

# An Argument for Levinasian Ethics and the Arts With Considerations for Pedagogy

Lana Parker

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Résumé de l'article

At a time when an ethics based on responsibility for the Other offers a counter to the individualism of neoliberal ideology, I argue that it is crucial to recuperate the possibility of creating the conditions for ethical moments of facing through all means possible, including art. I deliberate the possibilities for art in sustaining Levinas's conception of an ethical intersubjective interaction, including: the call to listen to the Other, the implications of being called into question, the overflow of self, and the humility of response. To begin, I contemplate art as an Other that is able to face and break apart the *bonne conscience*. Second, I posit that the overflow that results from an interaction with the Other, as the *bonne conscience* is surpassed, can serve as a source of inspiration for artistic creation. Third, in the face of the ethical call, though one is first required to listen, one also has an obligation to respond; I contend that art can operate here, too, as a means of reply. I conclude the work with a discussion of the implications for pedagogy, including art as a means of broadening sociality.

# *An Argument for Levinasian Ethics and the Arts With Considerations for Pedagogy*

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LANA PARKER

York University

*At a time when an ethics based on responsibility for the Other offers a counter to the individualism of neoliberal ideology, I argue that it is crucial to recuperate the possibility of creating the conditions for ethical moments of facing through all means possible, including art. I deliberate the possibilities for art in sustaining Levinas's conception of an ethical intersubjective interaction, including: the call to listen to the Other, the implications of being called into question, the overflow of self, and the humility of response. To begin, I contemplate art as an Other that is able to face and break apart the *bonne conscience*. Second, I posit that the overflow that results from an interaction with the Other, as the *bonne conscience* is surpassed, can serve as a source of inspiration for artistic creation. Third, in the face of the ethical call, though one is first required to listen, one also has an obligation to respond; I contend that art can operate here, too, as a means of reply. I conclude the work with a discussion of the implications for pedagogy, including art as a means of broadening sociality.*

This work furnishes a connection between a reading of ethics that places the Other at the forefront of our individual responsibility, freedom, and wisdom, and our experiences with art. I write it in rejoinder and as a rebuke to dominant conceptions of self, responsibility, and success that have emerged out of neoliberal ideologies to influence schools and societies. I aim to make a case for the possibilities for art in sustaining Levinasian ethics (1989, 2011) while maintaining the significant tenets of these ethics: (i) a call to listen to the Other, my neighbour, that emanates from the *mauvaise conscience*, which “cannot avail itself of the protective mask of a character contemplating in the mirror of the world a reassured and self-positing portrait” and which is instead “responsible for its very presence” (Levinas, 1989, p. 81) and which compels the self to be called into question; (ii) the process of being called into question emerges wholly from being faced in an exchange that is necessarily asymmetrical, honouring the full alterity of the Other and affirming only the limits of knowledge; (iii) the overflow of self that results from the interaction fractures our fragile understanding of the world, our *bonne conscience*; (iv.) our humble response that is at once a reply and an apology for the limits of our fettered thinking. I use the term “Levinasian ethics” here as a shorthand to denote the ethical relation at the heart of Levinas’s work. Levinas does not offer an ethics of rules or laws (Derrida, 1978) but instead proposes an intersubjective relation premised on a responsibility for the Other that pre-exists law, that occurs in the instant of facing, and that suggests transcendence in the face of radical alterity.

Though Levinas has been read for and against art as Other (Eppert, 2008; Kanaan, 2011, Iyer, 2001, Staehler, 2010), I contend that there is room to examine how the tension of space between art/audience can mimic the intersubjective relation between I/Other. The first section of this paper addresses this

primary objective by working at length with Levinasian ideas and texts to make the case for engaging with art as a Levinasian Other. I offer three possibilities to consider how art can be contemplated alongside or as a component of our intersubjective relation with the Other. First, I suggest that art itself can function as an Other. Second, I argue that there is a possible relationship between the fracture of my *bonne conscience* and inspiration for creation. Lastly, I analyse the possibilities for art to function as a response: a form of speaking that reflects our humility as listeners and respects the alterity of the Other in the exchange. In the second section of the paper, I mobilize some of the key elements of the first analysis—responsibility, encounter, and alterity—as an exploration of what art as Other offers pedagogically.

### Reconciling Levinas and Art as Other

In some of his work (e.g., “Reality and its Shadow” [1948/1989] and *Totality and Infinity* [1961/2011]), Levinas seems to turn away from art, criticising it for failing to truly illuminate the absolute unknowability of the Other and for totalising, collapsing, the Other's alterity. Levinas (1989) claims art “lets go of the prey for the shadow,” “[is] essentially disengaged,” and “constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion” (p. 141). Staehler (2010) notes that Levinas criticizes art for “[lacking] the immediacy of the ethical encounter with the Other,” suggesting that “by way of its sensuous nature, it diverts us from our ethical responsibility, and by way of its multiple meanings and layers it provides a possibility for evasion” (p. 124). In these critiques, Levinas fixes on a rather narrow conception of art created for aesthetic pleasure, which “does not attend to the experience of art that confronts and interrupts, but only to that which entertains and decorates, acculturates and captivates” (Zhao, 2014).

In other work, however, Levinas turns toward art, particularly the poetic imagination, acknowledging that art does have some power to “face” in lieu of in-person dialogic interactions.<sup>1</sup> Levinas's essays on Paul Celan and Jean Atlan reflect some of the ambiguity in his position on art as Other; in the former, he suggests that “the poem goes toward the Other” and in the latter “he takes [the artist, Atlan] to be part of an endeavour akin to his ethical philosophy” (Levinas cited in Staehler, 2010, p. 123-124). Eppert echoes the finding that Levinas's writings on art present ambivalence, if not outright tension. She determines that while Levinas criticizes art for “participating in [the] sphere of non-truth” (Eppert, 2008, p. 72), pretending toward knowledge and evading the demands of ethical responsibility, he also explores the possibilities for art and ethics through art criticism, and in several reflections on artists such as Celan, Blanchot, and Dostoyevsky.

Levinas's claim that art fails as Other because it “does not give itself out as the beginning of a dialogue” (Eppert, 2008, p. 131) is also relevant because it is a position he later seems to revisit in his discussion of Celan and poetry. As Hand determines, in Levinas's “Servant and her Master” (1966/1989) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974, as cited in Hand, 2008), “poetry ... looks to be suggesting and guiding Levinas's most radical philosophical revisions” (Hand, 2008, p. 74). Hand suggests that in his analyses of Celan and poetry, Levinas works through a reversal in his earlier polemical thinking on art. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas writes that instead of thematizing and totalizing, poetry offers a

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<sup>1</sup> In these examples of turning toward art as other, Levinas seems to maintain his suspicion of the image as a representative of a totality, preferring examples of language-based art, such as poetry, instead.

“conversion into the infinite” (Hand, 2008, p. 75) and a “saying without a said” (Hand, 2008, p. 76). Hand (2008) further notes Levinas’s surprise at his own changed thinking: “Levinas asks himself in a footnote: ‘Transcendence through poetry - is this serious?’ ... but then reacts to his question affirmatively” (p. 75).

Finally, in making the argument for reconciling Levinasian ethics and the arts, I turn to Gibbs’s (2000) analysis of Levinasian listening. Here one discovers that because “I” does not listen with the intent to respond, but with an attitude of apology, my only response to the Other is an affirmation of my limits, a bent knee before the teacher. Gibbs (2000) notes that “called to speak, I respond, I speak as I, but to another, to one who can criticize me” (p. 45). Can art be an audience to my response? Not fully, I concede, because it is only I (or yet another Other) who will hear the response. But Gibbs (2000) also determines that “discourse ... does not end in my first response, but rather leads into society, into social institutions and beyond (where a stable meaning can be given to the signs)—but this apologetic moment is never lost” (p. 37). And so it is that listening and response eventually move from the pure moment of shattering consciousness to the building of meaning in a more reified way. Is this not the very transition from an interruption to the common logics of hegemony? Is this not, also, the very path from interruptive to educative or informative? And so does the Other have to begin a traditional dialogue in order to function as an Other, or in order to break through consciousness and offer new meaning? How is it possible that we are always listeners, yet that art fails as an Other because it cannot hear? Does not the fact that art speaks, even if for a limited time, mean that it is an Other, calling for us not to engage in dialogic interaction, but to listen, hear, and break ourselves apart?

In the following three sections, I put forth the idea that in endeavouring to foster a more ethical interaction with the Other, one of the most powerful tools we have at our disposal is art. I turn to several analyses of Levinas’s philosophy to suggest that art can stand in the stead of a person, though not wholly or perfectly, to offer a manifestation of the “face” of the Other. I then work through the possibilities for listening as a source for inspiration. I also discuss how art can furnish a response to the Other.

## Art, Facing

While art has the capacity to be read as totalising, in that it fails to reflect the entirety of alterity, it can nevertheless be a significant tool for enacting an ethical politics toward a common world. It is precisely because art contains the risk of being perceived with the pitfall of closure or finality that it ought to be addressed directly. Because of the ambivalence in his writings, Levinas leaves room for art to be considered as Other and for it to be read towards an ethics of responsibility (Eppert, 2008; Llewellyn, 2008; Kearney, 1995; 1999; Robbins, 1999; 2005).

Kearney (1995) determines, “Levinas’s suspicion of images is not directed against the poetic power of imagination per se but against the use of such power to incarcerate the self in a blind alley of self-reflecting mirrors” (p. 110). It can be said, then, that Levinas’s primary objection to art is that it can be claimed as knowledge, foreclosing possibilities for further exploration of the Other. Yet, Levinas sometimes “[betrays] exceptions to his rule” and “[blurs] generic boundaries and hierarchies”; he “gestures toward the opening function of art—that is, art’s capacity to open the reader to the ethical” (Eppert, 2008, p. 73). It is this opening that is most interesting, as it suggests that, while it may not replicate the immediacy of face-to-face contact with an Other, art can undo, can invite, and can speak.

Art can “face” us because it obliges us to interpret and to come up short; it forces us to recognize that we will never completely know or understand the purpose of the work, nor the intent of the artist.

Kenaar (2011) furthers the discussion of whether art has the power to face, focussing specifically on Levinas and the image. With three compelling and useful questions, Kenaar presents the tension that emerges from discussions of Levinas and the image—the tension between the visual and the transcendental—as a necessary and acceptable component of Levinasian ethics: first, “should we understand the unresolved tension between the visual and non-visual dimensions of the Other’s face as a problem or is it, rather, the expression of the very form of the Other’s appearance?”; second, “must the Levinasian face be ‘rescued’ from the bounds of the visual or does it ultimately need the visual as necessary grounds for the revelation of transcendence?”; third, “is alterity exterior to the visual or is it a vanishing point that can be accessed only by looking in and through the visual?” (p. 153). In response, Kenaar determines that the Levinasian “face” is not simply a “static, mirroring structure” (Kenaar, 2011, p. 154) but an act of turning toward and away. Kenaar’s reference to facing as a movement is evident in Levinas’s (2011) own writings on the subject of desire for the invisible, metaphysics:

It is turned toward the “elsewhere” and the “otherwise” and the “other.” For in the most general form it has assumed in the history of thought it appears as a movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us, whatever be the yet unknown lands that bound it or that it hides from view, from an “at home” (“*chez soi*”) which we inhabit, toward an alien outside-of-oneself (*bors-de-soi*), toward a yonder. (p.33)

Here, Levinas writes of facing as a movement and makes space for Kenaar to build a case that to face is to act, to move. Kenaar’s work clears some of the obstacles to using art as a manifestation of the face of the Other by suggesting that the tension, the spaces created between self and Other through the act of turning to face, are of surpassing importance; these spaces should not be negated or bogged down with the limiting discussion of the face or the image as a simple visual structure with defined content.

Llewellyn (2008) further elucidates the correspondence between the Levinasian act of facing and the possibilities for art as a face by pointing to this tension in Levinas’s writings. Llewellyn (2008) finds that Levinas distinguishes between the “visibility of the phenomenal face” and the “invisibility of the ethical face that looks at me” (p. 172). He goes on to argue that if such a distinction is necessary for facing the Other, the same distinction should be equally plausible for the moment of confrontation with the Other’s portrait. Llewellyn also helpfully notes that the Other—the paravisual Other—is always outside my grasp. This permanent outsideness is what renders Levinasian ethics beyond the constraint of phenomenology (Gibbs, 2000); the overflow and excess are as true for the physical manifestation of the face of the Other as they are for works of art which represent the Other.

This idea of overflow, of exceeding the boundaries of the physical or the plastic, is also evident when one distinguishes between poetic imagination and art as a relic, or as an object of closure. Kearney (1995) finds that Levinas recovers the possibilities of art in his studies of Leiris, Celan, Jabes, Blanchot and others, by acknowledging that “the exercise of a poetic imagination open to conversation with the other ... is already one that allows the face to break through the plastic form of the image which represents or intends it” (p. 15). The poetic imagination, loosed from the restrictions of the immediately perceptible, offers us traces of the possible: an envisioning of what may be in the face of what is. When speaking of poetry, and of the connections between imaginative labours and social reality, Freeman (1999) suggests that Levinas helps situate art, not as a product of social construction nor of an autonomous agent, but in the spaces in between: the places of relatedness between self and Other. He suggests that “poetic creation,

among other forms of imaginative labor, has relationship—or, maybe more appropriately, *relatedness*—at its very heart” (p. 105) and that this sense of relatedness is less about who we meet, than about being held in a permanent sense of respons/e/ibility to the Other. Manifestations of the poetic imagination force us to listen, with humility and in apology for our lack of consciousness, to the words, thoughts, dreams in picture or motion or song, of the Other who we may never meet in person, but who nonetheless has the capacity to move us beyond the sphere of our current awareness and ambition. And what is poetic imagination if not a person’s attempt at recognising and envisioning all that which lies beyond one’s current consciousness, that which may exceed one’s sensibilities?

The tension between what is and what can be is precisely what imagination expressed as art can celebrate. Heaney (1995) determines that art and imagination invite a balance between “a reality which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual” and “a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances” (p. 3-4). Through this delicate space of between and relatedness, art obliges us to face what is subjective with humility and with an openness that we often find troubling or difficult when ideas are presented as fact.

## Listening for Inspiration

Each new hour holds new chances  
For new beginnings...  
The horizon leans forward,  
Offering you space to place new steps of change. (Angelou, 1993)

There is no world without the adventure of art, without anthropomorphism, any more than there is a world without the Other. (Crignon, 2004, p. 117)

When linking Levinasian thinking with art, the process of beginning, of creating, and of responding, should find ethics as its point of departure. In this section, I outline the way Levinasian listening increases wisdom and demonstrate how that newfound wisdom may inspire. Listening is an interruption that begets further interruption. It provides a person with the desire, the inspiration, and the content for interruption by: (a) broadening the criteria for thought as a patrol of consciousness; (b) overflowing consciousness and exposing the “infinity of exteriority” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 34); and (c) developing the desire for infinity.

Listening broadens my awareness of the world because it is in listening that I am able to connect and disconnect with the Other. Gibbs (2000) notes that “if one is looking for a definition of myself, of what I really am in myself, then the answer will require the inclusion of something that is not myself” (p. 32). But what I am looking for is not, in the Hegelian sense, simply the opposite of what I am. I am not seeking what I am not. Because, as Levinas (2011) contends, “if the same would establish its identity by simple *opposition to the other*, it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the same and the other” (p. 38, emphasis in original). I am not seeking within a totality, but beyond it. In listening to the Other, I become aware of my own limits and can come to know myself because: the Other introduces me to the world; he or she augments the “criterion of adequacy” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 41) I use for thought, which acts as a “gatekeeper of consciousness” and which allows “the self [to check] itself” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 42); this Other expands what I consider meaningful and gives me new ways for connecting and disconnecting

with the world. It is also in the process of listening that I can transcend my self and recognize the impossibility of ever fully knowing the Other; this excess that remains outside the control of knowing mirrors the void that can be created between discourse and noise.

The face of the Other remains forever beyond me, elusive, an “absolute alterity” (Levinas cited in Gibbs, 2000, p. 38) that overflows my consciousness. This allusion to consciousness, and to the surpassing of it, is what is paramount in the act of listening, and what most intimately links listening with inspiration. In his study of music, Copland (1980) suggests that “inspiration may be a form of superconsciousness, or perhaps of subconsciousness—I wouldn’t know; but I am sure that it is the antithesis of self-consciousness” and that “the inspired moment may sometimes be described as a kind of hallucinatory state of mind” (p. 42-43). This perception of inspiration draws on a sense of that which runs outside the self and certainly outside the limits of self-consciousness. The interaction with the Other can inspire us because it stimulates our “superconsciousness” and exposes the spaces that lie beyond our patrol of thought. Copland’s observation that inspiration is akin to a “hallucinatory state” also invokes the dizzying sense of enormity and the quavering uncertainty that one experiences in an interaction with the Other. This is the moment of contact and of listening: when one is held over the horizon edge of consciousness and exposed to the “infinity of exteriority” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 38). Because the Other at once enlarges my sphere of meaning and yet remains absolutely beyond me, listening to him or her stimulates my imagination and excites my sense of the possible. I am exposed to the infinity of exteriority and am challenged by it. The awareness that I can never fully know the Other compels me to keep listening, while my broadening span of meaning exposes new possibilities to connect and disconnect with the Other across the void of unknowability. I become a listener who “does not only listen once, but must remain attentive, still listening” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 40). The anarchic rupture of the closed circle of totality that exceeds my consciousness as I listen is required of me again and again: I am infinitely responsible to listen infinitely (Seferin, 2009).

One cannot, in the discussions of exteriority and infinity, ignore the power of desire, which continually orients us toward the Other and ensures that we continue to face the Other in search of further meaning. Levinas (2011) describes the relationship between desire and infinity in the following way:

Infinity is not the “object” of a cognition (which would be to reduce it to the measure of the gaze that contemplates), but is the desirable, that which arouses Desire, that is, that which is approachable by a thought that at each instant *thinks more than it thinks*. The infinite is not thereby an immense object, exceeding the horizons of the look. It is Desire that measures the infinity of the infinite, for it is a measure through the very impossibility of measure. (p. 62, emphasis in original)

I argue here that in thinking “more than it thinks,” the self recognizes its limitations and feels the need to expand awareness through listening. This is the self’s desire to listen, to break apart, to tentatively explore recently redrawn boundaries of consciousness, and to seek expression through newly opened spaces of meaning. As I grow through the spiral of meaning-making, approaching and yet never approaching infinity, I will also grow the desire to keep learning from my teacher, to respond, and to test the limits of the new totalities I construct and demolish.

As Levinas (2011) and Kenaan (2011) describe, the act of facing is a movement. The desire which induces me to keep listening and to keep turning toward the Other is also not a static fixation. My desire is a movement. It is “the elsewhere or the other, is called *other* in an eminent sense” and “no journey, no

change of climate or of scenery could satisfy the desire bent toward it” (Levinas, 2011, p. 33). In this sense, it is a longing that cannot be satisfied by self; indeed, even in turning toward the Other, this is not a desire that finds its fruition in satisfaction. It is a thing that feeds itself. It is not a desire quelled or diminishable; it is an insistent urge that ceaselessly compels me, not to find that which I need born of the “consciousness of what has been lost” (Levinas, 2011, p. 34), but toward a land I do not yet know. It is a desire that “desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness—the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it” (Levinas, 2011, p. 34). Listening moves me closer to that which I desire: the invisible always beyond the horizon. It does not guide me to the safety of the past or indulge me in remembrance. It does not permit me nostalgia nor protect me with security. Instead, it opens me up and undoes my certainty. It opens me up, and shows me the spaces between myself and the (im)possibility of satisfaction. It is only once the potential of these spaces reveal themselves to me that I am able to speak or act politically, to create an interruption and to explore the possibilities for change.

### Speaking for Freedom

speak up speak up speak up  
speaking is beautiful and necessary (Jahin cited in Young, 2013)

If the process of listening opens in me a capacity to respond, then speaking and acting, interrupting and creating, become acts of freedom. Here, I present an ethics for speaking based on Levinasian understandings of how and why one speaks in response to the Other in both call and apology.

Levinas (1989; 2011) has, through advocating for listening that is based in an *a priori* responsibility to the Other, provided a way for ethics to be rooted in a particular affective disposition. In the transaction between I and the absolute alterity of the Other, Levinas describes a relationship that is wholly dependent on the irreversibility of the role of I and Other. First, to make meaning and to break apart the illusion of totality, I must begin with the relegation of the ego, the opening of my self to the perpetual position of listener—of learner—in the face of the Other as teacher. Second, I speak in order to respond, and in order to affirm my self, but never assume the role of teacher. In this process, Levinas (2011) is not describing speaker *qua* speaker, but speaker as responder:

Conversation, from the very fact that it maintains the distance between me and the Other, the radical separation asserted in transcendence which prevents the reconstitution of totality, cannot renounce the egoism of its existence; but the very fact of being in a conversation consists in recognizing in the Other a *right* over this egoism, and hence in justifying oneself. Apology, in which the I at the same time asserts itself and inclines before the transcendent, belongs to the essence of conversation. The goodness in which ... conversation issues and from which it draws signification will not undo this apologetic moment. (p. 40)

In this instant of listening, and in the subsequent moments of response, I am, as a listener, not responding polemically to advance or defend my understanding of the world. The Other retains his or her ipseity entirely; he or she is not called into question and does not fall within the capacity of my judgement. Because the Other cannot be appropriated and is not subject to derision, the affective position is essentially non-violent. Gibbs (2000) notes that the Other as speaker is not master, in the Hegelian sense, so much as teacher. The teacher does not seek to colonize my thinking or to assert an



understanding over my own—indeed, to do so would be an impossible task of reconciliation—but instead seeks to breach the certainty of my current thinking. The Other breaks apart my consciousness not with violence, but with the right of the Other to whom I have an innate sense of owing, of responsibility. The Other speaks as teacher to expose me to the infinity of exteriority and to help me grow in wisdom. So it is that if I speak, I speak in response, as a listener who recognizes the fiction of totality and who is called on to affirm, to apologize, and to change.

But what is it about speaking specifically, both speaking out as an Other and speaking in response to an Other, that is so important to the Levinasian model? To answer this question I must step back to considerations of freedom and responsibility from earlier in the discussion. As noted, I need the Other to be freed from the constraints of totalising narratives, and it is this promise of freedom, in combination with the previously-discussed *a priori* responsibility for the Other, which constructs the affective disposition of I as listener and I as speaker. Levinas (2011) relates this need for the Other to the acts of listening and speaking, and distinguishes speaking from thinking by noting that:

The breach of totality is not an operation of thought, obtained by a simple distinguishing of terms that evoke one another or at least line up opposite one another. The void that breaks the totality can be maintained against an inevitably totalizing and synoptic thought only if thought finds itself *faced* with an other refractory to categories. Rather than constituting a total with this other as with an object, *thought consists in speaking*. (p. 40)

It is clear that thinking is not enough. Levinas (1989) rejects thinking as a “monologue” that “would recover the sovereignty characteristic of the autonomous person, only by becoming universal” (p. 72). Put another way, thinking unto itself cannot shatter totality but works only to reinforce extant structures of logic. For this reason, I am required to engage in the exteriority of speaking, the outside-of-self act of speaking, if I am to form wisdom in new directions and to create spaces beyond the enclosures of knowledge. Without the Other, I am imprisoned in reason, in Western totalities of truth and objectivity, with no room for the Other and with no hope of rupturing the sameness of a universal discourse. Another way of reflecting on the connections between thought and action is to suggest that a thought, unspoken, can only become a memory. Its greatest potential is as a thing remembered. A thought unspoken and not acted upon, unperformed, is a quiet and impotent thing even if it leads to other, deeper thought. These further thoughts, if also unspoken or unarticulated as action, only serve to extend the depth of what has been lost to the world. The key then, with what is thought or even what is remembered, is that it be spoken, recorded, or acted upon. It is through speech and action that the capacity exists for something better, or at the very least different, than what is. It is in speaking that my thought comes into being, that I recognize possibility, that I begin.

There is, however, a problem. On one hand, Levinas (2011) asserts, “speech is thus the origin of all signification—of tools and all human works—for through it the referential system from which every signification arises receives the very principle of its functioning, its key” (p. 98). Language, he argues, is what organizes the phenomena of existence into meaning. Levinas (2011) also notes that “speech first founds community by *giving*, by presenting the phenomenon as given; and it gives by thematizing” and that the process of thematization “relates the phenomenon to the existent, to exteriority, to the Infinity of the other uncontained by my thought” (p. 98-99, emphasis in original). On the other hand, Levinas (2011) asserts that “the other alone eludes thematization” (p. 86) and that thematization, arrived at through speaking, forecloses the other. Levinas (2011) would not have us seek representation and

evidence to make a “determination of the other by the same” (p. 85). The need for language and the simultaneous dangers of thematization create a tension which is not easily resolved, but can still be worked through. Critchley (1999) examines the issue and determines:

*the disposition towards alterity within the subject which is the condition of possibility for the ethical relation to the other is expressed linguistically or articulated philosophically by recourse to an ethical language that has a paradoxical relation to that which it is attempting to thematize.* As so often in the later Levinas, it is a question of trying to say that which cannot be said, or proposing that which cannot be propositionally stated, of enunciating that which cannot be enunciated, and what has to be said, stated or enunciated is subjectivity itself. (italics in original, p. 231)

Levinas’s work abounds with these irreconcilable tensions—but perhaps that is the point. Would it not be hypocritical to have a philosophy that engages with the impossibility of completeness yet presents no possibilities for paradox or tension? Would it not be strange to ethics as a first philosophy to determine in advance the potential outcomes? Language is often necessary for speaking, just as it is often requisite for action, but its use is not unproblematic. Language leads to thematization that must be resisted in order to establish the truer, more tenuous, more subjective grounds for freedom. Language creates space between *saying* and *said*, and it is precisely in these spaces that the possibility of freedom, born of listening and responding, emerges.

Having established the connections between speaking and freedom, I now turn back to how art for the political can function as an act of speaking. While language is important to the discussion of speaking, “art takes us to places beyond the smooth everyday capacities of speech” (Maclear, 1999, p. 81). The audience, as either listener or as Other to whom the artist is responding, is witness to the emergence of something new, at once a manifestation of wisdom and an apology. Levinas submits the spiral (Gibbs, 2000) as a visual representation of ethics that moves from beginning to infinity. I suggest that art as an expression of ethics is a function and extension of that spiralled framework. Presume that I am faced, listening, and then am called on to respond. I may respond in words or through the creation of art. Alternately, I may be called upon by the Other to listen wherein the Other is a work of art. I may decide to act, may decide to begin, by drawing on the inspiration from my acts of listening and response. These works, rich in the moment of their creation with the potential to interrupt, become voices calling across space. So it is that art makes use of language or images, or a combination of both, to proffer the occasion for an ethical interaction.

I am here making an assumption that language is associated with art, whether it is through obvious utilisation in songs, novels, or poems, whether it is represented in film as dialogue, or whether its function is mirrored through imagery. The link between language and art is perceptible even when one is faced with an image: it is the language of thought that overtakes pure sensible experience to receive new meaning; it is the language of thought as a “gatekeeper of consciousness” (Gibbs, 2000, p. 42) that is broken apart in its exposure to the Other. The connection between language and image that I posit above, that language complements image and symbol because of the innate connections between thought and language, is also echoed by Levinas (2011) who notes that “language is not one modality of symbolism; every symbolism refers already to language” (p. 98). As I have previously discussed, Levinas, with whom one encounters resistance when discussing the distinctions between language and forms, or “things,” still offers an important consideration for the role of language by cleaving the act of saying from what is said. The spaces created in the tension between the saying and the limits of thematization, what is said, are

where the opportunities for freedom to surface. Levinas (2011) suggests that “speech is always a taking up again of what was a simple sign cast forth by it, an ever renewed promise to clarify what was obscure in the utterance” (p. 97). I contend that it is this act of taking up which becomes important—more important than the “simple sign”—because it leads to freedom. How does this correspond to art? An artist speaks of the world when he or she creates and, whether she uses language directly or indirectly, her act of creation is an act of turning to face, creating space between what is proposed and what is seen or heard. This is not an interaction that forecloses language, or possibility, by firmly proposing knowledge or advancing a singular ontology. Instead, the space generated in the act or performance of speaking invites plurality, discrepancy, and a sense of incompleteness.

## Pedagogical Implications

I offer this second section as an invitation to begin to consider the pedagogical possibilities of art as other. Levinas (1998) states, “I don’t live in a world in which there is but one single ‘first comer’; there is always a third party in the world: he or she is also my other, my fellow” (p. 104). This third party gestures toward a sociality beyond the I/Other relation and implies that art can call us into interactions with a (non-art) Other, gathering diverse voices and viewpoints to the classroom, reducing the terror of what is unknown, and increasing desire for infinity. Art offers, then, not only a way of facing the Other, but also a pathway to further others. Art affords a sociality and plurality—beyond the constraints of curriculum—that is always on the horizon. For the remainder of this analysis, I think through some implications of intersubjective ethics for pedagogy, including: Levinas’s (1989) discussion of philosophical exegesis; opportunities for facing the Other through existing pedagogies for space-making and “making strange” (Greene, 1994); relationality and encounter in multiliteracies; and art curriculum and instruction.

### I. Philosophical Exegesis

Approaching the piece with an educational lens, I argue that Levinas gives us pedagogy to work with in “Reality and its Shadow” (1948/1989). He announces that art as pleasure, as distraction, and as an evasion of responsibility, is wicked. It is an exercise of ego. However, art is redeemed in its ethical purpose when one engages in criticism. When the critic “treats the artist as a man at work” (Levinas, 1989, p. 142), the critic is “inquiring after ... influences” and “[linking the artist] to real history” (p. 142). This serves as both a critique for contemporary art education and a gesture toward pedagogy that redeems the ethical value of art in the classroom.

Levinas might be, rightly, dismissive of the majority of art education that emphasizes a “simple reconstruction of the original from the copy” (p. 142). In a classroom full of exemplars, rules, and models of excellence, art becomes an exercise of mimicry, replication and repetition. It becomes the embodiment of the *bonne conscience*: the ego reassuring itself of its own immortality. This reflects Levinas’s concern that art is liable to become a “blind alley of self-reflecting mirrors” (Kearney, 1995) when taken as a representation of knowledge. A thin engagement with art becomes a claim on the alterity of the Other.

Instead, Levinas is imploring us to commit to “philosophical exegesis” in our engagement with art,

which treats art as “myth” and which animates what might be otherwise foreclosed. Through criticism, he notes, “the immobile statue has to be put in movement and made to speak” (Levinas, 1989, p. 142). And, as he builds on his thinking in *The Transcendence of Words* (1989/1949), he observes that criticism, “which is the word of a living being speaking to a living being, brings the image in which art reveals back to the fully real being” (Levinas, 1989, p. 148). Extended to pedagogy, criticism is the means by which art becomes educational, relational, and of the moment. It is in talking about the work that work from the past can be enlivened into the intersubjective moment.

## II. Space-Making and “Making Strange”

A further dimension of this pedagogy begins in answer to a question posed by Ruitenberg (2011) in her examination of the relationship between education and subjectification: “To what extent are schools spaces in which young people have a chance to respond, to enter into the world and make a space there?” (p. 137). At least some of the answer to this call for space-making lies with the possibilities of art in the classroom. I am arguing here that art offers both: a way of encountering the Other, of making space for the philosophical exegesis that Levinas suggests, and a way of entering into the world through creation. As noted in the previous section, “Listening for Inspiration,” the act of facing is a gesture of movement that navigates the space between self and other, as well as between what is and what may yet be. A pedagogy that emphasizes space-making and “making strange” is one that hopes to critically question the self in response to the Other. It is a pedagogy that does not rely on knowledge claims on the Other’s alterity, but begins to use every encounter as a moment for rupture and revision.

According to this pedagogy, the arts can serve as an Other across subject areas and grades. The pedagogy also demands an engagement with art that, as Zhao (2014) notes, is not safe art. It is art that disrupts and is difficult, provoking discomfort and calling students and teachers into question. The pedagogy further calls for critical engagement with art through modes of questioning that reflect the tension between coming into the world and forging new ways of being in that world. That is, questions that interrogate the socio-political and cultural constructions of what counts, and that examine responses between self/Other. Greene (1973; 1994) and Maclear (1999) offer two existing approaches for how these lines of question might function in ways that preserve the alterity of the Other and that engage art in cross-curricular contexts.

In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Greene (1994) suggests that in listening, in attending to voices from an Other, we open ourselves to possibilities for freedom. Using Merleau-Ponty, she notes, “the freedom to be sought is inextricably meshed with responsibility and obligation” (p. 100). She also determines that art, including literature, dance, and music, is one of the most powerful tools for pursuing that freedom through listening and through exploring multiplicities. Art, Greene (1994) argues, “[enables] persons to hear and to see what they would not ordinarily hear and see, to offer visions of consonance and dissonance that are unfamiliar and indeed abnormal, to disclose the incomplete profiles of the world” (p. 129). Greene’s characterization of art pedagogy mimics the orientation to the Other that is suggested by a Levinasian ethics; it is an approach that helps students begin to see art as a potential tool for change. Greene describes how the arts may be integrated into the classroom as a way to construct something new and to ask questions about how art can bring diverse modes of analysis into the classroom. She suggests that “those who read or look or listen attentively can create new orders within themselves” and that, through this exposure to the Other through art in the classroom, “they may discover original perceptions

of what it is like to be alive [as well as] ‘themes of relevance’ against which students can pose worthwhile questions” (Greene, 1973, p. 16).

The element of questioning and of receptiveness is central to an arts-based pedagogy grounded in an ethics based on the Other. As such, the content, the aim, and the purpose of the questions need to be aligned with the larger goal of opening students to the Other. Maclear (1999) grapples with this space-making, being a witness to art, using a construct of parallax vision. Her work on this question furnishes some specificity to the problem of how to inquire alongside students. The first element of Maclear’s (1999) witnessing structure, the “corrective,” is designed to examine the space between the art(ist) and the world. She asks: “What counts as evidence?” and “How is testimony socially enframed?” (Maclear, 1999, p. 86). The second element, the “contemplative,” shines a light on personal response. These become questions that allow us to “revisit our own perceptual and epistemic assumptions” (Maclear, 1999, p. 86). Taken together with Greene’s assertion that the value of art in the classroom begins with worthwhile questions, Maclear’s approach to witnessing furnishes some structure for educators hoping to more broadly engage with art across curricula.

One final consideration for both making space and making strange: if we accept the premise that the arts can evoke multiplicity and invite a deeper level of questioning, and that art can function in the classroom as a set of valid semiotic resources to provoke students into experiencing the new, then we can also posit that exposing students to diverse arts and to varied means of expression will afford them exponentially greater exposure to larger questions of how to live alongside one another in the world. This is Levinas’s “third party” that provokes from one interaction with the Other a profound sense of responsibility for an ongoing Other, the sociality beyond the individual. While it is difficult to always model a process of democracy within a school setting with its inherent contexts of power, the creation and analysis of art provides a window to the Other and to the potential for different ways of being. It gestures to not just one Other, but to all the possibilities of Other that exist beyond the boundaries of the classroom. This plurality lifts the terrible burden of conformity and obedience from the shoulders of students, and gives them license to approach, with humility, the vast possibilities of how to live in a society of others not through competition but through responsibility.

### **III. Implications for Multiliteracies**

In connection to the discussion of multiplicities and questioning, and in consideration that art can serve as a mode of response to the Other, a further consideration for art in the classroom is as a dimension of multiliteracies. Crafton, Silvers, and Brennan (2009) offer the following introduction to multiliteracies:

As small children, we lived in a multimodal world. We discovered that art was a language with as much communication power as speech. Later we learned, like oral language, the arts could act as a bridge to reading and writing and that music and movement had the same potential for contributing to our expression of meaning and self. There were so many languages and literacies when we were young, so much playful, joyful movement among them as we began to learn the stunning communication potential within us all as human beings. (p. 33)

The authors here furnish a description of making and receiving meaning that stems from existence and experience. As beings in the world, it is our first inclination to use whatever semiotic means we have at our disposal. Yet somehow, over the course of traditional literacy schooling, that resourcefulness

narrows into a preoccupation with print literacy. Multiliteracies re-assert the value of multilingualism and multimodalities, and ground literacy in sociocultural practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Multiliteracies research helps educators recognize that “all literacy events are multimodal, involving the orchestration of a wide variety of sign systems” (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996, p. 14) and that, as such, all modalities should count as relevant literacy in the classroom. If the arts are taken as a component of multiliteracies, “rather than mere entertainment or decoration — which are the first things to go when there are budget cuts or test score pressures,” then it encourages educators to plan for art integration that is “more seriously engaged and more fully integrated into the whole educational process” (Zhao, 2014, p. 256).

Working from within a multiliteracies framework, there are echoes between a Levinasian conception of facing the Other as an interruption to our existing patrol of consciousness, Greene’s claim that art helps make the world strange, and the multiliteracies dimension “experiencing the new” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Cope and Kalantzis (2009) determine “experiencing the new entails observing or reading the unfamiliar, immersion in new situations and texts, reading new texts or collecting new data” which becomes “potentially transformative insofar as the weaving between the known and the new takes the learner into new domains of action and meaning” (p. 185). The multiliteracies framework here evokes the very sentiments of what it means to come up against the Other, to transcend consciousness, and to expand the patrol of thought. It not only legitimises the arts as semiotic resources of experience and text, but also endorses the significance of the encounter of the new, the yet-unknown, to learning.

Levinas’s conception of ethics as a responsibility for an encounter that preserves the alterity of the Other is also complemented in a multiliteracies approach that strives to recognise multilingualism as an opportunity for negotiated meaning, rather than as a difference to be overcome. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer more in-depth analysis of the possibilities for language and meaning-making, researchers across literacy education (Dooley, Tait, & Zabarjadi Sar, 2016; Ippolito, 2010; Kostogriz, 2009) are beginning to work with Levinasian constructs of responsibility, alterity, and wisdom in an effort to cultivate language programs that challenge colonial discourses and traditional Western epistemologies.

Multiliteracies and an ethic of intersubjectivity offer one another a sort of reciprocal resonance. Just as multiliteracies research and pedagogy broadens the scope of how and with whom we make meaning, the ethical responsibility for the Other—the call to listen—enlivens multiliteracies with purpose. An expanding array of semiotic resources at our disposal furnishes us with the tools we need to face and to speak in response. The ethical call serves as the *a priori* intention of literacy. Notably, this Other-oriented rationale for literacy also works to recuperate the “value” of literacy from its current positioning through neoliberal hegemonies as a means toward economic security and accountability (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2013). The reason to engage in the work of making meaning with one another is not about competing to refine skills for the labour market; instead, making meaning together is a humbly offered answer to a responsibility that precedes ontology.

#### IV. Pedagogy for the Arts

Finally, unlike much contemporary education, this pedagogy rejects mimesis or replication as proof of mastery. Instead, it aims to disrupt the existing space and produce new spaces as students negotiate tensions and complexity. Greene (1973) notes that some artists deconstruct life experiences by first disassembling and, oftentimes, discarding the traditional. These artists have begun “tampering with inherited conventions, questioning the very idea of art [in order to force people] to examine [their] own

preconceptions and expectations” (Greene, 1973, p. 12). This marks a purposeful break from artistic convention, and it mirrors the shift away from absolute knowledge that is required to rupture the *bonne conscience*. Artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, photographers, and dancers frequently experiment with, refine, or reject the historical parameters of connoisseurship. Students ought to be exposed to these reconstructions and experiments so they become witness to the ways an art, like a language, can evolve. Explicit exposure to artistic rule-breaking might encourage students to understand the limits of convention and to begin to explore the purpose of disruption. In this way, the arts provide a unique opportunity for teachers to not only re-see the world for themselves, but also to introduce the tensions that exist between standardization and complexity of meaning into the curriculum.

A second radical revision of art pedagogy should centre on repurposing the role of arts in schools. Creation ought to be explored as an act of respons/e/ibility to the Other, rather than as a gesture of replication, mastery, or containment. In lieu of teaching the elements and principles of a discipline as isolated lessons—somewhat akin to teaching spelling and grammar through rote exercise—the arts should be explored as a way of constructing meaning and of being together in the world. The emphasis on creative composition rather than performance, on process rather than product, will cultivate the disposition that creation is not about closure. The creative end is not a true cessation: it is a gesture that might be revised, amended, repurposed, discussed, critiqued, and sought as inspiration. It does not stagnate upon its completion, and it certainly does not culminate in a grade given by a teacher.

The third element of revised art pedagogy would emphasize criticism and conversation as a central feature of artistic engagement. This opens the door for art integration across subjects, as it links art to philosophical exercise, which might be the aim of any subject or theme. Educators, enriched with access to technology, have near limitless possibilities to introduce various art forms and content into the classroom at each and every grade. This access, coupled with the inquiry-rooted approach to making strange detailed above, provides a strong methodology for arts integration that deconstructs art subject silos and expands the tools for making meaning and being responsible to the Other across curricula.

## Concluding Thoughts

I submit that the consideration of a Levinasian ethics and the possibilities for its accord with art is particularly timely. In society and politics, the Other seems to be increasingly under attack, more a source of reckless fearfulness, and more a flashpoint for polarization than ever before. Political rhetoric is rife with blame, individualism, and closure. In schools, literacy practices are narrowed into what can be measured on standardized tests, with diminishing focus on creative and critical approaches to art education. Levinasian ethics, and the possibilities and promises of art, invite a humility and generosity of listening that renders our biases fragile; the ethical call to listen is grounded in the Other, in my responsibility for the Other, in my respect for the Other’s complete alterity, and in my desire for freedom and wisdom based on our interaction. It is toward this understanding of responsibility, freedom, and wisdom that this pedagogy advances.

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## About the Author

**Lana Parker** is a Core Member of the Institute for Research on Digital Learning at York University. Her research focuses on literacies, curriculum theory, philosophical inquiry, and responsive pedagogy. She can be contacted at [laparker@edu.yorku.ca](mailto:laparker@edu.yorku.ca)