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## **Eros and Sensation: Art and Aesthetics in Emmanuel Levinas's Prison Notebooks**

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**Abstract:** The release of Emmanuel Levinas's *Prison Notebooks* (*Carnets de captivité*) as a part of the first tome of his collected works has further illuminated the extent of the philosopher's preoccupation with art, especially literature. Levinas's own literary efforts have been well documented, but less attention has been paid to the relationship between the *Prison Notebooks* and Levinas's early philosophy of art. In this article, I suggest that much of what Levinas has to say apropos art in his early philosophy can be traced back to meditations undertaken in captivity. I will unearth the influence of the *Prison Notebooks* in three articles from the 1940's "L'Autre dans Proust", "La Réalité et son ombre", and "La Transcendance des mots".

I argue that in Levinas's early philosophy of art follows two distinct "paths": the path of eros and the path of sensation. On one hand, Levinas questions how and if literature can do justice to the question of alterity, whereas on the other he seeks to make sense of the relationship between art and sensibility. I argue that in his notebooks Levinas offers an account of the meaning of sensations that forms the basis of his early aesthetics. Thus, the study of the *Prison Notebooks* is important as it allows us to see how Levinas's early philosophy of art, including his seminal "La Réalité et son ombre", functions as a continuation of a philosophical project already begun during his time in captivity.

**Keywords:** Emmanuel Levinas, aesthetics, art philosophy, literature, sensation

**Biographical note:** Jussi Pentikäinen is a doctoral student currently working on his PhD thesis in aesthetics at the University of Helsinki. His thesis will follow the development of the relationship between art and ethics in Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy.

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## Introduction

Reading Levinas's *Prison Notebooks* (*Carnets de captivité*) published as a part of the first tome of his *Oeuvres* (2009) one is taken aback by the sheer number of references to art and artists. As Levinas remarks in an interview with François Poirié, his time in captivity was spent – alongside hard manual labour – reading “plenty of things I had not had the time to read before”<sup>1</sup>. Much of this reading consisted of novels and poetry, classics alongside modern writers, which seems not to have been merely forced upon him by the external circumstances. Levinas's well-known efforts to write a novel (or rather several novels) are further proof of his sincere interest in art.

Levinas's literary ambitions have understandably aroused a lot of interest<sup>2</sup>, but in this article I will instead turn my attention towards the myriad of remarks on art and artists present throughout the notebooks. I argue that Levinas's early ideas on art as introduced in three articles in the 1940's are influenced by meditations undertaken during captivity. The articles I tackle are Levinas's seminal “La Réalité et son ombre” (1948), as well as the lesser-known texts from the 1940's, “L'Autre dans Proust” (1947) and “La Transcendance des mots” (1949).

Although in Levinas's published works references to art often seem to function merely as ways to clarify wider philosophical points, careful study of the *Prison Notebooks* proves that often the origin of these arguments can be traced back to Levinas's engagement with art. I argue also that offering a “genealogy” of Levinas's early aesthetics helps to elucidate the arguments made in his later published writings. Thus, as Sarah Hammerschlag writes, the references to art in the *Prison Notebooks* can function: “as partners in a dialogue, as sources even for his philosophy.”<sup>3</sup>

## The Path of Eros and the Path of Sensation

The *Carnets de captivité* consist of seven individual notebooks written primarily during Levinas's years as prisoner of war – first in France and later in Germany at Stalag XIB – between 1940-5. However, as Rodolphe Calin points out in his “Notice” to the first volume of Levinas's *Oeuvres*, these dates are not entirely accurate. Calin recounts how the notebooks were discovered in an envelope on which Levinas himself had written “Carnets de captivité, 1940-1945”. The first notebook is dated, however, to 1937 and the last reaches all the way to 1950<sup>4</sup>. In many cases it is only possible to offer an estimate of the time that each part of the notebooks was written.

What is abundantly clear, however, from the very first notebook onward is that Levinas is highly occupied with art, especially literature. Alongside the usual suspects – Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Shakespeare, and Racine – one can find references to Proust, Rodin, Bloy, Ariosto, Dante, Goethe, Gide, Hugo, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Poe, among others<sup>5</sup>. Very rarely does Levinas refer to other forms of art other than literature. Perhaps the most surprising of these instances are a few short comments on cinema, rare in the rest of Levinas's oeuvre. In several of the notebooks he describes films which seem to have left an impression on him thus putting into question Colin Davis's statement that he did not show the topic "the slightest interest."<sup>6</sup>

The example of cinema can be used to introduce the way Levinas approaches art in the *Prison Notebooks*. He writes: "in their strangeness things reveal themselves as a mystery. This is the charm of cinema."<sup>7</sup> I argue that focusing on how art reveals the "strangeness of things" is a characteristic feature of Levinas's early aesthetics. In the context of all forms of art – including cinema, "une art propre"<sup>8</sup> – he emphasizes the manner in which art reveals a sort of dichotomy in "things" themselves. In the fifth notebook he writes:

The sound, the colour and the word cover objects. Sound as noise, colour in covering a surface, the word as <concealing?> (*sic*) a meaning (*sens*). The sensations, then, have an objective meaning (*signification*). But in art one can say that the first movement consists of detaching the sensation of this objective meaning (*sens*), of this objective reference."<sup>9</sup>

Already in this sketch of what Levinas calls the "problem of aesthetics" one can find the origins of what later becomes a major preoccupation in Levinas's first published writings on art. The previously quoted paragraph can be compared to the following passages from *De l'existence à l'existant* and "La Réalité et son ombre," respectively:

The movement of art consists of leaving the level of perception so as to reinstate (*réhabiliter*) sensation, in detaching the quality from this object reference<sup>10</sup>.

The most elemental process of art consists of substituting an object with its image. Image, but not concept.<sup>11</sup>

Even the choice of words is at times almost identical. "The first movement" or the "the most elemental process" of art marks the rift between the "concept" or "objective meaning" of the thing. In the notebooks and the post war writings this rift is described as a "detachment" or "substitution" of the object with its sensible characteristics<sup>12</sup>. Thus, already in captivity Levinas sketches a theory of

aesthetics in which he stresses the separation of the sensual and conceptual moments of being. This theory, as I will argue later, reaches its fullest form in “La Réalité et son ombre.”

However, this is only half of the story. In the *Prison Notebooks* Levinas seems to be operating with two different views on art that are, if not at odds at least at times hard to reconcile. The first view deals with the aforementioned rift between the sensuous and the conceptual, whereas the second is built around the question of *eros*. Eros or love – sexual love as well – play a key role in Levinas’s writings in captivity. Perhaps alluding to Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*, he writes in the second notebook: “The feminine is the other (*autrui*) before the other is another (*autre*) person. New path towards the apperception of the other (*d’autrui*)”.<sup>13</sup> Love, understood here as love between a man and a woman, is for Levinas a necessary condition for grasping the possibility of alterity.

Much of what Levinas has to say apropos art in the *Prison Notebooks* is related to the question of eros. For example, in the second and the fifth notebooks he analyses at length the work of Marcel Proust with the aim of showing how the story of Marcel and Albertine is “the story of a relationship with the other (*autrui*).”<sup>14</sup> In the sixth notebook, on the other hand, he writes extensively on Léon Bloy’s *Lettres à sa fiancée*. This is somewhat surprising due to Bloy’s problematic views on Judaism.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, as Seán Hand writes, in Bloy’s view the Jewish people are “necessarily damned and elect”<sup>16</sup>, and this idea of election Levinas incorporates into his own philosophy. Furthermore, in the notebooks he writes how the work that Bloy has done to Catholicism in elevating it beyond categories and to the “order of mystery” must be done to Judaism.<sup>17</sup> Levinas also seems to locate in Bloy’s Catholic veneration of the woman a kindred idea to his own philosophy of the feminine other<sup>18</sup>.

The two distinct paths of Levinas’s philosophy of art are both present in his writings on art in the 1940’s. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to these as the “path of sensation” and “path of eros.” While these paths differ from one another, they cannot be absolutely separated. Eros cannot be understood without reference to sensation. In *Le Temps et l’autre* Levinas for example describes the contact of the subject with the other qua feminine as “caress” (*caresse*). This caress is sensuous contact with the other that is characterized by a “lack of all fusion” and thus in a tactile experience the subject concretely and on a sensuous level comes across the irreducible alterity of the other.<sup>19</sup> In the following I will trace the roots of Levinas’s early philosophy of art to the *Prison Notebooks* and show how Levinas’s early aesthetics is characterized by the “paths” of sensation and eros.

## The Path of Eros: Lessons from Proust

As Hammerschlag remarks, Léon Bloy is the most cited author in Levinas's *Prison Notebooks*.<sup>20</sup> Yet Levinas never dedicates a full article or an essay to his work. Proust's work, on the other hand, is the subject matter of one of Levinas's first published texts after his release from captivity. Therefore, I will focus on Levinas's reading of Proust as an example of the "path of eros." In an often-quoted passage from the second notebook Levinas gives an overview of his "work to be done" (*oeuvre à faire*). This work is separated into literary, philosophical, and critical, and in the last category the only name given is that of Proust.<sup>21</sup> The fruit of this critical labour is "L'Autre dans Proust" (1947).

The argument presented in the 1947 article is remarkably similar to the one formulated in the *Prison Notebooks*. In both, Proust is characterised as "the poet of the social" (*le poète du social*).<sup>22</sup> In the context of the *Prison Notebooks* "social" is to be understood in the context of love. In fact, Levinas writes in the very end of the last notebook how "Eros as the base of the social" is among the "things to elucidate" in his further work.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the path of eros followed by Levinas in his reading of Proust is tied to the larger issue of social life itself, leaving the sphere of pure literary criticism.

Levinas writes how in Proust's *Albertine disparue* the other, Albertine, is felt by Marcel in and through her very absence. The other agitates the ego in being always hidden.<sup>24</sup> Later in "L'Autre dans Proust" Levinas remarks how in the relationship between Marcel and Albertine eros is given in the guise of a "direct relationship with one who gives themselves in receding, with the other as other, with mystery".<sup>25</sup> It seems, then, as if Proust gave Levinas an early inspiration for the idea of the "diachronic" relationship with the other described in his later works. The other, just as Albertine, is the Other due to the impossibility of perfect synchrony.

Danielle Cohen-Levinas has also noted the influence of Proust on Levinas's philosophy. She writes how Proust's work is "one of the pivots around which Levinas's rupture with substantialism turns for the benefit of the real emergence of the intersubjectivity of love."<sup>26</sup> Having read "more Proust than ever"<sup>27</sup> during his captivity, Levinas is able to locate in the author's work a description of a love that is characterized by "the struggle with the ungraspable", love that resists totalization.<sup>28</sup> I argue that the first path of Levinas's early philosophy of art, the path of eros, is characterized by a critical engagement with literature that proves how art, especially literature, can function as an influence to Levinas's philosophy.

Considering his importance for the development of Levinas's philosophy, it is somewhat surprising that Marcel Proust "virtually disappears" from his oeuvre after the release of the 1947 article<sup>29</sup>. In *Totalité et infini* Proust's name appears just once, the context being the question of sensibility. Levinas speaks of the "façade", the face of things that he juxtaposes with the face of the other. In Proust, according to Levinas, one is turned towards the hidden, "the reverse of the sleeves of a lady's gown, like those dark corners of cathedrals, nonetheless worked with the same art as the façade."<sup>30</sup> While the face (*visage*) is also characterised by its mystery, this cannot be compared to the "reverse" or "dark" that one's attention is turned towards in Proust. The context of this lone reference to Proust is still partly aesthetic as Levinas links façade to beauty "whose essence is indifference, cold splendour, and silence".<sup>31</sup> Thus, Proust appears in a manner that hints more towards Levinas's views in "La Réalité et son ombre", as we will see, than the analysis of Proust offered in the *Prison Notebooks*.

While the reason for Proust's disappearance cannot be stated with any certainty, I suggest that at least part of it might lie in the fact that by the time of his major philosophical works, Levinas has learned from the author what he needed to learn. Proust gave him the model of love as the origin of sociality, in which the other perturbs the ego even in (and due to) his/her absence. Literature here works as more than just a way of lending credence to Levinas's argument, functioning as a real inspiration. After "assimilating" Proust's teaching into his own work, Levinas seems to not have been compelled to return to his critical project sketched in the notebooks.

Part of the reason for Proust's disappearance might very well also lie in the two paths of Levinas's aesthetics. While the question of eros in Proust cannot be absolutely separated from Levinas's analysis of sensation, as voluptuousness and caress both play an important role in his understanding of love, the path of sensation tackles the topic from another perspective. The rift – or possibly lack thereof – between the two conceptions of sensation is indeed one of the major issues in Levinas's aesthetics. Levinas approaches Proust solely in the context of sensation-as-eros, but as he later turns towards the questions of art as sensibility and enjoyment, Proust is seemingly left behind. This disappearance is not total, however, as he can be seen as having left a significant trace to Levinas's philosophy.<sup>32</sup>

## Language as Expression, Language as Content

While Levinas's article "La Transcendance des mots" (1949) was published one year after "La Réalité et son ombre", I choose to tackle it first as the text can be read as an intermediary form between the path of eros and the path of sensibility. In this article, Levinas critiques the first volume of Michel Leiris's autobiography *La Règle du jeu* (titled "Biffures", 1948) and offers an analysis of the way that Leiris makes use of the homonym in the work's title.<sup>33</sup> The path of eros is here present in a different guise than in "L'Autre dans Proust". Instead of love between a man and woman, Levinas is interested in the ethical significance of language as a possibility of breaking free from the solitude of the ego and being for the other (*pour l'autre*). He writes that

The act of expression makes it impossible to remain within oneself or keep one's thoughts for oneself and so reveals the inadequacy of the subject's position in which the ego has a given world at its disposal.<sup>34</sup>

Significantly, Levinas juxtaposes the "being who speaks" (*le sujet qui parle*) with the artist who "situates himself purely and simply at the heart of his own spectacle."<sup>35</sup> This "spectacle" can be construed to be one that Leiris himself is also taking part in. According to Levinas, a break with it is possible only when language is liberated from the primacy of thought. Thus, in "La Transcendance des mots" he juxtaposes language as *expression* and being-for-the-other with language as a vehicle for *thought content*. Keeping in mind the risk of a certain anachronism, this dichotomy can be thought of as an early formulation of the difference between Said (*Dit*) and Saying (*Dire*) introduced later.<sup>36</sup>

Levinas's preoccupation with the question of language as expression and a vehicle for thought content can again be traced back to the *Prison Notebooks*. In the fourth notebook he writes:

The expression of a thought – is always a different thing than the objective content of the thought. Already by the simple fact that the expression – words – intervene all the being that articulates and all the "play" involved in the articulation – the "picturesque" of language.<sup>37</sup>

In another fragment close by Levinas adds: "The last form of this play of the material of language is the poem with rhythm and rhyme."<sup>38</sup> The very act of expression then always intervenes with thought and this intervention is also where *poetry* steps in.<sup>39</sup> Levinas analyses Leiri's method in *Biffures* in a like manner. The bifurcations and erasures present in the work reveal the wide field of associations inherent in each word: whether it be the case, for example, of the material similarity between words

or of the circumstances they were learned in.<sup>40</sup> In Leiris's work, then, one can locate the very same dichotomy of language between its content and the "picturesque" moment already presented in the *Prison Notebooks*. On one hand, language is a tool used to express an idea, whereas on the other it is poetry. This dichotomy is however not absolute. Levinas is keen on showing in Leiris's work "a thought, at the actual moment of thinking, make contact with the perceptible matter of words".<sup>41</sup> Thought itself cannot be absolutely separated from the materiality of words to which it has recourse from the very beginning.

I argue that the reason "La Transcendance des mots" functions as a middle road between the path of eros and the path of sensibility is due to the dichotomy of language. The material moment of language, the genesis of poetry, belongs firmly to the path of sensation whereas the analysis language *qua* expression falls under the path of eros. In this article Levinas argues that the primary meaning of language cannot be found in its functioning as a vehicle for thought content or in its "biffures" and "bifurs". The primary meaning of language is *expression*, which becomes a major theme in Levinas's philosophy from the 1950's onwards.

The idea that the materiality and sensibility of language plays a key role in poetry is certainly not unique to Levinas. On the contrary, it is a leitmotif of modernist poetics ever since Mallarmé at least.<sup>42</sup> This poetic theory can be seen "in action" in the works of poets like Tristan Corbière, Jules Laforgue, and, of course, Mallarmé himself. Fittingly, if perhaps by coincidence, in "La Transcendance des mots" Levinas refers to the duality of language as "symbolism." He describes the way that "in sound the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its content" making it "the symbol par excellence".<sup>43</sup>

The concept of "symbol" here seems to refer to the same phenomenon as the "picturesque" moment in language. In a sound and a word there is always something more than just the said. Levinas makes a similar remark already in the *Prison Notebooks*, when stating that the very "sonority of sound" (*la sonorité du son*) is "a symbol to the extent of being *éclat*".<sup>44</sup> This he juxtaposes with certain instruments, like bells, the ringing of which is "the sound in its very sonority", without any content.<sup>45</sup> The word, then, carries with it the moment of sonority and *éclat*, brightness and light, the latter being in Levinas the precondition of knowledge and theory.

Interestingly, the word and the bell in its pure sonority are thus both something other than mere content. What differentiates them is the fact that the word always goes towards the other: the "deconceptualisation" of sound, to borrow Levinas's term, is counteracted by sound as a *word*. Somewhat polemically, Levinas writes: "The sounds and noises of nature are failed words. To really

hear a sound, we need to hear a word. Pure sound is the word.”<sup>46</sup> The primacy of the word can be traced back to the presence of the speaker, the other. Thus, Levinas here pits against each other sound-as-word and sound-as-noise, and in doing so emphasises the difference between the relationship with the other and art. He writes:

The use of the word wrenches experience out of its aesthetic self-sufficiency... The language of criticism takes us out of our dreams, in which artistic language plays an integral part.<sup>47</sup>

This idea of art as play or dream is something that preoccupies Levinas from the 1930’s onwards, as is proven by the first of his *Prison Notebooks*. Here Levinas writes how both art and dreams are characterised by lack of “seriousness”.<sup>48</sup> The antidote to this is criticism, as he states both in “La Transcendance des mots” and “La Réalité et son ombre”.<sup>49</sup> In the *Prison Notebooks* Levinas does not have much to say on the subject, except for a short fragment in which he offers a definition of the critic as “he who by essence can say more than just (repeat) the work itself”.<sup>50</sup> This formulation he later repeats in “La Réalité et son ombre” which I will turn to next.<sup>51</sup>

### **Genealogy of “La Réalité et son ombre”**

I argue that Levinas’s 1948 article “La Réalité et son ombre” functions as the fullest formulation of the aesthetic theory sketched in the *Prison Notebooks*. Here Levinas approaches the question of sensation with new conceptual tools: image, shadow, and musicality. These concepts allow him to further analyse the role of sensation in art. I suggest that in many important aspects “La Réalité et son ombre” can be read as a continuation and culmination of the work begun in the *Prison Notebooks* and that in this article Levinas furthermore seems to abandon the path of eros, following only that of sensation.

In the fifth notebook, written in 1944, Levinas offers an interesting “classification” of the meaning of sensibility in his thought:

In my philosophy, study of *the signification of sensation*: vision – light – reason; hearing – voice – verb; touch – caress – love; taste (smell) – eating – need. And however, alongside all this remains *the sensation in its pure materiality*, object of aesthetics; vision – colour, hearing – sound, verb rhythm etc.<sup>52</sup>

This passage informs my reading of “La Réalité et son ombre.” In it Levinas gives his account of the two meanings of the word “sensation” that guide his philosophy of art. Alongside the *signification* of sensation one can find its *pure materiality*, the latter being the realm of art. Thus, each sense opens a passageway to two different “dimensions.” Vision is the realm of light and reason as much as pure materiality of the colour.<sup>53</sup> The latter can be further connected to the issue of the detachment of the sensuous “qualia” from the object, or what I have after Levinas called “deconceptualisation”. Thus, the path of sensation is built on the foundation of this classification given in the fifth notebook.

Before moving on to a closer analysis of “La Réalité et son ombre,” it is worth pointing out that the role that tactility plays in Levinas’s “classification”. Touch, as in the case of caress mentioned earlier, is a major theme in Levinas’s philosophy of eros. It is interesting that in the fifth notebooks Levinas places touch as caress in the category of “signification of sense” alongside light and reason, whereas in the analysis of Proust he emphasizes the very manner that the feminine other refuses to become presence and thus retains her alterity. In *Le Temps et l’autre* Levinas, referring this time to Bloy, calls this “modesty” (*pudeur*). He argues that in modesty the feminine alterity exactly evades light.<sup>54</sup> Thus, it seems that both in the case of art and eros important is the juxtaposition with light and reason. I suggest that for this reason the paths of sensation and eros cannot be separated absolutely. Perhaps it hints at the possible reconciliation of art and ethics in general, a topic too profound to be tackled here.

“La Réalité et son ombre” is perhaps the most well-known for Levinas’s hesitancy towards the ethical potential of art. This hesitancy can be reduced roughly to two arguments. First, Levinas argues that art is in its essence untruth. Art according to Levinas does not capture being in its truth, but rather in its image or “shadow”. Second, he claims that art is by nature “enchantment” (*ensorcellement*): Art does not bring forth ethical action but rather a passive participation in the aesthetic experience. I suggest that these arguments are both built upon ideas already present in the *Prison Notebooks*.

Levinas opens “La Réalité et son ombre” by tackling the first argument regarding the relationship between art and truth. He writes that, instead of truth, art can be better approached as a “totally independent ontological event” that is characterised by its relationship with “darkness” (*l’obscurité*).<sup>55</sup> As sensation *qua* signification is indeed linked to “light” and “reason”, it is easy to understand why Levinas would here connect art to darkness. The pure materiality of art makes possible an “invasion of the shadow” (*un envahissement de l’ombre*) because it severs the ties of sensibility and reason, or – as Levinas writes in the fifth notebook – “objective sense” (*sens objectif*).<sup>56</sup> In “La Réalité et son ombre” Levinas describes the detachment of sensibility from its object as an essential feature of all art and refers to this “process” as substituting an object with its *image*.<sup>57</sup> Images are thus present in all art.

But what does Levinas mean with an “image”? If they are indeed present in all art, the term cannot be taken in its usual sense. A major undertaking in “La Réalité et son ombre” is to show that an image does not function like a window that would give us an access to the object depicted therein. This is, according to Levinas, the usual account of phenomenology of images.<sup>58</sup> Levinas’s target here might very well be Sartre, whose theory of images can be read as fitting the description. In *L’Imaginaire* he, for example, offers an analysis of portraits which seems to hint that images can function as a window through which we can access the person depicted while at the same time being aware of his/her absence in the flesh. Images to Sartre are then an interplay of this presence-as-absence.<sup>59</sup> Levinas denies this idea and he does it on the basis of the dichotomy of sensation.

“Shadow” (*ombre*) is one of the new concepts presented in “La Réalité et son ombre,” but its origin can be traced back to the “classification” of sensation given in the fifth notebook. With “shadow” Levinas refers to the sensible qualities that every being carries along themselves without being reduced to them. I argue that this concept functions as a continuation of Levinas’s analysis of sensation as pure materiality, here extended to the phenomenological issue of representation. The link can be found in the following quotation:

There is then in this person, in this thing, a duality in its being. It is what it is, and it is a stranger to itself, and there is a connection between these two moments. We say that the thing is itself and its image. And the connection between the thing and its image is resemblance.<sup>60</sup>

This duality in the person or “the thing” can be identified as the duality of sensation introduced in the *Prison Notebooks*. Just as vision can reach the object in its signification, as revealed in light, one can arrest the gaze on the pure materiality of being: “patches of colour, pieces of marble or bronze.”<sup>61</sup> Thus “image” in Levinas’s philosophy does not give us an access to the thing in its absence, but functions on the basis of the pure materiality of being. This allows Levinas to claim that art deals with “non-truth.” Image does not guarantee a passage to the object depicted – and thus the understanding thereof – but rather forces the gaze to remain on the level of shadow or pure materiality. It is also of note that “image” can refer here to all cases where pure materiality is detached from its object. Thus, images are indeed an essential part of all art, even music.

The strength of Levinas’s theory of images lie in the fact that he manages to offer an analysis that applies both to representational and non-representational art. In “La Réalité et son ombre” he notes how both types of art in the end refer to the “elemental procedure” of art, supplanting the object with its image. Thus, modern art, in its search for “pure music” or “pure poetry,” cannot be absolutely

separated from classical, representational art.<sup>62</sup> A portrait cannot be absolutely separated from a work of abstract art as they both share the same ontological ground. If images are seen merely as “windows” this becomes impossible. Furthermore, as every object carries alongside itself its shadow, the duality in being is not something that would only apply in the case of art. As Levinas recognises, the question of whether art precedes nature or vice versa is misguided, as it “fails to recognise the simultaneity of the truth and the image.”<sup>63</sup> This simultaneity can be read as referring to the very same dichotomy of signification of sensation and pure materiality presented already in the *Prison Notebooks*.

Another aspect of Levinas’s hesitancy towards art relates to its intoxicating power. This Levinas describes as “magic” (*magie*) or “enchantment” (*ensorcellement*).<sup>64</sup> With these words he refers to the way that images in all art, not only pictorial arts, take a hold of one experiencing them. This idea cannot be presented here fully, but one important aspect of the “enchantment” is its connection with the issue of “deconceptualisation” in art. Levinas argues that the rift between the sensation as pure materiality and the object is at its widest in music: “Sound is the quality most detached from an object.”<sup>65</sup> This is why Levinas refers to detachment of sensible features as the “musicality” of images and it is this musicality that lies at the root of the intoxicating power of images.

This idea is akin to the one presented in the *Prison Notebooks* as regards the pure sonority of sound. Levinas writes of “the bell that breaks the silence and fills the space with something that comes from below (*là-bas*).”<sup>66</sup> This is echoed by the idea that in art as non-truth one is dealing with the opposite of what goes beyond: that which remains “on the hither-side” (*en deçà*).<sup>67</sup> As I have noted in the previous section, opposite to this impersonal sound of the bell is the word that makes possible the relationship with the other. Similarly, the muteness of art is in Levinas juxtaposed with the face that speaks.

The “magical” power of art is furthermore tied to the question of time. Alongside “shadow” and “musicality,” one of the most famous concepts presented in the article is “the meanwhile” (*l’entretemps*) referring to “the eternal duration of the interval”.<sup>68</sup> As art as enchantment induces passivity in the one participating in it, the usual flow of time is also disturbed. The example used to illustrate the effect of the meanwhile in art, the work of Edgar Allan Poe, is already familiar from the *Prison Notebooks*. In the very end of the sixth notebook Levinas writes how the force of Poe’s work lies on the level of sensation: “The description of a cat – of a landscape – and especially the infinite time of the approach of the imminent that one cannot escape.”<sup>69</sup> Compare this to the following passage in “La Réalité et son ombre”:

The characters of certain tales by Edgar Allen Poe must have found themselves in this empty interval. A threat appears to them in the approach of such an empty interval; no move can be made to retreat from its approach, but this approach can never end.<sup>70</sup>

The work of Poe can be used as an example of the effect of the meanwhile due to the role that sensation plays in his work. In many of his famous short stories one is struck by the lack of action and the description thereof. Instead, Poe focuses on the description of certain objects or – as in Levinas’s example – a cat. This description helps to create an *atmosphere* of the literary work that is characterised in “La Réalité et son ombre” as the “the very obscurity of the image”.<sup>71</sup> The lack or impossibility of action, an impending doom that is always approaching as in the story “The Pit and the Pendulum” (1842)<sup>72</sup>, is comparable to the incessant approach of the meanwhile.

It is important to note that in the *Prison Notebooks* Levinas ties the question of what would later become the meanwhile to that of sensation. The pure immanence or “certain immediate aspects of perception” that according to Levinas forms the basis of Poe’s stories is also the inescapable present without hope of the future.<sup>73</sup> Thus, the question of the meanwhile is also a part of the path of sensation. Levinas juxtaposes the eternity of concepts with the eternity of the interval captured in images, the latter being something “inhuman and monstrous”.<sup>74</sup> Thus, the meanwhile can be understood to be the temporal mode of being of the image: the pure materiality of being is captured in art which in turn results in the impossibility of the interval to pass. The shadow of being is incapable of escaping the present moment, “Eternally Laocoon will be caught up in the grip of the serpents; the Mona Lisa will smile eternally.”<sup>75</sup> The mode of temporality characterised by the inescapable interval Levinas calls “destiny.”

The references to Poe, and to prose literature in general, are significant as they further bring home the fact that in “La Réalité et son ombre” Levinas seemingly abandons the path of eros. In the *Prison Notebooks* Levinas saw in prose a possibility of uniting art and alterity, but in 1948 it too is approached through “atmosphere” and “the meanwhile”, concepts that firmly belong to the path of sensation. Already in the *Prison Notebooks* Levinas sees the hope of future, the escape from destiny, as being tied to the question of alterity. *Eros* opens the dimension of time, because it is characterized by the distance between the lovers that can never be overcome; it is always “about to come” (*à venir*).<sup>76</sup> It is this promise of the future (*avenir*) that is denied by art, with its “à venir” being more comparable to that of “The Pit and the Pendulum”. As a result, art becomes in “La Réalité et son ombre” something potentially immoral. It ought to be highlighted that while all the building blocks are already in place in the *Prison Notebooks*, Levinas’s tone is not anywhere near as polemical as in 1948. The reason for this can only be speculated. Perhaps, as Richard A. Cohen states, Levinas’s

article is not so much an attack on art in general but rather a certain prevalent strand of “aestheticism”.<sup>77</sup>

I want to end on a short word on the role of criticism in “La Réalité et son ombre”. I argue that the question of criticism can also be tied to the dichotomy of sensation introduced in the *Prison Notebooks*. Criticism in 1948 plays the role of Hermes, functioning as a mediator between the two dimensions of sensation. The critic reaches towards the ambiguity inherent in art and brings it back to “the human world” (*le monde humain*).<sup>78</sup> The critic, as someone who says more than just repeating what the work has already said, can break the silence of art.<sup>79</sup> This is indeed what Levinas himself accomplishes for example in “L’Autre dans Proust”, which functions as exactly the kind of “philosophical criticism” that he calls for in the title to the last section of “La Réalité et son ombre”.

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued that Levinas art philosophy in the 1940’s is deeply indebted to his earlier ideas formulated in the *Prison Notebooks*. This is the case of “La Réalité et son ombre” – the “textus classicus” of Levinas’s aesthetics, to quote Cohen<sup>80</sup> – but also of his lesser-known articles from the same period. Although Levinas’s later writings on art show more the influence of post-captivity studies, I argue that the groundwork laid in the *Prison Notebooks* is still vitally important for the understanding of his aesthetics. This topic, however, lies outside the scope of this article.

The purpose of this text is not merely archaeological. I suggest that the importance of the *Prison Notebooks* is not limited merely to the realm of history of philosophy, although this alone is vast. The notebooks can also help elucidate the role that art and sensation plays in Levinas’s philosophy. Sensation is vitally important for Levinas’s early thought not the least because he approaches the question alterity through voluptuousness and sexuality. Being seems to be cleft in half on the primary level of sensation to sensation-*qua*-sense and sensation-*qua*-pure materiality. This can also help to explain the ambivalence in the way which Levinas approaches art: art and eros seem to share the common ground of sensuality but still in end up being incompatible. At least in the 1940’s, that is.

One topic present in the *Prison Notebooks* that I have so far left unmentioned concerns the issue of the extent of Levinas’s aesthetic theory. Levinas locates an essential dichotomy in language itself, between its materiality and its content, and in the fifth notebooks he seems to imply that this might possibly hold true in the case of philosophy, or even existence itself. He writes: “The last consequence

of my conception of aesthetics – metaphysics in the end an art, the meaning (*sens*) of existence is an art? Existence an art?”<sup>81</sup> Certainly, this is not a path that Levinas would later follow, but it does however prove the depth of the dichotomy in sensation that Levinas locates in being itself. This topic is something that ought to be picked up in later studies on Levinas’s philosophy of art.

## Notes

1. Levinas & Robbins, *Is it Righteous to Be?*, 41.
2. On the novel “Eros” see Nancy 2020; Nancy & Cohen-Levinas 2020; Davis 2018, 148–162. See also Nancy’s preface to the third tome of Levinas’s *Oeuvres* (Levinas, *Oeuvres III*, 9–30). For an account of Levinas’s literary ambitions in general, see Hand, “Levinas, Literature, and Philosophy”, 2019.
3. Hammerschlag, “Levinas’s Prison Notebooks.”, 28.
4. In Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 49.
5. Sarah Hammerschlag has noted how Levinas’s reading during his captivity was made possible by donations by the Red Cross. She also points out how censorship might have affected the selection. Certain authors, Jewish for example, were forbidden (Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets*, 200, note 35).
6. Davis, “Levinas and Film”, 517. Unfortunately, I have not been able to figure out exactly to which films Levinas refers. Perhaps the most enigmatic description is given in the second notebook. Levinas names Greta Garbo and the “camériste” Karl Freund, but also Erich von Stroheim “qui fait un film”. He writes of a “lyric” film six hours long, which makes one wonder whether he is referring to an existing movie at all. (Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 82).
7. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 102.
8. *Ibid.*, 82. “Dans leur étrangeté les choses se révèlent comme un mystère. C'est le charme du cinéma.”
9. *Ibid.*, 131. “Le son, la couleur, le mot recouvrent des objets. Le son comme bruit, la couleur comme recouvrant une surface, le mot comme <recélant?> un sens. Les sensations ont donc une signification objective. Mais dans l'art on peut dire que le premier mouvement consiste à détacher la sensation de ce sens objectif, de ce renvoi objectif.”

10. Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* 74/*Existence and Existents* 47. "Le mouvement de l'art consiste à quitter la perception pour réhabiliter la sensation, à détacher la qualité de ce renvoi à l'objet."
11. Levinas, "La Réalité et son ombre"<sup>774</sup>/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 3. "Le procédé le plus élémentaire de l'art consiste à substituer à l'objet son image. Image et non point concept."
12. Levinas in fact still speaks of "detachment" in relation to aesthetics in *Totalité et infini* (Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 203–4/*Totality and Infinity*, 187).
13. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 76. "Le féminin est autrui avant qu'autrui, soit une autre personne. Nouvelle voie vers l'aperception d'autrui."
14. *Ibid.*, 72. "L'histoire de la relation avec autrui". Here I, after Levinas, refer to the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu* as "Marcel."
15. On Bloy's relationship with Judaism, see Moore, "Philosemitism under a Darkening Sky", 271–5.
16. Hand "Salvation Through Literature", 58.
17. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 151.
18. Bierhanzl, "Ideology, Literature, and Philosophy", 210. On Bloy's role in Levinas's Prison Notebooks, see also Hand, "Salvation Through Literature", 57–60.
19. Levinas, *Le Temps et l'autre*, 82. "L'absence de toute fusion".
20. Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets*, 200, note 36.
21. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 74.
22. *Ibid.*, 71–2, 145. Levinas, *Noms Propres*, 121/*Proper Names*, 102.
23. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 195. "Eros à la base du social", "les choses à éclaircir".
24. *Ibid.*, 145.
25. Levinas, *Noms Propres*, 122/*Proper Names*, 103. "... relation directe avec ce qui se donne en se refusant, avec autrui en tant qu'un autrui, avec le mystère."
26. Cohen-Levinas, "The Literary Instant and the Condition of Being Hostage", 199.
27. Levinas & Robbins, *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 41.

28. Levinas, *Noms Propres* 123/*Proper Names*, 104. "...la lutte avec l'insaisissable".
29. Hammerschlag, "Levinas's Prison Notebooks", 30.
30. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 210/*Totality and Infinity*, 192. "... l'envers des manches d'une robe de grande dame comme ces coins sombres des cathédrales, cependant travaillés avec le même art que la façade."
31. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 210/*Totality and Infinity*, 193. "...dont l'essence est indifférence, froide splendeur et silence."
32. It is interesting to note that Proust's "reappearance" in the republication of "L'Autre dans Proust" as a part of *Noms Propres* (1976) coincides with a significant shift in Levinas's thinking in the late 1960's to early 1970's. The other is not approached as much through his/her presence and expression as in *Totalité et infini*. This, on the other hand, leaves room for rethinking the relationship of art and alterity: art can no longer be differentiated from the other merely due to the former being incapable of expressing itself in presence.
33. "Bifur" refers to "bifurcation" whereas "biffure" to "erasure", as Hand notes in his introduction to the article in *The Levinas Reader* (Levinas & Hand, *The Levinas Reader*, 144).
34. Levinas, "La Transcendance des mots", 1094/*The Levinas Reader*, 149. "L'expression comporte une impossibilité d'être en soi, de garder sa pensée 'pour soi' et, par conséquent une insuffisance de la position du sujet où le moi dispose d'un monde donné."
35. Ibid., 1094/149. "...ne se situe pas purement et simplement au sein de son propre spectacle".
36. Description of this difference that echoes the one given in "La Transcendance des mots" can be found in Levinas's 1977 article "Herméneutique et au-delà" (Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 81).
37. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 116). "L'expression de la pensée — est toujours autre chose que le contenu objectif de la pensée. Déjà par le simple fait de l'expression – mots - intervient tout l'être qui articule et tout le 'jeu' que comporte l'articulation - le 'pittoresque' du langage."
38. Ibid. "La dernière forme de ce jeu de la matière du langage c'est le poème avec le rythme et la rime."
39. Levinas refers to this genesis of poetry again in the fifth notebook. Ibid., 131-2.
40. Levinas, "La Transcendance des mots", 1090-1/*The Levinas Reader*, 145-6.
41. Ibid., 1095/149. "...la pensée pensante au contact même de la matière sensible des mots."

42. For the connection of Mallarmé's poetics to Levinas, see Bruns, "The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's Writings", 209.
43. Levinas, "La Transcendance des mots", 1093/*The Levinas Reader*, 147-8. "Le son est comme le débordement de la qualité sensible par elle-même".
44. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 145-6.
45. Ibid., 152. "Le son dans sa sonorité même."
46. Levinas, "La Transcendance des mots", 1093/*The Levinas Reader*, 148. "Les sons et les bruits de la nature sont des mots qui déçoivent. Entendre véritablement un son, c'est entendre un mot. Le son pur est verbe." Hand's choice to translate the word "déçoivent" as "failed" certainly makes the passage even more provocative.
47. Ibid., 1094/148. "Il arrache l'expérience à sa suffisance esthétique... le langage de la critique nous fait sortir de rêves – dont la langage artistique fait intégralement partie."
48. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 53, 59.
49. Levinas, "La Transcendance des mots", 1094/*The Levinas Reader*, 148; Levinas, "La Réalité et son ombre", 788/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 12–3.
50. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 139. "...celui qui par essence peut dire autre chose que {répéter} (*sic*) cette oeuvre même".
51. Levinas, "La Réalité et son ombre", 772/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 1–2.
52. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 142, my italics. "Dans ma philosophie, étude de la signification de la sensation : vision — lumière — raison ; ouïe voix — verbe ; toucher - caresse - amour ; goût (odorat) - manger - besoin. Et cependant à côté de tout cela demeure la sensation dans sa matérialité pure, objet de l'esthétique ; vision — couleur, ouïe - son, verbe - rythme, etc."
53. This idea is notably like the one expressed in *Autrement qu'être*, regarding the way in which the colour red is revealed in the verbliness of its being in art. In the painting the "the red reds" (*le rouge rougeoie*) (Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, 69/*Otherwise Than Being*, 38).
54. Levinas, *Le Temps et l'autre*, 79/*Time and the Other*, 86–7.
55. Levinas, "La Réalité et son ombre", 773/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 3. "Événement ontologique totalement indépendant".

56. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 131.

57. Levinas, “La Réalité et son ombre”, 774/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 3.

58. Ibid., 777/5–6. It merits questioning how many phenomenologists in actuality treat images as “windows” as Levinas claims. This issue cannot, however, be tackled here.

59. Sartre, *L’Imaginaire*, 51–2. For the sake of fairness, it ought to be mentioned that this brief description of Sartre’s theory of images leaves out many of its important aspects. Basil Vassilicos has analysed the possible influence of Sartre’s *L’imaginaire* on the theory of images presented in “La Réalité et son ombre” in “The Time of Images and Images of Time” (2003).

60. Levinas, “La Réalité et son ombre”, 778/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 6. “Il y a donc dans cette personne, cette chose une dualité, une dualité dans son être. Elle est ce qu’elle est et elle est étrangère à elle-même et il y a un rapport entre ces deux moments. Nous dirons que la chose est elle-même et est son image. Et que ce rapport entre la chose et son image est la ressemblance.”

61. Ibid., 779/7. “... Taches de couleur, morceaux de marbre ou de bronze.”

62. Ibid., 777/5.

63. Ibid., 780/7. “...méconnaît la simultanéité de la vérité et l’image.”

64. Ibid., 774–5/3–4.

65. Ibid., 776/4. “Le son est la qualité la plus détachée de l’objet.”

66. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 152. “La cloche qui crève le silence et qui remplit l’espace de quelque chose qui vient de là-bas.”

67. Levinas, “La Réalité et son ombre”, 780/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 7.

68. Ibid., 786/11. “... l’éternelle durée de l’intervalle.”

69. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 163. “La description du chat – du paysage – Et surtout le temps infini de l’approche de l’imminent qu’on ne peut pas fuir.”

70. Levinas, “La Réalité et son ombre”, 786/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 11. “Intervalle vide où doivent se trouver les personnages de certains contes d’Edgar Poe auxquels le menace apparaît dans son approche, aucun geste n’étant possible pour se soustraire à cette approche, mais cette approche elle-même ne pouvant jamais finir.”

71. Ibid., 785/10. “L’obscurité même de l’image”.

72. Levinas himself also refers to this story in his *Prison Notebooks*. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 163.
73. Ibid., "... certains aspects immédiats de la perception".
74. Levinas, "La Réalité et son ombre", 786/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 11.
75. Ibid., 782/9. "...éternellement Laocoon sera pris dans l'étreinte des serpents, éternellement la Joconde sourira."
76. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 120.
77. Cohen, "Levinas on Art and Aestheticism", 168.
78. Levinas, "La Réalité et son ombre", 788/*Collected Philosophical Papers*, 12.
79. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 139.
80. Cohen, "Levinas on Art and Aestheticism", 152.
81. Levinas, *Oeuvres I*, 132. "La dernière conséquence de ma conception esthétique – la métaphysique est en fin de compte un art, le sens de l'existence est un art? - l'existence un art?"

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