PHENOMENOLOGY, IMAGINATION, AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS......................................................................................................................... v

INTRODUCTION....................................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MODERN PHENOMENOLOGY OF ART ..................... 3

II. THE AESTHETIC OBJECT.................................................................................................................. 19

   Initial Concept of the Aesthetic Object......................................................................................... 19

   The Unique Character of the Aesthetic Object ........................................................................ 23

   Autonomy and the World of the Aesthetic Object ...................................................................... 32

   The Ultimate Concept of the Aesthetic Object .......................................................................... 36

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE......................................................... 40

   Presence and the Primacy of Perception .................................................................................. 41

   Representation and Imagination.................................................................................................. 45

   Reflection and Feeling.................................................................................................................. 48

IV. IMAGINATION AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE......................................................... 55

   Negative and Positive Theories of Imagination ..................................................................... 55

   Mental Action and Imagining .................................................................................................... 59

   The Value of Imagining to Aesthetic Experience .................................................................. 66
Aesthetic Experience and Photography: A Demonstration .................. 72

Concluding Remarks .............................................................................. 99

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................... 105

TABLE OF FIGURES

Fig. 1 – Hyerés, France (1931) ........................................................................ 21

Fig. 2 – Torcello, near Venice (1953) ................................................................. 76

Fig. 3 – Siphonos, Greece (1961) ................................................................. 80

Fig. 4 – Tib 2 (2013) .................................................................................. 90

Fig. 5 – Ascending 2 (2013) ........................................................................ 94
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INTRODUCTION

There are many disciplines in which a large amount of learning takes place in the process of *doing* the discipline in question. For example, success in the discipline of mathematics requires the learner to do a large number of various math problems in order to get a better understanding of the subject area. The study and appreciation of art and beauty, or aesthetics, is such a discipline. One learns about and cultivates an appreciation for art in *experiencing* art works. Naturally, the primacy of experience in the study of art lends itself well to phenomenology, or the study of the structures of experience.

From the start it is evident that art and phenomenology are interconnected in many ways. In the spirit of this connection, this thesis explores the relationship between art and phenomenology and investigates the structure of consciousness that constitutes aesthetic experience. The main goal in what follows is to show that imagination is a vital part of aesthetic experience and that the relationship between imagining and aesthetic experience is one of mutual reciprocity. Moreover, I argue that this reciprocity has the potential of having positive implications for both imagining and aesthetic experience in many instances, using examples from the art of photography to showcase this reciprocity.

There are four chapters in this thesis. Chapter one gives a brief background of the relationship between phenomenology and art, mentioning key concepts from
philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, and Martin Heidegger. With the goal of exploring aesthetic experience in mind, the second chapter discusses a vital distinction made by Mikel Dufrenne between the work of art and the aesthetic object to explain what exactly it is that the spectator experiences in perceiving a work of art. Building off of this distinction, chapter three investigates the structure of aesthetic experience and the role of imagination in experiencing art. Finally, chapter four integrates Dufrenne’s concept of the aesthetic object and Edward Casey’s notion of imagination into an aesthetic framework one can use to appreciate art. I use the art of photography to elucidate this framework; in particular the street-style photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson and the abstract, urban, experimental photography of Peter Rea. The ultimate goal is to give an account of aesthetic experience that positively integrates the mental act of imagining and gives the spectator one way among many of appreciating works of art.
CHAPTER 1

THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MODERN PHENOMENOLOGY OF ART

Before we begin to analyze the relations between phenomenology, art, and imagination, it will be helpful to briefly discuss a few of the main influential aesthetic theories in philosophy in order to set the stage for further analysis.

Although the scope of aesthetic theory is quite staggering, there are three dominant philosophers in the history of aesthetics that deserve mention with regard to this project: Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, and Martin Heidegger. Although these three philosophers do not constitute an exhaustive list of aesthetic theory that motivates a phenomenology of art, they nonetheless contribute notions that are of vital importance to the systems of phenomenology that will constitute the analysis in further chapters of this inquiry.

The work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is important for many reasons, but it was his Copernican revolution of philosophy that radically changed the course of philosophical history. By attempting to combine rationalism and empiricism into a coherent system, Kant constructed a new model of mind and reality that aimed at addressing the finitude of human experience. Under Kant’s system, the subject is never wholly detached from the objective world but is essentially *grounded* in the
world and *actively* engaged in it. This notion alone can be seen as one of the most monumental and influential contributions to modern philosophy.

It is Kant’s analysis in the *Critique of Aesthetical Judgment*, however, that is of prime interest to this project. Instead of treating aesthetics as an isolated subject of inquiry, Kant’s philosophy incorporates aesthetics as a central component of human experience that is equal in dignity to the theoretical experience elaborated in his *Critique of Pure Reason* and the practical experience explained in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. This positive treatment of aesthetical judgments of taste can be seen as the catalyst for modern aesthetics in that it suggests that aesthetics has philosophical *meaning* as opposed to being inferior to reason or purely subjective in character. That is, in Kant’s third Critique we see one of the first accounts of aesthetics as a legitimate philosophical topic worthy of being included in a philosophical system. Kant’s contribution to aesthetics is therefore highly influential. For instance, many subsequent philosophers of art such as G.W.F. Hegel, Martin Heidegger, and Mikel Dufrenne\(^1\) have criticized and developed Kantian themes from the *Critique of Judgment*.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of Kant’s aesthetic theory that continued to evolve as a theme for further thought on art was his definition of the aesthetic as an aspect of human experience grounded in the free play of the *imagination*. Kant’s three Critiques are generally viewed as a critical philosophy that attempts to

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\(^1\) These are only a few philosophers of many that have elaborated on Kant’s aesthetic ideas, however these three are noted in particular to show the ways in which Kant’s aesthetic theory can be seen as generating much interest in the field of phenomenology.
respond to the empiricist and rationalist traditions in philosophy. For example, Clive Cazeaux states,

Kant’s philosophy is ‘critical’ in a certain sense. His use of the term is allied to his assertion of human finitude. ‘Critique’, for Kant, refers to an examination of the scope and limits of our cognitive powers; in particular, a demonstration of both the possibility of knowledge within experience and the impossibility of knowledge beyond the limits of experience. As such, it is a reply to the skepticism characteristic of empiricist philosophy and to the dogmatic metaphysics of rationalism.\(^2\)

In his critical philosophy, Kant argues that the human mind possesses certain mental powers, such as reflection, understanding, and imagining. He then explains human experience as being a synthesis of these cognitive capacities and the empirical, sensible conditions of the world. Thus on Kant’s view, experience is constituted by a combination of the rational, cognitive capacities of the mind and the sensible, empirical conditions of the world.

According to Kant, in experiencing and contemplating the beauty of an object, the mind undergoes a “free play of the faculties of the imagination and the understanding.”\(^3\) That is, in judgments of taste, the imagination is freed from its subservient relation to reason and the understanding that we see elaborated by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Instead of forming a determinate judgment about a beautiful object that assigns that particular object to a specific concept, Kant argues that the absence of a determinate concept prompts the imagination to form an indeterminate concept and a *reflective* judgment. This is where Kant’s notion of purposiveness without a purpose comes to the fore. In the face of a beautiful object,


Kant asserts that the viewer uses her imagination to form a reflective judgment about the object’s formal qualities, which, according to Kant, resemble the formal qualities we see in nature (i.e., the object’s *purposiveness*). Thus Kant explains that the beautiful object, although not tied to any *specific* concept, is that which excites the free play of the imagination through the play of forms in a way that is pleasing to the viewer. Although Kant’s idea of art as necessarily naturalistic and formal is questionable (especially with regard to abstract and modern art), his introduction of the imagination in aesthetic experience still continues to be a theme for philosophies of art.

Furthermore, Kant holds that the subjective pleasant experience that the beautiful object elicits then moves the viewer to form an objective judgment about the beauty of the object. This objective judgment is supposed to lay hold to a universal judgment when paired with other similar judgments, due to the notion that the viewer of the beautiful object judges that everyone else *should* also find that object beautiful. Thus on Kant’s view, “the beautiful is that which, *apart from a concept*, is cognized as object of a necessary delight.” Kant’s notion of the freedom of the mental faculties and the primary role they play had extensive influence for subsequent philosophers, most notably those who constitute the tradition of German idealism.

G.W.F. Hegel’s (1770-1831) philosophy of beauty and art is tied in many respects to Kant’s notions discussed above. However, Hegel ultimately believes that Kant’s philosophy was a form of subjectivism, in that Kant holds knowledge to be

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reduced to appearances of the objective world, or *noumena* (things-in-themselves), which are beyond the subject’s reach.\(^5\) The move that Hegel makes involves the view that knowledge and reality are actually *one* in the sense that they are parts of a much larger whole. That is, knowledge and reality consist of what Hegel calls “the Absolute Idea,” an ultimate synthesis composed of the dynamic interplay between subjective thought and objective substance. Jack Kaminsky explains the function of the Absolute Idea in *Hegel on Art* when he states,

> Hegel repeatedly insists that the Absolute Idea functions as a telic agent in all human endeavor. It causes us to search continually for more embracing ways of explaining sense observations. It makes us assume that every phenomenon can finally be described in some all-inclusive system... The Absolute Idea is the hidden form that seeks to obtain full realization in the matter of experience. It is the hidden standard which causes us to ask whether a given explanation is *really* satisfactory, or whether a proposed hypothesis will *really* work.\(^6\)

Thus Hegel’s philosophy can be seen as a sort of part-whole idealism in which subjectivity and objectivity dialectically give rise to an ongoing procession of thought en route to the Absolute Idea. Central to his philosophy is the notion that a whole, in order to be a whole, must consist of a unity of parts.

Hegel argues that consciousness unfolds in this dialectic procession of thought, in which there is a constant and recurrent progression of *thesis, antithesis*, and *synthesis*. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he writes,

> Consciousness recognizes that it is the untruth occurring in perception that falls within it. But by this very recognition it is able at once to supersede this

\(^5\) It is, of course, a topic of debate as to whether or not Kant truly believed that things-in-themselves were ungraspable, but the key point is that Hegel took him to be committed to this notion.

untruth; it distinguishes its apprehension of the truth from the untruth of its perception, [and] corrects this untruth.\textsuperscript{7}  

Put simply, when one utters a judgment about a given object, one forms a \textit{thesis} about that object. One then comes to realize that one’s consciousness of that object and the statement one utters about it are \textit{incomplete} in a certain sense, that is, there is more to the object than is perceived. This is the \textit{antithesis}. One then realizes something about the object that was not previously recognized, and then forms a \textit{synthesis}, or a new thesis that is the offspring of the prior two phenomena.

The importance of Hegel’s philosophy, as in Kant’s, lies not only in the method he undertakes to describe consciousness but also in the significant role that art plays in his overall system. For instance, in describing Hegel’s aesthetic theory, Clive Cazeaux states,

\begin{quote}
Art’s ultimate role in Hegel’s system is to be the antithesis of thought: a representation which takes shape as an independent object opposite consciousness, and which consciousness recognizes as being both of itself and other than itself.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

Thus upon contemplating a piece of art, one recognizes that the concept in the work is both of oneself and foreign to oneself. It is of oneself in that it contains a \textit{Concept} or part of \textit{the Idea} but it is also foreign to oneself in the sense that it is opposed to self-consciousness (it is not \textit{part of self-consciousness}). This role of art, however, is not completely negative. Cazeaux writes,

\begin{quote}
In the dialectical unfolding of consciousness, there is the necessary antithetical moment when the mind becomes aware that what is immediately before it is not entirely true or adequate, and so it is motivated to utter a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{8} Cazeaux, p. 9.
Further judgment. [Thus] art is the stimulation of enquiry through material estrangement.\(^9\)

Hence Hegel sees art as *sensuously* displaying the necessary relationship that consciousness has with external reality; it is “material substance that has been imbued with mind” in that it contains part of the Absolute Idea implemented by the artist.\(^10\) As such, Hegel gives art increased meaning in that he argues that the beauty at which art aims is one of the ways of expressing truth, since art is the sensuous display of the Absolute Idea by the human Spirit. The term ‘Spirit’ is essentially the human capacity for thought, in that human thought is unique and distinguishes us from other forms of life.

Hegel’s philosophy of art is essentially an attempt at describing the history of each main historical period’s attempt at expressing the Idea, through an act of the human Spirit, in sensuous form. According to Hegel, the history of fine art consists of three main divisions: the symbolic, the classical, and the romantic. In the symbolic stage, the Idea is too abstract to express in sensuous form. Hegel’s main example for symbolic art is architecture, such as the Egyptian pyramids, which he claims are an attempt to sensuously express an inchoate and incomplete concept of the Idea.

Hegel then argues that in the sculpture of Classical art, the Idea is given its most adequate and concrete embodiment of form. This is due to the fact that Classical Greek sculpture is particularly adept at displaying the human body in an ideal fashion, which Hegel believes is the most sensuous display of the Spirit. However, although in Classical sculpture the Idea and the concrete sensuous display

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exemplify the height of beauty due to their harmony, they are still embodied in particular matter and thus “are burdened with an abstraction” in the sense that they are not fully spiritual in form.¹¹

The form of art that Hegel classifies as the highest is Romantic art, which can be further divided into painting, music, and poetry. These three forms of artistic expression are particularly prized by Hegel in that they are able to represent the Idea while at the same time resisting the particularity of concrete form. For instance, painting is restricted to a two-dimensional surface and thus resists being embodied in complete concrete spatiality. Music is purely derived from sound, which is devoid of spatial restraint, and poetry, Hegel’s highest classification among the Romantic arts, consists of what he calls “sound as the mere indication of inner intuitions and ideas.”¹² These classifications are important in that they show the idealistic nature of Hegel’s thought and the descriptive way that he explains art in relation to human consciousness.

The last philosopher we will discuss en route to our main analysis is Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Keeping with the common theme of art as a meaningful aspect of human experience described in the philosophies of Kant and Hegel thus far, Heidegger elevates art to the highest possible position in his philosophical system. In Being and Time, Heidegger argues that we have left behind the traditional, ancient Greek concept of Being as a primal ontological principle, and due to our universal application of the term to basically everything in existence, we have

¹² Ibid, pp. 86.
clouded the true nature of our Being as humans. We see in Heidegger’s philosophy a re-assertion of the Kantian suggestion that we do not experience the world through “sense-impressions” which are wholly detached from us as subjects; rather, experience is a type of inquiry about the world that presupposes a sort of intertwining between subject and object.

Heidegger’s thesis depends on the notion of ‘Dasein’, the German term for ‘being-there’. Heidegger uses the term ‘Dasein’ interchangeably with the term ‘Being-in-the-world’, which describes the basic nature of human existence or the default mode of Dasein’s being. Albeit that his answer is very different, essentially Heidegger can be seen as attempting to reinvigorate the Kantian project of showing the conditions necessary for human experience as such, that is, what the essential characteristics of existing are for human beings. Ultimately these essential characteristics are rooted in Being, which designates Dasein’s unique, ontological way of being-in-the-world that is distinct from the ontic being of other objects (beings) in the world. He states,

Hence Being, as that which is asked about, must be exhibited in a way of its own, essentially different from that which is discovered... Being lies in the fact that something is, and in its Being as it is; in Reality; in presence-at-hand; in subsistence; in validity; in Dasein; in the ‘there-is’.

And further,

Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing, access to it – all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry, and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves. Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity – the inquirer – transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity’s mode of Being; and as such it gets its essential

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character from what is inquired about – namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term “Dasein”.\textsuperscript{14}

Thus according to Heidegger, the Kantian project of deriving the conditions necessary for human experience can be accomplished by examining Dasein’s unique way of being-in-the-world. The way Heidegger attempts to arrive at Being is through his notion of what phenomenology is, which is vital to this project as well.

In order to grasp Heidegger’s notion of phenomenology more securely, a couple of concepts are worthy of explanation. The first is the concept of intentionality, developed from the philosophers Franz Brentano (1838-1917) and Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). This concept holds that human experience is always intentional, that is, it is always directed towards something. According to the concept of intentionality, there is no autonomous, Cartesian subject that exists independently from experience because all experience is always already involved in a project (i.e. directed toward something). In a way, this mirrors Kant’s notion of the finitude of human experience; however, we begin to see with Brentano and Husserl the notion of the intentional act as primary, and the division of subject and object is a result of reflection on experience. This notion characterizes one of the ways in which phenomenology deviates from Kantian thought.

The next important concept is the idea of truth as \textit{aletheia} or unconcealedness. According to Heidegger, our common understanding of truth as the Roman \textit{veritas} or correspondence to the facts covers up or conceals the ancient Greek notion of truth as having a primordial connection with Being. That is, in

viewing truth as the correspondence of a concept to an objective fact or state of affairs, human beings have forgotten that in order for there to be objective facts that the truth can correspond to, there must first be a subjective truth or uncovering which lets truth come into being.

Heidegger describes phenomenology as a combination of the ancient Greek terms ‘phenomenon’ (φαινομένον) and ‘logos’ (λόγος). He states,

The expression ‘phenomenon’ signifies that which shows itself in itself, the manifest. Accordingly the φαινομένα or ‘phenomena’ are the totality of what lies in the light of day or can be brought to the light – what the Greeks sometimes identified simply with τὰ ὄντα (entities).

On Heidegger’s view, logos is not strictly a translation of ‘reason’, ‘judgment’, or ‘concept’, but takes the form of discourse (apophansis) or “letting something be seen,” i.e. letting entities be perceived. He states,

Logos as “discourse” means rather the same as δῆλον (deloun): to make manifest what one is ‘talking about’ in one’s discourse... When fully concrete, discoursing (letting something be seen) has the character of speaking (Sprechens)- vocal proclamation in words. The logos is ϕωνή (phoné), and ineed, ϕωνή μετὰ φαντασίας (phoné meta phantasias) – an utterance in which something is sighted in each case.

Thus Heidegger’s conception of phenomenology is characterized as “apophainesthai ta phainomena,” or “letting that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself.” Put simply, on Heidegger’s view, phenomenology allows for an entity to show itself in the “how” of its unconcealedness. Heidegger writes,

What is to be demonstrated is solely the Being-uncovered (Entdeckt-sein) of the entity itself – that entity in the “how” of its uncoveredness. This

16 Ibid, p. 56, my emphasis.
17 Ibid, p. 58.
uncoveredness is confirmed when that which is put forward in the assertion (namely the entity itself) shows itself as that very same thing. “Confirmation” signifies the entity’s showing itself in its selfsameness.¹⁸ The confirmation is accomplished on the basis of the entity’s showing itself. This is possible only in such a way that the knowing which asserts and gets confirmed is, in its ontological meaning, itself a Being-towards Real entities, and a Being that uncovers.¹⁹

Being-true as Being-uncovering (Heidegger’s conception of aletheia) is possible “only on the basis of Being-in-the-world.”²⁰ Thus, the concept of truth as aletheia is grounded in Dasein’s basic mode of Being-in-the-world (the basic state of Dasein).

Furthermore, Heidegger states,

“Phenomenology’ neither designates the object of its researches, nor characterizes the subject-matter thus comprised. The word merely informs us of the “how” with which what is to be treated in this science gets exhibited and handled. To have a science ‘of’ phenomena means to grasp its objects in such a way that everything about them which is up for discussion must be treated by exhibiting it directly and demonstrating it directly.²¹

With the basic view of Heidegger’s conception of phenomenology in mind, we can now turn to his treatment of art.

Following Kant and Hegel, Heidegger continues the trend of giving aesthetics a superior role in philosophy and getting at the truth. However, given Heidegger’s conception of truth as aletheia, art enjoys a position in Heidegger’s philosophy that it never previously reached. Art is true, on Heidegger’s view, because it displays the tension or dynamic interplay between concealment and disclosure that is central to his method of phenomenological enquiry discussed above. There are two elements

¹⁹ Heidegger, Being and Time, p. 261.
that are essential to Heidegger’s notion of truth as unconcealment. The first is the term ‘world’, which is to be thought of in an ontological and historical way. On Heidegger’s view the term ‘world’ designates how a work opens up or discloses a realm or space that is characteristic of a particular being. The second is the term ‘earth’, which Heidegger describes as a ground or foundation on which man “bases his dwelling.”

Heidegger states,

> What the word [earth] says is not to be associated with the idea of a mass of matter deposited somewhere, or with the merely astronomical idea of a planet. Earth is that whence the arising brings back and shelters everything that arises without violation. In the things that arise, earth is present as the sheltering agent.

In producing and displaying a work of art, the artist effectively composes and discloses a world, and this world is in an essential strife with the earth. The two parties are set up against each other in the work, but the relationship is not one of discord or dispute; the two parties do not destroy each other. Each party carries the other beyond itself in the sense that in the display of strife, both parties disclose a certain ontological truth. The world of the work is always set up from the earth, and as such the earth jets through or reinforces the work. The work strives to escape the earth’s restraints, and this strife displays the unique ontological being of what is depicted in the work.

Heidegger’s famous example of this disclosure of truth in art is his description of Van Gogh’s painting of a peasant’s shoes. The truth of the painting does not lie in the fact that the shoes are representative of an actual pair of peasant shoes.

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shoes in the world of things, rather the truth lies in the disclosure of the shoes and their use-life or equipmentality. In the work’s portrayal of peasant shoes, we experience the world of the peasant woman and the strife that this world is in with the earth. In describing this revelation, Heidegger states, “This painting spoke. In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be.” According to Heidegger, the ability of art to throw new light on ordinary things in a unique way, such as we see in Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of ordinary peasant shoes, is one way in which truth can be revealed. We will see that Mikel Dufrenne’s method of describing the aesthetic object relies on Heidegger’s notion of disclosing a world.

Ultimately Heidegger argues that art discloses truth most adequately when it is poetic in nature. He states,

> Truth, as the clearing and concealing of what is, happens in being composed, as a poet composes a poem. All art, as the letting happen of the advent of truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry.\(^{25}\)

However it is important to note that by the term ‘poetry’, Heidegger is not referring to “an aimless imagining of whimsicalities [or] a flight of mere notions and fancies into the realm of the unreal.”\(^{26}\) Rather we should think of poetry here in a broad sense and as associated intimately with language and word. Heidegger speaks of poetry as illuminating projection or a sort of projective saying in which “announcement is made of what it is that beings come into the Open as.”\(^{27}\) We find this sort of poetry in the Homeric epics and in ancient Greek poetry, in which we are

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\(^{25}\) *Ibid*, p. 197. Heidegger’s emphasis.  
\(^{26}\) *Ibid*, p. 197.  
\(^{27}\) *Ibid*, p. 198.
exposed to the world of the characters and the strife of this world with the earth that encloses them and characterizes their place in the world of beings. In speaking of the linguistic work, Heidegger states,

In the tragedy nothing is staged or displayed theatrically, but the battle of the new gods against the old is being fought. The linguistic work, originating in the speech of the people, does not refer to this battle; it transforms the people’s saying so that now every living word fights the battle and puts up for decision what is holy and unholy, what great and what small, what brave and what cowardly, what lofty and what flighty, what master and what slave (see Heraclitus, fragment 53).

Heidegger does not construct a hierarchy of the fine arts like Hegel; rather he simply argues that all art is poetic in nature because verbal language is the most adept at displaying the dynamic tension between world and earth which he discusses in *The Origin of the Work of Art*. As such, the work of art is elevated to the status of being genuinely meaningful in that it provides a way for the viewer to see things in an unusual way, a way that uniquely discloses the tension between world and earth that gives rise to a *clearing* in which things are brought to light or lit up and unconcealed. Heidegger’s methodology and the notion that the work of art discloses a world will re-emerge as important aspects of this thesis.

It is hoped that the discussion above will suffice as providing a brief overview of some important concepts that will be utilized in the following pages. Using phenomenology as our method of analysis, we shall now turn to Mikel Dufrenne’s *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* in order to make an attempt at explaining what exactly the work of art is.
CHAPTER 2

THE AESTHETIC OBJECT

(a) Initial Concept of the Aesthetic Object

The inaugural German phase of phenomenology spurred by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger came to an end with the death of Husserl in 1938 and Heidegger’s isolation in Germany during World War II. However, the end of this first phase of phenomenology gave rise to a new, incredibly rich phase of French phenomenology characterized by many notable philosophers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, and Gabriel Marcel, among others. It was during this golden age of French phenomenology that Mikel Dufrenne’s *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* was written. To date, Dufrenne’s *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* remains the most extensive and comprehensive text on phenomenology and aesthetics extant.

We shall focus on Dufrenne’s aesthetic theory for two important reasons. One is the manner in which Dufrenne characterizes phenomenology. Along with his predecessors and contemporaries in the French tradition, Dufrenne’s conception of phenomenology is grounded in a “return to that fundamental and most concrete level of human experience which the Greeks had called *aisthésis*: sense-experience.” As such, Dufrenne’s *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* represents an analysis of

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aesthetic experience grounded in the openly available areas of human experience such as feeling and perception, allowing aesthetics to be explained in terms of these areas as opposed to being reserved for higher levels of cognition as we see in Kantian aesthetic theory.

The second reason for specifically focusing on Dufrenne’s aesthetic theory is his vital distinction between the work of art and what he calls the *aesthetic object*. According to Dufrenne, what the spectator perceives in aesthetic experience is actually the aesthetic object, which is distinct from the work of art in a crucial respect. We will return to this shortly, but for now let us turn to a detailed account of Dufrenne’s *Phenomenology* in order to grasp what, *exactly*, the spectator experiences in aesthetic experience.

To begin to elucidate Dufrenne’s aesthetic theory, a simple example will suffice. Imagine that you are walking into an art museum, and you enter a visiting exhibition displaying the works of Henri Cartier-Bresson. A particular photograph, *Hyères, France, (1932)*

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29 © Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum Photos
Figure 1.

Upon perceiving the photograph, you get a profound sense of depth descending down towards the street, where the blur of the biker suggests strong movement leftward. Overall the photograph exhibits stellar composition, that is, you can see that Cartier-Bresson placed himself in just the right location and waited for the perfect moment to capture an attractive amalgamation of forms. The question arises - how are we to characterize this photograph as a work of art? Isn’t it simply a picture of a man on a bicycle; a historical document - or is it something more? Is our perception of the work of art distinct from the actual work of art itself? More importantly, does the work need to be perceived to actually be a work of art, or is it
simply always so? These are just a few questions among many that are worthy of explanation.

Dufrenne’s goal is to describe such aesthetic experience in a way that explains what the essential characteristics of such aesthetic experience are. As we mentioned above, Dufrenne’s distinction between the work of art and the aesthetic object is important in this regard. Another important aspect in Dufrenne’s theory is his contention that the spectator is a necessary part of an artwork’s success as a work. That is, in a certain sense the work of art needs the spectator to perceive it in order for it to become an aesthetic object. The distinction between the work of art and the aesthetic object, and the work of art’s need of a spectator, are thus connected, as Edward Casey explains in his forward to Dufrenne’s *Phenomenology*:

The work of art is the perduring structural foundation for the aesthetic object. It has a constant being which is not dependent of being experienced, while the aesthetic object exists only as appearance, that is, only as experienced by the spectator. In its essential thinghood, the work of art can be used for alien purposes – as portraits are sometimes used for the purpose of identifying their subjects as historical personages. As aesthetically perceived, however, the work of art becomes an aesthetic object. It gains a strictly aesthetic, or felt, dimension which it lacked as a work of art.30

Let us unpack this a bit more.

The work of art can be seen as a sort of material substratum that makes up the foundation of the work, such as the stone in sculpture or the pixels and prints in photography. In aesthetically experiencing (i.e. perceiving, feeling, etc.) the work of art, the spectator does not necessarily focus on the work of art as such in terms of its material objectivity. Rather one focuses on what Dufrenne calls the sensuous or

perceptible element (*le sensible*)\(^{31}\), which is composed of the particular forms, colors, notes, etc. that the work *becomes* when perceived aesthetically.

Going back to our example of *Hyéres, France*, we are not solely interested in the material print as it hangs on the wall (i.e. the physical print in terms of the paper or material on which the photograph is printed), we are interested in the *image* that this physical work sets forth. Elements of the photograph such as the sense of depth descending down to the street, the speed of the bicyclist, the sinuous nature of the staircase – all of these, can collectively be seen as the sensuous aspects that come together in a composition that constitutes the photograph. As such, Dufrenne describes the aesthetic object as “a coalescence of sensuous elements.”\(^ {32}\) We will now turn to a more rigorous analysis of this definition by considering the unique characteristics of the aesthetic object.

**b) The Unique Character of the Aesthetic Object**

At this point, we must clarify the ways in which the aesthetic object is distinct from other objects in the world, which is mainly marked by the expressive character of the aesthetic object. This distinction will give us a better understanding of the general nature of the aesthetic object and allow us to move to a more specific analysis of aesthetic experience.

As we hinted at above, Dufrenne asserts that the aesthetic object is distinct from other objects in the world as a result of its *expressive* quality. That is, the job of the aesthetic object is essentially to reveal its creator or the *world* of its creator.

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\(^{31}\) *Ibid*, p. 11.

through the exhibition of the unique organization of sensuous elements such as line, color, sound, etc., that the artist imbues the work with. Cartier-Bresson’s position in his surrounding environment in Hyéres, France places us in front of what he saw, and the particular way he chose this position and focused the camera on certain forms reveals something about his particular character and ontological being. We will return to the notion of a world of the aesthetic object in the next section. For now, we must discuss how the aesthetic object exhibits an expressive quality that is distinct from that of other objects.

The main premise that underlies the conception of the work of art as having a unique expressive quality comes from Dufrenne’s contention that the aesthetic object is a sort of language, that is, as an aesthetic object it expresses characteristics of the artist in a meaningful way. Thus Dufrenne states, “It is impossible for us not to imbue an authentic work with life, not to sense a consciousness behind it which is affiliated with ours and calls out to us. To understand the language of the work is always to understand someone.”

With the main premise above in mind, we can begin by easily discerning the fact that the aesthetic object is different from living beings. There is a common misconception, especially in the arts that directly call on the human body, that the body itself is the aesthetic object. For instance, in a ballet, “Is not the dance in the dancer?” To be sure, the ballet depends on the dancer to be an aesthetic object, but not necessarily; that is, the dancer herself is not the aesthetic object as such.

Dufrenne states,

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34 Ibid, p. 74.
The living beings the dance employs are in its service, lending it their quality as living beings in order to represent life. And life treated aesthetically is not life *simpliciter*, any more than the dancer is an ordinary living being, or Dullin the real Julius Caesar. And if the dancer is in the service of the dance, if he tries to identify himself with it, it is because it is distinct from him. The dance for him is what the text or scenario is for the actor, and the score for the musician. The spectator perceives the dance as realizing itself through the dancer, as having an absolutely imperative need of the dancer in order to appear, yet not as identifying itself with him.35

Thus Dufrenne characterizes arts such as dance as “absolute languages which bespeak only themselves.”36 What the spectator perceives is not the dancer as an aesthetic object; rather, the spectator perceives a sort of world or atmosphere in which “subject, music and choreography cooperate and which forms the soul of the ballet.”37 Recalling Dufrenne’s definition of the aesthetic object, we can say that the aesthetic object pertaining to a ballet would consist of a sensuous display of elements such as form and movement, which constitute a sort of language that the spectator is left to perceive. This language penetrates all art, and applies as well to our example of photography. For instance, recall that we described *Hyéres, France* as exhibiting sensuous features such as movement, geometric lines (in the staircase), and depth that gradually diminishes in clarity. Considered as a unified whole, these sensuous elements make up the aesthetic object.

The next order of business is to discern the difference between the aesthetic object and other ordinary objects such as objects of nature and objects of use. It is certainly the case that we can appreciate the aesthetic qualities of natural objects, such as the vibrant colors of a tree in autumn or the calmness of a lake at dusk. But

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37 *Ibid*, p. 76.
these objects, although often beautiful, are not expressive of an artist and that artist’s being-in-the-world or distinct ontological characteristics. They do not reveal the intention of a creator. The natural sunset does not bear the marks of the hand of humankind like we can readily see in the brushstrokes of a painting or the compositionality of a photograph. In contrast, in the aesthetic object “the sensuous is no longer a sign, unimportant in itself, but an end. The sensuous itself becomes an object, or, at least, inseparable from the object that it “qualifies.”\textsuperscript{38} Furthermore, the natural (empirical) sunset is true objectively in the sense that it is true if there is an existent state of affairs that objectively correlates to a sunset. Conversely, the truth of the aesthetic object is not objective due to the fact that the aesthetic object’s truth consists of a meaning that is brought about through the feeling expressed in disclosing a world. Thus the truth of the aesthetic object is grounded in its sensuous elements that reveal the expression and world of the artist as opposed to an objective state of affairs that it corresponds to.

However, Dufrenne argues that art resembles nature in that it exhibits a “radical exteriority” – “the exteriority of an in itself which does not exist for our sake and which imposes itself on us, leaving us no other recourse than perception.”\textsuperscript{39} Furthermore, the aesthetic object resembles nature in the fact that there is an incomprehensible character to it; it conceals something mysterious. Dufrenne argues that this is the case because instead of being addressed to our understanding, art is meant to address our perception. In this regard, the aesthetic object is like the natural object. However, it is the form given by the artist that is implicit in the

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, p. 87.
aesthetic object that differentiates the aesthetic object from nature and allows the
aesthetic object to surpass nature. Dufrenne states,

Art does indeed rehabilitate the sensuous by altering or suppressing the
shape of the object to which in ordinary perception the sensuous
immediately refers, but this “dis-qualification” of the object is not the
renunciation of all meaning. A sense is always immanent in the sensuous, and
this sense is, above all, the form which manifests both the plenitude and the
necessity of the sensuous.\(^{40}\)

Unlike we find in nature, the truth of the aesthetic object is not objectively outside of
it in a reality it must imitate. Rather, the truth of the aesthetic object is in itself.

Dufrenne claims,

This ontological self-sufficiency which form bestows on the sensuous which
it unifies allows us to say that the aesthetic object is nature... Thus the
aesthetic object is nature through the power of the sensuous within it, but
the sensuous is powerful only through form. Form itself is, in the first place,
the form of the sensuous. Now, this form has been imposed on the object by
the art of its creator. Paradoxically, the aesthetic object is natural only
because it is artificial.\(^{41}\)

Thus we find that the aesthetic object is natural, but it differs from the common
natural object in that its truth is immanent as opposed to being objective.

The object of use is different from the aesthetic object much in the same way
that the natural object is. The ordinary object of use is commonly perceived in a way
that distinguishes between matter and its sensuous qualities due to the fact that we
value such objects primarily for the use that they have for us. Dufrenne states,

What interests [perception] in the object is its \textit{substance as a thing}, that by
which stone can serve for building, that by which steel can be used in a
machine, that by which words have meaning and enable communication to
take place.\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\) \textit{Ibid}, p. 89.
\(^{41}\) \textit{Ibid}, p. 91-92.
\(^{42}\) \textit{Ibid}, p. 87.
Conversely, in perceiving the aesthetic object the spectator does not distinguish between matter and the sensuous; the matter is the sensuous itself.

Ultimately Dufrenne separates the aesthetic object from the object of use by highlighting a vital distinction. The meaning of the object of use is associated with the way in which it fulfills its function as a thing. The object of use is thus abstract in that it is just one of many things that can be used for its goal. Also, the object of use exhibits a naked intelligence in that it is often made by a machine in mass production, and thus does not bear the specific mark of its creator. Dufrenne states,

In the object of use, the form certainly expresses the fact that it is manufactured but says nothing about who manufactured it. The maker has been the abstract means by which an idea has been realized in an object which itself remains abstract. Is this not the bitter fate of the factory worker and even of the prehistoric man as he chiseled flints? Nothing is more moving than those stones which bear the mark of human toil from the most remote ages, and yet what do they tell us about the man who make the first tool from them? Nothing, except that he was there.

Thus we see that the object of use, if it is aesthetic in any way at all, is so incidentally in connection to the way in which it fulfills its use and not by its very form. This is due to the fact that the object of use does not have the ability of expression that characterizes the aesthetic object.

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43 It is interesting to note that we are much more willing to call something ‘artistic’ or ‘crafty’ if it is skillfully made rather than mass-produced. For instance, one would be much more willing to call a one of a kind, hand-made pizza oven a ‘piece of art’ or ‘artistic’ than one would a Kenmore kitchen stove.

44 Ibid, p. 97. Dufrenne also states in the footnote, “That it gives the historian certain information about this man’s culture, from which he will be able to deduce or learn a great deal, is another matter. We are concerned now with the being of this man – and of his culture only to the extent to which it may itself express this being. My emphases.”
Alternatively, Dufrenne claims that the artist sensuously makes the aesthetic object and as such it tells us something about the creator or artist through its particular style. In the aesthetic object, the sensuous is organized by the artist in such a way that it has a meaning or sense (*sens*) that is necessary for the satisfaction of consciousness. The idea here is that without sense or the organization of the sensible (viz. a pure disorder of forms, colors, or sounds) the sensible would not be able to be grasped meaningfully by the spectator. Dufrenne also argues that part of the truth of the aesthetic object is its ability to reveal its creator. That is, the form that the creator gives in organizing the sensual elements of the work displays a certain style, and as such is an *expression* of the artist. For example, Dufrenne states,

> Style defines a form capable of attesting to the personality which created it, *a form which is meaning* and which, at this level of our analysis, means its creator. And it appears at the precise point where the two necessities combine, that is, where the aesthetic norm which regulates form, far from appearing arbitrary, lets us view a certain aspect of the world which is peculiar to the artist and by which the artist is recognized.\(^4\)

Hence ontologically, the aesthetic object uncovers a truth about the artist’s being. It is in this way that the aesthetic object is meaningful as opposed to an object that has a purely instructional purpose and says nothing about who created the object.

At this point we can also see that the difference between the aesthetic object and the object of use mirrors a distinction between two functions of language. This is important because Dufrenne often characterizes art as a type of expressive language. Language exhibits an ambiguity in the sense that in speaking one both (1) transmits an impersonal ‘meaning’ and (2) expresses oneself through this speaking. Hence the Husserlian claim that the word has a double function: it designates, but it

also exhibits. Dufrenne argues that the object of use can be likened to the transmission of an impersonal meaning, stating, “by its very form, the object of use attests to an act of making... [the object of use] does not tell me anything about the person who created it. It tells me about the gesture I have to make, and it is completely absorbed in the use I make of it.” In contrast, the aesthetic object is not addressed to the spectator in such a way – it does not solicit or aim to serve a practical use. It simply leaves the spectator to perceive it and discover its creator through its form, and as such is similar to the expression associated with language.

Finally Dufrenne compares the aesthetic object to the signifying object. A signifying object, such as a ‘turn-ahead’ roadway sign, points to something, precisely to the fact that there is a turn ahead. Its function is thus to signify or point to a given state of affairs. Such an object points out its subject. In the aesthetic object, the subject is not presented in such a way that it is purely a conceptual sign of a thing. Rather the subject is re-presented, and its truth does not depend on what is represented but on the manner of representation. Thus Dufrenne claims, “The aesthetic object does not demonstrate (démontre), it shows (montre).” And further, The aesthetic object does not speak to me about its subject. The subject itself speaks to me, and in the manner in which it is treated. The subject is an inevitable ingredient in the work not so much for its own sake as for the sake of the form which is given to it and by which it becomes expressive.

49 Ibid, p. 117.
50 Ibid, p. 123.
From this distinction we can see that although the aesthetic object may signify something, its does not signify a real object, and to think of the aesthetic object in this way is to turn it into a mere sign.

To sum up, then, we have distinguished the aesthetic object from living objects, natural objects, objects of use, and signifying objects, which has allowed us to come away with three essential characteristics of the aesthetic object:

1. In terms of its matter, that is, insofar as it is offered to perception, it has the being of the sensuous.
2. In terms of its meaning, that is, when it represents, it has the being of an idea.
3. When it is expressive, it has the being of feeling.\textsuperscript{51}

Thus in differentiating the aesthetic object from other objects in the world, we have revealed a unique characteristic of the aesthetic object. It is, in Dufrenne’s phrase, a “quasi-subject” – it has the character of a for-itself in that it is expressive in its very being. In the next section, we will also see that in this expression, the aesthetic object is capable of attesting to a world or atmosphere that opens itself to the spectator.

\textbf{(c) Autonomy and the World of the Aesthetic Object}

Dufrenne claims, “When, in the perception of ordinary objects, a figure stands out against a background, it means that a particular object assumes its autonomy.”\textsuperscript{52} In being perceived, the aesthetic object is autonomous not only because it stands in relation to a background, but also because it resists being characterized as part of the everyday world of ordinary objects. It is addressed to the spectator, and

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, p. 138.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, p. 150.
demands the spectator’s perception. We can see this particularly in the museum setting, where works of visual art are often framed to delineate the difference between the work and the objective world. The work is often placed in a space that is lit properly and is of an ideal height for viewing. Emanating from the work of art, the aesthetic object draws the viewer into a space that is different from the everyday world of ordinary things.

We can also explain this in terms of the difference in attitude that we take toward the world and toward art respectively. Our everyday way of relating to the world is typically constituted by what phenomenologists call the natural attitude – an attitude that is concerned with practical and active participation in the world. In exercising the natural attitude, we seek to find out how we can conceptualize things in a meaningful way and use such things to allow us to achieve our current projects. Heidegger’s example is that in perceiving a hammer, our perception of the hammer is tied up in our attitude towards it as a tool or a piece of equipment; we take it at face value as an object that can allow us to hang up a picture or build a desk. The attitude we take toward art is quite different. As we noted earlier, we do not perceive a painting for any sort of purpose that will aid us in a practical way (as we do when we see a hammer), but we contemplate it in the sense of its world and what it expresses, which is distinct from the world of natural things. Dufrenne states that in perceiving the aesthetic object,

I forbid myself any active participation. By becoming disinterested in the natural world which I have left, I have lost the ability to be interested in the aesthetic world. I am within it but only to contemplate it. Moreover, this is all that the work expects of me – that I stay in it to get to know it from within.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, p. 57-58. Italics on ‘active participation’ are my emphasis.
Both the attraction that the aesthetic object emits and the attitude that it demands characterize it as being autonomous in a unique way. For example, when a photograph is viewed in a gallery, it is autonomous in the pictorial space it occupies (i.e. it is framed on a wall in a comfortable light at a height that is optimal for perceiving) and in the unique way it expresses its sensuous elements.

The autonomy of the aesthetic object is what allows us to speak of its world or atmosphere, which Dufrenne discusses in terms of space and time. Through its autonomy, the aesthetic object draws us into a world of spatial and temporal aspects that we do not find in our everyday relation to the world. This is due to what Dufrenne calls the depth of the aesthetic object. In the everyday, empirical world, space and time are at first indefinite. They become definite through extension, i.e. in being a solid shape or mass that extends itself in physical space and time in relation to perception. In contrast, the aesthetic object is indefinite due to its intension (i.e. depth) or internal content. In perceiving the sensuous elements of the aesthetic object, we are opened up to a range of possibilities. Dufrenne states,

The world of the aesthetic object is not indefinite in the way that space and time are – in a mechanical way which becomes evident whenever one wishes to give it an objective representation. Rather, it is indefinite in the sense of a potentiality which no actualization can exhaust. It is an indefinite possibility of objects which are linked and reconciled by a common quality... In this respect, the aesthetic object has the dimensions of a world, dimensions which defy measurement not because there is always more to measure but because there is nothing yet to measure. This world is not crowded with objects, it precedes them.\(^54\)

Let us return to our example of Hyères, France. In perceiving the photograph, one’s concern should be centered on the world that is shown not in the sense of the actual

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\(^{54}\) *Ibid*, p. 182. My emphases.
temporal and physical aspects of what is depicted (as if the spectator were taking
the photograph to be a mere surrogate for its subject) but in the sense of spatial and
temporal possibilities or ways of giving form to the objectivity of what is
represented. In the photograph that Cartier-Bresson presents us with, we get a
sense of space and time in many possible manifestations. We see the potentiality of
a space below that consists of a sinuous and spiraling staircase that invites the
spectator to descend. Further beyond, the speed of the cyclist in the street gives a
sense of a fleeting and momentary sort of temporal motion and action that further
beckons the spectator to jump into the flow of the constellation of curves and lines
that constitute the world that the work emits. In short, the world that the aesthetic
object gives rise to is less a representation of the actual world depicted than it is the
atmosphere or aura of the artist’s subjective interpretation of this world. We can see
this atmosphere as a way of giving form to the objective world, or as a way of seeing
the world.

Dufrenne writes, “All the features furnished by the creator are [in the
aesthetic object] the witnesses and guardians of the expressed world, for example,
the cock and donkey of Chagall, the dishonest soubrettes of Molière, the elongated
bodies of El Greco.”55 Similarly, the image of Hyères, France suggests the potentiality
for space and time as dimensions of the artist’s expressed world, the world Cartier-
Bresson presents us with in the composition of the scene. This world (or potentiality
for space and time) is expressed by Cartier-Bresson in his organization of spatial
scale, his presentation of the neat geometrical lines of the staircase railings, the

sinuous character of the staircase that flows into the street, and the fleeting sense of temporality evident in the dynamic motion suggested by the cyclist speeding down the road. All of these sensuous aspects constitute a unified totality that expresses the artist. This expressed world is characteristic of Cartier-Bresson’s specific style (mode of expression) of organizing the sensuous elements of a given work, which we will discuss at more length in chapter four.

In being autonomous and expressing a world, the work is capable of giving rise to the aesthetic object. Moreover, in having this capability, the work can be thought of in terms of a quasi-subject. Dufrenne states,

> In short, the world of the work is a finite but unlimited totality, a totality which the work shows through both its form and its content, while soliciting reflection as well as feeling. This world is the work itself, considered not in its immediate and meaningless reality as a mute thing without a soul but as a thing which surpasses itself toward its meaning – that is, as a quasi-subject.  

It is helpful to think of the quasi-subjective nature of the aesthetic object in comparison with other subjective beings, such as human beings. Here Dufrenne is appealing to Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein* as a subjective mode of being-in-the-world. When one looks at another human being, one sees that person as an autonomous, subjective consciousness capable of expression and of transcending their facticity (they can form attitudes concerning their present situation in the world). In the case of the aesthetic object we see that in being viewed or contemplated the work is capable of expression in revealing the style that the artist uses to compose it and in the way it discloses a world characterized by spatial and temporal possibilities. The aesthetic object appears as a quasi-subject because, as

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expressive, it seeks to “transcend itself toward a signification which is not the explicit signification attached to representations but a more fundamental signification that projects a world.”

Hyères, France does not instruct us to do anything or inform us of any critical proposition. The photograph simply calls us to perceive it, and it is in terms of the world Cartier-Bresson discloses that we must do so.

(d) *The Ultimate Concept of the Aesthetic Object*

The character of the aesthetic object as an autonomous expression of the creator’s style, and thus of a world, prompts Dufrenne to define the aesthetic object as an *in-itself-for-itself-for-us*. We shall break this definition into three parts, beginning with *in-itself*. The aesthetic object is an *in-itself* for two reasons. First it occupies its own objective space, and exists independently of human consciousness. Although we stated that the aesthetic object (to a certain extent) depends on the perception of the spectator to come about, even without the perception of the spectator the aesthetic object still exists in its *potentiality*. The work of art is the base for the aesthetic object, which always exists in the work as a potential that is actuated when perceived.

Secondly, in addition to this objective character that the aesthetic object possesses, it also exhibits a fullness or wholeness that the spectator is not able to fully grasp. Dufrenne states,

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To say that the object is in-itself is to say that this object has an objective being which we are not able to grasp absolutely, because all knowledge begins with perception and because this in-itself cannot avoid being for-us.\(^{58}\)

In perceiving the aesthetic object, one’s perception limits one to focusing one’s attention on certain aspects of the sensuous, which results in other aspects being subsumed to the background. To return to our example of Hyéres, France, if one is focused on the geometric lines of the stairway railings, the fleeting presence of the cyclist is pushed to the periphery of vision. Thus there is a fullness of the aesthetic object that our perception does not allow us to grasp all at once, which attests to the classification of the aesthetic object as an *in-itself*.

The second part of the being of the aesthetic object is that it is also a *for-itself*. This can be explained by reverting back to the autonomous nature of the aesthetic object. As we stated in the previous section, the aesthetic object pulls the spectator into its world and forces the spectator to participate in its revelation or autonomous truth. Dufrenne states, “Aesthetic perception grasps the sensuous as imposing itself and as valid for itself. The sensuous exerts a kind of sovereignty over perception.”\(^{59}\)

The form and organization of the sensuous that the artist implements in the work is a form of the artist’s expression. As we stated earlier, this expressive revelation bears the form of a signification that the object possesses within itself.\(^{60}\) The aesthetic object is a quasi-subject, a *for-itself* that seeks the perception of the spectator to gain its full meaning. That is, in order to reveal its full potential of

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\(^{58}\) Ibid, p. 221.

\(^{59}\) Ibid, p. 225.

\(^{60}\) Ibid, p. 228.
meaning (to disclose the expression of its creator), the aesthetic object is a for-itself because it seeks to transcend its potentiality in the actuality of being perceived.

This aspect of the for-itself that is characteristic of the aesthetic object further shows the aesthetic object as being for-us, the final part of the threefold being of the aesthetic object. The style and form implemented in the work by the artist is addressed to perception and must be perceived in order to express its true nature. If the work is not for-us, it does not have the capability of manifesting its expressive meaning. We can see this most of all in the way in which works of art are displayed, especially in the museum setting. Works of art are set up in a space where there are no distracting factors surrounding them so that they are more easily taken in by the spectator. In speaking of the communion between the aesthetic object and the spectator that describes the aesthetic object as a for-us, Dufrenne states,

This communion is indispensible. Without it, the aesthetic object is inert and meaningless... The steeple is not an aesthetic object for the artilleryman who aims at it, nor is a painting an aesthetic object for someone who consigns it to the attic. Just as man awaits recognition by his fellow man and does not fully realize his being in the state of nature, as Rousseau said, so too the aesthetic object waits for a perception in which the sensuous will be displayed and, through the sensuous, its meaning as well.61

Dufrenne's comparison of the for-us of the aesthetic object to Rousseau's conception of man fully realizing his being in the recognition of his fellow man illuminates the quasi-subjective nature of the aesthetic object, which can only realize its full potential in first being a for-us.

To sum up, in this section we have conducted a phenomenological analysis of what the aesthetic object shows itself to be. It is first grounded in the work of art –

61 Ibid, p. 228.
the material substratum that the artist produces. Before perception, the aesthetic object exists objectively only in potential, and it requires the subjective perception of the spectator to display the sensuous form implemented by the artist. However, the aesthetic object is also autonomous and acts as a quasi-subject in that it seeks to express its meaning (the expression of the artist) by actualizing its potential through the perception of the spectator. The being of the aesthetic object thus gives rise to the curiousness of aesthetic experience. Thus far, we have described the being of the aesthetic object, but what of the experience of this object? Furthermore, how is this experience different from the experience of natural and ordinary objects? Let us now turn to an analysis of aesthetic experience in order to provide an answer to these questions.
CHAPTER 3

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth. –Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Primacy of Perception

The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) was highly influential to Dufrenne’s overall account of phenomenology. In the introduction to The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, Dufrenne states,

We understand phenomenology in the sense which Sartre and Merleau-Ponty have acclaimed this term in France: a description which aims at an essence, itself defined as a meaning immanent in the phenomenon and given with it. The essence is something to be discovered, but by way of an unveiling, not a leap from the known to the unknown. Phenomenology applies primarily to the human, because consciousness is consciousness of self; in this, we have the model of the phenomenon: appearing as the appearing of meaning to itself.62

We have discussed how this notion of phenomenology applies to aesthetic experience at the level of the aesthetic object in describing the aesthetic object as an in-itself-for-itself-for-us. Our task now is to describe phenomenology at the level of aesthetic experience, which Dufrenne breaks up into three main areas: presence, representation and imagination, and reflection and feeling.

(a) Presence and The Primacy of Perception

The basis for Dufrenne’s account of aesthetic experience is heavily influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s thesis in The Primacy of Perception. Edward Casey states, “The impact of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception on Dufrenne was profound. One may even venture to say that The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience represents the extension of Merleau-Ponty’s thesis concerning the “primacy of perception” to the domain of aesthetic experience.”63 The most substantial evidence of this influence is found in Dufrenne’s use of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the lived body in describing presence as the starting point of aesthetic perception in part III of the Phenomenology.

The ‘lived body’ is a term associated with Merleau-Ponty that Dufrenne uses to describe the way that one experiences objects at the pre-reflective level of experience, when these objects are purely present to the body. Put simply, the lived body can be explained in terms of the experience that one has with one’s surrounding environment before the ‘objects’ in that environment are made sense of or conceptualized. According to Merleau-Ponty, at the pre-reflective level of experience (the level of experience associated with the lived body in which one’s environment is not yet objectified) there is not a strict divide that separates subject and object such as we see in the Cartesian account of the knowing subject and its strict division from the objective world.

As Dufrenne understands it, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology can be seen as an attempt to resolve the infamous standstill that emerges from the dichotomous

63 Ibid, p. xxviii.
relationship between subject and object that is characteristic of traditional accounts of perception. This standstill emerges from the question of how, in perception, a subjective being (a conscious person) perceives objects in the world. At the level of experience, most traditional accounts of perception presuppose that the being who experiences entities is already an independent subject. In *The Primacy of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty holds that subjective and objective correlates exist only in virtue of one another, and perception is the primordial basis on which the interrelation between these correlates is grounded. That is, at the base level of experience, we cannot presuppose that subject and object are separated as they are in the workaday type of experience associated with ordinary objects that have a pre-determined use or function.

On Merleau-Ponty’s view, perception is the inevitable starting point for all knowledge and value in human life. Following Husserl, the synthesis that constitutes the unity of perceived objects and that gives a meaning to perceptual data is not an intellectual synthesis, but a synthesis of transition [*synthèse de transition*] or horizontal synthesis [*synthèse d’horizon*]. Merleau-Ponty explains this with his example of the perception of a lamp, in which we realize that in perceiving the lamp we only see various distinct profiles of the lamp from certain standpoints. In seeing one side of the lamp in perception, we anticipate the side that is unseen because we can touch it, or because it is given to us as “visible from another standpoint, at once given but only immanently.” This perception is not intellectual. If it were, we

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would be able to grasp the perceived object in its totality as either possible or necessary at the moment of synthesis. That is (solely in terms of perception) the perception of objects is not intellectual because it is never fully grasped or exhausted at the exact moment one perceives the object. For example, perception of the lamp consists of an indefinite series of perspectival views, and in none of these views is the lamp given to us exhaustively. Merleau-Ponty states,

> The perceptual synthesis thus must be accomplished by the subject, which can both delimit certain perspectival aspects in the object, the only ones actually given, and at the same time go beyond them. This subject, which takes a point of view, is my body as the field of perception and action [*pratique]*)... Perception here is understood as a reference to a whole which can be grasped, in principle, only through certain of its parts or aspects.66

Hence the body is the site of the reconciliation between subject and object due to its paradoxical nature. It is both an object, existing on the same level with other objects, and it is also *lived* as a subject with intentionality that is capable of perceiving other objects. Put simply, perception is not associated with a transcendental, subjective mind alone, but is carried out by the body at a level at which subject and object are not yet dichotomous or wholly distinct from each other.

The relation that the subject has with perceived objects at the initial level of presence is thus not strictly dichotomous, but is marked by reconciliation. Subject and object are interrelated in that the object exists only for a subjective consciousness that is able to recognize its objective nature and study it in its manifold appearances. That is, the subject cannot exist without the object and vice versa (one presupposes the other). In describing this reconciliation, Dufrenne states, “the subject can encounter the object only if it is first on a level with it, if it prepares

for the object from within its own depths, and if the object is offered to it with all its exteriority."⁶⁷ This notion gives a new orientation to phenomenology. Contrary to the constitutive idealism that may be attributed to many of Husserl’s works, consciousness cannot be associated with a fully constitutive subject that gives objects meaning. This is due to the fact that as a subject, one cannot fully abstract oneself from the objective world as long as one is in the objective world. Thus we return to the concept of intentionality, which is characterized as a “continually renewed project of consciousness by which consciousness achieves an accord with the object before all reflection.”⁶⁸ This accord is evident at the level of presence, which is precisely marked by the close bond between subjective and objective correlates.

In aesthetic experience, the presence of the work of art acts as a catalyst for the spectator’s perception, which then gives rise to the aesthetic object. The spectator first perceives the aesthetic object from various perspectives in the presence that constitutes the basis for aesthetic experience. For example, the initial perception of a photograph consists of a presence on behalf of the spectator to the photographic image (be it a physical image on paper or a digital image) that provides the basis for the sensuous character of the image to be seen. This presence is essentially a combination of various perspectives that the spectator may take in viewing the image. For instance I may realize in perceiving Hyères, France that the lighting in the room is such that I am not getting a proper sense of depth, so naturally I change my perspective and view the work from another angle. Thus

⁶⁷ Dufrenne, p. 219.
⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 220.
perception is characterized by the combination of the perspectival views of the
given object that the spectator perceives.

The spectator is drawn to this perception of the aesthetic object, because as
quasi-subject, the aesthetic object requires the spectator’s perception in order to
become manifest through conveying its inherent expression. At the level of presence
in aesthetic experience, the lived body perceives and submits to the sensible
qualities that are addressed to it in the expressive nature that is characteristic of the
aesthetic object. We will return to analyze the expressive nature of the aesthetic
object in discussing the moments of reflection and feeling in aesthetic experience.
But first we must discuss the direction that aesthetic experience takes en route to its
ultimate destination.

(b) *Representation and Imagination*

From its starting point in the presence that exists between the body and the
aesthetic object, aesthetic experience moves to the level of representation and
imagination. The brute presence of the aesthetic object gives rise to the image,
which Dufrenne calls “a *metaxu* or middle term between the brute presence where
the object is experienced and the thought where it becomes idea.”69 Thus at the level
of representation and imagination, perception transitions to a sort of objectification
that molds and shapes the manifold contents of perception at the level of presence
into events and entities (images) that are distinguishable.

Upon closer analysis, Dufrenne argues that the imagination serves two
purposes, and thus has two levels. At the transcendental level, the imagination is the

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69 Ibid, p. 345.
possibility of a look [regard] having a spectacle as its correlate, and can be viewed in terms of the possibility or capacity of representation.\textsuperscript{70} On the plane of representation and imagination, perception of the aesthetic object is first affected by the imagination in that it has the power or possibility to be seen transcendentally in terms of space and time. In other words, the aesthetic object is viewed as a capacity to be represented in virtue of the spatial and temporal characteristics of the work of art mentioned in the previous chapter. This possibility marks the given aspects of a unified perception (the aspects of space and time opened up by the aesthetic object), which the imagination then fills with empirical knowledge of prior experiences taken from the level of presence. Dufrenne states, “On both the empirical and the transcendental levels, imagination is a force which strives for visibility. The transcendental imagination having opened up the area in which something given can appear, the empirical imagination fills out this field.”\textsuperscript{71}

In aesthetic experience, Dufrenne argues that the role of the imagination is important at the transcendental level in that it allows for the representation of an image and is the capacity to create distance between the aesthetic object and the lived body. However, the imagination is not central to aesthetic experience due to the fact that at the empirical level, the imagination is not needed in aesthetic experience. The aesthetic object is sufficient in itself, and to view it in terms of external images or in terms of comprehending it in its contextual meaningfulness (i.e. contrasting it with other images of objects with imagination) is to do the aesthetic object an injustice. Dufrenne defends this position when he states,

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, p. 346.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, p. 349.
[In aesthetic experience] The represented object is discovered directly through appearance, which says all... In this case, imagining is limited to perceiving a given appearance better and does not anticipate the perception of something else. Imagination always provides the possibility of seeing – seeing the sense in the appearance, not outside it... [Thus] we must refuse to accord any adventurous character to the imagination.72

Thus the aesthetic object demands a sort of spatiotemporal distance or opening in which the image as representation may appear. This distance between the spectator and the aesthetic object is forged by the transcendental imagination, which gives rise to representation in the sense of possibility. Dufrenne states,

It is because imagination continually enlarges the field of the real which is offered to it and furnishes its spatial and temporal depth that appearances gain a certain stability and that the real becomes a world – an inexhaustible totality in which appearances arise through the disposition of my body and the direction of attention... To imagine is first of all to open up the possible, which is not necessarily realized in images. Imagination is to be distinguished from perception as the possible is distinguished from the given.73

According to Dufrenne, although the imagination exercises a primary role in the move away from pure presence to representation, it need not be reinforced by the empirical imagining that appeals to prior experiences at the level of presence. That is, in experiencing the aesthetic object, there is no need to confer upon it any outside experience one may have that is derived from other instances of experience at the level of presence. This is due to Dufrenne’s notion that the aesthetic object is already infused with meaning and expression and does not need further assistance in realizing its full potential. After the transcendental imagination clears a path for representation, we then turn to the final level of aesthetic experience, which we shall consider next.

73 Ibid, p. 357.
(c) Reflection and Feeling

The supreme proof of feeling’s depth is that it is intelligent in a way that intelligence as such can never be. – Mikel Dufrenne, The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience

At the level of the aesthetic object, we noted that there is a strict distinction between ordinary objects or objects of use and the aesthetic object. At the level of reflection and feeling in aesthetic experience, the direction that perception travels down the path of reflection mirrors this distinction. As we saw in the difference between ordinary objects and the aesthetic object, the aesthetic object is not aimed at scientific knowledge or use. The significance that the aesthetic object has is grounded in its expressive character. The perception of the aesthetic object has a similar significance. After the spectator creates the distance necessary for representation of the aesthetic object and actuates imagination, aesthetic experience then moves in the direction of feeling as opposed to a more critical or use-driven experience.

According to Dufrenne, the spectator can go down one of two paths of reflection, and these two paths emulate the two ways that the ordinary object or object of use and the aesthetic object possess signification. The first path is characterized by critical reflection, which is focused on structure and objective fact. For example, one could exercise critical reflection in viewing a photograph solely in terms of its historical data (when it was produced, by whom, with what specific camera and lens, what time of the day, etc.) or the photographer’s pictorial techniques (the method of focus, focusing on certain subject matter, the type of exposure or editing involved). Such reflection is analogous to constitutive activity,
which Dufrenne states, “defines the object by detaching it from the self so that it may be subjected to a critical examination.” Regarding art, this critical reflection is constitutive in the sense that it aims at the historical or technical characteristics of a work of art, not at the expressive character of the work that gives it an aesthetic dimension. Critical reflection thus leads to a detachment from the work due to the spectator’s substitution of her own analytical evaluation for the perception of the aesthetic object and its sensuous characteristics.

However, the spectator may take a different, more aesthetic attitude toward the object and focus more on its sensuous characteristics than its analytic structure. Given our example of photography, this type of reflection would focus on the atmosphere or world that a photographer’s works may invoke. Such reflection attests to the presence of the creator and his “universe of meanings – and to that expression of feelings toward which all reflection tends to surpass itself.” Dufrenne calls this type of reflection adherent or sympathetic reflection as opposed to the separating form of critical reflection that focuses strictly on structure. Adherent reflection is a type of reflection that makes us adhere to the aesthetic object and its sensuous quality. Dufrenne states,

By means of adherent reflection, I submit myself to the work instead of submitting it to my jurisdiction, and I allow the work to deposit its meaning within me. I consider the object no longer as a thing which must be known through its appearance – as in critical reflection, where appearance has no value and signifies nothing on its own – but, rather, as a thing which signifies spontaneously and directly, even if I am unable to encompass its meaning: as

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74 Ibid, p. 388-89.
75 Ibid, p. 389.
76 Ibid, p. 390.
a quasi-subject. And because this thing refers surreptitiously to expression, we shall see that a sympathetic reflection culminates in feeling.\textsuperscript{77}

Thus we can see that critical reflection seeks to master and know its objects, whereas sympathetic reflection is characterized by submitting oneself to the quasi-subjective nature of the aesthetic object.

To help us better understand sympathetic reflection, it will help us to consider it in an analogy to consciousness. In aesthetic experience, the aesthetic object possesses an existential necessity that cannot be explained in terms of a cause that is external to the object. Dufrenne states, “This is a necessity which must be called existential, since it is analogous to the necessity we experience within ourselves when we feel bound to the very development of our being to a particular choice or judgment.”\textsuperscript{78} Thus in aesthetic experience, the quasi-subjective nature of the aesthetic object exhibits an \textit{inexhaustibility}; that is, there is something about it that cannot be completely known in the sense of critical reflection. Dufrenne explains this inexhaustibility when he states,

\begin{quote}
The aesthetic object exists in the sense of a consciousness whose depths are unfathomable... The aesthetic object has depth because it is \textit{beyond measurement}. If we want to grasp it truly, we must transform ourselves. The depth of the aesthetic object is measured by \textit{the depth of existence} to which it invites us. Its depth is correlative with ours.\textsuperscript{79}
\end{quote}

This correlation between the depth of the aesthetic object and the depth of existence in the spectator is characteristic of the type of feeling that the aesthetic object expresses in being truly appreciated.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Ibid}, p. 393.  
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Ibid}, p. 395.  
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Ibid}, p. 398. My emphases.
More specifically, the depth of aesthetic feeling can be described in the sense that the aesthetic object reaches into the existential depth of the spectator and everything that constitutes that spectator’s self. Dufrenne writes,

[In aesthetic feeling] my past is immanent in the present of my contemplation and exists there as what I am – it is not the result of a hierarchy which would turn me into the final term of a causal sequence, but the seat of a duration in which I am conjoined with myself. This past which I am gives a density to my being and a penetrating quality to my glance.80

In addition to the ability of the aesthetic object to provoke the gaze of the spectator, the aesthetic object is also expressive, and as such it is able to be looked at as analogous to an expressive subjectivity. The quasi-subjective character of the aesthetic object is not evident in its extension as an object (i.e. its spatial dimensions and objective nature as such), but in its interiority made by the aesthetic object’s intensity of being. The aesthetic object is ontologically significant in the way that a subjective consciousness is in that it is capable of expressing a world and revealing its creator. Dufrenne specifically explains the interiority and depth of the aesthetic object through an analogy to consciousness, stating, “The aesthetic object is a relation to a world... We are justified in conceiving the aesthetic object by analogy to consciousness because it is a proxy to consciousness”.81

Thus in ordinary perception, Dufrenne argues, “imagination acts as a prelude to understanding.”82 Alternatively, in aesthetic experience the result of imagining takes a different turn in the direction of feeling, which results from a sort of communion between the object and oneself. This communion is a “more profound

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80 Ibid, p. 404.
81 Ibid, p. 413.
82 Ibid, p. 369.
communion with the object than we find in the activity of constitution."\textsuperscript{83} In aesthetic experience, perception branches out from the activity of constitution, which is characterized by attaining and having knowledge of objects, in the direction of \textit{being} or internal depth due to perception being rooted in the experience of presence. Thus in aesthetic experience there is a resonance or communion between the being of the object and the being of the subject. This communion is not, however, simply a return to the level of presence. In experience, the imagination can restore seeing to its full actuality provided that one returns to the level of perception. But in aesthetic experience, Dufrenne claims, “we are interested in transforming seeing without negating it and in inaugurating a new relation to being which would not suppress representation or return to pure presence,” and as such feeling is a middle point or oscillation between pure presence and representation.\textsuperscript{84}

At this point it would seem fitting to equate feeling with emotion, but Dufrenne resists this temptation. He argues, “…such feeling, in which perception is realized, is not emotion. It is knowledge [\textit{connaissance}] that “involves a certain commitment with respect to the world, through which it is neither thought nor acted upon but \textit{simply felt}.”\textsuperscript{85} This commitment in turn implies a certain mode of being with respect to the subject – a “direction or “sense” \textit{sens} – which is most tellingly revealed in the case of the artist.”\textsuperscript{86} Dufrenne uses the examples of the tragic sense portrayed in plays by the French dramatist Jean Racine, the grotesque and ironic elements of Honoré Daumier’s caricatures of French political figures, and

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Ibid}, p. 374.
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Ibid}, p. 376.
\textsuperscript{85} \textit{Ibid}, p. 378. My emphasis.
\textsuperscript{86} \textit{Ibid}, p. 378.
the marvelous character of the operas of the German composer Richard Wagner to express this point. But it is also the case that this sense (i.e. the tragic, grotesque, marvelous, etc.) can be aroused in the spectator as well. Dufrenne claims,

If the spectator were entirely destitute of it [sense] (as certain individuals are insensitive to certain values or the blind are insensitive to color), [s]he would fail to have an aesthetic experience or to know the aesthetic object. Thus feeling has a noetic function. It reveals a world.87

As such, the value of aesthetic experience lies in its ability to “maintain the functions of feeling in their purity.”88 The function of feeling in the sense of the aesthetic object should not be carried out to the level of emotion. If it is, the spectator is taking the world that the artist sets up too seriously. For instance, Dufrenne writes,

It is not necessary for a spectator at a comedy to feel the same merriment he would experience if he were really in the situation represented. It is sufficient for him to have the feeling of the comic and to laugh with a tranquil laughter which proceeds from knowledge and not from surprise. Feeling is pure because it is a capacity of receptivity, and an aptitude for perceiving the world.89

Thus by looking at art in the phenomenological sense characteristic of Merleau-Ponty and Dufrenne, we adopt a unique aesthetic attitude (as opposed to a natural or constitutive attitude) toward the aesthetic object, which allows for the expression of pure feeling that is not carried out to the level of emotion. In perceiving the aesthetic object, the spectator recognizes the correlation between her subjective being and the quasi-subjective being of the aesthetic object that conveys a certain feeling and expresses a world of its own distinct from the everyday empirical world.

(a) *Negative and Positive Theories of Imagination*

Theories dealing with the role of imagination in aesthetic experience can be broken up into two separate types – negative theories and positive theories. Over the course of history in aesthetics, theories of imagination have generally shifted from negative theories to positive theories. In much of classical philosophy, imagination was seen as phantasm or illusion, and in the most negative sense it was seen as a kind of mental disease. To imagine things was not to see *clearly*; it was the opposite of thinking rationally in terms of illumination through unification with ideal forms.\(^\text{90}\)

Aristotle is a notable exception here, as he argues that imagination is a part of the rational soul and is a necessary component in higher acts of reason. Imagination is thus positive in a sense on Aristotle’s view; however, it must be noted that the emphasis is still on rationality. Imagination is still subservient to the rational capacity of the soul and is simply a means for higher acts of cognition. Theories of the imagination developed throughout the medieval age of philosophy; however, views of the imagination were often not as important as the focus on truth and reason.

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Although not as explicit, we can also see this adverse and skeptical view of imagination in the rationalism and empiricism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As long as reason and intellect dictated the course of rational and scientific knowledge, the “obscure” function of imagination was suspect. No matter the results of imagination, the function itself was subservient to reason and intellect, and thus the ends to which it aimed were seen as less real than those achieved by rational discourse.

One of the earliest accounts of seeing imagination in a positive light was given by Joseph Addison (1672-1719). In The Pleasures of the Imagination, Addison states,

... the Poet seems to get the better of Nature; he takes, indeed, the Landskip after her, but gives it more vigorous Touches, heightens its Beauty, and so enlivensthe whole Piece, that the Images which flow from the Objects themselves appear weak and faint, in Comparison of those that come from the Expressions... as we look on any Object, our Idea of it is, perhaps, made up of two or three simple Ideas; but when the Poet represents it, he may either give us a more complex Idea of it, or only raise in us such Ideas as are most apt to affect the Imagination.91

It is important to note here the emphasis on the Expressions. In Addison we find perhaps the first contention that expression can make objects appear as more complex, vigorous, or beautiful than the real object itself. That is, instead of viewing the function of the poet’s imagination as an assembling of ideas into fantastic and unreal forms, the function of the imagination can be seen as a power to create new forms that are more valued and are taken more seriously than they were by earlier

theories. Thus instead of being merely fantastic and less real than the rational powers of reason, we see (especially in the romanticism that followed Addison) a view of the imagination as a great power of assembling ideas into creative, new, artistic forms that were valuable and meaningful.

In the Romanticism subsequent to Addison’s remarks in The Pleasures of the Imagination, we find an idea of imagination as a sort of divine power or creative muse. For example, Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) “praises the imagination as the divine, creative, I am that repeats itself in the activity of poets.”92 This view takes imagination to its logical positive extreme, portraying it as an unexplainable creative “force” that is the source of all authentic and beautiful art.

The rather miniscule role of imagination in Dufrenne’s account of aesthetic experience is due to his distaste with Romantic theories of imagination, which he finds obscure and unexplainable. Moreover Dufrenne’s Phenomenology is primarily an account of the spectator’s role in the experience of art, which makes his theory much different from earlier romantic theories that focus mainly on the role of the artist and the creation of the art work. In the preface to The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, Edward Casey writes,

[The] conspicuous demotion of the place of imagination in aesthetic experience is an aspect of Dufrenne’s antagonism to Romantic and idealist theories of art where imagination is given a characteristically inflated role. Even if imagination is essential to artistic creation, the relation of this act of creation to the spectator’s grasp of the aesthetic object is tenuous, and, in any case, no comparable exertion of imagination is called for on the part of the spectator.93

92 Townsend, p. 92.
93 Dufrenne, p. xxix.
This demotion of the place of imagination is evident in Dufrenne’s claim that, in aesthetic experience, the imagination only functions at the “transcendental” level, and that the “empirical” imagination must be suppressed and restrained due to the notion that the appearance of the aesthetic object is already “fully articulate and fully eloquent.” Dufrenne states, “The genuine work of art spares us the expense of an exuberant imagination.”

Romantic theories of imagination in aesthetic experience tend to focus on the creative “genius” of the artist, which is vague and often unexplained in terms of the spectator. In taking a phenomenological approach to aesthetic experience that focuses on the spectator’s role in perceiving the aesthetic object, Dufrenne seeks to clear up this problematic vagueness of Romanticism, claiming, “The real task of imagination in aesthetic experience is therefore to grasp the represented object in appearance, without substituting for it an imaginary object held to be more or uniquely true.”

Dufrenne’s accounts of the aesthetic object and aesthetic experience are admirable because they allow us to focus on the sensuous aspects of a work of art as a unified whole rather than as various particular qualities of the work of art itself. However, given Dufrenne’s notion of the role of the imagination in aesthetic experience, there are some conceptual issues with his theory that must be addressed. Most importantly, in Dufrenne’s analysis of aesthetic experience it is unclear whether or not the “transcendental imagination” and the “empirical imagination” are to be suppressed and restrained.

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94 Ibid, p. xxix.
95 Ibid, p. xxix.
96 Ibid, p. 367.
imagination” are two distinct types of imagination, or if they are merely different levels of the same imagination functioning at different intensities.

Furthermore, the term ‘the imagination’ that Dufrenne uses is vague in the sense that it is not at all clear what the imagination is. Is it a “faculty” or capacity of the mind? Is it a mental action? Dufrenne seems to argue that the imagination is derivative of perception. That is, he only discusses the imagination in terms of the function that it carries out in perception since perception is the primordial basis for all experience. However it seems quite dogmatic to assert that the only meaningful way to experience art is through the expressive mode of experience that Dufrenne describes. Can’t we evaluate works of art in other ways, such as in a realist sense or a formal sense? That is, can’t the appreciation of art in terms of realism (focusing on art’s ability to imitate reality) or formalism (focusing on the forms and formal elements of a work of art) aid or enhance one’s aesthetic experience as well? In order to address this question, we shall now consider an account of imagination that will allow us to reconstitute and strengthen Dufrenne’s notion of aesthetic experience.

(b) *Mental Action and Imagining*

In *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*, Edward Casey conducts a phenomenological analysis of imagining that reveals the *autonomous* nature of imagination. Casey argues that in the history of philosophy, imagination has never been given its proper credit as an autonomous function. Traditionally, imagination has either been described as an intermediary function of the mind that is derivative of perception (as we see in Dufrenne’s analysis), or it has been given an inflated role
that is undesirable due to the mysterious and undefinable character of the imagination (as we see in Romanticism). Casey states,

... if the mind is regarded as a mere processor of perceptions or as a graduated series of successively higher functions, imagination will be denied a genuinely distinctive role of its own... [In traditional accounts of mental activity] imagining has almost invariably been relegated to a secondary or tertiary status which it merely subtends some supposedly superior cognitive agency such as intellect or (more frequently) modifies some presumably more original source such as sensation.97

In either case, imagination becomes derivative or subsidiary to other mental acts, and we fail to see the autonomous and unique character of imagination as a mental act. Casey states further,

Clearly, what is needed is an approach that respects essential, and not merely contingent, differences between mental acts and that attempts to account for each in its own right and without recourse to a preestablished hierarchy of acts. Any such hierarchy is pre-evaluative in the sense that it determines or expresses in advance which acts are more, and which less, important.98

Here Casey is alluding to the multiplicity of the mental, a notion according to which one must remain open to the idea that “there is no strict hierarchical structure – only a proliferation of unforeclosable possibilities.”99 By adopting this mindset, Casey sets out to give imagination its proper, nonderivative place in the canon of philosophical thought.

The first point that calls for clarification is the ambiguity of “the imagination” in traditional accounts. To elucidate this ambiguity, Casey argues that the use of different variations of the term ‘imagination’ in ordinary language is often incorrect

and has rendered the word obtuse. When we use the term ‘imagination’, we often 
employ it without a proper descriptive basis. Casey gives three examples:

1) My imagination was playing tricks on me when I mistook that tree over there for a man.
2) It was just my imagination when I thought I saw a red rat in my bedroom.
3) In my imagination I thought that he was out to get me.\textsuperscript{100}

The experiences in which the term ‘imagination’ is used to refer to in the above 
three examples are all different, and in none of them is the term used to describe a 
case of imagining in the proper sense. Casey states,

Sentence one refers to a case of perceptual illusion, where we mistake one perceived object for another. In sentence two there is reference to a hallucination: to the quasi-perceptual appearance of a nonexistent object, which the hallucinated subject takes to be real. Sentence three uses the same term, ‘imagination’, to indicate something still different: a fantasy or delusion of perception.\textsuperscript{101}

The three examples above showcase the problematic place of imagination by simply 
revealing how the term is misused in ordinary language. In order to avoid these 
problems, Casey conducts a phenomenological analysis of imagination that discloses 
the essential characteristics of imagining that will aid us in our analysis of aesthetic 
experience.

The first thing Casey notes is that imagination is not a faculty or area of the 
mind, but rather a \textit{mental action} – an event of the mind. Thus we should avoid using 
the term ‘the imagination’ due to its ambiguity, which often renders the term 
tenuous and associates it with a conceptual idea or entity that cannot be explained.

As a mental action, imagination is \textit{intentional}. Casey states,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{Ibid}, pp.9-10. \\
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Ibid}, p. 10.
\end{flushright}
To claim that mental activity is intentional in structure is to claim, at the very least, that it is composed of two distinguishably different phases, which we shall designate as the “act phase” (commonly called the ‘noetic’ correlate in phenomenological terms) and the “object phase (the ‘noematic correlate’).” In and through an act – “act” in the strict sense of mental act or act of consciousness – the mind directs itself onto and absorbs itself in a specific content.\textsuperscript{102}

In the act phase, there are at least three levels or kinds of imagining: imaging, imagining-that, and imagining-how. To image is to form an intuitive or imagistic form. It is to entertain imagined entities or events whose description would include predicates denoting qualities of color, tone, kinesthetic feeling, and the like."\textsuperscript{103} In imagining-that, one imagines that the imagistic forms that result from one’s imaging constitute a totality or a state of affairs. Casey states,

> When we imagine things as standing in such relations, we imagine that these relations obtain; we suppose that something is the case, and in this way a given state of affairs forms the specific content of our imaginative presentation. A nexus of relations, not objects or events in their seperateness, is intended.\textsuperscript{104}

Thus in imagining-that, one imagines a totality or a nexus of relations among the particular images one forms from the act of imaging that is constituted by a unified process of interaction between images rather than focusing on concrete particular images.

In imagining-how, the imaginer takes one step further in that she not only images particular objects and events and imagines that states of affairs between them obtain – she also imagines how or what it would be like if the given states of affairs obtained. Casey writes,

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, p. 38. Parentheses are my addition.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, p. 44. Casey’s emphasis.
... [in imagining-how] there is a sense of personal agency, of the imaginer’s own involvement in what is being imagined which is lacking or at least muted in instances of sheer imagining-that. To imagine how is to project not merely a state of affairs simpliciter but a state of affairs into which the imaginer has also projected himself (or a surrogate) as an active being who is experiencing how it is to do, feel, think, move, etc. in a certain manner.\textsuperscript{105}

Although this list is not exhaustive of the ways in which one can imagine at the act phase (we may imagine-as or imagine-with respect to, perhaps), these three ways constitute certain crucially characteristic ways in which we typically imagine in human experience.\textsuperscript{106}

In aesthetic experience of the visual arts, these three forms of imagining can be applied to aesthetic experience. To briefly revisit Dufrenne, the spectator’s perception of the work of art gives rise to a representation that the spectator must, in Casey’s terms, begin to image. For instance, in perceiving Hyéres, France, we may represent our visual perception of the picture by imaging certain imagined content – the descending depth of the winding staircase, the fleeting speed of the cyclist in the street, the sinuous sense of motion that seems to follow the direction the cyclist proceeds, etc. We may then imagine that all of these separate images constitute a nexus of relations among each other (viz. a unified, continuous whole of interrelated images), and further imagine how it would be to stand in the position of say, Cartier-Bresson or the cyclist cruising leftward. Although Dufrenne would shun imagining-how in aesthetic experience (as it would turn us away from the purely sensuous aspects that collectively make up the aesthetic object), Casey’s notions of imaging

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ibid}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Ibid}, p. 48.
and imagining—that seem to be similar to Dufrenne’s “transcendental” imagination that allows for the possibility of the aesthetic object to emerge from the work of art.

What we must reiterate at this point is the difference between Dufrenne’s and Casey’s respective accounts of imagination. Dufrenne treats imagination as derivative of perception, whereas Casey argues that the imagination is *autonomous* from other mental acts. Casey gives two essential characteristics for the autonomy of imagination:

1. The autonomy of imagining consists in its strict independence from other mental acts, from its surroundings, and from all pressing human concerns.
2. The autonomy of imagining consists in the freedom of mind of which imagination is uniquely capable.\(^\text{107}\)

The first characteristic argues that imagining is autonomous from other mental acts such as cognition or perception, that is, imagining is completely independent of other mental actions. The second characteristic links imagination to a certain freedom of the mind, which can be explained in terms of the ability for the mental act of imagining to project or postulate an infinite set of open possibilities in which phenomena may appear.

Although Casey argues that imagination is an act that is wholly autonomous in character and independent from other mental acts, he nonetheless claims that there are *continuities* between imagining and other mental acts, such as perception – especially in aesthetic experience. Casey writes that, in aesthetic experience,

> The transition from perception to imagination, as from imagination back to perception, occurs without any sense of abrupt break: the two activities

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become continuous with each other within a single self-enclosed aesthetic experience.\textsuperscript{108}

Given the ease with which one can shift from perception to imagination, it becomes very difficult to pin down exactly when one is solely perceiving or solely imagining. In many cases, due to its continuities with perception, imagination seems to be a natural and unforced extension of perception. However, Casey warns that this extension, although at times so natural it appears to be a continuation of perception, is “imaginative and not perceptual in character.”\textsuperscript{109} Casey states that, in imagining,

\begin{quote}
A given perceptual experience is extended, but by means of another kind of act which differs intrinsically from perception proper. This supplemental act is one of imagination, even though its function can be designated as a form of “paraperspective.” In its paraperspectual capacity, imagining is not only capable of linking up with preceding acts of perceiving: it carries on their work in a different modality.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

Thus in experience, perceived and imagined objects become interrelated as conjoined aspects of perceptual objects or events which one uses to apprehend such objects more adequately than one could in perception alone.

Casey’s view of imagining as an autonomous mental act suggests that we can experience the aesthetic object both in Dufrenne’s more reserved sense (focusing on the sensuous style of presentation that the artist has put forth without exercising higher-level acts of imagining) and in a more imaginative sense, in which acts of imagining-that and imagining-how operate at a higher intensity or degree. The question then becomes whether or not it is beneficial or useful to experience art in the imaginative sense. To be sure, if we adopt Casey’s view, the acts of imaging and

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, p. 141.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid, p. 139. Casey’s emphasis.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, pp. 139-140.
imaging—that states of affairs between images obtain are (to at least a minimal degree) necessary conditions for aesthetic experience. However, if we are to experience the aesthetic object in the sensuous and expressionistic sense that Dufrenne advances, it is not necessary for imagination to operate at further levels such as we find in advanced imagining—that (where we bring in images external to those produced by the perception of the work) or imagining-how.

Given this distinction, I would like to further discuss the significance and value that may result from further acts of imagining beyond those necessary for the expressionistic type of experience outlined by Dufrenne. Along with Casey, I think we will find that more advanced levels of imagining may actually enhance aesthetic experience, as opposed to a simple turning away or disregard for the aesthetic object. That is, I believe that in addition to Dufrenne’s conception of aesthetic experience, there are other types or modes of experience that may be valuable in that they may enhance the aesthetic experience of the spectator and deepen the capacity for grasping the affective feeling that Dufrenne discusses. Let us now turn to analyze the characteristics of such advanced stages of imagining and how they may be beneficial to aesthetic experience.

(c) The Value of Imagining to Aesthetic Experience

Adopting Casey’s view of imagination as an autonomous mental act is not only compatible with Dufrenne’s account of aesthetic experience (in that the imagining associated with Dufrenne’s account would be associated with imaging and imagining—that at a basic level), but it also allows us to view works of art with another attitude that would not be available to us in the expressionistic sense of
apprehension Dufrenne endorses. When imagination is functioning at higher levels in aesthetic experience, we may imagine in terms of what Casey calls pure possibility – that is, in aesthetic experience the imagination may produce a multitude of possibilities that remain open and indeterminate, but still possible. This kind of aesthetic experience need not refute Dufrenne’s account, as in Dufrenne’s account of aesthetic experience imagining does not function at the increased level that Casey suggests. That is, in Dufrenne’s account, the possibilizing capability of imagining is concealed or hidden in the background and more emphasis is placed on imaging and imagining-that in terms of the aesthetic object’s sensuous characteristics and the way these characteristics form a state of affairs among each other. Thus it seems that instead of being mutually exclusive, Dufrenne’s account of aesthetic experience may be combined with Casey’s notion of pure possibility to give the spectator a useful tool for appreciating art.

According to Casey, in perceiving a work of art, one may enact one’s imagination to open up various possibilities regarding what one perceives in the work. If we apply this line of reasoning to Hyères, France, it becomes evident that, at each decisive moment in composing the scene of the photograph, Cartier-Bresson could have taken an indeterminate amount of possible directions. For instance, instead of centering the photograph on the shifting phenomenon of the spiral of the staircase, Cartier-Bresson could have centered the picture on the cyclist, or the brick wall, or his foot, etc. Furthermore, he chose to stand in that particular spot, but he could have oriented his body to snap the picture at different heights or angles to create different perspectives. Finally, Cartier-Bresson tripped the shutter at the
perfect moment, when the cyclist (who seems to have been traveling at a quick pace) was perfectly framed by the building on the left and the staircase on the right. All of these examples show the intentionality and control that the photographer has in the process of creating and composing a snapshot. Although we can say in hindsight that some options were much more likely in terms of probability, for Cartier-Bresson himself “in the throes of creation there was no sense of precise probability, of determinate degree of likelihood, with regard to his options.”\(^\text{111}\) We can concentrate on this notion of pure possibility in terms of the spectator as well. In perceiving Hyères, France, the spectator may “adopt an attitude that is sensitive to aspects or nuances which [she has] not yet apprehended and which are, for the moment, purely possible in status.”\(^\text{112}\) In aesthetic experience we are not confined solely to perceiving or feeling the aesthetic object, we are also able to imagine images and totalities of relations among images. Casey states,

> It is imagination as autonomous which introduces the factor of pure possibility into aesthetic experience. Only an autonomous imagination can project, explore, and populate the domain of the purely possible in art. This domain is intrinsic to the very being of works of art, and yet it is left unaccounted for in representationalist and expressionist theories, both of which fail to appreciate the autonomous activity of imagination in artistic creation and enjoyment.\(^\text{113}\)

Thus adopting Casey’s view of imaginative autonomy provides us with the ability to experience works of art in various ways that are not possible by solely focusing on what is represented or expressed. For instance, one can appreciate Hyères, France not only in terms of the affective feeling it elicits through the world or atmosphere it

\(^{111}\) Ibid, p. 206. Casey is discussing Picasso with this quote – I simply show here how this notion of pure possibility applies in the case of Cartier-Bresson.

\(^{112}\) Ibid, p. 207.

\(^{113}\) Ibid, p. 207
discloses, but also in terms of its formal qualities (the work’s association with a particular art historic style or the work’s analytic spatial dimensions and make-up) or the possibilities that are opened when one imagines various aspects of the work that are purely possible and not yet visually actualized. It may be the case that the expressionistic sense of aesthetic experience is the most significant existentially, in that this kind of aesthetic experience allows us to recognize the quasi-subjective nature of the aesthetic object and how its phenomenological depth is correlative with our depth as a subjective consciousness. However, imaginative autonomy allows for a further type of aesthetic apprehension, namely, viewing the work of art in terms of pure possibility.

In addition to providing a new way of appreciating art, the view of imagination as an autonomous mental act may have positive implications for aesthetic experience. For instance, in exercising the freedom of mental activity that imaginative autonomy allows, the spectator may develop new ways of seeing the work of art that enhance the spectator’s experience of the aesthetic object. Casey states,

What is perhaps most noteworthy about such an experience is the way in which the imaginative extension of perception serves to enrich perception itself. We return to the work refreshed, and in such a way as even to enhance its perception. This enactment occurs through the active animation of the work’s perceptual qualities. Such animations build on prior imaginings: now that I have brought Natasha to life in imagination, the Natasha on stage before me seems more vibrant and alive.\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, p. 141. Here Casey is using the example of ‘Natasha’, who is presumably a performance artist on stage. The idea is that in the case of perceiving, say, a character in a play, imagining can have positive implications in that imagining the character and certain situations she may encounter and the way she would handle them given her personality adds a more nuanced and dynamic interpretation of the character. This new interpretation has the possibility of being beneficial to aesthetic}
In adopting this positive view of imagination with respect to aesthetic experience, we see that instead of distracting the spectator and not allowing the aesthetic object to emerge from the work, more complex types of imagining may be a valuable contribution to the spectator's aesthetic experience. That is, what the spectator gains from acts of imagining with respect to the work of art may allow the spectator to *return* to the aesthetic object with a better *capacity* for organizing and feeling the sensuous qualities of the work of art.

It is necessary here to point out that I am not claiming the act of imagining *necessarily* benefits or enhances aesthetic experience. It must be granted that imagining is often spontaneous in its enactment, and in some instances it may hinder rather than enhance aesthetic experience as Dufrenne warns. However, it does not follow that we should simply jettison higher acts of imagining from being included in aesthetic experience altogether. Furthermore, I would like to consider a notion that Casey does not consider in *Imagining* that may have positive implications for his theory of imagination. We briefly discussed how imagining at all levels may be beneficial to aesthetic experience above, but this concept may be developed further to include the notion of a reciprocity between the beneficial aspects of imagining and aesthetic experience. That is, in addition to aesthetic experience benefitting from acts of imagination, we must also consider whether acts of imagining benefit from aesthetic experience as well.

experience due to the notion that when the spectator returns to experiencing the play, her prior imaginings can be integrated into what she perceives, which may have the ability to enhance aesthetic experience by intensifying the character of the person acting and thus making the play more 'lively'.


In aesthetic experience, we are exposed to images, ideas, and experiences that we often do not have the ability to perceive in our ordinary dealings in the life-world. Art adds a sense of spontaneity and excitement to the everyday. In going to an art museum or attending a local art fair, we sense and perceive the affective sense of artists, and thus enter the world that these artists disclose by feeling these affective aspects. Furthermore, the world that is disclosed as a result of the perception of a given art work may provoke the spectator to imagine various images and relations among images that do not obtain in the real world, but nonetheless are valuable in the sense that they may be remembered or re-imagined in later instances of imagining. For instance, in imagining for the purpose of explaining the tranquility of a stream in telling a story or writing an essay, I may appeal to the imagining that was provoked by my standing in front of Cezanne’s *The Brook* and remembering what it was like to imagine standing in the calm flow of the stream and seeing the vibrant green hues of the trees depicted by Cezanne. Such aesthetic experience can aid in the spectator’s further acts of imagining, provided that they can be remembered and re-imagined after they are initially perceived.

(d) *Aesthetic Experience and Photography – A Demonstration*

*Pictures, regardless of how they are created, are intended to be looked at. This brings to the forefront not the technology of imaging, which of course is*
important, but rather what we might call eyenology (seeing). – Henri Cartier-Bresson

So far, I have discussed three main concepts – Dufrenne’s theory of the aesthetic object, Dufrenne’s theory of aesthetic experience, and Casey’s fundamental theory of imagining. Although Casey’s concept of imagining is much more robust and complex than what my fundamental sketch has mapped out, my goal has been to show that a phenomenological analysis of imagining as autonomous can show us that the relationship between aesthetic experience and imagining does not need to be seen as problematic or incompatible.

The three theories we have discussed all have valuable insights that can be combined to form a comprehensive system. Dufrenne’s conception of the aesthetic object is crucial to what I have been aiming to show about the experience of art. The idea that the sensuous characteristics of the work of art (as opposed to the work of art’s material structure) are primarily what the spectator focuses on in aesthetic experience cannot be stressed enough. As we noted earlier, the sole purpose of the aesthetic object is to be perceived. But it may be the case that we are not grasping the word ‘perceived’ in its fullest sense and, as philosophers know all too well, the use of words (and how they are mentioned) is extremely important. The word ‘perceive’ comes from the Old French ‘perçoivre’, which is derived from the Latin verb ‘percipere’ meaning ‘to seize’. Percipere is a combination of the Latin per – ‘entirely’ and capere – ‘take’. To entirely take something in would imply that one focuses on the true essence of that object. That is, to perceive an object in the truest sense.

sense of the word would not only mean that one merely sees the object and what makes it up but that one entirely takes in that object and recognizes the sensuous elements that are characteristic of it as well.

In being recognized fully in perception, the aesthetic object acts as a quasi-subject. Its ultimate goal is to be perceived, and it arrives at its fullest sense of being when it is perceived. This is a result of the fact that in being perceived, the aesthetic object expresses an ontological fact about its creator. The artist was there and set up the work so that it may be perceived by the spectator. There is always an element of intentionality in the creation of the work of art – the artist intends the work to be perceived, and as we mentioned, this happens by way of the spectator entering the world of the work. As such, the artist creates the aesthetic object by setting up the work of art in an act of expression, which gains its full being in its perception on the part of the spectator.

From this essential distinction between the work of art and the aesthetic object, we turned to an analysis of the three levels of Dufrenne’s conception of aesthetic experience, namely the levels of presence, imagination, and representation. Dufrenne’s account of imagination proved to be problematic for two reasons. The first reason stems from Dufrenne’s distinction between transcendental and empirical imagining, which we found problematic due to the notion that the two “types” of imagining are not actually distinct categories, but are interconnected and that one entails the other. That is, we addressed the distinction Dufrenne makes by noting Edward Casey’s use of the concept of the multiplicity of the mental in which there is no hierarchical structure that constitutes imagining, but the act itself
functions in terms of a purely open set of seemingly infinite possibilities. Due to this possibilizing function that imagination employs, it is impossible not to imagine in the empirical sense jettisoned by Dufrenne. A phenomenological analysis of imagining shows the act as autonomous and not merely derivative of perception, although there are numerous continuities between the two acts.

The second reason to be skeptical of the levels of imagination Dufrenne puts forth is the notion that “empirical” imagining must be suppressed and avoided if at all possible, as it turns the spectator away from the purely sensuous qualities that are emitted by the work and may inhibit the spectator from truly perceiving the aesthetic object. As we already noted, it is not clear if one can imagine solely in “transcendental” terms, and in experiencing art it seems to be the case that even if one is appreciating a work of art in terms of its sensuous and expressive qualities, “empirical” imagining is still functioning (at least in a minimal sense) and is simply pushed to the background while the transcendental aspects of imagining are emphasized. Furthermore, it is not clear that higher acts of imagining are as distracting and harmful to aesthetic experience as Dufrenne warns. We discussed the notion that it seems plausible that one can return to the aesthetic object at any time during the process of experiencing a work of art, and that higher acts of imagining may actually enhance rather than diminish the quality of one’s aesthetic experience. If this is the case, then it is also plausible that the relationship between imagining and aesthetic experience can also work in the other direction, and we thus advanced the notion that aesthetic experience (of art) can augment one’s capacity to imagine as well. In order to explain this thesis in greater detail, it will
now be helpful to provide a demonstration of both the perception of the aesthetic object and the value of imagining to aesthetic experience using a few examples.

Let us begin by considering two more photographs by Cartier-Bresson, which will allow us to discuss the perception of the aesthetic object and the value of imagining to aesthetic experience (and vice versa), while providing us the additional opportunity to discuss Cartier-Bresson’s particular style that is characteristic of the three examples we will have considered, including Hyères, France. Cartier-Bresson is considered the father of photojournalism, and his work is a product of the quickness and mobility that accompanied the introduction of the handheld camera around the turn of the twentieth century. Much of his earliest work (to which Hyères, France belongs) is a synthesis of two common photographic styles of the period – the ephemeral and fleeting street snap shot and the quasi-formalist style of capturing the world in complex and ornate geometric patterns.

For our second image, let us now consider Torcello, near Venice (1953)\textsuperscript{116}:
In *Torcello, near Venice*, Cartier-Bresson presents us with another image that is nearly perfect in its composition. Although frozen in a moment in time, what is depicted and how it is depicted by Cartier-Bresson suggests a much more ephemeral and dynamic state of affairs than is seen upon first glance.

We can begin an analysis of the aesthetic object by reiterating the notion that what concerns us as spectators is not necessarily the work of art as such (in this case the photo paper and ink or the algorithm of the digital image and its means of projection), but the aesthetic object, which we described as a certain state of affairs or relationship among the sensuous elements in the photographic image. Moreover, it is important to note that a large part of the significance of the image (as a work of art) is the way that it expresses an ontological and intentional fact about its creator.
(in this case Cartier-Bresson). As such, our goal in the rest of this section is to showcase the artistic significance of various images and the importance of imagining in experiencing them.

Using the concepts of Dufrenne and Casey that we have discussed in previous pages, we may notice that in our presence of *Torcello, near Venice*, the work of art that Cartier-Bresson set up presents itself as an aesthetic object that we, as spectators, may experience. We can also use the mental act of imagination to selectively image objects in the visual field (such as the tip of the boat, the reflective surface of the water, the bridge, the running woman, etc.) to represent their sensual characteristics and their relations to other objects in the photograph. To aid in our grasp of Cartier-Bresson’s particular style and mode of organization in composing the aesthetic object and presenting to the spectator, it will be helpful to consider the composition of the photograph at hand.

*Torcello, near Venice* situates the spectator in what looks to be a small boat or gondola cruising down a river. In terms of the spatial scales, the image can be broken up into three distinct planes of depth. The foreground consists of the boat (which is where the shot is taken) and the water underneath and just ahead of it. The main shape of the foreground consists of a large pointed triangle surrounded by the reflective ripples of the water, which clash with and accentuate the sharp, rigid lines of the boat that is nearest to the spectator. The river leads the eye to the middle ground, which consists of the main spectacle. The general shape of the middle ground is an oval of negative space produced by the bridge and its reflection in the water ahead, which is supported on both sides by banks of land. The image on
the left side of the river consists of what seem to be stone banks and steps leading to a street and a large building. On the bridge, we can see a woman moving swiftly to the right side of the river, which looks rather wild and unkept. In the background (at the horizon), the images are even smaller and diminished in clarity. The right bank curves left, leading to two hazy buildings, one of which is in the shape of a tall rectangle that jets up above the bridge. Although we perceive the two-dimensional image by being present to it and perceiving it, it is imagination (Casey’s notion of imaging) that allows us to break the two-dimensional image up into various images and planes of depth that we then represent to ourselves. Furthermore, in imagining we can’t help but notice that there is so much more to the image than we are able to perceive. For instance, there is presumably a bottom of the boat, an interior of the buildings, a left side of the running woman, etc. that are concealed or hidden. Following Casey’s notion of imagining in aesthetic experience, after imaging the basic elements of Torcello, near Venice, we can imagine-that the boat is traveling slowly towards the bridge, that the woman is running quickly, etc. In contrast to Dufrenne’s notion that we must suppress such imaginings, the use of imagination in such instances gives a fuller sense to what is represented and adds to the fleeting and ephemeral aspects that the spectator experiences in perceiving the aesthetic object.

In Torcello, near Venice, the spectator can notice that Cartier-Bresson has again tripped the shutter at precisely the right moment (this came to be a famous particular artistic style associated with Cartier-Bresson known as “the decisive moment”) – if the shutter had been tripped a split-second later, the running woman
would be concealed by the bare trees on the right bank. Furthermore, the pace of the woman running leftward and the slight skew of the tip of the boat rightward give a sense of a pull in the woman’s direction. Although many more hypotheses about the significance of this dynamic relationship could be advanced, what is important is that *Torcello, near Venice*, is a prime example of Cartier-Bresson’s distinctive style of presenting the aesthetic object to the spectator in a way that provokes acts of imagining.

In order to make Cartier-Bresson’s particular mode of organizing the sensuous elements in the field of vision of his photographs both more plausible and more explicit, we shall consider one more image and compare the three images from Cartier-Bresson. This will allow us to understand the distinctive ways in which Cartier-Bresson opens up a unique world in presenting his works and will allow us to consider how the mental act of imagining may be beneficial to aesthetic experience and vice-versa. In *Siphonos, Greece* (1961), Cartier-Bresson presents us with another image that is characteristic of his unique blend of formalism and the fleeting nature of the street-style snapshot.

\[117\] © Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum Photos
The spectator looks through a narrow opening between two buildings, up a staircase that leads to a woman who is running, ready to ascend another set of stairs that is concealed from view but evident from the shadow on the adjacent wall.

The spatial scales in this third image are slightly different than the previous image. The foreground leading to the middle ground is more accentuated (much like we saw in Hyéres, France), and leads to the running woman who constitutes the center of the photograph. The background is relatively miniscule compared to the foreground from the spectator’s point of view - it is only seen in the buildings ahead of the running woman at the horizon. Although the narrow opening in the buildings gives way to the main spectacle, the majority of the image is made up of the geometric patterns of the buildings on both sides of the initial staircase. Like the
other two images we have considered, Cartier-Bresson’s ability to capture a fleeting spectacle in such a narrow window of opportunity is a testament to his style of freezing the world at a decisive moment, in turn setting up a world of his own that suggests a multitude of various possibilities that the spectator is then able to project and explore in the mental act of imagining.

The main spectacle of *Siphonos, Greece* consists of the woman who is in motion and about to ascend a staircase that leads to the top left of the photograph. The staircase at the spectator’s feet leads upward to the top right corner of what would be the frame of the image. The conjunction of these two images creates a dynamic sense of tension between the direction of the staircase leading to the top right and the swift motion that the woman suggests that pulls the spectator’s view to the top left of the image. Being that Cartier-Bresson has snapped the shutter at precisely the right moment, the woman is frozen just as she is about to disappear from view behind wall to her left. In imaging these individual aspects of the given photograph, the spectator can piece certain images together - such as the staircase, its direction, the running woman, her direction, and the ensuing staircase evident from the shadows – to *imagine* a unified state of affairs that comprises a dynamic relationship.

Although an analysis of any further works by Cartier-Bresson is beyond the scope of this project, my goal is to at least show that one can argue – at least in the three images considered (which share yet many more similarities with Cartier-Bresson’s other images) – that Cartier-Bresson presents us with a variety of aesthetic objects that are similar in style and can be grouped under a common
genus. Going back to Dufrenne’s analysis, the common genus would be the affective world that Cartier-Bresson is able to open for the spectator, who is present to the images that portray this world. A combination of perception and imagining allows the world of the aesthetic object to emerge from the work, and further acts of imagining – such as imagining—that there is another object in the visual field to get a better sense of depth or imagining-how it would be to be in a space in the visual field – may enhance the spectator's experience of the aesthetic object.

In all three images considered thus far, a human body is included in the field of vision. Moreover, the people captured in each of the photographs are in (what seems to be) a very fleeting moment of motion. As we mentioned previously, this ephemeral affective feeling of quickness that is aroused in the spectator upon perceiving Cartier-Bresson’s photographs is an aspect of his distinctive style, and the unique ways in which Cartier-Bresson is able to capture such fleeting moments is unique to the world that is opened up as a result of the perception and representation of each of the particular works considered. This perception and representation is possible because of the mental act of imagining as we have defined it.

In addition to Cartier-Bresson’s concentration on the momentary, fleeting nature of human life and experience, he has also centered all three images on dynamic relationships or states of affairs between objects in the visual field. This is an extension of his dictum in which he states, “Above all, I craved to seize the whole essence, in the confines of a single photograph, of some situation that was in the
process of unrolling itself before my eyes.”¹¹⁸ In Hyères, France, the center of the image is constituted by the shifting that results from the opposition in direction in the formal geometric pattern of the staircase. Torcello, near Venice is centered on the dynamic relationship created by the synthesis of the running woman and the direction that the tip of the front of the boat is pointing, in which the woman seems to be a beacon for the boat, pulling it in the direction she is fleeing. And in Siphonos, Greece, Cartier-Bresson has centered the spectator’s view on the dynamic relationship that arises from the direction of the girl running left and the preceding staircase (which creates a sort of ‘X’ shaped pattern). Imagining is important in perceiving this dynamic relationship because it is imagining (mostly imagining—that the running girl is in the act of running up the stairs) that allows the spectator to project possible courses of action that may have ensued the frozen state of the image. That is, in perceiving the photograph the spectator visualizes what is represented with a unique embodied perspective or way of seeing which allows her to imagine what would happen if the photograph were to come to life.

Considering Cartier Bresson’s unique style of organizing the sensuous elements in the photographs at hand can help us in our analysis of the aesthetic object and the world that it opens up for the spectator. Cartier-Bresson’s distinctive mode of composition, that is, his standing in a certain location and intentionally tripping the shutter at precisely the right moment, allows the spectator to see what Patrick Maynard has called the significance of the artist’s actions. Maynard states,

"As appreciation develops, we may come to see the compositional elements described (elements such as spatial scales, dynamic relationships, and the position of certain objects in the visual field) as having been purposely placed, pushed, contrasted, combined, and so forth."¹¹⁹ This realization on the part of the spectator allows her to imagine that the actions of the artist exhibit and express that artist’s specific style, and the worlds that the aesthetic objects that the artist creates are further an expression of how that artist saw and perceived what was there to be seen.

In the case of Cartier-Bresson, his actions in tripping the shutter (and in the moments leading up to him snapping the shot) can be imagined by the spectator in her experience of the aesthetic object. This imagining – instead of suppressing the spectator’s experience of the aesthetic object – may actually aid or enhance aesthetic experience. For instance, after I imagine that Cartier-Bresson was in Siphonos, Greece and was at the base of the stairs looking through the narrow passage ahead and after I use imagination to project possibilities onto objects and their relations in the visual field, it becomes clearer to me how fleeting and ephemeral the image Cartier-Bresson has captured truly is. As a result of one’s imagining, the image has the ability to become a testament of feeling in expressing how the scene affectively influenced Cartier-Bresson and how he was able to meaningfully interact with his environment to produce such a wonderfully composed image. The aesthetic object becomes fuller and more vibrant as a result of

imagining. Even if imagining things that are not present in the visual image at hand turns one away from the strict appearance of the aesthetic object, this imagining can allow the spectator to experience the aesthetic object again in a fuller sense and allow her a different way of seeing what is before her.

The works of Cartier-Bresson that we have considered are truly beautiful and artistic because they give us a new way of looking at the world – a lens that we can look through that is characteristic of Cartier-Bresson's distinct way of seeing his environment. Cartier Bresson is quoted as saying,

To photograph means to recognize – simultaneously and within a fraction of a second – both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one’s head, one’s eye, and one’s heart on the same axis.120

By experiencing and visualizing the works of Cartier-Bresson, we follow this line of sight – starting with the objects themselves – back to the eye, the head, and then ultimately the heart of Cartier-Bresson, which is how we are able to grasp the unique type of feeling that is characteristic of the aesthetic object in Cartier-Bresson’s works. Not only can the spectator appreciate what is before her through her distinct mode of seeing the world, but she can view other images by the same artist to appreciate similarities and nuances and imagine these nuances while appreciating the work at hand so that she may view the works for what they truly are – distinct moments of Cartier-Bresson’s experience that called out for him to record them. Through his works, Cartier-Bresson shows us to take a step back and

look for moments that stand out to us or call for us in the sea of everyday experience.

In what has been discussed so far, we have only touched on the works of one particular artist and the ways in which these works can function to open up or disclose a world. Cartier-Bresson’s photographs are not strictly copies of what he saw at a certain time, because the ways in which Cartier-Bresson recorded them (where he stood, what he focused the field of vision on, where the objects are in the field of vision, how the light is captured, etc.) say something about the original situation or state of affairs that gave rise to the aesthetic object. Moreover, the ways in which Cartier-Bresson has organized the sensuous elements in the photographs considered are expressive of an affective feeling, a way in which the objects in the field of vision solicited Cartier-Bresson’s gaze.

The particular style and mode of expression that Cartier-Bresson’s photographs exhibit have provided us with a useful example for displaying how a phenomenology of visual art can be structured. However the advent of new imaging technology that we have seen in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries has changed the look of the photograph immensely.\textsuperscript{121} Digital cameras and imaging software have become commonplace, greatly reducing the number of strictly film photographers. It is astounding to think that Cartier-Bresson shot many of his best

\textsuperscript{121} I am not claiming that the new age of photography is the sole reason for new and creative modes of representation for photographers. To be sure, there has been much creative and non-representational photography – such as late nineteenth century symbolist photography and early twentieth century surrealist or Dada photography. I am simply claiming that photography is \textit{much} different now that it has been in the past and much of these nuances are a result of the shift to digital photography.
images with a Leica 35 millimeter rangefinder camera and composed all of his photographs through the lens (as opposed to editing or affecting the scene in the process of developing the film). Although we have seen that Cartier-Bresson’s photographs express more than they ultimately show the spectator, there is a distinctively realistic sense to his images. They are all largely unstaged (the people pictured have not been instructed to stand in a certain place or play the part of a certain person) and Cartier-Bresson went to great lengths to stay hidden and inconspicuous.¹²²

The development of new technology in photography has given photographers a vast amount of new ways to record and produce images. The photographer is no longer confined to simply taking and printing an image (although there is a bit of flexibility in how a film image looks with the chemical process of development). Digital cameras and editing software allow photographers infinite possibilities in terms of what is represented in an image. In order to get a better grasp of how a phenomenology of visual art can account for the significance of more abstract and experimental photography, it will now be helpful to consider a couple of works from Peter Rea, a photographer from Manchester, England who specializes in abstract urban experimental photography. Our goal in analyzing the following two images will not be to locate a distinctive artistic style, but to show how more abstract photographs and modern editing techniques can produce

¹²² Cartier Bresson never used a flash. He believed that it attracts too much attention and is impolite, “like coming to a concert with a pistol in your hand.” (Van Riper, 2002). As a stealthy tactic, he is also known to have covered the shiny metal areas of his camera to better conceal himself and stay hidden from the spectacle.
significant aesthetic objects that are expressive and can reveal to the spectator a very important phenomenological insight.

Peter Rea has a vast body of photographs from which to select, but I have chosen two photographs of his that I believe exemplify his unique style and mode of expression. I have focused on Rea’s photography to show that, although it is immensely different from styles such as that of Cartier-Bresson, these differences do not detract from the important similarity that they share in giving rise to an aesthetic object and disclosing an affective world of feeling.

The key difference between Cartier-Bresson’s photography and Rea’s images are their respective means of production. As noted earlier, Cartier-Bresson composed all of his images through the viewfinder. The editing process for Cartier-Bresson consisted of a quick, yet careful moment of composition, and virtually no subsequent editing took place. Thus the beauty of Cartier-Bresson’s photography lies partly in his ability to let what is captured in the image speak for itself, so to speak. That is, as knowledgeable spectators, we can appreciate the skill and artistry needed to yield such beautiful images without carrying out any editing process after taking the photograph.

Alternatively, many of Rea’s images are largely composed in a post-photographic editing process. Although the photographic process (the intentional tripping of the shutter) is still an extremely important part of the creation of Rea’s images, his unique method of layering different images on top of one another and manipulating and duplicating images plays perhaps the most crucial role in setting up a world for the viewer. Manipulating and editing photographic images has been
widely criticized in the art of photography, most notably by the so-called “pure”
photographers who hold fast to Cartier-Bresson’s dictum that the photograph
should be composed largely or entirely in the act of taking it (through the
viewfinder). To be fair in this respect, one may object that Rea’s images are not
photographs in the strict sense of the term; rather they are a multitude of various
photographs that are intentionally layered and placed together to constitute a
digital image. This objection must be granted to a certain extent, but we must not
avoid getting too concerned about technicalities of this sort. Photographs are still
the main ingredients in Rea’s images and much skill is needed in capturing and
organizing these images. To worry about whether Rea’s works of art are
photographs or a kind of digital art is to miss the point, as our goal is to show how
Rea’s works can give rise to an aesthetic object and disclose a world of their own.

Let us first consider Rea’s image titled *Tib 2* (2013):
Figure 4
As a first example of Rea’s photography, this image contains all of the elements that go into Rea’s distinct flavor of “abstract urban experimental photography.” In opposition to Cartier-Bresson’s works, we are not presented with anything that, as a totality, resembles a determinate or realistic state of affairs. But upon closer inspection, we can see that what Rea presents us with is actually a synthesis of various urban objects. Although they are hard to make out, included in the image are street light-posts, car wheels, brick buildings, and even some vegetation to top it all off.

In the presence of the work, there is a feeling of disorientation in the sense that it is not at all evident where one’s body would be in relation to what is presented. At the level of presence, all the spectator can do is simply perceive what the artist has presented and, in this case, what is given is abstract to say the least. But as Dufrenne tells us, “The work of art is an education in attention.” With Dufrenne’s conception of the aesthetic object and the structure of his account of aesthetic experience in mind, we must remember that our only job as spectators is to devote our attention to what is set up by the artist in question. As a work of art, the image invites the subjectivity of the spectator to take the form of what Dufrenne calls a pure look at or a free opening to the object (mere perception without any explicit preconceived notions). In other words, the spectator is to perceive what the artist represents (the image and the objects in it) as something non-conceptual in the sense that the image is not to be associated with any use or practical value (as an image would be used in forensics to support evidence or in science book to

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123 Dufrenne, p. 63.
represent a real object so that the viewer may use it for scientific purposes). By freely opening ourselves to the object, we are actually allowing the quasi-subjective disposition of the aesthetic object to pull us into its distinct world of spatial and temporal aspects that we can imagine further at the level of representation.

In representing *Tib 2*, we shall keep in mind the notion of compositionality and its elements of spatial scales and dynamic relationships. This notion is important here because it gives us a systematic way of breaking down the artistic elements of the photograph so that we may imagine and represent the image in order to appreciate it in an artistic sense. This sense includes the appreciation of elements in the image such as line, contour, color (in this case different shades of white, black, and grey), light, etc., which collectively amount to the sensuous characteristics that make up the aesthetic object. In terms of spatial scales, we do not have much to work with. What is included in the field of vision (brick architecture, street light-posts, car wheels, etc.) has been intentionally placed by Rea in such a way that he has taken the objects out of the “normal” place that they would occupy in one’s everyday dealings with the world. Moreover, there are no explicit planes of depth that instantly jump out at us. At best, we can say that the layers of images included are constituted for the most part so that the darker objects appear closer to the viewer, while the images that are lighter in hue seem more transparent and less to the fore of the work. This phenomenon is created largely by the way Rea has layered the various objects in the image. Being that the image is black and white, the lines and shading of the objects are emphasized. Furthermore, in contrast to the inchoate nature of the image, there is a sense of balance between negative and
positive space. That is, the objects that are darker in the image occupy roughly the same amount of space as the lighter images do.

The element of composition that Rea has emphasized the most is one that we did not mention in our analysis of Cartier-Bresson’s works – the element of rhythm. The image of the street light-post is repeated at slightly different angles three times, and this gives rise to a dynamic relationship in which the eye may follow a line of sight slightly upward and to the right. The line of sight or temporal progression of the eye is also emphasized by the repetition of the car wheel in between the light posts and the stacks of cylindrical protrusions above the wheels. As such, the work functions as a sort of experimental image that uses line and shading in a way that is sporadic, yet still provokes the spectator’s body to react in such a way as to notice regularities, proportions, and lines of sight that allow the spectator to imagine a world of space and time unique to the particular work in question.

Before elaborating more on the artistic significance and the phenomenological insight Rea’s works can give us, it will be beneficial to consider one more of his images to give another example of the distinct way he organizes sensuous elements in his works. In *Ascending 2* (2013), we are presented with a complex, abstract image that is also very curious in terms of its planes of depth and organization:
The illuminated, rectangular blocks (probably windows or blinds) that are stacked on top of each other are larger at the bottom of the image and decrease slightly in size as they ascend to the top of the image, creating the feeling that the spectator is closest to the objects towards the bottom right of the image. Moreover, there are several sets of these ascending blocks layered on top of each other, and they all seem to converge on one point towards the upper left portion of the image. The eye moves up the sets of stacks toward the point at which the various sets of them culminate. The perception of such art leads to the ability to reflect on the way that we see things (the way that our perception of the work as spectators is influenced by how the objects in the visual field are presented), and thus aesthetic experience of works like *Ascending 2* can be understood in terms of variation among the objects presented by the artist and the distinct way of seeing that these objects give rise to.

There are two main points I would like to focus on that may help explain why Rea’s works can be seen as artistically significant. First, in the two images considered (and in virtually all of his other works) Rea skillfully compiles and layers a variety of images together (which are often the same image layered at different depths and angles). In the spectator’s experience of these compilations, the aesthetic object emerges as a unity or identity from the manifold appearances of the objects included in the image. This identity is further exaggerated by Rea’s intentional placement of them in various angles and positions. What is significant here is that the spectator perceives this unity in a temporal sense that is constituted by a dynamic interplay between the embodied perception of the spectator and the quasi-subjective expression of the work. Because these images are presented as works of
art that are simply meant to be perceived, the objects in them are disconnected from their ordinary horizon or place in the world of everyday things. The emphasis is not necessarily on what is presented to the spectator but, as we saw in Cartier-Bresson’s photography, on how it is presented.

A second reason why Rea’s images can be seen as significant in an artistic sense deals with his ability to create these aesthetic objects out of photographs of objects that one would typically overlook in one’s workaday way of dealing with the world. The typical pedestrian does not walk around phenomenologically analyzing street-posts and windows – such objects usually occupy a space farther out in the horizon of our vision as opposed to being the specific objects of phenomenological reflection. In the everyday world, we have tasks and objectives – we single out objects and make decisions on how to act in relation to these objects in virtue of what we want or need. In contrast, there is a playfulness in the experience of art that abstracts what is perceived from its normal horizon, allowing the spectator to experience the perception of the aesthetic object in a way that emphasizes the pre-reflective ability of an image to move our bodies and affect the way we feel. By photographing urban objects and organizing them into various positions, intervals, and depths, Rea gives these rather mundane objects a sensuous character that affects the spectator in a way that they would not affect her in her everyday, ordinary dealings in life.

In perceiving Tib 2 and Ascension 2, the mental act of imagining that we have chosen as our point of focus has been brought to the fore. Rea forces us to imagine what we perceive due to the fact that what is presented (in its totality) is not
necessarily a re-presentation of anything that we can make determinate according to rational concepts. This process sparks the mental action of imagining – in fact it shows us that what the spectator represents to herself is affected by the way in which it is presented by the artist and by the mode in which the spectator sees what is presented. This way of seeing is imaginative in character – it is not a set of rational principles that the spectator has pre-conceived and engages the work of art with. Rather, as we see in Rea’s photography, imagining can function as an autonomous mode of mental action that is always functioning along with other mental actions regardless of whether it takes the form of a potentiality or an actuality. Moreover imagination is a benefactor to aesthetic experience because it gives the spectator an ability to project a field of possibilities in which the aesthetic object can appear and gives the spectator various ways of seeing what is represented that can enhance the appreciation of art.

Being that the mental act of imagination as we have defined it seems to be beneficial to aesthetic experience, we are left to ponder another question. If imagination is beneficial to aesthetic experience, is this relationship reciprocal? That is, in addition to the ability of imagining to project new possibilities and ways of seeing onto the work of art and thus the aesthetic object, does aesthetic experience benefit or provide a rich source for imaginative acts? I believe that the answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” In the world of art, the spectator finds herself immersed in the experience of quasi-subjective objects that provide an infinite amount of possibilities from which to imagine. This is partly due to the playful nature of aesthetic experience and the way art operates in a realm that is often
separated from the practical, everyday world of normal experience. But it also has to do with the ways in which artists are often able to represent everyday objects and scenes in creative ways that allow the spectator to imagine them in a new light. Thus, imagination is continually provoked and actuated by aesthetic experience since the very work of art itself is the result of an exercise in imagination on the part of the artist. Aesthetic experience positively influences the mental act of imagining because the aesthetic object is not associated with a predetermined use which would give it a restricted set of possible functions. Rather, an infinite amount of possibilities may be explored in the experience of the aesthetic object due to the playful nature of art, and this enhanced ability of art to provoke the projection and exploration of a multitude of possibilities makes art a rich source for imaginative acts.

An additional reason for the mutuality of aesthetic experience and imagination is the way in which aesthetic experience and imagination thrive on variation. Imagining gives the spectator an infinite amount of possible vantage points from which to view a given work of art. Furthermore, in the act of aesthetic experience, the spectator exercises variation in the sense that the perception of the work of art is itself an exercise in variation. In perceiving what the artist has presented, various possibilities are explored by the spectator and these possibilities change depending on the facticity of the spectator (who the spectator is and how she views herself) and what the spectator focuses her vision on. The importance of the notion that aesthetic experience is a rich source for acts of imagination deals with the positive character we have attributed to imagination as a result of noting
its autonomy. Imagination, defined as an autonomous mental action in which one projects and explores possibilities, can be a useful action for one to perform in the appreciation of art. Imagination is used in a vast amount of human activity, but due to the strong bond imagination has with perception, it is often mistaken as an aspect or part of perception proper. If what I have argued holds, then imagination *is* valuable and is *not* simply a mode of perception; it is an independent way in which we can explore the possibilities of what we see in a variety of different ways. Because of its playful and non-cognitive nature, aesthetic experience is a mode of experience in which imagining is emphasized and reflected in a way that can be meaningfully integrated into human life, providing us with a variety of ways to appreciate and understand both ourselves and others.

**Concluding Remarks**

In this thesis, two main points have been argued for. The first point concerns the distinction between the work of art and the aesthetic object. This distinction shows that the work of art expresses something beyond its purely material and objective being. This distinction holds for all types of art – literature, theatre, painting, sculpture, etc. – all of these can be perceived as aesthetic objects in aesthetic experience. When one sees a play, hears music, or views a painting, the object of attention is not necessarily what is represented in a physical and representational sense. Rather what the spectator focuses on are the sensuous elements of the play, song, or painting that are set up by the artist in a particular style. In the presence of the aesthetic object, the conjunction of the embodied perception of the spectator and the work of art gives rise to the aesthetic object, which is constituted by a
certain constellation of sensuous elements in the work that discloses an affective world of feeling. Furthermore, experience of aesthetic object in the sense in which we have described it suggests that aesthetic experience is not structured by an atrophied mode of vision that presupposes a direct realism in which a Cartesian subject purely sees the object in question (in this case the work of art). Rather, by doing a phenomenological analysis of aesthetic experience, it becomes evident that the seeing involved in aesthetic experience is necessarily embodied, and as such this seeing is pluralistic and cannot be generalized into one “type” of subjective vision common to all human beings. That is, vision and how one sees what one sees is influenced by certain factors such as one’s locale, one’s gender, one’s socioeconomic status, and so forth. As such, a satisfactory account of aesthetic experience must account for such visual pluralism.

The second point considered in this thesis deals with the role of imagining in aesthetic experience. In the Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience, Dufrenne advocates a suppression of imagination in aesthetic experience due to the notion that higher “empirical” acts of imagining divert the spectator’s attention from the aesthetic object and are unnecessary. However, Dufrenne’s dichotomy between transcendental and empirical acts of imagining is highly suspect, and it is not at all clear what a “purely transcendental” act of imagining would consist of. Alternatively, we considered Casey’s notion that imagining should be viewed as an autonomous mental act that is not solely derivative of perception. In this case, imagining would not necessarily hinder the perception of the aesthetic object, and we considered cases in which imagining can enhance the affective aspects of the aesthetic object.
(Cartier-Bresson) or project possible spatial and temporal fields in which the aesthetic object may appear (Rea). Inversely, the infinite possibilities that are explored in aesthetic experience can be seen as providing a rich source for the mental act of imagining.

In conclusion, this thesis is essentially a defense of the claim that the relationship between aesthetic experience and imagining is reciprocal, and in many cases both imagining and aesthetic experience benefit from the relationship. The expressionistic sense of art appreciation that Dufrenne endorses is still a viable option for the spectator to take in aesthetic experience; however, it is still possible to have a meaningful aesthetic experience that incorporates the mental act of imagining in its higher capacity. In conjunction with perception (but not subservient to it), imagination is the mental action that allows us to evaluate the composition of works of art as we saw in our analysis of Cartier-Bresson’s and Rea’s photography. As such, it can provide the spectator with a type of tool that is useful in the appreciation of art. For example my imagining how it would be to embody the cyclist in Hyerés, France may allow me to realize nuances that I would have not otherwise noticed by solely perceiving the work of art alone and adds to the ephemeral and lively quality of the aesthetic object.

Instead of being subsidiary to one’s perceptual capacity, imagining shows itself as an autonomous mental action that may provide us with an enhanced ability to represent what we are presented with. This thesis has explored how the reciprocal relationship between imagining and aesthetic experience can be beneficial. It also hints at another aspect that remains open for exploration – the
social context of aesthetic experience and the importance of the Other in experience in general. The work of art needs the spectator in order to express the feeling of the artist and disclose a world. Moreover, no work of art is ever perceived by any one individual in its entirety. The work of art appears through an indefinite amount of perceptual viewpoints that are affected by many historical and social conditions, and as such it should be perceived in the context of a community rather than an individual.\(^\text{125}\) The question should be less of a subjective question about whether or not a given work is art, but rather a collective question about what the artistic qualities of a work are which may lead to a consensus that is not purely subjective. These notions of the social nature of aesthetic experience and a collective consensus are simply two of many directions this thesis may lead. Nonetheless, whatever path is taken should be one in which imagination is given its proper, autonomous place.

\(^{125}\) The notion of developing a ‘heterotopics’ that challenges the monocular, disengaged ‘vision’ of Cartesian perspectivalism is discussed at length by Michael E. Gardiner in “Phenomenology and Its Shadow: Visuality in the Late Work of Merleau-Ponty,” *The Handbook of Visual Culture*, NY: Berg, 2012, 115-29.
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