

MEANING IN FORM

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Resumen

Experimentar visualmente la obra de arte debe ser experimentar 'un momento de forma significativa' -la 'figurativa'. Pero ¿cómo debemos entender la relación entre forma y significado durante esta experiencia? En este ensayo enfatizo los problemas que surgen de cualquier intento objetivante de separar el 'interior' del 'exterior' de la obra. Irónicamente, este intento 'objetivante' puede también ser encontrado en fenomenólogos como Moritz Geiger y Mikel Dufrenne y su idea del 'objeto estético'. Mi interés es, entonces, preguntar si lo figurativo puede ser enfocado en esos términos de manera confiable.

Palabras clave: estética; forma; significado; Moritz Geiger; Mikel Dufrenne.

Abstract

To experience visually the work of art must be to experience 'a moment of meaningful form' -the 'figural'. But how should we understand the relationship between form and meaning during such an experience? In this essay I stress the problems that stem from any objectifying attempt to keep a separation between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of the work. Ironically, this 'objectifying' move can also be found with phenomenologists such as Moritz Geiger and Mikel Dufrenne and their idea of 'aesthetic object'. My concern is therefore to wonder if the figural can be faithfully approached in their terms.

Key words: aesthetics; form; meaning; Moritz Geiger; Mikel Dufrenne.

To experience visually the work of art must be to experience 'a moment of meaningful form' - the 'figural'. But how should we understand the relationship between form and meaning during such an experience? How should we grasp the formal dimension of the figural?¹ How should we define its 'morphology'?²

In this essay, I shall stress the problems that stem from any objectifying attempt to keep a sometimes hidden separation between on the one hand what

¹ The formal dimension should be here understood as visual organisation, or morphology, in relation to meaning, and not as mere 'external aspects' or even 'contours'. It is the notion of 'physiology' which comes, in fact, close to what Gestaltism (in German, 'Gestalttheorie') or 'configurationism' aims at: studying something in terms of structure and interdependency of its parts.

² The way I use the word morphology should not be confused with physiology. The former studies the figural in its meaningful visual aspect, whereas the latter would analyse how different parts which might or might not be visible (for example the structural, the critical, the psychoanalytical, or the historical) are articulated as functions.

I call 'morphisms' (matter, drawing, light, colour, or technical qualities), and, on the other, 'exmorphisms' (what is external to the former: subject-matter, theme, the 'real world', significance, etc). This 'objectifying' move can be found with, paradoxically, phenomenologists such as Moritz Geiger and Mikel Dufrenne when they both study by contradiction 'the aesthetic object' (Geiger 1986).³ Geiger inquires into the damaging effects of subject-matter, technical qualities and historical significance, when it comes to experiencing a work aesthetically, and Dufrenne in his *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (1973) differentiates the notion of 'work of art' from the aesthetic object.⁴ The work of art is for him an object that has the potential of being aesthetically perceived, that is to say of becoming an aesthetic object. The former is already created and has a historical existence, the latter relies on aesthetic perception to be brought to light. Hence, the phenomenologist's enquiry starts from the work of art and then proceeds to the aesthetic object.⁵ I shall argue that a mode of understanding which truly does justice to the experiential nature of the figural, cannot allow any separation whatsoever between form and meaning, the subjective and the objective, morphism and exmorphism.

My concern is therefore to wonder if this terminology and way of operating are truly adequate when it comes to work out a faithful conception of a moment of meaningful form in art. Is not their 'aesthetic object' a disguised version of that old dichotomy between form and content, medium and significance, morphisms and exmorphism? Can the figural be approached in these terms, and what are the differences between these conceptions of 'aesthetic object' and the idea of the figural?

³ Geiger in *The Significance of Art* talks about a 'form of dilettantism where an attitude which is aroused by extra-aesthetic aspects and values of the work of art claims to be aesthetic, as when, for example, one is pleased merely by the value of the subject matter of a work of art.' (Geiger, op. cit., 182). But what he calls the 'extra-aesthetic attitude ... can also, for instance, be engendered by the technical ability in the production of a work of art' (ibid., 183). And, finally, another 'danger lies in wait for the art historians when they confuse the historical and the aesthetic significance of a work of art' (ibid.).

⁴ Mikel Dufrenne distinguishes the aesthetic object from the 'living being' (a distinction which has had to be made in the case of performing arts), from 'the natural object' (in terms of the creative act), and from 'the object of use' (in terms of the presence of the creator), and makes a comparison with the signifying object (mainly based on the 'immanence' of the meaning in the sensuous).

⁵ The work of art is an object which has the potential of being aesthetically perceived, that is to say of becoming an aesthetic object. The former is already created and has a historical existence, the latter relies on aesthetic perception to be brought to light. Hence, the Dufrenne's enquiry starts from the work of art and then proceeds to the aesthetic object.

I. On the Notion of Morphism

To begin with 'morphism' I shall discuss the distinction Dufrenne makes between material and matter, for it gives us a good introduction to what will be radically emphasised with the figural. For Dufrenne the material is a tool, and it only becomes matter when it 'expresses' its sensuous qualities. The material is the instrument of a function, it conveys something else as it does for an object of use.⁶

If we take the example of Balthus's *The Street* (1933) the human figures are not like shaped material, they are meaningful matter, with an immanent sensuousness. They are internally constituted. The surrounding street seems to act in a more neutral way, a conveyance which points at something external to it, just like an object of use where the object is paint, and the use, to re-present a street. We become aware in this painting of the distinction between matter and material, painting and teleological paint. The extraordinary effect of this work is that it reveals the constituting difference and relation between the two: matter 'means' something, before it becomes some material used 'in order to' mean. To choose the word 'meaning' is here not innocuous.⁷ It evokes a unity: a means which means, a fusion between morphisms and exmorphisms. But let us for the moment pursue our study of these approaches which tend to separate, although very often involuntarily, the latter from the former.

The notion of technical qualities is closely related to that of material. Being impressed by the technical ability that makes Holbein the Younger one of the most convincing Northern realist painters of the sixteenth century stems from the act of acknowledging the power the creator has to master the material in order for it to convey what is claimed to be conveyed.⁸ To admire the way Rothko in his *Untitled* (1951-55) manages to create the illusion of a rectangular space on a canvas is the attitude of someone who seeks to assess how well the

⁶ Dufrenne goes even further by stating that 'the artist's materials negate themselves as things by appearing' (ibid., 303). His dialectics undeniably shapes his phenomenology: for him matter and material, immanence and conveyance, are struggling poles. Are we here in front of a kind of speculation? This is without doubt a problem to be considered in the part devoted to 'the subject' and the figural.

⁷ We are here playing on the fortunate correspondence between, the Anglo-Saxon etymology of the verb 'to mean' ('moenan': to intend, to have in the mind), and the Latin origin of the noun 'a means' ('medium': midst, whose Old French derivative is 'meien': intermediate). This notion of 'convergence' is also what Mark Roskill expresses in *The British Journal of Aesthetics* when he contends that to 'ask the meaning of a work of art is ... to recognize - from whatever point of view - a complexity of feature calling for that term.' and he goes on to say that it 'entails ... the combination of an interpretation and a claim, which may or may not be convincing' (Roskill 1977, 107). Meaning is between the claim and the reception, between the means and what is meant.

⁸ Peter and Linda Murray in *Dictionary of Art and Artists* do not hesitate to see him as 'probably the most accomplished and penetratingly realist portrait painter the North has produced' (Murray 1989, 198).

artist manages to transmit a message.⁹ This implies a reference to a supposedly existing external 'reality' (and I should even add 'or ideality').¹⁰ The spectator who is impressed by the complexity and richness offered by Vieira da Silva's paintings - see for instance her *Checkmate* (1949-50) - necessarily thinks of her ability to re-produce a complexity and richness which both exist in the real world (or in the viewer's mind). In any case the appreciation of technical qualities projects us out of the painting: by focusing on the articulation between material and theme we keep the former separated from the latter. There is no meaning anymore, only some external 'telos' to which we are directed.¹¹ But to reject this aspect is not to say that technical qualities are foreign to experiencing a moment of meaningful form in art. On the contrary, but they should give way to the immediacy of meaning, and be the 'shape' of the sensuous. To be totally convinced that they are a constituting part of it, one should just think of natural objects: unless one believes in an almighty creator (an image that is after all taken very seriously by certain contemporary astrophysicists), one does not usually look for technical qualities in the natural world. Talking about a technical 'tour de force' when in front of the Giants Causeway or of a veined piece of marble does not make much sense. The 'natural object', in Dufrenne's wonderful expression, is 'a desertlike being whose image is found in a nature that has not been transformed by the mark of human determinations' (ibid., 146). The figural bears the master's touch. But the question is not to wonder how one masters the material's devotion to the subject matter, but to witness their fusion, where one experiences what Paul Ricoeur calls 'the innocence of the instrument' (Ricoeur 1965, 225).¹² Balthus's figures are there, through the 'innocence' of the creator's 'savoir faire'. A moment of meaningful form needs a human responsibility, but not always the artist's intention, and such a responsibility remains

⁹ Donald Judd characterises, in *Complete Writings 1975-1986*, Rothko's treatment of space in terms of 'almost traditionally illusionistic' (Judd 1987, 67).

¹⁰ The use of the word 'reality' evokes here an authenticity which can be re-presented but which cannot itself re-present. The equally external characteristic of 'ideality' prevents us, in this case, from opposing it to 'reality': the former confines the existence of things to the world of ideas. The work of art's existence would therefore exclusively depend on the fact that it re-presents a pre-conceived idea.

¹¹ Telos: from the Greek 'telos' (end, finality). Kant, as is well known, devoted the second part of his *Critique of Judgement* to a 'Critique of Teleological Judgement' (Kant 1952, 1-180). He investigates the analytical (pp. 1-34), dialectical (pp. 35-74) and methodological (75-149) dimensions of the 'teleological judgement'. Among all the reflexive facets he ascribes to it, is the following passage in which the meaning of the word 'teleological' is made obvious: 'Now we have in the world beings of but one kind whose causality is teleological, or directed to ends, and which ...' (ibid., 99).

¹² Paul Ricoeur, in *Histoire et Vérité*, talks about technique in terms of 'innocence of the instrument': 'La technique, et, en général, toute 'technicité' ont l'innocence de l'instrument' (Ricoeur 1965, 225).

partly in the particular technique used by the creator. No natural objects can produce the same effect as these passers-by in the street because they are presented to us, and this 'has' to be realised through a human touch: Balthus's mastering skill which permits the work to fulfil what it claims to fulfil.

The figural is certainly different from the so-called 'natural object' inasmuch as a human being has no responsibility for the latter. Nevertheless, there is one formal similarity between the two of them: the former possesses a meaning which is manifested through the sensuous.¹³ It is this immanence only which makes the natural object akin to the figural. However, their fundamental difference cannot be forgotten. The latter is bound to be artificially created. On the one hand the figural is 'natural' because there is a communion between matter, sensuous and meaning. But on the other hand it implies a human responsibility which makes it unlike any natural object. Nature cannot deliberately make the spectator aware of the meaningful dimension of things unless we believe there is a creator behind it. Whether or not there is a creator behind the natural world obviously cannot be debated here. In fact, even if it was the case the problem would be the same: whether it is human or divine, the figural or the natural object bears the trace of a creator behind it, someone who had the intention to present some-thing to a witness. Form can obviously be found in the natural world, but whose status of being-created-for-us in the case of the figural remains certain and not to be questioned.

As already mentioned, I have chosen to use the word 'meaning' in order to evoke the notion of fusion between matter and theme, or vehicle and subject-matter. It is now understood that such meaning only takes shape through the sensuousness of such and such a configuration. I have in a way set the boundaries of this formal investigation: there is no possible separation between cause and effect, origin and finality, there is no vehicle any more, we do not talk about medium and representation, paint and figuration. We talk about the 'figural', or the 'moment of meaningful form'.

The problem of hidden dichotomy can be found again when Dufrenne establishes a sort of hierarchy between colour, drawing, light, matter, and this in relation to 'aesthetic experience'. For him, drawing which defines the contour of an object has always had a privileged position in terms of its ability to shape a represented object. As far as the spectator remains with the represented object or ascribes to painting the sole 'mission of signifying a rational truth' (Dufrenne, *op. cit.*, 285) colour will always have a secondary role and will always be available to be perceived separately from the unity of the painted figure.

¹³ The formal dimension of the figural object (and only the formal) is in fact very close to Dufrenne's conception of 'aesthetic object', which, on this occasion, 'rejects any distinction between matter and the sensuous: matter here is nothing other than the sensuous itself.' (Dufrenne, *op. cit.*, 87).

According to him, colour is an aspect of painting which asks for perception instead of interpretation. It is the pictorial matter of painting, just like sound is the matter of music, and to that extent it calls for sensory-experience. This is the reason why colours are 'defined by the pictorial functions assigned to them and even by their expressive value' (ibid., 289). If we were to follow Dufrenne, the way these colours are chosen and arranged constitutes a harmony which ascribes meaning to the object. Colour cannot have a representational function. Only drawing, contour, shape, light and matter belong to the represented world or induce the perceiver to refer to a world external to the painted or sculpted figure.¹⁴ On the other hand he acknowledges that colour, contrary to drawing, cannot be perceived on its own, that it requires form in order to manifest itself. And this is when his 'aesthetic object' reveals itself: when 'form becomes colour without ceasing to be form' (ibid., 293). Then drawing is not apprehended in terms of representational means anymore, it is not corrupting anymore.

This position is obviously highly questionable. Colour can be used and perceived in a very symbolic, representational way. Drawing on its own can be abstract, without subject-matter. And it is certainly due to the particular configuration in which colour, lines, light, matter are used, that makes the work of art be figural. In other words, contrary to Dufrenne's aesthetic object, it is not when all the formal features of a painting act like colour that we can start witnessing some figurality from the work. Is it colour more than lines, light and matter which prevents the witness from recognising what is represented in order to experience what is presented? Is the reason why we talk about a figural object due to drawing and light acting like colour? Contrary to Dufrenne's 'aesthetic object' I argue that the idea of the figural does not ascribe any privileged status to colour or even matter over drawing and light. Its consequence would be again to maintain a line between medium and theme, form and content, conveyance and significance. It is a whole whose particular artistic nature is to mean something by the mark of human determination. If these formal features were to be analysed separately we could ascribe to them almost any figural function, and thus explain the work of art regardless of its particular characteristics. This cannot be accepted and there is no room for manipulating generalisation.

¹⁴ Drawing is even categorised as a structural, repetitive, ordering element, or a 'rhythm', viz. something which organises and thus constitutes the unity of the work, whereas the notion of harmony, close to what can be found in music, seems to be ascribed to colour. They have for Dufrenne the power to articulate the material. The work of art aesthetically perceived is not a material thing anymore: it is governed by rhythm and harmony. As a result we have this idea of 'material background which is the work's elementary matter' (ibid., 308). It acts as 'the very whiteness' (ibid.) in drawing, 'the stone's very countenance' (ibid.) in architecture. In other words it remains instrumental. The material, in the case of the figural object is not even a necessary background. It is certainly animated and articulated by rhythm and harmony, drawing and colour, light and matter, shapes, contour. However, it loses this functional status to let a figure reveal itself as a whole.

II. On the Notion of Exmorphism

The second constituent of this study follows naturally from the first one. This is what I have conveniently (if awkwardly) grouped under the name of 'exmorphisms'. It concerns anything that is outside the image and which might have a claim on the latter: the represented world through theme, subject-matter, and significance, the 'real' world, and the reproduced world.

Theme is obviously closely related to representation:¹⁵ it is a reference to something external to the work whether it is painted realistically or not.¹⁶ To better grasp the nature of the relation between representation and the figural object let us linger in front of a painting which, unsurprisingly, proved to be of primary importance for 'anti-ocularcentric' thinkers such as Jacques Lacan and Jean-Francois Lyotard: Hans Holbein the Younger's painting *The Ambassadors* (1553).¹⁷ It is unquestionably acknowledged that it represents, and was meant to represent, Jean de Dinteville (1504-55) who was French ambassador to England in 1533, and George de Selve (1508/9-41), Bishop of Lavaur.¹⁸ They are depicted surrounded by a whole series of iconographic allusions suggesting their universal knowledge as true humanists: astronomical

¹⁵ See Dufrenne's account of 'representation': 'If we wish to understand representation in the widest sense of the term, we must say that there is representation whenever the aesthetic object invites us to leave the immediacy of the sensuous and proposes a meaning in terms of which the sensuous is only a means and essentially unimportant. That is, we must explain this meaning according to norms which belong not to aesthetics but to logic. What characterises representation and makes it contrast with feeling is not so much the reality of what is represented as an appeal to concept. The represented object is an identifiable object which demands recognition and which expects an unending analysis on the part of reflection. It invites us to turn away from appearance and to seek its peculiar truth elsewhere' (ibid., 312).

¹⁶ Richard Wollheim, in *Art and its Object*, gives a similar view with his concept of 'seeing-as' (Wollheim 1980, 12-22): for him 'representation' induces 'representational seeing', or 'seeing-as', in such a way that 'a representation of something is a visual sign, or reminder, of it' (ibid., 20), so much so that 'the former notion [representation] could be elucidated in terms of the latter [seeing-as]' (ibid., 17). Modernism in general obviously corresponds to that cultural moment when art, as Dufrenne reminds us, realised the dangers of 'being no more than a means in the service of representation.' (Dufrenne, op. cit., 313).

¹⁷ For a presentation of 'the antiocularcentric discourse' in twentieth century French thought, see Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*. He underlines that both Lacan and Lyotard were attracted by the use of anamorphosis for its 'antiocularcentric' power. Lacan, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1981), saw in the anamorphosis the power to challenge 'the Cartesian subject's geometrical mapping of space' (Jay, op. cit., 363), the 'phallic gaze' (ibid.), this 'God's-eye view of the world' (ibid., 364). In a similar manner, Lyotard in *Discours, Figure* is interested in the illegitimate nature of anamorphosis (1985, 376-379). It is 'the sign of an unknown writing rather than a representation': 'le signe d'une écriture inconnue plutôt qu'une représentation' (ibid., 377). Both of them were in fact inspired by Jurgis Baltrušaitis and his fascination for anamorphosis, which he develops in his *Anamorphoses ou Magie Artificielle des Effets Merveilleux* (1969). And for his writing on Holbein the Younger's painting *The Ambassadors* see Baltrušaitis, op. cit., 91-116.

¹⁸ Homan Potterton in *The National Gallery* gives an accurate description of the painting: 'The mosaic floor is derived from that still existing in Westminster Abbey. The objects on the what-not

instruments, a terrestrial globe, a hymn book, a lute, a book of arithmetic, etc. A viewer who is moved by identifying the subject-matter of the painting (viz. two well-settled and knowledgeable humanists) experiences what the figures 'tell' us to see. We are in front of a proper teleological art. The picture has a purpose, a dead end: to point at something which would survive without painting, which is external to it. It re-presents the ambassadors. Even more than that, it 'depicts' them, as if the image was losing its pictorial nature to their devotion. The story that is told already exists: it narrates the sumptuousness and impressive presence of two knowledgeable humanists, with a beginning and an end. The surrounding objects of use are only dedicated to their cause, or, I should say, to 'a' cause which we are required to acknowledge.

But what is particularly important in this painting, in so far as I am trying to work out the relation between subject-matter and the figural, is the shape in the foreground. It is generally held as being the anamorphic representation of a skull.¹⁹ This painted figure can be easily misidentified - or not identified at all. In that case it disobeys the narrative systemic logic of the rest of the picture. It shows itself as a noema - the figural object - which calls for a specific and unique noesis - the figural attitude.²⁰ Nothing happens outside this link, no theme to be thought of, no story to understand. This is intentionality in its most accomplished form.²¹ It is not an absence of subject-matter, rather the act of

are (lower shelf) a lute with a broken string, a case of lutes, an open hymnbook with music, a half-open book of arithmetic, a terrestrial globe and (top shelf) various astronomical instruments including a cylindrical sundial, which gives the date as 11 April, and a polyhedral sundial, which gives the time as 10.30 a.m. The age of both sitters are given in the portrait: that of the Dinteville on the sheath of his dagger, De Selve's on the book under his elbow. A crucifix is partly visible in the top left-hand corner, the brooch on Dinteville's cap is ornamented with a skull ... and, on the foreground, a «curious shape» which also assumes the form of a skull when viewed from the extreme right.' (Potterton 1990, 64).

¹⁹ Lyotard reminds us of two different kinds of anamorphosis, which he took from his reading of Baltrusaitis's detailed study on the subject: one triggers a 'flat anamorphotical figure' ('figure anamorphotique plane' (Lyotard, op. cit., 376), and the other is a 'catoptrical anamorphosis' ('anamorphose catoptrique', ibid.). The former is the one used by Holbein according to a technique of projection where the 'normally proportioned' figure can be seen when reflected on a vertical cylindrical mirror.

²⁰ The notions of 'noema' and 'noesis' are to be found in Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*: they both come from the Greek 'noein' (to think). The first cited is the 'object of consciousness' (its Latin derivative is 'cogitatum'), and the second is 'consciousness' (in Latin 'cogito'). As a result, a 'noematic description' describes what is experienced, and a 'noetic description' investigates the experiencing subject.

²¹ Husserl, in his *Second Meditation*, defines 'intentionality' as follows: 'Conscious processes are also called intentional: but then the word intentionality signifies nothing else than this universal fundamental property of consciousness: to be consciousness of something.' (Husserl 1977, p. 33). Lyotard, echoing Husserl in *La Phenomenologie*, writes: 'To say that consciousness is consciousness of something is to say that there is no noesis without noema, no cogito without cogitatum, but no amo without amatum either,' (Lyotard 1954, 54).

focusing on something: its meaning. The anamorphosis has a meaning, a more abstract meaning precisely because it is abstracted, bracketed, from the representational scheme of the rest of the painting. It 'means' the shapes, lines and colours it displays. 'Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning' says Merleau-Ponty (op. cit., xix). It follows that any formal perception is meaningful. But this is not to say that to experience the figural is about retrieving a re-presented object. Rather, as a visual phenomenon it 'means' an amalgam of colours and lines showing itself as such because of that other pictorial surrounding, that other signifying layer where the two humanists, their clothes, the curtains, the carpet, and the table are all part of the same semantic story and the same unity. Nothing indicates that the painted figure which represents a table should be prevented from fulfilling its function (which is in that context to signify a table), no more than any of the other figures that obey the same logic of signs. The moment of meaningful form comes here from a dissident figure which seems to represent itself, just as one of those 'tautological objects' that Georges Didi Huberman talks about (1992, 28).²² In fact, Holbein's painting is more complex to the extent that the notion of pictorial irrelevance does not exclusively occur in terms of semantics, but also in terms of visual logic. Even if one had recognised the figure as an anamorphosis of a cranium, how would it relate to the rest of the painting? What physical laws enable this anamorphosis to stand like that in the middle of a realistic scene? There are here different levels of representation. In the case of *The Ambassadors* when the figure in the foreground is recognised as being a represented anamorphosis of a cranium, the figural acts as an irrelevance, or rather a difference of visual logic. When the same figure is not identified as such and is consequently perceived as a set of colours and lines then the figural has more to do with 'semantic difference'. In both cases, the conveyance of a potential subject-matter is disturbed by something whose nature is different, and this is when theme is challenged by meaning.

Another form of representational thinking can be found with the notion of the historical (and I should add cultural) significance of the work.²³ For instance, taking into account how important Picasso's painting *Guernica* (1937) is for the history of western civilisation, or perceiving Holbein's painting as a masterpiece in the history of portraiture because of their penetrating realism, is

²² Georges Didi Huberman, in *Ce Que Nous Voyons, Ce Qui Nous Regarde*, talks about 'tautological objects' as 'objects which call for nothing else than being seen for what they are' (Didi Huberman 1992, 28).

²³ Geiger distinguishes the historical significance of the work of art from its aesthetic nature. See Geiger, op. cit., 183-184.

to treat the work as an illustration, an illuminating object.²⁴ To explain colourless *Guernica* in relation to the 1937 human predicament of a small bombed village during the civil war in Spain is in a way to use the painting for some external purpose: that of understanding what historical context the work is meant to represent. However, this is not to say that what is figural in the painting is meaningless: it re-presents a historical fact, but it 'invokes' a dramatic situation. It 'means' a clash where no room is left for colour and which is rendered through an extraordinary tension between aggressors and aggressed, violence and peace, darkness and light.

The painted figural is not a re-presented object insofar as the spectator remains with a certain 'from itself' of the image. This, as Dufrenne puts it, is actualised by the immediacy of the sensuous.²⁵ Both immediacy and the sensuous seem to prevent any act of recognition. While perceiving, the viewer does not link what is seen with what is already known, although it 'is' already known: we have already seen passers-by in a street, but in spite of this Balthus's painted figures 'show' themselves in front of us. In other words, the sensuous whose nature is immediate does not have the time to convey anything other than itself. Because it refers to itself, it has a meaning, an incarnated one. Matter, the sensuous and meaning constitute therefore a whole which might well prepare the ground for the idea of presentational dimension of the figural. In a way, this whole precedes the theme, and the clash precedes Picasso's bombed village, or fascism versus democracy.

After having stressed the non-representational characteristic of the figural, we have to wonder if we are not confining it to the notion of abstract art. The answer is two-fold. If abstract art is usually narrowly defined in terms of non-figurative, in the sense that it does not have any objective correspondence in the real world, then the figural object is surely not abstract. No one can doubt that Balthus's passers-by exist in the real world, or rather in the non-painted world.²⁶ Such a definition of abstract art corresponds to what Marxist aesthetics

²⁴ The well-known historical context of this painting can nevertheless be recalled: on 26 April 1937 the German Nazis bombed for three hours the Basque village Guernica in the middle of the civil war, as a means to try out their Heinkel and Junker bombers. This triggered Picasso's first explicit historical/humanitarian artistic engagement.

²⁵ More exactly, for Dufrenne, because the aesthetic object is expressed, it 'is represented in its truth ... and not in its flat and meaningless reality.' (Dufrenne, op. cit., 312).

²⁶ Graham McFee, in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, makes a very relevant remark: when it comes to defining 'the concept of truth' in pictorial representations, the 'difference is not between true and false, but between true of the picture and true in the street: seeing the woman in the picture is just that - seeing the woman in the picture.' (McFee 1994, 45). This is obviously related by the author to Wollheim's concepts of 'seeing-in' and 'seeing-as' which the latter develops in *Painting as an Art* (1987). McFee's problem of pictorial truth is close to my problem of the objective existence of Balthus's passers-by. As Balthus's artefacts they exist as much as the 'real' passers-by in a 'real' street.

calls 'formal art',²⁷ or to what some western art theories name on the other hand 'informal art'.²⁸ It is what Etienne and Anne Souriau, with some nuances, define as 'first degree art' (Souriau 1990, 9).²⁹ Now, if we are more faithful to its etymology and if we follow Andre Lalande for whom the term 'abstract' is about 'any notions of quality or relation which are considered apart from the representations in which they are given' (Lalande 1968, 9), then what triggers the experience of the *figural* is about abstraction. It is a figure that the viewer is induced to isolate from a given configuration.³⁰ The painted passers-by present themselves because they are pulled out from their context. It is in a way between non-figurative and figurative art and the Souriaus do not hesitate to classify it as 'second degree representational art' (see note on 'first degree art'). For more clarity I define the *figural* as being abstract and meaningfully presentational. I understand here that it offers the same characteristic as abstract art in the

²⁷ Plekhanov, for instance in *Art and Social Life* at the beginning of the twentieth century launched a famous attack on cubism for its lack of 'social realism' (Plekhanov 1972). Defining the function of art as reflecting social forces, cubism like any formal experimentation is a decadent art which reflects the decadence of western bourgeois society. At the same time 'formal art' is rejected precisely because it does not mirror 'reality'. An obvious contradiction which finds its source in a dogma: the only true and possible realism is a social, figurative, one.

²⁸ Informal painters of the 1950s such as Fautrier, Dubuffet, Moreni or Lapoujade rejected any form of representational order, whether figurative or geometrical, in order to fully explore the qualities of matter. These were in fact largely inspired by Bataille's notion of 'informe' understood as a materialism of raw matter: '... formless is not only an objective with a certain meaning, but a term serving to deprecate, implying the general demand that everything should have a form', and most 'materialists, although they want to eliminate all spiritual things, have ended up describing an order of being which, insofar as it involves hierarchical relations, is characterised as specifically idealistic. They have located dead matter at the summit of a conventional hierarchy of facts of diverse orders, without noticing that they have thereby succumbed to the obsession with an ideal form of matter, with a form more approximate than any other to that which matter should be. It is time, when the concept of materialism is involved, to refer to the direct interpretation of raw phenomena, excluding all idealism;' (quoted and translated by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood in *Art in Theory* (1993, 475-476). The original text in French can be found in *Documents* (Paris, 1968).

²⁹ In their *Vocabulaire d'Esthétique* Etienne and Anne Souriau distinguish 'first degree art' from 'second degree art'. The former is non-representational, i.e. when 'the form involved ... concerns, and informs about, a being presented by the work's discourse by way of hypothesis or of lexis presented by this discourse, but a being ontologically well distinguished from the work itself' (quoted by A. Souriau 1990, 9; from E. Souriau's *La Correspondance des Arts* - chap. xx, page not mentioned). This art is therefore non representational and non figurative, and is therefore what is commonly and according to them illegitimately called 'abstract art'. 'Second degree art' would be representational but still non figurative. This would be for them a more rigorous way to define 'abstract art': '... these forms of abstract art represent definitely something, idea, essence, feeling [sentiment], form, etc.; ... But they do not represent objects from the real world as they appears in perception; this is therefore a non figurative art ...'. (A. Souriau 1990, 9). Defined as such the *figural* object would be an abstract second degree form of art.

³⁰ This quote is taken from Andre Lalande's *Vocabulaire Technique et Critique de la Philosophie*: '[abstrait se] dit de toute notion de qualité ou de relation que l'on considère de façon plus ou moins générale en dehors des représentations ou elle est donnée.' (Lalande 1968, 9).

common and philosophical senses of the word. It is not deprived of any meaning whose equivalent can be found in the objective world. Balthus's painted human figures are constituted through meaningfulness, they present themselves precisely because they are abstracted from some original reality. It can be compared with music, when it is so convincingly defined by the linguist Nicolas Ruwet (1972), as a language which signifies itself.³¹ The figural points at itself because of its presentational meaningfulness for the spectator. It does not refer to the real world, but has a correspondence with it (in the sense of similarity or analogy). Indeed, it does not point to the real world, but it presents the real world without being the real world precisely by being separated from it. In this sense the figural is an abstracted meaning.

Another kind of exmorphism is obviously introduced by the previous paragraph: the problem of 'reality'. I shall first of all summarise the figural's particular status as follows: it shows itself, it neither informs nor instructs. It discloses its meaning through the sensuous by not referring to an external world. It does not re-present a world and in that sense the figural does not claim to be identical to this world. It reveals itself precisely by showing that its links with this other world are based on a principle of abstraction. It shows a correspondence with what I call the real world, but it 'is' not the real world precisely by pulling out from it. This is where the difficulty lies. It has in fact more to do with an atmosphere rather than a clearly displayed world. But this is not to say that it is unreal like in a dream or an illusion. The moment of meaningful form has its own world and is thus real itself. This is rendered possible because of what is external to it, because of another real world. It is a temporally bracketed meaningful form which plays with the notion of reality, and which in any case points at how arbitrary and subjective the effect of realness can be.

Without going into detail in the usual debate surrounding the problem of appearance/reality, it is worth mentioning Dufrenne's view on this matter when applied to his 'aesthetic object'. The starting point of his enquiry is a distinction between subjective and objective worlds. On the one hand the objective world 'has no other prerogative than that of being the limit toward which each subjective world tends when the latter ceases being lived in order to be thought' (Dufrenne, op. cit., 192), and on the other the perceiving subject is 'in' the world, 'opening up a world' (ibid., 195). This goes against two traditionally opposed approaches: rational objectivism which considers the world as not being related to subjectivity, and mere subjectivism which would present the subject as 'the' world. The 'aesthetic object' which is presented by Dufrenne as a 'quasi-subject' - i.e. in the sense it expresses its creator, it is partly intentional - 'can appear both as being in

³¹ This concept is developed by the French linguist Nicholas Ruwet through a comparative study of language, music and poetry in *Language, Musique, Poesie* (1972).

the world and as opening up a world' (ibid.). It owns a form of subjectivity while remaining real. Therefore he questions the relation between reality and aesthetic world. The problem is not here to hold as real the only objective world. Effectively what is bracketed by the spectator perceiving the 'aesthetic object', is what subjectivity makes real. It is in fact with representational painting that the image cannot be held as real precisely because the spectator necessarily refers to the objective world. On the contrary, his aesthetic world constitutes a world of its own and becomes real as soon as it is perceived as such, as soon as it reveals the expressed world and the represented world joined together. As a result 'the objective world is no longer regarded as the absolute norm of the real' (ibid., 197). Dufrenne in fact presents the problem of reality/unreality in terms of whether there is a referent or not. Thus the reality of an object depends on whether it is perceived as something of its own or not, it is in fact subjectively determined. His position is therefore not to say that there is one real world which makes the 'aesthetic object' unreal because it does not belong to it. It is rather to use the fact that any attitude toward some so-called reality is to perceive something of its own.

Thus, as far as this problem is concerned, Dufrenne's 'aesthetic object' is very close to the idea of the figural object. Only two points show some slight differences. First of all his remaining dialectical oscillation between quasi-subjectivity and aesthetic reality cannot be taken into account here. This is because it is related to the hidden separation between morphisms and exmorphisms: 'quasi-subject' and 'real world' are one and the same, just like the whole of matter, colour, drawing, and light 'is' the whole of theme, significance and subject-matter. It constitutes 'meaning', a means which is meaning. This is in fact only a way to emphasise more radically what Dufrenne suggested with his represented and expressed worlds joined together in order to constitute his aesthetic world.

More concretely, with representational painting the viewer tends to identify what belongs to the 'real world' which one believes to be universal. Most of the time the represented world claims for objectivity, whereas the real world is held as 'being' objectivity. The former thus presents by nature an incomplete image of reality, precisely because of the impossible task of imitating what does not and cannot exist by itself or as a universal authenticity. The figural presents itself to the spectator as 'a' real world, and at the same time it shares the appearance with 'the' real figure. It is a real but not objective world which actualises itself in a shared experience with its witness. This leads us to the second aspect of my 'disagreement' with Dufrenne's approach to reality in relation to his 'aesthetic object'. The point should not be in fact to claim that any real world is no more than a world of its own and that it is not the privilege of the objective one. The point is not to wonder whether Balthus's painted passers-by are real as such in the same way that objective human figures in a street can be. It is rather to acknowledge

that what is objectively real is the meaningful experience that stems from such a figural object. Such an experience has an objective existence and to that extent belongs to Dufrenne's 'objective world'. And I can push the limit even further by saying that, after all, only the 'objective world' is real and it includes experience as an authentic existence, a world of its own.

Another form of exmorphism which stems from the problem of reality is the one of reproduction. The experience one has of *The Street* as a picture in a book is obviously different from the one which stems from the authentic piece itself. This is particularly true for painting or sculpture (or I should say obvious) and, to a certain extent, photography. One lives that unique moment of creation in one's own temporality. It is this presence of the creator which makes the work of art a human achievement. It actualises itself in a shared temporality between the artist and the spectator, it is a mutual respect between the two of them. Even more than that, to experience the authentic work of art is the necessary celebration of our human nature, a sort of impossible reflexivity which mirrors in us that the other is.

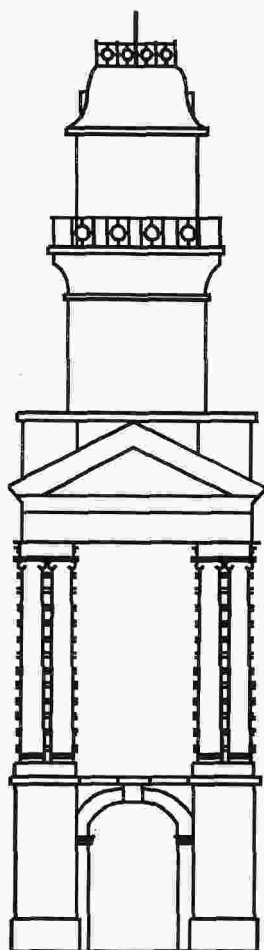
The role of a reproduction of a painting and even a sculpture, need one even say this, is to invite the viewer to have an idea of what the 'real' work is about, it only shows the proof of its existence. The case would probably be the same with cinema, theatre, opera, or music. But instead of being a reproduced picture from a book, a slide or a poster, the reproduction occurs through television or radio. For each of these forms of art the notion of authentic work depends on its particular performance in front of its particular witnesses. The authentic movie is the one perceived at the cinema; the 'real' play, opera, or concert, however it is interpreted, is the one performed on the stage or in an auditorium for its audience. With painting the performance is different but the authenticity remains the same: rooted in a respectful, faithful, and direct relationship between the viewer and the creator's work. Reproduction transfers, translates and affects the whole of matter, drawing, colour, light, and thus its sensuous nature. By giving such a processed version of the relationship mentioned above it damages that shared temporality between the spectator and the artist, that lived meaningful experience which humanises us. To see a copy of *The Street* from a book instead of experiencing Balthus's painting at the New York Museum of Modern Art enables one in fact to approach the figural at a conceptual level, in its principle. This, after all, does not affect the nature of any objectivism: to explain or analyse a meaningful form does not require lived faithfulness, respect and authenticity. The colour photograph of *The Street* provides, to use Dufrenne's wonderful expression, a 'real but diminished presence' (*ibid.*, 44). It gives us the possibility to study what the figural is by remaining paradoxically within the field of exmorphisms, this time understood as ideas, principles, concepts. The reproduced image does not prevent us from understanding how Balthus's passers-

by present themselves by being abstracted from some objective context. But it certainly prevents us from evoking the *figural*, whose actuality can only be found in the experience of the work of art as an authentic human achievement. To experience what might be called the 'original' painting includes a subjective component - the spectator's knowledge of what this 'original' is meant to be, or of its existence. This is a fundamental constituting part of any artistic experience which can claim to pay tribute to any artistic creation.

Perhaps I can add that, depending on the nature of the reproduction and the work to be reproduced, the damage caused by this 'diminished presence' varies. Reproductions can be classified and organised into a hierarchy according to how well they disclose the presence of the creator's work, and to what extent they can be considered as works of art themselves. For Dufrenne, on the contrary, the sensuous nature of any reproduced work will be necessarily impoverished, the spectator will enjoy an experience of another nature. As a matter of fact certain kinds of reproduction (like lithographs, bronzes, or casts) do possess some sensuous quality of their own, and the viewer is not inclined to refer to what is believed to be the 'original', or rather to the 'model'. However, we should not forget that Dufrenne's notion of sensuous nature is related to aesthetic value. The authenticity I am referring to, brings together the sensuous and the proximity of the human creator. However and regardless to its quality, reproduction will never fully reveal the work of art as an authentic creation to the spectator where drawing, colour, light and matter, are fused with theme and significance. It will never fully show itself as a temporal sensuous meaning, which only the mark of human determination can render possible, and for which no dichotomy between what I have called 'morphism' and 'exmorphism' bears any relevance.

Formalism as a projective method of interpreting resembles an irrelevant systematic hermeneutics, which alienates itself from what is at work. It makes us follow Hermes's boundaries in order to see the formal nature of things. There is neither time nor room for a dichotomy between the outside and the inside world of the work, between cause and effect, origin and finality, no teleology. The figures we are dealing with are actualised by the immediacy of their sensuous dimension. As a result, there cannot be any opposition between 'significant form' and some ideal or real world whether it is cultural, social, historical or religious. There is only a fusion: 'a means' which 'means', a presented meaning; and this fusion is a moment of meaningful form from which represented worlds ought to be drawn. But the *figural* can also be understood as a presentation that disrupts, or even transcends already existing representations; an event which in any case is not 'intended' for the objective world, but whose phenomenality is 'different' from it.





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