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Review of *The Paradoxes of Art: A Phenomenological Investigation*, by Alan Paskow

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The Paradoxes of Art: A Phenomenological Investigation
Alan Paskow
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Though the title suggests a phenomenological account of art and, in fact, has some important and insightful things to say about art, this work focuses primarily on the ontological status of "fictional beings" and the question of "representation" in art and in experience more generally. Paskow makes a case for a "realist" aesthetic. The first part of the book, which provides examples from literature and painting, culminates in a discussion of why fictional beings can be important to us. The second part of the book is almost exclusively devoted to a consideration of painting. It illustrates how a realist aesthetic can be brought to bear on painting and develops this aesthetic in relation to this particular art form. Throughout Paskow is concerned not only with what we should take art to be, but why it should matter to us.

This work is genuinely "phenomenological" in the sense that it attends directly to our experience of the work of art, especially the painting. Unlike much American current literature in continental philosophy, it is not primarily a commentary on the texts of continental philosophers who have addressed the topic at hand. In fact, for good or ill, Paskow ignores the 20th century phenomenological literature on art and painting—Geiger, Heidegger, Ingarden, Dufrenne, Merleau-Ponty among others. The body of literature that he does explicitly take up (Chapter I) is contemporary analytic aesthetics: especially Walton and Yanal, but also Carroll, Boruah, Rosebury among others. However varied,

complex, and insightful the work of these philosophers is, Paskow takes them all to be committed to some sort of representationalism. On his account, they are all committed to an orientation characterized by a subject-object split and thus end up quarreling over subjectivistic and objectivistic accounts of art. Paskow's realism is not an objectivism.

He finds his orientation in the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, the Heidegger of phenomenological ontology. Chapters II and III draw on *Being and Time* for an account of how we might have a non-instrumental relation to things and "why and how others matter" to us. Paskow argues that Heidegger's great contribution in *Being and Time* is to show us the way out of the false alternative between egocentricity (and anthropomorphism) and theocentrism (God's eye point of view, objectivism). This false alternative derives from Cartesian representationalism. He recognizes that Heidegger's later developments have to do, at least in part, with Heidegger's concern for a residue of egocentrism and anthropomorphism in his early work. In addition, the early Heidegger has little to say about art and painting. Most Heideggerians concerned with Paskow's questions turn to Heidegger's *Origin of the Work of Art*. Paskow thinks that the later Heidegger "has not articulated a full or convincing theory of art."(31) Paskow does not find "sufficient clarity in the terms 'earth,' 'world,' 'truth,'…and so forth…." (30).

In the introduction Paskow discusses briefly Husserl's contribution toward a phenomenology of painting, most of which can be found in *Husserliana XXIII: Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Errinerung*. Paskow asserts that Husserl failed to answer the question that he is posing, though Husserl's accounts "are suggestive and, indirectly and

unintentionally, indicate the kind of epistemological position that I defend."(21) Further, Husserl "lacked the courage of his intuitions."(24) Paskow also claims that Husserl never developed an account of human experience as "being-in-the-world." This reviewer would argue that Husserl's account approximates Paskow's position quite intentionally, that Husserl provides a critique of representationalism, and that Heidegger adopts and adapts this from Husserl. Be that as it may, phenomenology for Paskow provides the way to a realist aesthetic.

Yet it is a peculiar realism, for with regard to the things of experience, including art objects and paintings, Paskow also calls his approach Neo-Kantian and refers to his own "Neo-Kantian addendum" (114) to Heidegger's account. He argues that Heidegger in *Being and Time* "seems to be unconsciously admitting his belief in the existence of a phenomenologically inaccessible realm of things in themselves."(113-4) Paskow may be right about some of the formulations of *Being and Time*, but this is the very reason that Heidegger abandons the unfinished work. Clearly and explicitly Heidegger wished to abandon the Kantian "thing-in-itself" which he, following Husserl, saw as a function of the Cartesian tradition of representationalism. Paskow's position thus remains captive to the representationalism that he claims to overcome. He cannot find a way to reconcile the historical and cultural context of our experience of things with what he sees to be "naïve" common-sensical realism. But he does not wish to give up any claim on the thing in itself, so he suggests, but does not develop, the notion that our experience of things is analogous to the thing in itself. Accordingly, he suggests further that the things of our experience are symbols "at one level."

As one might expect from this kind of existential Neo-Kantian realism, Paskow is more interested in other persons than in the thinginess of things. In a kind of summary, he states that his "contention is that paintings are at base about others—on the face of it, fictional others, but in an important and overlooked sense, "real" others—their stories, their concerns are, whether we acknowledge them or not, our stories, our concerns."(150) Things, he goes on to say, "are always proxies for people."(150) Even abstract art tells the stories of others. For his account of the experience of others, Paskow takes his cue from *Being and Time* and its presentation of two modes of relation with the other: leaping ahead and leaping in. Paskow argues that these two alternatives are not adequate to our experience and suggests a third mode: allowing the other entry into my life. This mode is the appropriate mode for coming to art and paintings in particular. We can and should allow the fictional other into our lives.

After dealing with the experience of things (Chapter II) and others (Chapter III), in Chapter IV ("Why and How Painting Matters") Paskow turns to the experience of painting. He suggests that the experience has three levels: 1) the unreflective visual and affective experience, 2) the spectator's reflective effort to ascertain what the work is about, and 3) an evaluative and contextualizing conceptual placement of the work according to a particular purpose. He calls this last level, the level of theory and interpretation. He argues that philosophers have too much focused on this third level at the cost of the first two levels and the direct experience of the painting in which we allow it entry into our lives. The third level is inevitably "distancing."(151) Using the example

of Vermeer's *The Woman Holding a Balance*, Paskow attempts to provide a phenomenological account of the pre-theoretical experience of this painting. Paskow has much to say about the experience of painting and about this painting by Vermeer in particular. He suggests that we enter into the world (or better, "subworld") of the painting "as though it were a dream of our own."(181) There is only one world but there are many subworlds. In this way, Paskow can account for the differences and disagreements about paintings but also the value of entering into the conversation about the painting and engaging these differences and disagreements. He appeals to the Gadamerian concept of the fusion of horizons to make sense of this experience.

In the fifth and final chapter ("For and Against Interpretation") Paskow discusses what he takes to be the seven basic schools of interpretation today: 1) traditional (formalism or new criticism), 2) psychological, 3) psychosocial, 4) sociohistorical, 5) subjectivist, 6) ethical, and 7) deconstructionist. A peculiarity of Paskow's terminology is his distinction of his own phenomenological approach from "interpretive" approaches. It is peculiar inasmuch as Heidegger is justifiably considered a major influence on the interpretive turn of much of recent "theory." The Heidegger of *Being and Time* calls his own phenomenology hermeneutical. The work in hermeneutics by Gadamer and Ricoeur is scarcely mentioned by Paskow (only in the last few pages), though he acknowledges in a footnote (244) that his own position is best supplemented by "reception" theory. The developers of reception theory, Jauss and Iser (neither of whom for whatever reason are listed in the bibliography) were much influenced by Gadamer. As noted above, Paskow is "against" interpretation insofar as it distracts from the immediate experience of the

artwork. Interpretive theory may be dogmatic and reductive. Yet Paskow is not simply against theory. This higher level of reflection may indeed provide important insight into the artwork, but any theoretical approach oversteps its bounds if it claims to be the only and final truth or if it does not pay sufficient attention to the work itself.. Paskow claims that the various theoretical approaches may be complementary to one another and that the theoretical approach to the artwork should be kept in a dialectical tension with the direct experience of the artwork. At one point he suggests an "amalgamation of both phenomenological and interpretive responses."(237) To illuminate this tension, Paskow chooses three of the theories (all "unmasking") and provides three interpretations of the Vermeer painting to contrast with his own interpretation in the previous chapter: feminist, Marxist, and deconstructionist. His first two interpretations are quite credible and persuasive, unlike the deconstructionist interpretation, though of these Paskow is clearly most interested in the deconstructionist. His commentary on Derrida and deconsstructionism is stronger, though unfortunately most of it is to be found in the footnotes.

The book concludes with a summary of his position which he characterizes as conceding the relativity of alternative interpretations without endorsing relativism. There is always an element of undecidability, ambiguity, and uncertainty in the understanding and interpretation of an artwork. There is no definitive interpretation, though some are better than others. These claims about interpretation are not at all unusual, nothwithstanding Paskow's claims in the introduction and throughout the work for the unusual and bold character of position. What philosophically is most interesting is how and why these claims about interpretation are made—how and why one can came

relativity without relativism. To show the basis for his view Paskow refers both to his own Neo-Kantianism and a regulative ideal of the best interpretation and to Aristotle and Aquinas. Aristotle he says provides "a theoretical underpinning" (238) to his claims about cross-cultural and trans-historical interpretation. Paskow also refers to his own "quasi-universalistic position."(239) Put in historical terms, can one have one's Aristotle and Kant too? One might argue, as Paskow does implicitly, that this appeal to Aristotle and Kant characterizes *Being and Time*, the text that provides the lead for Paskow's own interpretive approach. But Paskow's *The Paradoxes of Art* leaves the reader wishing for a more extensive account of a phenomenology that is both Aristotelian and Kantian.