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The Phenomenology of New Art in Ortega**

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Abstract: Ortega's work, like the reality of Isis, has ten thousand faces. It is multifaceted, and due to its creative and discursive approach, progresses without the reflective layers characteristic of a systematic construction. This very nature is the source of its rich layers and its internal complexity. One way of reading it may be to seek the best way to provide coherence. This is what I have attempted in my book on Ortega. However, that will never be the only way to read Ortega. In fact, no interpretation can exhaust the richness of his work. Another approach is to reveal the internal tensions, the flaws, and the discrepancies that emerge when trying to build a cohesive whole from it. This perspective inevitably notices the deep evolutionary motives aimed at suturing the most evident fissures. This latter reading is the one I wish to undertake in this discussion. I hope that, in this way, I will not have to repeat what we might call the more constructive interpretation I have presented in my book.

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THE TWO FRONTS OF ORTEGA: OVERCOMING KANT, THINKING LIFE

In the mid-1920s, Ortega embarked on two complementary philosophical endeavors. The first was to definitively break away from the Kantian system, which he referred to as the "piety of culture" and the tyranny of the "ought-to-be." The second was to advance his own theory of life as an original and structural phenomenon of the new philosophical era. Achieving both objectives through a single philosophical argument was no easy task, yet he made significant strides in partial elements. He had done so in *The Theme of Our Time* (1923), he reiterated this in his approach to Kant's centenary in 1924, and he would return to it in his aesthetic writings of 1925. Of course, Ortega did not explicitly state that with *The Dehumanization of Art* and *Ideas on the Novel* he was also abandoning the Kantian aesthetic framework, just as he had previously abandoned the moral and epistemological framework of Kantianism. However, his two famous aesthetic essays can also be interpreted from this perspective of breaking away from the past, and quite radically at that. Understanding what this operation entailed offers profound philosophical lessons, which may still hold relevance for our present. To explore this matter, it is useful to recall certain features of the Kantian program and its vision for an aesthetic regime.

Kant was extraordinarily aware of an asymmetry between theoretical pure reason and moral pure reason. The former had an element that ensured the universal application of logical functions, allowing all human beings to apply them to the perceptions of sensible intuition in a common manner. This element was the schema. Whoever wished to apply the subject function of any judgment had to seek in the sensible perceptions the permanent material content over time. Logical subject and temporal permanence were analogous functions. The same could be said of the logical function of implication, which was applied unequivocally through the temporal succession of perceptual material contents. The logical function of disjunction or reciprocal relation was applied to the sensible content through the schema of simultaneity. Pure concepts achieved their unequivocal sensible use through these schemas. As forms of the temporal order, they were transcendental, constant operations of the imagination.

However, the pure concept of moral reason, the categorical imperative, did not possess schemas for application to sensible material. The notion that human beings are ends in themselves and not mere means — the key to respecting the moral imperative in human action — could not be universally applied to states of sensibility, because imagination did not have a universal

operational schema here. We lack a universal moral imagination that tells each of us what it materially means to be an end in oneself. This absence of a moral imagination compromised the effectiveness of practical reason.

Kant sought a solution to this problem until the end. He made an initial attempt in the *Critique of Judgment*. Even in his *Metaphysics of Morals*, he alluded to the need for aesthetic education, after recognizing the importance of Friedrich Schiller's program. In any case, this program shaped the modern aesthetic regime, which was only truly challenged by Nietzsche, the final enigma of all avant-garde theory. We can refer to this Kantian aesthetic regime as the core of bourgeois *Bildung* (cultural education). Its central idea was that moral reason required something akin to the imagination possessed by theoretical reason. This substitute for imagination, this kind of moral imagination, was the aesthetic faculty of judgment.

From early on, Kant intuited that this faculty, which was supposed to ensure the applicability of moral categories, needed to have a dual structure. Drawing on his extensive readings of English literature, to which he was greatly inclined, he identified the distinct functionality of the notions of the beautiful and the sublime in relation to the two central aspirations of moral reason. The regime of the beautiful allowed for the imagining of a type of feeling in which the human being expressed a communal dimension. By cultivating a common sense as a response to the pleasure principle, the beautiful set boundaries for what it could mean for a human being to be an end in itself in social interactions. It produced a shared pleasure, achieved through the free play of subjective faculties, characterized by ease and naturalness of experience — what was termed "natural grace," an attitude in which humans neither coerced nor violated themselves. If one were guided by this feeling of the beautiful experience, they would be able to form a community where respect for each individual's intrinsic worth could emerge without the abstract constraints of a purely legalistic sense of duty. Guided by this schema of the beautiful, one could act morally in concrete terms, ensuring free integration into a community of shared sentiment that did not violate human singularity. It was enough to leave the other as free and happy in their spontaneity as the experience of the beautiful suggested. Here, one could be an end in oneself in a way that did not disrupt the communal structure, based on granting the same spontaneity, naturalness, and joy to the other. Thus, the beautiful acted as a surrogate for the schema, fulfilling the same function, but applied to the realm of moral reason. Respecting the experience of the beautiful — shared enjoyment — served as a guide for respecting the law of the good, for acting in common.

But Kant understood, much more than Edmund Burke and in line with other bourgeois thinkers from Humboldt to John Stuart Mill, that this communal condition as a foundation for moral reason was not free of risks. It could indeed become stifling if maintained unilaterally. To ensure moral action, it was not enough to align our actions with the idea that the other could be an end in themselves in the material sense that the common sense of the beautiful allowed. To guarantee the moral experience integrally, we needed to intensify our understanding of freedom. Kant realized that this intensification had to be mediated by that specific aesthetic enjoyment produced by the feeling of the sublime. If the good could not be separated from the beautiful, from a certain grace and naturalness in human interactions, then the experience of freedom as something of our own had to be strengthened by the capacity to enjoy the sublime. An integral aesthetic education, if it was to serve morality, had to address both grace and dignity.

The radical difference between the beautiful and the sublime lay in that the first aesthetic object forged a common sense, while the second created a unique, intransferable experience—solitary, in a way, as romanticism would soon interpret. The fact that both could be derived from certain experiences of nature guaranteed universal access to this experience, something required for its function of mediating universal moral law.

ABANDONING THE PROGRAM OF BOURGEOIS BILDUNG

From this entire argument, only this difference matters to us. The experience of the beautiful is communal. The experience of the sublime is personal and solitary because it aims to intensify the sense of one's own freedom. Of course, Nietzsche dismantled this aesthetic regime. The beautiful, in the Kantian sense, became something suited to a domesticated sensibility. The sublime, springing from Dionysian sources, had to be projected into the communal sphere under the power of Apollonian instincts. The assumption behind this transformation was that nature was no longer the formative object of aesthetic education. This role fell exclusively on the products of art. The displacement of nature toward the artistic work, along with its productivity, became the most significant sign of this new understanding. Music, as a symbolic representation of the will to live, now became the key to aesthetic education and the program of Bildung. In Wagner's great works, the possibility of a total artwork capable of forming a sublime, public art was to be realized, taking up the torch of Schillerian theater as the educational ideal for a new humanity. We know where this program led.

Ortega takes up this scenario, and the problem he addresses in *The Dehumanization of Art* is connected to this evolution. However, he confronted a phenomenon that challenged the general program of collective Bildung. His starting point, characterized as the unpopularity of new art, was merely an expression of this rupture. Art was no longer governed by any educational program, by the formation of a common sense, or by the need to prepare a moral community. In reality, new art had broken away from the old program of mediation toward a new morality. Now, art was no longer aimed at the production of community. Instead, it continued to project itself onto social life, not by generating community but by causing social fracture. Symptomatically, it seemed that art was breaking with the grammar of the Kantian concept of the beautiful. The community, now reduced to the form of the masses, reacted to the eruption of the personal freedom of the artist with a certain hostility. This is what made the sociological study of art relevant, particularly the social reception of art, a line of inquiry that Ortega valued in Jean-Marie Guyau, known as the "French Nietzsche," whose work *Art from a Sociological Perspective* had been published in Madrid by Sáenz de Jubera Hermanos in 1902.

Of course, Guyau still sought to maintain the Kantian program in his own way and defended the system of its mediations. Ortega, writing forty years later, observed the end of the bourgeois emancipatory dream and its socialist intensifications, noting the impossibility of creating a common sense with art. On the contrary, he saw that this program had been abandoned. Hence, as he stated, it was necessary to reflect on the sociology of art, a task yet to be undertaken in this new context. Through this perspective, Ortega renewed a consistent element of his thinking: his hostility toward the figure of the bourgeois, now the man blind and deaf to new art. All sentiments related to pain and joy — those elements intrinsic to Kantian beautiful art — were dismissed as melodramatic. In reality, the neighbor had disappeared for the artist. Common sense, that form of Kantian contagion, was superfluous. Ortega even rejected the dimension of unconscious contagion. Against the aspiration to forge a common sense or to extend the idea of freedom in the public's personal experience, the new art now aimed only for a form of intelligent, non-sentimental pleasure.

Thus, Ortega saw in this type of art an additional impetus for fulfilling his first objective: separating himself from the Kantian universe. But what about the second objective, to secure within the same movement a philosophy of life? At first glance, reflection on the new art seemed a way to achieve this. New art required from its audience and revealed in the artist "nobility

of nerves, [...] instinctive aristocracy" (Ortega y Gasset, 1997: Vol. 3, 355). These characteristics altered the domain of the sublime, as the new art was characterized as a means of knowledge for the best (ibid.: Vol. 3, 356). It did not serve to forge a common sense, nor to enjoy shared freedom, nor to affirm "the false presupposition of real equality among human beings" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 356), but rather to differentiate among them. If Ortega had been more attentive to the latest German literature, he might have been pleased to find a fundamental metaphor aligning with a contemporary novel, *The Magic Mountain*, where human beings were divided between the inhabitants of the plains and the elitist mountain dwellers, experiencing death in the elevated Berghof of Davos. For Ortega, this was a "salvific split," in stark contrast to the final pedagogical ironies of Thomas Mann, who bade farewell to the late-romantic illusions of aesthetic elitism.

Nevertheless, this theoretical way of discussing the social aspect of new art, so positive, contrasted with Ortega's remarks about actual artistic works. The difference is striking. For instance, his appreciation of Picasso's painting as an "exemplary failure" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 366 n1) was far from encouraging. In other passages, he spoke of "errors and even frauds of cubism" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 377). When discussing Dadaism, he referred to it in terms of extravagance and failed attempts. All of this, of course, confirmed the abandonment of the Kantian "ought-to-be," as the "organic principle" of new art implied the abandonment of all norms (ibid.: Vol. 3, 366 m2). This orientation primarily excluded the norm of natural reality and dismissed the principle of realistic mimesis. Perhaps this is why he felt inclined to locate something sublime as the key to new art. Ortega spoke of "constructing something that is not a copy of nature and yet possesses some substantive quality, implying the most sublime gift" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 366). However, this sublime dimension was now used for an alternative moral program. For Kant, the sublime aimed to ensure the freedom of the individual as the common dignity of humanity. The beautiful aimed to secure its egalitarian and communal dimension. Both addressed universal aspects of human reason. Now, the sublime aimed to project a different public morality, seemingly aligned with political reform. In both spheres, and in 1925, Ortega welcomed the emergence of an aristocratic bearing (ibid.: Vol. 3, 356).

This moral reform implied a new sense of freedom. All the elements of new art proposed by Ortega were rooted in a new understanding of freedom, uncoerced by the principle of reality or the constraints of living forms. The new pure art was a free art, rejecting mimesis. It was art as play, where the decisive element was the perception of one's own creative freedom,

the abandonment of the shared space of feelings typical of naturalized spontaneous life. This compact set of attitudes moved forward through the absolute mediations of art toward irony about the work itself, its lack of transcendence, always viewing creative activity as play. Going beyond common realities formed the basis of ultraism, seen by Ortega as a "new sensibility" (Ortega y Gasset, 1997: Vol. 3, 365). Aesthetic pleasure was no longer the pleasure of nature but of the art objects themselves. It was an artistic pleasure. Art transcended immediate, naturalized, reified reality. It created its own reality. In this way, art became an autonomous, absolute sphere, living for itself.

The call for the dehumanization of art thus implied the process of denaturalization of art, and this, in turn, the absolutization of art. But for Ortega, it also signified the *debourgeoisification* of social life. This aspiration closely aligned with his idea of being "very 20th century" and "not at all 19th century." At the peak of his life, Ortega finally saw the triumph of the rupture with the world of his elders, a rupture he had demanded since 1914. Art seemed to be the best example of that liberal revolution he had advocated with unprecedented force in Hispanic thought. But what about the second objective, of paving the way for an authentic vital reason? This issue, which opened the door to his true philosophical horizon, was much more complex. As always, la *pars construens* was more intricate than the critique.

NEW ART AND LIFE: THE AMBIVALENCES OF THE PHENOMENON

Ortega believed in the organic nature of epochs, an "identical inspiration, a shared biological style" that pervaded an entire era. As if anticipating Foucault's aspiration for an ontology of the present, he asserted a "compact solidarity with itself that each historical epoch maintains in all its manifestations" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 354). Consequently, he felt compelled to link the phenomenology of new art with the philosophical key he was striving to offer for the entirety of the epoch. Integrating Weber's differentiation of spheres of social action, he understood that the organicity of an epoch required respect for the boundaries between these spheres (ibid.: Vol. 3, 371). However, unlike Weber, he envisioned an organic unity of the epoch. Conceiving this unity within an order of autonomous spheres required careful thought. Ortega had to place the systematic phenomenon of life at the architectural center of his time. Thus, the phenomenology of art gained greater significance. To achieve this, he had to relate his philosophical ideas about life to the new art and place it within the framework of ascending or descending life — the key to the "salvific split," the foundation of all differences. In this regard,

he had no doubt when asserting that "Any obstinacy in remaining within our habitual horizon signals weakness, a decline of vital energies" (Ortega y Gasset, 1997: Vol. 3, 367). The will to live, if carried out freely, was a will to "deform reality." Style, as he noted recalling his earlier observations on Mannerism, implied dehumanization. Everything seemed to align. New art enhanced vital energy. But there, surprisingly, tensions erupted.

How did dehumanized new art intensify life? This point was unclear. In the conclusion of *Art in the Present and Future*, Ortega had to acknowledge that the pleasure of classical art was the enjoyment of the vital, while new art was the enjoyment of the aesthetic (ibid.: Vol. 3, 428). From this perspective, the advantages of new art for life were not evident compared to the Kantian or Schillerian program. After all, disgust for reality — a central element of new art — was also disgust for "living forms or living beings" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 377). In classical art forms, "sources of torrential life" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 377) were evident. One only needed to recall the sense of vital plenitude that Kant recorded in the aesthetic experience, a plenitude that Schiller theorized as *Spieltrieb*. The vitalism of art seemed better assured under the classical program. So, did new art enhance vital intensity or not? Was it in harmony with the organic style of the epoch, or not?

Ortega emphasized that the work of new art was to be viewed by an observer freed from any sentimental structure. But was sentiment not rooted in the structure of life? New art was both the result and cause of this liberation, teaching a disgust for the human. The subjectivity that emerged from this training preserved only intelligence, ready to appreciate the objectivity of the work. Feelings obscured vision, eliminating the *pathos* of distance. Here, Ortega had in mind the music of Debussy, the poetry of Mallarmé or Valéry. These were far removed from the Dionysian, euphoric elements in art. He ventured into territory where he was uncertain. This emotionally cold art was valued positively, but cubism and Dadaism, which were no less intellectual, seemed like frustrated experiments. In any case, the Dionysian elements seemed to guarantee life's exuberance. Intelligence, as a mode of relating to the object of art, did not appear compatible with this exuberance. "Life is one thing, poetry another," Ortega had to admit when speaking of Mallarmé's dehumanized poetry, which he called "the higher algebra of metaphors" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 371–372). The intelligence needed to understand it required a certain aristocratic spirit. Ultimately, Ortega had to acknowledge that the freedom to engage in this artistic play — the irony, the *pathos* of distance, as a distinctive subjective form of new art — "nullifies all vital resonance" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 372). How could one advance the process

of dehumanization without moving toward a process of devitalization, of cooling life? And if new art dehumanized and devitalized, was it not heading toward trivialization? The invitation to dwell in art as in an imaginary reef may have been different from a "flight from the world," an "attempt to avoid reality," but was it not also avoiding the reality of life? The organicity of the epoch centered around life was, in any case, compromised. The questions became unstoppable. If the origin of every metaphor lay in a fear of reality, if metaphor was the trace of a taboo against touching it, was art still a trace of that fear, another way of keeping reality under the mandate of taboo? However, new art did not display respect for reality but rather a kind of sadism toward it. Disgust was certainly one of the emotions that produced taboo. But did it not also imply a certain disgust for life itself?

Ortega hesitated between these two lines of analysis: an art of objective intelligence and an art connected to life. However, only an art linked to life was organic with the epoch and, more importantly, aligned with the principle of his philosophy. He was thus compelled to expand his analysis in an attempt to provide an explanation. For instance, he demonstrated that these were two divergent aspects of the will to avoid touching reality. One led to infrarrealism, which dissected reality sadistically, even paying an "inhuman attention to feelings" (Ortega y Gasset, 1997: Vol. 3, 375). This was the path taken by the new novels of Italo Svevo, James Joyce and Marcel Proust. The other led to suprarrealism, which exalted art through the use of metaphor to abandon reality, as seen in poetry, painting, and music. In both cases, there was a clear demonstration of the artist's superiority over the real, which was, in any case, despised. Art asserted its own reality. But what nourished art if it sadistically despised reality, if it hated and precisely dissected it?

Ortega stated his answer clearly: ideas. They were what made art an inherently intellectual pleasure (after Pirandello). But what did ideas hold within themselves? Such questions linger beneath Ortega's text, hinting at the final, unspoken question: what did ideas have to do with life? By not clearly formulating said question, Ortega once again remained ambivalent. In the end, he realized that the intellectual understanding underlying new art was that it truly hated artistic tradition. Behind the hatred of living forms, was there perhaps a hatred of art itself? Ortega sensibly posed this question. And if the epoch was organic, was not this hatred of tradition, of history, of the institution of art a symptom of a broader disdain, a deeper weariness?

Following the course of his questions, Ortega believed he had reached a solid phenomenon, the bedrock of the historical situation. "Is there an

inconceivable resentment fermenting in the hearts of Europeans against their own historical essence...?" (Ortega y Gasset, 1997: Vol. 3, 381). The question was radical. It seems evident that Ortega, in pursuing the phenomenon of new art and attempting to align it with the organic sense of the epoch, discovered something significant for his own philosophical development. He realized that it was difficult to understand new art from the systematic phenomenon of life unless this phenomenon was grasped as intrinsically historical. It was challenging to relate the phenomena of new art to life, but something seemed to come to light when it was linked to historical life. The fact that Ortega sensed new ground is evident in the simple fact that he framed it as a question, and more importantly, that he left it unanswered.

CONCLUSION: DIALECTIC BETWEEN LIFE AND HISTORY

If what new art expressed was hatred, what kind of enthusiasm did Ortega, nevertheless, see within it? Is there enthusiasm in boredom, disdain or disgust? Ortega acknowledged that all of this was highly ambiguous. It was more than that — a contradiction of love and hate, an emotional chaos that could well be the result of fatigue. When the delirium of that fatigue became the material of art, there could only be one response: comic irony. Art thus became a joke, a farce. We are faced with Nietzsche's appreciation for *opera buffa*, for Verdi's *Falstaff*. Here, Ortega glimpsed a path for easing tensions, a way to recover a light spirit, to enjoy a moment of joviality. The parodic nature of art emerges here, as Nietzsche had prophesied. Art lives off art, but by mocking art. This was the only content still capable of enchanting the world, the last trace of its "magical gift," the final expression of freedom. The institutionalized was scorned for the sake of new paths to freedom. History was despised in order to open up history.

In the end, as always when he encountered contradictions and ambivalences, Ortega resolved them by invoking real dialectics. In this case, it was even a marvelous dialectic. The negation of new art was the path to affirmation. Seriousness arose from resentment toward what was already dead, although the positive outcome was the farce it produced. Resentment producing a farce has a name: sarcasm. This was the meaning of its lack of transcendence. What was denounced here was the sublimation that had led art to present itself as the new salvation of humanity — the piety of the Kantian cultural universe once again. Pressured to reconcile all of this with the affirmation of life central to the organicity of the epoch, Ortega identified this movement as embodying the maxim *ab integro ordo*. He recalled that,

by mockingly rejecting the historical evolution of the institution of art, one arrived at the immediacy of life. Negativity served this positivity.

However, something in this step does not work. Sarcasm is not puerility; it is the expression of an old soul, not a child's. Ortega overlooked this and used the argument to reconcile art with life. New art took us back to childhood, just as Picasso's masks took us back to prehistory. That was its greatness: it created childlike ingenuousness in an old world. Thus, he was able to connect with the "triumph of sports and games" (Ortega y Gasset, 1997: Vol. 3, 384). Through this, he could reconcile with the values of life and youth. Art, he announced, was leading Europe into a new childishness.

But what remained of the idea, of the new objectivity, of the new intellectual aristocracy? Was it enough to express hatred for history to claim this new status? What about the contents of the artistic work itself? Did it matter that some were mere essays, or even frauds? These were unavoidable questions, and Ortega had the intellectual tools to pose them and was not satisfied with superficial answers. In another work, when he spoke of childishness, he associated it with the belief "that man can do whatever he likes at any time" (ibid.: Vol. 3, 423). If this was the result of the dialectic between historical negativity and the positivity it generated, it seemed that new art had a rather simplistic foundation. Real historical dialectics had to have a different structure, once again pressing Ortega to resolve the problem of the centrality of life with the complement of historical reason. With this elementary dialectic, the phenomenology of new art was overly simplified, which perhaps explained its uncertain aspect. The vital dialectic seemed inclined toward the simple positivity of affirming immediate life. Provisionally, in his 1925 essay, faced once again with the need for epochal organicity based on the fundamental fact of life, Ortega leaned towards a more one-sided view. This non-transcendent art, purely affirming youth, the body, and sports with great modesty, was not the intellectual art he initially analyzed — the new objectivity, the spirit of distance, and the drive for ideality. This tension could only be resolved if new art was mediated by history in a way other than mere negativity.

Ortega could not feel comfortable with his final reflections or the state his philosophy had reached in 1925. His own assessment of the essay was notably cautious. He called the likelihood that his analysis was correct an "illustrious coincidence." This was highly ironic, but not out of a lack of seriousness or puerility, but rather due to a keen sense of intellectual responsibility. His unease, unknowingly, was already searching for the next step in his thinking. Art was like Isis, and it could be called a reality with ten thousand names.

Philosophy, at the very least, should recognize this and not be satisfied with just one. However, there is no doubt that Ortega challenged anyone who objected to his arguments to offer a new path for art. Ultimately, the most significant outcome of *The Dehumanization of Art* lies in its emphasis on the intellectualization of art and its dependence on the idea. This fundamental stance did not clearly establish the organicity of the epoch based solely on the phenomenon of life. New art had no clear relationship with life, nor did it appear to have a complex relationship with history. The interplay of affirmations and negations seemed too simplistic. A more complex mediation, a more realistic historical dialectic, called for a new way of relating life and history. For this reason, in my opinion, this 1925 book is a powerful contribution to the "full emergence of historical sense," (Ortega y Gasset, 1997: Vol. 3, 427) and, in this regard, a fundamental stage in Ortega's thought.

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Феноменология нового искусства у Ортеги

Получено: 05.09.2024. **Рецензировано:** 20.10.2024. **Принято:** 24.11.2024.

Аннотация: Работа Ортеги, подобно реальности Исиды, имеет десять тысяч лиц. Это многогранное произведение, которое благодаря своему творческому и дискурсивному характеру продвигается вперед без рефлексивных складок, свойственных систематической конструкции. Именно этот характер придает ему богатство слоев и внутреннюю проблематичность. Чтение может стремиться найти наилучший способ предложить вам ее целостность. Именно это я попытался сделать в своей книге об Ортеге. Но это никогда не будет единственным прочтением Ортеги. На самом деле ни одно прочтение не может исчерпать его богатство. Другой способ его чтения — это выявление внутренних напряжений, неудач и дисбалансов при попытке построить из его работы некую целостность. Такой взгляд неизбежно обнаруживает глубокие эволюционные мотивы, смысл которых заключался в устранении наиболее очевидных разрывов. Именно такое другое прочтение я хочу предложить в этом исследовании.

Ключевые слова: Ортега-и-Гассет, искусство, феноменология.

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