

DISTANCE AND IMMERSION: PHENOMENOLOGICAL AESTHETICS AND THE QUESTION OF A 'PARADIGM SHIFT'

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the question of how two obvious but apparently antithetical features of aesthetic experience – distance and immersion – can be integrated into one theory. The author criticizes the contemporary neglect of the first feature (distance or disinterestedness), and argues for a more dialectical notion of aesthetic experience which would include both of them. To this end, the article starts, in section one, by re-examining the main points in the evolution of phenomenological aesthetics, which some authors consider a chief source of this neglect. The presence of two questions is emphasized: (1) the idea of a distinctive perception which we traditionally call aesthetic and can trace back to Kantian roots and (2) the process of breaking with the subject-object model of experience. In the end of this section, the question is raised whether the successful elimination of the latter means the necessary rejection of the former. In section two, the author argues for a negative answer to this question, and a candidate for a 'new paradigm' of aesthetics is considered – the idea of the environment. As the conclusion to this section, the compatibility of the idea of the aesthetic mode of perception in the traditional sense, together with the original sense of the idea of environment, is defended. Lastly, in section three, these findings are made more specific and confirmed by turning to Jan Patočka's analyses of the experience of space.

Key words: Jan Patočka; phenomenological aesthetics; distance; immersion; space

DISTANCE ET IMMERSION : L'ESTHÉTIQUE PHÉNOMÉNOLOGIQUE ET LA QUESTION DU « CHANGEMENT DE PARADIGME »

Cet article tente de savoir à quel point deux traits évidents mais apparemment antithétiques de l'expérience esthétique, à savoir la distance et l'immersion, peuvent être inclus au sein d'une même théorie. L'auteur critique le rejet actuel du premier de ces deux traits (la distance ou le désintéressement) et argumente au profit d'une conception plus dialectique de l'expérience esthétique qui prendrait en compte chacun des deux aspects. Pour cela, l'article commence par réexaminer les moments clés de l'esthétique phénoménologique que certains auteurs considèrent comment la principale source d'inspiration de ce refus. L'accent est mis sur la présence de deux aspects : 1°) l'idée d'une forme spécifique de perception, traditionnellement désignée comme esthétique et que l'on peut faire remonter jusqu'à ses racines kantienne; 2°) le processus de libération du modèle sujet-objet de l'expérience. À la fin de cette partie, la question est posée de savoir si l'élimination effective de ce modèle signifie également l'abandon nécessaire de la notion de distance. Dans la deuxième partie de l'article, l'argumentation se fait au profit d'une réponse négative, et un candidat à un « nouveau paradigme » est examiné sous la forme de la notion de milieu (*environnement*). À la fin de cette partie, l'auteur défend la compatibilité de l'idée du mode esthétique de la perception, dans le sens traditionnel du terme, avec le sens originel de la notion de milieu. Dans la troisième et dernière partie de l'article, ces constatations sont spécifiées et confirmées à l'aide des analyses de l'expérience de l'espace du philosophe Jan Patočka.

DISTANCE A PONOŘENÍ: FENOMENOLOGICKÁ ESTETIKA A OTÁZKA „ZMĚNY PARADIGMATU“

Článek se zabývá otázkou, nakolik mohou být dva samozřejmé, avšak zjevně protikladné rysy estetické zkušenosti – distance a ponoření se – zahrnuty do jedné teorie. Autor kritizuje současné odmítnutí prvního rysu (distance, či nezainteresovanosti) a argumentuje ve prospěch dialektičtějšího pojetí estetické zkušenosti, které zahrnuje oba rysy. Za tímto účelem článek začíná přezkoumáním hlavních momentů ve vývoji fenomenologické estetiky, která je některými autory považována za hlavní inspirační zdroj onoho odmítnutí. Zdůrazněna je přítomnost dvou témat: (1) idea specifického druhu vnímání, které je tradičně označováno jako estetické a které lze stopovat až k jeho kantovským kořenům; (2) proces vymaňování se ze subjekt-objektového modelu zkušenosti. V závěru této části je položena otázka, zda úspěšná eliminace tohoto modelu rovněž znamená nutné opuštění pojmu distance. V druhé části je argumentováno ve prospěch negativní odpovědi na tuto otázku a dále je přezkoumán kandidát na „nové paradigma“ – pojem „prostředí“ (*the environment*). V závěru této části je obhajována kompatibilita pojmu estetického modu vnímání v tradičním smyslu a původního významu pojmu prostředí. V závěrečné třetí části jsou tato zjištění specifikována a potvrzena pomocí analýz zkušenosti prostoru českého filozofa Jana Patočky.

Aesthetic experiences involve two features that, I suppose, we would all – aestheticians, philosophers, and laymen – agree on. When we experience great works of art or outstanding examples of natural beauty, we can exercise a kind of distance from the exclusive pursuit of our everyday practical interests; we can feel a temporary release from the all-pervasive entanglement in our ordinary concerns. Nevertheless, everyone knows that aesthetic experiences are not only experiences of disinterest or indifference; they are also experiences of a heightened interest, of being absorbed, moved, or involved. These two features – distance and immersion (or detachment and involvement) – form one of the essential dichotomies, or antinomies, lying at the heart of modern aesthetic theory. As a consequence, they create the tension that is behind many (if not all) the influential attempts to define the notion of aesthetic experience. For the purpose of such a definition, they can be used either in isolation (one of them becomes the main or only feature defining the notion of aesthetic experience) or in a kind of more or less dialectical relationship to one another. The first possibility leads to the elimination of this tension, but, I believe, at the cost of the explanatory scope of such a theory. The other is more inclusive, but it has to face the apparent paradox of two antithetical features that must be integrated into a single theory.

Much of this essay is an attempt to argue for the latter possibility, because I want to claim that it is the only available way to keep the notion of the specific kind of perceiving (or thinking, imagining, and so forth) which we call *aesthetic*, alive. For this purpose, I re-examine, in section one, the main points in the evolution of phenomenological aesthetics. In this section, I emphasize two matters that occur in aesthetically relevant phenomenological writings and also play the main role in contemporary aesthetics in general: (1) the idea of the distinctive kind of perception that we traditionally call aesthetic and can be traced to Kantian roots and (2) the process of breaking with the bipolar model of mind, or the subject-object scheme, which is so deeply embedded in Western thought. Some aestheticians, influenced by the phenomenological movement, claim that the exaggeration of the idea of distance is the cause of undesirable conceptual divide between subject

and object in the notion of aesthetic experience. At the end of this section, I ask whether the successful elimination of the latter means the necessary rejection of the former. In section two, I argue for a negative answer to this question, and reconsider the candidate for 'a new paradigm' of aesthetics – the concept of the environment. I examine here further possibilities of this notion by confronting Arnold Berleant's approach with David E. Cooper's critique of the contemporary use of this concept. As a conclusion to this section, I defend the compatibility of the idea of the aesthetic mode of perception in the traditional sense with the original sense of the concept of the environment (and thus with the framework of the process of emancipation from the subject-object model of experience). Lastly, in section three, after playing two phenomenologically inspired approaches against one another, I turn to phenomenology itself. I consider Jan Patočka's analyses of the experience of space, and emphasize and confirm the findings from earlier sections.

I. The idea of distance and the abyss of the mental representations

Edward S. Casey begins his overview of the evolution of phenomenological conceptions of aesthetic experience by referring to Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, specifically to his explanation of beauty deduced from the first moment of the 'Analytic of the Beautiful'. According to Kant, as Casey emphasizes, the judgement of taste bears on formal features that inhere in the object judged, since these inspire certain feelings in the subject: 'Taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest. The object of such a satisfaction is called beautiful.'¹

Casey underlines the central role of experience in the context of the third critique: the outcome of any judgement of beauty is, as we have seen, the subject's feeling and thus it is the experience that counts, not the object, which is primarily at stake in matters of knowledge. 'In order to decide whether or not something is beautiful, we do not relate the representation by means of understanding to the object for cognition, but rather relate it by means of the imagination (perhaps combined with the understanding) to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure.'² The crucial point here is the moment of immediacy, for the basis of this specific judgement is always a *feeling*, or, in other words, a directly experienced quality without the necessary mediation of any concept. We do not need to know what kind of object is in a front of us to judge it beautiful. More precisely, we do not conceptualize it with regard to any theoretical or practical purpose. We do not recognize the object with respect to any general, immaterial entity (concept, category, type, or kind), of which it is the case. Instead, Kant says, 'we linger in our contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself'.³

For a long time, it seemed that the notion of the aesthetic field thus defined, with the emphasis on the dominance of the subject's experience, opened a plausible way to understanding the sources of aesthetic value – both in art and in the aesthetic experience of natural objects. Nevertheless, despite the important role played by experience or, in

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 96.

² *Ibid.*, 89.

³ *Ibid.*, 107.

the Kantian version of it, by the experiencing of the subject, the aesthetic field remains hopelessly split, with the object on one side and the subject's experiencing on the other side of the aesthetic domain. As Casey rightly claims with reference to Heidegger's 'Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks' (written 1935–36):

From the 18th century onward, recourse to experience has meant the subjectification of the artwork in the abyss of mental representations. Neglected are dimensions of the artwork that surpass the domain of subjectivity and representation, e.g., Being and the Open, Earth and World. Rather than being the contents of any possible subjective experience, these factors transcend such experience. From the very start, they take us somewhere else.⁴

The gradual overcoming of this bipolar model, which was for a long time inseparably linked to the era of representationalism in Western thought, also appears, as Casey suggests, within the evolution of the phenomenological approaches to aesthetic experience. The shadows of mentalism or representationalism, which were still present in the work of the founders of phenomenology and its early figures (Edmund Husserl and Roman Ingarden), were gradually eliminated, and eventually⁵, Casey writes, 'once the dogma of representationalism is removed from the schema, there is room for a more constructive and expansive notion of aesthetic experience and its contents. The major phenomenological aestheticians offer us a model for experiencing art in enriched and nuanced ways without being committed to the primacy of representation and its associated subjectivism.'⁶

According to Casey, this successful 'exorcism' of the subject-object schema within the evolution of phenomenological thinking 'happens mainly through an emphasis on the concrete complexity of perception that takes us out of our minds and into the environment place-world whose analogue is the world of the artwork: a world that is no mere assemblage of things but a poignant actuality that bristles with imaginative possibilities.'⁷ Consequently, the notions of the aesthetic object and aesthetic experience have been extensively reinterpreted within this development. The old idea of the aesthetic object based on this bipolarity, understood against the background of the relationship between subjective representation and a mere physical continuum, has, Casey argues, been superseded 'by opening up the aesthetic object to the ingression of place-worlds while reconceiving aesthetic experience as a form of feeling that not only ties subject to object but melts down their very difference', and 'then the diremptive bipolarity inherent in representationalism gives way to a more ample vision of what art and its experience can mean in expressive artworks.'⁸ The notion of *object* (and complementarily of *subject*) then becomes, to a certain extent, a simplification or even a misinterpretation. More precisely,

⁴ Edward S. Casey, 'Aesthetic Experience', in *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetic*, ed. Hans Reiner Sepp and Lester Embree (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, London, New York: Springer Science, Business Media B. V., 2010), 1.

⁵ Casey has in mind the work of the next generation of phenomenological philosophers, especially Mikel Dufrenne and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. As I seek to demonstrate in the final section of this article, we may usefully add Jan Patočka's writings to his list.

⁶ Casey, 'Aesthetic Experience', 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*

we should speak about the 'situation of aesthetic perception', rather than about the experience of a self-contained entity, which has the character of substance and attribute. For it is, after all, such a fundamental situational structure out of which further differentiations of subject and object and other constellations of things emerge. The aesthetic object in the sense of 'opening up [...] to the ingression of place-worlds' (even if its focus is a solid thing) is never concerned with a static given, and should thus be understood in its processuality, that is, more like a movement, dynamism, in a word, an *event-object*.

Besides these more or less successful efforts to jettison the burden of representationalism in the work of phenomenological philosophers, we can, however, still identify there the presence of that Kantian figure with which Casey began his overview. The following example originates in Ingarden's *Cognition of the Literary Work of Art* (1937). Here, he describes the initial phase of aesthetic experience:

The occurrence of a preliminary aesthetic emotion (in one's stream of experiences) usually entails, first of all, a *check* on the previous 'normal' course of experiences and activities concerning the objects of the surrounding real world. What we were occupied with a moment before, though perhaps very important to us then, can suddenly lose its significance, become uninteresting, and we are indifferent to it. We therefore do not continue – even if 'for a moment' – our business during which the quality (usually related to an object) evoking the preliminary emotion imposed itself on us. For example, how often when walking a mountain path – paying attention to the details of a way which is not always safe – are we involuntarily 'struck' by the so-called beauty of the landscape? We then stop automatically. The details of the bends of the path we had climbed up to the summit have become uninteresting; we have no longer have time for them; something else is 'attracting' us now. Similarly, we often suddenly interrupt a talk about some practical or theoretical matter, because we have been accidentally dazzled by a casual quality evoking a preliminary emotion, for example, beauty and a peculiar expression of someone who has just passed by on the street.⁹

Apparently, for Ingarden, that mode of perception, which 'reinforces and reproduces itself', or the exercise of which is worthwhile for its own sake, and not for any practical or theoretical purpose, does not lose its significance at all. But one may object that Ingarden's theory of aesthetic experience is still too influenced by its Husserlian origins and the purely intentional character of consciousness (and is thus still burdened with residues of mentalism). Take, then, for example, Heidegger's description of the way a work of art displays meaning-contexts that are otherwise concealed by objectivizing appropriations:

To work-being there belongs the setting up of a world. Thinking of it within this perspective, what is the nature of that in the work which is usually called the work material? Because it is determined by usefulness and serviceability, equipment takes into its service that of which it consists: the matter. In fabricating equipment – e.g., an ax – stone is used, and used up. It disappears into usefulness. The material is all the better and more suitable the less it resists perishing in the equipmental being of the equipment. By contrast the temple-work, in setting up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth

⁹ Roman Ingarden, 'Aesthetic Experience and Aesthetic Object', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 21:3 (1961): 297. Translation amended.

for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work's world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word.¹⁰

What does Heidegger mean by 'work material'? How is it that we notice it in a work of art, and experience 'the massiveness and heaviness of stone, firmness and pliancy of wood, hardness and luster of metal, the lighting and darkening of color', and so forth? For this, Heidegger provides a negative explanation strongly resonating with the Kantian aesthetic legacy. On the one hand, it is the practical everyday determination of things, their 'usefulness and serviceability', which must disappear from a work of art. On the other hand, such refraining from the ubiquitous determination of things makes possible – *causes* – the material to re-appear and come 'into the Open of the work's world'.

Two other, more general, question or lines of discussion arise, which at the same time dominate – and not by chance – contemporary aesthetics. What is more important, these lines intersect at a very interesting point. Here, at this point of intersection, we encounter a problem as important as the question of a 'paradigm shift' within aesthetic theory in general. According to some influential contemporary aestheticians, to put it briefly, we are faced with the problem of re-thinking the old paradigm of modern aesthetic theory or searching for a new one or both.¹¹ How should we formulate this 'old paradigm'? Arnold Berleant, for example, identifies it, exactly in the Kantian vein, as a 'distinctive kind of attention, contemplative and disinterested, that is directed towards a work of art apart from any other consideration, particularly of use, that would compromise our satisfaction in its intrinsic value',¹² and quotes as a *locus classicus* of this doctrine the same passage of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* mentioned by Casey at the beginning of his overview of phenomenological concepts of aesthetic experience.¹³

According to Berleant, the idea of disinterestedness lies 'at the heart of a cluster of ideas' that developed in eighteenth-century English and French philosophy, and did not find explicit expression until Kant's third critique.¹⁴ My purpose here is not to revise Berleant's outline of the history of modern aesthetics. But Berleant's claim includes one important point for our discussion. This cluster should contain other ideas regularly associated with disinterestedness, one of which is *distance*.¹⁵ In a nutshell, Berleant holds that the result of this conceptual connection is the distancing of the object of perception, circumscribing it with clear boundaries, which results in the *isolation* of the art object or

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and ed. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 2001), 44–45.

¹¹ See, for example, Arnold Berleant, 'Historicity of Aesthetics I', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 26:2 (1986): 101–11; idem, 'Historicity of Aesthetics II', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 26:3 (1986): 195–203; idem, 'Aesthetics and the Contemporary Arts', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 29:2 (1970): 155–67; idem, 'Re-thinking Aesthetics', *Filozofski vestnik*, 20:2 (1999): 25–33.

¹² Arnold Berleant, 'Beyond Disinterestedness', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34:3 (1994): 242–43.

¹³ See note 1 of this article.

¹⁴ Berleant, 'Beyond Disinterestedness', 244.

¹⁵ According to Berleant, the 'cluster of ideas', which has the idea of disinterestedness as its key term, consists of contemplative character, distance, and universality. *Ibid.*, 245–49.

the object of aesthetic appreciation in general: 'In aesthetics, the isolation of the art object is the correlative of appreciative distance.'¹⁶ To sum up: first, it seems, that the separation of the perceiving subject from the object perceived (and from the rest of the world as well) is a necessary consequence of the Kantian idea of disinterestedness; second, this separation results in another inadequate idea – namely, art objects and objects of aesthetic appreciation in general consist primarily of solid, self-contained, substantial entities, not processes, situations, or events. The question arises whether it is possible to keep these closely related ideas alive, face to face with evidence of contemporary neo-avant-garde art forms or the aesthetic appeal of urban and natural environments. No, it is not possible, says Berleant, who calls these ideas 'dogmas',¹⁷ the significance of which is largely historical and the eternalization of them exaggerates their place and hinders aesthetic inquiry.¹⁸

In the contemporary critique of traditional aesthetics we encounter the same tendency that was identified by Casey in the evolution of phenomenological conceptions of aesthetic experience. This common tendency consists in the attempt to re-describe the concept of aesthetic object in terms of our active, engaged, and embodied being forming a part of the environment we live in. This should not be surprising, Berleant is, after all, considered the 'strongest proponent of the phenomenological approach' in environmental (or ecological) aesthetics¹⁹ and he draws explicitly upon phenomenology for other areas of aesthetic theory as well (mainly for works of art and the aesthetics of our built environment). Nevertheless, Berleant also claims that the separation of the perceiving subject from the perceived object is a direct consequence (or even a correlative) of the doctrine of disinterestedness. But this second claim is far from being obvious, at least within the field of phenomenology.

The question then arises whether we need – for the re-description of the notion of aesthetic object – to abandon the idea of disinterestedness (which may of course transcend the version of the idea by which Kant defined genuine aesthetic judgement). In other words, in order to get out of the 'abyss of mental representations', which is the cause of subjectification of artworks (or aesthetic objects in general),²⁰ do we need to abandon the idea of a distinctive kind of perception, the exercise of which is worthwhile for its own sake, or, as Coleridge says, is 'carried forward not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse of curiosity, not by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution, but by the pleasurable activity of the journey itself'.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid., 247.

¹⁷ On this question, see, for example, the debate between Carlson and Berleant. Arnold Berleant, 'The Persistence of Dogma in Aesthetics', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52:2 (1994): 237–39; Allen Carlson, 'Beyond the Aesthetic', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 52:2 (1994): 239–41.

¹⁸ Berleant, 'Re-thinking Aesthetics', 28.

¹⁹ See, for example, Ted Toadvine, 'Ecological Aesthetics', in *Handbook of Phenomenological Aesthetics*, ed. Hans Reiner Sepp and Lester Embree (Springer Science+Business Media B. V., 2010), 85–86.

²⁰ See, Casey, 'Aesthetic Experience', 1.

²¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria. Or, my Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and opinions, and Two Lay Sermons*, I: *The Statesman's Manual*, II: *Blessed Are Ye That Sow Besides All Waters* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 149. Quoted by John Dewey in connection with the understanding of the aesthetic experience. See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), 5.

II. The environment as an aesthetic paradigm

Let us recapitulate the argument. We began with Casey's critical review of the development of phenomenological accounts of the notion of aesthetic experience. Here we recognized two important concepts or ideas: first, the idea of a distinctive kind of perception, whose exercise is worthwhile for its own sake, which has Kantian origins and we call aesthetic. Second, the dualistic model of the notion of experience, which is characteristic of modern Western thought and is one of the main philosophical targets from the phenomenological point of view.

As we have seen, the same ideas are present in the current debate on re-thinking key terms of traditional aesthetics, with, however, one striking difference. On the one hand, Casey does not seem to imply that an undesirable subjectification of the notion of aesthetic experience and its correlate, isolationism concerning the object of aesthetic appreciation, are inevitable consequences of the idea of disinterestedness. On the other hand, Berleant, a phenomenologically inspired aesthetician, explicitly adopts such a position. He calls for a search for a new paradigm free from the shortcomings and errors of the old one. We now turn to the question of how this new, functional, vital notion of the aesthetic object, which is also supposed to display aesthetic qualities, might look. Later, I shall consider other possible arguments for this, which appear in the works of David E. Cooper and Jan Patočka. Lastly, I shall consider, by means of some of Cooper's and Patočka's useful insights, the compatibility (or, the above-indicated incompatibility) of Berleant's suggestion with the neglected idea or 'dogma' of disinterestedness.

First, let us resume the alleged shortcomings or errors of the 'old paradigm'. 'It is,' as Berleant sums up the main points, 'precisely by setting aside interest, "either of sense or of reason", that we become capable of receiving aesthetic satisfaction. Assuming a disinterested attitude frees us from the distractions of practical purposes and permits us to dwell freely on an object or representation of it, which we then regard as beautiful.'²² Why should this notion of *the aesthetic* be defective? Whether it is the aesthetic experience of an artwork or the aesthetic experience of a natural object, this notion, according to Berleant, limits the density and layered structure of aesthetic experience, because not only artworks but also our environments 'possess the uncanny ability to insinuate themselves into our bodies, stirring up somatic and affective responses, and engaging us in ways that are difficult to reconcile with the contemplative ideal.'²³

At first sight, serious problems encumber traditional aesthetics in many ways, not only in the domain of fine art. We are therefore led to suggest, according to Berleant, that the same quality of perceptual engagement, which is, for example, so evident and true of the experience of architecture, holds for the experience of environments in general. Berleant comes to the conclusion: 'if we take the environments as an exemplar, it becomes the model of engagement, a kind of experience far removed from tradition with which [we] began. We must then relinquish disinterestedness, an attitude, impossible to fulfil in

²² Arnold Berleant, 'The Aesthetics of Art and Nature', in *Landscape, Natural Beauty and the Arts*, ed. Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 229.

²³ *Ibid.*, 230.

architecture or environment, equally, without bifurcating experience and turning it into a subjective response to an external and alien world.²⁴

In this way, Berleant proposes the emergence of a new paradigm of the aesthetic, which is based on the negation of the old paradigm of the aesthetic attitude as a distinctive appreciative distance. Environment as a new aesthetic paradigm implies that 'the experience of environment as an inclusive perceptual system includes such factors as space, mass, volume, time, movement, color, light, smell, sound, tactility, kinaesthesia, pattern, order, and meaning. Environmental experience here is not exclusively visual, but actively involves all the sensory modalities synesthetically engaging the participant in intense awareness.'²⁵ Environmental experience, then, with the phenomenological inspiration behind it, serves as a model for aesthetic theory in general.

Concerning our somatic, imaginative, and cognitive place in the world we live in, Berleant clearly follows the development of phenomenological conceptions of aesthetic experience. We can note a number of aspects, or enriching moments, of openness to our lived place-worlds, which are in obvious contradiction with the notion of aesthetic object as a self-contained entity, having the character of substance and attribute. Nevertheless, one important question arises at this point: the environment as the new paradigm of the aesthetic should be able to offer new ways of understanding the distinction between *the aesthetic* and *the non-aesthetic* (if we are not to abandon the term *aesthetic* at all), for example, the distinction between the sense of my actually being a part of my environment, for all intents and purposes, and the sense of place, which is aesthetically significant. But in this respect Berleant's approach does not take us very far.²⁶ At this moment, the outright abandoning of the old paradigm of the minimal notion of the aesthetic results in blurring the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic without offering a useful alternative.

But let us explore this suggestion of the environment as a new aesthetic paradigm more carefully. Maybe we should explore the notion of the environment itself. This is the approach of another phenomenologically oriented philosopher, David E. Cooper, who, in the early 1990s, offered the critique of the contemporary use of the notion of 'the environment' as it has been used in environmental thought. Cooper proposes that we should follow the once prevalent idea of the environment as a milieu, ambience, neighbourhood, and so forth. In this sense an environment is not something a creature is merely in (as in geographically, causally conceived, inert space), but something it has as a disposition. This relation of a creature to its environment is, according to Cooper, an 'intentional one. An environment is something *for* the creature, a field of meaning, or significance'.²⁷

The notion of a 'field of significance' – behind which we recognize an explicit phenomenological inspiration²⁸ – is introduced to express how items within our surroundings,

²⁴ Arnold Berleant, 'The Environment as an Aesthetic Paradigm', *Dialectics and Humanism* 1–2 (1988): 105.

²⁵ Arnold Berleant, 'Environmental Aesthetics', in *The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 116–17.

²⁶ Allen Carlson points to this difficulty in his discussion with Berleant. See Carlson, 'Beyond the Aesthetic', 240.

²⁷ David E. Cooper, 'The Idea of Environment', in *The Environment in Question*, ed. David E. Cooper and Joy A. Palmer (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 167.

²⁸ See, for example, David E. Cooper, *Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 47–53.

or environment, 'signify or point to one another, thereby forming a network of meanings. It is this which confers cohesion, a certain "wholeness" on an environment, rather as episodes in a novel belong to a coherent narrative through pointing back and forth.'²⁹ The knowledge necessary for such a reading is 'practical, unreflective familiarity', Cooper says. But Cooper's 'literary metaphor' indicates that more than this fundamental, unreflective level of a 'reading' of our surroundings is at play here. Cooper implies that there is a way of transcending these constitutive acts of building our environment into a much larger network of possibilities.

It consists in a centrifugal movement of reflection, a movement by which we not only reflect and open that level of 'practical, unreflective familiarity', but also continually broaden, enrich, and revitalize it.³⁰ In Cooper's words: 'As a metaphor in a poem inspires a reader to reflect on one thing through the prism of another, so a natural phenomenon, for the person who "reads" it poetically, belongs to a vocabulary of symbols which prompt reflections and lend to them a poignancy they would not otherwise enjoy.'³¹

Now, we should ask: Where lies the difference between the practical, unreflective reading, which is constitutive for – ontologically speaking – the existence of our environment, and this 'poetical reading'? How can we further specify the relation between these two 'readings'?

Cooper expands on this question in his second article, which is focused on relations between environmentalism and 'aestheticism'.³² He argues here against the tendency 'to drive a wedge between the appreciation of art and nature', and for this purpose he formulates, so to say, the minimal common core of both kinds of appreciation in question. And, what is important, he does this within the framework of his (originally phenomenological) idea of environment as a 'field of meanings' and at the same time in the traditional (or Kantian) sense: 'the distinctive mark of aesthetic appreciation or "the judgement of taste" is that it is "independent of all interest". Such appreciation is "disinterested" in that, unlike appreciation of a hot bath after a game of rugby or of a jury's just verdict, it is not due to the satisfaction of antecedent desires or "interests" – physical, moral or whatever.'³³

Cooper, however, does not adopt and advocate this central piece of the 'old paradigm' in its minimal formulation, but he does offer its 'fleshed out' version. In art, Cooper suggests as an amendment the concept of 'alternative worlds', for the experience of which a work of art is an opportunity. Great works of art 'set up' these possible worlds and invite their exploration, Cooper says.³⁴ They are *alternative* worlds because we leave our everyday, practical selves in the experience of these works, and they are *alternative worlds* 'because of the rich and diverse dimensions provided for our exploration – formal, emo-

²⁹ Cooper, 'The Idea of Environment', 167.

³⁰ *Ibid.* In this sense we may also differentiate between animals, which lack a reflective capacity, and human beings, who are capable of various kinds of reflection or 'reading' of the natural environment. The animal's lack of reflective capacity is, Cooper says, probably compensated for by a greater intimacy with their environment.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

³² David E. Cooper, 'Aestheticism and Environmentalism', in *Spirit of the Environment: Religion, Value and Environmental Concern*, ed. David E. Cooper and Joy A. Palmer (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 95–106.

³³ *Ibid.*, 103.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

tional, narrative, symbolic, and so on.³⁵ These worlds can, however, also be constituted by our environments themselves: ‘Sometimes, a person who “goes into nature” is, somewhat literally, entering a different world from the city which is the milieu of his or her everyday, practically engaged existence. But even when a forest, say, is the milieu of a person’s “practical orientation” – as with a charcoal-burner – it can become an “alternative world”’.³⁶

A ‘poetical reading’ of our living environment is thus based on the level of fundamental, ‘practical, and unreflective familiarity’, but at the same time, it is the expansion and enrichment of it. In this sense, it belongs to our basic movements, although it transcends the level of habitual, concrete, bodily knowledge of our surrounding. In aesthetic experience, we continually step out of the field of the actual, of the immediately given, in order to return there with new perspectives and possibilities thus gained. This movement would be impossible without the ability not to be *immersed* in being and to be temporarily *distanced* from it. Martin Jay points, in this sense, to the etymology of the word ‘interest’, that is, in aesthetic experience ‘we are no longer [...] *inter-esse*, but rather somehow outside it’.³⁷ In a word, we are disinterested. The idea of disinterestedness, then, seems to be not only functional within this context, but also offers a distinctive feature by which we can differentiate between the constitutive (non-aesthetic) reading and the re-constitutive (poetical) reading of our environment.

From this perspective, it seems that ‘the environment’ as a ‘new aesthetic paradigm’ is quite easily compatible with the old one. In other words, it becomes evident that in order to get rid of the troublesome legacy of representationalism and mentalism we need not abandon the idea of the aesthetic kind of perception in the traditional sense.

III. ‘Living spatially’ and Horizons of Experience

One might, however, object that so far we have been considering only a mere conflict of two more or less adequate interpretations of phenomenological insight. That is why we now turn to the example of genuine phenomenological thought, that is, Patočka’s analyses of the experience of space. Well before Cooper, Patočka presented a range of very similar questions.³⁸

First of all, Patočka describes the character of our ‘being in space’, which is, according to him, also intentional or, more precisely, *dispositional*. For Patočka, as well as for Cooper, there is an essential difference between our awareness of being in space, between our ‘living spatially’ and a neutral being in space as a part of it, among other things. In Patočka’s words:

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 104.

³⁷ Martin Jay, ‘Drifting into Dangerous Waters: The Separation of Aesthetic Experience from the Work of Art’, *Filozofski vestnik* 20:2 (1999): 69.

³⁸ There are explicit references to Maurice Merleau-Ponty as the chief source of inspiration in Patočka’s, as well as in Cooper’s work, especially in connection with the primacy of our embodiment, that is, the primacy of perception, of our practical use of things, looking at them, touching them, and so forth.

A merely corporeal being can exist in space, can relate to space, nonetheless the lived spatiality of our body cannot consist in its objectively geometric relations as a thing. Our body is a life which is spatial in itself and of itself, producing its location in space and making itself spatial. Personal being is not a being like a thing but rather a self-relation which, to actualize this relation, must go round about through another being. We relate to ourselves by relating to the other, to more and more things and ultimately to the universe as such, so locating ourselves in the world.³⁹

According to Patočka, we occur in the world not as fully self-conscious, finished subjects, but in the modality of 'primordial inside'.⁴⁰ This 'primordial inside' is not a primarily external geometrical relation (which is at best the abstraction from it), but is something that directs and leads all our relations to reality, determining what will be close and what will be remote, what will be familiar and what will be unfamiliar. The notion of 'primordial inside' denotes, according to Patočka, our original, bodily disposition of our being-in-the-world and thus the availability of all items around us.⁴¹ The level of habitual, unreflective, practical familiarity is for both Cooper and Patočka an ever-present presupposition of the further building of our environment or the world.⁴² Especially for Patočka, it is not a static or mechanical relation between an organism (or an 'I') and its surrounding; rather, it is a movement or 'primordial dynamism'.

Thus there is always available to us [Patočka writes] a body with certain skills and habits (for instance, I can play the violin). That is nothing trivial. All our activity presupposes this disposition of the body. Every level we reach with a learned skill has to be achieved, presupposes a certain type of mastery over the world. To learn something assumes that there is a body at my disposal.⁴³

Very similarly to Cooper, Patočka differentiates between the 'environment' of an animal with its lack of reflective capacity and of human beings, who are capable of various or, we could say with Cooper, alternative kinds of reflection or 'readings' of his/her environment. Since animals thus have only a living 'context' at their disposal, human beings

³⁹ Jan Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, trans. Erazim Kohák, ed. James Dodd (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1998), 31.

⁴⁰ For a comparison of Patočka's considerations on the relationship between home and the dwelling (which include his concept of 'primordial inside') with Emmanuel Levinas's similar considerations on the same subject, see Miloš Ševčík, 'The Intimacy of Inside and the Danger of Outside: The Personal, Sensory, and Affective Aspects of Patočka's and Levinas's Concepts of Home and the Dwelling', in *House & Home from a Theoretical Perspective*, ed. Efe Duyan and Ceren Öztürkcan (Istanbul: DAKAM Publishing, 2012), 152–156.

⁴¹ Jan Patočka, 'Prostor a jeho problematika', *Estetika* 28:1 (1991): 16–17.

⁴² We do not usually reflect on or realize this presupposition. Nevertheless, it becomes extremely evident when we become disoriented. In Cooper's words: 'An environment as milieu is not something a creature is merely in, but something it has. This is why it can find itself without one, as when I am parachuted into the Sahara or a badger [is] removed to a laboratory. Neither of us then knows the way about; nothing is familiar or has anything of home for us. A creature without an environment would, of course, be an impossibility if the only sense of the term were that of The Environment or geographical bits of it. Each creature must, after all, be somewhere and not nowhere. Cooper, 'The Idea of Environment', 166–67. For a similar point made by Patočka, concerning the situation when we suddenly discover that we are somewhere we did not expect to be, while we became absorbed in reading on the tram or the train, see, Patočka, 'Prostor a jeho problematika', 18.

⁴³ Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, 44.

have a much wider range of possibilities; they have a common world to which they turn and in which they engage on many levels:

An animal [Patočka notes] lives in an unceasing *immediately relevant* relation to its context, in the present, related to something that interests it immediately, affecting it. Humans, by the attitudes they assume, are constantly placing themselves into situations other than the directly present ones, into past, into the future, with all their quasi-structures – quasi-present, quasi-past, etc. (remembering is going into the horizon of the past where a course of life that once had been present is repeated in tokens; we move in the past as if it were present, hence quasi-present), going into imaginary worlds, into the world of reading, of thought sequences, of tasks not met, of duties that place us into a special space which is and yet is not.⁴⁴

In both Cooper's analysis and Patočka's, the relation between 'I' and its environing referential totality of possibilities becomes essential. Both authors hold that it is not something that happens somewhere inside pre-existing, empty, neutral space, but is for both something that shows itself as grounding, a fundamental event within the process of constituting our experience of the environment or space. But there is one more important point, common to both philosophers. We already know that Cooper points out a kind of reflecting, which grows out of that pre-reflective establishment of one's environment. He emphasizes the possibility of the movement by which we not only reflect and open up the level of 'practical, unreflective familiarity', but also the dimension by means of which we also enrich and reconstruct it. Patočka too conceives human beings as transcending the level of the immediately given: 'Besides concrete movements in the realm of corporeal dynamism, with their meaning and purposes, creating the rhythm of repetition – habitual melodies corresponding to organic rhythms – there are also abstract and symbolic movements, imaginary, transcending the field of the immediately given, of actuality, and following pure possibilities. These, too, represent a thrust toward the world, embracing ever broader spheres.'⁴⁵

Humans are able to place themselves into situations other than those directly present to their senses. We would say with Cooper, as well as with Patočka, that human beings are able to inhabit alternative worlds, or, say, to actualize a range of possibilities much wider than those accessible directly to our senses. But how are these possibilities accessible with all their quasi-structures, that is, with their alternative quasi-pasts, quasi-presents, and quasi-futures? Where do they come from?

Given, then, the importance of our everyday 'living in possibilities', we must not forget the foundation that makes it possible. In his essay 'The Problem of Space', Patočka points to the presence of the 'primordial surrounding' that exists before the divide (the borderline) between subject and object.⁴⁶ This 'originary surrounding' is still present, but not motionlessly, Patočka says. It is constantly of the same shape, but it is a 'shape-in-motion', a 'stationary shape' which is permanently pulsating. Every encounter with anything from the outside is in this sense a selection from this surrounding; it comes out of it, but it

⁴⁴ Ibid., 32–33.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁶ Exactly in the direction of the evolution of aesthetically relevant post-Husserlian phenomenological thinking pointed out by Casey. See section one of the present article.

disappears in it again. Patočka differentiates between the centre and this opening and closing periphery, which is stationary, and is part of 'originary surrounding', which is not a geometrical centre, but part of 'me' or 'I', he says, which is the living creature, both the addressed and the responding organism. It is not any objectified structure; it is a continuous horizon.⁴⁷

As we can see, Patočka in this connection re-introduces the originally Husserlian term 'horizon': 'every individual reality is given with its horizon, it is never present fully but rather in various perspectives which our experience unwittingly synthesizes.'⁴⁸ Taken literally, a horizon means, as Patočka writes, 'the ultimate visible in a landscape. Everything within the horizon is defined in relation to it. The lines of perspective, the tangents of our visuality, meet at the horizon. The most distant, least fulfilled determines the meaning of what is nearest, most concrete, most fully given.'⁴⁹ In its metaphorical (and thus philosophical) use it means the contextual limitation that determines the real potentiality of everything that is, from a given point of view, visible, audible, thinkable, imaginable, and so forth. From these considerations, we can now recognize the 'unreflective, practical familiarity' discussed above, which is ontologically inseparable from being of the environment in Cooper's sense, and is of this horizontal character. Everything that is available to us, what is at our disposal, brings with itself the perspective in which it is synthesized. But, as we have seen, we, unlike animals, do not depend only on 'context' in our lives, that is, we do not depend only on our unwitting, habitual, instinctively repeated interactions between our organism and its surroundings. As human beings, we have the world at our disposal. What does having at our disposal mean in this connection?

Even the simplest movement, such as a movement of my hand when reaching for something, 'is not a reality but a realization'; it emphasizes, according to Patočka, the processual character of our inhabiting the world.⁵⁰ The world understood in these terms is therefore not an aggregate of discrete, objectified items, but the horizon of horizons: it is 'the horizon of all reality in which each partial horizon has its place, where everything has its place – even dreams, the past, the future, imagination, schematization, nature, history – society, home, foreign contexts.'⁵¹ Reaching, walking, handling things, but also reading, imagining, dreaming, playing something, all of these activities are purposive; they have the character of a movement with direction. Each of these movements involves a tension between its past, present, and future. All of them involve a tension between something that is and something that is not yet. On the terms introduced above, each of these activities or movements brings with it a different perspective, a different point of view, that is, a different horizon.

Now, from previous considerations concerning Patočka's distinction between the 'context' (the living environment of an animal) and the 'world' (the living environment of a human being) we know that for Patočka human beings are able to step aside – if just for a moment – from the ordinary, pre-reflective flux of life, and create beside, or even against, this established course of life a further range of alternative possibilities. As Patočka puts it:

⁴⁷ Patočka, *Body, Community, Language, World*, 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

Every action has its goal, making things appear as we wish and can. When we de-realize reality in play, what we seek to do is to broaden reality so that it would present to us one possibility among others. One thrust toward the world, toward the object, takes place in reality and in possibilities, it starts with the given and transcends it in planning, projection, imagination.⁵²

Our 'living in possibilities', our openness to the environing place-world includes, thus, as a necessary component, the possibility of 'de-realization of reality'.

There are outstanding opportunities for such a 'broadening of reality', such as reading a novel, listening to a piece of music, watching a movie, or experiencing natural beauties. Whatever we will call these situations – aesthetic or otherwise – we should notice that the *de*-realization of reality as a necessary condition of its broadening includes a productive, momentarily distancing ourselves from it. As we have seen, without the ability not to be *immersed* in being (*inter-esse*) and to be temporarily *dis*-interested in our ordinary pre-reflective course of life, we would hardly be able to enter alternative quasi-pasts, quasi-presents, and quasi futures with their horizons of experience. In conclusion, then, I am claiming that even the example of Patočka's analyses of experience of space show that the re-description of the notion of aesthetic object in terms of process, and in terms of the primacy of our bodily emplacement in the world, does not require us to abandon the idea of a specific distance in which we can still recognize Kantian origins of the concept of aesthetic experience and which we traditionally call aesthetic.

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⁵² *Ibid.*, 46.

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