Aesthetica Preprint, n. 123, maggio-agosto 2023 ISSN 0393-8522 DOI: 10.7413/0393-8522137

Max Black on metaphorical language: exploring the line between analysis and aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with Black's philosophical proposal on metaphor as opening a threshold between analysis and aesthetics. Black was willing to show that analysis was adequate in explaining the cognitive and creative value of metaphor. But Black's analysis also focused on innovation and metaphorical insight as aspects exceeding analytical skills and categories. Therefore, his interaction view is charged with aesthetic interest for two reasons: on the one hand, the method of analysis might have favoured the assimilation of metaphor to the conceptual metaphor of the cognitive approach; on the on the other hand, his studies provide the conditions to approach metaphor using aesthetic categories with greater critical awareness.

KEYWORDS

Max Black; metaphor; interaction; metaphorical seeing; insight

1.

Twentieth-century aesthetics in the European tradition was intertwined with hermeneutics and phenomenology and devoted much attention to metaphor as a device of knowledge and meaning-making. Before the mid-century, metaphor found its place also in the American theory of interpretation of Ivor Armstrong Richards, who defended the cognitive value of tools of poetry and literature on the basis of his revised contextual theory of meaning. In his *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* in 1936 Richards describes metaphor as *interaction*: "when we use a metaphor, we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction" (Richards, 1936, p. 93). Metaphor thus is interpreted as an "undivided pair of elements," which are named *tenor* and *vehicle*, interacting with each other. He also claims for the distinction between the *functional* and necessary metaphor and the orna-

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mental metaphor (Richards, 1948, p.150). He says that, especially in poetry, metaphor cannot be substituted because the meaning resulting from interaction is not otherwise achievable. Thoughts in fact cooperate to produce "a meaning of more varied powers than can be ascribed to either" (1948, p. 100).

For Richards, the understanding of interaction requires shifting attention on *symbolization* at the expense of the *reference* function. In Richard's theory, a word is not the substitute of a referent, but it rather stands for "a combination of general aspects" from its contexts (Richards 1936, p.93). The meaning of a metaphor indeed is due to its *delegated efficacy*: metaphors are "substitutes exerting the powers of what is not there" (Richards 1936, p. 32). However, Richards' use of words must be remarked in the view of the confrontation with Max Black (cf. Giuliani 2023). Richards claimed for the leading power of interaction and symbolization against reference but maintained that the "standing for" of a sign is a kind of substitution.

In Richards's second essay on metaphor in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, named *The Command of Metaphor*, the issue addressed is instead the status of the discourse *on* metaphor. In this essay, which is rich in literary examples, Richards takes Coleridge as the author inspiring the idea that words are not a medium by which to copy life, but they constitute our experience, that is our "modes of regarding, of loving, of acting". Richards here claims for continuity between the ordinary use of language and the language used in interpretation: in the case of metaphor, he argues that, on the one hand, metaphors are necessary to explain the notion of metaphor itself; on the other hand, he claims that the interpretation of metaphor must have a result in a better use of language that is better "control of the world we *make for ourselves* [my emphasis] to live in" (Richards 1936, pp. 134-135).

Metaphor is later addressed by Richards in 1948 at a symposium on emotive meaning organized at the University of Cornell. In this context, Richards assumes that philosophy is the *practice of interpretation* (1948, p. 156): he says that philosophy, more than with "analyses, treatises, or diatribes", deals with the use of language and the meaning of words in argumentation like "true", "say", "mean", "believe," "understand" (p. 155). In the case of metaphor, philosophy as interpretation is intended to ask questions both on metaphor and on the discourse on metaphor: e.g., what is the meaning of "saying" when one is arguing that what is said through metaphor is not the same as what is said without it. Furthermore, Richards claims that the task of philosophy is to mediate among different *modes of* lan-

guage: in his opinion, the authority of philosophy relies on its effort to preserve languages from mutual interference (Richards 1948, pp. 152-153).

The same symposium on emotive meaning hosted the contribute of Max Black. The concept of interaction as production of meaning, the idea of philosophy as a practice dealing with the use of language, the constitutive power of language are all issues of the confrontation of Richards and Black. In the Forties, Black could still be considered an exponent of the *Cambridge School of Analysis*, whose members worked on philosophical analysis inspired by Russell and Wittgenstein's interpretations of logical atomism and Moore's earlier studies (Beaney 2016). Black studied as a mathematician at Cambridge and soon became interested in philosophical research because he was inspired by the lectures of Moore, Ramsey and Wittgenstein (Black 1985, p. 11). In the following years he had been elaborating a philosophical method that he later called "articulation of concepts": the analysis of a concept for Black aims to make explicit the use-governing criteria of the corresponding word or expression through the description of clear, not-problematic cases of its application (Black 1985, p. 13-14). Black's cultural liveliness had favoured, during his years at Cambridge, his meeting with Ogden and Richards, the authors of *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), which was a key study in the field of linguistics and semantics. Richards aroused Black's enduring interest in metaphor and other non-scientific uses of language (Black 1985, p. 11). However, Black in 1948 blames the absence of a "consistent and coherent" theory of emotive meaning in Ogden and Richards's study and also in Richards's later work (Black 1948, p. 112). In simply labelling the non-referential use of language as emotive, they failed in defining the emotive with respect to the referential meaning (Black 1948, pp. 111- 112). For Black, the undefinition of terms is normally produced by forced dichotomies which result in incoherent arguments. In the case of emotive meaning, Black blames the "excessively narrow" definition of "referent", which derives in turn from taking denotation as the standard of the symbolic function (Black, 1948, p.113). Black hence argues that the opposition of emotive and referential, and consequently the identification of emotive and non-referential meaning, must be avoided on the basis of the clarification of the meaning of reference (Black 1948, p.115).

For Black, Richards' implicit nominalism prevents his discourse from clearly explaining both symbolic reference and interaction, that is, how words come to be significant together (Black 1948, p. 114). Black's effort in clarifying interaction leads him to the very issue of

metaphor. Richards indeed maintained that metaphor was the model of symbolic interaction in language (Richards 1936, p. 92). In 1948, he was arguing that metaphoric transference is the basis for "common sense", because most traditional ways of seeing ourselves and our relationships depend on the "transferences of ways of thinking" from one "world of discourse" to another (Richards 1948, p. 151). He was also arguing that philosophy as analysis of language was not appropriate for understanding metaphor: analysis necessary implied a substitutive view of metaphor, which was taken as a symbol to be replaced with some equivalent expression. Black was willing to use analysis for the clarification of metaphor in order to clarify the meaning of interaction.

2.

Metaphor was not initially an explicit object of Black's research, but rather was defined in relation to the analysis of other concepts. In his first philosophical studies, Black had placed metaphor in the field of ambiguity: it was a symbol not precise enough to be analysed, a form of ambiguity to be brought back to clarity (Black 1932-1933, p. 242; cf. Giuliani 2017). Some years later, in his manual of logic, *Critical Thinking* (1952), Black stated a difference between metaphor and ambiguity. While the ambiguous term confronts us with the impossible choice among different referents, metaphor – namely, a word which occurs metaphorically in a certain context – indicates an unusual referent on the basis of some similarity. After the confrontation with Richards in 1948, Black took metaphor as a more specific issue. In 1955 he published *Metaphor*, the essay that became a seminal work for the theory of metaphor in the philosophy of Novecento (Contini 2020, p. 121). In 1983 Black declared that his intention in 1955 was to "make a new accommodation" of Richards' insights by correcting his "'primitive' and somewhat schematic" distinction between "signified meaning" and "emotive meaning" (1983, p. 7, my tr.). Indeed, if we look at *Metaphor* in the light of Black's previous confrontation with Richards, a multiple theoretical scope can be identified. On the one hand, Black is willing to outline the articulation of the concept of metaphor in order to provide some agreeable definition. Furthermore, by his definition he pretends to clarify the concept of interaction addressed by Richards. Finally, more generally, he suggests that the very philosophical analysis is committed in defining a *plurality* of modes of reference.

With regards to the first point, that is the clarification of the

concept of metaphor, Black provides a list of "unmistakable instances" (Black 1954-55, pp. 274-275) of use of the word "metaphor". On this basis, he provisionally asserts that "when we speak of a relatively simple metaphor, we are referring to a sentence or another expression, in which some words are used metaphorically, while the remainder are used non-metaphorically" (Black 1954-55, p. 275). Black here names "focus" the word that is being used metaphorically in the sentence and "frame" the remainder of the sentence (pp. 275-276).

After showing the limits of some alternative conceptions of metaphor, Black returns to Richards' idea of interaction by literally quoting his definition from *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*: "when we use a metaphor, we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction" (Richards, 1936, p. 93). Black here is willing to highlight two aspects: he points out that Richards is using a metaphor ("interaction") to talk about the metaphor itself and he shows that the metaphor of "interaction" is intended to emphasise the dynamic power of metaphor and its effect on the receiver. Richards claimed indeed that the reader-receiver of a "working" metaphor is forced to connect different meanings and must attend to both the old and the new meanings resulting from interaction (Black 1954-55, p. 286). Black agrees with Richards in placing metaphor outside a comparative perspective. However, two points seem to him to need further clarification: firstly, the *connection* determined by metaphor, which seems to be "the secret and the mystery of metaphor"; secondly, it must be explained how *new meanings* are resulting from interaction, that is, how "the extension or change of meaning is brought about".

Black provides some attempts to understand the interaction and its effects through *analogies*. Firstly, the *filter* analogy is provided and applied to the "man is a wolf" example in order to give an account of the connexion determined by metaphor. Black defines a metaphorical sentence as the interaction between two "systems of commonplaces", or "relevant systems of implications" associated with two subjects: a principal subject (the frame, that is, so to speak, the "true" reference of the statement), and a secondary subject, that is the word used metaphorically (the focus). "System of commonplaces" is the name for the set of standard beliefs accepted by the speaker who is using the word literally, that is, the commonplaces normally implied by literal uses of the word (p. 288).

For Black, metaphor acts like a filter since it exerts an evocative and selective power. Metaphorically calling a man a wolf is to

evoke the wolf-system of related commonplaces. The next step is the application of the filter. Using the filter, that is, understanding the metaphor, means identifying the implicit statements that can be adapted ("made fit") to man "in a normal or abnormal sense". In line with the provided analogy, those statements should be the points of contact, the points where the filter allows something to be seen. Outside the analogy, it is a matter of selecting the human traits that can be said in a wolf-language (e.g., being a predator, can also make sense for man). If the metaphor is appropriate and the receiver is adequate, says Black, it must be possible to construct a system of implications regarding man organised on the basis of correspondences with the wolf-system. The connection Richards spoke of is rather meant to be a construction of correspondence.

If we alternatively think of metaphor as a *screen*, says Black, we can also say that the principal subject is *seen through* the metaphorical expression or, if we prefer, that the principal subject is *projected upon* the field of the subsidiary subject (p. 288). In both cases, the connection determined by metaphor is the correspondence between two systems of implications that determines the conceptual organisation of the principal subject of the metaphor.

The second point to be explained and clarified about the interaction of metaphor is innovation. Innovation consists firstly in the novelty of the implications produced. The implications resulting from the projection are *new* implications. In the view of the filter analogy, innovation is firstly due to the evocative power of metaphor. The emphatic power of metaphor highlights and pushes on the foreground traits that are not normally evoked by literal uses of "man". But the very condition of innovation is the organisational action of the filter. "The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasises others-in short, organises our view of man" (p. 288). It is not just a matter of defining, showing, renaming: the effect of the encounter between focus and frame is a new "organisation". Man seen through the filter of the wolf is a new man, thought of according to different categories: for example, filtering the "predatory" trait is not just to say that he has wolf-like aggressiveness; it means thinking of man using the category of defence/aggression. This is a change of perspective that in turn opens up new implications, allows connections to be made that, e.g., explain man's behaviour differently.

But innovation is also the expansion of the meaning of the focus due to the frame, in Black's example "poors are the negroes of Europe": here the focal word ("negroes") "obtains a new

meaning, which is not quite its meaning in literal uses" (p. 286). And with regards to the "man is a wolf" metaphor, Black makes a remark to point out the "humanisation" of the wolf too: "If to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would" (p. 291). In other words, the implication-system of the metaphorical expression does not remain unaltered by the metaphorical statement.

For Black, the idea of interaction between systems of implications is adequate in explaining metaphors acting like cognitive devices. Interactive metaphors are *required* for the "distinctive *intellectual* operation […] demanding simultaneous awareness of both subjects but not reducible to any comparison between the two" (p. 293). Here a further sense of "innovation" emerges. Metaphors cognitive content is not merely the articulation of the correspondences between the meanings engaged in interaction. Emphasis is a necessary part of the cognitive content of metaphor since it organizes the priority and weight of implications. A metaphor reduced to a set of correspondences, says Black, would "fail" to give the same *insight* that the metaphor did, that is a "nice feeling for… relative priorities and degrees of importance" of implications (pp. 293-294).

3.

The analysis of *Metaphor* might be seen as an attempt to show that analysis maintains the objective and referential aspect of metaphorical meaning but it also attributes some traits of irreducibility. The interaction defined by Black's analysis is based on correspondences and analogies, but metaphor meaning is different from the association, comparison, or substitution of the meanings of the terms engaged. It follows that metaphor cannot be replaced by literal statements of resemblance or comparison. Innovation is a constitutive feature of cognitive metaphor, and it is due to the reciprocal agency of both focus and frame, for which in some cases "it would be more illuminating to say that the metaphor *creates* the similarity than to say that it formulates some similarity antecedently existing" (1954-55, pp. 284-285).

The power of innovation makes the metaphor close to a kind of *invention*, a dispositive that makes it possible to hold together different images or thoughts. The idea of such an invention might recall a mathematical concept found in Black's article named *Necessary Statements and Rules* (1962b, firstly published in 1958).

Black here speaks of necessary assertions as those that allow some apparently anomalous objects to be defined maintaining the rules in force in the system. Black mentions the case of parallel lines meeting at a point at infinity: the invention of the "point at infinity" allows parallel lines to be defined according to the general rules of lines, e.g., according to their relationship with a point. Similarly, in another example, Black points out that speaking of a straight line in terms of a "circle with a radius tending to infinity" makes it possible to include both figures (the circle and the straight line) in a single theory: the straight line can be seen as a circle and the circle finds, in this extreme expansion, an object apparently outside the domain (1962b, pp. 80-84). This invention fulfils the function of creating a link by which determined and distinct symbols come to be defined in terms of each other.

Black might agree that cognitive metaphors operate in a similar way since they *establish the condition* for the eventual comparison of different objects.

The idea of metaphor as invention and as a "dispositive" is also important for the comparison between metaphors and models that Black provides in *Models and Archetypes* (1962a). Black starts from the general idea of a model. The scientific use of models allows the understanding of an original domain of interest by the assertions of a secondary domain that is "relatively unproblematic, more familiar or better organized" than the former, that is, a domain we have the necessary knowledge to have an *intuitive grasp* of (1962a, pp. 232-233). The use of models can be either predominantly heuristic or explanatory. Analogical models have heuristic power but also a high degree of abstraction. They aim at reproducing only the structure (or "network of relations") of the original domain in a different medium (e.g., hydraulic circuits for economic systems) on the basis of analogical correspondences. The application of the analogical model consists of the translation of its assumptions in the new domain (Black 1962a, pp. 230-231). However, valid inferences in the abstraction do not prove the validity of their implications outside the model in the field of application (Black 1962, pp. 226-228). This is why, for Black, analogue models provide plausible hypotheses, not demonstrative *proof*s (Black 1962a, pp. 222-223).

For theoretical models with existential use, Black cites Maxwell's "incompressible fluid" as a model for the electric field. The explanation of forces action in the electric field is possible because the field is *thought of as* that fluid, and not thought as, for example, *something* filled by the fluid described by Maxwell (Black 1962a,

p. 228). The history of physics itself, for Black, shows other similar cases: the models that made fundamental discoveries possible, such as Ruthenford's solar system and Bohr's model of the atom, were not used as terms of a comparison between two domains carried out from a neutral position, but as languages needed for thinking about the domain of application; in fact, the model of the atom is not a translation, an "imaginative dress" of the mathematical formulation, which gives it greater concreteness, but is the language in which the atom is thought of *as it is* (Black 1962, p. 229). The theoretical model is applied to the new domain, so that inferences are not ruled *by* analogy but proceed "through and *by means* of an underlying analogy" (Black 1962, p. 229).

The study on theoretical models allows Black to further articulate the meaning of innovation for the interactive metaphor. He writes that, while the heuristic model requires one to place oneself in a neutral position in order to make a comparison based on analogical correspondences, the explanatory model "requires an identification typical of metaphor" (1962a, p. 228). Furthermore, Black argues that the explanatory model acts as a *speculative instrument* (Black quotes Richards' expression in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*), operating a "marriage of disparate subjects" and a "transfer of implications" with "unpredictable" results. The theoretical model "helps us to notice what would otherwise be overlooked, to shift the relative emphasis attached to details – in short, to see new connections"; it thus leads to inferences which do not merely move on prepared tracks (pp. 236-237).

4.

When Black some years later (1977) writes again about metaphor, the metaphorical identification he was dealing with in the study on models comes in the foreground. In *More about Metaphor* (1977), Black states that metaphorical thinking must be clearly distinguished from the analogical one: the user of the metaphor needs to express what he or she is doing as "thinking of something (A) as something else", and not as "comparing A to B" or "thinking of A as if it were B" (cf. Black 1977, p. 446). Furthermore, Black writes, metaphor is "at least (*but not that, merely*)" thinking of something (A) as something else (p. 446). Metaphorical thought, expressed in terms of "thinking of something as", does not fulfil the sense of the metaphorical expression. In fact, Black writes that "metaphorical thought *and utterance* [my emphasis] sometimes em-

body insight expressible in no other fashion" (Black 1977, p. 448). Black proposes an example of a "good metaphor" in this context: "Life *is* the receipt and transmission of information". If we take this metaphor "seriously", it is difficult to translate it in any other propositional form than identification. When we use a good metaphor, we do mean a constitutive "feeling": "A good metaphor sometimes *impresses,* strikes, or seizes its producer: we want to say we had a "flash of insight" (Black 1977, p. 446).

Black provides a mathematical example for identification in metaphorical thinking dealing with the necessity of an effort of imagination:

> One might ask a child to think of each of the following figures as a triangle: one composed of three *curved* segments; a straight-line segment (viewed as a collapsed triangle, with its vertex on the base); two parallel lines issuing from a base segment (with the vertex "gone to infinity"); and so on. The imaginative efforts demanded in such exercises (familiar to any student of mathematics) is not a bad model for what is needed in producing, handling, and understanding all but the most trivial of metaphors. That the use of the relevant concepts employed should *change* […] seems essential to the operation. (1977, p. 448)

In Black's discourse, we see an emerging connection between metaphors that incorporate a specific *insight* and involve imaginative effort and creative metaphors, which are "strong" metaphors insofar as they are "markedly emphatic and resonant" (1977, p. 440, 451). From this perspective, Black's lexical choices in the semantic field of "seeing" take on new relevance. Black in *More about Metaphor* provides a visual example in order to justify the creativity of metaphor: he compares the view enabled by metaphor to the slow-motion view afforded by cinematography: the slow-motion view is determined by the specific medium, but it can also be said to be *objective*, because "what is seen in a slow-motion film becomes a part of the world once it is *seen*" (Black 1977, p. 454, my emphasis). In the same essay, Black claims that metaphors operate as a cognitive tool "indispensable for perceiving connections which, *once perceived*, are *then* truly present" (p. 454). Furthermore, Black takes up the example of the screen, which he had already proposed in *Metaphor*, to explain the gap between metaphor and analogy. Black claims that "looking at a scene through blue spectacles is different from *comparing* that scene with something else" (p. 445). In a strong metaphor, correspondences and implications are not similarities that are formulated, but something that is produced, that results from the metaphor that we are "going through". Black's analogy also suggests that the seriously asserted metaphor *puts in a figure*, makes one see something new. The thinking-as is in fact

a *seeing-as*, in which immediacy coexist with the tension between differences.

The idea of some "seeing-as" experience in metaphor suggests a stimulating comparison with Wittgenstein's discussion about *sehen als* in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953, II, xi; engl. tr. 2009). We will briefly mention a few aspects. With regards to the gestalt image "duck-rabbit" and the experience of the duck "appearing" where a rabbit was previously seen, Wittgenstein (2009) writes: "Can I say? I describe the change like a perception; just as if the object had changed before my eyes […] 'Ah, now I see *this*', I might say (pointing to another picture, for example). This has the form of a report of a new perception" (Wittgenstein 2009, §§129-130, p. 206). But Wittgenstein also writes that "the expression of a change of aspect is an expression of a *new* perception and, at the same time, an expression of an unchanged perception" (§130, p. 206). If, in order to account for this tension, we decide to say that "we see the figure as a duck" we propose a mixture of seeing and thinking: "'Seeing as…' is not part of perception. And therefore it is like seeing, and again not like seeing" (p. 207, §107). This use of language, however, should not lead us to theorise about a duality that need to be reconciled, a coalescence that needs to be mediated and justified:

> 163. "You can think now of this, now of this, as you look at it, can regard it now as this, now as this, and then you will see it now this way, now this." a What way? There is, after all, no further qualification.
>
> 164. But how is it possible to see an object according to an interpretation? —- The question presents it as a strange fact; as if something had been pressed into a mould it did not really fit into. But no squeezing, no pressing, took place here. (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 211)

In fact, if one sees the gestalt image as a rabbit or a duck, she is basically seeing in a different way; it could be even said – and this could be the case also for metaphorical seeing – that she is literally seeing different things (Kubalík 2018, pp. 106-107).

5.

It seems possible to highlight some correspondence between the sense of immediacy in the experience of seeing-as and metaphor experience in Black's important confrontation with Donald Davidson. Black replied to Davidson's essay, *What Metaphors Mean* (1978), in *How Metaphor Works* (1979). Black here takes a me-

taphorical sentence quoted by Davidson ("Metaphor is the dreamwork of language") and provides a summary of true assertions about metaphor based on commonsense, which is intended as a pre-theoretical point of view. Firstly, Black maintains that metaphor *has a meaning*: the metaphor producer says something and means what he says (e.g., he intended that he should be taken as speaking seriously). It follows that metaphors can be understood or misunderstood and can be rejected or endorsed. Metaphorizing may fail or succeed and may be appropriate or not. Contextually, metaphorical statements usually imply other unstated implications: the producer typically is alluding to, suggesting, and evaluating other things. Moreover, in keeping with *More about Metaphor*'s assumptions, Black argues that Davidson's metaphorical sentence (metaphor as the "dreamwork of language") expresses a distinctive view of metaphor and gives a new *insight* into what metaphor is. Black is claiming that metaphor deals with expression as a different sense of reference and a different sense of *saying*; furthermore, he is asserting that the very analysis can explain expression as a different kind of reference.

On the other hand, in his confrontation with Davidson (1979) Black also admits the limits of his analysis in the interaction view. He still believes that metaphor is something more than comparison. There is no doubt regarding the need for metaphorical thinking: he still believes that we try to see A as metaphorically B since we need "to express our sense of the rich correspondences, interrelations, and analogies of domains conventionally separated" (1977, p. 448). But the meaning of the "something more" that distinguish metaphor identification remains "tantalizingly elusive". Black says that "We lack an adequate account of metaphorical thought" (Black 1979, p. 143). However, for Black philosophical analysis is capable of recognising, pointing out and making sense of that "something" exceeding. Indeed, the need for a speaker to use a metaphor is recognised and taken seriously on the very basis of the analysis of language.

Black's appeal to take *seriously* speaker's metaphors should also count in taking seriously Black's metaphors and analogies when he is writing about metaphor. That is to say that his assumptions can be applied both to the analysis of language and to Black's discourse on analysis, in accordance with the continuity between language and philosophy that was invoked by Richards. It may be said that the use of metaphors guide Black's analysis towards the threshold of aesthetics, since his metaphors deal with the seeing-as experience, the creative identification, the sense of *expression*, the feeling

for correspondences, some *insight* to be *embodied*. However, just as Black's analysis of metaphor suggests the value of metaphorical insight, Black's analysis may prove to be an appropriate method to understand and critically perform the crossing of the aesthetic threshold.

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