

## Reconsidering Ingarden's Contribution to European Aesthetics: Aesthetic Experience and the Concept of Encounter

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**Abstract:** Entering the discussion about European Aesthetic traditions, their aspirations and achievements, their metamorphosis and developments, author argues in favor of acknowledging the importance of what in her opinion should be seen as milestone in Polish tradition of aesthetics. One such important element of European Aesthetic tradition that author wishes to acknowledge is the phenomenological aesthetics developed by Roman Ingarden (1893-1970) in the 30-ties and especially two concepts which best show lasting power of Ingarden's contributions. Author describes the concept of aesthetic experience used by Ingarden in his lectures on aesthetics (Ingarden, 1958-70) and its persuasive application to the field of music and literature. She suggests that its meaning deserves to be further explained and appreciated. It is argued that contemporary cognitive theories of aesthetic experience come very close to what Ingarden discovered and outlined in this writings without ever acknowledging preceding examples of complex approaches to aesthetics experience. Author suggests that one more concept from Ingarden's aesthetics should be appreciated. It is the concept of aesthetic encounter between author, performer and the listener/recipient (spotkanie) that Ingarden tried to introduce as the important category for aesthetic research. These concepts were meant to be discussed and researched across different areas. Underlying the differences and developments within European aesthetics in the last century author stresses the achievements and aspirations of axiologically orientated aesthetic theory of Ingarden and purports to affirm its lasting contribution to the European tradition.

**Keywords:** Roman Ingarden, aesthetic experience, aesthetic meeting, Polish school of aesthetics, phenomenological aesthetics.

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Contemporary European aesthetic traditions seem based on two concepts from philosophy: the concept of aesthetic judgment (developed from the concept of taste) and the concept of the aesthetic experience. This last concept seems to me to be the cornerstone of these traditions. However, there have been times when the tradition of seeing aesthetics as based on aesthetic experience has been questioned or even denied. In the nineties Richard Shusterman (Shusterman, 1991) wrote a paper entitled *The End of Aesthetic Experience* and in it he rewrote the twentieth century history of the concept pointing to its recent demise. Surely it wasn't difficult to see that neither the institutional theory of art put forward by George Dickie nor Arthur C. Danto's way of seeing art and aesthetics and its mutual relationship left much space for aesthetic experience. Yet, in a general view of aesthetics this seems quite surprising taking into account that the theory of aesthetic experience seems to be one of the most developed within the twenty century aesthetics. In European circles as much as in American ones the aesthetic experience has received a lot of attention, leading to more and more detailed and advanced descriptions.

One of the accounts of aesthetic experience developed within twentieth century European philosophy, that is at the same time highly detailed and well integrated into the larger aesthetic theory is Roman Ingarden's account of aesthetic experience. It was a part of Ingarden's phenomenological aesthetics, which in itself was meant to be a part of international aesthetic formation and as such could easily be seen as one of the coordinates of the European Aesthetics. Ingarden spoke about his understanding of the field of aesthetics and its prospects during Aesthetic and Philosophical Congresses in Vienna and Paris. In both cases presenting his philosophical approach to aesthetics and hoping to persuade his international colleagues to a philosophically framed vision for aesthetics. In what follows I would like to review Ingarden's theory of aesthetic experience and ask about its current value and place within European aesthetic traditions drawing

attention to the concept of encounter, which was introduced by Ingarden in his lectures and presented as the main concept to frame aesthetic experience in.

### Roman Ingarden's Phenomenological Aesthetics

Roman Ingarden (1893-1970) is one of the most important figures in the Polish School of Aesthetics, perhaps the most important figure considering the novelty of his approach to aesthetics. Ingarden studied under Husserl and was influenced by his phenomenological philosophy. Their approaches were close but different mostly due to Ingarden's ontological and analytical focus. Tatarkiewicz mentions in his writings that Ingarden became interested in aesthetics while attempting to resolve the problem of ontological status of things within phenomenology: "*excellent training for the working out of more general philosophical problems*" (Tatarkiewicz, 1971, pp. 461). But Ingarden was not just practicing for more important philosophical tasks. He was genuinely interested in art, most profoundly in music and literature. His approach to aesthetics was that each and every domain of art needs individual research to find out its specificity and that only after such analysis is done, one may attempt a general theory of aesthetics, possibly a sectioned one.

*„When in 1927 I began writing my first book on this subject it was quite clear to me that one cannot employ the method of empirical generalization in aesthetics, but that one must carry through an eidetic analysis of the idea of a literary work of art or a work of art in general“* (Ingarden, 1975, pp. 259).

Ingarden was attempting a phenomenological aesthetic or, as it was to be known, aesthetical phenomenology.

*„works of art, aesthetic objects, as well as their creators and consumers, and the connections between the two, may and ought to be investigated phenomenologically. This method aims above all at bringing its objects of enquiry to an immediate givenness in a suitably shaped experience and to a faithful description of the data of that experience“* (Ingarden, 1975, pp. 269).

It was also clear to him that the domain of art is bordering other philosophical domains so closely that it would be virtually impossible to talk about works of art without talking about perception and ontology for example. It was the aesthetic theory and the realm of various art objects in particular that prompted Ingarden to stretch the ontological domain to feature intentional objects he saw in the domain of art. Out of this concern came Ingarden's pluralistic ontology as well as his unique understanding of the work of art as an intentional object, a schematic but complex and flexible entity containing different strata (Polish *warstwy*) and spreading over time. Perhaps the most noticed aspect of Ingarden's aesthetic theory are those strata within the work of art, but I would like to point to the account of aesthetic experience instead as the most important element of his aesthetic theory – his contribution to European tradition that shouldn't be forgotten<sup>1</sup>.

First let me briefly present the most important elements of Ingarden's aesthetic theory. Ingarden's understanding of art was based on an assumption that what makes art is the artist's composition. The work of art is not the material thing, the stone block or a canvas with paint on it. The work of art is a conception, a schematic yet rich in details blueprint based on author's ideas that is usually realized somehow, materialized on the canvas or in musical performance. The work of art is different from its realization as it is made out of qualities and formal relations while the material object (that viewers

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<sup>1</sup> In the translator's introduction to Mikel Dufrenne's *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* Edward S. Casey talks about Ingarden as the one „[...] *who showed phenomenological aesthetics to be a viable and valuable enterprise*“ (Dufrenne, 1973: XIX).

sometimes take for a work of art) is made of some material with physical features. Observers may see the material object such as a bronze sculpture but the work of art that they refer to is not the sculpture they see but the schematic intentional project behind it, which in its realization has just been given one way of appearing.

It may be said that Ingarden conceived of the work of art as:

- being schematic and in need of completion – a blueprint for an actualization in some material or physical process;
- having different strata – Ingarden spoke about 4 strata for a literary work, although musical work had just one strata;
- realized in material (thus having a material bases) or physical process/events – in other words having its realizations that would be possible to perceive sensibly;
- perceived (as art) through aesthetic experience with the help of the aesthetic object, which was, in Ingarden's view, the only way, through which the work of art itself may finally be presented to the perceiver;
- through aesthetic experience the aesthetic values may be constituted and appear to the perceiver thus fulfilling the artwork's ultimate aim.

Ingarden's theory of aesthetics focuses on the work as the central element and yet the work is described as something that is hardly available. It is the center of every and any performance, of every attempt at artistry and so on. Whoever wants to realize a work of art should be faithful to it, Ingarden believes. Any realization must be first and foremost an attempt in realizing this work of art as fully and faithfully as possible.

On the other hand, just as it is obvious that the work of art's existence is dependent on the creator's conscious acts and the material in which it is realized, a bronze for a sculpture, a canvas with paint on it for a painting – different objects or different physical processes, in Ingarden's view the work of art is aesthetically autonomous. Its aesthetic qualities and values are fully present or in the case of values they are based only and entirely upon the work of art. And thus far it is safe to say, that the main focus of Ingarden's theory beside the work of art has been placed on the aesthetic values.

Ingarden saw the work of art as an intentional object, something developed and created by the author in time, but since the moment of its creation existing independently and often moving into the social and material spheres and thus gaining recognition and further independence. A work of art as such is not just one thing rather, it is a blueprint with all of its possible realizations and implications, it is a set of properties and qualities for multiple possible manifestations. After being conceived in time it becomes its own array of possibilities. It is not an ideal as well, for it would imply one best realization, yet such a thing isn't possible for each and every social act concerning this work of art (at least) changes the horizons of its possible realizations. Similarly, the work of art in Ingarden's theory is always more than the sum of its realization, the work is constituted upon all the possibilities for its realizations but not one of them should be seen as perfect or ideal precisely because it disregards all the others. In this sense the work presupposes many different paths for its development, oftentimes crossing over or even contradictory to one another.

From the point of view of the viewers and listeners the work is almost always inaccessible; one sees the ideal realization as the furthest horizon. Nevertheless, one always hopes to know the work and to see its realization, such that would faithful and fulfilling. Finally, let it be stressed that the work of art as such may only be known in a form of an aesthetic object (the face of the work) through the aesthetic experience, which will further allow for realization of the aesthetic values. Without aesthetic

experience, the work of art as conceived by Ingarden would hardly be understandable and would definitely be inaccessible. The aesthetic experience provides the way to perceive and understand the work of art.

### **Aesthetics Experience in Ingarden's Phenomenological Aesthetics**

Ingarden's attempts to describe aesthetic experience span from individual (personal) experience to more general descriptions including many possible modifications. It is an exceptionally detailed and carefully thought out theory of aesthetic experience encompassing criteria for its realization, different phases of its course, and its various effects upon perceiving subject.

„An aesthetic experience is not [...] a momentary experience [...] but a composite process having various phases and a characteristic development which contains many heterogeneous elements“ (Ingarden, 1961, pp. 295).

The experience itself as a process will happen provided the primary conditions are fulfilled. In particular, the experience will not happen if a subject is in pain, or experiences fear or is having too many problems that consume his consciousness, if there is no focus, no clear vision. Some of these conditions are very general and some are more specific but Ingarden maintains that aesthetic experience requires some special conditions as it is not random and neither does it happen without any preparation. Such naive vision of aesthetic experience as purely spontaneous would be misleading. If aesthetic experience happens spontaneously for some people that means that these people are especially prepared for it; that perhaps their readiness for art and their focus on artistic qualities is much greater than it usually is with most of the people.

Aesthetic experience in Ingarden's theory could be characterized in a following way:

- Aesthetic experience is based equally on emotional and intellectual elements;
- Aesthetic experience is focused on qualities and qualitative approach;
- All phases of aesthetic experience are dynamically contrasted;
- The final phase of aesthetic experience is also the realization of aesthetic value(s);
- The final phase usually provides an emotional response to the realized value(s), which is equivalent to liking or dislikes the work;
- The final phase may or may not end in formulating an aesthetic judgment upon the work.

Ingarden described the aesthetic experience as a process or a set of processes that either develop one out of the other or collide and push each other further. He stressed the dynamic differences between different phases of experience; the slow and relaxing following the more active and energetic based on constructive and developing activities only to be replaced with another more calm and more reflective. The phases of the experience have been conceived as contrasted in character, tempo and intellectual or emotional impact.

„the whole process of aesthetic experience includes on the one hand, active phases, on the other hand, again, the feeling phases of a passive experiencing, the moments of turning motionless and contemplative“ (Ingarden, 1961, pp. 300).

In particular Ingarden sees the experience as consisting of several independent phases:

- 1) The beginning phase – a peculiar quality or multiplicity of qualities struck a perceiver and causes him to feel a so called preliminary emotion (*emocja wstępna*), which changes her/his total approach causing the desire to possess the quality, to be saturated with it and so forth.
- 2) Second phase – is where the preliminary emotion begins a new phase of experience, in which (a) the normal course of life and experience is halted; the perception is much more focused – concentrated on the other qualities of what is perceived or imagined, (b) weakened are all echoes of former moments, which usually appear every step of the way (Ingarden, 1966, pp.13); (c) [finally] all of the approach of the subject changes from natural and becomes specifically aesthetic (Ingarden, 1961, pp. 299).
- 3) Next phase(s) – is based on actively focusing on watching the quality and qualities that engage the listener/viewer, which usually requires complementing and then the experience may run through many additional phases, dynamically varied, complex in themselves, consisting in building, completing, imagining, analyzing and interpreting, wavelike changing from active to passive, from constructive to reflective.
- 4) Final phase – is the relaxing phase, in which takes place an acknowledgment of an aesthetic object which has the character of feeling the harmony of qualities. This phase leads to constituting of an aesthetic value or values of the work and emotional response to those. This is an emotional recognition phase, which may also lead to formulating of an aesthetic judgment and thus passing a judgment on the work.

It is important, however, that the experience thus explained, only rarely is realized completely, fully and to the extent that the aesthetic values – Ingarden devoted so much time to – are realized at the end of it. In many cases, the experience is shortened, severed or falls apart completely due to lack of attention or focus or both. Ingarden knew that in order for the experience to be possible and to be completed, one needed to be constantly drawn to the qualities of the work as perceived in its realization.

Ingarden used the Polish word *przeżycie* for the aesthetic experience as a process encompassing different mental acts and states, up until the final phase of the experience. The final phase of aesthetic experience is also its most important part. It is there where the fate – as it were – of the experience and hence of knowing the work of art – is decided upon. If the experience will result in constituting the aesthetic object fully and harmoniously the aesthetic value will be constituted. And if this is happening meaning that experience has been developing successfully allowing for appearance of aesthetic value Ingarden calls it *doświadczenie*. This double naming is certainly very confusing, mainly because later on Ingarden doesn't seem to be careful about applying it. It shows, nevertheless, how important it is to understand the difference between the process happening gradually and requiring many little acts and activities and the fulfillment of this process in the final act of “seeing” the work in its most faithful realization – by successfully bringing to life an aesthetic object – and being in contact with the aesthetic values in the final phase of the experience. The aim of the aesthetics experience of a work of art has been thus confirmed by Ingarden as the importance of realizing aesthetic values and getting to know the work of art.

Let me briefly expand on the topic of the culmination of the aesthetic experience and the constitution of the aesthetic values. In Ingarden's view there is a certain hierarchy in the aesthetic field. For every work of art there are neutral moments and qualities and there are artistically and aesthetically valuable qualities. Upon a certain set of the artistic and aesthetically valuable qualities two kinds of values may be constituted: artistic and aesthetic. These values, as Ingarden believes, are very different from each other.

Ingarden (1964, pp. 205) explains:

*„Artistic value [...] is something which arises in a work of art itself and has its existential ground in that. Aesthetic value is something which manifest itself only in the aesthetic object and as a particular moment which determines the character of the whole. The ground of aesthetic value consists of a certain aggregation of aesthetically valuable qualities, and they in turn rest upon a basis of a certain aggregate of properties which render possible their emergence in an object“.*

The artistic values are present within the work of art and are based in its realization, aesthetic values, however, are only present in an aesthetic object and thus upon the aesthetic experience of the work.

The most interesting moment of aesthetic experience for Ingarden is when, in finalizing of the experience, the work is finally seen in its totality – in this particular time and space and for this particular observer – and the aesthetic value of the work is being constituted and presented to the perceiver, which in course leads him to an emotional response. The response may be positive or negative – liking or disliking the work is it is presented. Based on this response perceiving subject may formulate the aesthetic judgment on the work.

*„Later on, having experiences the whole aesthetic process and having detached ourselves from the aesthetic object that is present to us in an evident way, we may pronounce judgments on value, comparative evaluations at cet“ (Ingarden, 1954, pp. 309).*

This moment's importance lies in the qualitative characterization of this phase of experience. The most important in the aesthetic experience are the qualities, upon recognition of which the recognition of the work itself is based.

### **The Concept of Encounter and its Current Validity**

The concept of encounter was first officially introduced by Ingarden during Third International Congress of Aesthetics in Venice in 1956 (Ingarden 1975, pp. 260), and later on during second meeting of Aesthetic Section on the XIV International Congress in Philosophy in Vienna in September 1968 (Ingarden, 1970, pp. 9).

*„I therefore proposed that we should take as a starting point of our enquiry into the definition of aesthetics the fundamental fact of the encounter or communion between the artist or the observer and a certain object, in particular, a work of art: a quite specific encounter, which leads in certain cases to the emergence of, on the one hand, the work of art of the aesthetic object, and on the other, to the birth of the creative artist or of the aesthetically experiencing observer or critic“ (Ingarden, 1975, pp. 260).<sup>2</sup>*

The first mentioning of the concept of encounter was unsuccessful, as in Ingarden's own words, it was ignored *with a certain amount of contempt* (Ibidem). He was, nonetheless, certain that studies in aesthetics must restrain from seeing the creative processes as active on one hand and the receptive processes as passive on the other hand. Contrary to such a simple view, the aesthetic domain is filled with various processes, both active and passive, intertwining and complementing each other, creating a communion of sorts (Ingarden, 1975, pp. 262).

Ingarden comes back to the concept of encounter many times, suggesting that describing aesthetics one should point to an encounter between experiencing subject and an object, *„a meeting that is a source of*

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<sup>2</sup> Underlining is mine – MS.

*developing aesthetic experience, a correlative constituting of the aesthetic object*“ (1970, pp. 10). An analysis of such meeting would, in his words, not only allow for pointing to all relevant elements of the aesthetic plane, but would moreover make it work harmoniously and without the division of “subjective” and “objective” aesthetics. This meeting was in Ingarden’s view a primary fact of aesthetics and should be taken as such. It is a meeting between an observer and an object of some kind. More specifically, on one hand we have a work of art and an aesthetic object appearing later on as its representative, and on the other an artist, and finally, although it is perhaps the most important ingredient, a contemplating observer or a critic. They are in contact with each other, not necessarily in agreement and the entanglement of the processes that spun from such meeting create more, a communion.

Ingarden felt discouraged in his attempts, but never abandoned his vision for aesthetics. He views his theory as a middle way in aesthetics, object-subjective studies in aesthetics. The concept of encounter has appeared in many of his writings. In the first lecture from 1960 (30 March) in the first in a series delivered during his teaching at the Philosophic Section of Jagiellonian University<sup>3</sup> and later published as *Wykłady i dyskusje z estetyki* (Ingarden, 1981) he says:

*„Encounter between object and subject leads to transforming of that, which emotes, and to transforming this, which has been met, transforming, because this, which moves people, is modified [...]“* (Ingarden, 1981, pp. 19).

Again, it was this transformative aspects of the meeting that mattered the most. Seeing art from the subjective or objective positions, was faulty, as it never recognized these mutual influences. In words of Władysław Stróżewski<sup>4</sup>, Ingarden’s pupil, his attempts were directed towards balancing out the subjective and the objective in aesthetics (Ingarden, 1981, pp.7). The concept of encounter offered a transgression of the division found in aesthetics; it offered to join together different sides of it. The encounter allowed for acknowledging of the presence of all the agents and all the forces at play. Ingarden demanded that we acknowledged not only the independence of the work of art (or aesthetic object) from the perceiving object but that what happens during aesthetic experience and thus what aesthetics as such is based on is this special kind of meeting, coming together of an observer and a work of art, changing and influencing one another. This communion, as Ingarden calls it, is based on being together in time and being intentionally directed towards one another. It presupposes that the aesthetic object is somehow truly independent from perceiving subject but that in aesthetics this relative autonomy is overcome by a need to get to know the work of art, to perceive all the qualities and to experience them. I am sure that such an understanding of the communion between artwork and recipient as the bases of the field of aesthetics may be as valuable today as it was in the beginning of the twentieth century. This postulate seemed to capture the need to understand the bond between the artistic, the public and the work itself.

*„[...] the basic postulate of an aesthetic which has realized that fundamental fact [...], is the encounter between man and an external object different from him and for the time being independent of him“* (Ingarden, 1974, pp. 263).

<sup>3</sup> See Władysław Stróżewski wstęp do *Wykładów i dyskusji z estetyki* (Ingarden, 1981, p. 6).

<sup>4</sup> Władysław Stróżewski (b. 1933).

## Concluding Remarks

It is not easy to assert the coordinates of contemporary European aesthetics. Nevertheless I strongly believe that aesthetic experience is the most established directive in contemporary aesthetic, in European philosophy as much as in American philosophy. The account of experience presented by Roman Ingarden fulfills this directive in the most thorough and satisfying way. Out of many interesting theories, in which aesthetic experience has been presented, Ingarden's detailed description seems to me a very persuasive and promising one. Ingarden presents the experience as an intricate and multiplex process, during which the work of art becomes present and its qualities known to the recipient. The time spent trying to understand the work of art is the time needed to fall in love with it, to get to know it. During experience, which as Ingarden sees it is a meeting, and more that it is a communion, subject realizes the qualities present within the work of art and later on witnesses the values built upon them. All of this is possible in time and thanks to care and understanding brought by the subject.

Recipients of art sometimes forget that the aesthetic perception of the work of art is not instantaneous. It takes time and effort to grasp the form, the medium and the content of the work. And even when, as with some experts in the field or artists themselves, it happens very fast, it is a process and as such it contains different phases and different thresholds. Moreover the process of aesthetic experience is dynamically varied. It is different depending on the viewer and her or his current mental and physical state. Most importantly Ingarden stresses both the development of the aesthetic experience and its finalization, during which the aesthetic value may be realized and responded to.

As I have tried to present in this paper, Ingarden's understanding of aesthetic experience is not only in accordance with individual experiences, but it is also a most important part of his general account of art. In his presentation of phenomenological aesthetics, Ingarden stressed, that aesthetics must take into account first and foremost the encounter between the object (the work of art) and the recipient. Aesthetic theories should represent all the parties involved: the creative-artistic side of the author, the objective-qualitative side of the work of art and the perceptive-aesthetic side of the recipient. Only then will the aesthetic processes be represented and the work of art seen in its proper dynamics. One may say that the concept of encounter has not been developed further. Another concept, an aesthetic situation, was used instead<sup>5</sup>. The concept of aesthetic encounter seems not so present anymore. Nevertheless, in all of his teaching Ingarden has brought aesthetic experience and the concept of encounter to the forefront of aesthetical phenomenology. It is certain to me that the account of aesthetic experience is the most developed and most precious part of his theory, deeply rooted in phenomenology and yet focused on the work of art and the relationship between the subject and object. If, as Ingarden was afraid, the opportune moment for introducing the concept of encounter to the international society for aesthetics has been lost in 1956, still the aesthetic experience as a focus of aesthetic theory has only developed since then and it is now safe to say that the twenty century European aesthetics has been built around aesthetic experience, of which one of the most developed accounts was presented in the writings of Roman Ingarden.

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<sup>5</sup> It was developed further by Maria Golaszewska, Ingarden's pupil.

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