Idols that Have Mouths but Do Not Speak: Levinas's Critique of Art between Platonism and Jewish Aniconism

GIULIA CERVATO

In Levinas's production, the text most openly discussing the value of art is certainly "Reality and its Shadow", published for the first time in 1948 in the journal *Les Temps Modernes*, directed by Jean-Paul Sartre. At the time of its publication, the article and its author received harsh criticism due to the allegedly simplistic and anachronistic nature of the accusations addressed against art. As Richard A. Cohen explains, this judgement is also shared by several contemporary scholars,[1] who describe Levinas's critique of art "as both narrow-minded and denunciatory, both false and hostile" (152). In this essay, Levinas openly complains about the hypertrophy that aesthetics had acquired in the post-war French cultural background. More generally, he blames Western thought, especially in its Heideggerian tendencies, for seeing art as the place for the eminent manifestation of truth.

In recent times, he states, art has ended up assuming the status of "metaphysical intuition" *par excellence* ("Reality and its Shadow" 1), and artists have been acknowledged as eminent mediums for the knowledge of the absolute. In other words, Western thought gave the work of art a sort of ontological priority concerning Being itself. In this way, it became "more real than reality": in contemporary Western thought, Levinas observes, surrealism is not something alternative to realism but a form that represents its superlative degree. These considerations are brought forward through a comparison between the Western experience and that of the Jewish spiritual world, which proclaims the prohibition of representation.

As several scholars point out, however, Levinas does not start his analysis by immediately contrasting between Jerusalem and Athens. Rather, he believes that, at the beginning of their philosophical development, they express an original agreement on the subject of art. In particular, authoritative scholars as Aaron Rosen (371) and Jacques Rolland describe Levinas's judgment on art and aesthetics as remarkably similar to the critique expressed by Plato, the eminent founder of Western thought. In this respect, Jacques Rolland even says that Levinas's Platonism is very "strict, if not intransigent" (233).

The fundamental contention of this paper is that this concordance is merely apparent or at least partial. Levinas indeed finds useful arguments for his refusal of art in Plato but considers this Platonic criticism completely insufficient. Even more paradoxically, he judges Platonism and the seeds that it sowed in the Western philosophical tradition as responsible for the hyper-valuation that art has gained among his contemporaries.

1. Apparent Harmony: Levinasian Platonism

The first Platonic consonance is announced in the title: the main thesis is that art establishes a world of darkness and confusion by replacing each object with its image. From Levinas's perspective, the pictorial image functions as an inverted symbol, for it has no sign function

Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics Vol. 47, No. 4, Winter 2024 [42-52]

but rather blunts any relationship of signification. Thus, art causes a definitive swamping in an "exotic" dimension which, despite the promises of escaping toward a proper dimension of transcendence, collapses into the hither side of the world and into the hither side of Being:

> Is to disengage oneself from the world always to *go beyond*, toward the region of Platonic ideas and toward the eternal which towers above the world? Can one not speak of disengagement on hither side?… To go beyond is to communicate with ideas, to understand. Does not the function of art lie in *not understanding*? Does not obscurity provide with its very element and a completion *sui generis*, foreign to dialectics and the life of ideas? Will we then say that the artist knows and expresses the very obscurity of the real? ("Reality and its Shadow" 2-3).

In this passage, evident congruities with Plato emerge: first, Levinas seems to have in mind the well-known Platonic criticism according to which the works of the artists, the μιμηταί, are three times further from the truth ("τρίτος τις ἀπὸ βασιλέως καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας πεφυκώς, καὶ πάντες οἱ ἄλλοι μιμηταί", Plat., *Resp*. 10.597e). The darkness generated by this removal from reality is then described—both by Levinas and by Plato—precisely through the metaphor of shadow: the most evident reference is the famous allegory of the cave (Plat., *Resp*. 7.514a-514e) in which the prisoners, chained and unable to move, cannot recognize shadows as such and are led to believe that the shadows, not the light source that produces them, are reality (Plat., *Resp*. 7.515c).

Nevertheless, the most interesting consonance in this respect is to be found in the aforementioned Tenth Book: when debating about the ontological statute of representations, Plato focuses on a particular form of art, that is to say, σκιαγραφία,[2] a term which means chiaroscuro painting or, more literally, "shadow-writing" (Plat., *Resp*., 10.602d). Σκιαγραφία does not represent things as they are in their authentic ontological structure, Plato says, but as they *appear* to the senses in their phantasmatic profile. Just like a form of witchcraft (γοητεῖα), it has the power to cast a sort of spell on the viewer and produces temporary confusion (ταραχή) in his or her soul. Thus, those whose rational capacities are weak enough to be misled by the senses and cannot consider multiple points of view are convinced of their reliability.

Even though he later admits that only children and fools risk being permanently caught by this bewitchment, Plato's words suggest that the essence of art lies in this attempt to deceive and undermine rational comprehension. This judgment clearly resembles Levinas's: for both, art produces an obstacle to understanding and, even more drastically, its very nature lies in producing those obstacles.

The second criticism evoked by Levinas has to do with the effects of the escape into the hither side allowed by art. It revolves around the implications of detaching from the real world towards artistic illusions. According to Levinas, the so-called "exoticism" of art guarantees a profoundly irresponsible (*dégagée*) and hopelessly amoral existence, both for the artist and for those who benefit from art: "There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in the artistic enjoyment" ("Reality and its Shadow" 12). In this case, this judgment has a deep connection with the Platonic condemnation: in the aforementioned Tenth Book, while underlining the inaccuracy of art and artists' lack of skills and knowledge, Plato writes that μίμησις must be qualified as "a form of play, not to be taken seriously" (Plat., *Resp*. 10. 602b).

In this case, the two authors' stresses and tones slightly differ, but they reach a similar conclusion. For Plato, it is up to the inhabitants of the *Kallipolis* to recognize the unreliability of art and relegate it to a dimension of *divertissement* (Plat., *Resp*. 10. 607b), banning it from the city. Meanwhile, for Levinas, art autonomously and voluntarily exiles itself from the social context ("Reality and its Shadow" 12).

In this discussion, Levinas's target is artistic enchantment, which is ultimately responsible for the artists' and audience's abandonment of the real world. This "exotic disengagement" is described through images taken from the musical field. It is not associated with a proper sound element (which often has a positive value in Levinas) but with the rhythmic component of the

melody. The "possessed and inspired" ("Reality and its Shadow" 2-3) artist is transported into a dimension where he or she loses his or her initiative and individuality while passively following the tempo of artistic inspiration. These themes and images—which will later be positively re-evaluated, namely in *Otherwise than Being*—are used here to suggest that, in artistic creativity and aesthetic enjoyment, the subject loses his capacity for initiative and dissolves into impersonal and irresponsible anonymity. This condition is very similar to the neutrality of the *il y a*: "in the rhythm there is no longer a one self, but rather a sort of passage from one self to anonymity" ("Reality and its Shadow" 2-3).

Such rhythmicity capable of cancelling the ego of the artist and of those who participate in aesthetic ecstasy runs through art in all its forms and multiple languages. Through its infinite rhythmic repetition, any work of art generates an illusory impression of movement, which hides an intrinsic fixity and imprisons the artistic product in the "meanwhile" (*entretemps*) ("Reality and its Shadow" 8): "eternally Laocoön will be caught in the grip of serpents" and "eternally the Mona Lisa will smile" ("Reality and its Shadow" 9). The temporality of the work of art is so fallacious and grotesque because it consists precisely of this forced and unnatural arrest onto the instant.

This fixity regards all forms of art, meaning it also involves literature. Even in the most vivid novels, characters remain "imprisoned" within a fictitious existence, in the infinite repetition of themselves. That is why, according to Levinas, despite its non-figurative nature, not even literature is capable of "shaking the fixity of images." Every work of art is, in fact, "plastic" and ultimately very similar to sculptures ("Reality and its Shadow" 8).

This leads to another surprising consequence: because of their paralysis, literary characters are silenced, just like a statue ("Reality and its Shadow" 10). This reference to silence also occurs in the opening lines of the essay, in which Levinas underlines that the apparent completeness of a work of art makes it mute and incapable of engaging in a true dialogue. Later in the text, he describes art in an even more explicit way as that force that fills the world with idols that "have mouths but do not speak" ("Reality and its Shadow" 12). The point is now quite clear: the fixity that Levinas highlights seems to establish a profound correlation with silence. Every work of art—even, paradoxically, those that are entirely made up of words or sounds—has a completeness that makes it inexorably silent.

These observations allow us to consider another text published by Levinas only one year later: "Transcending Words." Here, the author discusses the problem of silence in art in an analogous way: "The arts, even those based on sound, make silence" ("Transcending Words" 145). Art and aestheticization have a certain tendency towards saturation, calm, and pacification, aiming to appease any irruption of the authentic sound phenomenon, which, according to Levinas, is exclusively linguistic: "The sound and rumour of nature are deceptive words. To truly hear a sound is to hear a vocable. Pure sound is the Word" ("Transcending Words" 148). On several occasions and with an increasingly decisive tone, Levinas establishes a sort of unavoidable "either-or" between art and the speaking word. Where art asserts itself undisturbed, words fade.

In discussing this point, "Transcending Words" offers an argumentation that was absent in the previous essay. Through brief observations, Levinas proposes a parallel between art and writing precisely in this respect. Like art, writing crystallizes and devitalizes words, which are fully lively only in orality. Written speech comprises "disfigured words, frozen words [*paroles gelées*] where language is already turned into documents and vestiges." Works of art and writing share the inability to engage in a dialogue and fall equally into silence. The author suggests a similar consonance between the immobilism of a work of art in another passage, where he underlines the privilege of the living word over writing, which is an "image-word or an already picturesque sign" ("Transcending Words" 149).

The last profound correspondence between Levinas's thesis and Plato is precisely identified in this connection between art, silence, and writing. As known, in a *locus classicus* of the *Phaedrus*, Plato, too, significantly compares written speech to painting (Plat, *Phdr*. 275d). Just like in Levinas, moreover, this comparison revolves around the fact that neither art nor writing lend themselves to a proper dialogue. As Socrates points out, "Writing… has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence."

This link was finally made explicit by Levinas in the conference *L'écrit et L'oral* (*The Written and the Oral*), which was given in 1952 at the Collège Philosophique in Paris. After describing the relationship between the reader and the written word, Levinas comments:

> A painting is a whole world with its centre outside us. That is why, in order to describe the disappointment provoked by dialogues with written speeches, Plato compares writing to painting, which seems to be able to respond, but does not.... The work of art is distant, it does not have a face. Not only does it not respond, it does not raise questions, either" (*Parole et Silence* 209).

These words display the connection between the two criticisms that Levinas had addressed to art and writing from 1948–49. Neither one of them answers, i.e., escapes the responsive dimension of language that constitutes the essential horizon for an asymmetrical relationship with the Other and its call for responsibility. Ultimately, art and writing are irresponsive and, therefore, irresponsible to the extent that, as Feron points out, the ethical response "is at the same time responding of and responding to" (83).

2. Beyond Plato

Despite starting with this significant harmony, Levinas and Plato take two remarkably different paths, as will be shown. This becomes evident in Levinas's analysis of the value of writing in the aforementioned *L'écrit et l'oral*, where, despite using the words of the *Phaedrus* on several occasions, he reaches decidedly anti-Platonic conclusions without even problematizing them.[3] In other texts, however, this anti-Platonic line of argument becomes explicit and is acknowledged by the author, who, while appreciating some cues of Platonic philosophy, seems to consider them as near-sighted. If correctly evaluated, Levinas's analyses criticize Platonism and, along with it, the original traits through which it influenced the development of Western thought *tout-court*.

The first hints of this gap can be found in "Reality and its Shadow." Although, to quote Calin, in this essay Levinas is still "a Platonist, that is, a thinker of light" (389), he does not hesitate to underline that the Platonic criticism of art is incomplete and deficient. Even though the products of art may appear caricatural and grotesque, their proliferation and the hypervalorization of aesthetics in contemporary philosophy do not depend on art itself but, more subtly, on the interpretation that the West has always assigned to the reality that art represents. Let us read Levinas:

> A being is that which is, that which reveals itself in its truth, and, at the same time, it resembles itself, its own image.... The idea of shadow or reflection to which we have appealed—of an essential doubling of reality by its image, of an ambiguity "on the hither side"—extends to the light itself, to thought, to inner life.... In art, allegory is introduced into the world, as truth is accomplished in cognition. These are two contemporary possibilities of Being. Alongside the simultaneity of the idea and the soul—that is, of Being and disclosure ... there is a simultaneity of Being and its reflection.... The discussion over the primacy of art or nature—does art imitate nature or does natural beauty imitate art—fails to recognize the simultaneity of truth and its image. The notion of shadow enables us to situate the economy of resemblance within the general economy of Being *(*"Reality and its Shadow" 6-7).

These few lines portray a purely Levinasian argumentation which may find a significant critical objective in Platonic thought. The heart of the matter is no longer represented by art as such but by its object or, in other words, by that which art counterfeits or obfuscates. In this context, the philosopher does not simply speak of reality but introduces two categories—Being and being—which, in Levinas's vocabulary, belong eminently to Western thought. Their usage clearly has consequences on a theoretical level: Being and its image, as well as each being and its reflection, are given simultaneously. Being and its image have such a strong relationship of absolute inseparability and complete contextuality that art seems a necessary and unavoidable consequence of the very giving of Being.

This type of bond, Levinas suggests, is due to the sheer nature of Being as shaped and theorized by Western thought (which, needless to say, is also what art is bound to represent). Images of Being are possible and inevitable because Western thought has always understood them in visual terms. Plato famously describes the ontological principles of realities as εἴδη (literally "that which is seen", "shape"). Furthemore, in the *Phaedrus*, the soul's return to the metaphysical world happen by recollecting earthly glimpses of ideal beauty, described as that which is "the most clearly seen" (ἐκφανέστατον, Plat., *Phdr*. 250d). If Being is a matter of form, it will inevitably produce a shadow; if Being is a matter light, it will inevitably produce a reflection. This first and fundamental operation—interpreting Being and its giving in an optical sense—authorizes art and allows it to become a privileged place to manifest Being. The Platonic critique of art, while being followed quite slavishly by Levinas, fails to effectively grasp the original breach through which art penetrates Western thought.

This conclusion is explicitly suggested in the 1952 conference, during which Levinas argues that, in Western terms, "the world organizes itself according to a visual perspective—it remains plastic." Very significantly, he then immediately adds that "Every art is plastic. Should we remember the prestige of art in contemporary civilization? The optical interpretation of truth since Plato?" (*Paroles et Silence* 210). These words are fundamental to clarify Levinas's perspective: despite assuming such distant positions in judging the role of art, in Levinas's view, Plato and Heidegger fit into a line of continuity, as both depended on the emphasis attributed by the West to this visual element. Truth is visual and, *for this very reason*, produces a reflection or a shadow.

This remark has another decisive consequence. As Levinas mentions in the passage quoted above, this interpretation announces the entry of the "logic of resemblance" ("Reality and its Shadow" 7) in the general economy of Being. In Jacques Collénoy's words, "Reality (the sum of beings), as long as it presents its face, is always *its* double, *its* shadow, *its* image" (86). This scheme introduces "copies and specimens" of what is unique, delivering the individual "to the generality and extension of a genre" ("The Prohibition Against Representation" 123). In other words, the visuality of Being favours the emergence of a tendency towards systematization, harmonization, and order.

The same observation is more explicitly brought up in "Transcending Words", in which Levinas comments:

> However, doesn't the spatial quality in the play of word-erasing come from its visual aspect?... Yet, again, isn't it true that the particular brand of symbolism imbedded in the aesthetic essence of reality owes its explanation to the very nature of visual experience under which Western civilization eventually subsumes any kind of spiritual life? The aesthetic essence deals with ideas, it is luminescent, it seeks clarity and evidence. It ends up in the unveiled world of phenomena. Everything is immanent to it. Seeing means being in a self-sufficient world that is completely here. Any vision reaching beyond the realm of given facts remains within that realm.... And the universality of art also rests on that primacy of vision. It produces beauty in nature, it calms and soothes it. ("Transcending Words" 148-149).

Another side of Levinas's argument is developed in the above passage. If the truth of being is expressed in terms of manifestation and unveiling, as ἀ-λήθεια, analogously, the activity of the subject who grasps it can only be understood as a corresponding gesture of clarification and e*lucidation*. Again, this attitude leads to the notion of comprehension as an act of ordering and systematizing. For Levinas, vision and light become fundamental hermeneutical keys for interpreting Western thought in its entirety, from its beginnings to the most recent outcomes. These themes constitute a *fil rouge* that holds together Western philosophy, which represents a single great effort in the direction of clarity, evidence, and, ultimately, universality.

3. Recomposing the West: Husserl and Heidegger

In Levinas's reconstruction of Eurocentric thought, light metaphors become particularly appreciable in the broad and articulated treatment that Levinas gives of Husserl and Heidegger. Husserl was a fundamental key figure in the years that Levinas spent in Freiburg. Nevertheless, Levinas recognized a sort of imperialism of light and vision in Husserl's phenomenology. For example, the correspondence between the activity of the intentional act of the subject and the intended object is described as that movement whereby "every object calls forth and as it gives rise to the consciousness through which its being shines and, in doing so, appears" (*Discovering existence with Husserl* 119).

Here, the criticism towards the predominance of the visual element in Husserl intertwines with the fundamental adage of Levinasian philosophy related to the process of assimilation by the Same towards the Other: "Light is that through which something is other than myself, but already as if it came from me. The illuminated object is something one encounters, but from the very fact that it is illuminated, one encounters it as if it came from us" ("The Time and the Other" 64).

In Husserl's intentionality, Levinas registers a tension towards evidence that implies a progressive clarification of the intentional contents by the subject through a gradual process of identification in which he assimilates them to himself, understanding and depriving them of their radical otherness. The striving for clarity, harmonization, and systematization that Levinas recognizes above all in the Husserlian *Sinngebung* is described again in optical terms.

As mentioned, Levinas traces the core of Heidegger's thought to an analogous "play of light" (*Totality and Infinity* 27). In *The Trace of the Other*, Levinas paraphrases Heidegger's theses as follows: "The Being of beings—difference itself, and consequently alterity—enlightens, according to Heidegger, insomuch that it is buried and always forgotten.… For it is still in term of light and obscurity… that Being is approached.… Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the Other where the Other, manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity" (*The Trace of the Other* 346).

In this context, the visual metaphors are also traced to the process of assimilation of the Same towards the Other. In Levinasian terms, losing one's otherness means inserting the Other within a horizon that is always complete, harmonious, and ordered, as guaranteed by appearance and visibility themselves. Vision namely produces a "call to order" ("Phenomenon and Enigma" 63) which makes any otherness fade away in its very manifesting. As soon as it enters vision, everything is invariably returned to the present and harmonized with the other elements that comprise the field within which it is summoned.

It is now possible to more widely contextualize the deep link between this systematizing tension of Being and truth understood in optical terms and the soothing faculty Levinas attributes to art in the 1949 essay. The silence for which Levinas reproached plastic figures and statues does not constitute a distortion provoked by art alone, as Plato thought. Instead, it represents a caricatured and grotesque version of a tendency already expressed at the root, in the modality through which Western thought structures its own ontological categories. As Levinas states years later in *Otherwise than Being*, "The movement beyond Being becomes ontology."

Moreover, he adds that this same root also produces "the idolatry of beautiful" *(Otherwise than Being* 199), making explicit the connection between a certain ontological conception and the much-reviled hypertrophy of art.

Despite some philological simplifications, Levinas identifies and lets emerge a general tendency of the West, which is rarely so openly addressed: the typically Greek obsession for beauty,[4] form, and shape, the urge to trace every spiritual act to a plastic and icastic dimension in a sort of constant need for aestheticization.

The point of the last part of this essay is that Levinas may have detected these common threads precisely because he had the possibility of observing the path of Western philosophy from the outside. Thus, he could take advantage of the different and completely de-centred point of view of his Jewish heritage. In this regard, in "Reality and its Shadow", Levinas seems to oppose a Jewish principle to Greekness, recognizing that "the proscription of images is truly the supreme commandment of monotheism" ("Reality and its Shadow" 11).

As Cohen underlines, it is very naïve to reduce Levinas's critique of art to a sort of blind obedience to Judaism, as some do (52). Nevertheless, *contra* Welten (60, 62), this bond to his Jewish heritage must not be belittled. Rather, the philosopher's religious beliefs must be understood as a hermeneutical key that helps him to consider Western assumptions in a more radical and detached way. A curious outcome in the dynamics between the Other and the Same occurs here. The Other—the Jewish—will prove a fundamental hermeneutical key for deconstructing and understanding a kind of thought—the Greek-Western one—that has always put self-comprehension and self-clarification at the core of its interests.

4. Jewish Aniconism and the Second Commandment

Despite alluding to this confrontation in "Reality and its Shadow", the philosopher does not delve into the relationship between the negative evaluation of art expressed in the essay and the aniconism imposed by the Jewish Bible. Nevertheless, this question is addressed directly in an essay published years later, entitled "The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man." The essay opens with a declaration of intent, in which Levinas states that, although he does not want to launch himself into a historical and philological reconstruction of the biblical prohibition, "we should not allow that expression to circulate glibly and out of context, like an aphorism, without having previously examined closely what the Bible says about it, and, in its multidimensional language, the Law of the Talmud" ("The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man" 121).

The formula to which Levinas refers is part of the so-called "second commandment." It constitutes the second prescription which is announced to the people by Moses, who has just received the tables of the Law in the book of *Exodus*. In the relevant verses, we read:

> You shall not make for yourself a carved image (*pesel*) nor any manner of likeness (*temunah*) of anything that is in heaven above, that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth (*Ex*. 20.4).

Some considerations should be pointed out here. The divine prohibition is expressed through the terms *pesel* and *temunah*. The first derives from a **p-s-l* root (from which the verb *pissel*, "to hew", also comes from) and refers to plastic and sculpted images. The second, *temunah*, has to do with the act of shaping and configuration and is usually translated as "image" or "representation." As Scholem recalls, this same term is used in a passage from *Deuteronomy* evoking the episode of the revelation on Sinai, in which Moses' inability to directly see God is reiterated. In spite of what happens on that occurrence, this term does not refer here to the representation of divinity but aims to banish representation of any kind, from that of creatures inhabiting the sea to those that live in the sky. The meaning of this indication is further specified in the following verse:

> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous (*qanna*) God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation (Ex. 20.5).

This prohibition is associated with a *Leitmotiv* that will become topical in Jewish spiritual tradition, that of the so-called jealousy of God. Here, God himself proclaims himself as *qanna* ("jealous") of his own people in the name of the pact (*berit*) he made with them. The purpose of this prohibition, therefore, is to ensure that the people of Israel remain faithful to their one God and do not let themselves be fascinated by the polytheistic and idolatrous orientation of the populations that surround them, allowing new deities made up of gold and stone to mine their monotheism.

This perspective clarifies why this prohibition refers particularly to statues and plastic images, which were often used by pagan populations as objects of worship. That is also why the title of the Talmudic treatise that deals the most with the problem of idolatry, namely, the *Avoda Zarah*, has nothing to do with images but means "foreign cult." However, this original need for the people of Israel to maintain their identity and differentiate themselves from neighbouring polytheistic populations soon turned into a general aversion to any representation, leading to the total interdiction of images.

The reference to these motifs and texts is to be found, as mentioned, only in Levinas's preterition. However, when he approaches the heart of his philosophical thesis, he cannot but once again quote a text taken from the religious tradition, which the author had already silently mentioned in "Reality and its Shadow." While discussing the nature of representations and works of art, he says that, in the plasticity of their pure appearance, they end up being "the caricature of 'mouth that do not speak', 'eyes that do not see', 'ears that do not hear', and 'noses that do not smell'" explicitly referring to "Psalm 115" ("The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man" 123)", in which it is analogously stated that foreigner idols "have mouths, but they speak not; eyes have they, but they see not; they have ears, but they hear not; noses have they, but they smell not" (Psalm 115-5-6).

Levinas stops here and does not quote the verses that immediately follow, in which it is added that "those who make them [idols] will become like them." In a way, through this observation, the Psalm unmasks the propensity to produce artistic objects as a mere symptom of a more totalizing and radical attitude, which can run through an entire tradition and determine its thinking. One cannot but notice that, unsurprisingly, Levinas develops his thesis by continuing and expanding this very line of argument:

> As for me, I would like to enquire whether, beneath the mistrust of images of beings recommended by Jewish monotheism, there is not a denunciation, in the structures of signifying and the meaningful, of a certain favoring of representation over other possible modes of thought. In representation—*cogitatio et cogitatum*—presence is created and recreated.... Cohesion and complicity of a seeing and a taking, but, in the re-presentation, the putting of that which is thought [*le pensé*] at the disposal of, and *on the same scale as*, thinking: a deep-seated immanence or atheism in sight and knowledge, or the temptation of idolatry! ("The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man" 122).

These few lines summarize the core of Levinas's interpretation of Jewish aniconism. Images and representations are not prohibited simply to maintain an exclusive connection with the unique god. Rather, this prohibition also hints at a possible way of thinking that resists the urge of presence and, correlatively, the need for conceptual grasp. Jewish aniconism paves the way to a thinking that does not need thematization. In the second commandment, Judaism expresses an invitation to approach the Other without any intention to fully understand,[5] dominate, and objectify it. In this regard, Abraham's religion can be seen as a genuine alternative to the Western way of thinking, which cannot give up (or even admit) this intention.

5. Conclusions: The Irrepresentability of the Face and the Redemption of Art

The anathema against art is then discussed by Levinas with particular reference to the notion of Face. Since it constitutes the Other *par excellence*, the Face must escape the risk of representation in the strongest possible terms. This led to Levinas's words about its representability, which is firmly rejected:

> This transcendence is alive in the relation to the Other man, i.e., in the proximity of one's fellow man, whose uniqueness and consequently whose irreducible alterity would be—still or already—unrecognized in the perception that stares at [*dé-visage*] the Other. Beneath the plasticity of the face [figure] that *appears*, the face [*visage*] is already missed. It is frozen in art itself, despite the artist's attempt to disfigure that 'something' that starts again, *figurative*, in presence ("The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man" 126)

These judgments are reiterated throughout the philosopher's work. In *Totality and Infinity*, for example, he states that the Face is a manifestation constantly unmaking the very form under which it appears (*Totality and Infinity* 66) or "a 'vision' without images" (*Totality and Infinity* 23). As Philippe Crignon puts it, "not being a phenomenon, the face is strictly invisible, and *thus* unfigurable" (103, my emphasis). In similar terms, the complete opposition between the notion of *visage* and art had already been illustrated in "Ethics and Spirits", where Levinas made the point that art fails to put a face to things and ends up producing nothing but mere caricatures ("Ethics and Spirit" 8).

Nonetheless, in the same essay, he surprisingly recognizes that the "greatness and deceit of art reside" in such a failed attempt ("Ethics and Spirit" 8). Here, as Françoise Armengaud suggests ("Faire ou ne pas faire d'images" 2) Levinas may hint at a way for art to ambiguously redeem[6] itself. Namely, he mentions the potential revelatory value of an art form that aims to disfigure the domain of the figurative and disfigure itself. Yet it fails in doing so, falling back into that very domain: this failure is able—in Levinas's view—to show art incapacity and insufficiency. By failing to negate its figurative elements, art may be able to show its inadequacy to express a truly metaphysical dimension.

This remark appears to be of the utmost importance if we relate it to the interview on Sacha Sosno that Levinas released a few years later (*On Obliteration. An Interview with Françoise Armengaud Concerning the Work of Sacha Sosno)*. This artist's work was centred on the attempt to disfigure things or—to quote the title of the volume in which the interview is collected—to "obliterate them." Of significance, this artist's work seems to provide fertile ground for Levinas's reflections on obliteration, which, as readers will recall, already represented the question at the core of "Transcending Words."[7]

Ultimately, we might conclude that the redemption of art, in Levinas's terms, is to be found in attempts of this kind. Art shall no longer try to put a face to things but should instead represent the very impossibility of this effort. In this perspective, the "art of obliteration" should not produce "images without images", as Paul Bernard-Nourad puts it (105-106), but *represent* the lack of metaphysical resources of *any representational* product. In other words, we shall entrust it with the charge of denouncing its incapacity to restore the Other in his/her transcendence. From this perspective, art (at least in a strictly figurative sense) may survive in pointing to a dimension beyond aesthetics, as Armengaud points out ("Etica ed estetica" 106-7), and, thus, beyond Being. That would ultimately be a form of art that takes up Jewish aniconism and puts it into question. To put it paradoxically, art can redeem itself by repeating the gesture of Abraham destroying idols,[8] that is, by staging its own collapse.

University of Padua, Italy

Notes

[1] Rosen particularly refers to Jill Robbins (*Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*) and Robert Eaglestone (*Ethical Criticism: Reading after Levinas*).

[2] This term comprises the noun σκιά ("shadow") and γραφή ("writing"). It occurs ten times in Plato and refers to a peculiar form of perspective painting with illusionistic characteristics that were probably used in theatrical scenographies. According to Eva Keuls, it was "an impressionistic technique, using divisions of bright colors and relying on the phenomenon of optical color fusion" (1). It probably developed between the fifth and fourth century B.C.

[3] Levinas widely refers to the *Phaedrus* in *L'écrit et l'oral* to express his preference for oral speech over writing. Throughout his work, he uses the expression "speech that can assist itself" (e.g. *Totality and Infinity* 71) several times with reference to the description of oral speech in *Phdr*. 275e. This expression is also mentioned by Derrida in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics", where he says that the Levinasian Face "does not present itself as a sign, but expresses itself", which implies "to be able of attending to one's speech" (*Writing and Difference* 126). Derrida's general critique of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* lies behind these words: how could Levinas aspire to successfully criticize Western philosophy while using its own language, first and foremost, by adhering to its *phonocentrism*? A partial answer to this question could be given based on Levinas's remarks on the *Phaedrus*. According to Levinas's, the *Phaedrus* supports the oral speech because it can be reformulated and freed from the author's *vouloir-dire*. This conclusion is derived from a patent misinterpretation of Plato's text but paradoxically approaches Levinas's ideas on language to Derrida's. For a more general overview of this debate see "The contaminated Wound: Derrida on the language of Levinas", by Gert-Jan van der Heiden. As known, the debate between Derrida and Levinas will continue even after Levinas's death. On the occasion of his friend's funeral, Derrida will compose the notorious *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, whose contents and implications are subtly discussed by François Raffoul (211-222).

[4] This connection is specifically brought up in one of Levinas's Talmudic Lessons dealing with the translation of the Bible into Greek. In that context, the Greek language is marked by harmony and beauty (*In the Time of Nations* 52-52).

[5] A similar opinion is expressed by Ruud Welten, who states that "The prohibition of images represents an awarness of this incomprehensibility" (71), with reference to the figure of the Other. In particular, the author reads Levinas's discussion on Jewish aniconism in the light of the notion of obliviousness.

[6] In a footnote, Françoise Armengaud recalls Levinas's comment on her lexical choice: "Vous dites de le 'rédimer', comme s'il était un péché!" ("Faire ou ne pas faire d'images" 11).

[7] The title of the Leiris's autobiography *Biffures*, to which "Transcending words" was dedicated, literally means "erasures."

[8] According to *Apocalypse of Abraham*, a first-century A.D. text, the patriarch Abraham was the son of a seller of idols. Profiting from the absence of his father, he secretly broke all but the largest one in order to blame it for their destruction ("A Religion for Adults" 14).

Works Cited

Armengaud, Françoise. "Etica ed estetica nel pensiero di Emmanuel Lévinas: a proposito delle Obliterazioni di Sacha Sosno." *Studi di Estetica*, vol. 22, 2000, pp. 89-112.

–– "Faire ou ne pas faire d'images. Emmanuel Levinas et l'art de l'oblitération." Noesis, no. 3, 2000, pp. 1-13.

Bernard-Nourad, Paul. "Image et visage. Sur l'interdit de la representation dans la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas." *Nouvelle Revue d'esthétique*, no. 25, 2022, pp. 89-106.

Calin, Rodolphe. "La non-transcendance de l'image." *Le souci de l'art chez Emmanuel Levinas*, edited by Danielle Cohen-Levinas, E-book, Muncius, 2011.

Chardel, Pierre-Antoine. "Du primat du visage aux richesses inattendues de l'écriture." *Revue philosophique de Louvain*, no. 1/2, 2002, pp. 186-211.

Collenoy, Jacques. "La réalité et son ombre." *La part de l'*Œil, no. 47, 1991, pp. 81-90.

Cohen, Richard A. "Levinas on Art and Aestheticsm. Getting 'Reality and its Shadow' Right." *Levinas Studies*, vol. 11, 2016, pp. 149-194.

Crignon, Philippe. "Figuration: Emmanuel Levinas and the Image." *Yale French Studies*, vol. 104, 2004, pp. 100-125.
Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alain Bass, Routledge 2001.
Eaglestone, Robert. *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*. Edinburgh University Press, 1997.
Feron, Étienne. *De l'idée de transcendance à la question du langage. L'itinéraire philosophique d'Emmanuel Levinas*. Millon, 1992.
Heiden (van der), Gert-Jan. "The Contaminated Wound: Derrida on the Language of Levinas." *Debating Levinas' Legacy*, edited by Andris Breitling et al., Brill, 2015, pp. 265-279.
Keuls, Eva. "Skiagraphia Once Again." *American Journal of Archeology*, vol. 79, no. 1, 1975, pp. 1-16.
Levinas, Emmanuel. "A Religion for Adults." *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism.* Translated by Sean Hand, John Hopkins UP, 1990, pp. 11-23.
—– *Discovering Existence with Husserl*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith. Northwestern UP, 1998.
—– "Ethics and Spirit." *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism.* Translated by Sean Hand. John Hopkins UP, 1990, pp. 3-10.
— *In the Time of Nation*. Translated by Michael B. Smith. Indiana UP, 2000.
—– *On Obliteration. An Interview with Françoise Armengaud Concerning the Work of Sacha Sosno*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Chicago UP, 2019.
—– *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer, 1991.
—– "Phenomenon and Enigma." *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Nijhoff, 1987, pp. 61-73.
—– "Reality and its Shadows." *Collected Philosophical Papers*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Nijhoff, 1987.
— *Parole et Silence et autres conférences inédits au Collège philosophique.* Grasset/Imec, 2009.
—– "The Prohibition against Representation and the Rights of Man." *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translated by Micheal B. Smith. The Athlon Press, 1999, pp. 121-30.
— *Time and the Other*. Translated by Richard A. Cohen. Duquesne UP, 1987.
—– *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne UP, 1969.
—– "Transcending Words." *Yale French Studies*, vol. 81, 1992, pp. 145-50.
Plato. *Platonis Opera*. Translated by Hohn Burnet. Oxford UP, 1903.
Plato. *Phaedrus.* Translated by Robin Waterfield. Oxford UP, 2002.
Raffoul, François. "The Subject of the Welcome: On Jacques Derrida's Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas." *Symposium*, no. 2, pp. 211-222.
Robins, Jill. *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*. University of Chicago Press, 1999
Rolland, Jacques. *Parcours de l'autrement. Lecture d'Emmanuel Levinas.* E-book, PUF, 2000.
Rosen, Aaron. "Emmanuel Levinas and the Hospitality of Images." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2011, pp. 364-78.
Welten, Ruud. "Image and Oblivion. Emmanuel Levinas' Phenomenological Iconoclasm." *Literature and Theology*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2005, pp. 60-73.