower Press, 2007), 112. Spectatorship is imbued with the problematic of inter-subjectivity, 'the individual's encounter with someone beyond themselves'. Here, Aaron refers to an obviously extensive and important problematic (perhaps even the problem of problems in the ethical phenomenology of art) in her short study of Levinas.

speaks here or a certain tenderness and grace opening up in her voice, gently inducing – in her charming Swedish-accented English – the reluctant pianist to play the song?³⁴ *To what extent is our attraction 'aesthetic'?* Obviously, it is difficult to account for human attraction without touching on the expression surfacing in the human face. The insufficiency of the traditional terms of aesthetics concerning a female human being (for example, beauty, grace, sublimity, subtlety, comeliness)³⁵ is evident – one is groping for the right words here. The question arises whether the source of our difficulties in giving an exhaustive account of our attraction is to be located in the established aesthetic-ontological order itself in which, as it were, the right 'phenomena' are to be identified – and which is well under siege here in Ilsa's entreating face. As this scene shows, what is at stake in *Play It Again, Sam* lies beyond sensibility and visibility.

II.2. THE FACE-TO-FACE IN ART

With this brief analysis of the film, my intention has been to demonstrate the complexities dormant in the ethics of art: even if the issue is about a disqualified experience of an encounter in an artwork, this experience may on occasion maintain an ethical agenda quite close to its eventual counterpart, retaining features like the call and the ensuing Desire for something other opening in the face on the screen. Although it has to do – as Levinas would have it – with capturing an essentially diachronic situation in a fixed and limited time sequence, converting what is essentially inconvertible into a story, that is, producing it a totalitarian, ontological manner, these faces may well divest themselves of their aesthetic disposition, come alive, and signify.

The reason for such liberation (despite the clear shortcomings of plasticity) can be found, as I have sought to demonstrate, in the genesis of ethical signification and the promise it carries. These feeble instances of ethical meaning, elevation felt in front of the faces of the film, are hard to locate; it all happens in a transitory manner. It is a case example of ethical experience gained in art: nascent ethical knowledge with the ethical implied in immanence and yet prompting transcendence, as if it were forcing its way out of the tight confines of image

³⁴ Ilsa: 'Play it once, Sam. For old times' sake.' Sam: 'I don't know what you mean, Miss Ilsa.' Ilsa: 'Play it, Sam. Play "As Time Goes By".' Sam: 'Oh, I can't remember it, Miss Ilsa. I'm a little rusty on it.' Ilsa: 'I'll hum it for you...' 'Casablanca (1942): Play it Sam, Play As Time Goes By. Ingrid Bergman, Humphrey Bogart, Sinatra sings', YouTube video, 4:51, from the film *Casablanca* (1942), dir. Michael Curtis, posted by 'pamfilyam', 17 September 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Do2olZ49M54.

³⁵ See Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *A History of Six Ideas: An Essay in Aesthetics*, trans. Christopher Kasparek (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1980), 168–74.

sense in the direction of ethical signification. It has to do with a situation where the ethical emerges from the depths of the aesthetic in a totalized manner with the potential of ethical knowledge properly understood to be articulated in the face-to-face of verbal critical activity. Even though these encounters with Ilsa and Allan reach full-blown ethical concreteness in discourse, where the grip of aesthetic incantation is finally broken, the preceding points should not be disregarded. Much is prefigured of the ethical event in the solitary phase; it is as though ethical alterity, well on its way to the fore, flickered in front of the viewer in rare moments of reception. Ethical experience is in a conversation not only with the impersonal core that feeds it but also with an ethical plenitude in criticism, where it is all headed.

This ethical experience may be described in a more structural manner, focusing on its intermediary status in ethical signification and excluding, for a second, its genetic context (its forgotten foundations in anonymity or the promises of discourse). Facing Ilsa or Allan on the screen induces something like a traumatic change in the viewer, though this change is quite far from the trauma characteristic of the encounter with the Other in the world. There is something in the operations of art, in the receptive situation, and, particularly, in the spectator's position, which saves me from the real weight of the challenge. There is no sense of being questioned (in the moral sense) as it normally happens in the face that defies all my attempts to grasp it in my meaning-giving activities. There is no real opposition to the Other's resistance surfacing in it (see *TI*, pp. 196–67). The comforts of the cinema, the excitement and appeasement I draw from witnessing, that is, not taking part in the events, not getting fully involved, spare me from what would look like a downside of the encounter. In my comfortable seat, I await a call that does not shatter my interiority. In the face-to-face of art the door of interiority is, strictly speaking, never broken down: the force of exteriority, its incommensurability, is never validated. Owing to the safety provided by the spectator's seat, the face-to-face of art looks all too much like a phenomenon in the traditional sense pertaining to the totalized order.³⁶

³⁶ More often than not, the world appears in its complete self-givenness, it stands on its own feet similarly to the phenomenon in the history of Western thought, as manifested even in the work of Husserl. Levinas launches an attack on the Husserlian idea of signification and intelligibility intrinsic to content, or more expressively, the 'luminosity of content' (*TI*, p. 95). He wants to substitute the model of givenness as auto-representation (in which things are simply given in relation to a consciousness) with a scheme that takes its inspiration from the Other, from hetero-affection. 'For a signification to be given *Leibhaft*, to exhaust its being in an exhaustive apparition, is absurdity.' (*TI*, p. 96) To have meaning for him is essentially to be in relation to an absolute, vis-à-vis some alterity, which is not absorbed in perception (*TI*, p. 97).

The spectator is given no opportunity to face his or her own insufficiency in the challenging but never defying encounter with the Other; whatever rupture is realized in the field of his or her subjectivity, it is easily 'mended in the horizons outlined by needs' (TI, p. 179). Does one not tend to go home with a sense of 'satisfaction' even after disturbing exposures identified as the 'value' of the show? The appeal is tamed in the schematism of cultural signification³⁷ where Being is collected in the totality of manifestation, giving way to a never-ending hermeneutics.

And yet, the ethical opening of the ontological-aesthetic order is pending. In a most curious fashion, I cannot spare myself from and I am responsive to the *elevation* implied in this experience of reception: the involvement with the Other is effectuated in a Desire very much desired by me, the viewer-existent. If one goes into enough depth, it becomes clear that it is the ethics of the face that, in a weird fashion, dominates the consciousness of the beholder. The face on the screen does not behave as a normal object of vision in my understanding, that is, given to me, subordinated to my rule of prescribing an identity to all otherness, and as such pertaining to the order of the Same. What Levinas says about its real-life counterpart holds here, too: the face is 'present in its refusal to be contained' (TI, p. 194). It is an entity that is not seen; the alterity of the Other overflows and dominates the sphere of the Same. These faces retain a strong presence. To use Levinas's words, in reception one gives way not only to the neutrality of the image, but also to 'a solicitation that concerns me by its destitution and its Height' (TI, p. 200). The faces on the screen might evoke only limited responsibility; still, in so doing, they go beyond purely phenomenal form at one moment and act, strictly speaking, without the intermediary of the image. Whatever the weaknesses of this encounter, the talk is about expression that, as Levinas puts it a few lines below, 'does not radiate as a splendour that spreads unbeknown to the radiating being'. In a word, it is not a matter of beauty or the sublime in these fleeting insights. One is exposed to the interlocutor, which covers a non-aesthetic reaction, that is, not relating to a being offered in representation that 'remains a possibility of appearance' (TI, p. 200). In the reception of the moving image, faces impose themselves by appealing to the viewer with their destitution

³⁷ Levinas, 'Signification and Sense', 18. See Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture', in *Entre Nous: Essays on Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Barbara Harshav and Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 2006), 154: 'Culture can, first, be interpreted – and this is the privileged dimension of the Greco-Roman West (and its possibility of universalization) – as an intention to remove the *otherness* of Nature, which, alien and previous, surprises and strikes the immediate identity that is the *Same* of the human Self.'

and nudity, in ways that make it difficult for one to be unresponsive to the appeal.³⁸

One wonders about the exact ethical phenomenological status of these experiences of the face-to-face in film; the question arises of how precisely these instances of ethical quasi-knowledge surface in aesthetic reception. The face-to-face offered by art is obviously a special one, not the same, but not entirely different from the real one. Attentiveness comes to the fore in art in a way that is comparable to, but not the same as, what surfaces in reality. It is emphatically about attentiveness as offered in art – attentiveness qua art – with important similarities and differences in the purport and direction of the reduction initiated. From a phenomenological perspective interested in the minute shifts in the experiential field, the limited yet undeniable presence of exteriority should be recognized in the faces of the movie.

I am certainly aware of the risks of proposing such a multifaceted agenda. By insisting – together with the aesthetic and thematic concerns – on an ethical call that goes beyond the framework of need and sensibility yet falls short of the ethical event, I am exposing myself to all kinds of problems. It is difficult to argue for a type of elevation that is of a clearly non-aesthetic but ethical nature while not meeting the basic characteristics of the encounter (for example, incommensurability). Yet I wonder if these fears are not rooted in a static understanding of art, ignoring its underlyingly complex nature, in which the aesthetic and the ethical programmes are intertwined, the non-truth of the image serving – on Levinas's suggestion – as a basis of the truth of art (*RS*, p. 13).

I find myself, for similar reasons, in a strange situation with respect to scholarly attempts to establish close creative relations between Levinas's thinking on art

³⁸ Shame might be a good example to illustrate the ties that connect the viewer to the faces. Who has not turned away from the screen intentionally awakening a shameful situation, feeling for the person humiliated in front of one? Or who has not stared at the screen, witnessing a character confronted with an Other's shame? In the example of *Crime and Punishment* mentioned above, Levinas hints at the possibility of a quasi-traumatic encounter in an artwork discussing the compassion felt by Sonia for Raskolnikov. In general, he wonders where the shock comes from when one indifferently passes by the Other, 'under the gaze of Others'. Levinas, 'Signification and Sense', 29. The relation with the Other, claims Levinas, empties me of myself, yet reveals fresh resources in me, a certain sense of wealth. This is, as was argued above, Desire not satisfied but deepened by the desired: goodness, as such. As this literary example used in Levinas's philosophical work testifies, filling in often means getting involved in the situation, that is, becoming vulnerable in relation to the Other. There is – to use the words of the section 'Ethics and the Face' again – definitely an act of expression in which the being that imposes itself with its appeal 'does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness' (*TI*, p. 200). In the work, one is attentive to the elevation, in other words, essentially interested in being invaded by an appeal coming from the exterior.

and film. Whereas I entirely agree with the goals of these scholars, that is, to explore the potential of a film to go beyond the classic understanding of the ontology of the cinematic image (as put forward in Bazin's work) and realize a transcendent dimension in film,³⁹ I am sceptical of the possibility of doing this in an easy, uncomplicated way, without paying heed to the complexities of ethical signification in works of art. Developing a non-ontological, ethical reading of film on the basis of Levinas's reaction against totalization in language is a welcome but highly problematic move, film being a visual-aesthetic entity. It is a matter – as I have sought to explain – of trying to locate an ethical event in the experience of the ethical in a work of art, which is by definition impossible – though not an entirely hopeless manoeuvre, on condition that the genetic unfolding of reception, with the seeds of the ethical germinating in its core, is taken into account. The source of the problem here is most probably methodological. As Geoff Bennington implies on account of the early Derrida and Husserl, the question is whether reading – or, in our case, viewing – is, or only exemplifies, the essential asymmetry of the ethical relation.⁴⁰ I would certainly go with the latter option (also explained here by Bennington): the alterity of the text (film) cannot be absolute alterity (otherwise it would not be recognized as a text, would not call for reading) but it is some kind of alterity, as its ultimately irreducible nature defying any attempt at deciphering proves. Art is not the face; it is to some extent like the face. In the light of this basic insight, Cooper's efforts to map out the Dardenne brothers' problematic ('how to make optics and the visible world speak what is essential to ethical human relations but which cannot be encompassed by vision')⁴¹ seem to offer an exciting yet somewhat desperate approach. Cooper investigates a list of cinematographic solutions in various films by the Dardennes which ethically challenge the clichés of cinema:⁴² the camera showing the backs of characters, bodies overflowing the frame, the 'body camera' filming body movements and actions, and so forth – all these moments are meant to 'flesh out an ethics at the borders of the visible world', surpassing plastic form.⁴³ These instances of obliteration challenge in one way or another the dominance of the aesthetic, including a basic change in the attitudes, torpedoing any possibility of identification by the viewer.⁴⁴ Yet one wonders if this Dardennean

³⁹ Sam B. Girgus, 'Beyond Ontology: Levinas and the Ethical Frame in Film', *Film-Philosophy* 11 (2007): 90, 96.

⁴⁰ Geoff Bennington, 'Deconstruction and Ethics', in *Deconstructions: A User's Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 67.

⁴¹ Sarah Cooper, 'Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers', *Film-Philosophy* 11 (2007): 69.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

attempt to keep the viewer at arm's length from the character – not letting one identify with the character, that is, take the place of the character, see as the character sees – would indeed bring on proximity (as Cooper suggests) or perhaps only some kind of analogy with the extreme forms of responsibility outlined in *Otherwise Than Being*. Certainly, the obliterations that the Dardennes rely on in their ethical project will go against my 'murderous' powers to grasp (*TI*, p. 47), my inclination to have an experience of this filmed Other's perceptions and vision. Still, it can hardly be argued that the ethical relation inherent to spectatorship is exempt from thematization, the desire to 'kill', reflecting, as it were, a 'non-allergic relationship with alterity' (*TI*, p. 47), since the silence of the cinema is simply lacking in any true exteriority that would challenge the spectator.⁴⁵

More needs to be said about the attentiveness of art to validate my point. Before I continue my argument and give a more precise description of this borderline phenomenon, I shall briefly address a competitive reading of the faces of art.

II.3. ON THE SUBLIMITY OF FACES

As I admitted, my proposal for a genetic account of the ethical signification of art could seem too ambitious: it tries to cover a situation in which there is a call addressed to a viewer of limited ethical capability (not up to the ethical event) yet disassociated from any grounding in the aesthetic. Along these lines, my reading of faces could be challenged by the Kantian sublime. On account of its unique style of signification, the face may be meaningfully taken to be a sublime entity, an essentially aesthetic phenomenon with strong affinities towards the ethical. In its quasi-resistance, it may behave in similar ways to the dynamically sublime: elevation is experienced when the mind runs into negative exhibition, the awakening of the ideas of reason (for example, freedom) by way of the aesthetic.⁴⁶ Pleasure arises despite the difficulties, in this case the face

⁴⁵ Of film theorists writing on Levinas, perhaps Saxton best articulates the caesura that needs to be drawn, to my mind, between the undeniable capacities of art to provide an ethical experience and the equally undeniable limits of art in expressing the ethical event. Saxton does not think that film and its unique features (including, 'the delay between filming and viewing, the absence of the imaged subject, and the duplicability of the image') could set in motion an encounter between viewers and images meeting the standards of Levinasian ethics, that is, accounting for the confrontation that one's exposure to the Other implies. See Libby Saxton, 'Blinding Visions: Levinas, Ethics, Faciality', in *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, ed. Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton (London: Routledge, 2009), 104. On the other hand, she claims that films like Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and their cinematographic apparatus challenge basic tenets behind Levinasian iconoclasm, such as the one on vision being inherently totalizing (*ibid.*, 105).

⁴⁶ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 135.

(essentially uncontained) being counter-purposive to our sensibility and cognition. In fact, Kant calls for abstract ways of exhibition in the field of art, too, disqualifying overly sentimental novels, plays that, in his view, display noble attitudes without reservation, and thereby 'make the heart languid and insensitive to the stern precept of duty [...] incapable of any respect for the dignity of the humanity in our own person.'⁴⁷ He speaks highly of the proscription of images on the following pages, which makes his stance look even more relevant to Levinas's aesthetic problematic.⁴⁸

It is surely no use comparing two systems which, despite their deep-seated dialogue, have essentially different goals. Levinas challenges transcendental philosophy in its roots in his ethical project, giving the right of way to the Other under all circumstances in signification. Still, as a means of stressing the distinguishing features of the two agendas and continuing their dialogue, it may be worth underlining a couple of important points in Levinas. First of all, for Levinas, the face is not an aesthetic phenomenon, that is, its validity does not have to do with delight surfacing on account of its form or formlessness, the failure or success of intuiting it. This narrative of increasing clarity in the intentional thematization of experience⁴⁹ dominates the Kantian sublime as far as the situation concerns relating to something that does not match our sensibility and cognition. The face for Levinas, however, is not a phenomenon (or it is the phenomenon par excellence)⁵⁰ since its purport is not to be understood with respect to its grasp or content, but ethically, in its questioning presence, as an entry into unconditional alterity in the economy of being. 'The face is not a modality of quiddity, an answer to a question, but the correlative of what is prior to every question.' (*TI*, p. 177) As is demonstrated by the position of the 'Exteriority

⁴⁷ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁸ I thank Nicolas de Warren (University of Leuven) for indicating this possibility of treating the faces of art.

⁴⁹ Levinas denies the equation drawn between intelligibility and the manifestation of Being as has been done in the entire course of Western Philosophy. As Levinas sees it, if manifestation were the sole foundation of knowledge, Being would be nothing more than a tendency towards clarity in the intentional thematization of experience. There would be no validity outside this framework: 'This is a thematization from which derive, or to which are susceptible, all potentialities of experience, as they press toward or await thematization.' Emmanuel Levinas, 'God and Philosophy', in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 57. The adventure of experience would be about the clarification of the obscure; the question of Being and truth would be meaningful only in a framework of totality. Of course, Levinas is trying to bring to the fore the dis-interestedness of the exteriority looming on the horizons of consciousness, something that cannot be accounted for intentionally and assembled in consciousness, yet is constitutive in knowledge.

⁵⁰ 'Experience deserves its name only if it transports us beyond what constitutes our nature.' Emmanuel Levinas, 'Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity', in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 47.

of the Face' section (following the section on separation) in the line of the argument of *Totality and Infinity*, the face is meant to challenge an experience totally absorbed in enjoyment and initiate it into transcendence, that is, fully blown (ethical) being. It plays a central role in the emergence of the existent, in its subjection, by introducing this being to questioning, contradiction, a movement coming from the other: 'the exteriority of a being is inscribed in its essence' (*TI*, p. 196). As such, the face itself is language, reason, and thinking. I have tried to emphasize this ubiquitous and overflowing character of the face vis-à-vis the Same.⁵¹ The second point is that this shift towards the ethical can also be felt in the style of the reception of the face. A certain upbeatness surrounds the challenge in Levinas, not necessarily limiting the freedom of the Same but founding and justifying it. The opposition with the face is, as Levinas emphasizes, not validated in a negative fashion, exercising violence, but following a more positive, ethical agenda of investing freedom into responsibility. The relation is ultimately maintained 'in peace with this absolute alterity' (*TI*, p. 197, which is an instance where the advances of Levinas's face over and against Sartre's objectifying *regard* are well demonstrated). My investigations recognize, and aim to corroborate, this metaphysical scheme in the unfolding of the reception of art.

II.4. IN THE THEATRE AND THE CINEMA

To get a clearer picture of the faces of art, we should return to the differences between proximity in art and in reality, which was discussed earlier in relation to the safety of the spectator's seat in the cinema and the limits of his or her responsibility in reception. The focus needs to be on the inequality endemic to the intimacy of the I and You, totally invisible from outside and, accordingly, from the third-person perspective. In essence, Levinas's point is that the relationship with the Other does not appear for the third party; it cannot be grasped in terms of totality, universalized, and absorbed as a relation of two parties in a whole. The Other is wholly transcendent and cannot be 'snatched' from above, as it were, in an image.⁵² For one thing, there is no multiplicity with a place for everyone in it; this multiplicity is, Levinas stresses, only brought into play in the relation of

⁵¹ Another instance perhaps, where the ubiquitous and overflowing character of the face in signification comes to the fore, can be found in John Cassavettes's *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974). This film consists in a great deal of close-ups; it communicates the various stages of the emotional drama in and through faces reflecting the events, making expression almost tangible in these frames.

⁵² 'The relation between me and the other commences in the *inequality* of terms, transcendent to one another, where alterity does not determine the other in a formal sense, as where the alterity of B with respect to A results simply from the identity of B, distinct from the identity of A. Here the alterity of the other does not result from its identity, but constitutes it: the Other is the other.' (*TI*, p. 251)

multiple singularities. What does this suggest about the face-to-face of art? It is not too difficult to place the arts in this metaphysical constellation: art as the holder of aesthetic reduction naturally tends towards multiplicity, the universalized order without (ethical) singularity. In a sense, the spectator's seat seems similar to this exterior position to the extent that the directness of the challenge, an essential feature of proximity, is lacking in it. As we have seen, the reduction initiated in works cannot maintain a similar ethical standard to its real-life counterpart: the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, or the orphan does not appear in its singularity, with its height and abasement. As in reality, one also has in-depth encounters with faces in artworks, yet the viewer is not fully implicated in – indeed is shielded from the unlimited on-the-spot exposure to the Other. His or her position matches that of the third party that lies outside the intimacy of the I and You and the untotalizable challenge exercised by alterity in this relationship.

This loss of the incommensurability of proximity in art is arguably not a loss, but a natural process in the heart of the unfolding of knowing. Art is, it appears, part of the mechanisms of knowledge in which the Other's signifyingness (*signifiance*, *TI*, p. 262) is made present, assembled into Being. As Levinas argues in *Otherwise Than Being*, the relationship with the third party is basically a correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is met,⁵³ and the relationship with the beholder of works seems to be no exception to this rule. To this end, the viewer and his or her views re-enact the thematization of the Other, which is inescapable in reality. What is happening in reception is, essentially, the betrayal of the anarchic relationship as well as, Levinas acknowledges, its conveyance before us.⁵⁴ As such, the initial, limitless responsibility is dealt with. In a way, the third party troubles the subject's exposure to the Other, who is totally irreducible to a spatial sense, stretching the Other out as a theme, in the unity of consciousness.⁵⁵ 'There must then be a comparison between incomparables and a synopsis, a togetherness and contemporaneity; there must be thematization, thought, history and inscription.'⁵⁶ Order, appearing, and phenomenality are introduced into proximity as an essential move of signification.⁵⁷

⁵³ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 158.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 81–82.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁷ It is no exaggeration to treat this breaking into the intimacy of the face-to-face, this turn towards unity and distance, as the very birth of consciousness and thought. *What precedes appearance* is in fact manifested on the entry of the third party. Levinas's genetic leaning, his interests in the phenomenization of the world, comes to the fore again. In his words, 'The apparition of a third party is the very origin of appearing, that is, the very origin of an origin.' *Ibid.*, 160.

The saying is betrayed by the said, but depends on it; the face is both visage and something visible, pertaining to the order of Being.⁵⁸

The reception of theatrical works exemplifies well this type of tertiary encounter with faces. I am sitting in my theatre seat, surrounded by other people in a shared space that includes the stage, and I look at the characters in their world. There is definitely an encounter with faces, but without the use of equipment (such as the focus that a camera movement in film would enable), I cannot but take the onlooker's position. I am just sitting there, and it is wholly up to me, my meaning-giving activity, to respond to the events. In other words, the challenge of the face is not delivered to me, not made palatable (unlike, it seems to me, in film). Certainly, with the use of music, spotlights, and the organization of the stage attention can be centred on a character, and his or her expression singled out in detail; nevertheless, this will rarely silence the third party in me, picking out and registering the characters and their actions. The reduction offered by the theatre has, I feel, more to do with the communal side of events, in which I trade in intimacy for deliberation and becoming part of the show. I give rise to inter-subjective structures. This is also why, perhaps, theatrical space is more political than film space. On the other hand, pure spectatorship (facilitated best by reading and film) is fully centred on seeing, implying moments of *dis-interested* seeing⁵⁹ – something that is by definition made difficult in the pregnant atmosphere of theatre, promoting participation.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ One of the merits of Bokody's work is his decision to synthesize Levinas's problematic as a rift between (aesthetic) disinterestedness and (ethical) dis-interestedness. In his view, the major issue in Levinas is the contrast between the irresponsibility of the aesthetic relation and the limitless responsibility of the ethical relation. Bokody realizes that there is not only an antithetical relationship but also an essential similarity between the two forms of dis(-)interestedness. Both cases entail a reduction occurring as the spectator is lifted out of the everyday context of his or her interests. The main difference, however, is in the volume. In real-life exposure, one is totally dis-interested; according to *Otherwise Than Being*, one's freedom and subjectivity are eradicated in the Other's bodily presence and one resigns one's own being to become the Other's hostage. In art, no subordination is implied to such a degree and one's freedom is maintained (Bokody, 'Érdeknélküliség és felelősség', 4–5). Bokody and I may be saying the same thing here, except for the direction of our analyses and the ultimate classification of the disinterestedness of art (see esp. *ibid.*, 153). My solution is a genetic one, stressing the transitory nature of disinterestedness, on occasion giving way to dis-interested Desire. I wish to show that ethical significations are on the way, breaking out of the saturation of image sense in ethical experience. Conversely, Bokody does not take the exit to dis-interestedness in criticism (critical articulation reintroducing the aesthetic in responsibility); he reverts to disinterested experience and emphasizes the relative merits of this experience with regard to the ethical event. By concentrating on relations after the face, not in front of it, he seeks to lay bare the ethical capacity of works. This means seeing art as a realm where the Other's inexorable demand is tempered in the third party, and, the encounter being bracketed, inter-subjective

The artistic mechanisms that seem to distinguish the art work from the world so sharply are, in many types of art, more in line with the mechanisms of the world than generally expected. What particularly matters here is the justificative side of the third party appearing in the intimacy of the face-to-face. By not facing the Other and taking the onlooker's perspective in the space of theatre, I give way to an inevitable closure in the foundations of humanity, letting justice surface in my consciousness. I get immersed in the reality of the show. Rather than letting the disturbing ground of proximity prevail, I judge the world and its characters before me. These judgements and justice are, in fact, the real impetus behind the ontologization of the saying in the exterior perspective. The closing of the one-for-the-Other is certainly about a move towards guaranteed safety, in the comparison of incomparables, synopsis, contemporaneousness, thought, and history, taking the weight of unremitting transcendence off one's shoulders. Yet, even more so, this turn towards the visibility of faces and intelligibility covers a presence in a system in the ethical sense, equality before justice.⁶⁰ As Levinas notes:

This reverting of contact into consciousness and into a discourse that states and that is logical, in which the communicated theme is more important than the contact of communication, is not due to chance or the clumsiness of a behaviour. It is due to the relationship between the neighbour and a third party, before whom he may be guilty. It is due to the justice that is nascent in the very abnegation before the neighbour.⁶¹

Consciousness introducing a contradiction in the saying – Levinas's later term for expression – is necessary. Even if the two stand in an antithetical relation, the saying addressed to the Other has a place for the said and the third party. The closure of the incommensurable is inevitable – it leads to this closure and manifestation itself. The face of the Other introduces the third party; the metaphysical relationship of I and You is inadvertently channelled into the framework of institutions, laws, and statehood.

Totality and Infinity seems to argue in a similar vein for the complexity of relations between the face and the third party, going against a simple dualism, by claiming that the face in its incommensurability refers to the third party and

space is worked out in ever-novel ways. Though the inter-subjective relations implicit in reception do not match those of real-life exposure, they do present the basic framework of responsibility and, as such, further the case of ethics in art (ibid., 75–81). My only worry is the in-depth character of this experience: how could the spectator have Tengelyi's 'joyous, or even blissful moments in life' if the Other's appeal is filtered out? Doesn't art provide ethical truth precisely *because the inexorable demand is awakened in reception*?

⁶⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 157.

⁶¹ Ibid., 193.

its justice. The Infinite opening up in the face is at the same time the opening up of the third party, that is, the whole of humanity present in the face. As Levinas puts it, 'The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice. It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity' (*TI*, p. 213).⁶² With this focus on humanity, the *Totality* book treats the third person in a more indirect manner than *Otherwise Than Being*. In the second major work, Levinas goes on to recognize a neighbour even in the third person (despite its distance), addressing a call to me as well as the Other, in this way further refining the structure of inter-subjective space.⁶³ I must respond not only to one but multiple calls. With respect to this shift, Tengelyi emphasizes that the third party is not merely an onlooker with respect to my relationship with the Other but someone who himself or herself takes part in the constitution of this relationship and heavily influences it.⁶⁴

What is true for one type of art may not, however, be true for others: arts with a tendency towards pure contemplation⁶⁵ might have a soft(er) spot for the saying before the (inevitable) phenomenon. Looking for similarities between the two realizations of the face-to-face (in reality and in art), it has to be admitted that, in film at least, one is infinitely more incorporated in the encounter than is the third person. And this is despite the exterior position taken by the viewer. The work is

⁶² Conversely, the same complicity calls for treating judgements with an element of hesitation, always reminding the equity of justice of the anarchic signification that dictates it. Prior to any measuring and knowing, prior to society, my response to the Other gives rise to ethical signification and, eventually, judgement. See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 193. Levinas is keen on tying in the elementary call with justice, and, conversely, on keeping alive the original ethical source behind justice. He has good reasons for doing so. Making a complex point (acknowledging the structures of justice, the law, and the State next to the ineliminable source) entails obvious risks: 'politics left to itself' (*TI*, p. 300) might any time give way to tyranny judging the I and the Other in universal terms, in their absence – forgetting the I and You behind the third. See Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 159. One wonders about art left to itself, then, as overly aesthetic, which is arguably Levinas's main problem too. Art seems to play an important role in the inevitable closure, the ontologization, of proximity by staging the spectacle; as such, it also seems necessary for Levinas to go back to the origins of ethical signification (the ethical event of saying) by calling on the critic to challenge the ostentation of the aesthetic whole.

⁶³ Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 157.

⁶⁴ László Tengelyi, 'A harmadik transzcendentális alakja' [The transcendental form of the third party], in *Tapasztalat és kifejezés* [Experience and expression] (Budapest: Atlantisz, 2007), 251.

⁶⁵ This point of mine has an affinity with Thomas Mann's views on theatre. In his essay entitled 'Versuch über das Theater', Mann basically defines the magic of the theatre as an ersatz art for the 'masses', as an art form that ties down viewers' imagination in an imperfectly concrete world. The reality of the novel, by contrast, is, on this view, supposed to be deeper, more precise, more fully realized, and easier to grasp. Thomas Mann, 'Versuch über das Theater', in *Essays*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1993), 53–93.

actually made for the viewer, which is why one's attitude towards the outside should be described as more prioritized, with more access to alterity – something like *a third person promoted to a you, a neighbour*. All the shots, particularly the close-ups, are meant to involve me as the spectator – the me-spectator – to establish an intimacy that otherwise pertains to the interlocutor – so much so that in special moves of the camera, for example, taking a sudden angle overlooking Rick's shoulders, I feel like it is me talking to Ilsa. The involvement of the viewer is a basic objective of film, which has a phenomenological significance, in the sense that the call of the Other appears to reach the viewer in his or her seat. What is lost in terms of the demand, the incommensurability, of the call is partly reversed in the intimacy of spectatorship, the experience of the ethical surfacing in reception. Apart from the sense of justice appearing 'at a distance' from the events, for a moment I seem to be able to take the challenge of transcendence. The saying that energizes judgements comes to the fore; the very source of the human signifies. Other than the aesthetic, art is the vehicle of ethical reduction: glimpses of the ethical force their way towards articulation in the critical discourse with the Other.

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