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Towards a Topology of Aesthetic Immersion

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I. Introduction

It is not uncommon to hear claims that artworks have the ability to carry us beyond reality, to lift us from the hustle and bustle of our everyday lives and take us somewhere else. And indeed, does not J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* in some sense take me to Neverland, Claude Debussy's *Reflets dans l'eau* to the shores of glittering waters, and Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* into the swells of a stormy ocean? Sometimes such parlance finds its way into philosophical discourse, developing into what we might call a "travelling theory"¹ of aesthetic immersion – as, for instance, Mikel Dufrenne claims in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (*Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique*, 1953) that "the witness, without leaving his post in physical space, penetrates into the world of the work. [...] In front of a figurative painting, I am *with* the characters represented: I am *in* Canaletto's city or *under* Ruysdael's oak".²

But how should one understand such parlance? In what sense am I *in* Barrie's Neverland, Canaletto's Venice or Ruysdael's forest? Do I in some sense really *go* somewhere when I am immersed in an artwork, or should the whole discourse be taken as a mere metaphor? Moreover, if I do go somewhere, *where* do I go when we go into the artwork's world? I never leave my place in the auditorium, in the gallery, or my armchair, and yet, it seems, in some enigmatic way I am no longer there in the theatre, museum, or my living room, but in the world of the work that consumes my attention. So, where exactly am I in aesthetic immersion?³

Questions such as these, I would claim, are becoming more and more topical in discussions regarding the nature of aesthetic experience. Along with new digital technologies, ranging from IMAX-theatres, 3D-movies, virtual reality devices, and multi-channel video installations to interactive algorithms, "immersivity" has become one of the buzzwords of the contemporary artworld. However, despite the fact that experiences of immersion have been described for centuries and now more than ever, the phenomenological structure of aesthetic immersion is surprisingly poorly known.

In this article, I will propose a *topological* framework within which the question of aesthetic immersion can be approached. By drawing on Martin Heidegger's phenomenology, according to which human existence as *being-there* (*Dasein*) is inseparable from its relation to the *there* (*Da*), the place where existence is played out, I will examine the way the perceiver occupies her *there* while being immersed in an artwork. I will argue that aesthetic immersion is

¹ This term is proposed in James Elkins, *Pictures & Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 72.

² Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 57.

³ In this article I refer to *aesthetic immersion* rather than *aesthetic experience*, as I consider the latter a larger category, consisting of different modes, intensities, and temporal phases of aesthetic encounters, which are difficult to bring under a unitary view without unwarranted reductions. I take aesthetic immersion to be one particular instance of aesthetic experience, and the following description should not be taken as aiming at the whole scope of aesthetic experience.

characterised by a peculiar *in-betweenness*: in aesthetic immersion I am no longer there on the same plane with the world I usually inhabit, as I am turned away from my quotidian lifeworld toward the world of the artwork; yet I cannot inhabit the work's world in the same way as I inhabit my lifeworld, and I can never concretely be in that world. Thus, I will argue for a twofold thesis: firstly, that the "travelling theory" should not be taken as being mere metaphorical parlance, but, secondly, that the "travelling" in aesthetic immersion is not so much characterised by a movement from one place to another but by a reorientation in the perceiver's place-awareness altogether. I argue that aesthetic immersion is characterised by a certain sense of placelessness, a peculiar experience of falling in between two worlds, into an "elsewhere", where my usual sense of place, time, space, and selfhood is momentarily disrupted. By doing so I aim to show the notion of place and the topological phenomenology pertaining to it offer a systematic starting point for a phenomenology of aesthetic immersion.

II. Being in place

An ancient Greek fragment dating from the early 3rd century BC, attributed to the Pythagorean thinker Archytas of Tarentum, proposes that nothing can exist without existing *somewhere*, and thereby all beings occupy a place (*topos*).⁴ Such a *topological* understanding of being also guided the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger over two millennia later, as the notion of *place* serves as the conceptual locus in Heidegger's attempts to articulate the situated, unique, and contextual nature of meaningful presence.⁵ In Heidegger's thinking, human existence is essentially *Da-sein*, "being-there": we always find ourselves in the midst of a meaningfully organised world, amid things and other people, and our very being cannot be articulated separately from this being-in-the-world. In his later thinking, Heidegger claims that being is an *event* (*Ereignis*), in which the openness for meaningful presence is first opened. *Ereignis* refers to the *taking-place* of meaningful presence, that is, to the way the world takes place as the *there* (*Da*), as the spatio-temporal clearing (*Lichtung*) of the world, where humans as *Dasein* are given their place.⁶

Heidegger claims that the clearing of the *there* occurs essentially as temporalising-spatialising opening of *time-space* (*Zeit-Raum*).⁷ Heidegger writes: "Time and space, as belonging to the essence of truth, are originally united in time-space and are the abyssal grounding of the 'there'."⁸ As such, space and time are co-original and have to be thought with intimate link to the *Ereignis* itself. Furthermore, *Ereignis* is the process in which and through which the *there* is organised as an intelligible place: we always find ourselves situated in a spatio-temporal and meaningful place and we cannot abstract ourselves from this place in which our existence is played out. Thus, *Ereignis* is an event in which both my selfhood and the world as a spatio-temporally organised gathering of meaning are co-originally constituted. The metaphysical

⁴ Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 14.

⁵ This topological interpretation of Heidegger's thinking has been defended by Edward S. Casey (see Casey, *The Fate of Place* chapter 11) and by Jeff Malpas in *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* (MIT Press. See Malpas 2008) and *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).

⁶ Heidegger's most sustained discussion of *Ereignis* can be found in *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012). See also Heidegger's essays *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York, Evanston & London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969) and *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking in Basic Writings*, 2nd revised edition, trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2003), 427–449.

⁷ Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, §§ 238–242.

⁸ Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, 297.

distinction between the subject and the object is a theoretical abstraction that presupposes but covers over this primordial belongingness-together of the self and the world.

What has all this to do with aesthetic experience and, more specifically, with aesthetic immersion? If human experience is taken to be bound to its situatedness – if, in other words, the notion of place is taken to offer a systematic locus for the articulation of the whole fulcrum of human experience – then it naturally follows to ask how *aesthetic immersion* is related to the situated character of human existence. Could aesthetic immersion be articulated, in some way or another, as an experience of place?

The most usual answer in existing phenomenological literature is that artworks have the capacity to re-illuminate our *lifeworld*, the world which we inhabit, and disclose it to us in a depth and intensity that are usually covered over by our immersion in everyday activities. Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art* (*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 1935–36) is in this respect paradigmatic: the Greek temple, Heidegger tells us, gathers together and discloses the elements that constituted the Greek world – it is a focal point that materialises and embodies what it is to be Greek – and in a similar fashion Van Gogh's painting of peasant shoes discloses to us the rural world in which the meaning of the shoes is embedded.⁹ For Heidegger, the *work* of art – the event that takes place in and through art – is tantamount to an opening where “all things gain their lingering and hastening, their remoteness and nearness, their scope and their limits”, that is, come to presence in their *unconcealedness* (*alētheia*).¹⁰ The artwork is a locus of self-understanding that makes us stop and see in a new way the world to which we are so accustomed to that we no longer really see it. This understanding of the artwork as performing an *epochē* that changes our relationship to our surroundings has been picked up and modified in several ways by thinkers such as – just to name few – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Henry Maldiney, Éliane Escoubas, Paul Crowther, Martin Seel, and Miguel de Beistegui, who in different ways articulate how art has the capacity to make us see in a new, deeper way the world in which we always already are.¹¹

There is certainly no denying that by thematising their surroundings, artworks sometimes help us understand *our* world better and more intensely. One can, however, argue that this interpretation, which equates the artwork with the happening of truth, emphasises the reflective outcomes of contemplating an artwork and bypasses another, less reflective mode of place-disclosure at work in an artwork. Namely, in immersive experiences, my surrounding world seems to recede into the background as a foreign world consumes my attention. In such a case the work of art does not seem to re-illuminate the world in which I already am – or if it does so, then only retrospectively – but instead opens up a world of its own. Indeed, Heidegger himself notes, while thinking of Van Gogh's paintings of shoes, that “in the vicinity of the work we

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art* in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 32–35, 40–42.

¹⁰ Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, 44.

¹¹ See Merleau-Ponty's essay *Eye and Mind* in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, trans. ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 121–149. Gadamer's discussion of the ontology of art in Part I of *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weisheimer and Donald G. Marshall. (Second, revised edition. London: Continuum, 2006). See also Henri Maldiney's books *Art et existence* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2003), *Ouvrir le rien, l'art nu* (Collection “encre marine”. Paris: Éditions Les Belles Lettres, 2010), and *L'art, l'éclair de l'être* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2012), Éliane Escoubas's books *Imago mundi: Topologie de l'art* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1986) and *Espace pictural* (Édition augmentée. Collection “encre marine”. Paris: Éditions Les Belles Lettres, 2011), Paul Crowther, *Art and Embodiment: From Aesthetics to Self-consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993), Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), and Miguel de Beistegui, *Aesthetics after Metaphysics: From Mimesis to Metaphor* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

were suddenly somewhere else than where we usually tend to be”.¹² Where is this “somewhere else” and how is one to understand such place-disclosure?

III. Going elsewhere

In *Eye and Mind* (*L'Œil et l'esprit*, 1961), Merleau-Ponty argues that paintings have the peculiar capacity to function more like portals than objects:

I would be hard pressed to say *where* the painting is I am looking at. For I do not look at it as one looks at a thing, fixing it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it.¹³

Something similar happens when I am looking at a play, reading a novel, or listening to music: the work *qua* work is not the object of my intentionality but something *according* to which I perceive what the work makes manifest. Precisely art's peculiar mode of givenness as a medium of perception instead of an object of perception makes it possible to lose oneself in the work.

When I am immersed, say, in a play or an engrossing novel, I don't physically leave the place I'm in, and yet, in a sense, I am not *there* anymore – I lose my sense of my immediate surroundings, my sense of time, even my sense of selfhood as I sink into the work; but nor am I in the world of the play or the novel. I am not concretely transported to some poetic netherworld, nor I do strictly speaking remain here in my lifeworld – rather, being immersed in an aesthetic experience is to fall into an enigmatic *in-between* of my lifeworld and the world of the artwork, into a place where the sense of time, space, meaning, and selfhood are momentarily altered. Jean-Luc Nancy has described this strange existential no-man's-land in the essay “On the Threshold” (“Sur le seuil” in the collection *Les Muses*, 1994) while discussing our existential position when looking at a painting:

So, we have entered there where we will never enter, into this scene painted on a canvas. All at once, there we are. We can't exactly say that we have penetrated there, but neither can we say that we are outside. We are there in a manner older and simpler than by any movement, displacement, or penetration. We are there without leaving the threshold, on the threshold, neither inside nor outside (...).¹⁴

Such is the paradox of aesthetic immersion: even without going anywhere I seem to go somewhere. Here I wish to argue that the structure of this enigmatic experience becomes systematically articulable in a topological register. Earlier I argued that the ontological correlation between the self and the world realises itself, or takes place, as the opening of the *there* where the self and the world are gathered together in their belongingness to each other. In this register, aesthetic immersion can be approached as a disturbance in process by which the *there* takes place, and which, consequently, modulates the way the self and the world are given in experience. In other words, what I would like to suggest here, using a term borrowed from Paul Crowther, is that the work of art is an event that modulates “the ontological reciprocity”¹⁵ of the self and the world, and that this event manifests itself on the experiential level as aesthetic immersion.

Earlier I outlined that a place is a spatio-temporal configuration of meaning, and the sense of selfhood is tied to its being-placed. Since aesthetic immersion is a disruption in the constitution of place, it can be further analysed in terms of its way of disrupting the dimensions that

¹² Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art* in *Poetry*, 35.

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, 126.

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 57.

¹⁵ Crowther, *Art and Embodiment*, 2.

constitute place – meaning, time, space, and selfhood. I have presented a detailed phenomenological description of these disruptions elsewhere, and here I will confine myself to some broad outlines.¹⁶

Heidegger argues in *Being and Time* that being-in-the-world is essentially characterised by being-among (*Sein-bei*) other beings: I find myself as always already situated amid the world among other humans, things, events, and so forth.¹⁷ There is an essential *unilaterality* to this being-among-beings: I am on the same plane with them, sharing the same world, capable of interacting with them. Heidegger argues that the meaning of beings in quotidian interaction is determined precisely by my capacity to project myself and my practical concerns upon them – their meaning is dependent on their place within a network of significations that I project upon the world in my care for my own existence. But, as is often observed in aesthetic theories, to experience an artwork as an artwork is not to treat it as an object of pragmatic use. The artwork presents beings, events, and other humans from a distance that severs the unilaterality of quotidian being-among-beings by opening its own space of manifestation. I am not amid the world of Canaletto's Venice or Ruysdael's forest in the same way I am amid my lifeworld, and I cannot run into the world of a play by running onto the stage. This distance changes the way the presented beings and events make sense – they no longer sink into the network of pragmatic significations that sustains my daily life, but rather show themselves in their own absolute self-showing. It is precisely this function of art as truth-disclosure that many phenomenological accounts of art concentrate on. What I would like to stress here is that this disclosure is possible only because the artwork hollows for itself its own space-time, its own place of manifestation, that destabilises the unilaterality of quotidian being-among-beings and enables beings to show themselves outside the context of the quotidian lifeworld.

Furthermore, Heidegger tells us in *Being and Time*, also the time-space of the *there* is structured by *Dasein*'s pragmatic needs: space is organised in terms of distances and directions that govern *Dasein*'s interactions with its surroundings, and time marks *Dasein*'s way of projecting itself towards its future possibilities in the light of the past and the present.¹⁸ Immersion into an artwork excludes such pragmatic relationship with the work, and thus also the perceiver's mode of inhabiting time and space are altered. Emmanuel Levinas has described the effects of such distancing in terms of the experience of temporality: the work of art effectuates a certain falling out of the flow of time, an encapsulation of time into a "meanwhile" (*entretemps*), where the perceiver's sense of time partakes in the temporal closure of the artwork – Mona Lisa will never stop smiling and Laocoön will never escape the serpent – and thus suspend its ecstatic openness to the future.¹⁹ On the experiential level, this shows itself as the perceiver's forgetfulness of time during immersion. On the same note, in aesthetic immersion the perceiver loses his sense of his immediate surroundings and directs himself towards the virtual space of the artwork, which he can never enter. As Henri Maldiney points out, this space, which the work establishes, "is not volumetric, nor even metric," and as such it is an "invisible place without a site".²⁰ It is not localisable within the coordinates of the lifeworld space, and thus while projecting herself into the work's virtual space, the perceiver loses her sense of her immediate spatial surroundings.

¹⁶ Harri Mäcklin, *Going Elsewhere: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Immersion* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2018).

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), §§ 12–13.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, §§ 23, 68.

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Reality and its Shadow* in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 137–141.

²⁰ Maldiney, *L'art, l'éclair de l'être*, 269, 283, respectively

One interesting and often recorded aspect of aesthetic immersion is the peculiar way artworks have the capacity to make the perceiver forget her sense of selfhood. For example, Dufrenne notes that “I am lost – literally, ‘alien-ated’ – in the aesthetic object. The sensuous reverberates in me without my being able to be anything other than the place of its manifestation and the echo of its power”,²¹ and Maurice Blanchot describes the experience of reading as “the situation of one who has lost himself, who can no longer say ‘me,’ who in the same movement has lost the world, the truth of the world, and belongs to exile [...]”.²² On the same note, Georges Poulet has noted that “[r]eading, then, is the act in which the subjective principle which I call *I*, is modified in such a way that I no longer have the right, strictly speaking, to consider it as my *I*”,²³ as the book “lives its own life within me; in a certain sense, it thinks itself, and it even gives itself a meaning within me”.²⁴ There is no little amount of radicality in such claims, since they go against the grain of a long line of arguments, spanning from Kant’s unity of apperception to contemporary theories of minimal subjectivity, according to which conscious experience is essentially characterised by the subject’s (thematic or non-thematic) awareness herself as the subject of the experience.²⁵ What happens in aesthetic immersion is a peculiar suspension of this awareness, as the work hollows me as the stage of its manifestation without me being able to distance myself from its happening by positioning myself as the “I” of the experience. Since the very way of my awareness of the *there* is suspended, also my awareness of myself as *being-there* (*Da-sein*) is suspended.

Aesthetic immersion as an experience of “going elsewhere” can thus be characterised in terms of a double negation. The “else” of the “elsewhere” denotes, on the one hand, the turning *away* from the quotidian lifeworld, where I am alongside of the thing, side-by-side and on the same plane with them, *towards* the manifestation of the work. On the other hand, the “else” of the “elsewhere” points to the fact that the perceiver’s position is still outside the work’s world, in which the perceiver can never dwell side-by-side with the beings and events the work unfolds. Aesthetic immersion as “going elsewhere” is then not a movement to another world but a reorientation *within* the lifeworld *away* from it toward a world which I can never enter. It is precisely this reorientation, effected by the work, that manifests itself on the experiential level as the disruption of the perceiver’s sense of space, time, meaning, and selfhood, which together constitute the quotidian sense of being *there* in the lifeworld.

IV. Conclusions

It is indeed true that sometimes art has the ability to take us “somewhere else”. In this paper, I have argued that the phenomenological structure of aesthetic immersion – that is, the experiential structure of “going elsewhere” – is much more complex than the common parlance of art taking us to another world would suggest. Taking my cue from a topological interpretation of Heideggerian phenomenology, I have argued that aesthetic immersion is not a matter of transportation to another world but rather an experience where the perceiver’s mode of being-in-the-world momentarily changes. Aesthetic immersion entails a suspension of the perceiver’s

²¹ Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 226.

²² Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 75.

²³ Georges Poulet, “Phenomenology of Reading,” *New Literary History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (October 1969): 57.

²⁴ Poulet, “Phenomenology of Reading,” 59.

²⁵ Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer & Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), §§ 16 – 18; Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2005) and *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy, and Shame* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

awareness of being *there* in the lifeworld, without the perceiver thereby being transported to another world, where she could live in the same way as in the lifeworld. Rather, aesthetic immersion is structured by a peculiar experience of falling in-between two worlds, of reorienting oneself toward a world that cannot be, strictly speaking, entered, so that the perceiver's sense of her immediate surroundings, and even of her own selfhood, is momentarily suspended. In this way I have attempted to show that a topological approach to the phenomenology of aesthetic immersion functions not only as a corrective to the "travelling theory" of aesthetic experience but also as a systematic starting point for a comprehensive description that ties together the experiential structures of immersion – that is, the disruptions in one's awareness of meaning, time, space, and selfhood – under the notion of *place*. At the same time, such an approach enriches the existing topological interpretation of art by uncovering an altogether different place-experience than what the existing literature has hitherto been able to offer.

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Author’s bio

Harri Mäcklin is a postdoctoral researcher of aesthetics at the University of Helsinki. His main research interests include phenomenological aesthetics, hermeneutics, and the history of modern aesthetics. His PhD thesis *Going Elsewhere: A Phenomenology of Aesthetic Immersion* develops a systematic phenomenological description of aesthetic immersion by using a topological framework. He has co-edited the anthology *Paths from the Philosophy of Art to*

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