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Towards a humanistic narrative about art: reflections on Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch

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This article explores the possibilities of a humanistic narrative about art with special reference to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch. Throughout the article it is shown how Levinas's and Bloch's respective interpretations of art are connected with their theories of ontology. Levinas understands being as a neutral and indifferent manifestation of reality. In his phenomenological analysis of art Levinas appeals to examples from modern art in particular and emphasises that artworks withdraw from the 'light' of being, which is to say, artworks refuse intelligible description in language. For Bloch, by contrast, being essentially carries an unrealised promise in the germ. Bloch hermeneutically explores the 'pre-appearance of utopia' and human happiness that are portrayed and symbolised by religious, pre-modern and early modern art in particular. Towards the end of the article an interpretation of prophetic hope is put forward with reference to Levinas's and Bloch's work, in an attempt to overcome the limitations of both authors with respect to the possibilities of a humanistic narrative about art.

Op weg na 'n humanistiese kunsnarratief: 'n perspektief op Emmanuel Levinas en Ernst Bloch

Hierdie artikel verken die moontlikhede van 'n humanistiese kunsnarratief met spesiale verwysing na die denke van Emmanuel Levinas en Ernst Bloch. Daar word deurgaans aangetoon hoe Levinas en Bloch se onderskeie interpretasies van kuns verband hou met hulle synsopvattings. By Levinas word die syn as 'n neutrale en onverskillige manifestasie van die werklikheid beskou. In sy fenomenologiese analise van kuns maak Levinas in die besonder gebruik van voorbeelde uit moderne kuns en beklemtoon hy dat kunswerke hulle onttrek aan 'lig', en dus beskrywing en verstaanbaarheid in taalgebruik weerstaan. Volgens Bloch daarenteen dra die syn wesenlik 'n onvervulde belofte in die kiem. Bloch maak hermeneuties gebruik van die idee dat veral religieuse, premoderne en vroegmoderne kuns 'n voorafskaduwing van die steeds onvervulde menslike geluk vasvang. Teen die einde van die artikel word 'n interpretasie van profetiese hoop aan die orde gestel na aanleiding van die werk van Levinas en Bloch, en word aangevoer dat die beperkinge van albei denkers ten opsigte van die moontlikhede van 'n humanistiese kunsnarratief daardeur te bowe gekom kan word.

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This article focuses on the theme of a humanistic narrative about art, with special reference to the work of two eminent figures in twentieth-century continental philosophy: the French phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) and the German neo-Marxist Ernst Bloch (1885-1977).[1] What "humanistic" refers to in this context is specifically the philosophical foundation and substantiation of human dignity, and the hope for the possible maintenance, restoration and salvation of human dignity within the indifferent march of history. "Narrative" here simply means the story told to make sense of something.

My basic contention is the following: Bloch's rich theory of ontology, which has recourse to the notion of pre-modern philosophy that being carries an unrealised promise in the germ, enables a narrative in which art vibrates with a special meaning. By contrast, Levinas's modern theory of ontology — which understands being as the neutral and indifferent manifestation of things — allows art only a limited meaning. Bloch's interpretation of examples from art history is essential to his presentation of numerous aspects of his thought. In the case of Levinas, aesthetics is conceptually marginalised in his thought and his writings attend only occasionally to the theme. My intention, nonetheless, is to do some justice to Levinas's contribution to the philosophy of art, particularly as it is presented in his early work.

After the exposition of Levinas's position on art, I shall focus my attention on Bloch and investigate the phenomenological logic at work in his extensive commentaries on art and culture. Towards the end of the article an interpretation of prophetic hope will be emphasised in an attempt to overcome the shortcomings in the positions of both Levinas and Bloch on the interpretation of art.

The search for a plausible humanistic narrative about art underlies the reflections in this article. Thus, the intention is to find in art a resource for generating meaning. In such a quest for meaning, it is important to remain sensitive to the fact that art cannot always be integrated into a meaningful narrative, since works of art very often

1 This article is based on a chapter from my unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Reconsidering humane social ideals — prophetic hope in Emmanuel Levinas and Ernst Bloch*, completed in 2005 at the Institute of Philosophy, Belgium, at the Catholic University of Louvain. The supervisor was Prof R Visker.

challenge the ruling conceptions of what is meaningful. The dimension to many artworks that remains impenetrable to interpretation will be referred to as the unicity of art.

The responsibility implied by the reflections in this article rests primarily with the cultural critic and the spectator of art, and not with the artist. It seems important that the framework of interpretation should be conceptualised in such a way that it allows the artist the freedom of spontaneous creativity. I wish to delineate the scope of these reflections from two approaches: on the one hand, a moralistic approach, where art is used in the service of an overriding political or ideological cause, and made subject to authorised censorship; on the other hand, an "aestheticism" in which the experience of art as *l'art pour l'art* excuses one from responsibility for accounting for the meaning made possible by artworks.[2]

1. At the interstices of light and shadow: Levinas's account of art

Three texts are of special importance for Levinas's phenomenological analyses of artworks: the essay "Reality and its shadow"; a passage in *Existence and existents* (Levinas 1978: 52-7);[3] and a number of intermittent remarks on art scattered through *Totality and infinity* (Levinas 1969: 74, 140, 192-3, 203, 263). Let us first consider the understanding of art in *Existence and existents*, and its uneasy relationship with Levinas's reflections on the topic in *Totality and infinity*, before looking in closer detail at "Reality and its shadow".

The starting point for Levinas's reflections on art in *Existence and existents* is the distinction between our sensation and our perception of ordinary objects in the world. What Levinas calls perception relates to the intelligible side of things, while sensation relates to the impression the world makes on our senses prior to intelligibility. Perception is what shapes our chaotic sensational impressions of the world and represents

2 I borrow this distinction between moralistic and aestheticist approaches to art criticism from De Visscher (1990: 66, 75). De Visscher convincingly argues that Levinas (1989) in his essay "Reality and its shadow" overcomes the schism between these two approaches and also the limitations of both.

3 Cf Levinas (1978: 46-51) for essential background to this passage.

the form of our understanding of things. For example, in looking at an ordinary object such as a clock, perception entails our understanding of its function, which is to say, our understanding of time, and our intuitive notion of the unity of its parts. Sensation relates to the materials a thing is made of, its shapes and its colours. This brings Levinas to the idea that sensation registers information in its brute materiality. Perception constitutes our sensational impressions into unified totalities: "In sensation the sensible object shall be constituted, but the mind [perception] is already constituted" (Levinas 1978: 49).

Now, in the experience of artworks this unity of perception (intelligibility) and sensation (impressions) becomes interrupted. What an artwork does "in its primitive manifestations, is to furnish an image of an object in place of the object itself" (Levinas 1978: 52). Art extracts things from their worldly contexts. In, for example, a painting of a rural street-scene, the frame of the painting delineates the scene and serves to remove what is depicted from its worldly context.

This removal of the appearances of things from their worldly contexts by artworks contains a yet more dramatic dimension. What happens in the experience of an artwork is that its materiality (sensation) breaks through the crust of its form (perception). As Levinas (1978: 53) explains, "[t]he movement of art consists in leaving the level of perception so as to reinstate sensation". Characteristic of just about all art forms is that they make noticeable to our senses the unintelligible quality of an object. This means that the sensational qualities that are normally co-constitutive of things in the world are now released in a free play of colours and shapes.

Levinas (1978: 53) refers to this way in which a quality can become detached from its work as the "musicality" of art. A musical note refers to nothing except itself: "[I]n music [, the] way a quality can divest itself of all objectivity — and consequently of all subjectivity — seems completely natural" (Levinas 1978: 53). The uneasy relationship between perception and intelligibility in artworks also undermines the normal relationship between subject and object, so that artworks can no longer be referred to as objects in the world. We can objectify things in the world because they are accessible on the level of perception. The world provides a horizon against which objects have a meaning by which they already refer to subjective perception. Artworks upset this.

Just as the isolated musical notes of a melody refer to nothing except themselves, artworks appear to us as worlds unto themselves. Since artworks do not appear in the intelligible light of the world, they disrupt the conceptual categories by which we attribute meaning to things.

This disruption of perception by sensation can be noticed in poetry, too. Words cannot be separated from their meaning, but what happens in poetry is that their meanings do not stand in the foreground, so that "there is first of all the materiality of the sound that fills" words (Levinas 1978: 54). In the first instance, one listens to, and appreciates the quality of rhyme in the words in a poem, and feels wonderment for the way in which these sound qualities of words also indicate the connection between their meanings.

This explains why Levinas refers to art as "exotic". Inasmuch as artworks show us "swellings or abscesses of being" (Levinas 1978: 55), something that precedes light and intelligibility, they can be said to approach the *there is*.[4] This in part explains what ultimately lies behind Levinas's reflections on art. His contention that artworks show us being in its brute materiality indicates that his reflections on art are connected with his notion of being as disconsolate neutrality, in other words his modern theory of ontology.

This leads us to a further aspect of Levinas's reflections on art, one which is bound to the historical context in which his work crystallised. It is striking that he refers in particular to examples from modern art in particular (Levinas 1978: 55-7, 1989: 141). He provides the significant explanation that there is in all modern art "the common intention to present reality as it is in itself, after the world has come to an end",

4 Levinas's notion of the *there is* [*il y a*] is the pivotal theme of his early philosophical work, and remains important in his mature and later works. By *there is* Levinas refers to a primordial, fundamental layer of being, which precedes being as light and intelligibility. Cf Levinas 1978: 57-64 and 1987: 44-57 in this regard. What we call the subject originally finds itself stuck to anonymous being or captured in what Levinas refers to as "the being without beings". It is only in the approach of the fellow human being that the self is liberated from the fatality of the *there is*, that light becomes possible, and that language and meaning open up (Levinas 1969: 92, 262, 297). Throughout this article, "light" is used as a metaphor for the intelligibility of being. This meaning also applies in Levinas's and Bloch's metaphorical use of the word.

and that in contemporary painting "things no longer count as elements of a universal order" (Levinas 1978: 56). From this it can be seen how Levinas's reflections on art are connected with his theory of ontology. For him, many examples of modern art are significant, because they show being in the way he conceives of it: neutral and disconsolate.[5] In its non-representativity, modern art shows the underlying chaos of being; which is to say, a chaos preceding the light by which things are organised within the horizon of the world. Modern painting shows us a scattered world, brings to expression the pessimistic feeling that characterises our time, suggests a world in which we no longer have a foothold:

> From a space without horizons, things break away and are cast towards us like chunks that have weight in themselves, blocks, cubes, planes, triangles, without transition between them. They are naked elements, simple and absolute, swellings or abscesses of being (Levinas 1978: 56).

In modern painting the existence of things in their brute materiality shifts to the foreground. Modern art can be said to approach the *there is* in its portrayal of an underlying chaos in being (thus an ontological aspect), but also in its expression of the bleak outlook of modern man's existence (thus anthropological, sociological and historically contingent aspects). As Levinas (1978: 57) remarks: "The discovery of the materiality of being is not the discovery of a new quality, but of its formless proliferation".

In *Totality and infinity* Levinas's reflections on art in many respects represent an inversion of his views in *Existence and existents*. Of essential importance for *Totality and infinity*'s view of art is the passage on beautiful and ugly things (Levinas 1969: 74), where he distinguishes three kinds of nakedness: first, the "face" of the other, which, when denuded of its "form", appears in its own light; secondly, the nudity of the body, which always bears some reference to the nudity of the "face"; and thirdly, the nakedness of what Levinas calls "ugly things". This notion of "ugly" things is developed in the light of the distinction between form (finality) and materiality (nakedness), which now takes on a meaning that seems to contradict *Existence and existents*. The disrup-

5 Levinas (1989: 141) himself admits this: "This sad value is indeed the beautiful of modern art, opposed to the happy beauty of classical art". In the case of Bloch, by contrast, his richer account of the world means that the happiness and beauty of older art appeal to his narrative about art.

tion of the unity of matter and form, which the earlier work ascribes specifically to art, is now also attributed to things in the world. The previous distinction between perception and sensation now takes on shape as a distinction between finality and nakedness:

> Things are naked, by metaphor, only when they are without adornments: bare walls, naked landscapes. They have no need of adornment when they are absorbed in the accomplishment of the function for which they are made: when they are subordinated to their own finality so radically that they disappear in it (Levinas 1969: 74).

Things borrow their finality from the function or the purpose they serve. What Levinas refers to as "ugly" things are things that have not been absorbed into their functions. To such things there is a noticeable residue of material reality, which Levinas calls the nakedness (or nudity) of things. "For a thing nudity is the surplus of its being over its finality" (Levinas 1969: 74).

This point stands in an uneasy relationship with *Existence and existents*. What was first specifically ascribed to art is now also ascribed to normal things. The inversion of the earlier position on art becomes even more noticeable in the function now ascribed to perception:

> The perception of individual things is the fact that they are not entirely absorbed in their form; they then stand out in themselves, breaking through, rending their forms, are not resolved into the relations that link them up to the totality (Levinas 1969: 74).

This contradicts the notion in *Existence and existents* that perception relates to the form (finality) of things, and sensation to the disruption of form. The part which *Existence and existents* ascribes to sensation, *Totality and infinity* ascribes to perception: the latter would now stand for the experience of the unintelligible side of things. Directly in line with this, *Totality and infinity* also contradicts *Existence and existents* in the role it ascribes to art. "Beauty then introduces a new finality, an internal finality, into this naked world" (Levinas 1969: 74). While, according to *Existence and existents*, it is precisely a certain nakedness (materiality) of things that art demonstrates, according to *Totality and infinity* art serves to cover over (lending form to) the nakedness of things.

Even though from *Existence and existents* to *Totality and infinity* Levinas's terminology for analysing the experience of art is inverted, and the role ascribed to art changes, the theory of ontology presupposed

in his reflections on art seems to remain constant. With the change of the role ascribed to art, however, there is an inversion in his understanding of the relation between art and ontology: while in *Existence and existents* art is understood as approaching the *there is*, in *Totality and infinity* art helps to cover up anonymous being. Still, in each case Levinas's reflections on art convey something about his thinking about being. According to *Existence and existents*, art shows the brute materiality that makes out part of being and yet precedes being as intelligibility. From a remark on the artistic meaning of architecture in *Totality and infinity* the same idea, namely that the intelligible side of things is doubled by a residue of obstinate and disconsolate neutrality, is clearly recognisable.

> It is art that endows things with something like a façade — that by which objects are not only seen, but are as objects on exhibition. The darkness of matter would denote the state of a being that precisely has no façade. The notion of façade borrowed from building suggests to us that architecture is perhaps the first of the fine arts. But in it is constituted the beautiful, whose essence is indifference, cold splendour, and silence (Levinas 1969: 193).

The "darkness of matter" symbolises the disconsolateness of the anonymity that hides behind artistic façades. For Levinas, in contrast to Bloch, matter is not a medium of promise.

In "Reality and its shadow" Levinas remains committed to the idea in *Existence and existents* that artworks show us that side of things that becomes obscured in our mundane experience of them: "What common perception trivializes and misses, an artwork apprehends in its irreducible essence" (Levinas 1989: 130). Where "Reality and its shadow" deviates from *Existence and existents* is in the way that it conceives of the relation between art and the *there is*. In *Existence and existents* Levinas works with the idea that artworks approach the *there is* by appealing to us on the level of sensation rather than that of concepts. This becomes radicalised in "Reality and its shadow", according to which the experience or appreciation of art brings one under the spell of the *there is*. The phenomenological analysis of art running through this essay crystallises into three main themes. The first relates to the subjective experience of art, and the second and third to Levinas's phenomenological analysis of the relation between art and the world.

First, for Levinas the most fundamental aspect of the subjective experience of art is that the artwork exercises a hold over the subject,

so that the subject comes to be on the verge of losing its sovereignty as subject. In "Reality and its shadow" Levinas works with the idea that rhythm is what characterises the subjective experience of art. We all know the experience of becoming carried away by listening to an enjoyable melody, or of being overwhelmed by a beautiful symphony. In such experiences it is as though one's conscious orientation to the world gets caught up in the rhythm of the music and one's initiative is paralysed. In this sense the artwork exercises a hold over one, such that one's subjectivity in the world is under threat of being uprooted.

Levinas (1989: 133, italics added) points out that "rhythm [...] describes a sphere situated *outside of the conscious and the unconscious*, a sphere whose role in all ecstatic rites has been shown by ethnography". In a tribal dance the rhythm of an African drum exercises a strong enchantment on the participants. Such participation is not a mode of consciousness, because the participants do not exercise sovereign mastery over existence. Since being caught up in a rhythm does not entail withdrawal from the world either, as going to sleep does, it is not a mode of unconsciousness.[6]

Levinas believes that the experience of artworks takes place on a plane which precedes that of concepts and comprehension: "What is today called being-in-the-world is an existence with concepts" (Levinas 1989: 134). An "existence with concepts" here refers to the relation with the world as a realm of intelligibility. Levinas delineates his own position in contrast to that of Martin Heidegger by stressing that, most primordially, the subject is "among things" and that "[t]o be 'among things' is different from Heidegger's 'being in the world'" (Levinas 1989: 133). According to Heidegger, one orientates oneself within a horizon in which one has found oneself without choosing it. As we have seen, for Levinas the subject takes its foothold in a plane which precedes that of light and intelligibility. The subject, most primordially, is not in the world, but needs to take a foothold in being in order to erect itself from anonymous being. Now, since the experience of art is on a plane which precedes that of concepts, it should not be seen from the outset as belonging to the world either. Furthermore, in the experience of art the subjectivity of the subject is bent back to this primordial plane of the *there is*.

6 For further detail on the notion of the conscious and the unconscious in his early work, cf Levinas 1978: 67, 68.

Robert Eaglestone (1997: 110) provides an interesting summary of the difference between Levinas and Heidegger in their philosophies of art. "For both [Heidegger and Levinas], art opens: but for Heidegger, it opens up the Being of being, for Levinas, art opens the inhuman. For both, art 'worlds': for Heidegger the world was 'worlded'; but for Levinas a strange and monstrous 'hither world' is opened". For a better understanding of the notion that art opens a passage to a "hither world", let us now consider the second prominent theme in "Reality and its shadow", which entails the relation between art and the world.

For Levinas, the relation between art and the world is one of both resemblance and abstraction. Photography, for example, shows things by abstracting them from their contexts (Levinas 1978: 52). Levinas explains the relationship between artworks and their (possible) objects in the world by bracketing art forms such as painting, poetry and music. He attaches a special metaphorical significance, once again, to music in this regard. He uses "musicality" as a metaphor for what is characteristic of modern painting. The straight lines and colours in a minimalist painting by Mondrian, for example, neither relate to any particular object in the world, nor do they represent one.[7] In a strange way, the painting becomes a microcosm of its own meaning, or to put it phenomenologically, the painting comes to appear in its own light:

> [M]odern works [... claim] to be pure music, pure painting, pure poetry, because they drive objects out of the world of sounds, colours and words into which those works introduce us — because they break up representation. A represented object, by the simple fact of becoming an image, is converted into a non-object [...] (Levinas 1989: 134).

In line with the distinction between sensation and perception in *Existence and existents*, artworks can be considered to be non-objects, since they refuse to be comprehended.

The further dimension that Levinas stresses with regard to the relation between art and the world is resemblance. In this regard Levinas makes a distinction between things as they appear in the world and things as they are shown by artworks. He explains this distinction by an analogy with what is typical of a caricature (Levinas 1989: 135).

7 My example.

A caricature is a picture of a human face, but it also shows something else, namely the "picturesque" quality of a particular face. In the experience of looking at a caricature or portrait of someone, we see something which is there, but which we do not see in our mundane interaction with people. Art focuses our view on that aspect of persons and things that blurs in their everyday appearance.

A third prominent theme in "Reality and its shadow" is that artworks show what the *there is* does to the subject. In this regard Levinas places what is essential to statues phenomenologically between brackets (Levinas 1989: 137-8). A statue (or sculpture) of a moving figure, as it were, freezes an action in a time-slice: "A statue realizes the paradox of an instant that endures without a future" (Levinas 1989: 138). Levinas (1989: 137) clearly intends to use this as a metaphor for all other art forms, as he states that "every artwork is in the end a statue — a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself".[8]

We come to a better understanding of this notion of artworks as stifled instants by seeing it in the perspective of the relation between time and the instant. Levinas (1978: 92) opposes the idea of time as a continuous flow (which he calls the "vulgar" understanding of time) and tries to understand time by drawing on the instant. Characteristic of the subjective experience of the instant is a certain outcry for release. The instant can be released only by coming into contact with something which is other than that which preceded it. Discontinuity is a necessary condition for the possibility of time. Without it, no release and no time are possible, so that the instant remains stuck in itself. Statues of moving figures show us this drama of the instant: "[T]he instant of a statue is a nightmare" (Levinas 1989: 139). Statues cry out for an impossible redemption.[9]

The instant extracted from the flow of being, frozen and eternalised in artworks, Levinas calls the "meanwhile". Now, as he explains the

8 Levinas (1989: 138) also makes use of an example from painting in this regard and states that the Mona Lisa will "smile eternally".

9 This outcry for redemption, as it were, gives "life" to an artwork: "The artwork does not succeed, is bad when it does not have that aspiration for life which moved Pygmalion [...] The artist has given the statue a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life" (Levinas 1989: 138).

significance he attributes to the "meanwhile", Levinas (1989: 140) takes the daring step of making a connection between the artwork as a stifled instant and death. What the hesitation shown in the frozen action of a statue resembles is precisely death:

> What is unique and poignant in [the] instant [of death] is due to the fact that it cannot pass. In dying, the horizon of the future is given, but the future as a promise of a new present is refused; one is in the interval, forever an interval (Levinas 1989: 140).

Like the dead, statues are eternally held up in the "meanwhile".

Levinas's contention that artworks are withdrawn from the world has some immediate consequences for the interpretation of art. As Levinas himself admits, his contention that art withdraws from the light of the intelligible world confronts the interpretation of art with a dilemma, in that interpretation now means expressing in language and bringing into light that which refuses language and light: "[Criticism …] reintroduces that world [of the hither side] into the intelligible world in which it stands, and which is the true homeland of the mind" (Levinas 1989: 142).[10] On the other hand, Levinas (1989: 142) admits that ethics renders interpretation necessary, since "[t]here is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment". This claim is made in close connection to the notion that in the experience of art one approaches the *there is*. "To make or to appreciate a novel and a picture is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action" (Levinas 1989: 141). It is in the mere appreciation of art, in being caught up in the experience of the distinct rhythm of an artwork that, according to Levinas, one's enjoyment of art starts to border on a kind of egotism. Thus, the philosopher and the cultural hermeneuticist are rendered responsible for rising above such egotism and accounting for all the "possibilities [of meaning] swarming about" in art (Levinas 1989: 142). I shall return to this point.

10 At the beginning of "Reality and its shadow", we find a suggestion in the same vein: "[Criticism…] would represent the intervention of the understanding necessary for integrating the inhumanity and inversion of art into human life and into the mind" (Levinas 1989: 131).

2. Bloch's notion of art as a pre-appearance of utopia

While Levinas delivers a strong plea for the extent to which art is withdrawn from the world, for Bloch art is from the outset understood as vibrating with a special meaning. Although Bloch also acknowledges that artworks are worlds in and of themselves, detached from reality, and do not serve to copy reality, for him the meaning of artworks none the less stands in the horizon of a humanistic narrative:[11] "[T]he whole of art shows itself to be full of appearances which are driven to become symbols of perfection, to a utopianly essential end" (Bloch 1986: 14). In one of his essays on Bloch, Levinas (1998: 34) accurately remarks that in Bloch's hermeneutics, art attains the status of a "universal culture that sets alight vibrating by sympathy".[12] As an expression of hope, as an existential yearning, as a hankering after homeliness, and as an anticipation of human happiness, art is important as a carrier of moral meaning.

I shall adduce examples of Bloch's treatment of a number of different art forms (and aesthetic experiences), such as theatre, architecture, painting, literature and music, in order to show the way Bloch conceives of art and interpretation within the context of society, and to map out the logic at work in Bloch's cultural and aesthetic narrative.

Bloch's position on the role of art within the context of society is well illustrated by his reflections on theatre.[13] He finds a number of the surface characteristics of theatre attractive. In theatre, art takes place as a collective and a public event. The expectation that people are filled with as they go to the theatre, gathering socially in an enthusiastic spirit; the raising of the curtain; the setting of the stage where "the fourth wall is missing", are expressions of the anticipation at work in cultural life (Bloch 1986: 413). Bloch's enthusiasm for theatre conveys his belief that art should serve a moral and educational purpose. For example, his stress on the advantage of theatre performance and seeing

11 "So art drives world-figures, world-landscapes, without them being destroyed, to their entelechetic limit: only the aesthetic illusion detaches itself from life, whereas the aesthetic pre-appearance is precisely one because it stands itself in the horizon of the real" (Bloch 1986: 810).

12 Levinas 1998: 34. His appreciative essays on Bloch appear in Levinas 1998: 33-42 and 2001: 92-105.

13 The section in Bloch (1986: 412-31) entitled "The theatre, regarded as paradigmatic institution, and the decision in it" is relevant here.

theatre as opposed to reading the text[14] conveys his belief that art should go over into action, into practice, which is not directly politically or ideologically determined, but a social and educational practice. Also, "in front of the stage decisions can be made [...] far more collectively than in front of a book" (Bloch 1986: 418). By theatre performance, or opera for the sake of argument, art enters human life in its everyday physical concreteness:

> [T]he theatre, in contrast to the book, is the sensual experience-reality in which unheard things are publicly heard, in which what is remote from experience-reality becomes vividly public, in which the composed-compressed, the full-filled really appears, as if it were in the flesh (Bloch 1986: 419).

The tone we hear in these reflections is noticeably different from the notion in Levinas (1989: 142) that "[t]here is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment". According to Bloch, theatre, phenomenologically seen, accomplishes an institution of the new, where the isolation that is characteristic of the writer's solitary creative activity is overcome and finds a physical and sensual expression in the public realm. Therefore art carries within it the potential to start symbolising human practice.

For Bloch theatre is an art form that does not stand detached from a reality of purposefulness. Bloch (1986: 426) states that, as an institution of the new, theatre should promote human happiness through festivity. Theatre serves as a mirror image of the rich variety of emotions and plots that characterise human existence. The emotions expressed in theatre — such as fear, pity, or grief — and the tragic plots in which the fate of characters is caught up do not resemble a future world of human happiness but, Bloch maintains, these are nonetheless integral to theatre's serving a moral purpose.[15] "Because [in tragedy] it becomes clear from the effect of its heroes, an effect rich in hope, that something is not quite right about their downfall, that the element of the

14 "Theatre must always prove to be a plus compared to reading, no matter how lively the pleasure ear and eye have derived from reading" (Bloch 1986: 418).

15 "Thus, theatre brightens in general in its moral, paradigmatic institution as a cheerful one [...] That is why the circular horizon of morning [der Rundhorizont Morgen] spans precisely around tragic heroes, in fact even around genuine emotion, namely around the noble downfalls of the tragic play" (Bloch 1986: 430).

future raises in it" (Bloch 1986: 431).[16] In its portrayal and dramatic expression of injustice, tragedy is able to give rise to a positive passion for justice.

Bloch's notion of theatre as a paradigmatic institution illustrates how he conceives of the relationship between artistic activity and moral responsibility. At the beginning of this article I stressed that I intend the responsibility implied by these reflections to be mainly on the side of the art critic and spectator, and not on the side of the artist. However, in his reflections on theatre Bloch does ascribe some responsibility to theatre as social institution. For example, he stresses that the stage set for the performance of a play always needs to help open a new perspective, but "in such a way that the time-aroma of the writing and its stage-set never drifts away" (Bloch 1986: 426). Also, Bloch (1986: 428) states that "the classical drama must be spoken and portrayed in such a way that the present is not forced on to the drama, but so that the drama also implies it". Bloch thus ascribes to theatre the responsibility to integrate into its exploration of new horizons both an acute historical awareness and an awareness of the actual conflicts and injustices at work in society.

At the same time Bloch clearly warns against the danger of moralising or politicising theatre. He delineates his own position against what he calls "false" and "vulgar-political topicalisation" (Bloch 1986: 427). False topicalisation takes place when the topicalisation enters a field "that is alien to the work, *with the loss of the given drama*" (Bloch 1986: 427). In the case of theatre, the moral responsibility that Bloch ascribes to the artistic activity is thus limited to an engagement with the new, accompanied by historical and contextual awareness. In this Bloch follows Schiller's view, according to which theatre becomes morally purposeful only when it is allowed to flourish without moralistic or ideologically determined restriction.[17] "Only then, through the richness of the scene, can theatre serve morality, as has so often happened in art, precisely of the highest kind" (Bloch 1986: 425).

16 Cf also Bloch 1986: 417-8.

17 The German Idealist Friedrich Schiller (1749–1805) is the author of *On the aesthetic education of man* (1795). Cf Bloch's (1998: 74-9) further appreciation of Schiller.

Let us now look more closely at the logic at work in Bloch's aesthetic narrative. The fourth part of *The principle of hope*, which comprises the whole second volume, deals with "Outlines of a better world". Here Bloch expands his utopian hermeneutics by showing how the anticipation of a better world is latently at work in political theory, technology, travel, leisure and a variety of art forms. In Bloch's treatment of art, the central category in his aesthetic narrative — that of *art as the pre-appearance of utopia* – takes on concrete shape.[18] Bloch contends that in art, and in leisurely human sociality, a pre-appearance of utopia occurs within the injustices, alienation and hardship of the existing order. For Bloch, both the activity of cultural life and the content of art in some way or other anticipate a world of human happiness.

Bloch points out that, as a mode of pre-appearance, art is characterised by a *paradox of nearness and distance* (Bloch 1986: 834, 836, 837). The nearness relates to art making a resemblance or trace of "utopia" immanently present within the realm of the existing order. At the same time, what is resembled has its reference in something which lies in the distance, beyond the prevailing horizon. "Pre-appearance gives this aesthetic significance of happiness at a distance, concentrated into a frame" (Bloch 1986: 837).

With regard to this immanence which characterises pre-appearance in art, Bloch stresses that the *pre-appearance of art is distinct from that of religion*: "Art is fundamentally defined as real pre-appearance, as an immanently fulfilled {*immanent vollendeter*} one — in contrast to religious material" (Bloch 1986: 809, translation corrected). In Bloch's philosophy both art and religion are important forms of anticipation both are eminent examples of pre-appearance. Bloch maintains that they are qualitatively different as forms of pre-appearance. The promise resembled in artistic pre-appearance is within the immanent realm already shown as completed. The utopian anticipation in religion consists of the expression of a promise of, and longing for, a world which is not yet perfected, which is in disaccord with the prevailing order, and of which we cannot make a conclusive portrayal within the immanent

18 Article 38 of *The principle of hope* is devoted to "Buildings which depict a better world, architectural utopias" (Bloch 1986: 699-745) and Article 40 to "Wishful landscapes portrayed in painting, opera, literature" (Bloch 1986: 794-838).

realm. Artistic pre-appearance does accomplish this immanence of pre-appearance and shows a perfection of its promised object, since "art drives its subject-matter to an end, in plots, situations and characters, and brings it to a stated resolution in suffering, happiness and meaning" (Bloch 1986: 809).

It is interesting to note that Levinas (1989: 131) also refers to this saturatedness of the artwork, when "the last brush stroke is done". For him this saturation of the artwork phenomenologically signifies that the critic has become redundant, that the artwork is completed as a world unto its own, and then no further word is to be said. For both Levinas and Bloch, art brings into view something which is not illuminated by the light of the intelligible world (or, in the case of Bloch, is not yet illuminated in the prevailing order). What art brings into view is, for Levinas, the obscurity beneath light and, in his initial phenomenological reduction of the artwork, this is devoid of moral significance. For Bloch, the artwork somehow suggests the riddle without which intelligibility would not be possible, as if in the artwork the source of light, still escaping our attempt to nominate it, flashes into the prevailing order. It is as if the artwork allows us a glimpse of what is *not-yet* illuminated by the light of the prevailing order.

Bloch's notion of art as a pre-appearance of utopia means that artworks — by way of some quality or other — resemble the object of human longing. The pre-appearance in art, even though it is characterised by this limited immanence, does not resemble its object as a whole, but only opens "a perspective onto it" (Bloch 1986: 809).

In Bloch's aesthetic narrative three levels of pre-appearance can be distinguished. Each one of these resembles the anticipated object in a phenomenologically different way. I consider it helpful and appropriate to distinguish the following three levels of pre-appearance: first, *representative pre-appearance*, second, *symbolic pre-appearance*, and third, *pre-appearance in a cipher or in the subjective feeling of anticipation*. This classification is not made by Bloch himself, but I propose it in order to deepen our insight into the interpretative logic at work in his aesthetic narrative. Since the possibilities of Bloch's aesthetic hermeneutics are, especially now that we have some historical distance on his work and its context, often underestimated, I intend this classification to contribute to the outlines of a humanistic narrative about art.

First, let us look at *representative pre-appearance*. Characteristic of this level is the portrayal of what Bloch, in his hermeneutic use of the word, calls "utopia". Not only various kinds of artworks fall under representative pre-appearance, but also the activities of cultural life, leisure and sociality, as in these the causalities of capitalism are interrupted and the realm of human freedom momentarily pre-appears within the realm of necessity.[19]

Representative pre-appearance occurs in, for example, the activity of architecture, in so far as it serves as an artistic expression of the value we attach to, and the way we give shape to our inhabitance of the world. The humane inhabitance of the world is a fundamental category in Bloch's hermeneutics, insofar as this is what utopian anticipation and humane longing ultimately stand out for in their predisposition to fulfilment within the world and within history. Architecture shows man's hankering after homeliness and also portrays the human subject as the agent of his/her own design.[20] In line with what is said about the immanence characteristic of artistic pre-appearance, it also shows human design as being purposefully driven to its concretisation and completion in an architectural structure.

Let us also look at some examples of representative pre-appearance in painting. Here pre-appearance occurs, for example, in paintings whose content portrays festivity, leisure, and the celebration of human sociality

19 For his discussion of the utopian meaning latent in leisure, see Article 42 of *The principle of hope* on "Eight-hour day, world in peace, free time and leisure" (Bloch 1986: 885-924).

20 "The house itself, this complete and unified element of his work, had to be invented or discovered by the architect in accordance with guiding images which do not lie in what is immediately given in the outside world, at least not in its fixed immediacy. Music [… contains] far less immediate models of the world than architecture" (Bloch 1986: 727). Cf also Levinas's (1969: 156-8) remarks on the house as a place of dwelling and inhabitance. Levinas (1969: 156) regards the house as a space that allows for the subject's withdrawal from the world, and thus for its interiority: "Circulating between visibility and invisibility, one is always bound for the interior of which one's home, one's corner, one's tent, or one's cave is the vestibule. The primordial function of the home does not consist in orienting being by the architecture of the building and in discovering a site, but in breaking the plenum of the element, in opening in it the utopia in which the I recollects itself in dwelling at home with itself."

— paintings that express a happy and fulfilled human inhabitance of the world. On the content and utopian latency of such paintings, Bloch (1986: 813-4) remarks:

> On the whole, through the fair scenes to the bourgeois tranquillities — in the wood, on the promenade or even in an imagined vale of Tempe — there runs the category which can be described as that of *Sunday pictures*; its subject is: an immediate other world beyond hardship.

Bloch (1986: 813) celebrates Brueghel, Manet, Seurat, Cézanne and Gauguin as "Painters of the residual Sunday". Bloch's interpretation of Brueghel's *Land of Cockaigne* (Figure 1),[21] which is also the front cover illustration of the second volume of the English translation of *The principle of hope*, provides a good example of what is meant by representative pre-appearance. Apart from leisure and sociality, this painting of a farmer, a knight and a scholar, all overcome by drunkenness and enjoying a nap under the same tree, portrays the fantasy of a land where food is in excess and corporal gratification is a key ingredient of human happiness: "An eternal Sunday, which is one because there is no sign of any treadmill, and nothing beyond what can be drunk, eaten boiled or roasted is to be found" (Bloch 1986: 813). Seen thus, the painting brings to expression the predisposition of human longing for immanent fulfilment, and the possibility of its realisation. Also, Brueghel's paintings *Children's games* (1560), *Dance of the bride* (1566) and *Peasants' wedding* (1568) serve as good examples of a depiction of "utopia" as immanently realised in their celebration of carefree human sociality.[22] They serve to make a depiction of utopia present within the incomplete world.

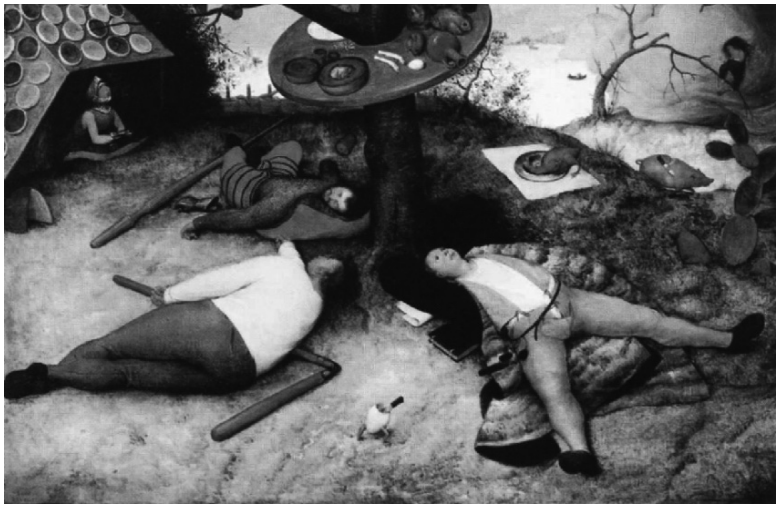
Interestingly, Levinas (1978: 90) also highlights the leisurely symbolism of a Sunday:

> The alternation of effort with leisure [...] moves toward a Sunday, a pure leisure when the world is given. The Sunday does not sanctify the week, but compensates for it. The situation, or the engagement in existence, which is effort, is repressed, compensated for, and put to an end, instead of being repaired in its very present.

21 Bloch (1986: 813). The original Dutch title of this painting from 1567 is *Luilekkerland*.

22 These last three paintings referred to are my own examples in illustration of Bloch's idea.

Figure 1: Pieter Brueghel, *The land of Cockaigne* (1567). Oil on oakwood, 52 x 78 cm. München: Alte Pinakothek (Hagen & Hagen 2001: 75)



As should be clear from the citation, Levinas offers only a qualified appreciation of such leisurely release; for him it is not an ultimate liberation. While for Bloch such immanent and inner-worldly fulfilment is significant, and bears a strong resemblance to ultimate fulfilment, Levinas looks beyond this for a transcendent fulfilment. It remains, however, an enriching aspect of Levinas's account of the world that he does express some appreciation of inner-worldly fulfilment.

A further type of representative pre-appearance found in Bloch's appreciation of painting is the "ideal" or "wishful landscape" [*Wunschlandschaft*]. As an example of this Bloch refers to the beautified landscapes in the paintings of Casper David Friedrich. This is an example of representative pre-appearance, because natural beauty would form a constitutive part of a happy and humane inhabitance of the world.[23]

23 Bloch (1986: 835) quotes from an essay of Heinrich Kleist on Casper David Friedrich's painting, entitled *Impressions before Friedrich's sea-landscape*, and then remarks on it as follows: "For the happiness imagined in Kleist, powerful enough to make foxes howl, deep enough to satisfy the demand made by the heart and to dispel the injury done to us by nature, in an unalienated world: — for this

Yet it seems undeniable that there is something about the utopian resemblance in the idealised landscape which shades into symbolic rather than representative pre-appearance. Bloch explicitly states that "the situationless landscape is certainly one of the most exact spatial symbols, in the pre-appearance of the picture" (Bloch 1986: 837).

The second of the three basic forms of pre-appearance that can be distinguished in Bloch is *symbolic pre-appearance*. Characteristic of symbolic pre-appearance is that by their content such artworks symbolise the idea of the kernel of sanctity that being carries in the germ.[24] The resemblance of the *humanum* in symbolic pre-appearance is less direct than in the case of representative pre-appearance. In the examples of symbolic pre-appearance that Bloch celebrates, the symbolism generally does not bear any explicit reference to a *humanum*. Rather, Bloch claims that such artworks are loaded with a symbol-intention pointing to utopia. In the logic of Bloch's aesthetic narrative we typically find examples of symbolic pre-appearance in religious art, architecture and music. In this context we need to bear in mind Bloch's attitude towards religion. For Bloch religion, especially Christianity, is an important resource of meaning, but as a neo-Marxist, of course, he does not intend to let religion speak in its own terms. Religion is not a lie merely to serve as "the opiate of the people", as the orthodox Marxist would have it, but a lie which conveys a deeper truth. In religion we find a symbol-intention which is not a flight from the world as it is, but an expression of the longing for a world of immanent human fulfilment.

utopia in the utopian element itself the situationless landscape is certainly one of the most exact spatial symbols, in the pre-appearance of the picture. But everywhere the wishful landscape is such that everything which happiness needs is present; no less and equally no more than art" (Bloch 1986: 837).

24 At the heart of Bloch's theory of ontology we encounter a distinction between existence and essence, which entails that being carries an unrealised kernel of sanctity inside it (as its essence). The "kernel" is supposedly the source of light, and the instance from out of which being derives intelligibility. In incomplete being the "kernel" is still covered under the "skin" of facticity characteristic of incomplete existence. Bloch's (1986: 1183-311) appreciation of various religions and of Christianity in particular stems from the fact that, in the logic of his hermeneutics, religions bring this idea to symbolic expression.

A typical example of symbolic pre-appearance in religious art would be a painting of an ascending Christ-figure.[25] For Bloch, Christ is the symbol of humanity hypostasising itself, of a humanity that comes to stand on its own feet. The symbolism of consolation we find in Christian religious art is also significant as symbolic pre-appearance. Think, for example, of the anticipation of the redeemer in Handel's oratorio *The Messiah*.[26] This can be interpreted as a symbolic expression of the hope for Messianic consolation that, for example, the tears of the victims of history may be wiped away.[27]

An example of pre-appearance in religious architecture is the dynamic expression of Gothic cathedrals. Bloch (1986: 733) describes Gothic architecture as an "attempt at a new world-structure carved out of rock and stone like a human community". The dynamic surge, the harmony and the uniform upward-directedness all symbolise the self-transcendence of human desire and the longing for a world which is in disaccord with the prevailing order.

The third form of pre-appearance that can be distinguished in Bloch is *pre-appearance in a cipher or in the subjective feeling of anticipation*. Pre-appearance on this level is not limited to art, but it does include art, namely in the form of classical music. This third form of pre-appearance can occur both in the experience of astonishment at the overwhelming beauty of a landscape and in listening spellbound to the thundering sound of a Beethoven symphony.[28] Why should these divergent examples be classified together as related on the same level of pre-appearance? They are related, since in them the locus of the pre-appearance occurs not so much in what is shown by the object (as is the case in the first two forms of pre-appearance), but rather in the subjective feeling of anticipation that the aesthetic experience unleashes.

25 Example of my choice in illustration of Bloch's logic. Cf Bloch's (1986: 1265-74) treatment of the "Wishful mysteries" of resurrection, ascension and return that surround the figure of Jesus.

26 "The trumpet shall sound, / and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, / and we shall be changed."

27 For Levinas's position on Messianic hope, salvation and consolation, cf 1978: 91.

28 Cf Bloch's (2000: 136-43; 1986: 1079, 1080, 1101-3) special appreciation of Beethoven.

Let us now consider an example of each of these related forms of pre-appearance. Pre-appearance in a cipher can occur in the experience of natural beauty, for example, when one is astonished at the red glow of light in which a mountainous landscape is bathed for the few minutes after sunset.[29] Walking along the River Thames in London in the twilight hours is an experience that can evoke such a subjective feeling of *le desir incroyable*.[30] In such experiences the subject comes into contact with the immensity, the beatitude and the immeasurable joy of existence. Here hope breaks through in its dimension of cosmic depth. Here the subjective feelings of wonderment, hope and anticipation are opened to their correlate in the aesthetic object, such that a fullness of time is experienced and, phenomenologically, the alienation between subjective anticipation and objective reality in incomplete being is for a moment alleviated. The locus of pre-appearance in a cipher is thus primarily in the subjective feeling evoked, since the object of aesthetic experience, here, can only become a cipher when the subjective astonishment is opened to it, and then the object becomes an adequate correlate of aesthetic experience.

Bloch also conceives of the experience of listening to music, which he considers to be the most utopian of the arts, as a silent form of subjective astonishment, where it is as if the feeling of anticipation evoked has its correlate echoing back to it, and anticipation fulfilling itself in the aesthetic experience itself. In the second movement of Mahler's Eighth Symphony, the theme composed is based on the last verse of Goethe's *Faust*, "Verweile doch, du bist so schön" [Stay awhile, you are so fair]. Bloch (1987: 141, my translation) remarks in this regard: "Something breaks in here and brings a fulfilment of that which was in the dark. The darkness itself becomes light. But the light in the darkness remains dark [...]".[31]

I stated that in this third form of anticipation the locus of pre-appearance is mainly in the subjective feeling of anticipation. Bloch

29 In a discussion of classical literature, Bloch (1986: 807) interprets "morning and evening red" as "the ciphers of great nature". Cf also Bloch's (1986: 176-7) understanding of "ciphers".

30 Phrase borrowed from Jacques Brel's song "J'en appelle".

31 "Hier schlägt etwas ein und bringt eine Erfüllung von dem, was im Dunkel war. Und das Dunkel selber wird Licht. Das Licht aber im Dunkel bleibt dunkel [...]".

(1986: 827, italics added) himself states that music, which he considers to be the most utopian of the arts, is "by no means as objective as other arts, although referring far more intensely to objects which do not lie in the horizon of sensation and ideas but of *emotions*".

Bloch (1986: 834) states that classical music in particular exhibits this paradox of nearness and distance that is characteristic of artistic pre-appearance:

> The utopian strikes into the immediacy of musical self-contact, the nearness of this musical landscape is in turn charged with significance of an extremely distant humanized world. Music thus has that paradoxical perspective that its objects appear ever greater, and therefore nearer, the more they move towards the horizon on which music lies and forms hope.

Why is this meaning attributed specifically to classical music? With classical music, the aesthetic experience within the subject, in the feeling of anticipation it unleashes and the utopian pre-appearance, touches the subject where it is closest, as the unfulfilled hope springing forth from the "darkness of the lived moment".[32] Bloch states that the "musical self-contact" is charged with pre-appearance while, at the same time, the object of the aesthetic experience moves further and further away. The more the subject comes into interior contact with the promise of fulfilment, the further the promised fulfilment retreats on the horizon.

As we have seen, Bloch provides a thrillingly rich narrative in which art, as an irreplaceable resource of meaning, is inseparable from humanistic values. Bloch integrates into his humanistic narrative a rich variety of examples from just about all the art forms and from ancient to modern times. It is clear that religious, pre-modern and early modern art (up to the late nineteenth century), in particular, resonate with a special meaning in Bloch's notion of art as the pre-appearance of utopia. We need to ask whether modern, twentieth-century art lends itself

32 The notion of the "darkness of the lived moment" [Dunkel des gelebten Augenblicks] represents the most prominent anthropological and existential-philosophical theme in Bloch's work. The evanescence of the present means that the moment is lived [gelebt] but not experienced [erlebt] (Bloch 2000: 191). Hidden in the lived moment is a content which plays along and is determinative of meaningful human orientation in the world, but which one cannot point out or designate clearly. The content of the just-lived moment escapes every attempt to nominate it directly and explicitly. Cf also Bloch 1986: 295-300 in this regard.

equally well to Bloch's narrative. Although it is difficult to find in Bloch's writings an unambiguous answer to this question, I shall attempt to provide one by considering a number of examples from twentieth-century painting.

One of the most famous examples of a socially engaged work of art from the twentieth century is Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which was painted after the town of that name had been attacked from the air by insurrectionists. The social commentary expressed in the painting is apparent. Yet, as it is an expression of a lack of justice and humanity, and an outcry against injustice and inhumanity, rather than a celebration of an excess of humanity or a positive expectation of it, it does not easily link up with Bloch's narrative. Perhaps Bloch is bound to a limitation in his own metaphor, which always tends to be in the positive, such as "*humanum*", "utopia", "fulfilment" or the "reign of freedom".

Furthermore, it is clear that many twentieth-century paintings are neither apparent in their meaning, nor expressions of a moral statement. Think, for example, of the abstract paintings of Mark Rothko and Nicolas De Staël (cf Figures 2 & 3), or the surrealist paintings of Joan Miro. We can try to integrate these examples into Bloch's narrative by saying that, in the vaguest sense, they bring a dream to expression. However, by forcing the interpretation in this manner to subsume these works into Bloch's humanistic narrative, we run the risk of disregarding and interpretatively violating what is specific to such works. These examples, along with much of contemporary art, seem to express confusion and a lack of meaning, which leans more closely towards Levinas's view that art shows us an underlying and fundamental obscurity in being. In spite of what remains plausible in Bloch's aesthetic narrative, the manner in which he attempts, as it were, to conduct all artworks as singing along in the choir of humanity does not always seem plausible for the purposes of a humanistic narrative about art. With its emphasis on human dignity, and its purpose of proliferating communal values, a humanistic narrative ought also to leave space for and to recognise the value of what does not fit into its scheme. A humanistic narrative ought to appreciate precisely, the fact that many contemporary works refuse to sing along in a choir such as Bloch's.[33]

33 Remarks such as the following serve as evidence that Bloch (1986: 158) indeed comes close to the danger of such closure in his narrative on art: "There is a

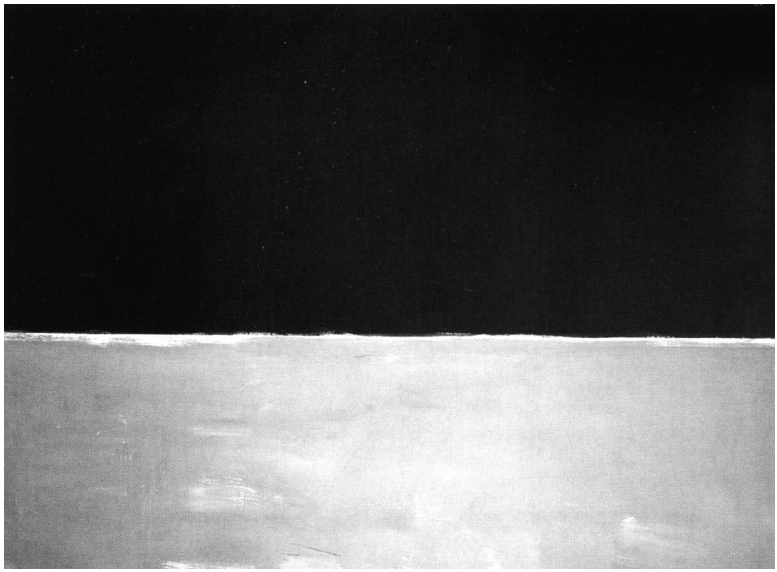
Figure 2: Nicolas de Staël, *Agrigente* (1954). Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. Private collection (Postcard editions of Centre Pompidou 2003)

What remains admirable and attractive in Bloch's endeavour to construct a humanistic narrative on art is that it seems to be very much in disaccord with the spirit of our time. In the book *The shock of the new: art in the century of change* (1980), based on a BBC TV series, Robert Hughes tells the story of an ever-growing pessimism in the twentieth century with regard to art's possible social meaning. He calls *Guernica* "the last great history-painting" and "the last modern painting of major importance that took its subject from politics with attention to changing the way large numbers of people thought and felt about power" (Hughes 1980: 110).

The spirit of social scepticism conveyed by this remark seems typical of our times. After the political derailment of humanistic ideals in

spirit of utopia in the final predicate of every great statement, in Strasbourg cathedral and in the *Divine Comedy*, in the expectant music of Beethoven and in the latencies of the Mass in B minor".

Figure 3: Mark Rothko, *Untitled (Black on gray)* (1969-1970). Acrylic paint on canvas, 175.3 x 235 cm. Kate Rothko-Prizel collection (Baal-Teshuva 2003: 17)



the twentieth century, any attempt at a humanistic narrative, such as we find in Bloch, has become stigmatised as implying a prior ideological commitment and as portraying the same spirit that gave rise to the totalitarian pursuit of communal ideals. I believe this to be an over-reaction, however, often based on flawed logic and in part the result of a too literal way of looking at the relation between art and society.

In order to overcome some of the limitations in Bloch's metaphor, to reinvigorate what I consider to be a highly plausible aesthetic narrative, and to find a humanistic narrative which is also sensitive to the unicity of art, I shall now outline my interpretation of "prophetic hope".

3. Prophetic hope as a humanistic narrative on art

Prophetic hope[34] subdivides into three levels: the prophetic imagination, which reaches out to the yonder, toward the realisation of the still unrealised possibilities of being human in the world; the outcry against injustice, and the prophetic challenge of the ruling mindset of a particular society at a particular point in history. What these three levels of prophetic hope have in common is that they express the longing for communal well-being and happiness. Art can serve as an expression of each of these three levels of prophetic hope. The relevance of prophetic hope has a broader scope than just aesthetics, and for me it has social and humanistic philosophy as its initial context. I hope, however, that in providing a key for interpreting art, it will offer some possibilities.

I shall now consider each of the three levels of prophetic hope, before proceeding to explain its context within social ethics and speculate on its possibilities as a cultural narrative.

Prophetic hope finds its most positive expression in the prophetic imagination, which expresses the still unrealised possibilities of a humane inhabitance of the world, something that we can at present touch only in our dreams and through our creative expressions. The meaning that is attributed to this first level of prophetic hope is strongly inspired by Bloch's notion of the daydream of a better world which announces itself from within the human subject, and which can eventually come to a symbolic and representative expression in art. What is also important is the significance that the humane inhabitance of the world attains as a moral, aesthetic and hermeneutic category in Bloch's work. The notion of the concrete inhabitance of the world as a moral category makes a perspective on morality possible in which aesthetic considerations are from the outset inseparable from the concept of morality.

The prophetic imagination is embedded in our concrete everyday life, to such an extent that it proliferates a horizon where neither ethics nor aesthetics is delineable from the rest of life. This inseparability of aesthetics from ethics, which we find in Bloch, is derived both from the

34 The interpretation of prophetic hope as presented in this section has been shaped directly by the impression made on me by the works of Levinas and Bloch. However, the specific meaning attributed to it here is my own interpretation and not found explicitly in Levinas or Bloch.

moral significance that art attains in the perspective of the notion of pre-appearance and, as the reverse side of the same argument, from the aesthetic quality inherent in a humane inhabitance of the world, as has been demonstrated above by the examples of representative pre-appearance.

The prophetic imagination is characterised to some extent by escapism. Nonetheless, this is the level at which prophetic hope finds its most creative expression. Prophetic imagination expresses the ideal of the still unrealised possibilities of a humane inhabitance of the world and, at the same time, breathes through our everyday concrete existence. This contention may strike the critical reader as surprising. I believe that the prophetic imagination captures the intertwinement of these two levels which, on the surface, may seem self-contradictory. In order to recognise this intertwinement of, on the one hand, concrete everyday existence and, on the other hand, the idealised existence to which we reach out with our imagination, we inevitably need to consider its expression in art. Let us turn to an example of how the everyday and the idealised are intertwined in an eminent humanistic example of prophetic imagination, namely the slave-choir in Verdi's opera *Nabucco*. In the first four lines of the slaves' chorus, which they sing in chains and performing forced labour, we may pay special attention to the manner in which the expression of the dream, the movement of the social imagination to a world beyond, is woven into metaphors that have a concrete register in the mundane, everyday world:

> Fly thought on golden wings;
> go alight upon the slopes and hills,
> where soft and warm the sweet airs
> of our native soil smell fragrant!

These wishful metaphors are not calling to mind something that does not exist; instead, they are suggestive of the world as a dwelling place in which things as real as the air we breathe attain an aesthetic significance.

In Beethoven's *Fidelio*, too, in the chorus of prisoners temporarily released from the dungeon, joyfully celebrating and anticipating their eventual liberty, the social imagination moves to the world beyond by clinging onto metaphors from our mundane corporeal existence, again using the air we breathe as a figure:

> Oh what a joy to breath freely in open air,
> Up here alone is life!
> The dungeon is a tomb.

If the prophetic imagination can breathe because of mundane metaphors, what is at stake in its movement beyond, toward human liberation and idealised landscapes, is something other than merely a flight from concrete existence.

A second level of the prophetic hope is the outcry against injustice which announces itself from injustice, from distress and from the awareness of it all. In social ethics we note this outcry for justice in the confrontation with the vulnerable position of the excluded and the marginalised. Such an outcry against injustice shows that our model of justice ought to take account of — and be sensitive to — the vulnerable position of those who are excluded. This level of the prophetic hope is of hermeneutic significance as it draws attention to socially engaged art, such as protest art, in particular, and brings to the fore the moral message in artworks that comment on the human condition within a particular social context, such as the South African photographer David Goldblatt's documentation of everyday life under apartheid.[35]

While the prophetic imagination is linked to artworks that anticipate justice and communal well-being by way of positive expression, the outcry against injustice draws attention to negative expressions of the longing for justice and humanity, such as we encounter in *Guernica*.

The third level of prophetic hope is the prophetic challenge. While the first two levels are of regulative importance for social ethics and give shape to our framework of interpretation, the third is mainly of retrospective relevance as far as the interpretation of art is concerned. Often a thinker or artist considered controversial at the time when s/he first disseminated his/her ideas can be morally vindicated and become a 'prophet' in hindsight. This links up with the prophetic challenge in the weaker sense of the term.

By disrupting pre-conceived ideas and established mindsets (the prophetic challenge in the weaker sense), art can also open the way for a prophetic challenge in the stronger sense. Then we are invited not only

35 David Goldblatt (born near Johannesburg, 1930) established himself during the apartheid years as one of South Africa's most eminent documentary photographers. His photographs portray — both critically and realistically — mundane existence and racial relationships under apartheid. His books include *On the mines* (1973), *Some Afrikaners photographed* (1975), *In Boksburg* (1982), and *Lifetimes: under apartheid* (in collaboration with Nadine Gordimer) (1986).

to review our established ideas, but to reach out towards unexplored horizons. Recognising the prophetic challenge is important because it shows us the dynamic nature of prophetic hope, as it evolves through human thought, culture and art.[36]

One may be tempted to ask, critically, whether this emphasis on prophetic hope as a key to interpreting art does not run the same risk as was pointed out in relation to Bloch's narrative. Like the notion of "art as the pre-appearance of utopia" in Bloch, prophetic hope focuses our attention on the moral meaning that is latently or explicitly present in works of art. Is this not, once again, a way of disregarding and hermeneutically violating the unicity of art, that dimension that remains impenetrable to interpretation? In this context we may appreciate one of the most valuable contributions of Levinas's phenomenology of the artwork. His contention that art withdraws from the light of the world can be understood as a recognition of the unicity of art. At the outset of this article I stated that I wanted to work towards a humanistic narrative which, while finding in art a resource of meaning, at the same time would remain sensitive to the unicity of art. I think that an emphasis on prophetic hope as an interpretative key could help us in precisely this direction. In social ethics prophetic hope means that we ought to be sensitive to and vigilant for the sake of those who are excluded. Prophetic hope as a key to interpretation means that we ought to be sensitive to and vigilant regarding that which falls outside our own scheme of interpretation. Such recognition of the unicity of art is of decisive importance for a humanistic narrative. Recognising the unicity of art, and the extent to which art may subvert current conceptions of meaning, is a step towards acknowleding some intrinsic value in art. One can acknowledge the unicity of an artwork and still allow that the work may have prophetic meaning.

This, however, does not explain why art remains important for a humanistic narrative. It is in this connection that the perspective which Levinas offers in the very last sentence of his essay 'Reality and its shadow'

36 Bloch (1975: 184) himself stresses this aspect of art's prophetic capacity: "What has cultural value expresses more than the goal of one age or one class: it speaks for the future. Any significant philosophical or artistic work contributes to future maturity. Therefore great achievements in the superstructure no longer belong completely to their age."

provides a credible explanation. It also serves as a corrective for the danger to which Bloch exposes himself in his humanistic narrative. In the last sentence of his essay on art, Levinas (1989: 143) places his preceding analyses in a different light: "[O]ne would have to introduce the perspective of the relation with the other without which being could not be told in its reality, that is to say, in its time".

What is adumbrated here is the perspective of ethics, which Levinas postpones during his initial phenomenology of artworks. Moreover, in the allusion to the reality of being, we can note that the extra-moment in Levinas's theory of ontology rises to the surface. The possibility of meaning as such presupposes sociality and a relation to the fellow human being. In this perspective the work of art, in its beatitude or its subversion, its significance or its lack of meaning, is discovered as a trace of the fellow human being, and takes its place as an inseparable part of the human community's existance.

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