



On beyond Imaging towards Affirmation of Artistic Virtue: A Levinasian Ethics in Aesthetics

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Abstract

This paper explores the ethical dimensions of artistic creation through the lens of Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy, challenging traditional perspectives in art. Traditional aesthetics often derive art within the epistemological domains, which can obscure the profound ethical implications of artistic activity. By focusing on Levinasian ethics, particularly the notions of responsibility, this examination argues that artistic virtue is affirmed not through mastery, economic value, or self-expression but through an ethical encounter—the very event of our relationship with the Other. This paper is twofold. First, it focuses on *imaging*—tracing art's development from ritual representation and economic commodification to technological expression within Western art methodologies, from ancient traditions to contemporary practices. In doing so, it examines both the historical and present conditions of art. Second, the paper turns to *responsibility*—to respond. By integrating Levinasian ethics into aesthetics, it redefines the role of the artist and the significance of the artistic process. It calls for a transformation in artistic discourse, moving beyond representation, commodification, and mere expression toward an ethics-centered practice that prioritizes responsibility, ethical engagement, and the affirmation of artistic virtue. In this view, art remains committed to imaging (aesthetics) while simultaneously grounded in responsibility (ethics). Thus, aesthetics ultimately opens into ethics.

Subject Areas

Philosophy

Keywords

Art, Ethics in Aesthetic, Imaging, Levinas, Responsibility

1. Introduction

Imaging is fundamentally a human intervention in the world in which we live. It arises from an artistic impulse—a natural response to human nature and the surrounding environment. Throughout history, imaging has served epistemological, economic, and sensual functions. However, it often becomes confined within fixed meanings and purposes. As a result, it may lack an ethical responsibility that pushes it to go beyond its traditional roles—not only in relation to society but, more importantly, in relation to the Other. The challenge, therefore, is to transcend imaging's conventional functions and open it toward a deeper ethical and human engagement.

The task of this paper is to provide a clear relation and/or connection between aesthetics and ethics. It attempts to establish a new dimension on art—an ethical implication of art in thinking of the other. The aesthetical discussion will go beyond traditional intervention to demonstrate a phenomenological conception guided by Levinas's readings.

In retrospect, it is essential to examine Plato's claim concerning the previous problem of art. In his profound critique of art, Plato first addressed the dilemma of art, in which he accused artists of being nothing but imitators. He postulated that poets should be abandoned from his ideal republic unless they could establish that their work benefited society. In *The Republic*, Plato outlines his ideal society, where all members of society cooperate and delve into reason and truth [1]. For him, art could threaten this ideal state for the following reasons: a) Art falsifies reality by mimicking it since physical reality is only a shadow of the true Forms. Art might potentially mislead people about what is right and good; b) The dramatic performances, particularly tragedies, evoke emotions that can undermine rational control, causing citizens to become more impulsive and less virtuous; c) Art can encourage immorality, which could skew young people's perceptions and encourage vice rather than virtue. Hence, Plato maintained that only art that advances morality and truth should be permitted in his ideal state due to these risks. Otherwise, artists should be strictly restricted or eliminated.

In response to Plato's critique of art, Aristotle defended its function. He maintained that imitation is a natural way for people to learn and that art enables us to comprehend the outside world and human nature. Through catharsis [2], a constructive emotional release that promotes equilibrium and understanding, the dramatic performances of tragedy cleanse these feelings. According to Aristotle, art enhances and teaches moral understanding [2]. Therefore, art should be studied and valued for its emotional and educational value.

The problem in art was, in fact, effectively established by Aristotle through its relationship to the epistemological realm (art as a road to knowledge). However, the moral implications of art are still unresolved and open. Ultimately, art aimed to further knowledge rather than consider ethical concerns.

On Beyond Imaging Towards Affirmation of Artistic Virtue. A Levinasian Ethics in Aesthetics calls for reexamining artistic practice as an ethical act. By inte-

grating Levinasian ethics into aesthetics, this paper redefines the artist's role and the artistic process's significance. It demands an alteration in artistic discourse that moves beyond representation, commodification, and expression toward an ethics-centered practice that prioritizes responsibility, ethical engagement, and the affirmation of artistic virtue.

This paper is twofold: The first focuses on imaging—to *represent*, from ritual representation and economic commodification to technological expression. It provides the Western art methodologies from the ancient to the contemporary art scene. With this, the previous and present conditions of art will be discussed. Second is a focus on responsibility—to *respond*. This ethical responsibility is an engagement with the world and others in a meaningful way.

Finally, by focusing on Levinasian ethics, particularly the notions of responsibility, this examination argues that artistic virtue is affirmed not through mastery, economic value, or self-expression. However, it demands beyond imaging through an ethical encounter—the very event of our relationship with the Other. This encounter is not about knowing the Other but about being responsible to them.

2. Imaging

2.1. Ritual Representation

Throughout history, the diachrony of exquisite artifacts reflects the enduring nature of human endeavor [3]. History has shown how the diverse past creates and shapes the image of the human being, from the earliest totemic cave paintings ever found to the religious iconography of the Middle Ages, the classical era's mimetic representation, modernism's abstraction, and the contemporary art scene's conceptual art [4]. Art might be a living activity, and man's creative impulse will always be explored, practiced, and appreciated.

Western cultures find enduring appeal in prehistoric cave paintings, historic structures, and artifacts depicting significant historical events. The grandeur of the past is reflected and expressed in these important cultural treasures. The Prehistoric, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian civilizations intervened in art as their cultural activity meant to convey their magical belief system [5]. Examples of Paleolithic cave art include images of deer, horses, and bulls carved, painted, or etched on the rock surface of caverns in France, Spain, and other countries. The Great Serpent Mound in Ohio and Stonehenge in England are examples of Neolithic construction. Egyptian figures, such as an animal's head inside a human body, are purposefully imagined in their inspiration from nature. They emphasize the figure's psychological appearance. Their paintings are meant to portray the hereafter rather than the actual world and are associated with their superstitious beliefs. Their attempts to create mimetic representational forms influenced by their environment may be evident in their works.

In the Greek and Roman ages, man sought to achieve the prominence and perfection of nature, and this is why the classical period is considered the age of "hu-

manism”. Naturalistic or idealized imagination is the foundation of classical art production. From England to the Persian Gulf, Spain to Romania, they have left us with many visible monuments that may serve to uphold social structures. This period demonstrates the use of art for political participation, particularly in constructing an ideal polis.

Iconography was employed in religious instruction during the Middle Ages to impart moral or ethical values. Early Christian structures, Byzantine mosaics, frescoes, Romanesque illuminated texts and reduced relief, Gothic elongated sculptures, and stained glass are examples of medieval art. The unique iconographic style of the Middle Ages sets them apart. The priest commissioned artisans to labor by religious precepts. Medieval critics, therefore, referred to murals and other large-scale artwork as silent preaching. When God’s message was read or heard, it was associated with religious imagery. The astounding amount of didactic content in murals suggests they were a popular way to spread religious knowledge. Like sermons, they spoke to a large and diverse audience while closing the disparities in literacy and illiteracy [6]. Therefore, religious imagery is a supernatural depiction by instilling concepts or beliefs that pervade culture, customs, and rituals.

The resurgence of classical thought is known as the humanist era or the age of science. Following religious control, the Renaissance is the new beginning. Reviving the classical tradition means “humanizing ideals”. In the 1490s AD, three significant individuals—Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475 - 1564), Raphael Sanzio (1483 - 1520), and Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519)—helped achieve perfection during the High Renaissance. These three Renaissance titans are notable for discovering and creating the foundations of visual representation. They transform craft into a magnificent art. For the first time in history, ordinary people have been featured in most portraits, such as Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, transforming their works from being limited to solely portraying holy or noble personalities, as was custom in the past. Society’s hierarchical structure has evolved, especially when it comes to its interference with artistic creations. Art evolved from medieval symbolic imagery to classical portraiture of the individual. Canvas is a movable surface for murals, which are usually painted, cut, carved, or engraved directly on the walls. Italy was the birthplace of the Renaissance, which progressively extended throughout Europe. The Baroque, Rococo, and Neo-classicism eras came after it.

Visual representation during the modernist era is a more subjective way for people to understand their surroundings. Modernism’s abstraction highlights the importance of purely formal components as the cornerstone of an artwork’s subjective appeal [7]. It placed a great deal of emphasis on how art affected the observer’s emotions and valued feeling over rationality. In their works, the post-impressionists, for example, emphasized techniques, developed their own very personal style, and used the impasto- as a thickened texture value. During this period, prominent individuals were strongly linked to the three titans of modernism: Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903), Vincent van Gogh (1853 - 1890), and Paul Cézanne (1839

- 1906). These painters followed the artistic trajectories of Gauguin to disseminate fauvism, Cézanne to cubism, and van Gogh to expressionism [8].

Furthermore, in the late 1960 s, a new artistic movement known as Conceptual Art emerged in the contemporary art world. The “concepts” were judged to emphasize expressions more than conventional painting or sculpture restrictions. Conceptual art was founded on an idea rather than on the form of attributes. Artists employ any suitable materials and other vulgar or raw (permanent or temporary) materials to create the desired message to convey the current state of affairs. Lastly, it demonstrates how important art is to time as we look at its implications on the magical, religious, political, economic, technological, and other spheres. It illustrates how art can pragmatically communicate with others as thought, language, symbol, or a sign of a particular individual, group of individuals, or distinctive characteristics of tribes, regions, and nations throughout the protracted representation process. A more profound reality about human consciousness is revealed through the representation of time, presence, and alterity.

2.2. Economical Comodification

As modern industrialization grew, the work of art was quickly liberated by the arrival of modernity. The rise of capitalism—a period of free-market capitalism—occurs during this contemporary era. To be free in the current bourgeois circumstances of production means to be able to buy, sell, and trade freely [9]. Commodity fetishism takes over the creation of art from earlier ritual activities. The art lost its symbolic purpose and became fetishism. In modern culture, artists and craftspeople are compelled to perform work meant for commercialization, a manufacturing process requirement. Production is the art of producing, and art serves the purpose of manufacturing [3]. By that point, a piece of art had lost its symbolic significance and aura of the past, and it had transformed into an economic tool used to produce use-valued products.

Fine art has changed toward commercial art. The public views these earlier artistic interventions as commodities that produce surplus value. Because they purchase labor power to utilize it—and labor power in use is labor itself—capitalists have control over the production process [10]. Therefore, the production of commodities is owned by private proprietors.

The melting points of the first and second industrial revolutions led to the commercialization of art. Art is regarded as beneficial in terms of production objectives. Manufacturing involves producing and processing artistic designs, whereas art comprises a broader range of techniques for developing numerous crafts and products [3]. This creative design integrates artistic components like statues, ceramic utensils, and culinary items imported and exported by skilled workers, artisans, and other creative artists.

The nation’s political and economic structure is one in which private proprietors operating for financial gain control its trade and industry. Marx and Engels argue that money is a social power for capitalists and that having a social standing

in production means more than merely having a personal status [9]. The artistic endeavors of artists and craftspeople and the symbolic depiction of a piece of art were reduced to a commercial relationship.

Commercialization leads to the extreme exploitation of capitalists and their hired workers, particularly artists or craftspeople forced to produce art. Artists and artisans experience alienation as a result of this state. Marx and Engels discuss four conditions that form alienation: alienation from products, alienation from labor processes, alienation from oneself, and estrangement from coworkers. The artists and artisans who made those goods are neither their owners nor are they recognized as their creators. Only private owners who make significant investments in manufacturing and distribution are beneficial. These capitalists only benefit from making money off their paid workers' labor.

Artists and artisans are reduced to inanimate objects and used as tools for production. They were taken advantage of and had their essence devalued. Workers were exploited by society, produced repeatedly, and worked nonstop. A worker isolates a coworker, making the two of them unrelated. Products are valued more highly than interpersonal interactions. There is no affection for others engaged; everyone is focused on capitalism as a common goal.

Additionally, the destruction or misuse of natural resources for the production of commodities usually results in injury and suffering to ecosystems. However, the capitalists who owned and controlled society have created the economic commercialization of art production in the modern era—a capitalist who pursues valuable commodities instead of considering others and practicing social responsibility.

2.3. Technological Expression

The advent of the information age promotes equality, freedom, and prosperity. The information era spread experience, democratized individuals, and aroused the senses of the mass.

The third industrial revolution began with the invention of the computer, which marked the start of the digital revolution. The development of semiconductors, mainframe computing in the 1960s, personal computers in the 1970s and 1980s, and the internet in the 1990s all contributed to its acceleration [11]. According to Klaus Schwab (b. 1938), the 21st century saw the beginning of the fourth industrial revolution. This era provided us with an amazing aesthetic experience regarding technology expression.

The public masses equally share their expression by exercising and demonstrating their social freedom in their society thanks to the combination of technological images and signs on the visual surface and the diverse sound of communication, which can be heard on television channels, radio frequencies, newspaper pages, and internet platforms. Digital imaging is a new trend allowing everyone to freely express their thoughts. Imaging are dynamic regarding human intervention, especially people's technical participation. Technology elevates art to its

whole public purpose. Through the use of the previously mentioned technology, art serves as a tool for the vicarious expansion of experience [3]. Several platforms allow us to connect individuals worldwide. People use technology to convey their identities, cultures, and ideals. Technology innovation is a result of (a) digital addiction, (b) the dissemination of false information, and (c) privacy invasion and monitoring. Imaging platforms addiction or excessive use negatively impacts many people's mental health. Modified, improved or generated images through artificial intelligence (AI) and propaganda that could sway and captivate an audience to promote a specific cause are being disseminated by technology. It spreads facts, rumors, debates, and even lies to sway public opinion.

Additionally, imaging platforms is now used to disseminate damaging and malicious content. Governments, businesses, and even specific people may gather data without the owner's permission. Digital access to the data becomes unrestricted and limitless. On social media platforms for instance, anyone can express themselves. Everyone is entitled to freedom of expression, the societal right to have opinions without hindrance, and the freedom to seek, receive, and disseminate knowledge and concepts via any channel without regard for boundaries. A distribution of the sensible, in Rancière's opinion, simultaneously creates something shared and something exclusive [12]. The way that something in common lends itself to participation and how different people contribute to this distribution is determined by the distribution of locations, times, and kinds of activity that underpin this allocation of parts [12]. People can experience and engage with technological expression. Lastly, imaging in the present day demonstrates the pinnacles of aesthetic technical expression. The emancipation of artistic engagement aims to distribute sensibility extremely.

Hence, to sum up this historical inquiry, human intervention or engagement in imaging appears to fall predominantly into a single function—artistic representation. Ritual, economic, and technological engagements, however, often fail to meet the ethical demands placed upon them. They do not fully resolve Plato's concern for an ideal society, nor do they satisfy the Levinasian call for ethical responsibility toward the Other. Imaging thus frequently remains within ritual and epistemological representation rather than moving toward ethical transformation.

At the same time, imaging has been utilized within forms of aggressive materialism through economic commodification, often resulting in exploitation reinforced by capitalist systems. Moreover, despite claims of democratization, participation, and equal access, imaging expressed through technological means can also lead to abusive or excessive practices, contributing to moral decline and the erosion of human dignity.

3. Responsibility

3.1. Artist Responsibility

In the holistic discussion of the Western tradition, specifically art methodologies, it appears clear that artists and artisans' ultimate goal is an attempt to master tech-

niques, economic utility intended for creating use-value objects, and technological intervention for self-expression. To some extent, imaging is utilized for magical, religious, political, economic, technological, and other spheres that try to represent thoughts, concepts, or ideas.

For Levinas, representation is insufficient because it reduces the Other to an object of thought. It encloses the Other within the self's mental framework or brings down the Other into our mind. Levinas states, "The Infinite, stronger than the power of vision, touches me before I think" [13].

Levinas tries to avoid us in totality thinking that tends to master and dominate through knowledge. Totality refers to a way of thinking and being that tries to grasp everything within a system and understand, control, or consume all that exists. Levinas sees that totality as ignoring other human beings' mystery, freedom, and irreducibility.

In the long run, beyond imaging, the duty of artists or artisans is not just to *represent* something but to *respond* ethically, with humility and responsibility prior to artistic creation. Levinas states that "responsibility is not a simple responsive act; it is antecedent to freedom itself" [13].

Moreover, the artist's responsibility is embedded in the encounter with the *Other*, which demands an ethical relation. Hence, artistic virtue is not merely through mastery, economic value, or self-expression through image but about sharing experience to that which transcends representation.

The artist, for Levinas, is not the autonomous and supreme creator of art, but rather, the artist is a servant of alterity—of the Other. Artistic virtue is not just constituted by form and contents that are contained in an image or any object for consumption. Instead, it seeks to preserve the ethical shadow, the mystery, freedom, and the face-to-face demand. Levinas argued, "The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse" [13]. The face of the Other cannot be fully represented; it *speaks* beyond representation. The artist's task is not to silence it but to *listen* and respond ethically through their work. Nonetheless, artistic responsibility is dual: it involves resisting the totalizing impulses of aesthetic systems that seek to encapsulate meaning while remaining faithful to the irreducible alterity of the Other. An affirmation of life beyond the visible, beyond representation, and self-interest turns into a gesture of ethical openness.

3.2. Ethical Engagement

Ethical engagement in artistic impulse is not just an external factor in composition but was intended for the very creation of art pieces. Levinas says, "the Other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me" [13]. Thus, ethical engagement for Levinas is the starting point before artistic creation. This means that "ethics is not a branch of philosophy but first philosophy" [14].

Artists and artisans are ethically engaged in the very event of the face-to-face encounter with the Other. It is an ethical event that calls the self into responsibility. This encounter is not about knowing the other but being responsible for them.

Levinas wants to move beyond representation, commodification, or expression toward something prior to thought. Instead, to *represent* Levinas, suggest responding to what speaks and calls them to responsibility.

To some extent, artists and artworks that exemplify ethical engagement include Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which responds to the bombing of civilians during the Spanish Civil War [8]. Rather than glorifying conflict, the painting presents fragmented and suffering bodies, compelling viewers to confront the violence inflicted upon innocent people. In this way, the work demands moral reflection on war and civilian suffering.

Similarly, Francisco Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814) portrays the execution of Spanish civilians by occupying soldiers, emphasizing fear, helplessness, and injustice [8]. The viewer is positioned as a witness to moral atrocity, transforming the painting into an ethical confrontation rather than mere historical representation.

Contemporary examples can also be seen in Ai Weiwei's installation works, such as *Remembering* (2009), which expose political oppression and humanitarian crises, including the suffering of refugees and victims of state violence. In Ai Weiwei's practice, art becomes a form of social and political intervention, extending imaging beyond representation toward ethical engagement.

Ethical engagement in aesthetics implies openness. To be ethically engaged is to resist the temptation of totality. Levinas is avoiding totality thinking, which is the enclosed system. Levinas is more about beyond practical morality to engage towards responsibility. When he says ethics, it is objective, and no subject or particular being is pertaining. This is free from biases, casting the dogmatic morality. This reflected Nietzsche's notion that art is autonomous and supreme over morality [15]. Levinas is not intended to resolve any ethical problems or provide a pre-script of morality for improving the conduct of generation. Dudiak (2001) sees that Levinas's philosophy is more prophetic than prescriptive, for which his ethics is through the condition of possibility, thus, the inspiration to the situation [16].

Joldesma sees the Levinas as essential for enjoyment and inspiration in the learning process and made to situate consciousness [16]. It shows that art does not rely upon knowledge. We are nourished not by the thought we discover but beyond the knowledge that it provides through the force of enjoyment and inspiration.

Ultimately, ethical engagement challenges the artist to maintain faithfulness to this responsibility. It demands a commitment to what exceeds representation—care that keeps the infinite horizon of the Other's call open.

3.3. Affirmation of Artistic Virtue

In Levinas's lens, artistic virtue is grounded not in the mastery of technique, producing surplus value, or purgation of emotion alone but in the artist's unwavering openness to the infinite Other. The true greatness of the artist or artisans lies not in the skill of craftsmanship or peculiar ability to capture the essence of the real

world but beyond representation—to bear witness to the irreducible mystery of the Other without attempting to enclose meaning. According to Levinas, “the Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and therefore, the place where meaning happens infinitely” [13].

For Levinas, art is an open space where infinity in art is *invited* rather than *captured* essence. He suggests that “infinity is the overflowing of the idea by its content—a relation with what is other” [13]. Hence, the absolute ethical relation always exceeds the limits of understanding, which overflows the thoughts that think it.

Furthermore, artistic virtue is not a celebration of the artist’s expertise over form (techniques, medium, or style) or content (theme or subject) of images but an affirmation of their ethical vulnerability: a commitment to keeping open the horizon of alterity in art activity. Artistic virtue is about creating art with humility, hospitality, and attentiveness.

Lastly, the most virtuous art does not give total understanding and/or knowledge but preserves the Other’s infinity. Art remains moving and incomplete but is open to continuous reinterpretation. Nevertheless, artistic virtue is an infinite act of responsibility—responding to the demand of the Other.

4. Concluding Note

This paper encompasses the traditional perspective on imaging from the earliest totemic cave paintings ever found to the religious iconography of the Middle Ages, the classical era’s mimetic representation, modernism’s abstraction, and the contemporary art scene’s conceptual art. It shows that the holistic approaches of Western art were deemed a ritual representation, economic commodification, and technological expression, to which the artistic virtue of artists and artisans is affirmed through mastery, economic value, and personal expression.

In moving beyond mere imaging, Levinasian ethics was integrated to elevate the artists’ and artisans’ true artistic virtue. Indeed, traditional aesthetics often derive art within the epistemological domains, which can obscure the profound ethical implications of the artistic activity of human beings. Examining the Levinasian perspective made us realize that ethics is not just the external factor in a composition. Rather, ethical engagement for Levinas is the starting point before artistic creation. In this regard, Levinas suggests that ethics is not a branch of philosophy but the first of philosophy.

Furthermore, from the lenses of Levinas, the duty of artists or artisans is not just to *represent* something but to *respond* ethically, with humility and responsibility, since the willingness to create without enclosing, to speak without silencing, and to bear witness to the infinite that cannot be captured. Ethical engagement in aesthetics demands more than representation, commodification, or self-expression; it calls for an openness to alterity.

Finally, art emerges as an ethical act, a space in which the self is exposed to the infinite call of the Other, remaining open and vulnerable. Art surpasses imaging

and comes close to the ethical pinnacle in this constant reinterpretation and confirmation—this never-ending reacting to the Other.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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