

DUFRENNE AND THE VIRTUAL

as an Aesthetic Category in Phenomenology

Introduction

In the last five to ten years technological progress has fostered the increasing use of the term *virtual*. Especially in the field of computer technology certain interfaces have been developed which are to be subsumed under the notion *virtual reality*. These interfaces, engineered to enhance the interaction between man and computing machine, are to be characterized as a frameless simulation of a universal environment, which may even lead to the construction of sensual input of tactility. We will return to this definition later.

However, the notion of the *virtual*, as we want to demonstrate, may serve as an aesthetic category, which originates in a particular *Ausarbeitung* of phenomenology. As such, it can be applied in analyses by present aesthetic theory. The starting point is a close look at inquiries into aesthetics in relation to new media (art which is generated by means of or with the help of computers and video, thereby engendering works of art which cannot be accounted for in traditional ways). As a result, a certain theoretical inhomogeneity of these inquiries becomes manifest. Various models of explanation like e.g. constructivism¹ are employed in a dispersed, pluralistic manner, and lack precise or rigorous examination of the field of inquiry. Consequently, no generally acknowledged terminology or conceptualisation has been developed and applied. Starting from the smallest, nuclear units and continuing upwards in scale until the comprehensive, general phenomenon is reached, the aesthetic field is simultaneously underdetermined, as obvious gaps in its description (for instance perceptual constitution) seem to indicate,

¹ (cf. Florian Rötzer (1993), *Images Within Images*, or, "From the Image to the Virtual World," in: Timothy Druckrey (ed.), *Iterations: The New Image*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1993, pp.6177)

and overdetermined, as the multitude of competing models of explanation indicates. The collection of essays *Electronic Culture*² from 1996 can be taken as an illustration of this pluralistic approach (plural in its pejorative sense). Either the realm of new media is regarded as a continuation of traditional forms of art by new means, that is, an approach in which the traditional categories are arduously adapted to these expansions of art, or a new conceptual system is brought into being, so the novel phenomena can be described in a precise manner, even in a new vocabulary³. The danger that lies in the first approach is a possible lack of flexibility of its concepts, which eventually will limit its conception of new phenomena; the danger of the latter consists in the lack of an underlying, supporting conceptual system to simultaneously constrain and organise the production of new notions.

In this quandary, we will try to present the development of a different perspective which may offer a solution intended to unify the two approaches. In terms of the category of the virtual, which is not widely used by phenomenological aesthetics, phenomenology may offer a possible way to answer both demands: the demand for conceptual rigour and the demand for adaptability to new constellations and facts. In order to give an account of this concept we are going to give a short summary of phenomenological aesthetics, its main representatives and its main concepts. Mikel Dufrenne's never tiring efforts in phenomenological aesthetics will be outlined; furthermore we will try to explain how the notion of the virtual, especially in the definition given by Dufrenne, can be applied to aesthetics in new media; an example of art in this new media will illustrate how the virtual can contribute to aesthetics as an efficient category. Finally a short discussion will present some ideas of the chances and possibilities of an aesthetics supplemented with phenomenological rigor and phenomenological categories.

Phenomenological Aesthetics

² (Timothy Druckrey (ed.), *Electronic Culture*, New York: Aperture 1996)

³ (cf. Villem Flusser, Jean Baudrillard)

Where phenomenology, if at all, deals with art phenomena it deviates from traditional aesthetics which sometimes still uses Kantian categories. The primacy of perception in phenomenology hints at a preference of sensuality as aisthesis. Hence it may be worthwhile to take a look at phenomenological positions in regard to aesthetics.

Generally it can be said that phenomenology has laid emphasis on various aspects of art. A few of its attempts lead to quite independent art theories, such as the aesthetics of reception following Roman Ingarden's analyses of literary works of art. Starting points in Husserl's writings with regard to the project of a phenomenological aesthetics are, among others, the theory of the image, the role of phantasy, and the neutralisation of the relation to reality.

To give an impression of what phenomenological aesthetics is about, and to render a survey of the notions and concepts engaged, we will present in a short outline its main representatives and their ideas. The historical beginnings of a phenomenological aesthetics which Husserl did not explicitly elaborate in his work are sketched with a few names: Moritz Geiger⁴ expands Husserl's focus on the object as such to aesthetics by the concepts of empathy (*Einfühlung*) and aesthetic enjoyment, which he mainly derives from empirical psychology. Fritz⁵ emphasises, in a way similar to Heidegger, the artistic being-in-the-mood (*Gestimmt*

Sein) and the relation of art to religion and metaphysics. Oskar Becker⁶ gives an account of the work of art as a hyperontological phenomenon, which cannot be considered simply a past fact, but remains beyond history. Yet these approaches are far from being systematic or complete, which perhaps is the reason for not having engendered further discussion. In comparison, Roman Ingarden⁷ is an exception, as he triggers the development of the above-mentioned aesthetics of reception, which elaborated his theory

⁴ (*Die Bedeutung der Kunst*, 1916)

⁵ Kaufmann (*Das Reich des Schönen*, 1960)

⁶ (*Dasein und Dawesen*, 1963)

⁷ (*The Literary Work of Art*, 1931)

of the interpretatory gap to an impressive theory of the processes in a reader's consciousness. As a matter of fact, Martin Heidegger has to be mentioned in this context, since he began his work as an assistant of Husserl in the phenomenological tradition. His contribution to aesthetics in general, as original and substantial as it may be (above all, his analyses of the work of art and of language as *Dichtung*), does not share many of the conventional features of phenomenological inquiry (focus on intentionality, on acts of consciousness, and so on), so it can be skipped here.

With regard to the phenomenological tradition in France, where the question of aesthetics fell on more fruitful grounds in terms of interest and elaboration, one has to mention Jean

Paul Sartre's concept of imagination. In his work imagination is not, as in Husserl's theory, only a modification of the primordial *Urmodus* (arch-mode) of perception, but has a power of its own, which results in the de-realisation, the *néantisation* of the real world. At the same time imagination is one of the forms which render possible a process of consciousness between subject and object. Sartre distinguishes this imagining consciousness from the realizing consciousness of perception. According to Sartre, the latter has infinitely rich nuances, whereas the former is determined by an impoverished state. The work of art, for Sartre, is transformed into an unreal thing, i.e. it appears only as aesthetic object, and only under the condition that the spectator's consciousness changes into an imagining consciousness. What we conceive as the work of art, as the real object in space-time, or as the real perceived musical performance, is for Sartre only the real analogon for the unreal object of consciousness, the aesthetic object. The material quality of the work of art is the agent evoking the aesthetic object. Sartre has to be praised for having introduced sensuality into the discussion of aesthetic experience.

The other great figure in French phenomenology is, of course, Maurice Merleau

Ponty. His fundamental contributions to the phenomenological movement, or rather to the idea it represents, are manifold. We only will recall the most important ones which treat

problems of the aesthetic field. The first thing that has to be mentioned, when Merleau-Ponty's view on painting is considered, is the emphasis on a lived perspective, on the relation between the living body and the visible world. In this way, he abandons the univocal, planimetric perspective. In the works of painters he tries to extract meaning which refers to qualities that seem rather alien to painting, such as the gesturing and speaking of the subject. In the same attempt Merleau-Ponty points out the primacy of solidity and constancy over secondary qualities like color and tangibility in a context of the subject's life itself. It is the fusion of the self and the world which, according to Merleau-Ponty, takes place in artistic creation, and not an imitation or subjective projection of the artist's imagination. Moreover, this approach allows for the overdetermination and abundance of meaning in an artwork. The notion of style as a system of equivalences an artist creates in order to grapple with the visible world (the coherent deformation by which he concentrates the still scattered meaning of his perception and brings about its explicit existence⁸,

and the intertwining of the visible with the invisible mark the subsequent drifting towards questions of ontology. This orientation towards ontological problems is a tendency he shares with the French philosopher Mikel Dufrenne, who has to be praised as the main contributor to the project of a phenomenological aesthetics.

Mikel Dufrenne

Mikel Dufrenne's *Phénoménologie de l'expérience esthétique* (1953)⁹, is a systematic and comprehensive attempt to penetrate the processes and layers in experiencing aesthetic phenomena of all kinds. In later years he dedicated a great part of his studies to aesthetic questions, such as *Le Poétique* (1963) in the following decade. Between the 1967 and 1981 a series of essays with the title *Esthétique et philosophie* was published in three volumes. 1987 the

⁸ Maurice-Merleau Ponty, *Signs*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1964, pp. 54f.

⁹ *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press 1987, p. 5.

book *L'oeil et l'oreille* (The Eye and the Ear) treated questions of the sensuous and focused on the mutual relation among the senses with regard to lived aesthetic experience.

Moreover we would like to draw attention to the fact that in the German speaking world Dufrenne is not as widely known as in England and North America. Until today not one single translation of his books into German has been published. Due to this fact Dufrenne is not widely studied among phenomenological thinkers in Austria, Switzerland and Germany.

In order to give an overall impression, we will sketch the main concepts of the *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. In this book, Dufrenne aims at the correlativity of aesthetic object and aesthetic experience, which can be described only in their mutual relations. Since aesthetic experience takes place in a subject, more precisely in a spectator-subject, Dufrenne stresses the aspect of the recipient and not that of the producer of art. The aesthetic object is the work of art accomplished by aesthetic perception. The sensuous is the key concept for the aesthetic object, since here one does not deal with an object's raw, expressionless sensuousness (of sense-constituents), but with a sensuous which is instrumental in the structure of the aesthetic object. The sensuous is the common act of the sensing and the sensed¹⁰.

Furthermore, the meaning of the aesthetic object is given as a whole in the sensuous and does not refer to something that lies outside the object as with action or knowledge. This meaning organizes the aesthetic object within the limits of spatio-temporal patterns. By means of potential internal relations a world is expressed, which, according to Dufrenne, qualifies the aesthetic object as a quasi-subject. The inexhaustible abundance of the aesthetic object in its multitude of actual and potential relations within itself and with the spectator justify speaking of a world as well as giving it the status of a quasi-subject.

This world within the aesthetic object has an expressivity of its own, since it is capable of rendering expression. This feature, one

¹⁰ Mikel Dufrenne, *In the Presence of the Sensuous*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press 1987, p.5.

of Dufrenne's most original contributions¹¹

is based on affective qualities which enhance the status of the quasi-subjective and make it possible to establish a typology of aesthetic objects. For the function of the affective quality, like the meaning of which it is the expressive counterpart, is precisely to organize the sensuous¹².

On the subject's side, Dufrenne introduces feeling (sentiment), which enables the communion of subject and object in aesthetic experience. Feeling operates as transcendental organ of the recipient, dealing with the expressivity of the work of art and locating it in his or her presence. This interplay of aesthetic object and perceiving subject in aesthetic experience also has a transcendental dimension: the affective quality of the aesthetic object even constitutes the expressed world and can thus be looked upon as cosmological a priori. In the perceiving subject as well certain affective categories can be identified, e.g. the sublime, tragic, the just, which we know a priori, and which Dufrenne calls existential a priori. In this transcendental context, the term virtual emerges for the first time: the existential a priori is a knowledge a priori, it has been always already possessed, thus it is virtual in the sense of being a possibility, a knowledge that has not yet been actualized. In his late work Husserl stressed the importance of habitus and sedimentation for his general concept of the life-world. Both of these terms are comparable with Dufrenne's virtual knowledge, to the extent that they are able to presuppose a realm of habits or achievements in consciousness which is not directly accessible by the latter's activities. Dufrenne remarked on this in The Notion of the A Priori: Now, the only difference between the a priori, understood as a virtuality and as a habit, is that virtuality is a nonacquired habit, even if it comes to light only through experience. Virtuality is the ground from which habits arise; it determines the facility and rapidity of their execution¹³.

¹¹ Edward S. Casey, Forward, in: Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, p.xxvii.

¹² Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, p.xxxiii.

¹³ Mikel Dufrenne, The Notion of the A Priori, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1966, pp. 155f.

This work is an attempt to liberate the concept of the a priori from the restrictions of Kant and to apply it in his position of a post-critical naturalism¹⁴.

As far as the meaning and function of the virtual and of virtuality are concerned, Dufrenne characterizes them as a not yet actualized knowledge, a possibility on the side of the subject in opposition to a possibility on the side of the real and of nature: For we must not confuse the virtual with the possible here. In the subject, the virtual already exists, even if it is not actualized or made explicit. The opportunity to be made explicit as knowledge is proposed by the world, since the subjective a priori is nothing more than the comprehension of the objective a priori: the subjective a priori remains virtual because the objective a priori remains possible¹⁵.

At this point in our account of Dufrenne's aesthetics, it might be useful to stop and turn to a short lexical outline of the term "virtual," which is used in different contexts. "Virtual" derives from the Latin "virtus," meaning strength or virtue. Its literal translation is "in possession of certain physical virtues." Its customary use would be as being such in essence or effect though not formally recognized or admitted, or, in physics, of, relating to, or being a hypothetical particle whose existence is inferred from indirect evidence, e.g. virtual photons¹⁶.

(moreover, the theory of science in a Bachelardian way, an *épistémologie*, may certainly contribute to the notion of the virtual, if Bachelard's emphasis on indirect inference is considered; according to him, apparatuses and experimental devices of natural science already represent filters or media which permit only indirect or mediated evidence); in the 19th century, with the developing science of optics, the virtual image is described as an image (as seen in a

¹⁴ Edward S. Casey, Translator's Introduction, in The Notion of the A Priori, p.xxiv.

¹⁵ Mikel Dufrenne, The Notion of the A Priori, p. 202.

¹⁶ Moreover, the theory of science in a Bachelardian way, an *épistémologie*, may certainly contribute to the notion of the virtual, if Bachelard's emphasis on indirect inference is considered. According to Bachelard, apparatuses and experimental devices of natural science already represent filters or media which permit only indirect or mediated evidence.