

# The Beyond and Its Shadow: Emmanuel Levinas On Visual Art as Transdescendence

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**Abstract:** Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy has consistently put forward that transcendence should not just stop in transcending oneself towards a higher and abstract state of being. Rather, it should ultimately be sought after in one's encounter with the individual beings that present themselves to us, or in his terms, the Other. For Levinas, one's relation to the Other is the epitome of radical alterity as he puts an emphasis in such infinity that is in every person which is simultaneously being represented and masked by the Face. This insurmountable reality is what served as his grounds for a substantial transcendental ethics in which he underlines a desire for the ethical relationship with the Other or in Being- for- the- Other.

Upon reading Levinas' philosophy, it is noticeable that he has constantly made use of aesthetic references, which signify how he has had various literary and aesthetic influences. However, throughout his works, the said references to art and the aesthetic activity apparently exhibit a handful of reservations towards the aesthetic experience. While he acknowledges the entertaining quality of art, he also makes us aware that it nonetheless tends to be disengaging, idolatrous and ultimately encourages a private escape and a descension into oneself. Thereafter, Levinas has always emphasized the necessity of the inseparability of philosophical criticism and the aesthetic experience.

In line with this, there is reason to believe that when situated in Levinas ethics, the aesthetic experience specifically that of the visual arts can be considered a peculiar intervention. Thus, this paper aims to inquire into and clarify Levinas' seemingly unresolved stances on art specifically that of visual art, by way of aligning such with a subliminal kind of transcendence in Levinas' transcendence project— Transdescendence.

**Keywords:** Levinas, Aesthetics, Transcendence, Ethics, Transdescendence

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## I. Introduction

It is a subliminal fact that the things we view as beautiful and/or as art affect and influence the way we perceive, think and even act upon reality. In whatever form it may take, though relative to each person's taste, may it be a painting, a poem, a novel, a sculpture or a movie, artworks evidently catch our attention. With such a point, the way we assent to the promptings of art is problematic for Emmanuel Levinas—as he brings into light the tendency of art to intervene with our train of thought, delude us and eventually, its ability to encourage a reverting kind of escape into one's self and ultimately, a movement away from one's ethical responsibility.

An escape from responsibility that something, and most often than not, the escape that art offers is a timely ideology and an evidently occurring phenomena. In quite a usual setting, when we see a certain artwork, for example, a painting or a photograph in a gallery, it requires us to stop dead in our tracks and linger in front of it for us to appreciate it; this is also not to mention that a film also typically requires an hour of undivided attention to follow its plot. What comes with the constant engrossment with a certain form of art is that every now and then when a person asks one for help with something, that person asked tends to delay his response or sometimes even misses and lets the opportunity to help, pass. Such a phenomenon is even more evident today when there is easier access, though secondary, to different kinds of art. In line with this, in *Reality and Its Shadow*, Levinas puts forward that our mode of response to another person is constantly being compromised by the encounter of art. This is due to the fact that the encounter of art has the tendency to absorb us and consequently, allows for a compromise in our ethical responsibility which falls within the scope of descending into one's self with the encounter of art and even in the production of it (in the artist's case). Nevertheless, even with art's peculiar nature, towards the end of the said essay, Levinas noticeably leaves room for art's salvation through philosophical criticism.

Remarkably, Levinas' notion of art does not only manifest in *Reality and Its Shadow* but constantly makes an appearance throughout Levinas' works on ethics as something that tends to intervene with the ethical relation by way of its peculiarity. Despite being so, however, we will see later on that the fundamental insufficiency of art by itself is also utilized by Levinas to fend for a more specific kind of transcendence. This is by means of art and the aesthetic experience signifying a lower and yet crucial kind of transcendence—a transdescendence—that inspires a more radical way of reaching out to the Other.

## II. TRANSCENDENCE AND TRANSDSCENDENCE

The notion of transcendence for Levinas evidently serves as a primary foundation of his philosophy to the point where one can really say that he is a philosopher of transcendence. However, the term 'transcendence' in itself can be quite vague; at best, one can say that it usually suggests a 'going beyond', but what exactly is it that one is transcending and surpassing in terms of Levinas philosophy? Evidently, Levinas puts forward his very own notion of transcendence that is imbedded in his framework. As Robert Bernasconi<sup>96</sup> had stated, Levinas did not intend for his critique of western philosophy to become an ethics at the outset; Levinas did not even want such a heavily prescriptive word to be attributed to what he was doing. However, along the way, he has consistently implied that

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<sup>96</sup> Robert Bernasconi, "No Exit: Levinas Aporetic Account of Transcendence." *Research in Phenomenology* 35, no. 1 (2005):101.

the way beyond being was undeniably to be grounded upon our individual encounters of the Other and this counts for no less than Ethics.

While Martin Heidegger focused on substantiating the authenticity of Being and a transcendence of the supposed human limitations or the way from Dasein to Being<sup>97</sup>, for Levinas, this was arguably to the point of self-absorption and a disregard for the Other. Henceforth, Levinas puts a halt to such an egoistic endeavor and puts an emphasis in constantly going beyond Being onto the Good that is to be found in bearing witness and responding to the Other. Consequently, this implies that transcendence in Levinas' framework is a constant process that comprises of several steps and undercurrents for its substantiation. In line with this, we will see throughout the course of Levinas' philosophical writings, that a going beyond for him can be explicated not only in the course of a thoroughgoing upward movement onto the shore of the Other (transcendence), but also that of a going underneath the depths of the "I" (transcendence).

### A. Self-Imprisonment

It has often been said that Levinas takes it a step further by taking several steps back first. In *On Escape*,<sup>98</sup> Levinas makes us aware that there is indeed no escaping one's pure being as he puts an emphasis on one's constant self-imprisonment and suffering. As Levinas states that "*The experience of pure being is at the same time the experience of its internal antagonism and of the escape that foists itself on us.*"<sup>99</sup> Self-imprisonment can be realized out of the feeling of restlessness in being that manifests in different kinds of emotions like that of nausea and malaise which eventually signal to a need for escape from being that is of course, impossible. With that point being said, for Levinas, pleasure from things and materiality often presents itself as a means of getting out or a promise of escape, but it is an empty promise for pleasure only seemingly eases one's pain but in the long run, it reveals to be just suppressing it. For Levinas, pleasure encourages complacency and even cowardice to the one experiencing it and, in its wake, lays the feeling of shame upon coming to the realization that an escape from being is not quite possible.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, even as Levinas will elaborate later on in his major works that certain kinds of pleasure can be used for the crystallization of the "I", in *On Escape* is where he initially drew the line by implying the tendency of pleasure to signify passivity for it is an *ecstatic* event or feeling that eventually turns into us dwelling on such a feeling and furthering into ourselves.

### B. Rising from Anonymity

In line with this in *Existence and Existents*<sup>101</sup>, he firstly develops his own formula for a metamorphosis of transcendence<sup>102</sup> by putting an emphasis on the notion of transcendence being a transcendence or a moving upward. Consequently, he starts from the ground up by phenomenologically elucidating the emergence of consciousness and subjectivity-- or in his terms, the hypostasis, in the instances of solitary existence. A vital and novel concept and step to his account on

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<sup>97</sup> Martin Heidegger and Joan Stambaugh, *Being and Time: A Translation of "Sein Und Zeit"* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

<sup>98</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *On escape = De lévasion*. Translated by Bettina Bergo, (California: Stanford University Press, 2003).

<sup>99</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *On escape = De lévasion*, 61.

<sup>100</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *On escape = De lévasion*, 61.

<sup>101</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis, and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2008).

<sup>102</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis, and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents*, 10.

the hypostasis is his concept of the *Il y a* or the *There is*. The concept of the *There is* can be analogous to several phenomena which Levinas has put forward like that of a child not being able to sleep<sup>103</sup> thereon being stuck and at a lost for quite some time and not being able to fast forward to the next day. It is the epitome of anonymous existence, of ‘something’ unconsciously getting carried away whilst participating in one’s own chaotic and general existence.<sup>104</sup> Just like its literal translation, the *There is* is like someone being cut-off mid-sentence and thereby trailing off. Thus, for Levinas, “*To be conscious is to be torn away from the There is, since the existence of a consciousness constitutes a subjectivity, a subject of existence, that is, to some extent a master of being, already a name in the anonymity of the night.*”<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, from the title of the book itself, it can best be described as an existence without an existent—yet. Initially, the *There is* plunges us into anonymity and to being complacent by way of it being neither destructive nor productive. Despite being so, the *Il y a* for Levinas is not to be taken purely in the negative sense for it is a natural mode of being and consequently a necessary condition towards transcendence since without the experience of such an existence, one could not learn to rise up from that subliminal intervening moment between consciousness and unconsciousness. The *Il y a* helps one appreciate not being stuck, in finally finding oneself being awake or in dozing off to slumber, either one is better than floating around aimlessly. It is evident that the *Il y a* is a necessary step in the hypostasis or in the quest to finding and regaining the existent in existence or finding one’s footing in being even though it’s way of transcending such a condition is by being taken a step backwards—*descending*.

### C. Temporality and the Transcendence of the Face

In *Time and the Other*<sup>106</sup>, the notion of Death played a crucial part in further elucidating Levinas’ account of time, transcendence and consequently—alterity; for the death of the Other reminds us that there is an end to one’s subjectivity due to our corporeality and the materiality of things, by reminding one of her limitations and even that of the ethical relation. Moreover, death or the very experience of it is evidently unspeakable to its subject; it subliminally signifies something ungraspable, a fundamental otherness of an event taking place. Despite being so, the notion of it does not incite an efficient escape but is susceptible to furthering into oneself through sympathy and is still not as encompassing as the face-to-face encounter with the Other, the notion of death is yet another descending movement.

Be that as it may, this was also where Levinas introduced the notion of temporality that was first developed towards the end of *Existence and Existents*. It notably breaks away from Husserl’s conception of time being a sort of retention of the past and a *protention* of the future. Rather, Levinas puts forward that each instant is a new beginning that allows for a redemption in that the past and the future is obviously not and never will be the present. In line with this, Levinas states that time is “*a relationship with a future that escapes presence absolutely, the Other’s future.*”<sup>107</sup> With that point being said, time also signifies hope and the infinity that the other signifies in that one can always recommence her existence or take it up in a new way and that there is always more to encounter out there—that there will always

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<sup>103</sup> See Chapter 2 of *Existence without Existence* for more narratives and examples of the *Il y a*

<sup>104</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis, and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents*, 59.

<sup>105</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis, and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents*, 60-61.

<sup>106</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other: And Other Essays* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987).

<sup>107</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other: And Other Essays*, 86.

something most especially, someone other who is bound to change our way of living in one way or another.

In line with this, Levinas' philosophy was widely known for his monumental explication of The Face. For Levinas, the Face of the Other is the embodiment of a reality that overflows and cannot be assimilated by the 'I'. Moreover, it is what "at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its ideatum—the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but it expresses itself."<sup>108</sup> With this in mind, Levinas has always put forward the commonly overlooked fact that the Other is not an image or an object of our vision; and this, quite frankly says a lot (which will be tackled later on).

The insurmountable reality behind each face and the insufficiency of only living for oneself in the encounter of it is what served as his grounds for a substantial notion of ethical responsibility in which he underlines an immediate desire for the Other and the Other's well-being. As he states that: "The Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me by his essence qua infinity."<sup>109</sup> Hence, for Levinas, it is not enough to just be, we must escape being and direct such an escape towards a transcendence or towards reaching out to the infinity that is behind the Face of the Other. The Infinite even as it is absolutely Other, leaves its trace on the finite or the Other and that is, in the face of each person we encounter and consequently the way we communicate and respond to the needs of the Other, are capable of revealing the glory of God or as Levinas puts it: *God writes straight with crooked lines.*<sup>110</sup> Through this, he was still able to justify and promote that transcendence is to be grounded and sought out in the ethical relation with the Other and that in the end, Levinas puts an emphasis that transcendence is a constant reaching out to the Other but that which acknowledges and retains its core footing in being.

#### D. Transcendence

It is noticeable that throughout the discussion, there seems to constantly be a shadow or a dark and obscure movement that signifies a crawling back and furthering into oneself. Such a movement that manifests in the definitions of the notion of the 'There Is, pleasure and death, *seemingly* carry one away from an ideal and uplifting transcendence for Levinas that goes outward onto the Other. However, it is often overlooked that such descriptions of furthering into oneself constantly appears in Levinas' discussion due to the fact that it makes way for a clearer and more dynamic movement as it aids the substantializing of the process of transcendence.

In line with this, as we have stated previously, Levinas' transcendence project was in fact indebted and influenced by his contemporary Jean Wahl. Thus, just as we have discussed Levinas' adaptation and emphasis on a transcendence that moves upward and onto the Other—a *transcendence* in the foregoing parts of this paper, a movement of transcendence was also accounted for. Buggraeve in discussing *The Levinasian Movement From The Exteriority To The Interiority Of The Infinite*, states that for Jean Wahl:

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<sup>108</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 51.

<sup>109</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*, 207.

<sup>110</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 147.

The one movement indeed makes the other possible, and vice versa. The movement upwards, which reaches over and beyond existence towards the transcendent, likewise makes possible the movement downwards, which reaches into the depths, or rather to under the depths of existence. Just as the descent into one's own bottomless depth makes possible the transcendence towards the irreducible and transcendent Other. In this regard 'the outbreaks towards on high' and the 'descent into the depths' are mutually involved with each other. The 'au-delà' (beyond) is at the same time an 'en deçà' (hither side), just as transdescendence opens up the perspective of transcendence.<sup>111</sup>

This evidently clarifies that the two kinds of transcendence are neither opposed nor contradictory but are complimentary. Consequently, one cannot subsist without the other. There is reason to believe that Levinas has adapted such a model of transcendence but has taken it up in a different way. Brenda Hofmeyer, in her article regarding radical passivity, explains that although never explicitly stated, Levinas, throughout his works especially in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, affirms the influence of Jean Wahl's *Transdescendence* in his philosophy and explains that:

Apart from a trans-ascendent or upward dynamic, there is also the mention of a 'relapsing immanence'. The latter, instead of going up and away, is suggestive of a downward or backward movement – a trans-descendence. For Levinas, this movement of descent into the underground of the I spells the ethical redefinition of the self. In other words, the ascending intentionality of feeling, the direct and intense contact with the Other, is linked with a descending movement into the subject itself.<sup>112</sup>

Quite clearly, from the passage we see that even for Levinas, what comes with the upward movement of a subject's overflowing into the ethical relation with the Other is also a parallel movement of descendence into oneself. This can be in line with the fact that the encounter of the Other is described by Levinas as quite traumatic in the way that one's existence is nonetheless being put into question and shaken to its core initially losing its footing and falling away from itself. With that point in mind, we can see that in Levinas' case the movement of descendence or the movement of *going beneath* that is linked to the intense and anarchic encounter of the Other is nonetheless functional for it is part of the process of transcendence as it allows an awakening and a rehabilitation of the Same and serves as a constant prompt to not settle into the bare minimum of mere being.

Arguably, it can be said that in Levinas' case it fits yet another notion of Levinas which he calls the Other-in-the-Same or the Other awakened. Levinas touched upon this in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* where he noticeably has taken his notion of responsibility for the Other to the a higher level by explicating how it is in line with and even immediately synonymous to one's subjectivity. Hence, subjectivity is precisely the Other-in-the-Same as Levinas writes that:

The subject in which the other is in the same, inasmuch as the same is for the other, bears witness to it. The difference of proximity is absorbed in the measure that proximity becomes closer, and by this very absorption is brought out gloriously, and accuses me always more. The same in its bearing as same is more and more extended to the other, to the point of substitution as a hostage.

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<sup>111</sup>Roger Buggraeve, "Affected by The Face of the Other. The Levinasian Movement from the Exteriority to the Inferiority of the Infinity" In *Dialegethai*, 2009.

<sup>112</sup>Hofmeyr, Benda. "Radical Passivity: Ethical Problem or Solution?" in *Radical Passivity Library of Ethics and Applied Philosophy*, (2009):26.

Expiation coincides in the last analysis with the extraordinary and diachronic reversal of the same into the other, in inspiration and the psyche.<sup>113</sup>

With that point being said, it also compels or rather—inspires the Same to lift oneself up from the darkness. Furthermore, alongside the descendance into the depths of being is a way for it to constantly distinguish and reassess oneself, and what one has to offer or do in order to efficiently respond to the other and care for her well-being. Henceforth, it can be said that for Levinas, it is quite necessary that there be an obscure event in the form of the events that signify transdescendance just as things that are in the presence of light evidently have a shadow trailing behind.

However, to get to the actual light or towards an upper kind of transcendence, which is the ideal one for Levinas he has constantly specified and maintained throughout his works that “*Transcendence in us is desire for something else—for Alterity.*”<sup>114</sup> Thereby, throughout the course of his writings, he has consistently found the way out of being or the ‘beyond’ onto the Good which is to be found in the immediate, ambiguous and even senseless acts in the movement of reaching out to the Other which reveals the trace of the Infinite.

### III. LEVINAS ON ART

#### A. Exoticism

Contrary to popular belief, an artwork for Levinas does not just stand as a transparent image or an imitation of an object in this world. This is what Levinas clarifies in a subchapter of his earlier work *Existence and Existents* entitled *Existence Without A World*<sup>115</sup> which references art. What ‘art’ connotes here for Levinas, even as they tend to recreate a certain event, is something that stands out from the ordinary things of this world—something exotic. Levinas explains that:

A situation depicted or an event recounted must first of all reproduce the real situation or event; but the fact that we relate to them indirectly through the intermediary picture and the story, modifies them in an essential way. This modification is not due to the lighting or the composition of the picture, to the taste of and arrangements made by the narrator but is first due to the indirect relationship which we have with them—to their exoticism in the etymological sense.<sup>116</sup>

Levinas thereby goes on to explicate that our treatment of art is that of it being a separated and foreign thing—a detached thing that in turn augments our contemplation of it. This may as well be in line with the Kantian concept of ‘disinterestedness’ in which the encounter of artworks tends to be filtered by using a different parameter and/or faculty other than reason.<sup>117</sup> This could be so for artworks mostly

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<sup>113</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 146.

<sup>114</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents*, 21.

<sup>115</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents*, 52

<sup>116</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents*, 52

<sup>117</sup> Immanuel Kant and Werner S. Pluhar. *Critique of Judgment*. (Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett, 2010).

appeal to the senses; since artworks elicit pleasure by being expressions of an aspect of the artist's reality in the form of materializations.<sup>118</sup>

A landscape is, as we say, a state of mind. But apart from this soul of objects, an artwork as a whole expresses what we call the world of the artist. There is a world of Delacroix and a world of Victor Hugo. Artistic reality is a mind's means of expression. Through sympathy for this soul of things or of the artist the exoticism of the work is integrated into our world.<sup>119</sup>

Bearing this in mind, artworks are commonly regarded as something that could reveal an interiority, that of the artist's perhaps; though, somewhere along the way, the images it presents along with the sensations it brings about, blurs the line between interiority and exteriority thereon acquiring its own meaning that vary from each person's way of relating or rather, sympathizing with them thereby eventually becoming ambiguous.

## B. A Break From Representation

The undercurrents of the prior writings of Levinas on art evidently culminated in his 1948 essay dedicated to the discussion of art which is "*Reality and Its Shadow*".<sup>120</sup> In the first lines where he describes the traditional definition of art, he notes that it is very much upheld and glorified in the society as that which reveals something that is the saving grace of reality or that which tells of the ineffable.<sup>121</sup> This definition of art is exactly what Levinas criticizes in the consequent paragraphs for it runs parallel to the totalizing tactics of western ontology—it promises and even monopolizes meaning which is quite peculiar for the very way artworks function is through their nature of being vague or ambiguous. For this reason, Levinas contends in the consequent passage that:

Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow. To put it in theological terms, which will enable us to delimit however roughly our ideas by comparison with contemporary notions: art does not belong to the order of revelation. Nor does it belong to that of creation, which moves in just the opposite direction.<sup>122</sup>

Noticeably in this passage, Levinas puts forward a crucial and yet commonly overlooked quality of art; that is of it not being able to function as knowledge. Henceforth, it should not be taken as something aiming to reveal things to us in the way that knowledge does. Art is not something of knowledge for in trying to learn something, we try to memorize it or imitate such information in our head, but artworks do not exactly do so. Artworks aren't just made to resemble something from this world for most artworks especially that of modern art do not even seem to belong in this world due to its foreign quality as it was said even in *Existence and Existents*. When we see artworks, we do not conceptualize and immediately figure out what it is trying to say, one actually needs to stop dead in his tracks in

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<sup>118</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis, and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents*, 55-57.

<sup>119</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents*, 55.

<sup>120</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Seán Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader* (Malden: Blackwell, 2009), 129.

<sup>121</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Seán Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 130.

<sup>122</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Seán Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 132.

order to fully appreciate or even try to comprehend such. It does not represent something in a simple way, it is a break from representation. Thus, it is an obscuring rather than an enlightening and Levinas asks the rhetorical question of "how can artworks be viewed as something all-encompassing when its mode of being in the world is through an obscuring?".

### C. The Formula For Art

In *Totality and Infinity*, he further puts an emphasis that artworks function by way of it paradoxically clothing the elemental with some presupposed meaning.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, most often than not, what aesthetic things signify is that of its utility through enjoyment; and so, most of his direct and indirect references to art in this book can be found and built upon his discussions regarding representation, sensibility and enjoyment—all of which when fused together may as well be the formula for each work of art for Levinas. As he states that:

The world of things calls for art, in which intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment, in which the Infinity of the idea is idolized in the finite, but sufficient, image. All art is plastic. Tools and implements, which themselves presuppose enjoyment, offer themselves to enjoyment in their turn. They are playthings [*jouets*]: the fine cigarette lighter, the fine car. They are adorned by the decorative arts; they are immersed in the beautiful, where every going beyond enjoyment reverts to enjoyment<sup>124</sup>

There seems to be a glimmer of hope, however, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. The second chapter regarding Intentionality and Sensing, containing a subchapter entitled *The Amphibology of Being and Entities* shows that while Levinas retains that art is exotic, he nonetheless uses this to reveal and explain the ambiguity of the verb *to be* just as the title prefigures.<sup>125</sup> For Levinas in this work, art can be comparable to the function of Language in relation to the essence of things. It encourages a dynamic movement of meaning rather than a static one. This in turn reminds one of the sublime temporality of the modalities in being and that of which recommences being—"that every nameable identity can turn into a verb" and this can explain a lot when it comes to explaining the depth of the radical alterity of the Other and the dynamic movement of language.<sup>126</sup> However, towards the end, Levinas reveals yet again that such a potential is always to be in line with exegesis when it comes to art.

Through art essence and temporality begin to resound with poetry or song. And the search for new forms, from which all art lives, keeps awake everywhere the verbs that are on the verge of lapsing into substantives. In painting, red reddens and green greens, forms are produced as contours and vacate with their vacuity as forms. In music sounds resound; in poems vocables,

<sup>123</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*, 74.

<sup>124</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*, 140.

<sup>125</sup> Gabriel Riera. "The Possibility of the Poetic Said" in *Otherwise than Being (Allusion, or Blanchot in Lévinas)*. *Diacritics* 34, no. 2 (2004): 14-36.

<sup>126</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 43.

material of the said, no longer yield before what they evoke, but sing with their evocative powers and their diverse ways to evoke, their etymologies.<sup>127</sup>

#### D. Art In General

Henceforth, it can be resolved that Levinas' notion of art is multi-layered. Art in general is often glorified and is a source of pre-occupation because it is an artist's profound expression of something. However, in addition to such a belief, Levinas often makes us aware of the dangers and red flags of art by implying that it is in fact a non-being and is also most often than not, a non-truth, a work of fiction. An artwork in its countless but synonymous forms, for Levinas, does not simply stand for something that is objectively out there; for the product of an artist, and even if the artist usually works on his art in isolation, is nonetheless derived from a mixture of inexhaustible influences, inspiration and ideologies—something subjective. Thereon, an artwork does not aim to represent a specific thing of our objective reality in a simple way. Furthermore, while Levinas admits and acknowledges that we constantly enjoy, take refuge in and put on a pedestal the images presented in artworks which elicit sensations and rhythm, but in the process of such, it has the capacity to detach us from reality and consequently lead us away from the Other. Thus, artworks in themselves are not and should not be treated as something that could reveal something on its own because of its ambiguous nature and promptings. This has continuously led Levinas to suggest that art should always come with criticism and interpretation.

#### IV. LEVINAS ON ART AS TRANSCENDENCE

Levinas has been highly criticized for his seemingly ambiguous and rather pessimistic views on art—both in his time and up to today. Thereafter, scholars have taken the task of delving into, interpreting and arguing behind his views on art. Ironically enough, the ambiguity of the meaning of artworks also seems to be one of the reasons for Levinas' supposed unresolved stances regarding it. It is quite surprising to know that someone who has had literary promptings like Levinas would seem to be so adamant about the arts.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, this fact also makes him more credible to criticize it. Moreover, when we carefully situate his criticisms of art in line with the philosophy he has built upon, bearing in mind that it is from a radical and transcendental ethics of generosity, hospitality, and going beyond one's limit by reaching out to the Other, one can hope to be enlightened and find a deeper understanding of both his ethics and aesthetics.

As we have seen in *Reality and Its shadow*, Levinas has implied that art is the shadow of reality, for artworks especially that of the modern visual art usually aim to reflect something from reality by deviating from it. "*Art does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with*

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<sup>127</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, 43.

<sup>128</sup> Colin Davis. "Levinas the Novelist." In *Traces of War* (2017):148-62.

*knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow.*"<sup>129</sup> In line with this, Levinas has constantly implied that the aesthetic experience is capable of engulfing one's subjectivity to the point of eventually carrying it to another side or rather; the hither side of reality as Levinas calls it

### A. Art and the *There is*

Levinas implies that works of art especially that of modern art do not seem to be from this world since they do not come about naturally. Artworks are made up of things of this world which have a practical and objective use, but in artworks they are used or become as something else and "*it is as if they are cast toward us like chunks that have weight in themselves.*"<sup>130</sup> In the way that materials are stripped off of their objective and contextual meaning by going through new modifications of such by the artist's use and manipulation—by its exoticism, artworks tend to overwhelm and confuse us as to what they could mean. For this reason, one is caught off guard and knocked off their feet due to the fact that they can denote an event in an image presented that seems to be an undetermined alternate reality—the hither side.

Fortunately, such a description of something can be likened by none other than one of Levinas' notions and that is of the *There is*. Such a claim can be justified due to the fact that Levinas directly dedicates a subchapter of his *Existence and Existents* for the explication of his notion of art and its exoticism to serve as a kind of preparation before he formally introduces the absurd concept of the *There is*. As he states that "*The discovery of the materiality of being is not a discovery of a new quality, but of its formless proliferation. Behind the luminosity of forms, by which already relate to our "inside", matter is the very fact of the 'there is'.*"<sup>131</sup> Thereon in his discussion, Levinas puts forward and describes that the *There is* is not simply a nothingness, but of an event of reverting to nothingness or of a coming back to an anonymous and formless existence. It can be likened to one of those paradoxical moments wherein the silence or the absence of the sound of anything becomes deafening for "*it is full, but full of the nothingness of everything*"<sup>132</sup> thus, indeterminate.

On the other hand, even though the *There is* is described as an anonymous instant, Levinas implies that it does not exactly feel like it is just an instant for it also runs on the hither side of time. With that point being said, Levinas refers to it as a nocturnal space that drags on and seems to be endless and impossible to move forward from. This fact of the *There is* is synonymous to and manifests what Levinas calls *The Meanwhile* in art which can be described as an artwork literally being timeless. This can be said for an artist succeeds in making a certain instant appear in matter thereon preserving and allowing such a moment to never come to an end. An artwork is a world between times. Therefore, an artwork is also never situated in the present in the sense that for Levinas, the meaning of an artwork can neither be immediately be

<sup>129</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 132.

<sup>130</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, Alphonso Lingis, and Robert Bernasconi. *Existence and Existents*, 56.

<sup>131</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 57.

<sup>132</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 58.

figured out nor can it decisively speak on its own and clarify its own existence. Therefore, the encounter with art in itself is a situation wherein the “*present can assume nothing, can take on nothing and thus is an impersonal and anonymous instant.*”<sup>133</sup> Thus, art seems to be able to reveal such an instant of the *There Is* by being a materialization of it.

## B. The Hypostasis And The Economy Of Being

For one to have clarity and for one’s subjectivity to emerge amidst its crisis and chaos or the *There is*, however, is to identify oneself as an existent from its existence hence, separated from the world it lives in. This separation is in turn, to be done by living from the constituents of its own world. Surprisingly, for Levinas, this comes about through a pre-moral egoism in the form of an uncorrupted enjoyment. One takes enjoyment and is nourished through the elemental of this world not by utilizing such or simply using it as a means towards an end, but by letting such elements infiltrate one through sensibility just for that reason itself—because it is enjoyable. These nourishments can be in the form of the terrestrial, like food, rest, happiness and the like. Such nourishments in the form of enjoyment and sensibility establish interiority and the economy of being from which the “I” crystallizes and establishes its footing.<sup>134</sup> Furthermore, it is what ultimately effects separation and allows one to distinguish itself and be conscious from the non-I or the things outside itself. This process which carries on to the *hypostasis* is where independence from the dependence in such elements is established and where subjectivity emerges. Thereafter, this is when the subject comes to terms with the fact that while he/she feeds off of the nourishments of the world, he/she is in fact a separated being from the world and especially from the Other who occupies the world as well.

Conversely, while Levinas admits that the encounter of art also elicits enjoyment, it is nonetheless a kind of elemental that is a cause for concern due to the fact that it is quite dense with a diverting kind of sensibility that instead of encouraging independence and separation, tends to encourage complacency and reverting into the sphere of the elemental even after one’s subjectivity has already emerged from it. In this sense, one of Levinas’ definition of enjoyment can be assigned which is that:

In enjoyment I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not ‘as for me ...’ but entirely deaf to the Other, outside all communication and all refusal to communicate –without ears, like a hungry stomach.<sup>135</sup>

This is so because the naïve and innocent enjoyment we take refuge in the moment we emerge from the *There is*, and that of which nourishes one’s interiority, should make way for

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<sup>133</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas Reader*, 138.

<sup>134</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An essay on Exteriority*, 144.

<sup>135</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An essay on Exteriority*, 144.

the sharing of such a cultivated interiority through the face-to-face encounter. Such an encounter of the Other and her alterity is what will disturb and consequently, put into question one's unassuming gratification or its egoism. However, in contrast with the aesthetic encounter on its own, the latter is most often than not, capable of effecting a setback along the way by deluding one's subjectivity in its puzzling wake and this is mainly due to the fact that artworks elicit and encourage the proliferation of the often stigmatized ideology behind images for Levinas.

### C. The Face And The Image Of Art (Levinas And Visual Art)

One of the reasons for the opaque nature of artworks for Levinas is due to the fact that they are loaded with imagery. An image for Levinas be it in the literal or the figurative sense, is evidently a way of doubling reality by means of an adequation or a reduction of it. In a way, an image *frames* and sets apart a scenery. Through such an “*elementary process*” of art: by presenting images, is how it makes things stand out.<sup>136</sup> However, being such, Levinas stresses that it runs the risk of distorting reality through a newfound freedom of imagination. Thereon, such a distorted depiction of reality is tolerated or even romanticized. He warns us of this as he states that:

by their presence insist on [an object's] absence. They occupy its place mark its removal, as though the represented object died, were degraded, disincarnated in its own reflection. The painting then does not lead us given reality, but somehow to the hither side of it. It is a symbol in reverse<sup>137</sup>.

With that point being said, Levinas constantly describes images to be quite deluding for a subject is constantly led to think that the encounter with art is quite simple. In trying to comprehend a piece of art, the subject tends to think that the comprehension stops on the image of art and that the encounter with such an object is straightforward. On the contrary, artworks for Levinas signify things in themselves; therefore, they should not be taken one-dimensionally including realistic art, for even if artworks resemble certain things of an artist's world, they still have a multiplicity of meaning even to the point of a regress in meaning. Furthermore, for Levinas, even if an artwork can be considered an expression or a work of the Other, an artist is still “*not present, does not attend his own manifestation, but is simply signified in it by a sign in a system of signs.*”<sup>138</sup> With such an easily overlooked fact of the artist's or the other's distance when it comes to art, that an artwork is not a direct contact with meaning and the Other, most often than not, an ambiguous and a probable misleading image is also constantly being patronized or rather, idolized. Hence, the propagation of this totalizing semiotic is also prone to being applied to one's perception of objects, oneself or worse —the face of the Other. As Aaron Rosen

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<sup>136</sup> Levinas and Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*,132.

<sup>137</sup>Levinas and Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*,136.

<sup>138</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*, 178.

ironically puts it that, “by being pronounced complete, placed on a pedestal, or hung on a wall, art encourages us to think of ourselves in the same way, as finished products.”<sup>139</sup>

Conversely, the Face of the Other just like any other concept for Levinas should not be taken literally. Despite Levinas having countless passages trying to describe what the face signifies, like that of its condition as a “stranger, destitute, or proletarian”<sup>140</sup>, the very act of doing so is admittedly self-defeating for the face cannot be defined, or rather, totalized, but this, however encourages us to attend to them. Levinas’ notion of the Face serves as a constant reminder of another human being’s separation and distinctness from the subject, and vice-versa, simply put, the alterity of the Other. The Face of the Other overflows with signification and the encounter of such alone makes one realize that there will always be something more than meets the eye. Thereby, when it comes to the encounter of the Other for Levinas, the faculty of vision in line with cognition can be constant predators in the name of objectification and assimilation; the source of violence may well be traced back to such a process of trying to absorb and reduce one into things, concepts and even images. Levinas describes that:

To see is to be in a world that is entirely *here* and self-sufficient. Any vision beyond what is given remains within what is given. The Infinity of space, like the infinity of the signified referred to by the sign, is equally absent from the here below. Vision is a relation with a being such that the being attained through it precisely appears as the world.<sup>141</sup>

In line with such a statement implying Levinas’ adversity to the faculty of vision, his statement that *ethics is an optics*<sup>142</sup> can seem quite blurry at first however, as one reads on, it can become clearer that Levinas constantly subordinates the faculty of vision due to the fact that it is a means of seeing closed wholes in reality. As he goes on to say that “it is a ‘vision without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision, or an intentionality of a wholly different type.’”<sup>143</sup> Moreover, ethics being an optics for him, is that it is a shame if one simply stops there, with seeing the Other and asserting things about her, reducing her, for the Face *is* by itself and not by reference to a system. Even if vision is where one initially and instantly sees the Other, it does and should not just stop at that; after all, optics is in fact the study of an exhaustive lot of “light and how it affects and is affected by other things.”<sup>144</sup> In line with this, ethics is not being content with what is immediately presented in vision, rather, it should pave the way towards one’s interaction to another who signifies the beyond and what always slips away from common perception. In addition, Levinas has always emphasized that the face is not an image for a human being, not just because it is mobile, but also because a human being is not a thing that we can adequate and manipulate to our own liking. The Face signifies something that one cannot

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<sup>139</sup>Aaron Rosen, "Emmanuel Levinas and the Hospitality of Images." *Literature and Theology* 25, no. 4 (2011): 367

<sup>140</sup> Levinas, *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*,75.

<sup>141</sup> Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*,147.

<sup>142</sup>Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority*, 23.

<sup>143</sup>Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority*,23.

<sup>144</sup>"*Dictionary by Merriam-Webster, s.v. "Optics,"* accessed February 1, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/optics>

conquer or overcome for it signifies the beyond or the infinity in the Other. Thus, the vision of the face alone, the straightforwardness of the ethical encounter may very well be called the starting point of transcendence for it precedes all principles and thereon constantly allows one to go beyond one's perception and capacities.

It is noticeable that there also seems to be another similarity with the pure exteriority that is the image of art and the radical exteriority of the face—that they both disturb and push our being to inquire and preoccupy itself with something. Though, it is also remarkable that Levinas, yet again, brings up art's peculiar nature to further elucidate the effect of the total alterity of The Face— suffice it to say that it is to contrast the two. The difference in Levinas' sentiments about them lies in their effect on us and in what they lead us to question. The image of an artwork, on its own leads one to an infinite regress of its meaning since it is pure exteriority for its *“secret is exposed enclosed in its monumental essence and in its myth, in which it gleams like a splendor but does not deliver itself. It captivates by its grace as by magic but does not reveal itself.”*<sup>145</sup> On the other hand, the Face of the Other paves the way to putting one's own existence into question with one's encounter of a radical exteriority or simply put, alterity. As Levinas states that *“It is the face; its revelation is speech. The relation with the Other alone introduces a dimension of transcendence and leads us to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative and egoist.”*<sup>146</sup>

#### D. A Threefold Disengagement

Based on the foregoing parts of this paper, it can be inferred that for Levinas, Artworks present something that has numerous anarchic capabilities at play. With such a point, it can be said that one of Levinas' main adherence from it can be derived from its capability to be used as an evasion of responsibility or to divert subjectivity. An artwork on its own for Levinas, as we have explained, is *essentially disengaged* from reality due to the fact that it stands out in its exoticism.<sup>147</sup> A disengagement is also inherent in the process of making or the production of an artwork in the artist's case and ultimately that of the disengagement of its spectator and/or appreciator which is the subject.

Levinas does not elaborate on and invalidate the hard work and struggles that an artist goes through, Levinas nonetheless views artists as quite privileged people for artists are usually excused from engaging that much in society because they are also idolized or even placed on a pedestal for they are *“free to think that they have gone beyond the real”* and that he always has a masterpiece on its way which is an artwork – all of this he does in isolation.<sup>148</sup> In a way, an artist can be said to be playing god with regards to his art for he is evidently in control of creating another world that is on the hither side. Hence, it is inevitable that the constant process for an artist involves that of a disinterestedness and a disengagement

<sup>145</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 192.

<sup>146</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 193.

<sup>147</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 131.

<sup>148</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 136.

from reality and other people for an artist situates himself “*purely and simply at the heart of his own spectacle*”<sup>149</sup> whereas the “*spectators obsesses*”<sup>150</sup> over delving into the artist’s world.

Thereafter, in a subject’s engagement with an ambiguous product that the isolation of an artist has reproduced and that the artist shares and leaves to the public, the subject is usually immobilized and is consequently not able to fulfill one’s duty of *facing* the Other for it is turned towards an artwork. Artworks are inevitably interesting yet alarmingly engrossing for Levinas. Paintings, sculptures, pictures and films are noticeably and typically sought out when one has some time to spare and for one to unwind since “*To make or to appreciate a novel and a picture is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace.*”<sup>151</sup> Most often than not, it is due to the fact that to look and be in the presence of art, since it does not appear to be anything of this world, allows one to momentarily forget one’s immediate reality and to in turn be taken into a new world.

By this means, the novelty of a curated world to be perceived is also quite enticing and pleasurable to the point of one’s established subjectivity collapsing and being carried away from one’s reality. The rhythm of sensations and images is also what makes it capable of carrying us away and making us unconsciously and immediately participate in its event. It is in this context that Levinas states that “*it is a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom.*”<sup>152</sup> It is really quite easy to be entertained by artworks and Levinas does not deny such a fact but thereon strategically deconstructs the enjoyment to warn us of its ability to neutralize one’s actions. Art is quite susceptible to becoming a guilty pleasure in the way that it could easily be used as an escapism or to revert to a sinking further into mere being-in-the-world rather than a being-for-the-Other or towards a consistent and spontaneous transcendence towards responding to the other and even substituting for the Other—something that is at the core emphasis of Levinas’ philosophy.

Hence, it is noticeable that Levinas’ references to art present and reflect a deep observation and a holistic account of the nature of art and that of the aesthetic experience. With that point being said, it is remarkable that for Levinas a great lot of art’s dark and negative aspects stems from almost all of the aesthetic experience’s steps being an immediate disengagement from reality which effects ambiguity that thereon becomes an avenue towards a relapse from clarity and certainty of reality and onto furthering into oneself.

## E. LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE AND PHILOSOPHICAL CRITICISM OF ART

So far, it is evident that Levinas’ sentiments are quite gloomy and dismissive when it comes to art. Artworks as Levinas describes are objects that function, thrive and settle in ambiguity or it keeps us in the dark as to what it really means when taken or perceived on its own and in this way is how Levinas makes us aware of its neutralizing effect. Neutrality is often described as an attitude of being lukewarm

<sup>149</sup>Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 149.

<sup>150</sup>Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 140.

<sup>151</sup>Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 141.

<sup>152</sup>Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 132.

and undecided about something and this, for Levinas, may well be a source of irresponsibility and even that of violence in the sense that neutrality effects silence in one or silencing of the Other. Silence in turn for Levinas does not necessarily mean that there is peace, sometimes it maybe that there is not an answer because something is being held back, withdrawn and even exiled—the intense and yet indirect encounter of art for Levinas is a constant paradigm of this notion of silence. Levinas profoundly describes it as a “myth taking the place of mystery.”<sup>153</sup>

Quite frankly, a myth is an irrational and yet established belief. In a way, some humans accept myths by tolerating them and by not really taking the initiative to even inquire into their nature or where such a belief is coming from thereby not clarifying if they are even plausible. Furthermore, myths are blind and tactless forces that humans use as explanations or rather as defense mechanisms against the hardships of explaining something. Such an ideology is very much synonymous to the way art presents itself and is being utilized by humans—as a way of settling into one’s preconceived notions and hasty generalizations; ultimately, as an evasion of a better dialogue. As Levinas states that “*The artist stops because the work refuses to accept anything more, appears saturated. The work is completed in spite of the social or material causes that interrupt it. It does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue.*”<sup>154</sup>

In line with this, Levinas has always put an emphasis that the Other literally and figuratively masks an innumerable lot behind the Face and the expressions she makes. Accordingly, it is of no surprise that language, discourse and communication play a crucial role in reaching out to the Other or the ethical relation and consequently towards transcendence. For Levinas, stating a word breaks the *plastic image of the face* due to the fact that in communicating with the Other is undeniably when the otherness of the Other is realized.<sup>155</sup> However, discourse with the Face of the Other for Levinas is not necessarily disclosure. Its end is not essentially situated in the hopes of attaining knowledge or intentionality. An ethical relation is brought about in the sense that it is not a negation of one’s being, it does not threaten one, rather, it puts the ‘I’ in question. Thereafter, it is one’s obligation to answer to the question/s that the Face of the Other puts forward and effects on us. The response to such a question reflects an innumerable lot about the separated “I” for in answering to the Other’s call, the “I” is also *offering* what it has cultivated from within.

It is to be noted that contrary to the conventional notions of Language, for Levinas, language is not an abstract puzzle; it does not pre-condition intentionality, for language is not something already out there that a subject uses in hopes of finding the other pieces in discourse. Rather, it is the very instrument and/or building blocks of what the “I” has to offer to the Other and into the substantiation of its ethical relationship with the Other. In discourse, the subject does not know what or how the other will respond, for what is the point of discourse if the subject already knows? this will just be another self-gratification or a movement of the Same. Through language, conversation and/or discourse with the Other, the ethical relation is actualized in the sense that it signifies the Other as an overflowing of

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<sup>153</sup>Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 142.

<sup>154</sup>Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 131.

<sup>155</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*,155.

thought and which deepens the ethical relationship and is meaning by itself.<sup>156</sup> Ultimately though, this is how the Infinite commands one's Being or in Levinas' term, *the Same* and how the Same in turn attests to such an infinity<sup>157</sup> by further transcending its conditions and by reaching out over to another shore<sup>158</sup> to the Other.

Works of art on the other hand, are elements which are *clothe* with signification<sup>159</sup>, but are not self-sufficient because perceived on their own, artworks cannot posit and clarify their own existence. Thereon, in stark contrast to language, art cannot transcend itself on its own for it needs a disclosure to have meaning and eventually to "*find for it a place in the whole by apperceiving its function or its beauty.*"<sup>160</sup> Thus, to combat the nature of art being a constant artificial intervention to one's subjectivity or responsibility to the Other, Levinas has consistently suggested the intervention of philosophical criticism of art. In the subsequent lines to the one stating that art does not begin dialogue on its own in *Reality and Its Shadow*, Levinas finds hope in the previously stigmatized ideology of a myth and consequently that of artworks for it "*is at the same time untruth and the source of philosophical truth.*"<sup>161</sup> Hence, Levinas prescribes an antidote to the inhumanity and irresponsibility of art through the philosophical criticism of it. This for Levinas will contemplate and inquire into the techniques used in the artwork and the influences surrounding the artist's work. Criticism will contextualize a work of art in line with figuring out what the artist is trying to convey. Hence, in doing so criticism "*treats the artist as a man at work*"<sup>162</sup> and will link this "*disengaged and proud man to real history*"<sup>163</sup> thereby also extracting the artwork from the meanwhile, or its literal quality of being timeless, and into situating it in a specific context that can help deepen one's understanding of the work of art. In short, philosophical criticism will humanize the artist and consequently the *inhuman and monstrous nature* of the artwork.<sup>164</sup>

Moreover, this study notes that the difference between Levinas' suggestion of philosophical criticism from mere criticism which he mentions at the first part of *Reality And Its Shadow* is that philosophical criticism is a *rehabilitated*<sup>165</sup> kind of criticism against the background of the traditional view of art as revelation. Since Levinas reminds us that an artwork is in fact a non-truth and is not a form of knowledge in the way that it doesn't clarify things on its own, it follows that one's encounter with it should also not be done in isolation for the seemingly self-sufficient nature of art despite it being ambiguous, that the subject perceives, can in turn be internalized by the subject in the use of criticism per se. This can be justified by the fact that criticism by mere contemplation in one's own or the language

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<sup>156</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 74.

<sup>157</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Philippe Nemo. *Ethics and Infinity: conversations with Philippe Nemo*. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2011), 108-110.

<sup>158</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*, 216.

<sup>159</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 74

<sup>160</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 74.

<sup>161</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 142.

<sup>162</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 141.

<sup>163</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 141.

<sup>164</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 142.

<sup>165</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Hand. "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 142

of the Same is counterintuitive in the way that it can lead to *a parasitic experience*<sup>166</sup> and yet again, a furthering into oneself. Thus, the philosophical criticism should necessitate an actual conversation with the Other about art. As Levinas makes us aware that:

The use of the word wrenches experience out of its aesthetic self-sufficiency, the here where it has quietly been lying. Invoking experience transforms it into a creature. It is in this sense that I have been able to say elsewhere that criticism, which is the word of a living being speaking to a living being, brings the image in which art revels back to the fully real being.<sup>167</sup>

A conversation with the Other about an artwork or a criticism of it art is to be done in the hopes of mobilizing *the Said*<sup>168</sup> that can be represented by the peculiar materialization of an artwork. This is by the very fact that an artwork can manifest the strangest things in the world for it is quite surprising sometimes to see that a simple canvass or photo paper is made dense with an image by an artist. As Levinas puts it that “*The palette of colors, the gamut of sounds, the system of vocables and the meandering of forms are realized as a pure bon; in the touch of color and pencil, the secrecy of words, the sonority of sounds-all these modal- there is resonance of essence.*”<sup>169</sup> All of which however, is to resonate only through an unsaying by way of conversing about what the artist is trying to convey in the artwork. As Levinas does follow to say that “*The exegesis is not something laid on to the resonance of essence in the artwork; the resonance of essence vibrates within the said of the exegesis.*”<sup>170</sup>

Through this, the artwork’s ambiguity and insufficiency can be put forward and can be made offerable to the ethical relationship by bearing witness to it and allowing it to have an ethical signification that is, *a Saying*.<sup>171</sup> Just as Levinas in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* used the ambiguity of language against the totalizing tendencies of the intentionality of language by speaking in paradoxes and in quite a difficult way of articulation, in the case of artworks, language can also be used to counter the disengaging effect of art in order to divert it towards the more worthy endpoint for Levinas which is ethics. Furthermore, through the necessary inseparability of criticism, conversation and art for Levinas, the aesthetic experience will not just be a way for one to descend into herself or to relapse into anonymity and mere being, but rather, to utilize and apply the

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<sup>166</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 131.

<sup>167</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 148.

<sup>168</sup> *The said, the word, is not simply a sign of a meaning, nor even only an expression of a meaning (contrary to Husserl’s analysis in the first Logic of Investigation); the word at once proclaims and establishes an identification of this with that in the already said* (OBBE: 36-37). The Said is one of the two aspects of language that Levinas elaborates on in his *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* which can succinctly be described as the actual and literal words *said*. For instance, when a person says ‘I love you’, those three actual words are the Said or the concrete product of articulation.

<sup>169</sup> Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, 40.

<sup>170</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Hand. “Reality and Its Shadow” in *The Levinas reader*, 41.

<sup>171</sup> The second and last aspect of language that Levinas elaborated on., however, is much more tricky as it is what signifies ethical ambiguity and this is *the Saying* As we have stated earlier that the Said of the statement ‘I love you’ are those exact three words used, the gesture and overall, the way someone says those words to another the Saying and is ultimately more capable of signification and meaning. Thus, if someone says ‘I love you’ while strangling you, would you still believe him? As Levinas continues in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* that: *The saying is both an affirmation and a retraction of the said. The reduction could not be effected simply by parentheses which, on the contrary, are an effect of writing. It is the ethical interruption of essence that energizes the reduction.* (OBBE:44)

ambiguity of art as an inspiration towards the cultivation of the ethical relationship by way of it being a prompt towards the Other—a transcendence.

## V. Conclusion

As we can see, Levinas' initially dismissive views on the nature of art did not just come out of nowhere for they stem from a plausible vantage point that prioritizes responsibility, initiative and generosity. For Levinas, the common saying of *art for art's sake* simply does not justify its implications to the human condition especially as it is very much upheld and given such a privileged place in our civilization. The encounter of art is often viewed as an extraordinary experience out of the ordinary that is of our day to day reality; the novelty of a new world that a material such as an artwork allows to appear in contrast from the mundane things we just use to achieve something, is quite enticing and has the ability to draw one in its world. One may think that this is just something we use for our harmless entertainment and enjoyment, but Levinas reminds us that it might be the other way around. An artwork's static ambiguity and a subject's curiosity as to what it truly means is a constant push and pull that can lead to absorption of the subject. As Levinas had stated: that "*evil powers are conjured by filling the world with idols which have mouths but do not speak.*";<sup>172</sup> for Levinas, the way artworks are put on a pedestal, viewed as the saving grace of humanity and as something that is to take refuge in despite having an ambiguous nature and meaning when perceived by itself or as they are presented to us, is a movement that is problematic for it tends to perpetuate an opacity of meaning taking over and blinding us from what should matter and to which we should dedicate our initiative to—our responsibility to the Other. In contrast to the effect of the Other's alterity or her mystery, The Face of the Other thereon signifies light in itself and further has the capacity to justify and bear witness to her existence and even to question ours not just with the use of language. Whereas, art on its own allows us to sink deeper into the darkness and indeterminateness of existence. In this sense, art is insufficient for it is not able to go beyond itself and clarify its own existence much more a subject's due to its peculiarity that come from its imagery and exoticism—it cannot transcend itself nor effect such but is always on the hither side.

Thus, Levinas does not try to change the mode of artistic production nor the constituents of such artworks but has constantly suggested a counter intervention of philosophical criticism to the essential intervention that is art or the aesthetic experience. Such an extension to the exotic aesthetic experience allows for one's experience of it and the questions it has brought about in a subject to be discussed and offered to the Other by means of a conversation—thereafter constantly being situated in the economy of being instead of remaining in the *il y a*. In short, the private escape or descension into oneself that is typically towards mere being and irresponsibility would cease to be so if such an escape would be diverted onto the ethical relation.

Throughout the course of this study, it is remarkable (if one has not already noticed) that Levinas did exactly what he was suggesting: Levinas has constantly brought up his dark notion of art and its descending ideology to argue for a more progressive kind of movement and that is of the transcendental movement that is to be done by reaching out to the Other or his ethics. Through the initial dismissal of art, Levinas constantly makes use of it and its essential egoism to remind us of an impartial transcendence that one could easily settle into instead of pushing forward into a transcendence that pushes towards the Other or the ethical responsibility. Even as Art signifies a certain kind of beauty, it is of no surprise that Levinas was not fazed and is nonetheless consistently concerned with The Good that can come out of it in just the right conditions. Figuratively speaking,

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<sup>172</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Sean Hand, "Reality and Its Shadow" in *The Levinas reader*, 141.

with the right conditions the experience of Visual art being a constant descension from the light or clarity can eventually compel one to push forward to the light that is to be found in the uplifting movement or the transcendence of the ethical responsibility to the Other– it is a shadow that trails behind and allows for contrast indeed.

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