

## SATURATED PHENOMENA: FROM PICTURE TO REVELATION IN JEAN-LUC MARION'S PHENOMENOLOGY

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TIN, M. B.: Saturated Phenomena: From Picture to Revelation in Jean-Luc Marion's Phenomenology  
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A *phenomenon* is that which appears. In his phenomenology, Jean-Luc Marion shows how a phenomenon that appears in and out of itself evades the metaphysical demand of grounding. Classical philosophy has acknowledged phenomena only in so far as they can be sanctioned by the concepts of the intellect. This holds good also of Husserl's constitutive ego. Now, Marion distinguishes between such intuitively "poor phenomena" and the "saturated phenomena" that exceed the intentional consciousness; they are given not *by* the consciousness but *to* the consciousness in an excess of intuition. This "gift of appearance" is Marion's main concern, in the visible in general, and in painting in particular. But whereas *idols* only reflect our own desire to see and to be seen, *icons* surprise us by the gaze the saint directs on us. A picture is the scene of a possible *revelation*; and the revelation is nothing but the phenomenon taken in its fullest meaning: intuitive saturation at its maximum.

A crucial question, nonetheless, remains: What is the relation between revelation as a phenomenological possibility, and Revelation as a theological dogma of the utmost importance?

**Keywords:** Jean-Luc Marion – Phenomenology – Aesthetics – Givenness – Revelation

"In a situation of nihilism, more than in any other, painting becomes for us one of the rare yet powerful refutations of the mastery. [...] the picture educates the gaze by leading it to its ultimate possibilities only insofar as, beyond any opposite object, it offers to it what phenomenology considers the phenomenon *par excellence* – that which shows itself from itself. [...] Thus, showing itself in and from itself alone, it shows us first of all what it means – to show oneself, to appear in full authority, in full glory, as the first morning of a world."<sup>1</sup>

With this succinct presentation, Jean-Luc Marion summarises a few traits of his aesthetics and, more importantly, the place he assigns to it in his philosophy. His philosophy namely concerns precisely the kind of phenomenon that, *appearing in full authority, leads the eye beyond any opposite object*. The mastery of objects, the objectivity, is one of the characteristics that Marion gives of the nihilism of our times; and we see that if painting is capable of refuting this mastery it is because, beyond the objects that we know, it shows

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *La croisée du visible*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1996 (1991), 77. Quotations from this book translated by Mikkel B. Tin.

us what we do not know since it appears for the first time. Painting's capacity of showing, however, is only a special case of a more general property which characterises the phenomenon as such: the "gift of appearance."<sup>2</sup> Painting interests Marion first of all because it opens the way to what he later calls the "saturated phenomena."

In his definition of the phenomenon, he cites, as we hear, the famous section 7 of *Being and Time* according to which the phenomenon is that which *shows itself from itself*, "das *Sich-an-ihm-selbst-zeigende*."<sup>3</sup> Here, Heidegger marks a philosophical distance to Husserl who had defined the phenomenon, not as that which shows itself in and from itself, but as the aim of an intentional act of the consciousness. Heidegger has taken a considerable step beyond the constitutive ego. But Marion wants to go still much further: A phenomenon which appears "in full authority, in full glory, as the first morning of a world" may still be a phenomenon, but it is the kind of "phenomenon that gives (itself) according to a maximum of phenomenality,"<sup>4</sup> "a phenomenon taking saturation to its maximum."<sup>5</sup> This kind of phenomenon is one "in which givenness not only entirely invests manifestation but, surpassing it, modifies its common characteristics."<sup>6</sup> It differs so radically from the "poor phenomena"<sup>7</sup> and "common-law phenomena"<sup>8</sup> of classical phenomenology that it calls for a new phenomenology. In fact, in its extreme form, as we shall see, a "saturated phenomenon" is a *revelation*. At one point at least, Marion thought that a revelation can be accommodated only in a *phenomenology of religion*.<sup>9</sup>

The suggestion of a phenomenology of religion in the early 1990s was taken as a provocation by many French philosophers in general and the phenomenologists in particular. In order to untangle the alleged confusion, Marion later carefully stresses the distinction he makes between *revelation* and *Revelation*: "The fact (if there is one) of Revelation, exceeds the scope of all science, including that of phenomenology. Only a theology, and on condition of constructing itself on the basis of this fact alone [...] could reach it."<sup>10</sup> Revelation with a capital R, as a Christian dogma, pertains to theology, revelation with lower case r, as an ultimate, yet possible phenomenon, should be a concern of phenomenology. So, when in certain sections of his work from 1997, Marion writes about the

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<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., 8.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen, 1986 (1927), 28. (*Being and time*. English transl. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2000 (1962), 58.)

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Being given. Toward a phenomenology of givenness*. English translation by Jeffrey L. Kosky, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, 234. (*Etant donné*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 2005 (1997), 326.)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit., 225. (*Etant donné*, 314.)

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit., 222. (*Etant donné*, 310.)

<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., 222. (*Etant donné*, 311.)

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The visible and the revealed*. English translation by Christina M. Gschwandtner et al., Fordham University Press, New York 2008, 48. (*Le visible et le révélé*, Les Édition du Cerf, Paris 2010 (2005), 74.)

<sup>10</sup> *Being given*, 367n. (*Etant donné*, 329n.)

Revelation of Christ, he claims not to be broaching revelation in its theological pretension to the truth, “something faith alone can dare to do. I am outlining it as a possibility – in fact the ultimate possibility, the paradox of paradoxes – of phenomenality, such that it is carried out in a possible saturated phenomenon.”<sup>11</sup>

Still, the work he published in 1989, *Réduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie*<sup>12</sup> and also *La croisée du visible* from 1991, as well as Marion’s interventions during a series of seminars on “Phenomenology and hermeneutics of religion” that took place from 1990 to 1992 and were published in 1992 in an anthology titled *Phénoménologie et théologie*,<sup>13</sup> were indeed important contributions to what Dominique Janicaud immediately labelled “the theological turn of French phenomenology.”<sup>14</sup> This label may have been just or unjust; from Marion’s definition of the revelation it is clear at least that he does not wish to turn to metaphysics; and by assigning to revelation a circumscribed place in his phenomenological system, he does try to avoid lurking irrationality and mysticism.

Now, not all Marion’s saturated phenomena are as controversial as the revelation: In his early work we find primarily the *idol* and the *icon* (at a certain stage including also the face of the other) and, later, the *event* and the *flesh*. The revelation, with a maximum of saturation, eventually resumes and radicalises the characteristics of these four phenomena; no longer as “what shows itself in the measure to which it is given,” but as “what gives itself in the measure to which it reveals itself.”<sup>15</sup>

In this article, I will follow his way from the visible in general, over the picture first and then the saturated phenomena, and finally to the revelation. The main question concerns the articulation Marion makes between these various kinds of appearances, and the arguments he gives to accommodate them all within one and the same phenomenology. I will borrow some of these arguments from *Réduction et donation* from 1989,<sup>16</sup> but more extensively from a few particularly clear-sighted articles from the early 1990s published

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<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., 5. (*Etant donné*, 10.)

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Réduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1989. (*Reduction and givenness. Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and phenomenology*. English translation by Thomas A. Carlson, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., 1998.)

<sup>13</sup> Jean-François Courtine (ed.), *Phénoménologie et théologie*, Criterion, Paris 1992. Jean-Luc Marion’s contribution was titled “Le phénomène saturé” and was later included in *Le visible et le révélé* and even, with amendments, in *Etant donné*. Other contributors to the anthology were Michel Henry, Paul Ricœur, Jean-Louis Chrétien. The seminars were organised by the Centre de recherches phénoménologiques et herméneutiques – Archives Husserl de Paris.

<sup>14</sup> Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*, Combas 1991. (*Phenomenology and the “theological turn”: the French debate*, Fordham University Press, New York 2000.)

<sup>15</sup> *Being given*, 246. (*Etant donné*, 342.)

<sup>16</sup> *Réduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1989. (*Reduction and givenness. Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and phenomenology*. English translation by Thomas A. Carlson, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., 1998.)

in 2005 under the title *Le visible et le révélé*.<sup>17</sup> My main source regarding art is *La croisée du visible*<sup>18</sup> from 1991. Also an anthology of articles, this book, however, certainly is not a philosophical treatise and does not count among the most noticeable of Marion's works; still it is an attempt to situate art within its philosophical context, quite an accessible attempt and revealing in several respects. Finally, in order to provide my presentation with a more solid philosophical framework, and to get to the revelation, I will refer to *Etant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*,<sup>19</sup> a comprehensive monograph dated 1997.

All these works have been translated into English, and to the extent that the English translations have been available I quote from those. Otherwise I have had to translate myself.

### **The metaphysics**

The starting point of Marion's aesthetical reflexions seems to be the criticism of the metaphysics that he formulates in his early major work, *Réduction et donation*. In fact we know that Plato, the first metaphysician as Marion calls him, ascribes to the image a lesser being compared to the original object whose image it is; and that the object in its turn depends on the immaterial *eidōs* of which it is but a material example. Plato's negative evaluation of a certain kind of plastic arts, to speak about these ones only, is due to the fact that instead of directing the attention from the sensible object to its intelligible idea, the imitative arts prompt it to descend from the objects to the images that reproduce them. Thus deprived of all reality, the image has no other being than that of the distant idea it reproduces and from which it has withdrawn doubly.

The metaphysical thought states that in order to be, all things must be grounded, and from Plato onwards, philosophy has strived to ground the world of phenomena. Subsequently, philosophy has reformulated this grounding as the sufficient reason, as another way to fulfil the metaphysical claim. Still in Kant, every object is conditioned, first by the intuition in which it is given, second by the concept according to which the object is thought in accordance with this intuition.

What Marion reproaches metaphysics with, is that it acknowledges no power of appearing to what appears, no more than any phenomenality to the phenomenon. Husserl seeks to escape this aporia, says Marion, by opposing to the principle of the sufficient reason the "principle of all principles" of his phenomenology, thus surpassing conditional phenomenality through a phenomenality without condition. This is possible inasmuch as, according to the "principle of all principles," "every originally giving intuition is a sour-

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<sup>17</sup> *Le visible et le révélé*, Les Édition du Cerf, Paris 2005. (*The visible and the revealed*. English translation by Christina M. Gschwandtner et al., Fordham University Press, New York 2008.)

<sup>18</sup> *La croisée du visible*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1991. (*The crossing of the visible (Cultural memory in the present)*. English translation by James K.A. Smith, Stanford University Press, 2004.)

<sup>19</sup> *Etant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1997. (*Being given. Toward a phenomenology of givenness*. English translation by Jeffrey L. Kosky, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002).

ce of right for cognition, that everything that offers itself to us originally in ‘intuition’ is to be taken quite simply as it gives itself out to be, but also only within the limits in which it is given there.”<sup>20</sup> In fact, according to Marion, *givenness* alone indicates that the phenomenon ensures in a single gesture both its visibility and the full right of that visibility, both its appearance and the reason for that appearance.<sup>21</sup> Husserl’s first properly phenomenological achievement is to acknowledge appearance as “given to the consciousness” instead of being “given by the consciousness.” This has far-reaching consequences, says Marion, in that “The givenness precedes the intuition and the intention, since these have no meaning if not for and by an apparition.”<sup>22</sup>

This does not prevent Husserl, in his reductive movement, to lead the transcendent phenomenon back to an immanent experience of the constitutive ego, and at the same time to limit it to a finite presence. “The consciousness thus determines the phenomenality by reducing every phenomenon to the certainty of an effective presence, instead of the phenomenality imposing on the consciousness to let itself be determined by the conditions and the modes of the givenness – always multiple and confusing.”<sup>23</sup> Marion criticises this limitation of the phenomenon to the donation in flesh and person, this “reduced phenomenality.” Following Jacques Derrida, he denounces, at the base of the Husserlian phenomenology, a metaphysics of the presence. He does not accept as a necessary condition of the phenomenon its permanent presence before the gaze of the consciousness.

It is in the Heideggerian definition of the phenomenon, according to which the phenomenon possesses an inherent power to phenomenally itself, that Marion finds a way out of the metaphysical aporia: “The phenomenon gives itself out of its own visibility, and cannot be reduced to the presence before a consciousness. The possible deviances of the phenomenality attest, in fact, that we do have to do with an initiative of the phenomenon itself to enter the visibility [...] the visibility does not represent itself, it presents itself.”<sup>24</sup> This initiative ascribed to the phenomenon is a first step on the way which leads from the metaphysical objectivity towards the gift of the appearance, from the phenomenon as object, or being, to the phenomenon as given:<sup>25</sup> “Whereas for Husserl phenomenology outdates ontology because, in the place of the latter and better than it, it deals with the beings, for Heidegger, phenomenology revives the title of ontology because it proceeds from the beings all the way to Being.”<sup>26</sup> If Husserl, in a “first phenomenological reduction,”

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<sup>20</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Erstes Buch, 1. Halbband, 51. Quoted by Marion in *The visible and the revealed*, 21. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 39.)

<sup>21</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 22. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 40.)

<sup>22</sup> *Réduction et donation. Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1989, 53. English translation unavailable. Quotations from this book translated by Mikkel B. Tin.

<sup>23</sup> *Réduction et donation*, 81-82.

<sup>24</sup> *Réduction et donation*, 91.

<sup>25</sup> *Being given*, 3. (*Etant donné*, 8.)

<sup>26</sup> *Réduction et donation*, 74.

reduced the phenomenon to its objectivity, and if Heidegger, in a “second reduction,” reconducted the phenomenon to Being, Marion, in what he calls a “third reduction” sets out to reduce the phenomenon to its givenness: “so much reduction, so much givenness.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The visible**

If the visible plays a part on the way from the metaphysical objectivity towards the gift of the appearance, it is not, paradoxically, due to its positive evidence. The visible is not so much a visual presence as it is its own phenomenality, its appearance. In his book *The crossing of the visible*, Marion has called his first chapter “Crossing of the visible and the invisible,” and he repeatedly states what he calls “The principle that the visible increases in direct proportion to the invisible it contains.”<sup>28</sup> The intervention of the invisible in the visible, or of a visible that contradicts the visible, is a constitutive paradox of the visibility which Marion expounds with the help of the perspective. In fact, the perspective can only exist as a void that my eyes can penetrate, “passing beyond all objects, [...] to attain that very void.”<sup>29</sup> By nature the void is invisible, and yet, only this void, or depth, can make the spectacle we see understandable, can “distend, dispose and manifest the chaos of the visible in harmonious phenomena.”<sup>30</sup> Without the dimension of depth, the spectacle before our eyes would be impenetrable and totally incomprehensible. There would be no space, no liveable world. The invisible *as* invisible is constitutive of the depth and thus different in essence from the *unseen* which can in fact be made visible, and is made visible by the painter: “The unseen does indeed belong to the invisible, but is not the same as the invisible, since it can transgress the invisible and turn into visible; whereas the invisible remains for ever such [...].”<sup>31</sup>

In order to appear, the visible depends on the invisible, and a phenomenology of the visibility must acknowledge the invisible as one of its possibility conditions. “Without the work of the invisible, what we perceive as visible really would offer no more than the rhapsodic and confused spectacle of coloured patches.”<sup>32</sup> But if it is true in our lived world of the three dimensions that “The more the invisible increases, the more deepens the visible,”<sup>33</sup> what then occurs in painting whose only two dimensions exclude any real depth, and whose visible surface can hide no invisible? The invisible is the constitutive paradox of the visible, and the most elementary paradox of a series that become all the more tangible as the phenomena become ever more saturated with intuition.

### **The picture**

Since there can be no doubt that the picture is flat and constitutionally deprived of

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<sup>27</sup> *Being given*, 14. (*Etant donné*, 23.)

<sup>28</sup> *La croisée du visible*, 17, 19, 25, 26 etc.

<sup>29</sup> Op. cit., 13.

<sup>30</sup> Op. cit., 17.

<sup>31</sup> Op. cit., 51.

<sup>32</sup> Op. cit., 28.

<sup>33</sup> Op. cit., 17.

depth, “As soon as the perspective is introduced in the picture, of whatever kind this picture may be, it doubles its paradox.”<sup>34</sup> The paradox is “a poor and flat surface, with no depth [...] nor secret, and no reserve where to hide any backstage spectacle, and which, none the less, opens up a bottomless depth.”<sup>35</sup> One of the painters’ essential tasks is to insert in the visible surface “intervals of invisible. Only they can stratify, separate and organise the strata of the visible according to a supplementary dimension which is perfectly unreal and totally phenomenological,”<sup>36</sup> namely depth. “Phenomenological” should be understood here as *ideal* [idéelle].

The classical perspective that organises the strata in depth according to a strictly defined viewpoint is one such phenomenological dimension (cf. Rafael’s *The marriage of the virgin*). However, the phenomenological dimension can be attained also with a more airy void, directly, without defined strata (cf. Turner’s *St. Gothard Pass at the Devil’s Bridge*). And here, not only the pictorial strata disappear, all “anecdotal detail” seems to vanish into the fascinating profundity of the canvas.

Thus, both in real space and on the plane surface of painting, the visible increases proportionally to the invisible. But the void has a different status in the two cases: In the void opened in my real world, I can move *really*, whereas in the void that makes up the perspective of the painting it would be impossible for me to move, really, but not impossible *ideally*. Therefore, the painted canvas, when perceived in its ideality, contains more visible information than would the same canvas perceived as an object in reality. The void that makes up the perspective is unreal and must be both intended and perceived as such, so as to avoid the effect of illusion which is not the aim: “With the void of the void that, in installing the perspective, exerts the power of the invisible over the visible, the aim is to open up the flatness of the picture-object to a world: in the perspective, the invisible transforms a real visible into an infinity of unreal, and so much more apparent, visibles.”<sup>37</sup> Ideality makes it possible to pierce, without at any moment leaving it, the *real* flatness of the picture and, *through the perspective*, to intend an *ideal* spectacle. This is what Marion calls *anamorphosis*: a complex perspective in the picture that alone gives to the really given and perceived its intended form – an invisible that gives form to the formless visible, a perspective that *informs*. “The phenomenon therefore succeeds in appearing only by passing from a first form – unformed – to a second form, which informs it as such because it fixes a figure of apparition for it. This second-level form does not merely make the phenomenon visible; above all, it distinguishes the phenomenon from others by detaching them as if from the depths.”<sup>38</sup>

The distinction between real and ideal, says Marion, corresponds to a fundamental distinction in the Husserlian phenomenology: a) The picture, as a real object, representa-

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<sup>34</sup> Op. cit., 19.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Op. cit., 22.

<sup>37</sup> Op. cit., 27.

<sup>38</sup> *Being given*, 123-124. (*Etant donné*, 175).

tive of itself, corresponds to the lived experiences of the consciousness; b) The perspective, in so far as it aims at a depth beyond what is visually given, corresponds to the intentional aim; c) The final spectacle, i.e. the completely revealed but unreal object, corresponds to the intentional object: "Painting plays in the tension between the two extremes of intentionality: the perceived, undergone and real lived experience, on the one side, the intentional object seen invisibly, ideal, on the other."<sup>39</sup> Like the perspective, also intentionality opens the dimension of depth in the visible object, and the depth appears – one could say – as the gap between object and objective. Consequently, when one of these two poles is missing, also the painting's perspective vanishes.

The objective disappears when the lived experience itself invades the canvas, when the personal impressions or perceptions supersede the reality that provokes them, when the *perception* of the thing supersedes the perceived *thing*. This is the case, says Marion, in a certain Impressionism (Monet's water lilies) and also in "action painting" (Jackson Pollock): The act of painting does no longer aim at an intentional object, lived experience and visible merge into one and become the only aim of the picture. The painting suspends what Husserl called the principle of the phenomenological correlation – namely the principle that all lived experience of the consciousness refers intentionally to an object. The materiality of the painting exceeds its transcendent intentional object.

But it can be also the lived experience that lacks in the picture and no longer the intentional object: This happens when the visible becomes so mechanical, so minimal, so insignificant that it can no longer be connected to any lived experience; the consciousness can only ascertain what it no longer constitutes. There is no room anymore for the invisible to open up a perspective (cf. Hantai's *Tabula*). Also here, there is no object, but there is an objective.

Art's independence of the painter's lived experience opens up new possibilities, since "The autonomy of the intentional objective defines, on the contrary, in phenomenological terms, what the Suprematist picture constructs: the pure thing, emerging from nothing but its own invisibility, literally emerging from nothing, in perfect independence of the states of consciousness, the spectator's as well as the painter's."<sup>40</sup> (Cf. Albers, *Hommages to the square*, and Malevich, *White square on white ground*.)

In these pictures of "the non-objective phenomenon," there is no longer any opening, no interval in which a perspective might open. But in this case, that does not deprive them of the dimension of the invisible, on the contrary, here, the invisible no longer plays *between* the intention and the visible it intends, it "plays *within* the visible itself."<sup>41</sup> A new paradox: the relation between the consciousness and its intentional object is inversed. In fact, their lack of perspective and an excess of invisible bring these pictures closer to icons (cf. Malevich' *Black Square*).

"All the mastery consists, precisely, in letting the unseen finally arise in the visible

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<sup>39</sup> *La croisée du visible*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.*, 39.

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, 40.



by surprise, unforeseeably. ... It tries to let much more arise than foreseen, than seen, than wished."<sup>42</sup> Such cases, where the picture reveals an unseen which is at the same time an unforeseen, permit saying that "The visible precedes the intention."<sup>43</sup> Thus, even in the most creative act of painting, the painter must assume a certain receptive passivity;<sup>44</sup> a mastery that excludes the unforeseen and the unseen of the picture in favour of the controlled and foreseeable, is what characterises academism.

Today, a production of images has replaced the creation of pictures. The images stem from the same kind of production as industrial objects. Like other objects, images depend on "production societies."<sup>45</sup> Whereas the real picture exposes us to the sight of that which does not belong to objectivity, the objective of the objectivity is the production of objects. And this production of objects, says Marion, belongs "to the essence of technique, that is to the essence of nihilism."<sup>46</sup> In consequence, the image, as an object that has been produced intentionally, differs fundamentally from the picture: if the picture can be reduced to its being it suffices to see it just once; now, the picture is not its being but its appearing. It appears before we intend it, and every time it appears it appears differently. The picture "is not, and yet it appears all the more."<sup>47</sup>

In *The crossing of the visible*, Marion distinguishes two kinds of pictures: idols and icons. "The idol is still, in some way or the other, proportional to the expectation of the desire, whose prevision it [...] fulfils. The icon exceeds definitely the measures of the expectation [...]."<sup>48</sup>

Let us first look at the idol.

### **The idol**

In front of the image, we find ourselves as voyeurs, watching the satisfaction of our own desire. "If one admits that metaphysics, at its beginning with Plato, established the opposition between the thing itself and the image in favour of the thing, and, at its end with Nietzsche, inversed this opposition in favour of the image, considered as as real as the thing itself, then one must say that the idol of the voyeur simply and exactly satisfies the requirements of nihilism: nothing is in itself, everything is in the measure to which valuation ratifies it, or it is not."<sup>49</sup> The image has freed itself from its original, in fact from any original; and if the image has no original it is because it asserts itself as its own original. Against the metaphysics that seeks to prove being, nihilism claims nothingness so strongly that it turns itself into a new metaphysics, a metaphysics of the nothingness instead of being: In a world of simulacra there is neither grounding nor phenomenon, there

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<sup>42</sup> Op. cit., 60.

<sup>43</sup> Op. cit., 62.

<sup>44</sup> Op. cit., 67.

<sup>45</sup> Op. cit., 89.

<sup>46</sup> Op. cit., 74.

<sup>47</sup> *Being given*, 48. (*Etant donné* 72.)

<sup>48</sup> *La croisée du visible*, 62.

<sup>49</sup> Op. cit., 93.

is nothing but a circuit of reflexes. Whereas, as we have seen, the invisible ensures an opening in and out of the picture, the image locks us up in our projections: “The image... accomplishes no liberation, opens up no new perspective: it only confirms a metaphysically determined situation, nihilism.”<sup>50</sup>

To satisfy our desire to see, we have chosen the screen; but the screen precludes any distinction between image and thing, image equalling thing, and this equivalence rules us as “an absolute tyranny.”<sup>51</sup> The screen becomes a reflecting partition that shuts us out from the world, at the same time as it shuts us in when sending back on us our own image. Because the *raison d'être* of the image is to fulfil our expectations, even our desires. The image therefore is essentially foreseeable. Now “Every image is an idol or it is not seen,” says Marion,<sup>52</sup> and the idol, faithfully fulfilling our previsions, “does not impose itself to be seen since it is the gaze that imposes on it to appear as it appears, a mere representative of the desire to see or to be seen.”<sup>53</sup>

We must interpret the *nihil* in the contemporary nihilism, so vehemently denounced by Marion in *The crossing of the visible*, as the oblivion of the *original*, however vague and problematic this notion is in a refutation of metaphysics. If on the one hand, the idol specifically, and the image generally, are no more than reflexions of our desires, the original, on the other hand, would take us by surprise, appearing without our expecting it. This is a key point in Marion's phenomenology.

Still, in the architecture of Marion's later phenomenology, the idol comes to play another part. As a picture, and as a saturated phenomenon, it gives itself before it is intended, at the very opposite of the idol in *The crossing of the visible*, and it gives more than can be conceived conceptually. In *Being given*, the idol has resumed its power to act on its spectator: “[...] the idol provokes an ineluctable solipsism. That is, since the painting summons *me* to see it, since above all I must see it again and again at the pace of *my* own changing horizon and concept, it shows itself only by arriving to *me*, therefore by individualizing me radically (*Jemeinigkeit* by the idol, no longer by Being).”<sup>54</sup>

### The icon

Whereas in *Being given*, idol and icon are seen in their complementarity as two categories of saturated phenomena, the contrast between them is far more pronounced in *The crossing of the visible*, one belonging to the nihilism of images, the other on the contrary “inverting the modern logics of the image.”<sup>55</sup> “The icon definitely exceeds the measure of the expectation, bewilders the desire, annuls the prevision: it will never be able and will never venture to overcome this distance; it inverts it by substituting its own aim – from it

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<sup>50</sup> Op. cit., 92-93.

<sup>51</sup> Op. cit., 99.

<sup>52</sup> Op. cit., 92.

<sup>53</sup> Op. cit., 63.

<sup>54</sup> *Being given*, 230-231. (*Etant donné*, 321.)

<sup>55</sup> *La croisée du visible*, 109.

towards us – for ours towards it.”<sup>56</sup> Inverting the intentional relation – or more precisely: correlation – the icon “contradicts term by term the modern determination of the image according to the merciless exigency of the metaphysical iconoclasm”<sup>57</sup> whose consequence is the production of images. But if the icon really is able to overcome the *nihil* of the image and the nihilism of our times, and if in doing this it is able to avoid a new metaphysics – and Marion in his later works is careful to explain why – it definitely puts phenomenology to a real test. It is with the icon, one could say, that *the visible arrives at the crossing* which is announced in the title of Marion’s work. It causes us to rethink intuition, constitution, objectivity, visibility, and quite particularly, the horizon and the I, fundamentals in Husserl’s phenomenology.

Marion sums up three characteristics of the icon:

1. It offers itself to the sight without recurring to any perspective.
2. The gaze of the saint is painted as an invisible object that looks more than it is looked at. In the icon, the invisible is no longer at the service of the visible, as it is in the perspective; in the icon the visible serves the invisible, namely the invisible exchange of gazes of the worshipper and Christ, the one in the mode of praying, the other in the mode of blessing, as the incarnation serves the transcendent.
3. The spectator discovers himself invisibly gazed upon by the gaze that is painted on the icon. The painted surface of the icon is no longer a screen, it appears as the visible shrine of a “central instance that is never painted, and invisible.”<sup>58</sup>

The icon breaks away from the mimetic logics of the image inasmuch as it accomplishes itself entirely in its reference, not to a visible object or person, but to a prototype – an invisible prototype.<sup>59</sup> But what kind of relation does the icon entertain to its prototype, if not a mimetic relation? A relation of *approximation*. In itself, the icon, just as the Cross, is the equivalent of a type. The canon presupposes this equivalence of status, precisely to ensure a theological grounding of the dignity of icons: they too are to be received as types, in a way which *approaches* the type *par excellence*: the Cross.<sup>60</sup> The *τυπος*, in its orthodox conception, instead of imitating its original, can only approach it, but this approximation actually ensures its sanctity.

In his description of the icon, Marion later omits this reference to a *τυπος*. What has been essential to stress in the saturated phenomena in general is that it “does not subject its possibility to any preliminary determination”<sup>61</sup> and the prototype, even invisible, may very well imply some preliminary determination. What becomes essential in the icon specifically is its inversion of the relation between the gazer and the gazed upon: In fact, different from other pictures, the icon is not a spectacle that offers itself to be looked at as

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<sup>56</sup> Op. cit., 62.

<sup>57</sup> Op. cit., 153.

<sup>58</sup> Op. cit., 44.

<sup>59</sup> Op. cit., 140.

<sup>60</sup> Op. cit., 125.

<sup>61</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 47. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 74.)

an object; the icon imposes itself as a subject, as the one who looks. Not only does the icon manifest itself; it is an “auto-manifestation,” says Marion.<sup>62</sup> The paradox consists in the icon’s taking over the initiative from the spectator.

Perhaps one could add that the historical icons are never signed and always anonymous; and that an important category of icons consists of the *nerukotvornyy*, those “not made by hand.” Without any traceable origin, they appear so much more “by and on the basis of themselves,” as “auto-manifestations” of sanctity.

### **The saturated phenomena**

At the beginning of this article, we read that the picture shows us “what it means – to show oneself, to appear in full authority, in full glory, as the first morning of a world.”<sup>63</sup> The picture is not yet a revelation, “nonetheless, it already concerns that which, possibly, will later have to support the weight of glory inflicted by a revelation [...]; without doubt it already befits to humble oneself before the most secret unforeseeable of the unforeseeable – the fact that it gives itself.”<sup>64</sup> If the visible in general is the “gift of appearance,” the picture is the scene of a possible revelation. In *The crossing of the visible*, Marion has not yet given the name of “saturated phenomena” to the idol and icon. It is in his subsequent works that he investigates them in more stringent phenomenological terms. But the final aim of these investigations seems to be the saturated phenomenon *par excellence*, the *revelation*. In *Being given*, “The saturated phenomenon therefore culminates in the type of paradox I call revelation, one that concentrates in itself – as the figure of Christ establishes its possibility – an event, an idol, a flesh, and an icon, all at the same time.”<sup>65</sup>

In the meanwhile Marion is careful to counter criticism and emphasises: “There is no drift or turn here, not even a ‘theological’ one, but, on the contrary, an accounting for the fact that in certain cases of givenness the excess of intuition could no longer satisfy the conditions of ordinary experience [...]”<sup>66</sup>

It is in an apparent effort to keep the saturated phenomenon within the limits of classical philosophy that Marion links it to the passage in Kant’s third critique where he introduces the “aesthetical ideas.” But the aesthetical ideas are exceptional in Kant’s system as they are based on an intuition of the imagination for which there is no adequate concept. In this respect, “aesthetical ideas” differ radically from the “ideas of reason” in the remaining parts of the Kantian system: for these there decidedly are concepts, but limited intuition only. What the rational ideas lack are not concepts, but intuition, hence the name Marion gives them: “poor phenomena” and “common-law phenomena.” Their deficiency in intuition makes them particularly handy in philosophical systems. Nonetheless, with his notion of aesthetical ideas, Kant acknowledges the possibility of a kind of phenomena

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<sup>62</sup> *Being given*, 232. (*Etant donné*, 323.)

<sup>63</sup> *La croisée du visible*, 77.

<sup>64</sup> *Op. cit.*, 81.

<sup>65</sup> *Being given*, 241. (*Etant donné*, 335.)

<sup>66</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 44. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 70.)

that, due to their over-saturation, exceed all conceptualisation. But Marion emphasises “The fact that this very excess prohibits the aesthetic idea from organizing its intuition within the limits of a concept, and therefore from giving a defined object to be seen, nevertheless does not disqualify it in phenomenological terms since, recognised as what it is, this ‘inexposable representation’ operates according to its ‘free play’.”<sup>67</sup> The aesthetical ideas are the concern of the faculty of judgment in which this “free play” is one criterion.

The same inversion that takes place in the aesthetical ideas of the categories established by Kant for the rational ideas, also turns out to characterise Marion’s saturated phenomenon. In fact, Marion now shows how the four Kantian categories and principles of understanding are inversed or at least exceeded in the saturated phenomenon: According to quantity, the saturated phenomenon cannot be aimed at intentionally (it is *invisable*, from the French word *viser*, “aim at intentionally”); according to quality, it is unbearable; according to relation, absolute; and according to modality, it cannot be looked at (it is *irregardable*, from the French word *regarder*, “to look”).<sup>68</sup> These qualifications of the saturated phenomenon are, as we see, inversions of the conditions defined by Kant for the ordinary intuition.

Marion mentions three examples of saturated phenomena to prove that these are no extreme hypotheses; they are said to occur whenever there is an excess and not a shortage of intuition: first, the infinite as Descartes describes it, second, the sublime in Kant’s aesthetics, and third, the internal consciousness of time in Husserl’s philosophy. Let us see how Marion expounds the Kantian sublime as a saturated phenomenon: in terms of quantity, the sublime has neither form nor order (it is great “beyond all comparison”); in terms of quality, it contradicts taste (it provokes “negative pleasure”, a “feeling of immensity,” of “monstrosity”); in terms of relation, it escapes every analogy and every horizon (it represents the “limitlessness”); in terms of modality, finally, it does not agree with our power of knowing (“it may appear in such a way as to contradict the finality of our faculty of judgement”). As the icon, also the sublime inverts the relation of our judgment to the phenomenon, so that it is “the phenomenon that from now on ‘gazes’ at the I in ‘respect’.”<sup>69</sup>

This is the starting point of Marion’s far-reaching proposals to revise the phenomenological assumptions. He ends up with these characteristics:

1. The saturated phenomenon is essentially unforeseeable. Since it is always exceeded by the intuition that saturates it, it should be called incommensurable, disproportionate.<sup>70</sup> Marion mentions *the historical event* as a phenomenon which exceeds quantity and thereby foreseeability.<sup>71</sup>
2. Due to the excess of intuition that saturates it, it is perceived by the gaze only in

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<sup>67</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 33 (modified translation). (*Le visible et le révélé*, 56.)

<sup>68</sup> *Op. cit.*, 34. (57.)

<sup>69</sup> *Being given*, 220. (*Etant donné*, 307.)

<sup>70</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 34. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 58.)

<sup>71</sup> *Being given*, 228. (*Etant donné*, 318.)

the negative mode of an impossible perception, in the mode of bedazzlement.<sup>72</sup> Marion mentions *the idol* as a phenomenon which exceeds quality, and *painting* as a special instance of idols (whereas previously, idols were a subspecies of painting); in these, intuition always surpasses the concept.<sup>73</sup>

3. A saturated phenomenon is absolute according to relation; it has no analogy in previous experience.<sup>74</sup> It is unconditioned by any horizon, shortly, unconditional. Marion mentions *flesh* as a phenomenon which exceeds relation. Flesh is the identity of that which touches with the medium where the touching takes place. Flesh is absolute.<sup>75</sup>

4. A saturated phenomenon imposes itself with such an excess of intuition that it can neither be reduced to the conditions of experience, and thus to the *I* who sets them, nor thereby forego appearing.<sup>76</sup> Marion mentions the icon as a phenomenon which exceeds modality: the icon is also the Other, who alone can constitute me as his own because he precedes me in the order of manifestation.<sup>77</sup>

So a saturated phenomenon cannot be overlooked, but it also cannot be looked at. It is a phenomenological extreme that appears as an overabundance of intuitive givenness, but devoid of discernable objects. Far from being able to constitute this phenomenon, the *I* experiences itself as being constituted by it. “The *I* loses its anteriority and finds itself, so to speak, deprived of the duties of constitution, and is thus itself constituted; it becomes a *me* rather than an *I*.”<sup>78</sup> Therefore the *I* of the intentionality is no longer capable of synthesising the intuition into an object with a horizon: the synthesis, in this case, can only be passive.<sup>79</sup>

It belongs to the definition of the saturated phenomenon to be a *paradox*, meaning that it arrives “against all that representation or intention, in short the concept, would expect.”<sup>80</sup> Nonetheless, in spite of this status as a paradoxical extreme, the saturated phenomenon should not, Marion insists again, “be understood as a limit case, an exceptional, vaguely irrational, in short, a ‘mystical’ case of phenomenality. On the contrary, it indicates the coherent and conceptual fulfilment of the most operative definition of the phenomenon: it alone truly appears as itself, of itself, and starting from itself, since it alone appears without the limits of a horizon and without reduction to an *I*. I will therefore call this appearance that is purely of itself and starting from itself, this phenomenon that does not subject its possibility to any preliminary determination, a ‘revelation’. And I insist that here it is purely and simply a matter of the phenomenon taken in its fullest meaning.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 36. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 60.)

<sup>73</sup> *Being given*, 229-230. (*Etant donné*, 320.)

<sup>74</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 38. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 61.)

<sup>75</sup> *Being given*, 231. (*Etant donné*, 321-322.)

<sup>76</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 43. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 69.)

<sup>77</sup> *Being given*, 233. (*Etant donné*, 323-324.)

<sup>78</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 43-44. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 69-70.)

<sup>79</sup> *Being given*, 226. (*Etant donné*, 315.)

<sup>80</sup> *Op. cit.*, 226. (315.)

<sup>81</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 45-46. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 71-72.)

### Revelation

“In contrast to the common-law phenomenon, whose poverty in intuition (and its limitation in meaning) permits objective knowledge, production, predication and reproduction, the phenomenon of revelation (if it exists) is characterized by its excess of intuition, which saturates all meaning and which, due to this saturation, provokes an event whose unpredictability escapes any production or reproduction. This phenomenon thus takes on the status of a gift, appearing to emerge freely and suddenly from itself. The phenomenon of revelation therefore is revealed from itself and appears in the mode of what gives itself. In a word, revelation only appears as a gift.”<sup>82</sup>

This is Jean-Luc Marion’s “Sketch of a phenomenological concept of the gift” in an article that carries this very title. Whereas *the ordinary phenomenon that appears* gives itself to the one it appears to, and seeing the phenomenon therefore becomes receiving it – if, in other words, the appearance constitutes itself in this extrinsic relation to its receiver – then the *revelation*, on its side, as a gift reduced to its pure being-given, is absolutely independent of any pragmatic or economical exchange. “The *I* has not the slightest idea, notion or expectation regarding who and what is revealed. Furthermore, not only does what revelation reveals without a doubt shy away from being constituted by any sort of *I*, but occasionally it is possible that no lived experiences of the *I* correspond to it.”<sup>83</sup> Marion refers quite extensively to Derrida’s work on the gift and quotes his contention that “The truth of the gift [...] suffices to annul the gift. The truth of the gift is equivalent to the non-gift or to the non-truth of the gift”<sup>84</sup> – as the gift is annulled as such as soon as it is involved in an economic system of exchange. But Marion relates Derrida’s definition only to reject it: in his eyes, the being-given is an *intrinsic* property of the gift and its mode of apparition, rather than the function of an *extrinsic* relation between a donator and a receiver. This pure gift is the paradoxical essence of the revelation in Marion’s phenomenology.

According to Marion, all phenomena give themselves; but the revelation is “the last possible variation of the phenomenality of the phenomenon inasmuch as given.” And he pursues: “The phenomenon of revelation not only falls into the category of saturation (paradox in general), but it concentrates the four types of saturated phenomena and is given at once as historic event, idol, flesh, and icon (face).”<sup>85</sup> At this point, Marion reminds his reader (and himself) of the main prerequisite of phenomenology: to remain within the field of possibilities, without assuming anything concerning actualities. Nevertheless, throughout Marion’s entire work, there is a clear assumption, namely concerning the revelation in its actuality. And this assumption has caused severe criticism. Marion tries to counter it: “If I [...] privilege the manifestation of Jesus Christ, as it is described in the New Testament (and in conformity with the paradigms of the theophanies of the Old),

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<sup>82</sup> Op. cit., 80. French original unavailable.

<sup>83</sup> Op. cit., 9. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 23-24.)

<sup>84</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Given time, 1, Counterfeit money*. English translation by Peggy Kamuf, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, 27. (*Donner le temps*, Galilée, Paris 1991, 42.)

<sup>85</sup> *Being given*, 235. (*Etant donné*, 327.)

as an example of a phenomenon of revelation, I am nevertheless proceeding as a phenomenologist – describing a given phenomenological possibility – and as a philosopher – confronting the visible Christ with his possible conceptual role (as Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, or Schelling dared to do), with an eye toward establishing it as a paradigm.”<sup>86</sup>

### Conclusion

Only a painting which is able to show itself, to appear, to impose itself as phenomenon, escapes the metaphysics, of which nihilism is the negative form. And it is in this capacity that painting proves its particular importance in the phenomenology of Jean-Luc Marion. The exceptional visibility of the picture becomes a particularly revealing case of the phenomenon. Excessively saturated with intuition, the icon on the one side imposes its gaze on the worshipper, the idol on the other side reflects a gaze which is obsessed with its own gaze. To pursue from these instances of visibility to the extreme of revelation “is only a matter of pushing the phenomenological intention to its end.”<sup>87</sup> Still, the consequence is indeed what Marion calls “a less classical phenomenological situation,”<sup>88</sup> with an intentionality that no longer finds itself accomplished in any objectivity, and even renounces its own status as *I*. But this renouncement prepares it for the revelation which remains Marion’s principal concern.

Marion begins his description of the saturated phenomenon with the “disastrous alternative” that awaits the philosophy of religion: the alternative “either of addressing phenomena that are objectively definable but lose their religious specificity or of addressing phenomena that are specifically religious but cannot be described objectively.”<sup>89</sup> But if this means that a religious phenomenon is impossible, “the religious phenomenon poses the question of the general possibility of the phenomenon.”<sup>90</sup> And with the possibility of the phenomenon, also the possibility of phenomenality, and especially of the “maximum of phenomenality”<sup>91</sup> which is the definition of revelation. Before the *impossibility*, the *possibility* must be established.

In fact, as we saw above, a transcendental phenomenology requires that one remain within the field of possibility conditions. So the closest the phenomenologist Marion can get to the revelation is the maximum of phenomenality which he says conditions its possibility. But this is still a condition, whereas the revelation was said to be the unconditioned phenomenon par excellence. And not only shall the phenomenality of the revelation be at its maximum, we just saw that it must include the four aspects of the saturated phenomenon: the historical event, the idol, the flesh, and the icon (face). So I ask with Marion himself: “Would I have come all this way only to recover precisely what I wanted to de-

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<sup>86</sup> Op. cit., 236. (Op. cit., 329.)

<sup>87</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 48. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 74.)

<sup>88</sup> *La croisée du visible*, 45.

<sup>89</sup> *The visible and the revealed*, 18. (*Le visible et le révélé*, 35.)

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> *Being given*, 234. (*Etant donné*, 326.)



stroy – conditions preceding possibility and delimiting it a priori? Better wouldn't I have recovered precisely, in regard to revelation, the very type of phenomenon that neither can nor should submit to them?"<sup>92</sup> Marion's answer is not fully convincing: he pretends his conditions are not restrictive and do not limit but open the possible; they even admit the possibility of the impossibility of the revelation.

In my eyes, one is entitled to ask whether a phenomenon that is saturated with intuition to the extent that it escapes qualification, whose possibility also implies the possibility of its impossibility, and which is justly defined as the paradox of paradoxes, is a convincing way out of the "disastrous alternative." But one may also ask why, after all, an alternative between on the one hand a phenomenon which is objectively definable but loses its religious specificity, and on the other hand a phenomenon that is specifically religious but cannot be described objectively, is "disastrous": Is it a problem if the revelation with lower case r renounces its transcendental possibility and resumes its historical actuality as Revelation with capital R? And is it a problem if, quite the reverse, the phenomenon of revelation turns out to correspond to certain categories and principles of understanding that permit us to describe it, at least partly, in objective terms?

And if these two alternatives, the theological and the philosophical, are unacceptable, there still remain alternatives. During the seminar "Phénoménologie et herméneutique de la religion" that took place at the Husserl Archives in Paris from 1990 to 1992, and where Marion presented his major achievement, "The saturated phenomenon", also Paul Ricœur intervened. In his intervention, "Expérience et langage dans le discours religieux," he did not speak of a disastrous alternative but pointed out a weakness in the premises of the debate: "[...] every time it is in a different manner, and with a different signification, that one experiences and practices what I previously called the obedience to the High. Is it an immanent or transcendent High? Anonymous or personal? A passively submissive or actively proselytising obedience? Solitary or communitarian?" Ricœur dismisses the pretensions of an abstract universalism and reconnects the religious phenomenon with the concrete quest which gives it meaning: "[...] we must renounce composing a phenomenology of the religious phenomenon taken in its indivisible universality, [...] we must be content, at the outset, to trace the main hermeneutic lines of one single religion."<sup>93</sup> Even the religious phenomenon is situated.

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<sup>92</sup> Op. cit., 235. (328.)

<sup>93</sup> Paul Ricœur, "Expérience et langage dans le discours religieux". In Jean-François Courtine (ed.), *Phénoménologie et théologie*, Criterion, Paris 1992, 20.