




In the Labyrinths of Phenomenology (of Art)

Report from the Debate

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On March 26th, 2024, an online debate organized by the Institute of Philosophy of Ignatianum University in Cracow took place. The debate was centered around the book *Fenomenologia i jej cień. Zwrot estetyczny w post-fenomenologii francuskiej (Phenomenology and its Shadow. The Aesthetic Turn in French Post-Phenomenology)*, written by Monika Murawska (Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw) and published by Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii Polskiej Akademii Nauk in 2023. The book seeks to examine the relationship between modern, conceptual art and phenomenology in the context of French philosophy, claiming that phenomenology remains relevant today to the extent that it furnishes a descriptive account of the work of art. In the book, Murawska examines the question of whether phenomenology is universally suited to providing us with an understanding of all works of art, and what its limits in that regard might be, but also relates this inquiry to the issue of subjectivity in all its fragility and vulnerability. Besides the author of the book, the following guests were also in attendance: Anna Alichniewicz (Medical University of Łódź), Mateusz Bednarkiewicz (Aleksander Zelwerowicz National Academy of Dramatic Art in Warsaw), Iwona Lorenc (University of Warsaw) and Piotr Schollenberger (University of Warsaw). The debate was led by Magdalena Kozak (Ignatianum University in Cracow). Technical support for the event was provided by Kamil Korona, and the debate was conducted via the Webex software platform (from Cisco) and simultaneously streamed on YouTube on the Ignatianum University channel.

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After an introduction and short description of the main idea behind the book by Murawska, the first talk of the debate was given by Lorenc, who presented on the topic *Fenomenologia sfrustrowanego podmiotu* (*Phenomenology of the frustrated subject*). According to Lorenc, the book by Murawska is the first publication in the Polish language that deals really comprehensibly with the aesthetic turn in French post-phenomenology, as well as being an original contribution by its author to the field. Lorenc stated that Murawska seems most comfortable in her writing when discussing the ideas of Henri Maldiney, and the author confirmed that Maldiney is the philosopher she agreed with the most in the context of the book. Lorenc also agreed with Murawska that phenomenology is destined today to exist in a relationship with such fields as aesthetics or philosophy of culture, where it is best suited to describing human experience as mixed, intertwining elements of culture and art as inseparable from the experience itself. That way, Lorenc said, phenomenology no longer seems separated from reality, or modern philosophical and scientific approaches to the latter. In her discussion of subjectivity, Lorenc distinguished between the frustration and trauma of the subject as amounting to two separate states. While the trauma of the subject is discussed by Murawska in her book, Lorenc claimed that it should be supplemented by the frustration of the postmodern subject.

After the talk by Lorenc, there was a response from Murawska, who agreed that the use of the term “trauma,” which originated in psychology but is now present in both philosophy and common speech, can be elaborated on in the context of the book. She also stated that while, in phenomenology, the idea of the strong subject of modernism reveals its total defeat, post-phenomenology cannot totally reject subjectivity, even if only in its weaker form.

The next talk was given by Schollenberger, who presented on the topic „*Cień jej cienia*”—*fenomenologia, sztuka i zmysłowość* (“*The shadow of her shadow*”—*phenomenology, art and sensuality*). Schollenberger also discussed the idea of the trauma of the subject, referencing the thought of Jean-François Lyotard, but his main topic was the metaphor of the shadow utilized by Murawska in the title of her book as well as in its content. This metaphor, Schollenberger noted, comes from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and is not merely an ornament, but an epistemological tool used in philosophy. If art is the shadow of phenomenology, as envisioned by Merleau-Ponty and Murawska, then according to Schollenberger we must also examine the shadow of the shadow of phenomenology, which would be our emotional sensuality, our open susceptibility. While the metaphor of the shadow of the shadow was itself created by the poet Bolesław Leśmian, Schollenberger

also quoted Mark Rothko, who compared the way of working of a philosopher and an artist, and who also wrote on sensuality.

Responding to Schollenberger, Murawska said that for her the shadow of the shadow of phenomenology is its subtle, barely palpable influence on those postmodernists who rejected phenomenology altogether, such as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. She agreed with Schollenberger, though, that Rothko's idea of sensuality was and still is influential in phenomenology, and also expressed her deep reservations about the artwork titled *Comedian* by Maurizio Cattelan—Murawska perceived it as a form of joke that does not merit non-ironic, serious interpretation.

Then Bednarkiewicz gave a talk on the topic *Rozpocząć zawsze od nowa—cień fenomenologii i scena* (*To always begin anew—the shadow of phenomenology and the scene*). Bednarkiewicz, who is a stage director, referenced Stanisław Różewicz in his discussion of the notion of the event in theater. He also compared the event in theater to the event in phenomenology, the latter being a topic which Murawska did address in her book, saying that in both there is an overabundance of meaning that cannot be fully experienced by us. This Bednarkiewicz related to the phenomenological idea of openness.

In her response to Bednarkiewicz, Murawska agreed that certain ideas in phenomenology, such as always beginning anew, can be used in our understanding of theater, though she also said that among French philosophers that she studied in her book only Lyotard referenced theater in his work.

In the final talk of the evening, Alichniewicz presented on the topic *Doświadczenie obrazu, czyli Lyotard nieco przewrotnie* (*Experiencing the picture, or, somewhat perversely, about Lyotard*). Alichniewicz assured the participants that she is not an expert in the field of history of art or aesthetics, but she nonetheless agreed to participate because of her interest in Lyotard. According to Murawska, Lyotard is also not a philosopher of art in the classical sense, and Alichniewicz agreed with that. She summarized the writings of Lyotard on philosophical disputation, as well as his critique of Plato and his writings on painting, and on that basis attempted to answer why he never approached the topic of the painting *Las Meninas* (*The Ladies-In-Waiting*) by Diego Velázquez. Alichniewicz took issue with the idea that modern art represents progress compared to the works of Velázquez, whose painting is not a form of naive mimesis but an artwork dealing with the relationship between the painter and the viewer—a kind of significance she related to ideas of Lyotard, quoting also from Michel Foucault.

Responding to Alichniewicz, Murawska pointed out that Lyotard did write about mimetic paintings, though not in the same context as about

modern paintings, as he tended to change his philosophical views not only on art but generally. He viewed modern paintings as revolutionary, political acts, and this cannot apply to almost any older artworks, said Murawska. She also stated, though, that Lyotard's thought is rich enough to facilitate a discussion of mimetic art.

What happened next was an extended conversation between the author and all of the participants in the debate, in which Lorenc returned to the idea of ontophanic-poietic tension that Murawska described in her book, Schollenberger commented that this tension operates in a certain kind of negative dialectics that exclude the possibility of overcoming of it, and Bednarkiewicz remarked that there is temporal tension in theater but also in subjectivity. The topic of the relationship between theater and ritual was also introduced, and Alichniewicz remarked that this has to do with the idea of myth as something that is an ever-present cultural background for the gesture and the event in theater. The final topic of this conversation, concluded by comments from Murawska, was Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of subjectivity.

There were also two other online debates organized by the Institute of Philosophy of Ignatianum University in Cracow in the first half of 2024. The debate entitled *Płeć i doświadczenie: w ujęciach feministycznej fenomenologii* (*Gender and Experience: Through the Lenses of Feminist Phenomenology*), centered around the book *Przeżywając płeć. Doświadczenie na styku feminizmu, poststrukturalizmu i fenomenologii* (*Living through Gender. Experience at the Intersection of Feminism, Poststructuralism and Phenomenology*) by Marzena Adamiak (of the Polish Academy of Sciences), took place on March 14th, 2024. Meanwhile, the debate entitled *Etyka bliższa sytuacji człowieka?* (*Ethics Closer to the Human Situation?*), focused on the book *Koncepcja etyki fenomenologicznej Paola Valoriego. Studium analityczno-krytyczne* (*Paolo Valori's Idea of Phenomenological Ethics: Analysis and Critique*) by Tymoteusz Mietelski (of the Catholic Academy in Warsaw, Collegium Joanneum), took place on May 27th, 2024.

All book debates organized by the Institute of Philosophy of Ignatianum University in Cracow are available online (in Polish) on the Ignatianum University YouTube channel.