



Difference and the Other: Considerations on Ethics and Politics in the Context of the Arts

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This chapter proposes an interpretation of ethics and politics based on an intersection of the notions of difference and otherness. Assuming that the subject is always constituted intersubjectively—that is, through the other—authors such as Sartre and Levinas established a necessary relationship between subjectivity, responsibility, and ethics. On the other hand, the subject is also, by definition, a performative agent, an actor, and this phenomenological dimension tends to emancipate the subject from the seriousness of the real, as well as from the wide (ethical) contracts of social reality. This leads to tension between two distinct ways of articulating subjectivity and ethics: on the one hand, the perspective that ethics emerges along with subjectivity; on the other, the perspective that the subject can emancipate himself from ethics (or even precede it), even if he still depends, for his own constitution, on a subjective otherness, on an intersubjectivity.

This does not mean that there cannot be realism within the scope of a subjectivity that has escaped ethics. In the context of the arts, the ethical and aesthetic dimensions, although essentially distinct, both feed off the same interplay between subjectivity and realism, even though the realistic character of aesthetic authenticity (which lives on singularities) is very different from the realistic character of ethics (which moves towards consensus and universality).

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The aesthetic experience expressed in art makes use of difference and dissent (understood here in the sense proposed by Jacques Rancière), but this political dimension should not be confused with the ethical dimension that governs art lobbies.

THE INTERSUBJECTIVE CONDITION OF SUBJECTIVITY

The implication of the notion of difference in the developments of phenomenology contributed decisively to the exhaustion of metaphysics and its classical dualities. Such dualities—which Derrida always accused of binarism and the respective propensity to value one of the poles to the detriment of the other¹—weakened as the mechanisms of identity became more diffuse and permeable and the subject was lost as an aprioristic origin. Hermeneutic phenomenology, in its various developments that extended to structural anthropology and, later, to post-structuralism, tends to reject a clear distinction between interiority and exteriority, between sensible and intelligible or between experience and signification. Since Saussure, the structuralist method highlights the relational nature of the elements that constitute linguistic or cultural systems, and these dynamics precede the subjects, who were gradually denied any special status.

Against the classic assertion of the primacy of the subject, whether in its Cartesian-Kantian or Hegelian version, the structuralists began to describe him as the product of pragmatic relations and language games that form structures or systems which are transversal to the notion of interiority (in the Cartesian sense) or of self-knowledge (in the Hegelian sense). Post-structuralism further emphasized this diachronic and differential character of the subject, assuming it “in all its historical and cultural complexity—a ‘decentered’ subject dependent on the linguistic system, a subject discursively constituted and positioned at the intersection between libidinal forces and sociocultural practices” (Peters 2000, 33). If structuralism still trusted in the possibility of closed structures and in the dialectical evolution of systems, post-structuralist thought rejects any hope of completion or progress, celebrating the “‘game of difference’ against the ‘work of dialectics’” (Peters 2000, 33).²

In these terms, subjects no longer speak, they are spoken. They no longer place themselves as an origin, but as a result of processes that involve a plurality of sources (the context, the semiolinguistic system, the media, the sociocultural framework, the history of the experience, the drives and traumas of the

¹ In Michael Peters’ description, Derrida’s thought “questions the assumptions that govern binary thinking, demonstrating how binary oppositions always sustain a hierarchy or an economy of value that operates by subordinating one of the terms of the binary opposition to the other” (Peters 2000, 32).

² At its most radical, post-structuralism (or, more generally, postmodern thought) has often been accused of nihilism and anti-humanism, being connoted with a certain degeneracy of philosophy. Several authors point out the dangers and contradictions that are inherent to it. For example, as Peters further notes, “postmodernism asserts the ‘death of the subject’ precisely when, historically, the ‘others’ of the hegemonic Western subject (women, ethnic groups, gays, etc.) began to have a voice and to claim their place as historical subjects” (Peters 2000, 77).

unconscious, etc.). There is talk of the dilution or even death of the subject. Consciousness is no longer primarily self-consciousness, but an intentional relationship with the exteriority, and this intentionality does not necessarily claim a subject, but only a hermeneutic agency. Even if the subject may still be found in the meanders of discursiveness, he will no longer be able to assume a unifying role in the discourse, instead being dictated by the discursive modality or by the discourse itself. As Ricoeur says: "Hermeneutics invites us to make subjectivity the last, and not the first, category of a theory of understanding. Subjectivity must be lost as an origin, if it is to be rediscovered in a more modest role than that of the radical origin" (Ricoeur 1986, 63). If the subject is lost as an origin, then nothing guarantees that he will be recovered. At the limit, he becomes an unnecessary element in the discursive process, and the eventual effect of "subjectivation" will be, in these terms, only an optional mode of discursive vocation, analyzable in the light of hermeneutic phenomenology.

The decisive attack for the deconstruction of the subject through the questioning of difference is related to the awareness of the other subject as absolute alterity. Husserl himself sensed this difficulty within the scope of his phenomenology founded on the egological or monadological principle of the subject. More than the basic intentional nature of all phenomenological experience (which projects the self to the outside, decentering it), it is the intentionality of the other subject that most deeply injures Husserlian's principle of subjectivity. In Ricoeur's description: "The apparently insoluble paradox is this: on the one hand, the reduction of all meaning to the intentional life of the concrete ego implies that the other is constituted 'in me' and 'from me'; on the other hand, phenomenology must account for the originality of the other's experience precisely as the experience of another different from me" (Ricoeur 1986, 77). And he adds: "Moreover, it is on the basis of this intersubjectivity that a 'common' nature and a 'common' cultural world are constituted" (1986, 77).

This paradox can be solved without violating the monadological condition if the subject is understood as a shared entity, a singularity that is constructed intersubjectively, even in the absence of a real interlocutor or the social other. The correlates of subjectivity are sustained by difference itself. The subject is projected to the outside right from the beginning and does not pre-exist outside of this projection—it is a deferral of oneself from oneself. It takes two subjects to make a subject. When one of them fails, the subject as a whole fails. Strictly speaking, it is not exactly a mirroring or self-awareness, but a projection that does not necessarily respect individuality and identity. The watchword is *otherness*. And the paradox is avoided because the unfolding of the subject still happens in a monadological space, like a schizophrenia, even before any interpersonal or interlocutory circumstances.

FOR AN ONTOLOGY OF THE ACTOR

The consciousness becomes subjective through an authorial projection: the hermeneutic agent (who is not yet a subject) attributes authorship to something (for example, a work with a signature, a footprint, a rumor, a gesture)

and, in that same attribution (which may be mistaken), he begins to read through the author's eyes, projects itself into him. The author, by definition, is irremediably absent—which is why we speak here of authorship instead of locution, enunciation, emission, etc.—but it is that absence that triggers the process of subjectivation on the part of the interpreter. It's a co-authorship.

Although the author's intention is always a little out of reach, it is precisely this deferral that feeds the interpretative effort. The hermeneutic agent becomes a co-author by assuming an author. Subjectivation is a bias of perspective to see through the eyes of the other, to take the place of the other, even when the other does not really exist. It is in these terms that the subject is made intersubjectively, however lonely the empirical circumstances may be. It is a self-generative process: the agent becomes a subject by acting in the place of the subject, on behalf of the other, in co-authorship, like an actor who assumes a role. It is the regime of performativity.

This mechanism is especially noticeable in certain spheres of human culture, such as religion, idolatry, or art. But subjectivation can take place wherever there is a perception of authorship, that is, wherever there is a suspicion of an artist, a conspirator, a demiurge—someone absent, fundamentally absent, who pulls the strings; and also through the avatar, the puppet or the toy, where there are also missing subjects that need to be filled in.

By subtracting authorship (the subjective other), the discourse will not necessarily be suspended, but it will no longer be subjective. There will still be hermeneutic agency, discursive becoming, a reading of the exteriority, an intentionality, but the result will be an objective landscape. Instead of the (co-authorial) reading of the authorial intention, there will only be an (objective) reading of the real itself, which is orphan; instead of expression, impression; instead of performativity, informativity; instead of connotation, denotation; instead of the narrative sense, the literal sense.

Literal or informative discourse aims at the real, it is an objectivation, it establishes objects and objectives in the world. Subjectivation, on the contrary, implies an escape from the real; the performative space is always the site of an unreality. This does not mean that only then, in performance, in the pursuit of the author, a teleology is established. It is wrong to think that "the narrative, unlike the real, has to make sense". The real also makes sense, there is also purpose in the literal and objective experience, whose attractor is the real itself. Subjectivity, as a phenomenological process, does not introduce teleology, but establishes a new teleological attractor: the author. When discourse deviates from objectivity (focused on the real) to subjectivity (focused on the author), it triggers a fundamentally different teleology, a new modality of sense, and this discursive path consists of an acting, that is, dictates the appearance of the *actor* (another way of describing co-authorial disposition).

This foray into the performative dimension, which is characteristically human, appears to be implied in art and aesthetic fruition, but it still does not serve us as a sufficient condition for a comprehensive description of *Aisthesis* (although we consider it to be a necessary condition). The aesthetic experience

calls for a departure from the literality of the real, implies a connection with unreality, but also implies a return to the real. It is not simply a question of seeing through the form (as happens in performativity, in the narrative sense, in the connotation in general), but it is also not enough to follow the form in its literal, informative, denotative, direct sense.³ The artwork imposes an extrapolation, a deviation beyond itself, an opening or performativity; and, at the same time, it also refers to itself, to its closure, because it fully carries its own authorial purpose.⁴

Once again, it is the concept of difference that offers us the synthesis of this processual arc: in the aesthetic experience, the real cannot collapse on itself, cannot be literalized; a minimum distance between the real and the return to the real is necessary. And the narrowing of this distance in art has a double effect: on the one hand, it tends to make the authenticity of the work more vibrant, it enhances its contingency, its aesthetic realism; on the other hand, it makes the very operation of difference more evident, allowing it to be highlighted as the pure interval that separates the real from itself.

The author is the one who sustains this gap and makes it possible to postpone the ever-imminent reduction of aesthetic experience to literal experience. Without authorship, the fracture or fold within the real would not open, nor would it make sense to speak of aesthetic authenticity. The purpose of the work of art is, in a way, to let the real be seen from a distance in order to make it different from itself, although still entirely real. In the artwork, as such, there is always an estrangement that prevents the real from stabilizing in its own literalness.

But the phenomenology of the work of art is not completed with the clarification of this particular tension between the real and authorship. Since the authorship is the engine of subjectivation, and because there are no subjects without intersubjectivity, it will still be necessary to introduce a third element: the co-author, the intersubjective correlate of the author. Intersubjectivity is the way to describe the ontological difference that inevitably separates the

³ Denotation also implies a mediation, a semiological process that relates a signifier with the respective meaning. As for the connotation, it introduces a double mediation by putting this denotative layer in perspective, transcending its literality. Nevertheless, for greater simplicity in exposing our argument, we here assume the denotation as “direct”, as opposed to the connotation. For a deeper understanding of the “double mediation” typical of connotation and performative discourses, cf. Martins (2016), chapters 7 and 8.

⁴ This paradoxical character of the artistic work—which always opens back into itself, in a kind of convergence between *Aisthesis* and *Poiesis*—is recurrent in the overwhelming majority of modern theories of art. Luigi Pareyson, for example, begins by considering that human activity always has a formative component: “Every human operation is always either speculative or practical or formative, but, whatever its specification, it is always thought, morality and formativity at the same time” (Pareyson 1993, 24). And he continues: “If every operation is always formative, in the sense of not being itself without formation—and one cannot think or act unless forming—the artistic operation is formation in the sense of intentionally proposing to form, and in the artwork, acting and thought intervene exclusively to enable it to be exclusively formativity. (...) Forming for the sake of forming, forming pursuing only the form itself: art is pure formativeness” (Pareyson 1993, 26).

subject from himself. And, in this difference, not only is the other of subjectivity always absent (author), but the movement to fill in subjectivity feeds on this same absence, as co-authorship.

Thus, a triangular scheme is formed that involves the real, the author and the co-author. These are the necessary elements for the integration of both fundamental dimensions of the phenomenological mechanism: objectivity (on the side of the real) and subjectivity (on the side of the author/co-author pair). In aesthetic fruition, these dimensions are intimately involved and relate to each other in a particular way, irreducible to informativeness (which ignores authorship), to performativity (which suspends the real), or even to other discourses that, like aesthetics, depend ontologically on a dialogue between objectivity and subjectivity, such as ethics.

RESPONSIBILITY ACCORDING TO SARTRE

The actor, in the phenomenological sense that we grant him here, provides a participatory character to experience. Subjectivity is participation, acting. We become subjects as we assume a (performative) role and responsibility. Without the subject there can be no responsibility. This is perhaps why we tend not to acknowledge responsibility in animals, although their behaviors are fully effective for survival as individuals or as elements of a group. It is not through the behavioral efficiency that the human stands out, not even through the attribute of consciousness, but rather through the attribute of subjectivity, on which all his performative richness is based.

The notion of *actor* well expresses the character of responsibility implied in the mechanism of phenomenological constitution of the subjects. In subjectivation, I follow someone's (the author's) footprints, but, strictly speaking, I am responsible for the footprints because the author remains inaccessible. Only in co-authorship, in performative action, do footprints truly become marks of subjects, subjective traits. It is about stepping into the footprints to make them exist. Responsibility takes place in a movement of restitution, in the commitment to assume a role. Here is the very mechanism of subjectivity. It is as if, as subjects, we were always a little behind our own steps. But this deferment between the intentionality of the steps and the steps themselves does not deprive us of the responsibility of taking them in someone's name (for example, in the name of God or in the name of a deferred image of ourselves). There are objective purposes and subjective purposes, and the latter always constitute the demand for an authorial intention.⁵

The notion of responsibility is often associated with the ethical dimension. In Sartre, for example, the human is responsible insofar as he is free, and he is free insofar as he is a subject. However, given that subjectivity takes place intersubjectively, then responsibility is not an individual condition, but a shared one. In his words: "When we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not

⁵ A portion of this paragraph's content was originally included in Martins (2023), 146.

mean that man is responsible for his strict individuality, but that he is responsible for all men" (Sartre 1973, 12). It is this extrapolation of responsibility beyond individuality that allows Sartre to describe existentialism as a humanism: "What we choose is always the good, and nothing can be good for us without it being good for everyone" (Sartre 1973, 13). Although Sartre admits that "the starting point is the subjectivity of the individual" (Sartre 1973, 21), understanding this subjectivity in the Cartesian sense, he adds that "it is not a strictly individual subjectivity, because we demonstrated that in the *cogito* we discover not only ourselves, but also others. By the *cogito*, contrary to Descartes' philosophy, contrary to Kant's philosophy, we reach ourselves in the face of the other, and the other is as certain for us as we are" (Sartre 1973, 21–22).

One could say that it is possible to deduce the condition of human responsibility without resorting to intersubjectivity, starting directly from Sartre's own maxim about the precedence of existence over essence: "Man is nothing more than what he does. Such is the first principle of existentialism. This is also what is called subjectivity (...). Man is, first of all, a project that is lived subjectively, instead of being a cream, something rotten or a cauliflower (...). If existence truly precedes essence, man is responsible for what he is" (Sartre 1973, 12). Here, the responsibility stems directly from the lack of an *a priori* essence of man. Responsibility is the direct consequence of the freedom condition of the subject who intends to build his own essence. If existence precedes essence, then, according to Sartre, "[there is] no given and immutable human nature; in other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom. (...) Man is condemned to be free. Condemned because he did not create himself; and yet free because, once released into the world, he is responsible for whatever he does" (Sartre 1973, 12). In these terms, responsibility is the correlate of freedom that assists the subject as a being in the world, even before his encounter with other men. The subject is born directly from the condition of loss that is his orphan existence, without a project. And, from there, he mobilizes himself in acts of overcoming.

However, this overcoming will only be possible if subjectivity is intersubjectivity, even in the mind of Robinson Crusoe or the loneliest of men. Sartre's existentialist humanism presupposes that "man is not closed in on himself, but is always present in a human universe" (Sartre 1973, 27). It is through otherness, understood generically as the human world, that the subject departs from himself in an effort of overcoming: "Man is constantly outside of himself, it is by projecting himself and losing himself outside himself that he makes man exist, and, on the other hand, it is by pursuing transcendent ends that he can exist (...). He lives in the heart, in the center of this overcoming" (Sartre 1973, 27). On the one hand, man is solely responsible for what he makes of himself, he is fundamentally alone; on the other hand, what he does of himself, he does it in the name of all men (or, at least, in the name of someone, of the other). For Sartre, existentialism is humanist in two senses: "because we remind man that there is no other legislator besides himself, and that it is in abandonment that he will decide for himself; and because we show that this is not decided by

turning to oneself, but that it is always looking outside of oneself for an end—which is such liberation, such particular fulfillment—that man will fulfill himself precisely as a human being” (Sartre 1973, 27).

RESPONSIBILITY ACCORDING TO LEVINAS

Emmanuel Levinas is another philosopher who related responsibility to the ethical dimension, also locating the origin of that relationship in subjectivity. In his words: “I speak of responsibility as the essential, original, fundamental structure of subjectivity. It is in ethical terms that I describe subjectivity. Ethics, here, does not appear as a supplement to a previous existential base; it is in ethics, understood as responsibility, that the very knot of the subjective is formed” (Levinas 2010, 79). For Levinas, responsibility is born in the confrontation with the other as absolute otherness: “Responsibility means to be by the other” (Levinas 2010, 80).

But this confrontation with the other, which also dictates subjectivity, cannot be confused with the simple cognitive relationship with exteriority. The opening to the outside world, by itself, does not constitute a discovery of the other; it is still immanence, sameness. According to Levinas, “immanence is the world, our world, the world that is given to us and where the other is nothing more than the same” (Levinas 1991, 29). Levinas thus describes the domain of knowledge as a vast domain, but still prior to the possibility of subjective alterity, responsibility or ethics: “Knowledge is a relationship between the Self and the Other, where the Other is reduced to the Self and stripped of its alienity, where thought focus on the other, but where the other is no longer other as such, he is already part of myself, already mine” (Levinas 2010, 14).

In these terms, no matter how rich is the knowledge acquired about the world, it does not necessarily demarcate itself from immanence, it is just an extension of being, its continuity, without transcendence: “The most audacious and distant knowledge does not put us in communion with the truly other; it does not replace sociality; it is still and always a solitude” (Levinas 1991, 46). Not even the communication of knowledge (between different individuals) is enough to mark the true confrontation with the other. Levinas says: “My effort consists in demonstrating that knowledge is, in reality, an immanence, and that there is no disruption in the isolation of being in knowledge; that, on the other hand, in the communication of knowledge, we find ourselves beside the other, and not confronted with him, not in the verticality of the face-to-face” (Levinas 1991, 43).

In order to establish a transcendent relationship with the other, it will then be necessary to access a different phenomenological plane. Levinas speaks of “sociality” to refer to the true face-to-face with the other, a relationship that cannot be reduced to mere social interaction or the transmission of knowledge or the very act of meeting the social other. On the contrary, it is a relationship of transcendence where knowledge is no longer possible, giving rise to a kind of abyss or enigma that Levinas describes through the concept of *face*: “The

face is not 'seen'. It is what cannot be transformed into a content that our thought would embrace; it is the uncontainable, it takes us beyond" (Levinas 1991, 70).

The face must therefore not be confused with its worldly manifestation. In sociality, it is not a question of apprehending a physical face, but of assuming the transcendence of the other. Levinas says that "the best way to find someone else is to not even pay attention to the color of their eyes! When observing the color of the eyes, one is not in a social relationship with the other. The relationship with the face can undoubtedly be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to it" (Levinas 1991, 69).

It is before the face's potency, that is, in the transcendent confrontation with the other, that the subject is born. Subjectivity finds its phenomenological genesis in intersubjectivity. That is why, for Levinas, the subject is born already on an ethical level: "Responsibility is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if it already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not by itself: it is, once again, initially by the other" (Levinas 1991, 80).

In these terms, where there is the other and being in front of the other, there is ethics. If there is intersubjectivity (that is, subjectivity), there will be responsibility. In Levinas, as in Sartre, subjectivity, responsibility and ethics are inseparable concepts. Subjectivity is one's own responsibility for the other, by the other. According to Levinas: "Subjectivity, by constituting itself in the very movement in which one is responsible for the other, goes as far as replacing oneself with the other. (...) Subjectivity, as such, is initially hostage" (Levinas 1991, 83). It takes a projection of the subject outside of himself—to a transcendent, always intangible plane, where the other, the face, the human world inhabits—so that the subject can realize himself as such. The subject is always made in a movement of supplementation of the other.

THE RESPONSIBILITY PRIOR TO ETHICS

The subjective process, understood in this way, bears a clear resemblance to what we describe as performativity. In performance, the actor acts on behalf of an absent author, assuming the co-authorial commitment that consists of realizing the authorial intention. The subject is animated from the outside, in the same way that the puppet (the actor) is animated by invisible threads (the authorial intention). The actor is always participatory (as a co-author) but never completely autonomous. Co-authorship always requires authorship. On the other hand, during this co-authorship commitment, the author never appears on stage and the threads remain invisible. Ultimately, it is the puppet's own animism that makes the puppeteer exist, projecting him as a transcendent or hidden author behind the scenes. Responsibility stems directly from the participatory character of co-authorship, which is implied in all performativity, even in the absence of actual authors to justify it. In this sense, responsibility is phenomenologically correlated to the actor and the performativity, even before relating to ethics. We place responsibility in the performative act, in the acting,

in the co-authorial participation that requires the “face” of the other (the author).

But we must also consider that performativity tends, by definition, to deviate from the real. In these terms, responsibility is originally inconsequential, it operates in fictional, performative worlds, it is born from the very escape from the sovereignty of the real. Performative action is responsible insofar as it demarcates itself from the real and its guidelines, committing itself to co-authorship. Performativity is freedom in the strongest sense of the word; not the nihilistic freedom of existentialism, but a freedom that generates subjective worlds, where agents become responsible because they are no longer conditioned by the objectivity of the real, but instead enact their own rules.

Ethics, by contrast, is serious: it always presupposes some kind of realism or functionalism. But if so, then responsibility relates to performativity without waiting for the seriousness of ethics. For there to be an ethical dimension, it is necessary to add to responsibility the weight of empirical, social, and historical circumstances. Ethics adds consequence to performativity. It is in the return to reality—that is, in the implication of an epistemic realism—that the ethical dimension is insinuated and that the work of art can claim its *seriousness*.⁶ Within this realist movement that remains committed to a performative standpoint, ethics seems to approach aesthetics: both discursive dimensions are founded on performativity (that is, on the constitution of a subject who is always a reflection of the other), and both obey to a tensional process that simultaneously places them in the performative standpoint and distances them from it. But, while aesthetics is a *return to the real* (which is manifold, or rather, particular in each one of us), ethics is a *return to reality* (which aims to be universal and well anchored, even when it intends to respect practical differences). It is to the extent that ethics aspires to universality that it is distinguished from the aesthetic dimension.

Ethics transcends phenomenology by referring to a functionalism anchored in social reality. In this sense, the ethical discussion is, in nature, epistemological rather than phenomenological. It concerns interpersonality more than intersubjectivity. Despite its genesis in the confrontation with the subjective other, ethics seeks to reify this phenomenological relationship and define the principles of its applicability in the contexts of human reality. In other words, ethics invokes the epistemic seriousness of reality (the empirical plane shared by

⁶We use the term *seriousness* here not only to indicate the general link to realism, but also, more specifically, as a synonym for *ethical value*. There is also an aesthetic value, but this is determined by other specific valences of the poetic work, namely: *persistence*, *contingency* (which also appeals to realism) and *difference* (cf. Martins 2018, 2020, 2023). Both axiological orders—ethical and aesthetic—cohabit in the artwork, contributing to its overall effectiveness in the cultural and institutional context of art. But even if ethical value can become the dominant engine for the artistic success of a given work of art (for example, by virtue of the social relevance of the theme addressed in that work), the mechanisms that confer this value should not be confused with the properly aesthetic mechanisms. *Aisthesis*, by itself, has no ethical relevance, it is fundamentally “disinterested” (in the Kantian sense).

all), and not just the phenomenological “seriousness” of the real (the literal sense).

In fact, it is convenient not to confuse the *real* (phenomenological) with *reality* (epistemological). In the real we are the center of our world. Each one of us is the persistent axis of all the phenomena that fill the objective experience and the construction of a particular world. But this axis should not be confused with the birth of a subjectivity: it is just the center of perspective from which objects and behaviors are perceived (a bit like in the cybernetic principle described by Norbert Wiener, namely his understanding of the machines feedback processes). The relationship that this axis establishes with the environment produces an objective world, what we call the real. At this level, we can already acknowledge the existence of a conscience, but not a subjective conscience. There is still no subject. And the real that is built around this primordial axis must not be confused with reality because the axis will be different from the point of view of each conscience. The real is phenomenological, reality is epistemological. The discourse of the real is nothing more than a literal, informative, objective discourse, prior to epistemological agreement, that is, still prior to the effort of discursive setting in terms of facts, which always requires a broad consensus in its aspiration to universality.

The experience of the real has to be continually resolved, it is in permanent completion or closure, and, in this sense, it is *unbearable*, for better or worse. The real compels to reaction. But this seriousness is not yet a responsibility. We can only be responsible for the other, on behalf of the other, within performativity. The real, by itself, does not claim subjects that carry performance or “free will”. Objectivity, by itself, is not yet displaced from itself and does not even allow us to speak of authenticity, either through art or science. Ultimately, the dimension of the real precedes man’s epistemological drive. The real is, first of all, literal sense, information. We can understand the informative discourse as the most primordial of the discursive modes, to the point of not even deserving a properly anthropological status (animals also process and share information). Informative orientation precedes epistemological awareness (which is a correlate of *technique*), but it also precedes performativity (which is a correlate of *intersubjectivity*).

Before the prosthesis and the other, there was only literal sense, like the strategic worldview of the animal that continuously collects and processes information from the environment to behave appropriately in that environment. As for the episteme and the performativity, they emerged later, and at the same time, from a common inheritance—the advent of the subject—but pointing in radically opposite directions: the concerted struggle against subjectivity in the case of epistemology and the nurturing of subjectivity in the case of performativity. Despite the tension that thus emerges between both emerging trends, they are not dissociable. They appear as the two sides of the same coin, which here serves as a perfect metaphor: heads on one side (subjectivation, performance), tails on the other (the episteme, the technical prosthesis).

Together, both trends emerge from a common anthropological drive that can be generically designated as *techné*.

In these terms, the epistemological discourse focuses on showing that, although we are the center of our world, we are not the center of the world. Here is the difference between the *real* (which is particular) and *reality* (which is universal). As for the performative discourse, it shows that we can escape the original center, we can move to other centers and experience them. In the case of epistemology, the decentering produces universality. In the case of performativity, decentering produces subjectivity.

In turn, performativity offers protection: the security of navigating through worlds that cannot literally affect us. This is also the space where we become truly free and responsible because such invented worlds have no other basis than the one that we decide to attribute to them. In an almost paradoxical way, the actor is simultaneously responsible (by acting on behalf of the author) and emancipated from the seriousness of realism (by colluding with the unreality that produces performative worlds).

Furthermore, the actor, as an agent of performativity, as a subject, is also emancipated from reality, and not just from the real. It constitutes the very antithesis of reality, whose epistemological discourse is constructed precisely in the struggle against subjectivity. The actor projects himself to the other side of a fourth wall that not only separates him from the real but opposes him to reality. It is as such that he can assume his responsibility and his freedom as a subject.

One could object that performativity, by moving us away from the real and by opposing reality, also frees us from the burden of responsibility that these planes of experience seem to oblige. In fact, realism imposes seriousness and pragmatism: within it, life is homeless, orphaned, and it is then necessary to react, sometimes even out of survival imperatives. In the real one *literally* dies and in the reality one *actually* dies. But the origin of responsibility does not lie in realism. From the outset, responsibility calls for a prior distancing in relation to the literality of the real, demands a subjective perspective, summons the other.

This does not mean that responsibility is limited to the performative environment, as opposed to realism. From the standpoint of performativity, without leaving it, the discourse can still be redirected to the real (in phenomenological terms, as in the aesthetic discourse) or to reality (in epistemological terms, as in the scientific discourse or in ethics) and these movements of return to realism do not necessarily imply a departure from responsibility. It is only important to retain the following: responsibility is not originally realistic or pragmatic; it always depends on the constitution of a subjectivity, but the original condition of the subject is equivalent with that of the actor, that is, it just implies performativity.

On the other hand, responsibility is also not something that should be unilaterally attributed to the author, as seems to happen in the phenomenon of faith, understood in a broad sense (for example, when one says that he entrusted

his destiny to the gods). The author is always absent, he doesn't really speak, he must be given a voice. And responsibility is born precisely in the co-authorial movement that restores that voice, emulating it. We act on behalf of the other, we perform, and thus we become subjects. The responsibility is perpetrated by the actor (or co-author), through his liberation from the real, that is, through the freedom of his discursive paths detached from the real, always in the name of the other, in the shoes of the other. Responsibility is established when realism no longer commands. It is true that we attribute responsibility to the author, but the author is absent, and it is necessary to restore his intention by assuming that same responsibility in acting. It is the actor who executes the performance.

DIFFERENCE AND POLITICAL DISSENT

What is thus proposed here is the emancipation of subjectivity, its detachment from ethics. The subject's responsibility relates to freedom, but this (performative) freedom is not yet constrained by social pragmatics or by the contracts that are established for the common good. Responsibility is not originally dependent on reality, on the contrary: by being linked to a fundamental principle of freedom, responsibility is the assertion of a singular, dissonant voice, contrary to the imposed order. Responsibility is, by definition, subversive, constituting the phenomenological foundation of politics itself, of man as a political animal. Politics (not to be confused with ethics) is the very voice of difference—or, as Rancière calls it, of *dissent*. Responsibility precedes ethics, but it is fundamentally political.

While ethics is related to the constitution of a social order, of a "police," managing the consensus and stability of the communities, politics is always heterogeneous, unstable, it is "an operator of declassification, a power to undo the police structure who puts bodies in their place" (Rancière 2006, 378). It is true that the political impulse also materializes in concrete ideals and social movements. In this sense, politics is always on the way to being dispersed when assimilated by the ethical body of society. As Rancière points out, "political subjects do not exist as stable entities. They exist as subjects in action, as punctual and local capacities to construct, in their virtual universality, those controversial worlds that undo the police order. Therefore, they are always precarious, always susceptible to being confused again with simple parts of the social body that only ask for their part to be optimized. If politics is a singular deviation from the 'normal' course of domination, this means that it is always threatened with dissipation" (Rancière 2006, 378).

The political voice only exists in the form of dissent and is annulled as soon as it settles in the social body, because, in this sedimentation, dissent has already become consensus—and consensus, according to Rancière, "is nothing more than the suppression of politics" (Rancière 2006, 379). Unlike ethics, which aspires to order and universality and is reflected in the very stability of the social body managed by consensus, politics remains on the sidelines, on the very

periphery of the sensitive world that constitutes the common order. Quoting Rancière: “Political subjects in general only exist because of their distinction in relation to any social group, any part of society or function of the social body. What constitutes them is the dispute itself. Political subjects are forces of enunciation and dispute that are inscribed as something more, something superimposed, in relation to any composition of the social body” (Rancière 2006, 377). In this sense, political dissent is always the assertion of a singular voice—that is, dissonant voice—by those who have no voice in social consultation. It is, above all, the manifestation of difference, deviation, subversion, on the margins of the domination schemes or the prevailing order.

This operation of difference is always implied in the performative work of the subject who takes responsibility for his own performance. Difference supports the mechanism of responsibility, the participatory character of subjectivity, the co-authorship, the subject’s own impulse to have a voice. But we are no longer referring here to an ethical responsibility in the sense of a community where, according to Plato, each man should play a specific role, contributing to the social order. For Plato, man became virtuous as he was faithful to his specific place in society; it was not for him to assume different roles or imitate others or deviate from his ethical purpose in the structure of the state. Hence the danger of the poets, who threatened to distort this order. The poets should “be banished from the republic, wherein identity is a matter of pure, ideal, unambiguous forms, and where men are to be totally and strategically socialized” (Diamond 1982, 860). In Plato’s eyes, since the poet was subversive, he became, at the very least, superfluous. Furthermore, by asserting his own individuality and the value of sensitive experience (also singular), the poet distanced himself not only from the State order, but also from the conceptual order of metaphysical forms, considered immutable and universal.

It is not in this Platonic sense that we adopt here the notion of responsibility, quite the contrary. It is not a question of relating responsibility to an ethical condition drawn from the social order, but of relating it to a political attitude. And this implies a radical inversion of the concept. According to Rancière, after the ethical regime of art, and after the representational regime that followed, we are now in a historical stage in which responsibility, understood in its political sense, was finally granted to the artist (Rancière 2009). In the aesthetic regime of art, at the height of its autonomy within culture, art began to openly dedicate itself to subversion and difference, becoming “the social arena for the rituals of resistance,” which “are, perforce, political” (Diamond 1982, 876).

ETHICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF ART

This political incursion should not be understood only as a preliminary stage in the eventual path towards an ethical function of the work of art. The political aspect of art—the poetic appropriation of difference—is fundamentally different from its ethical dimension. It is true that ethics is also present in works of art, contributing greatly to their value. Often, the ethical relevance of a given

work will override its aesthetic value, becoming dominant for the global acceptance of the work in the field of art and culture. And it is also true that ethical structures can be formed from the sedimentation of political impulses or ideals. But the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of art, even cohabiting within the same work of art, are not to be confused with each other. The aesthetic experience, by itself, does not claim ethics. It is possible to aesthetically enjoy a work of art without clearly paying attention to its ethical dimension.

In any case, even if the work is disconnected from ethical concerns, it will nonetheless be essentially political in its aesthetic nature. It can be said that, in the aesthetic regime, art is always politicized. In phenomenological terms, the political determination of the work of art, of any work, belongs to its aesthetic dimension, regardless of ethical value. This political determination relates, above all, to the concept of difference, and difference is an aesthetic ingredient. The artistic work searches for difference without necessarily presupposing ethical motivations. On the contrary, ethics will invite to the consensual sedimentation of artistic forms and messages, will invite to repetition, sometimes even in direct collision with difference—for example, in cinema, the recurrence of a certain socially relevant theme or a certain moral connotation or a certain deontology of the artist. Ethics feed art lobbies.

Politics, on the contrary, supports the subversive character of art in general. It is involved in the very cogs of the aesthetic mechanism, expressing itself through difference. It is true that we can also recognize the properly “political” character of certain works or artistic movements, considering their specific themes and objectives. In this sense, there will be works that are more political than others. But that kind of activist or revolutionary artworks—such as, for example, films framed in the so-called militant cinema, which are generally dedicated to some form of social denunciation—run the risk of repeating the same vices of the dominant ideologies or figures that they try to contend with. Political dissent is always on the way to becoming an ethical consensus.

A wide example is the so-called political correctness, which, ultimately, seems to contain a fundamental contradiction in its very designation (and this contradiction becomes even more evident today, with the various ideological radicalizations that are apparently liberating and protective of social minorities, but which threaten to degenerate into new policing and ethical puritanism, as in the so-called woke culture). Political correctness no longer has much to do with political dissent: it is already a new social order. Similarly, artists are well aware that it is strategically wise to address certain themes over others, although sometimes such apparently political choices are limited to enforcing trends established in the “politically correct” status quo. Frequently, the choice of socially relevant themes is, after all, nothing more than an adjustment to ethical consultation. In such cases, the concern with the relevance of the themes will have more to do with obedience to art and culture lobbies than with a genuinely political motivation of the artist sensitive to difference.

Furthermore, it is doubtful that art can play a particularly effective role in political activism due to its poetic nature. In a certain sense, the artistic

discourse is inadequate: it tends to refuse the literality and the denotative urgency that is the prerogative of political propaganda. As H. Marcuse pointed out: “The political potential of art is based only on its own aesthetic dimension. Its relationship with praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating” (Marcuse 1977, 11). And yet, artists, curators and critics insist on claiming the relevance of art, its usefulness. But the art of the aesthetic regime does not need ideals, nor does it have to address revolutionary themes to ensure its subversive character. Difference is enough. Sontag says that “morality, unlike art, is ultimately justified by its utility” (Sontag 2009, 29).

In turn, art doesn’t have to be useful or moralizing. The addressed themes, in themselves, become merely subsidiary in the aesthetic context of art, even if, at the same time, they can be decisive for the ethical relevance of the work as whole. One of the most rooted misconceptions in the field of art is to consider that the legitimacy of an artistic work necessarily depends on its relevance, its usefulness, its ethical value. And another related mistake consists of confusing the relevance of the work with its political or differentiating strength. But the work can be aesthetically revolutionary even without theme, moral, denunciation, or protest. The ontology of politics is difference itself, prior to any utility.

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