

Outlines for a Aesthetic-Ethical Approach to Pedagogy – A Reading of Jacques Rancière's aesthetics with Emmanuel Lévinas's ethics

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Abstract

In this article, we discuss the intersection of Emmanuel Lévinas's notion of ethics and Jacques Rancière's notion of aesthetics in a pedagogical context through the praxis of Expressive Arts (EXA). We begin by introducing Lévinas's ethics and its role in his philosophical system, and also its implications for relation between human beings. Thereafter we introduce Rancière's aesthetics and its potential to evoke ethics by reproaching non-art as art. After these presentations we introduce the praxis of EXA through four interviews with participants from an EXA-based work that we ourselves are previously familiar with. We analyze this praxis in the light of the above mentioned philosophical notions and conclude with a discussion on the pedagogical implications of this philosophical perspective on the uses of art in education. Our conclusion is that EXA is an advantageous praxis for a pedagogy that aims at taking into account the challenges and the complexity of this aesthetic-ethical approach.

Introduction

This article examines the relationship between aesthetics, ethics and learning by comparing Emmanuel Lévinas's and Jacques Rancière's respective ideas concerning ethics and aesthetics. Thereafter, we will connect these ideas to a concrete example by analyzing extracts from an interview study with participants from a socio-pedagogical work based on Expressive Arts (EXA). Lastly we will discuss what implications this examination would pose for pedagogical theories and practices.

Art and Aesthetics in Lévinas and Rancière

Lévinas's philosophy is centered on what he calls *the infinitely Other*¹, or *an-archy*, which simply put could be described as that which exists before the ontological being, before we assume any truths; that is, that which we cannot grasp, decide and name without simplifying into something else – into something that fits an ontological language. This that precedes ontology is an *otherwise than being* that disjoins being with itself (Lévinas 1961/1999, 1974/1999). The human cogito turns its impressions of this alterity into sameness, i.e. into a violently² simplified object

¹ As is common, we will differentiate the two similar notions of “the other” that Lévinas uses, by marking the other as in an-archy as *the Other* and the other as in an other person as *the other*.

² *Violence*, for Lévinas, is to reduce alterity into something already known or to reduce the other into a reflection of oneself.

that therefore becomes easier to grasp and to thematize. Alterity isn't therefore difference in the sense that we all have different attributes and experiences, since all these differences are already reductions of alterity into something that is graspable through language. Alterity is instead *that which isn't graspable through language* – that which is beyond language – and is grounded in the fact that you are not me (Lévinas 1948/1987). I am profoundly alone in my existing, no matter how alike another existent you I may be.³ I am incapable of finding the “kernel” – or the “essence” – of myself or others, and I am incapable of “expressing” my alterity or “understanding” the other's alterity. All this reduces alterity per definition, according to Lévinas. A reduction could therefore not be rephrased in a less reductive way since all phrasings are reductive by nature. Alterity cannot be understood – we never reach an absolute truth that we are able to conceptualize or grasp.

By accepting and thereby encountering this alterity, we encounter our lack of control and also, paradoxically, our inevitable responsibility for the other. We are confronted by our capability – and our drive – to commit violence to the other by reducing her/him into something that reflects ourselves. In this way, alterity makes us responsible for the other, whether we want it or not and whether this responsibility actually leads to us taking responsibility or not. We are confronted with a responsibility that we have always had since this responsibility is a part of our existing. Lévinas proclaims that this relation between alterity and responsibility is the foundation of an ethics. Contrary to common sense notions of ethics, Lévinas's ethics is the critical “persecution” of being – the breaching of sameness which recognition of alterity provokes. Ethics is an answer to the responsibility we are faced with in the encounter with alterity and this is where we find the kernel of *subjectivity* in Lévinas: “The subject ... cannot be described on the basis of intentionality, representational activity, objectification, freedom and will [...] The subject arising in the passivity of unconditionality, in the expulsion outside of its being at home with itself, is undecidable” (Lévinas 1974/1999, s. 53, 139). As Todd (2003) shows, this notion of responsibility doesn't mean that you take responsibility by showing empathy or act out of compassion, but primarily by not violating the other by reducing her/his alterity into a reflection of something already familiar. Lastly, as an extension of this responsibility, Lévinas's (1961/1999) writes that *justice* is the realization of the fact that this responsibility also counts for *the third* – that is other humans whose alterity I am not faced with, beyond my encounter with the

³ Lévinas distinguishes the verb *to exist* from the noun *existence* (Lévinas 1947/2001). Everything that exists becomes an existent, i.e. an event becomes a thing – a becoming becomes a being.

other.⁴ In Lévinas's ethics there is in one sense a right and a wrong: the ethical right is to embrace this infinite responsibility and the ethical wrong is to face this responsibility but then try to escape it. The ethical right demands that I over and over again do not fear alterity and instead re-humanize others from my de-humanizing images of them.⁵ In a more overarching social and political sense, this ethics enables *change* in the way it criticizes and opposes all forms of status quo, whether it is about maintaining an image of myself as a person or of the society that I live in. By extension, ethics becomes an antidote to truth holding as well as political and social fatalism.

Lévinas rarely wrote about aesthetics and his examinations of art are somewhat narrow and contradictory throughout his works. In his essay “Reality and Its Shadow” (1948/1989) he proclaims that art is a kind of thematization, which thereby conceptualizes alterity into sameness. Art criticism can, according to Lévinas, contrariwise reintroduce alterity.⁶ With the help from Rancière we will claim that there is a more satisfying connection to make between Lévinas philosophical concepts and aesthetics, which in some senses resonates with his notion of art criticism. Firstly, what is *art*? According to Rancière (2003/2008), art is *de facto* those objects that we call art. Art couldn't be anything more or anything less. Thereby our aesthetic understanding of art could be pointed towards any object that we want to consider an artwork. The more interesting question is: What is *aesthetics*? What Rancière calls aesthetics is one of the three *regimes* of understanding art (Rancière 2000/2013). The first two, which we will not engage with in detail since they are the regimes he distance himself from, are *the representative* and *the ethical regime*. The first regime evaluates art according to how well it imitates something else and the second evaluates art according to its ethical and political implications or contributions. The regime Rancière promotes is *the aesthetic regime of arts* which is a regime that treats art as autonomous in the sense that what it semblances, says or means isn't inherent in the artwork itself, but contrary

⁴ See Apeldoorn (2008), Apeldoorn, Larsson & Gudmundsson (2004) and Romanowska (2014) for examples of this process from being to justice, through alterity and responsibility,

⁵ Cederberg (2010) is thereby right to claim Lévinas's “post-antihumanism”. Lévinas's philosophy joins the antihumanism of the 20th century in the sense that he claims that “[h]umanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human” (Lévinas 1974/1999, p. 128), but he takes one step further by formulating a humanism that proceeds from the other instead of the same. This is an idea of humanity as “...the possibility to break with totality” (Cederberg 2010, p. 96). This differs from Biesta's (2006) paradoxical reading of Lévinas as an antihumanist: Lévinas humanism isn't based on facts about the human as a species, but doesn't either avoid to have an idea of what humanity is.

⁶ As Riera (2006) comments, this is first and foremost a way for Lévinas to distance himself from Heidegger's inquiries of aesthetics, which becomes evident in his later philosophical works.

something we read into it.⁷ To use a simplified example: a photography of a rose isn't in this sense a picture that necessarily shows a rose but instead a picture that could say infinitely things, depending on our discourse. It's a picture wherein there is a field of red color, another field of green, and a small white dot in the right corner for instance. There is no hierarchy in the picture, i.e. the white dot isn't any less important than the big red field, from an aesthetic point of view. Every interpretation of this picture is an act of transferring a discourse onto an otherwise autonomous piece of art. What are the virtues of reading art in this way? Rancière proclaims in accordance with his idea of democracy that reading art in this way validates the radical equality between us, that is: no one is able to grasp the correct interpretation of an artwork, since there is no such.⁸ Everyone is equal in the sense that we are all searching for a way to grasp something ungraspable. And the only way to validate this equality through art is to be ignorant of the hierarchical discourses that make me a more intelligent person than you, solely based on my discursive knowledge.

To clarify this connection between Lévinas's ethics and Rancière's aesthetics we could take as an example the encounter between an I and a you in and through an artwork. At first we may agree that the artwork is "nice" since this adjective matches our respective thematizations of the work. But, if we aren't following either representative or ethical regimes of the art, sooner or later our consensus regarding the work breaks. Sooner or later, one of us experience something that the other doesn't. It then becomes evident that what we perceive and how we make sense of what we perceive excludes something – what is excluded is that which doesn't fit our concepts and thematizations, that which doesn't fit what we perceive as the world. This that doesn't fit is alterity. I then understand that we have two entirely different and unique perspectives of the world – perspectives that we are alone in and that we couldn't ever fully share with someone. We are both wholly unique in our existing, which makes us equal. Our perceptions cannot ever coincide, but they could however constantly confront us with that which is excluded (Lévinas 1982/1993). My understanding and my description of you becomes insufficient. I become aware of that however I choose to relate to you or describe you simplifies the fact that you exist in a wholly different way than I. You

⁷ An interesting detail is that both Lévinas and Rancière writes about the muteness of the artwork, although they draw different conclusions from this dimension of art. See Lévinas (1948/1989) and Rancière (1998/2011).

⁸ See Rancière (1995/1999), which features his pivotal work on democracy and equality. See Rancière (2000/2013) for his clearest writings on the intersections of politics and aesthetics.

are someone I could never entirely share my existing with and whose experience I could never understand fully.

A feeling of responsibility emerges when I realize that my understanding of you and my descriptions of you diminish the infinite difference that lies in the fact that we exist separately. My responsibility for you – the responsibility for how I relate to you and understand you – becomes palpable. It becomes evident that I diminish you and your unique way of existing when I create an idea of who you are. I violate you, with Lévinas's words. The feeling of responsibility makes evident that I unintentionally dehumanize you – that I force you into an idea or a concept – and the responsibility lies in that I *could* “humanize” our relationship by being critical to these images of you and being open to the alterity that I am facing in the encounter with you. When I understand this, the realization is generalized and I understand that this holds for every other human being, including myself. I understand that the image I have of myself is insufficient and limiting, that it excludes alterity, and I understand that this holds even for every person that I pass on the streets. I am therefore responsible for everyone and nobody can take this responsibility from me. No one can take responsibility in my place. In this sense, ethics enables change and demands that I take responsibility and resist all forms of fatalistic status quo. By encountering each other in and through art it becomes evident that our images and our understandings of the world are insufficient and contingent and we become aware of that we aren't necessarily omitted to them. We become aware of our constant becoming, i.e. our capacity of act and change.

In short, our claim is this: the aesthetic regime of art validates our equality, but what makes us equal is the pre-ontological fact that Lévinas whole philosophy centers on, i.e. the fact that none of us can grasp or thematize without turning it into simplified concepts of our cogito. Thereby, we claim that art, read from the perspective of the aesthetic regime, bears a potential to provoke or enable an encounter with alterity. In this sense, we claim that it is possible to connect Lévinas ethics with Rancière's aesthetics. We will try to further examine this thesis by analyzing some interviews centered on a work in and through EXA.

Aesthetics in Expressive Arts

In reference to our prior articles,⁹ EXA could be summarized as a way to process existential questions and experiences by approaching intersubjectivity through

⁹ See Apelmo & Tedenljung (not pub.) and Apelmo, Lundkvist & Tedenljung (not pub.).

intermodality in order to enable constructive change.¹⁰ In other words, (1) it centralizes around a reflection on meaningful and existentially vibrant experiences in our lives, which (2) is expressed through several means of (artistic) expressions simultaneously or in sequence. (3) The work is always situated in a intersubjective context, i.e. in a context where the participants are able to interact *as subjects*, to be able to collectively (4) enable transformative moments that in turn leads to (re)constructive actions for change¹¹ The notion of aesthetics in EXA differs somewhat from ours. Art is, as in Rancière, that which we acknowledge as art. The artistic expression is also evaluated in EXA according to the artist's striving for *authenticity* in the process oriented work – that is, in what grade the expression is honest or genuine. Even if this “regime” diverge somewhat from Rancière's aesthetic regime of arts, we mean that there is compatibility between them.

We have in the past driven and participated in a work called *Skaparkväll* (tr. “Creativity Evening”), which was based on EXA accordingly to the presentation above. This work is partially documented in four interviews in Börje Forsgård's diploma thesis *Kommunikation med mig själv och andra – genom den egna skapade bilden*. We are aware of the formally low status of the study. Despite this, we claim that the respondents answers are able to illustrate our theoretical point well. This is because of the following reasons: the scientific level of the interviews doesn't substantially affect our reasoning since it is used as a source material that solely aims to illustratively concretize our philosophy and praxis. We have also followed the work with the interviews closely and judge that the presentation of the interviews mirrors the complexity in the respondents contributions. Additionally, the interviews are narratives that are based on a work that we ourselves are accustomed with, which means that it mirrors the praxis that our pedagogical philosophy centers around. The remarkable side of Forsgård's study is that all four respondents have a long experience of working with EXA as a tool and method and has at the moment of the interviews acquired a solid competence in this way of working and also has reflected on the processes that they have gone through in relation to themselves, others and the social context that they live in. We will problematize how they verbalize these processes below from our philosophical point of view. The interviews in Forsgård's study also focuses on the individual process that the respective respondent has made in and through the work, but it is at the same time crucial to also underline the collective and social character that EXA has. The

¹⁰ *Intermodality* is a term for the transitional use of multiple languages of expression.

¹¹ However, note that in Expressive Arts “subject” isn't necessarily corresponding to Lévinas's subject. An ordinary use of the notion of subject is as the active actor; in Lévinas's sense a subject is *ethical*, i.e. a subject is the one who subordinates himself/herself to alterity.

process of change is not individualistic but intersubjective in the sense that it goes from being to justice, in Lévinas's terms.

The paper centers on a project called “Creativity Evening”. In this context people from different parts of the society and with different kinds of life experiences are gathered. “Creativity Evening” is a concept that has been formed through EXA. The evenings are colored by heterogeneity as in age, belief, ethnicity, occupation, social and personal problems and different grades of exposure: the importance of this broad spectrum of collective experience cannot be emphasized enough. We have elaborated somewhat on this work in one of the earlier articles mentioned above and we have ourselves been involved in the “Creativity Evening” in different degrees. We now focus on an aesthetic and ethical perspective, leaving the spatial and social aspects aside. The Creative Evenings are an intermodal concept involving music, painting, body expressions, verbal and written language, poetry etc. The main focus on these evenings, and therefore also our main focus, is expressions through painting. To summarize the forms of the Creative Evenings in a somewhat simplified way, participants are led through a lengthy intermodal introduction and thereafter paint in any way they want without any rules or traditional artistic guidelines, during 10-60 min. They are told that whatever they create – whatever they attaches to they paper – they cannot do wrong or fail and that they won't be judged as it reflects the respective participant's unique expression. When the time is out, the participants show their respective paintings in groups of 4-5 persons. One painting at a time, the artist can say what else s/he wants and the spectators can afterwards comment or ask questions, but are told not to evaluate or judge the work in a traditional sense. The main idea is that all comments reflect the commentator, not the artist – your comment reflects your experiences, not the artists. The rest of the participants are encouraged to make the artists painting to their own and share experiences that emerge by thinking “if I would have painted this painting, it would have told these things about me and my life”. These reflections and talks often becomes personal due to the welcoming and accepting but also challenging nature of the Creative Evening, which is established mainly through the introductory phase.

Among the answers from the respondents of Forsgård's interviews two central aspects are stressed which are of interest for us and which we will deal with continuously: first the experience of an intersubjective search for something that is not yet verbalized or in other way expressed, and second the experience of a long-

term (and sometimes painful) personal growth. The first aspect will have more to do with our Rancièrian notions and the second with our Lévinasian.

First the aspect of experiencing an intersubjective search for something unexpressed: the respondents describe the work process as a process where you stop and acknowledge the paintings and their seemingly insignificant details in a way you otherwise wouldn't do: as artworks. They're thereby noticing and highlighting details that was previously unnoticed and make them into the pivotal object of their attention for a moment. As one respondent describes it, the process resemblances the process of play in which an object playfully is presented in a new way, i.e. as an artwork. This resonates with the notion of play that we described in one of our previous article. The same respondent talks about how s/he acknowledged the emptiness of art more and more under the process. Emptiness, or those objects that is perceived as “nothing” is for instance the “un-painted” part of the painting or the empty space of a room that affects the acoustics. A few respondents also describes the importance of allowing and encouraging different interpretations and perspectives of the artworks, ways of reading the art that are ignorant of any strict rules of interpretation. They emphasize the importance of being acknowledged as a *searcher* and not a *master* (Rancière 1987/1991). In this search you are often searching for ways to express yourself outside of your daily life language – metaphors, non-verbal languages etc. In rough terms, these descriptions resonate with the aesthetic regime of arts described above. First you acknowledge the discursive “un-art” as artworks, then you acknowledge the spectators equality throughout an aesthetic approach to the artwork. In ignoring hegemonic regimes for interpretation, every spectator is equal in the sense that everyone is a searcher – no one could claim being a master (Rancière 2008/2009). The only mastery would be one of a specific hierarchical discourse. This said, it is in human being to develop limiting discursive norms that and it will always emerge new norms in works such as this. Aesthetics must therefore always ignore these or else it would just be a matter of reproducing discourse. In other words, the difficult part is to remain vigilant and never stop interrupting the hierarchical discourse through the aesthetic regime of art. Formulating this in more Lévinasian terms, we could say that to face the infinitely Other we must remain ethical, in the sense of a persecution of discourse, i.e. of sameness, thematization, concepts of though etc., even though we cannot avoid or step out of discourse.

Moving along to the second aspect of the interview study, where the respondents emphasizes the value of sharing personal experience, thoughts and feelings by

sharing their paintings with each other. This experience of sharing is sometimes associated with a feeling of exposure, surprise and emotional pain, but in a long-term most of the respondents associate it with an experience of personal growth and empowerment. Some describes it as a process to learn to know oneself and to learn to accept, like and to stand up for oneself for the one you really are, despite your flaws. It also is described as a process of trying to express something new for which you haven't got the right terms yet. One respondent expresses how s/he expresses herself in a way that (from an outside point of view) differs considerably from her ordinary persona. From the perspective of Lévinas's philosophy there are a few points to be made here. First, there is a *trauma* of ethics: by encountering alterity we are dislocated in our becoming as it de-constructs our conception of being – it disqualifies our descriptions of others, ourselves and our impressions; but in the same sense it paradoxically also frees us from a narrow confined space of these descriptions. It faces us with the uncomfortable and sometimes unpleasant freedom of an-archy. Contrary to what some of the respondents say, this doesn't mean that you get in touch with your true self, since for Lévinas there are no such thing: at the core of subjectivity there is no essence but only an-archy. The motion of ethics is of deconstructing a discourse, and the inevitable motion of anti-ethics is to reconstruct this discourse in some way. That is: you never reach the kernel of you, but what you reach is a reconstruction of your conception of yourself. This means that ethics doesn't bring you to a definite end of an empowering process of growth: ethics is an *infinite* responsibility because of the *infinity of the Other*. Empowerment in this sense is reconstruction after ethical deconstruction. This empowerment isn't though an individual process but is inevitable imprinted by responsibility and justice, in Lévinas's sense.

Aesthetics, Ethics and Pedagogy: Discussion and Conclusion

We can see that a work as this touches a profound paradox in life: on the one hand it is necessary to take a position, continuously and ongoing, which gives our acts some references and guidelines on both a personal and a social level; on the other hand is the knowledge of the contingent character of these positionings and truth holdings also necessary. What you hold as true or stand for as a pedagogical leader is continuously challenged by alterity. In addition, we will encounter each other in a way that brings us closer to one another without diminishing alterity when we share life experiences of different kinds in intersubjectivity during a long period of time.

We do not thereby advocate any form of relativism, in which all truth constructions are equal and where everyone is considered to have a right to proclaim his/her

truths on equal terms without being questioned. This relativistic discourse is exactly what Lévinas and Rancière questions, since they claim that no constructions are capable of grasping an absolute truth. Lévinas and Rancière doesn't advocate *every* but *no* form of construction – they advocate the alterity, i.e. that which is beyond our constructions. We are equals in the sense that we are all incapable of fully grasping reality. Since alterity is the aspect of our existing that escapes our constructions, it is also the most “true” aspect of our existing.¹² To value alterity is therefore the opposite to relativism since it presumes a continuous critique of being – of the “true” – in an ongoing intersubjective relationship to the other. For a pedagogical leader the challenge is about trying to find structures for a work wherein alterity is given more space. We claim that aesthetics and ethics are crucial for this.

What, then, are our aesthetic and ethical challenges for pedagogy? Firstly, we will have to acknowledge that an aesthetic and ethical dimension is inevitable to pedagogy whether we want it or not. There will always be alterity that “interrupts” discourse in all pedagogical context and this aspect counterposes discursive knowledge, none the least in education (Lévinas 1961/1999). This doesn't mean that discursive knowledge always is negative, but that ethics automatically challenges it. It thereby interrupts what traditionally is considered the *raison d'être* for education as such. Alterity thereby interrupts what Freire (1970/2017) calls “banking model of education”. The expression of alterity could be handled as undesirable wrongs and could easily be choked. We would instead insist on that alterity and its consequences could be handled as potential sources for subjectivization, in the sense of making the participants act as ethical subjects in intersubjectivity. Alterity faces us with our responsibility and enables by extension that we encounter what Lévinas calls justice, i.e. the responsibility for the alterity that we are not facing but only can assume. Secondly, we claim that EXA as we understand it could be a meaningful tool in ethical subjectivization. By using multiple languages for expression we are given more opportunities to acknowledge alterity. There are two reasons for this: (1) when you are not able to verbalize your experience and at the same time are challenged in expressing yourself through different artistic forms of expressions, you are more likely to be encountered with the restrictions of thematization, and (2) by expressing oneself in other languages than the one you usually do, you are probably less likely to reproduce the discourse

¹² According to Lévinas, truth belongs to being rather than alterity since truth is a metaphysical notion for him. See Badiou (1988/2006) for a notion of truth that is neither metaphysical nor relativistic.

that you are already very familiar with. This means that intermodality doesn't acknowledge alterity *per se*, but that it could create better conditions for an aesthetic-ethical approach to pedagogy.

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