JSP

50th ANNIVERSARY SESSIONS

Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art

Aesthetics—Then and Now

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Then (and here I speak of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy [SPEP] in the early 1960s when it was founded), Continental aesthetics on the American scene was dominated by the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who had died in 1961—the year before SPEP began! My first SPEP (as a first-year graduate student at the ripe age of twenty-one) was in 1966 at Penn State. Themes such as visibility, expressivity, and indirect language were offered as new and exciting ways to think about aesthetics. After all, Merleau-Ponty's last essay ("Eye and Mind"/"L'oeil et l'esprit")—published during his lifetime in 1960—was both a radical reformulation of his 1947 "Cezanne's Doubt" and a whole new departure in aesthetic thinking. For those who read the French (and many of the members of the new American society were Francophones), this new essay spawned a reconsideration of Merleau-Ponty's work in aesthetics (as he linked it up to his ongoing phenomenology of perception, expression, and meaning/ sense). When Al Lingis published his translation of the great work that Merleau-Ponty was writing when he died (and *The Visible and the Invisible* appeared only a couple of years after SPEP was founded in 1962), visibility (as formulated in "Eye and Mind") achieved further articulation.

I. 1960s: Visibility | Expressivity | Indirect Language

Visibility arises out of the chiasmatic conjuncture of the painter's seeing (invisible to the artist's own seeing) and what is seen (the visible that the artist sees and paints). Aesthetic experience was placed in that between-zone that Merleau-Ponty would have named "perceptual intentionality." Visibility, however, is cast in a new language, still understood perceptually but now as an intertwining (*l'entrelacs* as Al Lingis translated it). The seeing of the Mont Sainte-Victoire, for Cézanne, as it appears (and how it appears) before him still incorporates his embodied doubts. Perhaps one could understand the visibility of Cézanne's seeing the mountain as something like Heidegger's 1930s poetizing of the artist in relation to the artwork in relation to art as an event of the Open. One could even think these two essays together, as framing aesthetic theory—particularly in the augmented Reclam edition of Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art," which Gadamer published in 1960—the same year Merleau-Ponty published "Eye and Mind." But Heidegger was already thinking Van Gogh's relation to his painting of shoes as allowing for the disclosure (truth) of a world. What Heidegger missed was that special relation of visibility that Van Gogh might have experienced in viewing his own shoes on the floor of his room. Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne may still have been looking at the mountain, or at a bowl of fruit, or even at his own image in a mirror. For Merleau-Ponty visibility is not a disclosure of a world—even when Cézanne views his own painting. Rather, visibility is an expressive conjuncture of seeing seen as sense (*sens*)—but visibility cannot be seen. It can only be sensed—or expressed (in an embodied sense).

Expression in the later Merleau-Ponty (and we are all familiar with the important chapter on the body as expression and meaning/sense in the 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*) is no longer simply gestural or facial expression. Rather, expression has become a matter of style, being-in-the-world, even wild being (*l'etre brut*). Expression in the later Merleau-Ponty has become a question of ontology and not simply phenomenology. And yet, much of Merleau-Ponty's concern focuses on expressivity and not just expression. Or, at least, expressivity is the name that Mikel Dufrenne gave to this important aspect of aesthetic experience in the wake of Merleau-Ponty's later work. Dufrenne himself, editor of the *Revue d'esthetique* and author of the 1950s *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (which Ed Casey translated into English), was sometimes referred to as

"the Dean of French Aesthetics." Expressivity, as Dufrenne used to say, is like squeezing meaning or sense out of a orange. Ex-pressivity comes out as sense, the sensuous, meaning. No longer only a question of Cézanne's mountain, or a bowl of fruit, or his own image visible before him, expressivity could apply to the abstract expressionist Kandinsky expressing what he called the "spiritual" (*die Geistige*) in art. Recognizable figurative shapes could be replaced with abstract movement and gestures and still be expressive. Abstract expressionist paintings could render the sensuous meaningful with nothing more than shapes, lines, colors, and "spiritual" energies filling the canvas. Expressivity could bring out meaning or sense, and the truth in art would not have to be derived from a pair of shoes or from a recognizable mountain. Expressivity does not require representation, or imitation, or intuition, or acts of creation. Expressivity speaks "in its own name."

For Merleau-Ponty, particularly as he defined his project in the early 1950s unfinished *Prose of the World*, expressivity—when speaking in its own name—is called "indirect language." Expressing meaning does not need to come in the form of verbal language. Expressivity—the squeezing out of sense—can occur as a kind of language in which no words are spoken, in which the Malraux-infused "voices of silence" speak as painting, sculpture, dance, music, photography, and so on. While Heidegger was *unterwegs zur Sprache* (on the way to language) and discovering that language speaks (*die Sprache spricht*), Merleau-Ponty was exploring how the arts are semiological (language-like), but in such a way that sense is expressed in a signifying-signified (hence Saussurean) fashion. Here, for Merleau-Ponty, *parole parlante* (speaking speech) is still going on, but in such a way that Rodin's *Balzac*, Debussy's "La Mer," and Klee's "Fire and Ice" each expresses in a language (indirectly and without saying a word). By the end of the first decade of SPEP, some outstanding work in aesthetics around the notions of visibility, expression and expressivity, and indirect language had achieved their effectiveness.

II. 1980s: Textuality | Jouissance | Networks of Similitudes

But then, twenty years later (by the time I became SPEP co-director from 1980 to 1986, the last year of which was the twenty-fifth anniversary conference, held in Toronto), aesthetics for SPEP members had taken on a

significantly different orientation. The names of Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault had become household words. Similarly, textuality, jouissance, and networks of similitudes had replaced visibility, expressivity, and indirect language.

The textuality of the text marks the signifying of a text in a determinate way. The textuality of the text is not the meaning of the text but, rather, how the text delimits itself. What constitutes a text is framed by its context, by what is excluded by the text, by what operates indecidably at the borders of the text, by what leaves its traces throughout the text. Thinking of the Trakl poem that the Heidegger of the 1950s discusses in his "Language" essay, the narrative of the stranger wandering outside in the snowy winter evening, looking in on those sharing the warmth of hearth and enjoying "bread and wine," is marked most notably by the window that separates those on the inside and the stranger on the outside. But Heidegger's task is one of getting language to "language" (i.e., to speak). His task is not to deconstruct as such the textuality of the text of the Trakl poem. Heidegger had, of course, introduced the notion of the *Ge-stell* in the 1956 addendum to "The Origin of the Work of Art." The *Ge-stell* is the framing, structuring, setting-into-place of the work of art in its relation to the artist and art. But as Roland Barthes shows in his 1970s "From Work to Text" essay, the text has no requirement of engendering, no demand of an artist or creator as progenitor to produce it. A "work" of art, for instance, will result from an act of creation. A "text" by contrast will be what Barthes calls a "method-ological field," a differential space that delimits itself by its practice as text. Roland Barthes examines fashion magazines to bring out a semiological space that he calls "the fashion system." Each time a woman is dressed in a particular way with determinate signs constituting a signifying system, a text is marked out. The author or designer is not in question here. Rather, the particular dressing (syntagma) constitutes the text. Were one to read back into Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art" the place of the Open as the event of truth, and if one were to discount the role and function of the artist, on the one hand, and the artwork, on the other, leaving the ques-tion of art on the periphery, the text would correspond to the Heideggerian disclosure, the Heideggerian truth of the text (rather than the work of art). And then there is the pleasure of the text!

The delimited text is an event of a certain pleasure, not the pleasure of the author or artist who creates the work of art but also not the pleasure of

the reader who reads it. For Roland Barthes (as with Lacan and Derrida), there is another pleasure that goes under the name of *jouissance*. This is the aesthetic pleasure that happens in the place of the text. The ecstatic event of signifying and code production makes the text come alive in its own terms. The jouissance that happens in the place of the text is an event, an enjoyment, an excitement, which arises out of the text as a system of signs, codes, and significations. The textuality of the text is where jouissance can take place, marking off the text with its indecidabilities and traces as the places where the excitement occurs. Sometimes the textuality of the text as jouissance comes in the form of a question: Who killed Laura Palmer? (David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*); Who framed Roger Rabbit? (film of that title); Who should "suck up"? (Richard Gere and Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*). Here the jouissance of the aesthetic text is an enigma. But there are many other instances of jouissance in the text, such as "the little differences" that *Pulp Fiction*'s John Travolta recounts when riding with Samuel Jackson and speaking of cultural differences.

These gaps, differences, and intervals can also be described as a "network of similitudes" (following the 1968 Foucault of *This Is Not a Pipe*). Magritte's 1926 surrealist painting shows a written statement, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" [This is not a pipe], beautifully inscribed in a flowing perfect font (almost the opposite of the scribbled names, such as "Apollo" or "Orpheus," in the Cy Twombly paintings that Roland Barthes so admired in the early 1970s). "This is not a pipe" is a negation, and yet Foucault takes it as an affirmation. "This is not a pipe" could be something other than a proposition. It could be just a handwritten note like the famous Nietzschean "I have forgotten my umbrella" ("Ich habe meinen Schirm vergessen") that Derrida takes up in his 1974 *Spurs*. So when Foucault receives the enchanted letter from René Magritte admiring Foucault's 1966 *Les mots et les choses*, and then writes his own essay a couple of years later, he returns to his question concerning the relation between words (*les mots*) and things (*les choses*). The words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" by themselves are just words, but if they signify something, the question remains: What do they signify? And what do they signify in French—maybe Belgian French? Do they refer to something in the world? Do they correspond to a syntagma with a sequence of signifieds (concepts) that are arbitrarily linked to them? Reference, signification, designation—these notions are all activated in the depicted sentence in the Magritte

painting. But they are also compromised when set in juxtaposition with an image of a pipe that hovers above the inscription. Is the pipe a floating signified? Or a floating signifier (*signifiant*) with its own signified(s)? It is a "pipe dream" and not a "pipe" at all? Is it some fetish that preoccupied a psychoanalytic Magritte? Is it like Freud's cigars? So many questions and no answers—just a picture of words and an image. Or is it all just a represented image, as Magritte's 1966 version, *Les Deux mystères*, seems to demonstrate.

Maybe the pipe is a simulacrum with no referent at all. Maybe it does not correspond to the negation below. Maybe the imaged pipe is an imaginary object. Or maybe, and this is what Foucault suggests, the site of interest is neither the negating words (or syntagma) that seem to be an affirmation on their own nor the isolated image of a pipe but, rather, between the words and the image, a whole "network of similitudes," none of which has any priority or dominating discursive prevalence. In short, the network of similitudes happens in the juxtaposition of one affirmation and the other—the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" and the image of a pipe. This space of difference between is marked by the juxtaposition of words and image in the painting. And it must not be forgotten that this is a painting—an aesthetic object (as Dufrenne would have called it). But what about this network of similitudes? Does it not resonate with the rhizomal that Deleuze and Guattari celebrated in their mid-1970s introduction to *Mille Plateaux*? Without exploring either rhizomal proliferations or the corresponding disseminations that Derrida also introduced in the mid-1970s, these new formulations became the stuff of endless SPEP papers and presentations as they fought for their place alongside the ongoing debates in Husserlian, Heideggerian, Sartrean, or even Merleau-Pontean phenomenologies.

Then, aesthetics was at a crossroads for the SPEP communities: Would the transcendental and existential varieties of phenomenological research allow for these alternative modes of thinking within the broader frame of what could now be called "Continental philosophy"? After all, SPEP had (and has) many missions (and aesthetics is only one of them). As a complement to SPEP, once the International Association for Philosophy and Literature (IAPL) appeared on the scene (founded in 1976), it could also provide a place for the development of those themes of Continental philosophy with an emphasis on the wide range of topics and issues that could

vaguely be called "aesthetics." For instance, Gary Shapiro and I first met at the second annual IAPL in Minnesota, and Ewa Ziarek first appeared on the IAPL scene in the 1980s while still a graduate student at Buffalo, where she is now a person of distinction. IAPL has now taken the "international" in its name very seriously. It has many missions (and serving the North American philosophical communities is only one of them).

Within SPEP itself in the 1980s, the disagreements that arose had to do with whether it would be able to succeed in the future, whether it could transform itself into a philosophy society devoted to many different ways of doing "Continental philosophy." The fiftieth anniversary is the answer that demonstrates that the choices we made were—although the path less traveled by—what has made all the difference for so many younger as well as established Continental philosophers in the here and now!

Already in the 1980s, Continental aesthetics had taken the turn— feminist theories, formulated by Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous had their American counterparts. Many SPEP philosophers were writing through and with Foucault, Barthes, and Derrida. Aesthetics was linked to politics in the writings of Deleuze, Lyotard, and Kristeva. Similarly, Adorno, Benjamin, and Arendt were recast in a new frame. And theories of inscription and textuality provided the context for the appearance of postmodern thinking in Continental philosophy.

Derrida's 1978 *La vérité en peinture* appeared in English in 1987. At last, some of the perplexing features of Heidegger's "Origin of the Work of Art" could be rethought, most notably solving the mystery of the ghostly peasant woman whom Heidegger placed in those shoes and how the shoes could be returned or rendered back unto the painter—or just handed over to Heidegger as a dutiful exchange. Henceforth, Derrida's Valerio Adami could enter the pantheon along with Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne, Foucault's Magritte, Barthes's Cy Twombly, Lyotard's Barnett Newman, Deleuze's Francis Bacon, and so forth.

III. Intermedialities | Responsibilities | Feeling the Differences

But now, since the turn of the century, the next fin de siècle had brought a new set of intermedialities. The postmodern thinking that began to take shape in the 1980s is undergoing a recasting with another set of issues in

aesthetics, ethics and politics. Lyotard taught us to think the presentation of the unpresentable in presentation itself, to think the time of the line as the inscription of what Derrida would call "indecidabilities." What is here and now (hic et nunc)—these were matters of the modern sublime in Barnett Newman's sculptures of those very names, such as *Here I* (1950), *Here II* (1965), and *Here III* (1966). But Lyotard reread Newman's sculptures and paintings in terms of the postmodern sublime—with the corresponding political differences that he would call *differends* in matters of disagreement. How to think differences? Places of disagreement where neither side can prevail, where a Gadamerian hermeneutics cannot fuse horizons (as was shown in the early 1980s debate with Derrida, immortalized in English by Diane Michelfelder and Dick Palmer's *Dialogue and Deconstruction* volume), cannot be resolved on one side or the other. And so, too, in aesthetics: Lines of difference, "zips," as Newman called them, are often not noticed, not available to vision, and yet they constitute the sublime moment of difference in the painting.

Deleuze's study of Francis Bacon, as in his fascination with the cinema, allowed him to think the deformations of the triptych—not as a captive self-portrait (as Merleau-Ponty's "Eye and Mind" would have explored Cézanne's self-portraits) but as the dispersed relations between the panels, in the figures, between the identities. Peter Greenaway's 2011 exhibition in the New York armory re-creating Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* is an intermedial extravaganza in which every detail of the Milan fresco is reanimated by video projections all around the cavernous spaces, filling them with light, vision, and experiential splendor. The participant/viewer is surrounded with images, music, close-ups, and distance shots, making what Benjamin would call an "original" with an "aura" into a transportable and repeatable event that would take the grand Dutch paintings on the walls of the restaurant in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* to the calligraphy written on the bodies of the Japanese woman's lovers in *The Pillow Book* into a Renaissance space in the twenty-first century. How to mark intermedial differential spaces as events of thinking, seeing, hearing, touching without touching? Peter Greenaway's aesthetic, cultural, contextual cinematic inscriptions of differences have been finding their way into the nooks and crannies of contemporary electronic worlds, and they serve as exemplars of how to create hybrid cultural events that are neither purely artistic nor purely

philosophical—but somewhere in between! All this would surely lead to the writing of a politics of aesthetic differences as in Agamben's *Homo Sacer*; Žižek's readings of Hitchcock and David Lynch; Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*; the Derrida of *Specters of Marx, Politics of Friendship, Of Hospitality*, and the posthumous *The Beast and the Sovereign* volumes; Badiou's "Inaesthetic Events"; and Rancière's "Regimes of Art."

Now, the responsibilities are not just ethical or political. They enter into the practices of the artist and the philosopher; and how to think the responsibilities between us (entre nous, but not in a Levinasian fashion; *partage* in Nancy's formulation) as bringing us together in a shared community at the same time that they separate us; and how to think in an *intermedial* fashion—to think the entre nous as an event of difference, to think the *differends* as a way to respond to claims for compromise or capitulation, and for the arts to perform these various differences so that they will not simply remain "sublime" but, rather, so that they will allow each agent, each group, each set of identities to think the spaces between us—that separate us and bring us together at the same time. Can there be touching (*toucher*) at these places and events of difference? Nancy, Derrida, and Irigaray each, in their own ways, have called for a thinking of intervals, not just as a matter of theorizing but as a space of responding to each other, as a space of marking out the differences, our differences—not just their differences! These differences are where the identities touch upon one another. As a matter of aesthetics, it should be possible to "feel the differences" (as Perniola would propose in his *Art and Its Shadow*). Can we feel the differences if we can't see them? Can we feel the differences if we think they are just identities? Can we feel the differences if they are "mine" and not "yours"? Can we feel the differences if painters, filmmakers, sculptors, architects, photographers, video artists, et al. can't show them to us? But maybe they can, and maybe we need to listen to them, maybe we can hear their words, mark their words—after all, what are artists for "in a destitute time" (*dürftige Zeit*), a time of abundance and plenty surrounded by poverty and despair, a time of hope and a politics of renewal despite corporate greed and legislative immobility? After all, if artists and art theorists can't feel the differences, how can "we"? Will these have been the lessons of SPEP conferences of the future anterior?