It is often said that Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the founder of the phenomenological movement, notoriously neglected the thematics of aesthetics and art. But while he did not propose a fully developed aesthetic theory, Husserl did provide significant insights that inspired and defined subsequent attempts to articulate a phenomenological aesthetics.

In his own writing, Husserl parallels aesthetic experience with the phenomenological attitude. Both presuppose a kind of epoché from the natural naïve stance and reveal the givenness of their objects as phenomena when the issue of existence is under suspension. Echoing Kant, Husserl describes aesthetic experience as a disinterested state disconnected from the object’s being or non-being and free from all theoretical and practical interests. In aesthetic contemplation we don’t think about the object or turn toward it to determine it conceptually and describe it by means of predications (see, e.g., Hua XXIII, 591/709–10; see also the famous letter to Hugo von Hofmannsthal written in January 12th, 1907, published in Hua-Dok III/3, 133–136. It is also expressed at several points in Husserl’s working notes gathered in Hua XXIII). Furthermore, we do not desire the object in order “to take delight in it as something actual” (Hua XXIII, 145 n.1/168 n.6). Husserl calls feelings like delight, love, or desire that presuppose belief object-feelings, which are clearly distinguished from the aesthetic feelings involved in aesthetic experience (Hua XXIII, 391/463–464).

Aesthetic feeling-intentionalities are always constitutively founded. This means that aesthetic contemplation always presupposes an already constituted objectivity toward which it is directed. At the undermost level of transcendent experience, aesthetic pleasure (or displeasure) is founded on simple perception, which is not itself a founded act. Analogously to “perception” (Wahrnehmung), Husserl names this originary aesthetic experience “value-(re)ception (Wertnehmung)” (Hua IV, 9/11). This gives us, “in immediate ‘intuitability’” (Hua IV, 25/27), perceptual spatio-temporal objects charged with value-characters, with some kind of “aesthetic coloration” (Hua XXIII, 389/462). For Husserl, then, beauty is first given in the originary intuitional act of value-reception as an objective character of the object itself (Hua IV, 14/16). Aesthetic pleasure (or displeasure) is an intrinsically intentional mental phenomenon directed to its own transcendent correlate, namely the aesthetically significant object.
Aesthetic experience may be existence-indifferent, but at the same time it is a turning toward. In this sense it involves an “aesthetic interest” (Hua XXIII, 586/704) directed, particularly, toward the how of the object’s appearance. What matters is “what appears as it appears,” (Hua XXIII, 587/705) “the presented object in the How of its presentedness” (Hua XXIII, 586/704), the “objectivity in its How” (Hua XXIII, 591/710). Let us see how this idea works in the case of taking the aesthetic attitude toward a painting. Husserl delineates here the following intentional nexus: (a) the perceptual constitution of the physical substrate (e.g., the colored piece of canvas); (b) the quasi-perceptual constitution and appearance of the image-object (Bild-Object), the painting as a depiction, which Husserl calls “a nothing (ein Nichts)” (Hua XXIII, 46/50); and (c) the either positing or non-positing consciousness of the image-subject (Bild-Subject), namely of the object that has been represented. In image-consciousness, the image-subject is the prevailing aim of our intention. The aesthetic dimension, however, emerges when the mind leaves the primary object of its ordinary intention and remains captured in the image-object and its subjective givenness. We live, then, in the aesthetic pleasure or displeasure which the How of the appearing awakens. For Husserl, “the manner of appearing alone is aesthetic” (Hua XXIII, 391/463); it alone is the “bearer of aesthetic feeling-characteristics” (Hua XXIII, 389/462). So, when Husserl rigidly claims that “(w)ithout an image, there is no fine art” (Hua XXIII, 44/41), he is actually pointing to a necessary presupposition of the aesthetic attitude, namely the movement of consciousness from its primary object to its image, considered as the primary object’s mode of appearing. This also holds for objects in nature, where our consciousness moves from direct perceptual correlates to their manner of appearing and remains aesthetically captured therein.

The constitution of an aesthetically valuable object on the basis of image-consciousness and its aesthetic dimension, however, does not suffice for the constitution of a work of art in the full sense. Works of art as cultural objects are constituted by historically formed, intersubjective communions of persons, who operate within the personalistic attitude of everyday life. The analyses Husserl offers in the second book of his Ideen (Hua IV) are illuminating on this significant issue.

**Aesthetics and art among early phenomenologists**

Waldemar Conrad (1878–1915) was the first of Husserl’s disciples to apply the eidetic phenomenological method to the field of aesthetics. In his long essay “Der ästhetische Gegenstand: Eine phenomenologische Studie” (1908–9), and on the basis of a presuppositionless attitude that would overcome existence-related determinations of the spatio-temporally extended realizations of artworks, Conrad sought to grasp the ideal essence of literary, plastic, and musical pieces of art and, ultimately, the aesthetic object in general. In the same vein, Theodor Conrad (1881–1969), in his dissertation titled “Definition und Forschungsgehalt der Ästhetik” (Munich, 1908), objected forcefully to the reduction of aesthetics to psychology and argued instead that aesthetics is a science of value. On his part, Moritz Geiger (1880–1937) placed special emphasis on the existential meaning of art and believed that aesthetics can provide a crucial point of access to the essence of human existence (see Geiger 1913 and the posthumous Geiger 1976).

Undeniably, though, the most systematic attempt among early phenomenologists to articulate a phenomenological aesthetics is found in the work of Roman Ingarden (1893–1970). As a realist interpreter of Husserl with respect to both the external world and universals, Ingarden insisted on an ontological reading of phenomenology and sought to unearth the a priori necessary structure and essential laws of pure consciousness itself. Within this context he came to grips with the thematic of aesthetics, which “was intended as preparation for unraveling the problem of reality” (Ingarden 1962, viii/x). The outcomes of his thorough scrutiny of the work
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of art and its ontology, on the one hand, and of the cognitive acts involved in aesthetic experience, on the other, were meant to contribute to his fight against transcendental idealism.

A genuine phenomenological aesthetics, according to Ingarden, must overcome distorted objectivist or subjectivist approaches to the aesthetic phenomenon and carry out the twofold task of investigating the correlation between constitutive intentional acts and constituted aesthetic formations. Ingarden does not construe aesthetic experience as some kind of momentary feeling of pleasure or displeasure; instead he explicates it in terms of its composite structure and phases of development (see Ingarden 1961, 295). As regards works of art, Ingarden clarifies that they are not identical with the material objects of what he describes as empirically and transcendentally mind-independent physical reality, even if works of art always presuppose some real substrate (Ingarden 1961, 294). Neither are they ideal timeless beings like the objects of mathematics. Works of art are intentional, which means they are constituted, like all social and cultural objects, by acts of consciousness. Artistic objects are, thus, doubly founded. Their existence and essential structure depend on real beings and the intentional acts of their makers and receivers.

Ingarden is mostly known for his treatment of the literary work, in which he delineated four constitutive strata: (a) the phonetic stratum of the oral or written linguistic formations; (b) the semantic stratum of meanings that arise as word sounds are ensouled by ideal concepts; (c) the stratum of schematized aspects by means of which the subject matter of the artwork is represented; and (d) the subject matter itself, namely the objectivities that are represented in the artwork (see Ingarden 1931). But Ingarden also dealt in depth with painting, music, architecture, sculpture, and film, investigating the pertinent layered structure of each.

The distinction between the work of art and the aesthetic object occupies a central position in Ingarden’s phenomenology. The work of art, the product of the artist’s intentional acts, is a self-same entity that contains points or areas of indeterminateness (Ingarden 1931, §38). It is a “schematic creation” (see, e.g., Ingarden 1964, 199) that has qualities that appear schematically but also several components or features in potential. It is the interpretative reconstruction by the individual observer, listener, or reader that completes the artwork and renders it concrete. Each such concretization is an aesthetic object. The process of concretization is permeated by a kind of imagination-driven creativity and, besides the reconstruction of what is actually present, consists in filling out the schematic elements of the work of art and actualizing its potential. One work of art can thus be differently, more or less faithfully, and according to the guidelines offered by the work itself, concretized in its different viewings, readings, or hearings. Each aesthetic concretization is characterized by a certain dependent freedom, guided by the artistic object’s potentialities.

Being part of the intellectual ferment of early phenomenology, Ingarden was also concerned with the thematic of values. He believed that the material substratum of an artwork is value-neutral. But he also argued that an intentional artwork possesses value-neutral qualities whose combinations can found artistically valuable moments pertaining to the artwork’s different strata. Moreover, the artwork possesses potentially aesthetically valuable qualities that become intuitively manifest in its aesthetic concretizations (Ingarden 1964, 205). Upon these aesthetically valuable qualities rest aesthetic values that characterize the concretized artwork as a whole (see, e.g., Ingarden 1975, 268). As several relations of one-sided or mutual dependence hold between the strata, their pertinent values are in a constant interrelation so that new values may arise and an overall polyphonic harmony may be accomplished. According to Ingarden, true works of art exhibit higher order metaphysical values, such as the sublime, the tragic, the sinful, or the comic, which pertain to the stratum of the represented objectivities and reveal the deeper meaning of life. Ingarden’s approach thus shows that a work of art can be evaluated in a compound manner as to its distributed merits and demerits. And the fact that different aspects of the overall value
stratification may be emphasized explains how the artwork can be met with varied or even discordant evaluative judgments.

**Martin Heidegger on aesthetics and the work of art**

While Ingarden stayed faithful to basic Husserlian problems of phenomenological analysis in his theoretical treatment of artworks, Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Husserl’s most promising student, approached art from a new perspective. This was dictated by the crucial question of his fundamental ontology, namely the question of the meaning of Being (see Heidegger 1977a, 73/86). On this approach, what should be investigated in discussing art is what determines works of art as works of art and thus allows them to show themselves on their own terms. Famously, Heidegger repudiated traditional aesthetics and its preoccupation with “aesthetic” experience and beauty. For him, the problem of art is not a problem of aesthetics since the aesthetic approach to art adopts a Cartesian metaphysical framework, which Heidegger strenuously rejected in his early magnum opus, *Sein und Zeit* (1927). There, he denounced the subject–object dichotomy prevalent in modern thought as an outcome of theoretical and scientific projections, taking Dasein’s everyday life and the world of its practical concerns as his starting point. Under this view, in the Heideggerian treatment of art, human beings are not thematized as feeling subjects who experience pleasure when encountering artistic objects. That would wrongly reduce art to a mere matter of human physiology. But neither is the work of art posited as a present-at-hand thingy object supposedly loaded with characteristic value properties. Heidegger argues that such a view presupposes the notion of thingness in one of the following traditional ways: (a) as substance with properties; (b) as unity emerging out of a sensuous manifold; or (c) as matter shaped by form. He shows that all three are derivative of and rooted in the primordial way entities are given as ready-to-hand for our practical concerns and tasks.

Heidegger actually points to a more authentic engagement with works of art, which can be best illuminated if we consider his interpretation of the notion of disinterestedness. In the first of his Nietzsche lectures (1936–37), “Der Wille zur Macht als Kunst,” Heidegger underlines a common and fatal misinterpretation regarding the definition of Kant’s “disinterested delight,” which “leads to the erroneous opinion that with the exclusion of interest every essential relation to the object is suppressed” (Heidegger 1996, 110/110). In fact, Heidegger tells us, “(t)he opposite is the case” (Heidegger 1996, 110/110). He claims that Kant, by negatively delineating disinterestedness, proceeds with a path-breaking methodology in order to bring to light the essence of aesthetic beauty itself. By excluding all cognitive and practical interests, “the essential relation to the object itself comes into play” (Heidegger 1996, 110/110). Free from any interest in possessing, controlling, or using the object to achieve something else, we attend to it in an unconstrained way, “purely as it is in itself,” and let it “come before us in its own stature and worth” (Heidegger 1996, 109/109). In such engagement with the object, this “letting the beautiful be what it is” (Heidegger 1996, 109/109), a human being arrives at the “fullness of his essence” (Heidegger 1996, 113/113).

When we authentically encounter an artwork, we do not turn to it and its subject matter with any theoretical or practical concern; we rather let it disclose the beings it sets forth as what they truly are. The work of art opens up a space for beings to shine forth, to reveal themselves. Heidegger, thus, speaks of art in terms of a “happening of truth” (e.g., Heidegger 1977b, 45/57). And by “truth” he does not mean a correspondence between assertions and facts. He means truth in its most original sense of *aletheia*, as the coming-out-of-oblivion (of *lehte*). In the famous phenomenological description of Van Gogh’s painting *Boots with Laces* (1886), Heidegger articulates this idea vividly. The Being of a pair of shoes, as shoes, cannot be manifested to us as long
as we depend upon their equipmental reliability, as long as we use them in an unobstructed way in our everyday lives. Van Gogh’s painting, though, is the site where the world of the worn-out shoes, taken to belong to a peasant woman, is opened up so that we see the equipmentality of the shoes; we see “what shoes are in truth” (Heidegger 1977b, 21/35). In other words, the world of the shoes is not itself an object or an aggregate of objects; it is rather the horizon of intelligibility according to which this example of equipment is meaningfully given to us. And this is what reveals itself in the work of art.

The truth-revealing function of art is not accomplished by the representation or imitation of reality. The artwork does not function as a sign pointing beyond itself toward the represented objects or states of affairs. It is the artwork itself that embodies the disclosed world. But every disclosure is, at the same time, concealment. Heidegger uses the notion of earth (Erde) in order to refer to all those hidden elements of beings that remain ungraspable and elusive, to “that which is by nature undisclosable” (Heidegger 1977b, 33/47). An artwork opens up a world but also presents the earth, the dark ground out of which the world springs forth. Part of the earth is the material of the artwork, the pigment, stone, or wood from which it is made. The artwork, unlike the artifact or the tool, presents those material elements in their materiality; it “lets the earth be an earth” (ibid., 32/46). Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of the world and earth of a Greek temple clarifies paradigmatically the antagonistic but complementary relation between the tensions of disclosure and concealment that essentially characterizes works of art.

Importantly, Heidegger places poetry at the center of his conception of art. Poetry is meant, though, in a broad sense as poiesis, as bringing into being. He says that “all art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry” (Heidegger 1977b, 59/72). Through their works, artists speak poetically. They do not use language instrumentally for communication; they rather set forth the poetic speech of authentic thinking, language in its primary function of bringing “what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time” (Heidegger 1977b, 61/73). Phenomenology also belongs in this category. As the philosophical method of revealing the concealed and normally forgotten, phenomenology, like art, brings the Being of beings to light (Heidegger 1977a, §7 C). Not surprisingly, Heidegger associated his thought with Hölderlin’s poetry and Cézanne’s painting. In one of his pilgrimages to Cézanne’s homeland (in March 1958), Heidegger is even reported to have said that he has found Cézanne’s path, “the path to which, from beginning to end, my own path as a thinker corresponds in its own way” (see Petzet 1993, 143).

The French contribution

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) played a leading role in the reception of German phenomenology in France. He was heavily influenced by Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of intentional consciousness, but he also embraced Heidegger’s existential approach and focused his philosophical interest on the concrete human being and human condition. Contrary, though, to Heidegger’s insight about the revelation of the truth of Being independently of Dasein’s volition, Sartre praises consciousness’ radical, unconstrained freedom and its total responsibility to shape the world through its sense-giving activity. With their acts, humans, as “directors of being,” (Sartre 1948, 46/39) relentlessly make the world reveal new faces and orderings. This same theoretical framework determines Sartre’s attitude toward art. Artistic creation, but also aesthetic contemplation, is thus seen as an expression of our power of unconditional choice.

The role of imagination is crucial in this respect. In the eyes of Sartre, imagination, in its mental and pictorial variations, denies what is actually given and animates some psychic or physical intermediate respectively, the analogon, as he calls it, aiming intuitively at the imagined as
something irreal situated in an irreal context. Such imaginary irreals are the aesthetic objects of our aesthetic attitude. Aesthetic pleasure, which Sartre clearly distinguishes from the enjoyment we take from sensory experience, is precisely a manner of apprehending imaginary objects (Sartre 1940, 362–73/188–94).

Importantly, in the Sartrean approach, perception and imagination exclude each other. In a painted portrait, for example, the material and analogical dimensions of the painting are surpassed as soon as we envision the imaged person. The painted canvas and the picture in its representing function are left behind, neglected; they are no longer given, no longer perceived (e.g., Sartre 1940, 232/120). Furthermore, the irreal aesthetic object, insofar as it is not posited as actual, is itself absent; it is a form of nothingness (néant) appearing in the work of art. In his own interpretation of aesthetic disinterestedness, Sartre claims that, in the aesthetic attitude, we imaginatively nihilate beings and aim at the nothingness of the imagined.

Sartre explains taking the aesthetic attitude toward nature in a similar way. A real thing, he urges, is never beautiful. We apprehend natural beauty by adopting an imaginative attitude toward reality. The real thing then stops being perceived and becomes an analogon of itself, permitting the manifestation of an aesthetic image of what the object is or could be. It is the ensemble, the configuration of the elements of the irreal object, that is beautiful. Indeed, the contemplation of beauty is accompanied by a “painful disinterest” in the real object, since the withdrawal of reality cancels any desire toward it (e.g., Sartre 1940, 372–3/193–4).

What will become emblematic of Sartre’s phenomenological aesthetics is the importance he reserves for literature. The core idea here is that in paintings, sculptures, and pieces of music, the aesthetic object and the aesthetic senses it carries cannot but be seen in the real substratum of the artwork. Colors, clay, and musical notes always point inwardly to something that is present in them. They embody aesthetic sense and communicate moods or feelings, but they cannot refer to anything beyond themselves. The yellow color in the clouds of Tintoretto’s Crucifixion (1565) does not signify anguish; the yellowish sky is itself anguish (Sartre 1948, 15/9). In this, Sartre points out that painting, sculpture, and music do not make use of language and cannot communicate conceptual meanings; they don’t say anything. Even poetry emphasizes the material qualities of language, which leads to the reduction of its significative function. Poets are thus “mute” because they use words the way painters use colors, creating language objects. Prose writers, however, use words as signs that point to objects, persons, and events beyond themselves. Through words, situations in the world are disclosed (Sartre 1948, 13ff/7ff). In his later writings Sartre attenuated his dismissive attitude toward poetry, but he never stopped praising the distinct significative function of prose literature. In Sartre’s view, it is precisely this that means literature can be engaged and committed, which is the point where Sartre’s aesthetic, ethical, and political insights meet. Not bound by the medium, the writer enjoys the privilege of fully and unrestrictedly controlling language and conveying his or her intended meanings. This literal creation is offered generously as a gift and an appeal to readers, who choose freely to respond not only aesthetically but also morally and politically.

Sartre’s contemporary and philosophical interlocutor, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), was also influenced by both Husserl and Heidegger. In his Phénoménologie de la Perception (1945), Merleau-Ponty investigated our primordial being-in-the-world, which precedes all dualisms imposed by the objective thought of common sense and science. He showed that, primordially, we live as incarnate subjects within the world of perception and action. The later Merleau-Ponty radicalized this theory of incarnate subjectivity and attempted to reveal a deeper ontological structure. In his unfinished manuscript of Le Visible et l’Invisible, and in his research notes, we find elements of an ontological circuit between man and nature, an ontological net of wild or brute Being (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 234, 251/183, 200). Man and worldly things share the same
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ontological flesh (*chair*), the primordial “weaving” of which is expressed in perception, language, philosophical logos, and art. For Merleau-Ponty, art, especially painting, thus acquires a special ontological weight. It is shown to be an “authentic language” that re-discovers and expresses our primordial being-in-the-world.

Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty describes the artistic aesthetic attitude in terms of a reduction in the field of primordial experience. By this peculiar *epoché*, the artist suspends both common and scientific knowledge and works “in full innocence” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 13/161). He or she “peels off” sediments of human praxis, evaluation, and theorization in an attempt to re-constitute the process of perceiving, to capture the essence of how the primordial world comes to being in its appearing. Merleau-Ponty claims that it is precisely by rendering manifest the essence of perception that painting and art in general can be seen as giving access to perceptual truth, that it is “the actualization of a truth” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, xv/lxxxiv).

For Merleau-Ponty, Paul Cézanne became the paradigmatic case of an artist who, as a quasi-phenomenologist, reveals perception and the world at the moment of their becoming in a painterly way (Merleau-Ponty 1948, 15–44/121–49). To illustrate this, Merleau-Ponty looks at how Cézanne’s paintings, against the academism of his time, do not call on us to see them from a single point of view as if our eyes were cameras. By combining views from varying angles, objects are presented as if seen from multiple points of view. Furthermore, the different superimposed planes manage to depict different levels of depth. The synthesis of these different aspectual elements gives “voluminosity” to the painted objects and depth to the painting itself. Perspective and depth in Cézanne’s works are not constructions of geometrical projections. They are rather lived dimensions of primordial perception. This is further enhanced by the way Cézanne presents the atmosphere of the impression without losing, as with Impressionism, the thing itself in its reality. And he achieves this by neither abolishing outlines nor by tracing just one; in his paintings, modulated colors indicate multiple outlines to delineate the painted figures and hint at their inner horizons. Distorted, swollen things, disjoined perspectives, multiple outlines, and discordant parts all contribute to the revelation of the hidden logic of visual perception, to the presentation of the thing in its making, in its emergence as a product of a lived process. According to Merleau-Ponty, the artist, the painter par excellence, grasps the “nascent logos” (Merleau-Ponty 1947, 133/25) of perception, the intuitive logos that, without the mediation of concepts, rules the “emerging order” of the sensuous presence of the world. And by exercising his or her “secret science” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 14/161), the painter actually rearranges the world of things, like the poet rearranges language, creating another order, a “new system of equivalences which demands precisely this particular upheaval (and not just any one)” (Merleau-Ponty 1960, 71/56). Art’s essential function is thus to approach the unthinkable and, functioning as “speaking speech (*parole parlante*)” (Merleau-Ponty 1945, 229/202), bring it to being for the first time. This is how, for example, Cézanne “speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if no one had ever painted before” (Merleau-Ponty 1948, 32/69).

The French philosopher who most systematically and extensively dealt with phenomenological aesthetics was Mikel Dufrenne (1910–1995). His Sorbonne thesis, the *Phénoménologie de l’Expérience Esthétique*, was published in 1953 in two volumes devoted, respectively, to the aesthetic object and aesthetic perception. Inspired by Husserl, Dufrenne conceives these as poles of a noesis–noema intentional correlation. In constant dialogue with Ingarden, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, Dufrenne thus attempts to trace a phenomenological path distinct from subjectivist and objectivist aesthetic theories. Similar to Ingarden, he distinguishes between the intersubjectively self-identical work of art and the aesthetic object that is given once the work of art is aesthetically perceived. He objects, though, to Ingarden’s radical separation of perception and aesthetic experience directed toward purely intentional objects.
Likewise, Dufrenne rejects Sartre’s accentuation of imagination and the sharp exclusion of perception from the realm of aesthetic experience. For Dufrenne, the aesthetic object is not cut off from perception, either as a purely intentional object (Ingarden) or as an imaginary irreal being (Sartre). More in accord with Merleau-Ponty, Dufrenne argues that the aesthetic object “is still a perceived object” (Dufrenne 1953, 273/212). However, this is not about the reduction of the aesthetic object to the “brute sensuousness” (Dufrenne 1953, 187/138) of ordinary percepts. Due to its inner logic of organization, the aesthetic object is permeated with meaning (sens), but this meaning never transcends the realm of the sensuous (le sensible). Carrying its immanent aesthetic meaning, “(t)he aesthetic object is nothing other than the sensuous appearing in its glory” (Dufrenne 1978, 403).

In Dufrenne’s view, then, the pivotal point is the claim that the aesthetic object is capable of expressing its inherent meanings. It does not function as a sign that points to something beyond itself, and its purpose is neither to depict, nor to knowingly demonstrate, nor to inform us of anything. The purpose of art is to express. Dufrenne grounds his insistence on the autonomy of art in this point. The aesthetic object is self-luminous and not, as Ingarden had it, heteronomously determined. It is, in Sartre’s terms, both in-itself and for-itself, or, in Dufrenne’s exact words, a “quasi-subject” (Dufrenne 1953, 488/393) with which the spectator is, so to speak, intersubjectively and empathically related.

The expressive aesthetic object reveals its own depth, its self-sufficient and unitary affective world. And precisely because of the world it opens, the aesthetic object is true. Truth here is not related to ordinary perception, which “looks for a truth about the object” (Dufrenne 1978, 403) and ends in some objectifying act of knowledge or some practical act. Dufrenne parallels aesthetic experience with phenomenological reduction, where belief in existence is suspended, as are intellectual and practical concerns. Aesthetic experience, as lived by spectators, is directed toward the object for its own sake and “seeks out the truth of the object such as it is immediately given in the sensuous” (Dufrenne 1978, 403). It is the truth that pertains specifically to the realm of the affective. Through an involved, performative, and gradually unfolding attitude, the spectator reads the object’s expressive character as given in a non-conceptual language. The constituents, more particularly, that compose such an attitude, what Dufrenne calls aesthetic perception, are: (a) sensuous perception that presupposes the subject’s concrete bodily presence; (b) representation that is closely related to a restrained imagination; and (c) a “sympathetic reflection” (Dufrenne 1953, 488/393, 490/395) that culminates in aesthetic feeling. In aesthetic perception, the subject experiences the resonance of its own existential depth with the inner logic of the aesthetic object in its very being.

Dufrenne’s aesthetic insights thus shed light on the intimate relation between man and world. This project is complemented by the final part of Dufrenne’s *Phénoménologie de l’Expérience Esthétique*, where a critique of aesthetic experience provides, in a Kantian spirit, an investigation into the conditions of possibility for the correlation of aesthetic experience and the aesthetic object. According to Dufrenne, it is the affective *a priori* that governs this correlation (see Dufrenne 1953, 455–56; see also Dufrenne 1959). More specifically, regarding its subjective or existential dimension, the affective *a priori* is a “pre-understanding actualized in experience” (Dufrenne 1978, 408). Regarding its objective or cosmological dimension, it is “that which gives it (the object) form and meaning, that by which it is constituted as capable of a world” (Dufrenne 1978, 408). These affective categories render the subject sensitive to the affective meaning that emerges from the lawfully ordered organization of the aesthetic object.

Following a similar path to that of the later Merleau-Ponty, Dufrenne radicalizes his view and in his *Le Poétique* (1963) seeks the ontological source of both subject and world. He claims there that Nature, with a capital N, is “the *a priori* of the *a priori* linking man to the world” (Dufrenne...
1963, 181) at the most fundamental level. Poiesis of Nature is what grounds all artistic creation and expression. Dufrenne’s view about the preeminent status of poetry is crucial, as poetic language brings us closer to the upsurge of language itself and expresses the original affective communion between man and world in a paradigmatic way.

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