Excessive Presence and the Image

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Daily the television confronts us with scenes of human suffering. In the news, starving children stare vacantly, weeping storm victims survey the ruins of their lives, the casualties of the latest terrorist bombing regard us from their hospital beds. We are also confronted with documentary films with their images of victims of previous catastrophes, both natural and human. Regarding this collective output, one has to ask: at what point does this surfeit of imagery make a spectacle of human suffering? What in fact is the boundary between receiving information and engaging in voyeurism? This question does not concern just the news and documentaries. Art itself often trades in violent imagery. How do we understand the ethical and political implications of the distinction between being a witness and watching a spectacle? What is the significance of the progressive erasure of this boundary? In what follows, I suggest some answers to these questions by exploring where art, ethics, and politics coincide. My claim will be that this place of coincidence is the peculiar presence they offer us. The voyeurism that marks our media-intensive age, I will argue, corrupts such presence, turning their endeavors into spectacles.

The Presence of a Work of Art

Hans-Georg Gadamer noted that a literary text has peculiar presence. In his words, “The words of such texts are authentically there only in coming back to themselves. This means that they are originally and authentically Texts—that is, they are words that first achieve their presence in this return—by fulfilling the true meaning of the text out of themselves.” Gadamer’s insight is that a literary text accomplishes its intention by returning the reader to itself. It fulfills its intention as a text, and thus becomes present as such, in this return. This claim can be clarified by contrasting the intention of a piece of literature with those of different types of text. The intention, for example, of a text that promulgates a law is that the law be obeyed. If people do acknowledge and obey it, it achieves its presence as a law. The intention of an informational text is simply to convey information. It achieves its presence when people read and, if appropriate, act on the information it conveys. Such information can easily fall out of date. No one, for example, would read last week’s grocery flyer to shop for this week’s sales. The staying power of such texts is quite limited. By contrast, a literary text is not informative in any straightforward way. We do not read Homer’s poems
for their informational character. They keep their literary value whether or not they depict actual events. When we read a letter of Horace’s as literature, its relation to the particular person it addresses is not relevant. Whatever information it might have conveyed about the existing world has long since lost the possibility of being acted on. While the fulfillments of legal and informational texts occur in the context of the actual world—that is, in people actually obeying the law or acting on the information they have received—the literary text gains its fulfillment through a linguistic context. Its fundamental intention is simply to be read again. When we do return to read it, we fulfill this intention. It is at this point that it achieves its presence as a literary text.

What exactly is this presence? Gadamer asserts that the words of a literary text achieve their presence “by fulfilling the true meaning of the text out of themselves.” They, in other words, determine the interpretation. They do so in a way that constantly seems to be new. Thus, we reread literary texts because they constantly offer us more than they did on our last reading. New insights, resonances, colorings appear. Such texts appear to exceed our previous interpretations. In this sense, the presence that they offer may be termed “excessive.” It exceeds our intentions. It surprises us. This is why it is profitable to reread the text. Unlike a law or a piece of information, it sets a context of interpretation that puts us in the position of always “catching up” with it. The same type of excessive presence also characterizes the visual arts and music. The good paintings last. They draw us back to themselves again and again. The same holds for symphonies, sonatas, and songs. A song that does not draw us back to hear it again never achieves the excessive presence—the presence that exceeds that of the previous experience of it—that characterizes the work of art.

The Presence of a Person

I have been speaking of intentions and fulfillments. Formally regarded, there are a number of possibilities here. The givenness of what we intend can exactly match our intentions. It can be other than what we intend—as is the case when we are mistaken. The givenness also can be less. It can, for example, not offer the detail that was part of our intentions. Finally, givenness can exceed our intentions. In showing itself, the object presents us with more than what we intended. To intend the object as having such excessive presence is, paradoxically, to intend it as exceeding our intentions. Such presence has a peculiar quality. It makes us aware that more is being offered than we can formulate in our intentions. The interpretations based on our previous experience are not sufficient to grasp the sense it embodies. We have to adjust our interpretation and return to it again. In such a return, however, we face the same situation. Yet another return is called for.

The preeminent example of such presence is not the work of art, but rather the other person. In his actions, the other gives himself as both like and not like me. He behaves generally as I do, but not in any strictly predictable way. There is always a certain excess in what he shows me. He is not limited to the predictions I make from my own experience. To intend the other as manifesting this quality is, as indicated, to intend the inadequacy of one’s intention. The intention directs itself towards a fulfillment that will exceed its intentions. To give a temporal cast to this is to note that this exceeding is towards the future. The real future—the future that distinguishes itself from the past—does not just repeat it. I do not anticipate it simply as a projection of what I have already experienced. It is present to me as an openness to the new, as an exceeding of the intentions that I form on the basis of my past experience. This presence of the future is in fact the presence of the other, i.e., his exceeding givenness. The other will be what he or she will be, not simply what I determine and anticipate from my perspective.

The presence of this givenness is, in fact, the presence of freedom. In its "excess," we have the phenomenological ground of three mutually implicit concepts: alterity, freedom, and futurity. "Alterity" shows itself in the fact that the other shows himself as other than what I project from my perspective. He or she exceeds the intentions that are based on this. As just noted, this very exceeding manifests the openness of the future. Freedom is implicit here, since as other than what I can determine or predict from my perspective, the other shows himself as free from my control. The open horizon of the behavior that I confront in regarding him points to the other as exercising his own control of his behavior. The margin of the autonomy that constitutes his freedom is phenomenologically present to me in the excess of his givenness, i.e., in his exceeding the intentions by which I attempt to anticipate what he will do or say. Alterity here is thus experienced as the alterity of agency. As such, it is experienced as the very otherness that opens up the future.

There is an ethical aspect to such presence. It can be expressed phenomenologically in terms of Husserl’s insight that perception is interpretation. According to Husserl, every intending to see involves an interpretation of what we do see. In fact, the interpretation guides the behavior that accomplishes the perception. Thus, to see a three dimensional object, I do not limit myself to one position, but either turn the object or shift my location to view its other sides. By contrast, to view a photograph, I limit my motion to attaining an appropriate viewing
distance. I do not attempt to see it from behind. As these examples indicate, there is a correlation between the interpretative intention that animates the seeing and the disclosive behavior that it guides. In particular, there are limits to our behavior towards others that we do not have with regard to things. Such limits point to the exceeding quality of the intention to the other. The intention itself, in guiding the behavior, makes some actions appropriate and others inappropriate. In making me limit my behavior, the intention imposes an ethical aspect on my encounter with the other.

How does the intention accomplish this? To intend the other as exceeding your intentions is to intend her as free. This means that you intend her as the author of her actions. To do so, however, is to raise the question of whether she would authorize your actions. Would she consent to your treating her in the way you intend? Would she, for example, authorize your lying to her? Can you assume that she would make this an object of her will? If not, then to intend her as free is to limit your behavior in this regard. Kant expresses this limitation in a formulation of his categorical imperative: “act so that you treat humanity either in yourself or others as an end and never simply as a means.” Concretely, this means that I cannot treat a person as a thing. In those actions that the other could not authorize, the recognition of the other’s freedom imposes limitations on my freedom.

To understand such limitations phenomenologically, we have to note that in confronting a person, the relation of intention to fulfillment suffers a reversal. Encountering the other, I am called upon in my response to fulfill her intentions. The exceeding character of my intention to the other is based on this fact. Thus, the intention that intends its own exceeding is actually an intending, a stretching forth, that awaits. Here, to intend is not to interpret, but rather to suspend the interpretative act till the other gives the lead. If perception is interpretation, then what we have here is a waiting to perceive. In this waiting, we acknowledge the inviolability of the other person. The other has authority in the sense that we accept her as the author of her own intentions. Her givenness as an author is excessive in the sense that it exceeds the simple perceptual givenness of a mere thing. It exceeds this by exceeding the interpretative intention that we place on such givenness. The excess is her interpretation, the very interpretation that, in animating her behavior, meets ours and calls on us to respond.

To intend the other as a person, then, is to intend to heed this very call. The intentionality that directs itself to the other is accordingly a form of responsibility. It is a stretching forth that responds to the authority or autonomy of the other. Engaging in it, we take moral responsibility for our own behavior. We exercise our own freedom to bind ourselves to listen. What we heed over and beyond what is said is, to use Lévinas’s term, the “saying” of the other. The excessive givenness of such “saying” points to the authority of the other, the other as always capable of adding to the “said,” to the already interpreted, to the already accomplished. Because of this addition, it is profitable to return again and again to the other. The other has authority. She sets the context of her interpretation, one that causes us continually to reinterpret her as we engage in this return. In fact, it is only in terms of this return, constantly repeated, that the other’s unique presence manifests itself.

This analysis shows a remarkable convergence of the presence of the other and that of a work of art. In each case, we have the requirement of yet another look. In each case, we encounter the kind of presence that exceeds the intentions directed to it, a presence that continually calls on us to adjust our intentions. Such convergence, I think, is responsible for the moral status of art, that is, for the fact that, in its very presence, it embodies a demand to be treated with respect. The acknowledgment of this demand points to art’s status as the materialization of our subjectivity. The art work stands before us as a material presence that exceeds such presence. As such, it has an ethical presence.5

The Presence of the Political

People often talk about politics in terms of managing collective interests. Political action, in the common view, is the action that concerns itself with health, education, defense, social welfare, and so on. All of these governmental functions, however, can be carried out in a tyranny. A tyranny exists to the point that governmental decisions are concentrated in a single individual, party, or system. It is characterized by an enforced unity of intent and action.6 Politics, however, involves give and take. It is by definition “the art of compromise.” It acknowledges what Hannah Arendt called the “plural condition” of humanity. This condition expresses itself in a plurality of interests, views, groups, and the parties formed to represent them politically. What is acknowledged here is the need to take account of others, in particular, to come to terms with their interpretations of our collective state, which may exceed or be different from our own views. What is missing, then, in a tyranny is the freedom that involves real choices, choices whose outcomes are not determined beforehand. As the Czech philosopher, Jan Patočka expressed this, “political life in its original and primordial form is nothing other than active freedom itself.” It is a life that exists “from freedom for freedom.”6
So defined, political life is grounded in what we have called the excessive presence of others. Its space is that of excessive presence. This point may be put in terms of the fact that man is not just a social animal. He is also a political animal. Thus, bees have social but not political structures. Humans have both because they are free and social. Being both political and social means that their freedom is social. It is a function of the fact that they can, with their different views and interpretations, present one another with alternative possibilities that can be acted upon. In other words, as both political and social, human beings make possible their mutual freedom by giving it a real content. Their differing interpretations of a situation present them with a range of possible choices for collective action. Given our finitude, we cannot of course realize all of them. We have to choose. In facing this choice we confront the excessive presence of the political. It is the presence of that which contains more possibilities than we could possibly realize. As forcing us to choose, it is also the presence of our collective freedom. This freedom is ongoing. Thus, as based on the excessive presence of our others, it is a presence that constantly requires a return, a readjustment, a new interpretation. In a manner similar to the art work and the person, it is there, it has its presence in just such a return.

**Erasing the Boundary**

The place of coincidence of the art work, the person, and the political is, then, the presence that requires a return. That all three have this presence is implied in the fact that they are all functions of the human, more particularly, of the excessive presence by which the human is recognized. This means that the undermining of this presence affects them equally.

In the West, this undermining is largely economic. It is a function of our increasing tendency to understand presence in economic terms. To the point that we do, people will appear as economic agents. Their world, correspondingly, will consist of goods that can be measured in economic terms. Politics in such a world will take as its sole task the ensuring of the smooth functioning and growth of the economy. It will see its job as increasing the gross domestic product by promoting exports, enlarging domestic consumption by increasing employment, and insuring that the educational and research capacities of the nation are such to maintain its competitive position. As for freedom, its primary manifestation will be that of economic choice. In the words of the free market theorists, each purchase a person makes will count as a kind of vote. In such voting, freedom will consist of choosing between competing brands. Given the power of advertising and the media to sway our choices, such freedom will of course be open to manipulation. Insofar as politics is thought of in these terms, the same forms of manipulation will be available to those with an economic interest in what the voters choose. Thus, one aspect of this reduction of presence will be an inherently oligarchic system. When purchases count as votes, those with more money by definition have more votes. When political choices are understood as choices between competing brands, political candidates will be marketed as such. The money required for such marketing will increase the political power of wealth.

The transformation of presence that occurs in this process can be understood as a type of commodification. This commodification results from the fact that one can make a great deal more money producing a large number of standardized products than from making something unique. The mass production that makes the former possible acts to decrease the unit costs of what one produces and therefore to increase overall profits. In the conditions of modern, capitalist production, then, presence becomes standardized. It becomes the presence of a commodity. This loss of uniqueness also affects the presence of the political insofar as the same mass techniques are used to present political alternatives. Thus, the same images, the same sound bites, the same slogans are used again and again. The attempt to maximize political exposure while lowering the unit costs of doing so invariably commodifies the political image. The result is a presence that has no excess. Rather than being something that is there through its return, it becomes an object of consumption.

One way to express this transformation is in terms of pornography. Pornography objectifies its subject. Through the image it presents, it transforms the person into a consumable object. The voyeur consumes it and moves on to the next pornographic image. The pornography of violence has the same effect. Presence here is not a function of a return, but rather of a chain of substitutions, where one image, when consumed, gives way to the next. In both cases, the object loses its uniqueness. It exists only in its replacement. To the point that art itself becomes viewed as a commodity, the same phenomenon occurs. To see this, one need only observe how long people will actually look at a painting in a gallery before moving on.

Hannah Arendt put this generalized transformation of presence in terms of the contrast between the lasting of a cultural object and the functionality of a consumer item. In her words, “An object is cultural to the extent that it can endure: its durability is the very opposite of functionality, which is the quality which makes it disappear again from
the phenomenal world by being used and used up.”

When we treat images as consumer items, we become a voyeur. This holds no less with pornography than with the images of human suffering that we “consume” with the news. It also holds for the politics that transforms candidates and issues into consumable sound bites. In each case, the erasure of the boundary between being a witness and watching a spectacle signifies the loss of the excessive presence that is at the root of our ethical and political responsibility. The image that is allowed to express this presence refuses to be consumed. It provokes us, calling on us to respond just as another person does. Feeling the call, one returns to it again and again as to a master. Our own political, ethical, and artistic responsibility is to keep open the place for this call.

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Notes


2. Thus, this type of text keeps its staying power by continually being reread. It loses its literary character when we do not read it for itself—when for example, we treat a letter as an artifact, as a “dead” historical document. To put this in terms of the reciprocal relationship that characterizes other types of text, we can say that its literary character is what draws us to return to read it, while this very return is what allows it to keep its presence as a literary text.

3. In Gadamer’s words, “Die Interpretation ist da nicht mehr ein bloßes Mittel zur Wiedervermittlung einer ursprünglichen Äußerung. Der literarische Text ist gerade dadurch in einem besonderen Grade Text, daß er nicht auf eine ursprüngliche Sprachhandlung zurückweist, sondern seinerseits alle Wiederholungen und Sprachhandlungen vorschreibt; kein Sprechen kann je die Vorschrift ganz erfüllen, die ein dichterischer Text darstellt. Derselbe übt eine normative Funktion aus, die weder auf eine ursprüngliche Rede noch auf die Intention des Redenden zurückweist, sondern die in ihm selbst entspringt, etwa im Glück des Gelingens eines Gedichtes selbst noch den Dichter überraschend und überraschend.” (“Text und Interpretation,” 352. See also ibid., 353.)

4. Lévinas also asserts, “The other is the future.” The basis of this claim for Lévinas is, however, quite different. According to Lévinas, what links the Other and the future is their sheer alterity. He writes, “the future is what is in no way grasped... [T]he future is ... what befalls and lays hold of us. The other is the future. The very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future.” (“Time and the Other,” in Time and the Other, and Additional Essays, trans. Richard Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1994, 76–7.) My view is that futurity is manifest in the other’s behavior. It is present in the excess such behavior manifests beyond what we intend.

5. As Husserl puts this: “Outer perception is interpretation, thus the unity of the concept demands that inner perception be such. It belongs to perception that something appear within it, but interpretation makes up what we term appearance—be it correct or not, anticipatory or overdrawn. The house appears to me through no other way but that I interpret in a certain fashion actually experienced contents of sensation. I hear a barrel organ—the sensed tones I hear I interpret as barrel organ tones. Even so, I perceive via interpretation what mentally appears in me, the penetrating joy, the heartfelt sorrow, etc. They are termed ‘appearances’ or, better, appearing contents precisely for the reason that they are contents of perceptive interpretation.” (Edmund Husserl, Logische Untersuchungen, ed. Ursula Panzer [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984], Husserliana, XIX/2, 762.)

6. Lévinas does not acknowledge this presence. His position is that the “image” art presents is simply the “old garments” that being leaves behind as it moves forward to the future. (“Reality and its Shadow,” in Collected Philosophical Papers [Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998], 7.) This means that “every artwork is in the end a statue—a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself.” In other words, it disengages from “the work of being itself, the very existing of a being” (Ibid., 8). It stops its temporal advance. The result is the peculiar timelessness of the work of art. It is also its “irresponsibility.” Since the work is frozen in time, “it cannot go toward the better.” Thus, it does not call on us to accomplish this better; it calls rather to a mere gazing on the image or shadow of being. In artistic productions, as Lévinas writes, “the world to be built is replaced by the essential completion of its shadow. This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility. The poet exiles himself from the city. From this point of view, the value of the beautiful is relative. There is something wicked and egoist[ical] and cowardly in artistic enjoyment” (Ibid., 12). As Jill Robbins shows in her excellent study, Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), this negative attitude towards art is quite general in Lévinas’s works.
7. Thus, Marxism, to the point that it demands a single view, can be accounted a tyranny; so can market capitalism insofar as it follows a set of rigid rules, for example, always decide for the course of action that offers the highest net present value on an expenditure.


9. The best account of this process of standardization remains Walter Benjamin’s, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitlalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977).