



Lectio 1 (August 2021): 106-118
Graduate Papers

Appreciating Art with Paul Ricoeur: from Aesthetics to Ethics

Jim Lester P. Beleno, M.A.
University of Santo Tomas Graduate School

Abstract: This paper is a philosophical exploration of the ethical import in Ricoeur's essay "Aesthetic Experience." Ricoeur's long detour in philosophy via hermeneutics made it possible to encounter the world of art creatively and critically. He became convinced that art always holds a prominent place in life, especially an ethical role in man's aim toward the good life with and for others in just institutions. However, the noble function of art is threatened nowadays due to its commercialization, manipulation, and monopoly by a few, making the art's beauty and meaning captive to man's consciousness. Therefore, the task of this study is to emancipate art through Ricoeur's radical yet creative hermeneutical admiration of aesthetics and to rediscover anew its implications to humanity particularly art's concealed imperative of ethics. Ricoeur is mindful that a genuine aesthetic experience is possible only through the subtle yet humbling act of generosity. This refers to an openness, a receptivity, and a kind of attention—a manner of perceiving wherein art is never compromised. Attention renders justice to art. It provides space for it to unfold its meaning, to make a revelation of its beauty. In this way, man is able to render a proper recognition toward a work of art to be attentive once again to the superabundant meaning that it carries, which in turn ceaselessly summons man to translate his aesthetic experience into an ethical experience.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Hermeneutics, Symbol, Ethics, Attention

"The [art]work is like a trail of fire issuing from itself,
reaching me and reaching beyond me to the universality of humanity."
— Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction*, 180.

It is very ironic that what is in front of us, the tangible and perceivable – like the work of art – is often left unnoticed or ignored. At worst, It is deemed vague and nonsensical. This apparent absurdity in terms of artworks is especially true with modern abstract paintings like that of the abstract expressionist Tápies and surrealist Matta that cause bewilderment to some spectators. The viewers are caught in a dilemma whether the paintings are worthy of the name *art* or are merely sugarcoated vandalism. The present indifference to art has obviously buried its symbolic meaning

and imperative value. The modern [busy] person has become inattentive and forgetful—inattentive to the appearing and *givenness* of the art, and at the same time, forgetful of its implications to human life. We treat art today superficially as a commodity, simply an ornamentation, embellishment, and adornment. This is the reason why some critics who claim themselves to be experts of art say “that there is no progress in the history of art.”¹ However, Ricoeur redeems the grandeur of art by stating that “there is still a history of materials, where progress [in art] is not absent.”² Most of the time, our obsession with art makes us neglect and forget the *who* and the *why* behind paintings, sculptures, music, statues, etc. For Ricoeur, the work of art is like a text, a living metaphor subjected to a Sisyphean struggle of hermeneutical interpretation and recognition.³ Hence, this is a testimony that art is imbued with irreducible and inexhaustible superabundant meaning. The paradox of the work of art opens before us: the obscurity of art is precisely its surmountable beauty; its presumed weakness is ironically its peculiar strength; its apparent non-sense is actually its sense. Art is a reservoir of meanings that is open to the world because of the “limitless of the thinkable, and with reference, the inexhaustibility of the world [of art] itself.”⁴ From this conviction of art, we are properly disposed and receptive to a genuine aesthetic experience.⁵

Aesthetic Experience

Ricoeur ontologically and anthropologically expresses the relation of the human person with art by conveying that the latter had and will always have a

¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Aesthetic Experience” in *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1998), 177.

² *Ibid.*

³ Ricoeur is convinced that: “The work of art can have an effect comparable that of metaphor: integrating levels of sense that are overlaid, preserved and contained together.” (Ricoeur, “Aesthetic Experience,” 172.) See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans., Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2003) and Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans., David Pellaur (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “Creativity of Language,” *Philosophy Today*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Summer: 1973): 100, doi: 10.5840/philtoday197317231.

⁵ One may ask a question if Ricoeur is credible enough to discuss about *aesthetics*, and Peter McCormick attests that “perhaps the most central theme of Ricoeur’s extraordinary variegated work over many years — the nature, kinds, roles, and problems of interpretation — touched in many places not just on philosophical questions about morality, politics, law, and religion; Ricoeur also considered some specific works of art, especially works of literature.” Peter McCormick, “From aesthetic to Ethical experience? Paul Ricoeur’s Aesthetics,” *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2006): 111-120, <https://journals.ateneo.edu/index.php/budhi/article/view/418>.

prominent place in man's life.⁶ The paleness of human existence has been colored by paintings as well as the troubled human mind, soothed by music. The problem in our modern relation to art is that the artwork has been normalized to the extent that it seems to no longer catch our attention. It ceases to give us a sense of wonder—a surprise of an unanticipated encounter—as art today is merely “reduced to sheer entertainment.”⁷ In other words, art today tends to be considered as mere objects among objects normatively used as everyday tools. This presupposes that art like the human person has the possibility to be restrained by utilitarianism, i.e., to be stripped away of the freedom to reveal itself and simply becomes reduced to mere utility. This, for Ricoeur, can be considered as a nihilistic tendency toward art that requires us to uphold an appreciative stance in the aesthetic experience. From such a view, “nothing must be excluded from one's admiration; one even has to learn in a sense to love everything.”⁸ Ricoeur shows that there are still realities in the world that are left unappreciated, unrecognized, and unloved—and art is one of these. He points out that we need to be patient and, like a child, keep that very wonder aflame, ceaselessly traversing to the uncertain for we dwell in a vast universe where polysemy reigns.⁹ In other words, we live in a world wherein meaning is never exhausted by the human intellect. Life's superabundance of meaning then is the perfect venue where we are summoned to ponder and challenged to posit questions.¹⁰ The essence of the artwork is polysemic, never running out of sense “and yet they induce unexplored relational possibilities and make possible the unfolding of new and original feelings”¹¹—a genuine aesthetic experience.

To further appreciate the beauty of art, Ricoeur relates it with language which is acknowledged for its semantic richness. He draws some affinities of art and language, saying:

The work of art is in this way, for me, the occasion for discovering aspects of language that are ordinarily concealed by its usual practice, its instrumentalized function of communication. The work of art bares properties of language which otherwise would remain invisible and unexplored.¹²

We always fall short in recognizing that art, like language, always bestows something new for it has a life of its own. The irony of this is that it possesses its own meaning and intention apart from the artist which tickles the spectator's curiosity: What does

⁶ See Ricoeur, “Aesthetic Experience,” 171.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 175

⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 172

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Philosophical Anthropology: Writings and Lecture, volume 3*, ed., Johann Michel and Jérôme Porée, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016), 289.

¹¹ Ricoeur, “Aesthetic Experience,” 172.

¹² *Ibid.*

that art mean? This simple yet profound question has no ready-made adequate answer. Since there will always be a certain gap, there exists an epistemic distance between an artwork and its observer for the unsaid, the unsayable, or the unspoken still remains a unique aspect of art. This is the subtlety as well as the beauty of one's authentic encounter with the work of art in which aesthetic experience is not merely a sensical or an emotional admiration of a masterpiece but more importantly, an experience of meaning.

At the latter part of Ricoeur's philosophical enterprise, he changed his interest to language as he traversed the "long route' of multiple hermeneutic detours[.]"¹³ It is through these detours that he was able to venture to aesthetics.¹⁴ Earlier, I have expressed how the work of art is polysemic in nature. This refers to how no one can and will ever fully exhaust art's meaning. From this inexhaustible richness of art, Ricoeur is convinced that art itself is hermeneutical. Hermeneutics for Ricoeur, as Richard Kearny pointed out, is the "art of deciphering *indirect* meaning."¹⁵ It follows then that art, as subjected to hermeneutics, has an indirect meaning and expression for it is open to various and even conflicting interpretations. Simply put, an artwork is presented to us indirectly through a detour of signs, and these signs in which an artwork presents itself summon us to think more.¹⁶ One can comparatively relate art now to a symbol that stimulates curiosity, invites creative imagination, and gives rise to thought.¹⁷ Ironically though, art as a correlative symbol points to something that cannot really be pointed to. This is the reason why every spectator is evoked to ponder on the unfathomable meaning of an artwork.

From this, we can understand how Ricoeur expresses his enchantment of how art gives rise to thought by saying that "The symbol gives; I do not posit its meaning; it is what gives meaning, but what it gives has to be *thought*, has to be thought through."¹⁸ First, Ricoeur argues that the symbol *gives*, and art as in a way symbolic, likewise *gives*. What is given is a "proposed world" wherein one is welcome to wander with

¹³ Richard Kearney et. al., "Owl of Minerva takes flight: Obituary for Paul Ricoeur" in *Paul Ricoeur: Honoring and Continuing the work*, ed. Farhang Erfani (United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2011), 2.

¹⁴ Jerrold Levinson, a distinguished University professor of philosophy who specializes on art, denotes that *aesthetics* is "the branch of philosophy devoted to conceptual and theoretical inquiry into art and aesthetic experience [including nature and natural environment.]" J. Levinson, "Philosophical Aesthetics: An Overview," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁵ Kearney et. al., "Owl of Minerva takes flight: Obituary for Paul Ricoeur," 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ See Paul Ricoeur, "The Symbol gives rise to Thought" in *Philosophical Anthropology: Writings and Lecture*, 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* We must note that Ricoeur necessarily uses "thinking" here not to construct, constrict or reduced the polysemic character of symbol into a knowledge, a concept, rather he innovatively uses it to render a proper and more just approach on symbol that gives rise to thought.

wonder.¹⁹ Ricoeur reminds one that wandering in this proposed world is not simply a walk in the park for there is a tendency to get lost in the maze of meanings within this world. Thus, this proposed world given by symbols as well as by art should be explored with the creative and critical aid of hermeneutics.²⁰ Secondly, Ricoeur encourages everyone not to take the proposed world for granted. One of the historical and at the same time biblical examples given by Ricoeur is that of water. According to him, one can formulate meanings through a creative as well as a critical interpretation in which “the symbolism of water is clarified by such symbolic gestures as those of immersion, wherein one discerns both a threat – the flood is a return to the undifferentiated – and the *promise of rebirth*: water is both what *wells up* and what *fecundates*.”²¹ Consequently, like the symbol of the water, art immerses its viewers, wells them to give way to a rebirth—a fresh kind of looking at reality, a new manner of perceiving, which inseparably leads to a better way of living.²² Hence, every artwork just like every symbol “points toward reintegrating human beings in a totality: the transcendent totality of the sky, the immanent totality of vegetation, of perishing and being born again.”²³ Art as a correlative symbol then has the possibility to become a source of unity among humanity because human persons by nature are artistic beings.

The work of art has a double effect on its spectator. The spectator is induced to refigure the proposed world of art while at the same time the proposed world of art refigures the spectator’s world. Ricoeur highlights that an artwork has the capacity to refigure and restructure the world of the spectator by unsettling, challenging, and remodeling the spectator’s expectations and convictions. Yet this event of refiguration does not intend to reproduce reality. Instead, it consists in restructuring the world of the spectator to confront him or her with the world of the artwork “and it is in this that the creativity of art consists, penetrating the world of everyday experience in order to *rework* it from inside.”²⁴ Ricoeur emphasizes this act of refiguration for most

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 87.

²⁰ David Kaplan, an associate professor of philosophy in University of North Texas, somehow confirms that hermeneutics is indeed necessary in deciphering the irreducible expressions of symbols as he asserts that: “Hermeneutics for Ricoeur is the interpretation of signs and symbols, and texts that relate us to the world and impose an indirect or interpretative approach to knowledge.” [David Kaplan et. al., “Paul Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology” in *Paul Ricoeur: Honoring and Continuing the work*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 116. Emphases are mine.

²² Ricoeur made the contention that this distinct *way of perceiving* is a sublime form of *attention*. For “the whole phenomenology of attention is dependent on a phenomenology of perception.” Therefore, “must we not say that to *pay attention is a way of perceiving*?” Paul Ricoeur, “Attention: A Phenomenological Study of Attention and its Philosophical connection,” in *Philosophical Anthropology: Writings and Lecture*, 25-26.

²³ Ricoeur, “The Symbol gives rise to Thought” in *Philosophical Anthropology: Writings and Lecture*, 123.

²⁴ Ricoeur, “Aesthetic Experience,” 173. Emphasis is mine

artworks does not just simply represent reality as expected in figurative art, as simply patterned after a model. This is the reason why Ricoeur unquestionably admired the non-figurative paintings of Soulages and Mondrian for their distinct works evoke every observer to further explore, discover, and refigure the sublime world of art. Ricoeur expounded more on this by reasoning that,

Soulages or Mondrian did not imitate reality, in the restrictive sense of the word, because they did not make a replica of it, that their work has the power to make us discover, in our own experience, aspects up to then unknown. On a philosophical plane, this leads us to question the classical conception of truth as adequation to the real; for, if one can speak of truth in relation to the work of art, it is to the extent that this designates the capacity of the work of art to break a path by the real in accordance with the work itself, so to speak.²⁵

Only after the imaginative refiguration of the spectators that the work of art in the same manner refigure the former's world when the latter starts to speak and the former learns to listen. Hence, Ricoeur made an important note heightening the value of art that "each work [of art] is authentically a modality of the soul, a modulation of the soul."²⁶ This is the reason why the work of art is not just a mere fancy decoration, not only the object for commercialization where the art which has the highest bid is deemed beautiful, nor is art exclusive for the few who can afford it. Art is for everyone who has a soul since art's greatest contribution is that it soothes the weary soul and converts the callous heart. Simply put, "the experience of beautiful – and even more to the point, of the sublime – leads us to morality."²⁷ Indeed, the experience of the beautiful does not only appeal to our senses but ushers us back to our sense of morality. Aesthetic experience for Ricoeur has an ethical as well as political import—in which the work of art is given a political voice that had been silenced for some time.

Arts, Ethics, and Attention

Most of the time, people are swayed by the cliché "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder" when appreciating art, but Ricoeur rectifies this, clarifying that "the beauty of a given work, the success of a given portrait belonged not to the quality of the representation, not to the fact that it resembled a model, not even to its conforming to allegedly universal rules, but to a surplus in relation to any representation and to any rule."²⁸ This very surplus of art's meaning is precisely what brings the spectator into a world "that surrounds me, that can submerge me; in any case, it is something I do

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 173-174. Emphasis is mine).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

not produce but in which I find myself.”²⁹ Definitely, no one produces the meaning or the world of art. Even artists are not exempted. This makes more sense in reference to Ricoeur’s hermeneutics of text and action. Following Ricoeur, David Kaplan insightfully articulates that:

The hermeneutics of the text also applies to action because like texts, actions are also readable [and so with the works of art], with meanings that are distanced from the intentions of the actors [or the artists], and subject to conflicting interpretations. In the same way that a text becomes detached from its author, an action [as well as art] is detached from its agent [artist] and may take on unintended meaning of its own.³⁰

In other words, art—like text and action—has its own peculiar yet unique intention and meaning detached from the artist. By recognizing art in this manner, one is able to distance himself from it. One does not fall into the tendency to treat art as a “kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of[.]”³¹ Hence, the appearing of art takes time. It does not reveal itself in an instant. It requires relentless patience for its surplus meaning is not “behind the text [or the artwork], as a hidden intention would be, but in *front of it*, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals.”³² This subtleness of art is its radical identity, its distinctive singularity. Ricoeur, following Gilles-Gaston Granger’s *Essai d’une philosophie du style*, conveys that

what constitutes the success of a work of art is the fact that an artist has grasped the *singularity* of a conjuncture, a problematic, knotted for her in a unique point, and that she responds to this by a *unique* gesture. How is *this* problem be resolved? I am thinking, for example, of Cézanne’s stubbornness confronting the Sainte-Victoire mountain: why always paint the same view over and over? Because *it is never the same*. It is as if it were necessary for Cézanne to do justice to something that was not the idea of the mountain.³³

To put it differently, the singularity of the problem that the artist is confronted compels him, in turn, to respond singularly; in the same manner, the spectator experiences the work of art singularly. Ironically, it is through this very experience of

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁰ David Kaplan et. al., “Paul Ricoeur and the Philosophy of Technology,” 22.

³¹ Richard Kearney et. al., “Introduction: Ricoeur Gives rise to Thought” in *Paul Ricoeur: Honoring and Continuing the work*, vii-viii. For Ricoeur this “distanciation is not the product of methodology and hence something superfluous and parasitical rather it is constitutive of the phenomenon of text as writing.” (Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 84) In the same manner, we can infer that like text, the distanciation of the spectator is constitutive of the phenomenon of the art.

³² Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 88.

³³ Ricoeur, “Aesthetic Experience,” 178. Emphasis is mine.

singularity that art's communicability becomes possible. Ricoeur explicates that the apprehension of that singularity in an artwork arouses a "sentiment of an incredible obligation." For instance, the paintings of Cézanne or Van Gogh are overwhelming as well as compelling. Their works summon us to a kind of responsibility. "It is as if the artist experienced the *urgency of an unpaid debt* with respect to something *singular* that had *to be said in a singular manner*...as soon as it can be problematized in the form of a *singular question* which is adequately answered in the form of a *response that is singular* as well, then it acquires *communicability*, it becomes *universalizable*."³⁴ In this case, an artwork has a life of its own apart from the artist's intention, and our experience of art or what Ricoeur referred to as aesthetic experience presents us with a utopia wherein we can envision a better world as well as a better humanity. This is the ethical import of aesthetic experience—the arts summon us to fulfill an incredible obligation of realizing a more habitable world and a more humane humanity.

Through the perceived singularity of an artwork, humanity like the artist is beckoned to an incredible obligation—like the *urgency of an unpaid debt* that implicitly invites one to do something good for the other.³⁵ Truly, "the work [of art] is like a trail of fire issuing from itself, reaching me and reaching beyond me to the universality of humanity."³⁶ To preserve this fire of art issuing within and throughout humanity, Ricoeur stresses that "to follow the requirements of singularity to the end is to give the best chance of the greatest universality: such is the paradox that must probably be maintained."³⁷ With this singularity of art, Ricoeur rediscovers the nexus of aesthetics and ethics:

I believe that, between ethics and aesthetics, there can be a sort of reciprocal instruction around the theme of singularity. For, by contrast with things, but like works of art, persons are also singular conjunctions – a face in which features are assembled in a unique manner, a single time; like works, they cannot be substituted for one another.³⁸

Hence, the work of art has a clandestine ethical implication. Every work of art has an untold story waiting to be told, and each story has a lesson—food for thought, soup for the soul, nourishment for the heart. No wonder, Ricoeur acknowledges that some works of art are testimony of the good (holy) life of good (consecrated) men, stories worth remembering and narrating.³⁹ Subsequently, these faces in a way speak to us

³⁴ *Ibid.* Emphasis is mine

³⁵ Leovino Ma. Garcia links this to the Filipino concept of "utang na loob" which is ironically a debt that is not really owed, but a radical kind of generosity—it is a gift, a passing on of grace.

³⁶ Ricoeur, "Aesthetic Experience," 180.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 182.

³⁹ See *ibid.*

and teach us to do good for humanity. In line with this, Ricoeur shared his reflection on the film *Tseddek*: “Do you remember the men and women whose testimony Marek Halter collected in his film *Tseddek*? What did they all say when they were asked, ‘Why did you do that? *Why did you take the risk of saving the Jews?*’ They simply answered, ‘What else can you do? *It was the only thing to do in that situation.*’”⁴⁰ This memorable scene serves as a living testimony that the aesthetic experience of the good and the beautiful ushers us to an ethical responsibility in view of a good life with and for others. However, Ricoeur is also cautious to the possible distortion and perversion of art in which the work is manipulated for an unjust cause that certainly bears unjust results. There are cases wherein artworks are illegally replicated for profit, instrumentalized for unlawful transactions, and irresponsibly used for propagandist movements. Ricoeur furthers that “perhaps this, finally, is the ultimate impasse of perversion, to wish to allow evil to benefit from what, at very high cost, the good and the beautiful manage to produce.”⁴¹ Simply put, the purity of art is muddied by the impure intentions of men. However, Ricoeur believes that the good is primordial to any evil, thus, the treasured goodness and beauty of art remains and persists which continuously haunts and dares its spectator to be ethical in order to live the good life with and for others in just institutions.⁴²

Planet Earth is now being sophisticated with numerous human activities which are odd in their very own ways causing the annihilation of the pre-established order of the world. Our home, the only abode of life that we know, is so fabricated with the gratuitous changing and imbalance passing of things, giving rise to unresolved inadequacy of ideas and confirmation of truth. Therefore, the beauty, as well as the meaning of creation, is thwarted by human wickedness. In our diverse and divisive world, everything is relativized to the extent that each individual has the power to impose truth and values. This defines the nature of things as these individuals want to disregard the certainty that these objects reflect objectively. For things must be what they are not the way we want for them to be. Our world is doomed not only to perennial difficulties, but generational problems liken to a contagious virus that is spreading ceaselessly and massively, targeting every vital part of our very own being. Ricoeur, in his *The Conflict of Interpretations*, claims that we have put too much premium on man’s *self-consciousness* to the point that meaning and truth are on the construction, constitution, and monopoly of the self.⁴³ This is why Ricoeur criticizes Descartes since the latter forgot to critique the self-consciousness’ credibility. Descartes instead triumphs his victory over sensible things by his

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* Emphasis is mine.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁴² See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 180.

⁴³ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* trans. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

universal methodic doubt at the expense of subjecting self-consciousness itself into doubt. Certainly, this is the attitude of the spectator toward an artwork. The human person has the tendency to constrict, limit, and reduce an artwork into a mere conceptualization of knowledge. Ricoeur initiates a phenomenological study of attention in order to introduce a proper and more just treatment and appreciation of art. Through such an attentive disposition, art is neither compromised nor constrained. More importantly, Ricoeur saw the lack of attentiveness of the modern person that has somehow forgotten to recognize the *otherness* in the art.

The inability to recognize otherness stems from a problem of attention. Ricoeur observed that most epistemologists and scientists especially psychologists customarily undermine an essential characteristic of attention.⁴⁴ For example, Wilhelm Wundt declares that “the world as we know it is composed uniquely of our representations.”⁴⁵ In this way, Wundt has reduced attention to a sort of sub-function of consciousness—“nothing other than a reflexive operation, a second-degree consciousness, a redoubling of representation.”⁴⁶ Hence, attention, following Wundt’s thought, is still a captive of self-consciousness. To refute Wundt’s understanding of attention, Ricoeur rightly considers attention to be a discrete manner of *perceiving* for,

To perceive is not “to have a representation in consciousness” nor “to be conscious of a representation.” To perceive is to be aware of [connaître] objects, of the world. When I perceive, I am not occupied with myself, I am not aware of myself. I am outside myself.⁴⁷

Attention, then, *perceives* the art in a way that it is not merely represented by the consciousness. Attention is purely to be *aware* of the presence, the majestic existence of the work of art. Thus, to be attentive is not to be occupied or to be aware of oneself, but rather, being open, aware, and available to the revelation of the work of art.

To further elucidate the significant role of attention in appreciating art, Ricoeur clarifies what attention is not in terms of paying attention to one’s perceptions but rather to what one perceives. What the spectator sees is what one

⁴⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “Attention: A Phenomenological Study of Attention and its Philosophical connection,” 24. In this essay, Ricoeur has cited Alexander Shand who claims that “attention gets expressed by a verb: “pay attention to,” which calls for an object, just like hearing, smelling, looking at, meditating.” (Alexander F. Shand, “An Analysis of Attention,” *Mind* vol. 3, no. 12 (Oct 1984): 449-473, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2247847>)

⁴⁵ Wilhelm Wundt, *Grundzüge der physiologische Psychologie*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1874), Introduction.

⁴⁶ Ricoeur, “Attention: A Phenomenological Study of Attention and its Philosophical connection,” 24.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

looks at, what one hears is what one listens to.⁴⁸ In perceiving an artwork, the attentive spectator does not pay attention to his consciousness of the artwork, of what one thinks about the artwork. Instead, one pays attention to the artwork perceived. Ricoeur reiterates that “attention is perception and *not a reflection, a redoubling*. Must we not say that to *pay attention is a way of perceiving?*”⁴⁹ This question that Ricoeur poses answers itself for attention indeed allows things to appear to us better, it allows the works of art to radiate their pure meaning and beauty “insofar as we are more attentive to them and that the art of thinking clearly in which logic and ethics are conjoined consists in paying attention as much as possible.”⁵⁰ Being attentive toward art then makes one perceive the unperceivable. It enables one to go beyond the hither side which is not normally seen and spoken—“attention is a kind of action; it ‘accentuates,’ ‘brings about,’ in a sense ‘chooses.’ It makes something about the object *appear*.”⁵¹ From this, we can now construe attention as a kind of availability and receptivity rather than the construction and constriction of knowing. In this way, the spectator is not the producer of the artwork’s meaning but is simply its witness.

Ricoeur, however, avows to the complexity of attention for

the nature of the soul is such that it hardly attends for more than a moment to a single thing; hence, as soon as our attention turns from the reasons which show us the thing is good for us, and we merely keep in our memory the thought that it appeared desirable to us, we can call up before our mind some other reason to make us doubt it, and so suspend our judgment, and perhaps even form a contrary judgment.⁵²

One can rightly ask, how is it to be attentive amidst the plurality of things to attend to. Ricoeur ironically yet cleverly responded that our attention is captured. Most of the time, we do not pay attention to something or someone because we tend to pay attention to everything or to everyone at the same time. This is why “*Attention implies inattention*.”⁵³ Ricoeur pondered on the thin line demarcating attention from consciousness. He acknowledged the possibility of being attentive only to one side of the picture which totally defeats the main intention of attention. Therefore, “if something draws the whole intention or a large part of it to its side, one cannot be

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Rene Descartes, “Letters of May 2, 1644 to Mesland,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III: *The Correspondence*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 233-234.

⁵³ Ricoeur, “Attention: A Phenomenological Study of Attention and its Philosophical connection,” 50-51. Emphasis is mine.

said to be paying full attention.”⁵⁴ Genuine attention, then, is not just an arbitrary liking of the part and parcel of art but is a paying of attention to the artwork’s wholeness for its true beauty lies in its totality. And to this, Gabriel Marcel is correct in saying that “reverent attentiveness is no doubt what is least perceptual in the soul; it does not consist in regarding something, it is a resting place, an internal restoration.”⁵⁵ Indeed, the concealed truth of art appears only to attentive minds.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Throughout the paper, I have presented the centrality of attention in the movement from aesthetics to ethics in Ricoeur’s ideas. It is now clear that “*the world of the work confronts the world of the spectator of the listener...it overturns expectations and changes horizons...If art did not have, despite its retreat, the capacity to come bursting into our midst, into our world, it would be completely innocuous; it would be struck with insignificance and reduced to sheer entertainment...*”⁵⁷ Ricoeur with André Malraux believes then that: “*Great artists are not the transcribers of the world, they are its rivals.*”⁵⁸ Hence, art does not merely represent the world but changes and transforms the world. Lastly, art summons the human person toward an ethical praxis to the other to the point that “even if I cannot see you, if I cannot touch you, I feel you, you are with me; it would be a denial of you not to be assured of this.”⁵⁹ Our aesthetic experience reorients us to the ethical project of living the good life with and for others.

References

- Descartes, Rene. “Letters of May 2, 1644 to Mesland.” In *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III: *The Correspondence*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Kearney, Richard et. al., *Paul Ricoeur: Honoring and Continuing the Work*. Edited by Farhang Erfani. United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2011.

⁵⁴ Jean Laporte, “Le libre arbitre et l’attention selon saint Thomas,” *Revue de metaphysique et de morale* 41 (1934): 39n citing Aquinas’s De Malo.

⁵⁵ Gabriel Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” in *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Mayra Harari (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 38.

⁵⁶ See Ricoeur, “Attention: A Phenomenological Study of Attention and its Philosophical connection,” 39.

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, “Aesthetic Experience,” 175.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Ricoeur cites here André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953).

⁵⁹ Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” in *The Philosophy of Existence*, 39.

- Laporte, Jean. "Le libre arbitraire et l'attention selon saint Thomas," *Revue de metaphysique et de morale* 41. 1934.
- Levinson, J. "Philosophical Aesthetics: An Overview," in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Malraux, André. *The Voices of Silence*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1953.
- Marcel, Gabriel. "On the Ontological Mystery," in *The Philosophy of Existence*, trans. Mayra Harari. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956.
- McCormick, Peter. "From aesthetic to Ethical experience? Paul Ricoeur's Aesthetics." *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture*. Vol. 10, no. 1 (2006): 111-120, <https://journals.ateneo.edu/index.php/budhi/article/view/418>.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Aesthetic Experience" in *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*. Translated by Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1998.
- . "Creativity of Language," *Philosophy Today*. Vol. 17, no. 2 (Summer: 1973): 100, doi: 10.5840/philtoday197317231.
- . *From Text to Action*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991.
- . *Oneself as Another*. Translated by Kathleen Blamey. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- . *Philosophical Anthropology: Writings and Lecture*. Volume 3. Edited by Johann Michel and Jérôme Porée. Translated by David Pellauer. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2016.
- . *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. Translated by Don Ihde Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974.
- Shand, Alexander F. "An Analysis of Attention." *Mind*. Vol. 3, no. 12 (Oct 1984): 449-473. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2247847>.
- Wundt, Wilhelm. *Grundzüge der physiologische Psychologie*. Vol. 2. Leipzig: Englemann, 1874.