

Art, Vision, and the Necessity of a Post-Analytic Phenomenology

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Paul Crowther, *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision: A Post-Analytic Turn*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, 208 p.

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Analytic philosophy posits clarity and consistency as the main criteria which the aesthetic discourse must fulfill. In the understanding of visual art, the logic and perception of pictorial representation are particularly emphasized. According to Paul Crowther, analytical approaches make use of notions such as “aesthetic” and “expressive” without explaining why these features should be of superior importance than the mere quality of being aesthetic or expressive. Crowther combines two different philosophical trends: analytic philosophy, which allows the approach of artistic phenomena by looking at their most logical underlying structures, and a second one, involving the elaboration of such specific structures from descriptive analysis. The analytic approach of phenomenology is necessary to make it accessible to a larger philosophical public, since it is currently perceived as an “exchange between initiates” due to the use of specialized academic jargon. On the other hand, as far as the philosophy and aesthetics of art are concerned, phenomenology entails a better understanding of the expressive character of painting at a much deeper level than analytic philosophy. There is a far-reaching phenomenological tradition, represented by thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Geiger,

Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Dufrenne, Ingarden, Gadamer, Edwar S. Casey etc.

Paul Crowther argues in favour of a post-analytic phenomenology: phenomenology needs analytic thinking. He warns about the practice of commentators of philosophical texts to focus more on ideas than arguments, preferring to tackle relationships between phenomenological thinkers and to pinpoint disparate important ideas in the detriment of identifying the gist and the carefully selected arguments. A certain critical distance is required, less focused on (and worshipping of) the thinker: “Analytic aesthetics needs phenomenology in order to expand its ontological scope and solve the problem of expression, and phenomenology needs to supplement its superior descriptive strength through the discursive force and lucidity of analytic philosophy. Overall, we need a post-analytic phenomenology.”

Crowther establishes his own theory of post-analytic phenomenology in three volumes: *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts: Even the Frame*, Stanford University Press, 2009; *Phenomenology of Modern Art. Exploding Deleuze, Illuminating Style*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012 and *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision: A Post-Analytic Turn*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

The first volume, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts: Even the Frame*, ponders the limitations of reductionist approaches to visual art, thus presenting the meaning of the image grounded in phenomenological depth, framed by the key relationships between the ontology of pictorial representation, the unity of self-consciousness, and the objective and subjective dimensions of cognition. Phenomenological depth, a new concept coined by Crowther, focuses on the ontological reciprocity between the subject and the object of experience, thus trying to describe the way in which the relationship between subject and the object of research changes its nature according to differences in action and perception. In one of the chapters, Crowther also proposes the phenomenological depth of photography, building on the ideas developed by Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag.

Phenomenology of Modern Art. Exploding Deleuze, Illuminating Style handles the characteristics of modern art with reference to style as the individual means by which an artist represents the world. This is not limited to the general strategies of composition, to matters of shape and colour, but rather to the means by which one visually reveals attitudes to certain aspects of the world, the ways in which one acts upon the world and inflicts changes upon the subject. The volume considers the basic characteristics of modern art, regarding style as the carrier of aesthetic signification. The author's aim is to see the ways in which significant changes are brought between subject and the object of experience at the level of visible things. According to Crowther, the only philosophical approach that can do justice to painting in terms of visibility and style is phenomenology. By asking which phenomenological approaches are suited best to the demands of modern art, Crowther undertakes a phenomenological analysis of the main features of modern art, starting from the ideas of Deleuze, Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty. Since a phenomenology of modern art cannot be merely descriptive, in order to explain the general stylistic traits of modern art, the author resorts to Kantian thought. Crowther directs his attention to Deleuze's analysis of Francis Bacon and modern painting, to the notion of ontological reciprocity derived from Merleau-Ponty. Nietzsche's philosophy of art as apparent from the notes contained in *The Will to Power*, as well as Merleau-Ponty's general theory of painting and the importance he bestows on Cezanne, are given due mention.

In *Phenomenologies of Art and Vision: A Post-Analytic Turn*, Paul Crowther turns to Richard Wollheim, who stresses the expressive attributes of painting. One might think that the individual emotions expressed in painting and sculpture are simplistic and not necessarily artistic but, unlike other analytic philosophers, Wollheim reminds us that there are unique aesthetic experiences in visual art that language lacks the means to express. Wollheim's work *Painting as an Art* is mainly analytical, but the precedence he gives to the way in which paintings appear and perceptually engage the artist and the viewer possesses a phenomenological nuance.

Crowther's goal is to provide a close reading of Wollheim's analytical philosophy of painting, so that, through phenomenological contributions, he can develop post-analytic strategies implying careful attention paid to the structures of the argument and to the ways in which ideas are logically organized, also to the clear explanation of ambiguous terms and the will to take critical distance from the ideas presented. The author emphasizes Wollheim's account of painting as an art, noting the importance attributed to the concepts of "Ur-painting", "seeing-as" and "twofoldness" and trying to overcome the approach deficiencies in the understanding of "style" and "expression". The focus lies with painting as an activity and the way in which the viewer acknowledges a painting as a work of art. Wollheim introduces the term "Ur-painting", conceived as a thought model that considers painting in terms of the activity's most basic characteristics, further explained along six descriptive steps.

Each of these steps implies a "thematization", that is, a description of some aspect of painting which then becomes a thought that guides the painter's intentions and practice. Seen in this light, Wollheim's model embodies a sort of phenomenological reduction that isolates the essence of painting as an activity. Crowther severely criticizes Wollheim, particularly as far as the concepts of style and expression are concerned, but also stresses that Wollheim's notions of Ur-painting and twofoldness are not only viable, but of the most decisive significance in relation to our key problematic. They offer its phenomenological and conceptual starting point. One of the main critiques he levels at Wollheim pertains to his leaving the notions of style and expression at a much too subjective level. As far as abstract art is concerned, however, Wollheim's theories are a starting point for the understanding of how such art gets its meaningfulness from the relation among the "presumption of virtuality", optical illusion and transperceptual space. This last notion provided an especially important bridge to the phenomenological tradition.

In the same work, he analyzes Heidegger's general philosophy of art, referring to the reading of visual idioms as intimations of the Being of being. Crowther stops to ponder on

Heidegger's earth/world concept, attempting to learn how it can be understood in relation with visual art. Crowther defends Heidegger's approach from the contextualist criticism of Schapiro and Hagi Kenaan. He continues by analyzing the complex arguments from Heidegger's essay *Art and Space*, in which the relationships between sculpture and space are explained.

Another chapter is dedicated to Merleau-Ponty's discussion on painting. The focus mainly lies on the bonding of subject and object of perception in the notion of reversibility/flesh. The privileged role of vision and perceptual depth in this is highlighted. He also mentions Merleau-Ponty's theory of style and expression in perception and the way in which painting's embodiment of this enables it to make vision's inherence in the visible, visible to itself.

The volume proceeds with the analysis of Lacan's detailed perspectives regarding the relationship between vision, subjectivity and picturing. Lacan's theories on the relations of self, Gaze, and picture, are presented and critiqued, as well as his account of the formation of subjectivity. Although certain of Lacan's theories are criticized, Crowther does highlight the viable ones, for instance, the relation between the Gaze and the picture, where the reciprocal Being of intersubjectivity and the picture as an arrest of gesture are referred to. The last chapter explores the connection between pictorial art and temporality in the work of Mikel Dufrenne, before turning to Dufrenne's notion of spatio-temporality as central to human experience and to painting. Of particular importance is the distinction between the 'pictorial object' and the object that is represented.

Through critical assessment and analytical reconstruction, Crowther reaches the conclusion that the phenomenological tradition can show how picture and sculpture as art forms engage with some of the deepest factors in the human condition — the ones that define who and what we are, and our relation to Being.

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