The Aesthetic as the Sociological
Social Constructionism vs. Aesthetic Experience

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"The truth has countless sources
and an infinity of histories."

Nichita Stănescu,
Fiziologia poeziei [*The Physiology of Poetry*]

"Life's greatest danger lies in the fact
that men's food consists entirely of souls."

Inuit shaman, quoted by Annie Dillard in
Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Abstract: *This article explores the epistemological conflict between aesthetics and the sociology of art by discussing some of the limits and self-contradictions the sociological methods present in their attempt at describing and explaining artistic perception and creativity. Focusing on the constructionist approach to art, the author argues that the aesthetic phenomenon is not satisfactorily accounted for by sociological methods and aims to show that an analysis of their limits might offer valuable suggestions for a new aesthetics.*

Keywords: *aesthetics, cultural capital, habitus, late modernity, social constructionism, sociological turn*

Résumé : *Cet article explore le conflit épistémologique entre l'esthétique et la sociologie de l'art en discutant quelques-unes des limites et contradictions de soi que les méthodes sociologiques présentent dans leur atteinte de décrire et d'expliquer la perception artistique et la créativité. En se concentrant sur l'approche constructiviste de l'art, l'auteure affirme que le phénomène esthétique n'est pas représenté d'une manière satisfaisante par les méthodes sociologiques et elle se propose de montrer qu'une analyse de leurs limites pourrait offrir des suggestions précieuses pour une nouvelle esthétique.*

Mots-clés : *esthétique, capital culturel, habitus, modernité tardive, constructivisme, social, tournant sociologique*

This article is part of a wider research project, which investigates the dynamics between late modern versions of the Aristotelian concept of imagination as a mediator in cognitive processes and the creative imagination of Kantian descent. Late modernity descended upon a concept of aesthetic experience that had a privileged epistemic statute, conferred upon it mainly through the labours of modern aesthetics—founded on the very idea of beauty as "perfection of sensible cognition" (Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, Ch. 15, qtd. in Guyer). It was inevitable for that position to be questioned or radically negated sooner or later, and with it the position of the artistic object as an artefact transcending both itself and its context of production and reception. Despite having evolved alongside aesthetics since the early 19th century (and thus itself an essentially modern discipline), sociology turns its rationalistic methods against the privileged objects of aesthetics in undertakings that may be called systematic only starting with the latter part of the 20th century. It is important to look carefully at the sources and contexts of such sociological undertakings because, for some decades now, they have seemed to have won the day without the "adversary" putting up much of a fight.

Although the "sociological turn" and its critique take the spotlight in this article, I shall start from the remark that, despite the consistent and manifold attacks on it in the last few decades, the idea of the centrality of the aesthetic does not seem to be definitively surpassed. On the contrary, it has even reinvented itself recently in theories coming from very different points on the spectrum of thinking, as different as Jean-Luc Marion's concept of "saturated phenomenon" (195) or the post-conceptual art signalled by Peter Osborne (10). We may, therefore, distinguish a paradox: two humanist epistemes, essentially modern but, each for different reasons, not transcended in late modernity, find their rationale in negating the other's premise, all the while exerting themselves on the same objects: the act of perception and framing of the aesthetic object, the art object as such and its manner of existence in the world. One side hosts a ramification of theories explicitly or implicitly grounded in the ontological/epistemological postulate of the autonomy of the artistic object or text (hermeneutics, the theory of literature, and, of course, the overarching aesthetics itself); the subdomain of the sociology of art (focusing on the two main acts related to the artistic object, its production and reception) lodges itself on the other side, which from the outset does not allow it to forget its dialectically antithetical position. More often than not, its representative authors flaunt a polemical tone with gusto.

Given this "state of war," this article will first analyze a selection of themes pertaining to the sociology of art—with all their oblique or negative relevance to the articulation subjectivity/creativity, and hence to the larger issue of imagination—, after which it will put forward a non-definitive list of limitations of the sociological methods when applied to the fundamentally open phenomenon of aesthetic experience; finally, from the contemplation of such self-proclaimed or tacit limits—not only those of sociology itself—, the article will glean several apophatic-style suggestions about the artistic object's order of reality, towards integrative theories still to come.

Let us first recapitulate some statements about the method. The modern sociological method emerged in the early 19th century from the attempt of adapting the newly

formalized methods of empirical scientific investigation to the study of human social relations, at the same time as it defined itself in opposition to classic humanist disciplines. The methods of scientific investigation, consisting mainly in sequences of sensory observations, data collection—often involving quantitative approaches (measurements)—, hypothesis formulation and verification/falsification, were abstracted from the study of natural phenomena. In keeping with the same structure-oriented logic that was relied upon in empirical sciences (observational "blind spots" are, if only provisionally, disregarded when theoretical constructs "connect all available dots"), predictions were issued on the organization of societal structures. Still, it was soon evident, even in the classic stage of sociology, that its methods needed to veer from those of "strong sciences," as attested by Max Weber's definition: "Sociology […] is a science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects" (6). The concept of "understanding" (*verstehen*), both in its immediate sense, of understanding exercised upon an act, and in its explanatory sense (*erklärendes verstehen*), of a process that clarifies the determinants of a subclass of actions, shown to possess finality when observed from the outside and *a posteriori*, is opposed to that of prediction in the scientific sense. Moreover, it creates a host of other method-related problems, possibly more numerous than those it solves: from the fact that it introduces the sociologist's subjectivity into the equation, through the realization that it is impossible to abstract one's own cultural presuppositions and one's own *telos*, to the quasi-impossibility of ascertaining the accuracy of the meanings thus *constructed* into a culture that is foreign to the observer. When it comes to the sociology of art, which studies the social genesis, interactions and evolutions of artistic phenomena, the weight of these issues is compounded by the fact that such phenomena already come ingrained with the highest density of "subjectivity issues" from all human phenomena, and that the ignorance of any of its complexities would simply be a form of reductionism.

From all the sociological strains concerned with the phenomenon of art I choose to focus, mainly because its theoretical fundament is both explicit and with some of the deepest-reaching tenets, on *social constructionism*. A current developed in parallel in the USA and France since the 1960s, this type of thinking left a decisive imprint on postmodernism and cultural studies. The numerous strands of constructionism have in common the view that everything that is intelligible or can be conceived as a discrete entity is in fact the product of countless human decisions and interactions, given that categorial structures do not exist independently (be it in the "world of ideas," in "nature" or as divine intention). Therefore, it is possible for the critical method to unravel and explain, at least in part, these genetic strands (which makes constructionism, indeed, a form of rationalism).

Like any "grand" idea, it is only too easy to misunderstand or take it that one step too far into the void (if there is nothing which is not a construct, be it social, cultural or linguistic, then the concept itself can be said to have zero explanatory power). Still, this approach cannot be denied a theoretical appeal and relevance, in that it provides a fresh set of instruments to study human subjectivity exerting itself on so-called objective phenomena and their existence in the world.

The phenomena of art production, aesthetic experience and taste are no exception, of course; they are seen as social or collective products in every sense: creators are the products of their society and their works cannot be abstracted from both the sense-bearing structures of their *Umwelt* and from the fact that they are designed to be integrated and circulated back into that *Umwelt*; the aesthetic judgement of an individual is modelled through education and the constant feedback of social acceptability, while what should or should not be considered art is dictated, at root, by extra-artistic criteria.

This type of sociological theory positions itself not in opposition with determinism (the philosophical position that every phenomenon—including artistic ones, we should keep adding—is the product of a unique, and finite, set of conditions, circumstances, causes, etc.), but with essentialism, which sees phenomena as possessing traits essential to themselves, therefore an identity. So not only does this constructionist thinking discard the Platonic notion of forms endowed with a more fundamental kind of reality, but it also challenges the Kantian doctrine of *a priori* knowledge. These doctrines are precisely what modern aesthetics has relied on, namely that works of art essentially or intrinsically possess a set of aesthetic attributes, and that no other kind of object possesses that entire set (despite the fact that other natural objects or human artefacts are able to elicit an aesthetic response, or that there are other objects, religious icons for instance, with a non-immanent referent, etc.). To be sure, constructionism is not the first attack on aesthetics, but it goes deeper than, for instance, the Russian formalists, who were content to exclude cultural-historical approaches and point to the intentionality and craftsmanship of the artistic object. Furthermore, constructionism does not, like the Frankfurt school, confine itself to the status of the art object in a mass-dominated culture and an age of mechanical reproduction, leaving its "irreducibility" unchallenged.

Still, the validity of any theoretical doctrine lies outside itself, ultimately in its power to clarify aspects of phenomena that are not immediately accessible to our intuition. It may be useful, in that sense, to stop first to capture the gist of two of the inescapable themes of the social constructionist's discourse, which may even be a base for a better understanding of what sets this discourse apart. One of these themes is that of *power*, which descends, one might say, into the structures of everyday life as well as in those of cultural and artistic production, engaging in a diffuse way—which in no way means indistinguishably—all participants in any social game. In what concerns the production of symbolic goods, where art is often regarded as a subdomain without any special privileges, it can enjoy at most a provisional and circumscribed type of autonomy, which power structures condescend to grant it, normally in exchange for some prestige-accruing services (ultimately a matter of "return of investment"). Modern artists, at least, cultivate and rely on the cult of the artist's disinterestedness and withdrawal from mundane pursuits, but constructionists point out, not without irony, that power structures are, in fact those that by keeping the artist at bay, allow him/her to take that distance from them, in order to all the better exploit them afterwards (cf. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* 27-8).

Another important working concept is *ideology*, produced and replicated as an instrument of domination—by groups or, at the end of a process of social maturation, by institutions. Ideology serves the interests of power, in that it acquires and maintains

a monopoly over the production of a specific type of symbolic goods. This is, of course, an idea appropriated from Marxist criticism, but social constructionism detaches it from the idea that it is employed by the ruling classes to distort reality and create a "false consciousness"—there is no "reality" as such, since everything consciousness has access to is already a construct, and it is not the prerogative of a dominant group, since, as mentioned earlier, this theory sees power as a diffuse structure. Needless to say, when there is no such thing as genuineness, consciousness also cannot be "false." Still, constructionists maintain a clearly discernible connection with neo-Marxist theories, such as that of a Gramsci, in their insistence that ideological structures are "naturalized," which is to say accepted unquestioningly by most people as "common sense," through habituation.

It begins to emerge, at this point, that there are things at stake in the constructionist critique of the artistic phenomenon that go beyond a battle with the remnants of idealist philosophy. Art is one of the most effective means of creating and perpetuating cultural hegemony, simply because it appears natural, and naturally disinterested, abstracted from contingent interests. However, this is mere appearance, since no "symbolic production" can possibly be disinterested; it is inevitably subordinated to extraneous aims because its very existence depends on its playing a part in the mechanisms of ideological production and domination.

At this point, a slippage that occurs in the constructionist method cannot fail to escape us: while it sets out to *study*, with professed scientific earnestness, whether symbolic artifacts embed (or not, or to what extent) extraneous social elements, it ends up *postulating* those elements.

That flaw of method also haunts the works of one of the most influential and sophisticated sociologists of literature descended from constructionism, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002), with the amendment that the work of an author who programmatically regards concepts as "polymorphic, supple and adaptive, rather than defined, calibrated and used rigidly" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 23) resists, not surprisingly, such clear-cut labelling. This is not the space to do justice to the complexities and nuances of his theory, but a brief review of his structuring concepts and a few commented quotes from his numerous works will give substance and support to the latter, critical, part of this article.

Let us begin by saying that Bourdieu reopens the Weberian discussion about the role of the researcher in constructing the reality he studies (Bourdieu and Wacquant 235-47). The researcher is confronted with the fact that every object of his study is already pre-constructed, and his only alternative is between reiterating meanings already present in the object and knowingly constructing the object himself, which requires, first of all, "a break with common sense" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 235).

Indeed the focal point of Bourdieu's method can be considered to be the endeavor of surpassing the antinomy between subjectivism and objectivism, of founding "a science of the dialectical relations between objective structures […] and the subjective dispositions within which these structures are actualized and which tend to reproduce them" (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 3). To achieve this dialectical synthesis between objective structures and subjectivism, Bourdieu constructs an original, though constructionist-informed,

theoretical frame, whose pillars are the concepts of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*. *Habitus* is loosely defined as a "thinking tool," a system of inclinations of an individual which enforces the current practices of power, without being its direct product (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 72). Since the elements that form the habitus are the result of the reification of the social structure within individual subjectivity, the concept constitutes that necessary theoretical bridge between "ontological individualism" and "constituted practice" and dismantles, allegedly, the neo-Kantian myth of the pure knowing subject. With respect to art, this position has at least two important consequences: the creator is exposed as a mere fetish (*The Rules of Art* 227-31); the world interior to the work of art and the social world as lived are rendered homologous and can now be studied as such with impunity.

The second concept, that of *field*, is a relational one; the field appears as a result of the interaction of individuals, institutions and factions, and is, in fact, the setting in which they constitute themselves as agents; the agents adhere to it inasmuch as they "play the game." In any given society there are a number of different fields that interact or clash. Consequently, the field of artistic and literary production inevitably interacts (which, indeed, includes clashing), with other ones, such as the power field and the economic field, and that simple fact exposes the traditional, aesthetic doctrine of the autonomy of art as nothing short of erroneous. Still, in a vastly different sense, Bourdieu does talk of the autonomy of the literary field, for instance: it simply means that this field follows its own logic of cultural legitimacy and actively configures and reconfigures its structure and hierarchy.

The third central concept, *capital*, is in fact an extension of the economic term to the cultural, social and symbolic spheres; all these different types of capital—understood as a resource or potentiality—generate prestige or power and are, therefore, desired and actively sought by actors of each (autonomous) field. Authors/artists may relinquish (direct) economic profit, but they receive a different form of "symbolic" capital, with its own system of rewards (often then translated in long-term pecuniary advantages). Thus, Bourdieu claims, disinterestedness is a *de facto* impossibility.

One of Bourdieu's "strongest" constructionist theses in the field of the sociology of art is to be found in the fact that he considers aesthetic judgment to be a fundamentally social faculty, produced as a result of belonging to a social class and through the agency of a certain type of education. Bourdieu's statistical analyses demonstrate, for instance, that the bourgeoisie adopts, to a much larger extent than other social groups, that which he calls distinction, the attitude of disinterested contemplation required by mainstream aesthetics.

Another constructionist concept of Bourdieu's, which also indirectly challenges traditional autonomous notions, is that of "symbolic structures," of which Bourdieu asserts that they are at the same time "structured structures" ("means of communication"), "structuring structures" ("instruments of knowledge and construction of the objective world"), and "instruments of domination" (a system of strategies and ideologies employed by a "body of specialists competing for the monopoly of legitimate cultural production") (*Language and Symbolic Power* 163-70).

At the level of the *producer* of symbolic goods (a category where the artist/writer non-exclusively belongs), this dialectical, we may say, thrust of symbolic structures has the paradoxical effect—proof of the subtlety of Bourdieu's theory—of confining or circumscribing him/her within an ideology of openness:

> To the extent that [the] products [of the field of restricted production] require extremely scarce instruments of appropriation, they are bound to precede their market or to have no clients at all, apart from producers themselves. Consequently they tend to fulfill socially distinctive functions, at first in conflicts between fractions of the dominant class and eventually, in relations among social classes. By an effect of circular causality, the structural gap between supply and demand contributes to the artists' determination to steep themselves in the search for "originality" (with its concomitant ideology of the unrecognized or misunderstood "genius"). This comes about […] by placing them in difficult economic circumstances, and, above all, by effectively ensuring the incommensurability of the specifically cultural value and economic value of a work (*The Field of Cultural Production* 120).

In other words, the "distinction" of the author, his/her rarity, is nothing but idiosyncrasy until it is socially evaluated, and then reinforced (through consensus).

As for the works of art themselves, Bourdieu claims that the distinction between them and other forms of "entertainment" has been created merely to reinforce a social hierarchy: "an aesthetic distinction […] is a misrecognized form of social difference" (*Distinction* 493). This leads to the ultimate polemical claim Bourdieu has made with the intention of dismantling with one blow the entire edifice of traditional aesthetics:

> Every essentialist analysis of the aesthetic disposition, the only socially accepted "right" way of approaching the objects socially designated as works of art, that is, as both demanding and deserving to be approached with a specifically aesthetic intention capable of recognizing and constituting them as works of art, is bound to fail. Refusing to take account of the collective and individual genesis of this product of history which must be endlessly "re-produced" by education, it is unable to reconstruct its sole *raison d'être*, that is, the historical reason which underlies the arbitrary necessity of the institution (*Distinction* 29).

Today we are probably too inured to this type of discourse (the lure of iconoclastic intoxication is not to be underestimated) to realize that it represents, in fact, an incomplete demonstration and that there is even something fundamentally counterintuitive about it. If we perform the mental experiment of detaching ourselves from the "shock value" of this approach and we pretend that we need to explain the "sociological turn" to a person freshly arrived from the past or a parallel world, it would not be easy to argue through the causal chain that starts from the immediate response to beauty that all humans possess and ends with ascribing that response to internalized social practices (habitus). Still, it

is the starting challenge of any critique of established patterns or paradigms of thought to become aware that it itself possesses an already accustomed gaze.

One must not make the mistake of dismissing all constructionist theories on art-related phenomena as fundamentally flawed. Albeit briefly, we have already seen that this rationalistic discourse has undeniable rigor, both descriptively and analytically. The fundamental question is whether this exactitude is deep-reaching enough to justify its present status as an academic orthodoxy, or it occupies this status only by default, i.e., for lack of a comparatively rigorous theory able to compete with it in the same field. The next step is to examine the premises of these theories (to carefully strip them of the all-too-prevalent polemical intentions) and to see whether they do not reduce the complexity or multiplicity of the phenomena they study. I shall, in what follows, point out a few critical lines, focusing specifically on the constructionist viewpoint on the production and reception of art. It is not within the scope of this article to perform a thorough critique of constructionism, but rather to make room for the idea that creativity and aesthetic experience are not satisfactorily accounted for by these theories that use the concept of structure as a building block.

The first important problem constructionism faces comes from the fact that it defines itself as neither a polemic (since it claims to offer stable descriptions) nor a philosophy (since it works on contingent data), but a scientific method that claims to provide a theory of "what is." Modern science, however, has required rigorous neutrality with respect to the object of study; any contamination of the object by its observer automatically meant that the observations were unreliable. Here the sociologist is inescapably a part of the society he/she studies. So the constructionist introduces the idea that there is no neutrality, or that all sciences construct the object they study. Even if there is something to be said about this argument, all mature experimental sciences have instituted series of external checks and protocols that allow their results to "transcend" the researcher's subjectivity and consequently achieve general acceptance and stability. In this case, the check can only come from members of the same society, who are likely to have the same (ingenuous or disingenuous) blind spots and who find themselves in the delicate position where they have to be assessors of the theory and objects of it at the same time.

Another type of objection is that constructionist analysis applies to fully constituted, mature societal forms, which have a relatively limited historical and geographical existence, and ignores less well-constituted types of societies. If, as is well documented in the case of art, the phenomenon under scrutiny has a wider areal than the type of society that the method in question can legitimately study, then one is entitled to question the validity of the method over that entire phenomenon.

A third objection against the (strong) claim that sociology is capable to offer a full description of art-centered phenomena comes from biological and neurophysiological research exploring the biological basis of the aesthetic experience. D.E. Berlyne's influential book *Aesthetics and Psychobiology* (1971) argues that progress in aesthetics was at a standstill until the emergence of these new-fangled instruments: information theory, providing rigorous procedures to analyze the stimulus patterns involved in the aesthetic experience, the breakthroughs of neurophysiology in the understanding

of pleasure and arousal, and the behavioral findings (on both human and non-human animals) on the motivational importance of elements such as complexity, novelty and uncertainty, so-called "collative variables," which "seem to be identifiable with the irreducibly essential ingredients of art and of whatever else is aesthetically appealing" (Berlyne viii). According to Berlyne,

> Animals, and especially higher mammals, spend much of their time performing actions that have no function other than bringing the sense organs into contact with stimuli of particular kinds, so that they can be said to be selecting or creating their own environments to a large extent. (98)

More recently, M.C. Flannery suggests that certain characteristics inherent to an organism allow it to perceive certain stimuli as agreeable. The source of aesthetic pleasure lies in the biological structure of that organism, which allows it to perceive an element of its environment in a positive way ("Biology, Aesthetics, & the Friends I've Made"). Perhaps the farthest-reaching thrust of this line of analysis is that one cannot reach the highest level of understanding of the phenomenon of artistic perception and creativity from the outside, by resorting to a conceptual scheme, but from the "lived-world," in a manner that establishes a continuous feed-back loop between direct experience and the analytic endeavor.

It is only too fitting to address methodological objections at this point. Three kinds of reductionism can be observed at work: *analogical*, *theoretical* and *methodological*. The first consists in the explanation of intrinsically aesthetic processes by analogy with more general social processes; from within the theory, however, it is impossible to demonstrate whether this assimilation explains all the aspects of the former or the exclusive reliance on certain functional homologies suppresses what *differentiates* them from all others. Bourdieu, for instance, takes analogies, such as that of "symbolic capital," turns them into concepts and exploits them at great length, without consideration of the illicit transfer which he commits and which can be easily exposed by thinking of how symbolic capital does not obey the same statistically predictable rules of accumulation, reinvestment of profit, diminishing returns, etc., that economic capital does.

The second type of reductionism implies accounting for processes at one level of explanation in terms of processes at a more fundamental level. While aesthetic phenomena are undeniably *also* social phenomena, constructionism becomes fallacious the moment it assumes that it is sufficient to explain the former as the latter. The third type, *methodological* reductionism, involves the treatment of qualitative processes in a quantitative manner. The sociologist's emphasis is on adequately *measuring* "distinction" or "capital," which shift the accent from the actual actions of artists and perceivers and the processes involved in the creation and appreciation of art and thus reifies them.

What is more: by professing its polemical intent and its disenchantment, constructionism at times commits what is known as the "straw man" fallacy, which means that it constructs a simplified version of the propositions it intends to attack and refutes with

success only its own construction. Even a subtle theorist like Bourdieu is sometimes guilty of such not-so-subtle arguments:

> Why such implacable hostility to those who try to advance the understanding of the work of art and of aesthetic experience, if not because the very ambition to produce a scientific analysis of that *individuum ineffabile* and of the *individuum ineffabile* who produced it, constitutes a mortal threat to the pretension, so common (at least among art lovers) and yet so "distinguished," of thinking of oneself as an ineffable individual, capable of ineffable experiences of that ineffable? (*Rules of Art* viii)

There are several more twists to this tale still. Constructionism takes that which it sets out to criticize (for instance, the *topos* of autonomy, ineffable or disinterestedness) out of its episteme and transforms it into an object of sociological interest, all the better to criticize it; this criticism may be convincing by itself sometimes, but only provided we take the legitimacy of this translation for granted. One must not forget that it is not art itself, nor theoretical aesthetics that institutes the "myth" of the disengagement of their field from mundane pursuits only the better to take advantage of their particular types of symbolic capital. This faculty of disengagement, which Vaihinger called "as if", is fundamental in any act of knowing and experimenting the word: the child learns about the world through play, the grown-up learns to drive a car or fly a plane in a controlled (even virtual, these days) environment. It is this same faculty which allows us not only to "suspend our disbelief," but to embrace provisionally the world implicit in the work of art.

It is thus possible to turn constructionism against itself, by using its own logic. Let us take an apothegm by Nietzsche: "Parmenides said: 'One can form no concept of the non-existent';—we are at the other extreme, and say, "That of which a concept can be formed is certainly fictional" (3: 50). We might, in a limited cataphatic way, understand this as an argument in favor of relativism, but it is equally possible to see in it an affirmation of the fundamentally open nature of the human mind, and extend it to art. Fiction and the imaginative function do not find in art a privileged expression, but are potentially present in all human actions, in the process of thinking, communicating and receiving the expression of the other's thinking. Their very nature requires only to be met with understanding, not seen as activities whose prime motivations are outside themselves, in social recognition or what Bourdieu calls "distinction."

What this article has intended to do by exposing some of the weak points of sociological or constructionist thinking about art-related phenomena is not, in fact, to demonstrate that it is wrong or unnecessary to think about art in these terms, but to point out that this is a fundamentally incomplete theory (a fact which tends to be overlooked today). There is a definite need to break out of the boundaries of traditional aesthetics, which does not participate in the lived world of artistic phenomena, but merely reaches *into* it, extracts items of meaning out of that lived experience, and attempts to assimilate them to pre-existing concepts and taxonomies. The tools that sociology brings in are doubtless useful, but not insofar as they deny the fundamental openness of the art work/experience.

Among recent theories, the most helpful and influential concept that acknowledges this radical openness is Marion's "saturated phenomenon", characterized by the fact that it "does not subject its possibility to any preliminary determination" (*The Visible and the Revealed* 47). Although this concept does not apply exclusively to art, it leads Marion to pronounce some far-reaching insights about this "non-objective phenomenon" which may well become the starting point of a new aesthetics: "The more the invisible increases, the more deepens the visible" (*La croisée du visible* 17, my translation); "the picture educates the gaze by leading it to its ultimate possibilities only insofar as, beyond any opposite object, it offers to it what phenomenology considers the phenomenon par excellence—that which shows itself from itself" (*La croisée du visible* 77, my translation).

Not only the picture, but also the literary work is fundamentally open, and that is because it captures and indeed, by its nature, best actualizes the possibilities embedded in language itself to concentrate (and play with) a multiplicity of meanings, to refer to a contingent object and simultaneously to transcend it, in an infinite, Chinese box-like regression of meanings.

I know of no better way to conclude this article than to quote at length a parable of Buddha's that shows why one cannot count too much on the societal middle ground when it comes to the real value of phenomena:

> There was a rich man who found his gold suddenly transformed into ashes; and he took to his bed and refused all food. A friend, hearing of his sickness, visited the rich man and learned the cause of his grief. And the friend said: "Thou didst not make good use of thy wealth. When thou didst hoard it up it was not better than ashes. Now heed my advice. Spread mats in the bazaar; pile up these ashes, and pretend to trade with them."
>
> The rich man did as his friend had told him, and when his neighbors asked him, "Why sellest thou ashes?" he said: "I offer my goods for sale."
>
> After some time a young girl, named Kisā Gotamī, an orphan and very poor, passed by, and seeing the rich man in the bazaar, said: "My lord, why pilest thou thus up gold and silver for sale?"
>
> And the rich man said: "Wilt thou please hand me that gold and silver?" And Kisā Gotamī took up a handful of ashes, and lo! they changed back into gold. (Carus 209-10)

This is the problem of intersubjectivity: there is a fluid space between subjectivities where that which appears can be either given full recognition or can be assimilated with a structure already constituted in the repertoire of collective consciousness. In that genuine encounter which is also a creative act, items of meaning, instead of being just passively peddled around, are instituted in their full depth and scope and their value is recognized. We are evidently reading this parable as an allegory of the (re)iteration of the artistic act at the level of individual consciousness and we see, fittingly, that this "miracle" of (re)constituting "plenitude" at the point of contact between subjectivities

transcends all social structures and hierarchies, the same way as the "poor orphan" offers to the man who had grown oblivious of his richness the access to a higher-order wealth.

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