

# 'Reading intercultural encounters as art': the call of the other and the relevance of beauty

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores intercultural education research about intercultural encounters as aesthetic phenomena. I will argue that Gadamer's notion of *hermeneutical identity* when encountering an artwork can enrich intercultural education studies' (IES) conceptualisations of an event-based research and pedagogy, conceived as a mode of response to a personal address. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas' ethics as first philosophy, IES's current ethical turn posits responsibility for the (radical) other (as a pre-ontological being-in-relation) – with the resulting fracturing of our self-directing ego – as the first reality of the self. In this article, I argue that Gadamer's hermeneutics speak to the curious methodological paradox, which results from IES' turn to Levinas. Here, Gadamer provokes fruitful methodological questions as to the kind of 'research aesthetic' that could plausibly emerge from such event-based research and pedagogy – when it seeks to sustain ontological/epistemological openness and not give (fully) into the 'betrayal' of (scientific) language.

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## Introduction

This article explores intercultural encounters as art. I wish to propose that Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of (aesthetic) hermeneutic identity may support Intercultural Education Studies' (IES) current ethical turn to Emmanuel Levinas. Gadamer draws our attention to the *event* of encountering an artwork, centred around art's address and our mode of responding to such *call for* signification. Turning to Gadamer, I also hope to (perhaps indirectly) respond to (intercultural) education studies scholarship, where it takes the notion of a 'hermeneutic worldview' (e.g., Biesta 2016a; Biesta and Heimas 2020) at times as a shorthand to denote a subject-erasing position to education and research. Here, hermeneutics is posited to either presume a subject-object relationship, in which an agentic 'I' reduces the other (selves) to (ontological, epistemological) same-ness. Alternatively, hermeneutics (e.g., when Heidegger-influenced) is seen to erase the conscious self by reducing it to a mere 'sense-making machine'; one that 'disappears' in the act of adaptation to/'receiving' an external environment (e.g., Biesta 2016a, 2021, 43–44). Either way, hermeneutics (when positioned this way) can run the risk of appearing synonymous with the subject-denying stance that marks (modern) rationalist education

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and research (e.g., Biesta 2003, 63). As a result, a hermeneutic anthropology may also be read as simply oppositional to Levinas' stance. Theorising the self's practical (pre-reflective) orientation in/to the world from the 'epiphany' of being in an ethical relation to the other, Levinas seeks to instead subvert an ego-logical approach (Levinas 2006).

In its search for such non-egological (i.e., sometimes positioned as 'non-hermeneutic', e.g., Biesta 2016a) approaches to theory and practice, IES has turned in particular to Levinas' (1969, 1987, 1985) 'ethics as first philosophy' (e.g., Arnett 2003; Gehrke 2010; Ferri 2018). Conceptualising the intercultural encounter from the (pre-ontological/pre-epistemological) position of finding-oneself-in-a-relationship of responsibility for the (radical) other – the self-directing, sense-making ego's first reality is re-framed as that of 'being fractured' (rather self-sufficient). The strangeness of finding oneself 'in relation' hereby not only denies the self's and other's ontological capture and epistemological/axiological fixation. It also preserves, rather than erases, the uniqueness of the subject. Here, subjectivity is not thought to be determinate prior to the encounter. It is emerging in and through the address by the other's face. We are called to acknowledge that our 'I' is pre-ontologically bound to what must also remain irreducibly other (than being) (Biesta 2003, 63).

In this article, I wish to argue that Gadamer's (aesthetic/philosophical) hermeneutics speak in particular to the curious methodological/pedagogical paradox, which results from IES' embrace of Levinas. IES seeks concepts and practices, which sustain (ontological/epistemological) strangeness. These are to prioritise the relational (and ever estranging) address of the other (and with that, the uniqueness of the subject) over the self-directing signifying acts of the self-sufficient ego. But IES also posits the intercultural encounter as a locus of (empirical) research. It seeks to derive de-centred research approaches and alternative ways of theorising the intercultural encounter. Correspondingly, there is a sense that a self-directed 'I' thinks and writes quite busily (and comes up with alternative theories and methods), even if 'fractured' and 'emerging'. How does one write and speak from a position of emergence and fracture, whilst also satisfying the epistemological expectations of the 'academic community' to produce some kind of (scientific) truth? Biesta, in his response to articles in a special issue on Levinas and Education (2003), gets to the heart of this (Levinas-induced) methodological provocation. He writes:

The predicament here, however, is although Levinas wants to speak about what is 'otherwise than being', he can only do so in the language of being, in the language of ontology. Levinas articulates this predicament with the help of the distinction between the saying (dire, literally 'to-say') and the said (dit) (Levinas 1981, 5–7, 37–38). Although the saying always precedes the said, his point is that it can only be thematised, can only be conveyed before us in 'language qua said' – which means that it can only be expressed 'at the price of betrayal'.

*(Biesta 2003, 63–64)*

Applying Levinas' insights then as some 'epistemological alternative', perhaps even panacea to the 'hermeneutic worldview', necessarily means to 'betray' Levinas and his 'ethics as first philosophy'. To put it differently, IES cannot escape moving from the saying to the said, but also does not wish to slip into the illusion that self and other can ever be fully known. How can research ever manifest as a result? I suggest that it is here, in Levinas' emphasis on the 'performative movement of the saying' that precedes the said, that Gadamer's aesthetic hermeneutics can add to our methodological reflections. What if

we considered our research in and about intercultural encounters an aesthetic phenomenon? The experience of art, for Gadamer (2012), is not simply a self-directed act of meaning-making, in which an agentic 'I' decodes a (passive) artwork. Meaning is instead seen to emerge in our response to art's call to be understood. In other words, we partake in 'building up' a common ground with the artwork, which cannot, however, be presumed beforehand (78). It is the encounter that reveals, conceals and 'congeals' (i.e., solidifies) meaning in the structure of the work (Gadamer calls this structure *Gebilde*).

Most importantly, however, the purpose of the art work, for Gadamer (2012), firstly consists in ('simply') being there, without having to act as a carrier of a generalisable truth. Because of that, the symbolic is thought to never just signal towards an (abstract) meaning. Instead, it renders its being present in a way that must be experienced and cannot be fully held in the generalities of language/concepts (i.e., the said). On the one hand, art's representations indeed instigate communication of course. These call on us to linger, to use our imagination, feeling and reason and play with art's possible meanings. On the other hand, the symbolic defies ultimate epistemological capture, because it must be first and foremost experienced. Our 'aesthetic pleasure' (34) is moved in this play with meaning (and all our senses), but what is 'understood' here, cannot be tied to, or fully communicated, in a 'correct' epistemic notion. Aesthetic pleasure finds its expression in the movement of our imagination, feeling and reason (i.e., the saying) – prior to any epistemological certainty that can be expressed in words and concepts. We are first and foremost moved (often 'pleasurably'). I will argue that Gadamer's aesthetic hermeneutics might encourage us to pay attention to the way intercultural encounters 'move us' and to experiment with ways of responding aesthetically to Levinas' methodological provocation (which emphasises the performative movement of the 'saying' over the 'said').

### *A note on 'synthesising' Levinas and Gadamer*

Before I move to detail the article structure, I wish to, however, add a note of caution (mainly to myself). Levinas' ethics as first philosophy and Gadamer's hermeneutics cannot be simply philosophically synthesised. Their ontology of ethics and alterity, as King (2019) cogently argues, are ultimately very differently located and can therefore not be simply 'assimilated'. For Levinas, ethics and alterity emerge (as 'ontology') from the immediacy of the address of the other's face/and our 'epiphany' of ethical existential boundedness (prior to any 'knowing'). For Gadamer, alterity – and with that recognition *and* rupture – is what moves the open-ended play of dialogue with the other as a play-partner. Levinas thus emphasises the other's (radically different) subjectivity in the ethical relation, whereas Gadamer is interested in what goes beyond our subjectivity and focuses on the subject matter; that which moves (or doesn't move) within the open-ended play of dialogue. Accordingly, for Gadamer, difference emerges as always a (potentially) 'meaningful difference' (as it relates to 'content'/the said), rather than an existential/relational difference; one that seeks to preserve the other's (pre-ontological) subjectivity. Although Gadamerian alterity is that which keeps the ever open-ended play of understanding going, it is always bound within a common world/form of human life. This makes difference always potentially intelligible (but *never* absolute knowledge in a Hegelian sense) – even if communication breaks down, one agrees to disagree, cannot build up a common ground or does not reach understanding (Vilhauer 2010). Respect for the

otherness of the other is, for Gadamer, then not constituted in asserting the ultimate unknowability of the other (their subjectivity). This, according to Gadamer, could potentially act as an excuse to simply *not* engage and disregard what the other has to say to me. Respect for alterity, for him, is manifested in embarking on the journey of joint play – in engaging in the back-and-forth-movement of (ever open-ended) dialogue. Within this difficult play of understanding I am not just challenged to genuinely consider what might (very uncomfortably) challenge and rupture my familiar view of the world. I also have to pay keen attention to the (improvised) rules of the play of dialogue (the way communication moves), when it unfolds in the moment of encounter with the other (as play partner). It is in this ‘open approach to the voice of the other [and the rhythm and rules of the spontaneous unfolding of dialogic movement] who speaks to us either face to face or across time that allows one to show the Other the highest level of respect (. . .) It is this comportment of openness toward the Other that constitutes a crucial ethical condition for the possibility of genuine dialogue, in which interlocutors may come to understand each other about some subject matter and share some truth about their world’ (Vilhauer 2010, 94).

As can be seen, Gadamer indeed accommodates strangeness in his concept of interpretation and derives a notion of ethics (as one’s conduct towards ‘alterity’ in dialogue) as a result. Yet ‘understanding’ for Gadamer does not firstly relate to the other’s subjectivity (the Levinasian ‘face’), but to the other’s ‘voice’ – i.e., what s/he has to say to me (the content that moves or breaks down within dialogue). Glossing over some of the finer philosophical points regarding Levinas and Gadamer’s different ontologies of ethics/alterity (please refer to King 2019 for an excellent in-depth discussion), the article will focus on this (Gadamerian) aesthetics of (open-ended) dialogue and the performative movement of interpretation in (research about) intercultural encounters, when we consider these ‘art’ (aesthetic phenomena). My aim is then not to philosophically synthesise Gadamer and Levinas’ approach to ethics and alterity. Rather, I wish to demonstrate how Gadamer’s hermeneutics can provoke fruitful methodological questions as to the kind of ‘research aesthetic’ and conduct that could plausibly emerge from thinking IES research as a ‘call and response’; one that seeks to sustain ontological/epistemological openness and ‘de-centre’ an ego-logical approach.

## Article structure

Having summarised my motivation for this paper and the gist of my argument (including some of the limitations), I will now detail the article’s structure in four steps. In order to situate the turn to Levinas within the IES scholarship, I will firstly give a short overview of the two motivating ontological and axiological/epistemological critiques in the IES literature. In a second step, I will argue that Gadamer’s aesthetic hermeneutics – with its focus on the non-generalisability of art’s truth – could help to redress IES’ potential methodological slippage in new, normative directions. Seeking new ‘de-centred’ (empirical) research approaches that focus on the *event* of the encounter, IES tends to (at times) derive its own, new normative claims by defining these against (what are considered) ‘less ethical’ approaches to research. In my third step, I will show how Gadamer allows us to define what a de-centred research aesthetic might look like in its own terms when it is not just negatively defined against the ‘ego-logical imaginary’ (e.g., the rage for signification

thought to reside in some current social science methods). In this main section on Gadamer's hermeneutics, I will explore (in four smaller steps) Gadamer's notion of play as the mode of being of human science knowledge. I will look at the role of (Gadamerian) alterity and prejudice in dialogue; and will end this article by showing how the sensory alterity of the work of art always defies epistemological capture, because art's ultimate purpose is to be experienced. Gadamer's notion of 'hermeneutic identity', I hope to demonstrate, provokes us to consider how our research and pedagogy (as aesthetic phenomena) could instigate movements of call and response; ones that invite others to linger and participate in the play of open-ended dialogue and meaning making – without giving in to the illusion of 'science' (as full disclosure of being/knowledge). Let us start then by locating the turn to Levinas for the IES scholarship.

### **The turn to Levinas in intercultural education studies scholarship**

Intercultural Education Studies' (IES') ethical turn of philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969, 1985, 1989) seeks to re-locate the meaning of self, other and otherness within an ever-emergent 'dialogism' (Ferri 2018), which focuses on the 'performative movement' of interpretation in intercultural encounters. IES' aim is here to avoid a pre-mediated ontology/epistemology of self- and other – and intercultural being – and subvert the more ego-logical approaches which mark modern education research (Biesta 2016a, 2016b). This turn to Levinas seems to be defined in the literature against two moments in intercultural education studies scholarship in particular. Firstly, it critiques the ontological assumptions about intercultural being inherent in the intercultural competence models, which grew out of the communicative and cultural turns in language education in the 1990s (e.g., Byram, Nichols and Stevens 2001). Secondly, it stands as a critique of those new normative directions and epistemological assumptions, which underlie the emancipatory arm of IES. Let us start this section with the ontological critique of the intercultural competence models.

#### ***The ontological critique: the intercultural competence model***

Oriented towards the communicating intercultural speaker, the intercultural competence models of the cultural turn (e.g., Baker 2011; Byram 1997; Porto 2013) seek to educate students in concrete attitudes and skills with the aim of enabling them to be aware of, and critically reflect on, cultural differences. These intercultural skills and attitudes are to help students to act skilfully within the fluid social, linguistic and cultural networks that mark our globalised 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000). The immediate question that poses itself is of course how one could formulate a model (able to pin down what skills and attitudes exactly are required) when modernity, and its fluid social/cultural/linguistic networks, are also defined as forever changing. The challenge is pinpointed in Baumann's notion of 'the autonomous society'. 'Society' is here not conceived as a provider of norms and laws, which can guarantee ethical orientation and gather its members around a stable, shared meaning. The autonomous society, which conditions the free autonomous individual, is only free, Baumann suggests, once it admits to its radical cultural liquidity: 'once it knows, must know that there are no assured meanings, that it lives on the surface of chaos, that it itself is a chaos seeking a form, but a form that is never fixed once and for all'

(Bauman 2000, 212–213). On the one hand, given culture is in flux nature and the unpredictable, even precarious spaces opened by intercultural experience therein, this indeed poses the question as to what ‘reliable’ pedagogical responses (even models) could ever be formulated in the face of such ‘chaos seeking (an ever-changing) form’. On the other hand, scholars in language/intercultural studies and applied linguistics rightly point to the need for models and pedagogical approaches, given the resulting (psychological, emotional) ambivalences that mark our globalised modernity.

Probably most famously, Bhaba (1994) described this new ambivalence as a ‘third space’ – an ‘interrogative space of psychic ambivalence and social contingency’ (59), holding the opportunity for active reflection on concepts of self and otherness.

There is no identity without a struggle against the constrictions of the forms inherited from ‘tradition’. [...] The aim is not to identify oneself with a tradition, but to construct a nucleus of values, a personal identity, both rebellious and loyal, towards one’s own roots.

*(Bhaba 1994, 197f)*

The question arose of how IES could pedagogically support students to actively (critically, reflexively) engage with this unavoidable process of estrangement of (universal) identity, and the building up of a ‘personal identity’ in the midst of such psychic ambivalence. Van Leeuwen (2001) who reflects ‘on the affective ambivalence of living with cultural diversity’ (in an article of the same title), states, for example, that feelings of fascination or fear towards the unfamiliar are very closely related (148) and are often unconsciously triggered in this third space. In his model of deep intercultural learning, Shaules (2007) equally focuses on the ‘hidden nature’ of intercultural being (233), when cultural experiences work on an unconscious, and often emotionally unpredictable, level. On one side then, the impossibility of defining a society and culture which does no longer holds any stable meaning impedes the formulation of corresponding models. On the other side, the affective ambivalences (and need for reflexive engagement) that result from living-in-between this fluidity, also call for a pedagogical response from disciplines (like language/intercultural education and applied linguistics) who derive their identity from preparing students to live and act in intercultural contexts. As a result of this new ontological focus on intercultural being – relationship formation/living with the other – became a new organising principle for IES’ pedagogy/conceptual approaches. Shaules (2007) argues hereby that relationship-formation is not only a core part of intercultural learning ‘as we try to make sense of the new environment and relate to cultural hosts’ (233), but also counts as a measure of success.

In other words, IES’ ontological turn towards the nature of intercultural being (in which relationship formation is core part) also aided its search for pedagogical models, which could equip students to become ‘successful at’ intercultural being. An example of one highly influential IE pedagogical model that grew out of this cultural/ontological turn is Byram’s (1997, 1990) intercultural communicative competence model (ICC). Developed alongside the EU’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001) in the 1990s, ICC had a considerable impact on EU policy, curriculum and teaching material development in Europe, South and East Asia, Australia, and the U.S.A. in particular (Kramsch and Whiteside 2015; quoted in Hoff 2020). Byram developed his model of ICC as a critical response to language teaching/learning approaches when these heralded the traditional mono-lingual native speaker as ‘the benchmark against

which to measure linguistic abilities' (Byram, Nichols and Stevens 2001, 5). He contended that this linguistic standard is unachievable for foreign language students. Even more importantly through, he added it also dismissed the social skills and competencies required to self-reflectively negotiate a relationship-focused intercultural situation, one that could result in a 'modification of monocultural awareness' (Byram and Fleming 1998, 137).

Because intercultural speakers need to be able to see how misunderstandings can arise, and how they might be able to resolve them, they need the attitudes of decentring but also the skills of comparing  
(Byram, Nichols and Stevens 2001, 6).

Byram's (1997) five-savoir model encompasses the attitudes, dispositions, knowledge and skills considered most relevant in honing students' ability to engage (skilfully/successfully) in intercultural encounters centred around relationship-formation.

- (1) *Savoirs/knowledge*: This is not about a specific knowledge of a culture but *how social groups and identities function*, e.g., in relation to how people see oneself/I see others etc.
- (2) *Savoir comprendre: skills of relating and interpreting*. This involves the skills of interpreting and mediating between oral and written documents from one's own and another culture.
- (3) *Savoir s'engager: critical cultural awareness*. Ability to critically evaluate (e.g., a society/culture, other intercultural speakers) on the basis of explicit evaluative criteria, perspectives or products in one's own/other culture (this has been later also expanded into intercultural citizenship education, see Hoff 2020).
- (4) *Savoir apprendre/faire: skills of discovery and interaction*. Ability to acquire new knowledge of cultural practices and operate knowledge, attitudes and skills in real-time communication and interaction.
- (5) *Savoir être: relates to the attitudes of the intercultural speaker*. Curiosity, openness, willingness to relativise one's values; suspend 'beliefs' about the other/one's own culture. Ability to de-centre one's values, beliefs, behaviours in light of other perspectives.

The ICC (Byram 1997) model outlines forms of knowledge (of self and other) and skills (relate, interpret, discover, value), which are to offer a conceptual model and guide to pedagogical practice. It aims to hone students' competent 'critical cultural engagement' in intercultural relationship-formation, raise intercultural awareness (i.e., reduce monocultural awareness) and increase intercultural understanding.

The ICC model has also gathered its critics over the years. Given the word limitations of this paper, I cannot follow up all avenues of critique. Hence, I will focus on the 'ontological critique', which is key to my argument around IES' turn to Levinas. For an in-depth discussion of the 'evolution of intercultural communicative competence' and its critics (and Byram's further development of the model), I recommend Hoff's (2020) excellent article. To start with, the ontological critique turns us back to where I started this section. Liquid modernity revealed the complexity of inter-cultural relations, which not only defy easy categorisation but are as heteroglossic as language itself (Kramersch 1998). Internationalisation and globalisation brought the intercultural dimension to our

doorsteps (Byram and Esarte-Sarries 1991, 8). As a result, not even languages can count as clear 'key signs of belonging' anymore and terms such as 'home' and 'abroad' have shifted meaning – and for some (e.g., jet-setting professionals/the elite) have (perhaps) even become obsolete in today's globalised, multilingual world (Phipps and Gonzalez 2004, 18). The resulting epistemological uncertainties revealed the insufficiency of existing models (e.g., the native speaker benchmark), as well as the difficulty of proposing a set of skills and attitudes, which could reliably prepare students to act in such heteroglossic cultural contexts. At the same time, the ontological turn towards intercultural being as relationship-formation allowed for new (conceptual/pedagogical) models to be derived through a focus on the intercultural encounter (face to face/textual).

Byram's ICC model is one such example of a conceptual/pedagogical acknowledgement of the changed nature of intercultural being. Hoff (2014), in her critical discussion of the ICC model, summarises its tendency towards ontological certainty. She is concerned as to the five *savoir* model's underlying notion of human universality, in which conflict is recognised and resolved – towards the aims of intercultural awareness raising and understanding. On the one hand, the model initially suggests an open movement of mediation as the questioning/interpreting of intercultural experience. Here, knowledge of what the self and other is or could be is indeed forestalled. On the other hand, this discursive terrain is closed when it moves towards the realisation of the ideal (conflict-free) humanity. Consequently, the ontological openness regarding the meaning of self and other in the encounter is then relativised – turned into a 'passive' intercultural narrative, which is conspicuously stripped of its strangeness (Dasli 2011). Here, self and other can be 'understood' (i.e., ontologically/epistemologically captured) and reconciled. Framed by such ontological certainty/essentialism, MacDonald and O'Regan (2013) propose that Byram's competence model demonstrates a certain 'impetus towards universal consciousness' (1006), which runs the risk of closing off the discursive terrain around intercultural *being*. '[T]he wish to highlight universal aspects of the human condition is made at the expense of actively and inquisitively investigating cultural difference' (Hoff 2014, 512). In summary, presuming that intercultural being can be a-priori defined, new epistemological certainties are derived and pedagogically realised in a way that conciliates (and renders knowable) self and other in the process.

### *The second critique - Emancipatory intercultural education*

In response to the (implicit) tendency of the (e.g.) ICC model to pre-determine the ideal intercultural being and move towards a reconciliation of self and other, emancipatory intercultural education seeks to shine a light on dissonance and contradiction in order to realise socio-political aims (e.g., social justice). The emancipatory arm of IES draws our attention to the inequities that are concealed by notions of (an ideal) human universality, especially when these hold wider oppressive societal structures in place. In an interview with Henry Giroux, a leading figure in radical education theory, Guilherme (2006) critiques intercultural competence models (like Byram 1997) when these synthesise the relation between self and other. The ideal of overcoming difference and achieving harmonious diversity, Guilherme suggests, can leave unquestioned oppressive societal structures. Therefore, the focus on the ideal humanity can (inadvertently) silence particular (marginalised) groups. This

can obscure those specific socio-political oppressions, which prevent the realisation of a concrete rather than abstract notion of 'humanity' in the first place.

This ontological critique of the intercultural competence model hereby maps onto wider critiques of those notions of multiculturalism, in which diversity (e.g., as a liberal ideal) is either thought to flow smoothly within existing 'cultural forms of uninterrupted accord' (Hooks 1994, 31), without disturbing *any* social relations, or is prescribed as a form of 'difference multiculturalism' (Turner 1994). Here, difference is assimilated into a wider political agenda, for example, of integration – as expressed by the idea of a 'melting pot'. This runs the (conceptual) risk of denying the individual's right and ability to reject their own culture or negotiate their own identity (and idea of their concrete humanity) against a prescribed expectation of difference (Prato 2009). Critical (emancipatory) cultural awareness seeks to make visible these wider issues of social contestation which can affect people's/learner's lives. It is, as Guilherme (2002) writes, 'a cognitive and emotional endeavour that aims at individual and collective emancipation, social justice and political commitment' (218).

Accordingly, critical educators in the field of language education (e.g., Phipps and Guilherme 2004; Levine and Phipps 2012) advocate for intercultural education pedagogies and concepts that refuse static and individualised notions of competence. Instead, IES is to take into account the social conditions and educational frameworks which construct the learner as having a deficit (educational, cultural, economic) in the first place. Here, IES is to question (in their concepts and practices) how educational environments, and the wider societal structures that give life to them, enable and nurture – or equally often dis-able – the individual's ability to become 'competent' (e.g., in accordance with pedagogical, or political aims) in the first place (Frimberger 2017). Groups, such as asylum seekers and refugees, for example, who do not enjoy equitable status, Phipps (2013) warns, 'act as symbolic examples of a subaltern who are excluded from the lofty aims of Intercultural Dialogue as equal exchange in many of their encounters, thus troubling the ideal [e.g., underlying the ICC model] and exposing its vacuousness' (115).

As a result, critical pedagogical approaches remind us that humanity cannot be considered a given ideal. It is perhaps better considered a 'provocation' (e.g., when considering those excluded from such ideals), which can drive the establishment of the broader socio-political conditions in which all learners can develop their full potential (humanity) as individuals in a specific society. Critical intercultural education's emancipatory aims are differently phrased in the often Freire-inspired (1973, 1995), literature. To give some examples: for Dasli and Diaz (2017), these aims involve a 'questioning of dominant ideologies'. Guilherme draws on Henry Giroux's 'border pedagogy' to point towards an alternative 'postcolonial cosmopolitan perspective to the North American, [Dewey-an] notion of democratic civic education' (2006). And Trueba and Bartolomé (2000) point to Freire to envision a teacher education in which educators are 'equipped with a full understanding of what it means to have courage – to denounce the present inequities that directly cripple certain populations of students (...)' (289).

### The logic of emancipation and the erasure of individual experience

Emancipatory intercultural education rightly draws our attention to the (well-meaning) ontological premises which can reside in conceptual/pedagogical models when these

presume an a-priori ideal of humanity. Their ontological critique poignantly concludes that such human universality (e.g., expressed in conceptual and pedagogical notions of what intercultural being/self and other is/should become) can indeed obscure the very concrete social injustices and inequities that the model pertains to 'overcome'. At the same time, however, emancipatory education (implicitly) re-establishes its own new normativity. MacDonald and O'Regan (2013) summarise this tendency: 'the critical-transformational ethical arm of intercultural communication discourse (...) intends to increase people's awareness of manipulation, exploitation, discrimination and abuse in the world against an (often) implied foundational ethical premise' (1009).

To expand on this 'normative critique', I will discuss three risks that result from the transcendental value assumptions that undergird emancipatory IE's notion of emancipation and liberation. Firstly, these can implicitly assume their own a-priori 'ontology' regarding the existence of a certain discrete and (modern) rationalist notion of what exactly constitutes an emancipated human being/self – against which social injustices can then not only be fairly measured, but also correctly intervened against (by the educator, researcher). Secondly, such normative claims can be founded upon the idea of a 'hidden knowledge' underneath what is presented in everyday reality. This is a hidden knowledge that calls for the liberatory acts of unveiling and de-mystification of (hidden) ideological entanglements. As a result, a hierarchy of epistemological distribution is (inadvertently) re-introduced, between those who can see 'real' reality and must act on this knowledge (as liberators), and those who cannot see and (subsequently) act (the oppressed). Thirdly, emancipatory intercultural education then runs the risk of inscribing the 'oppressed' self (not yet able to meet the rationalist notion of the liberated self/human; and thus not able to see or act on real reality) with the inability to assess their own life. This 'blindness' might also (inadvertently) suggest the oppressed person's/group's inability to evaluate those various dimensions of value outside of the rationalist framework, including a supposed incapacity to narrate and strategise what is to constitute a 'liberation' (or not) in the first place. Biesta (2016b) explains the resulting paradox of an emancipatory education, when the workings of power are thought to not only obstruct the individual's ability to flourish, but also to act upon their consciousness. He (2016b) writes:

What is needed to bring about emancipation, so educators in the critical tradition argue, is an explanation of the workings of power, as it is only when one sees and understands how power operates that it becomes possible to address its influence and, in a sense, escape from it (...) there is an important strand within the critical tradition in which it is argued that emancipation can only be brought about 'from the outside', that is, from a position that, itself, is not contaminated by the workings of power. (78).

The supposed effect of this 'clouding' of their understanding of their own conditions of oppression can then justify the individual's (assumed) inability to articulate their own life and its many value dimensions to themselves and to others. As Rancière (2004) indicates, such a model of emancipatory education can be underpinned by an implicit logic of dependence on an outside liberator. Here, the educator (for example) must create the conditions for knowledge to be revealed to the oppressed so that they can understand their situation and then, after the de-mystification, take action. As he writes in his 'politics of aesthetics' (2004) about the epistemological hierarchy that emerges therein: 'where one searches for the hidden beneath the apparent, a position of mastery is established'

(46). This is a notion of liberation, in which the individual's conscious experience (and with that their ability to self-govern) is (implicitly or explicitly) seen to be determined by their material conditions.

Pointing to its philosophical antecedent – the Marxist-Leninist doctrinal distinction between idealism and materialism – 'real' being here risks being determined by a notion of materialism which cannot be shaped or (in an extreme version) even be questioned by the individual's conscious experience of their own life. As a result, 'emancipation is understood as something that is *done to* somebody, but also reveals that emancipation is based upon a fundamental inequality between the emancipator and the one to be emancipated. Equality, in this account becomes the outcome of emancipation; it becomes something that lies in the future' (Biesta 2016b, 82). In such future-oriented logic of emancipation the individual's own understanding of the world, their conscious experience of their own (valued) life *in the here and now*, and their mode of narrating this life to themselves and others in its various dimensions of value, appear as outside of the established (modern, rationalist) logic of emancipation.

### The ethical turn: Levinas in intercultural education studies

Drawing on Levinas, critical intercultural education scholars (e.g., MacDonald and O'Regan 2013) wish to subvert the two 'subjectivity-erasing' trends in intercultural communication pedagogy which I summarised in the previous sections. On the one hand, IES hereby seeks to avoid the subject-erasing stance of the competence models when these 'transform' the otherness of the other towards a higher ideal (e.g., of intercultural being). On the other hand, it also hopes to counteract the subject-erasing stance of emancipatory intercultural education when it (inadvertently) subsumes the individual's experience under the new ontological/epistemological claim of 'liberation' (i.e., the logic of emancipation). With Levinas (1969, 1985, 1989), intercultural education scholars seek instead to conceptualise the meaning of self, other and otherness from within an emergent aesthetic of 'dialogism' (Ferri 2018). Rather than focusing on the ontological given-ness (of intercultural being), dialogism refers to the performative movement of interpretation in intercultural encounters. Here, Levinas' ethics as first philosophy emphasises the existential state of being in a relation of responsibility to the world, as prior to any disclosure of being (ontology) as knowledge.

In order to give expression to such pre-ontological stance, IES' alternative *non-model* of intercultural communication homes in on the *moment* of encounter as marked by the address of the other and the *response* to the 'epiphany' of responsibility (as an existential, rather than axiological relation). Posited as a response to postmodern concerns about human encounters (Arnett 2003; Gehrke 2010), the self, and otherness of the other, are here *not* sought to be reconciliated or transformed towards a higher ideal. Self and other are also not to be subsumed under a notion of emancipation that erases the individual's experience in substitution of a concept of selfhood that aligns to modern, rationalist conceptualisations of liberation (decided and acted upon by an external educator, researcher). With Levinas' help, IES instead wishes to transcend the competence models and, more generally, communication studies' search for a universal notion of community, in which difference is subordinated to identification and similarity (Gehrke 2010, 15).

Levinas's ethics as first philosophy allows IES to evade this risk of systematisation. It avoids pre-mediated concepts of otherness and ethical rules so that the other is not assimilated into identification, or individual experience absorbed into foundational ethical premises.

With Levinas (1989), IES then contends that our conduct of interpretation (in life and research) needs to acknowledge this a-priori otherness of the other. This gesture of interpretation (in research and pedagogy) entails a listening and paying attention to the other's radical exteriority – which can however never be fully assimilated into our schemata of understanding. For Levinas, this first of all begets a 'being with the other' (Levinas 1989, 149), even before any words are spoken. The moment of encounter, Levinas suggests, hereby also produces a certain self-discovery, a 'bearing witness to oneself' (Levinas 1969, 201). Here, the 'I' experiences their actuality within the flowing, performative movement as a response to the other's call. This self, which is experienced within the flow of encounter, is however not thought of as a discrete rational category. It is not conceived as a self that existed prior to, or independent of, the event. As Arnett (2003) reminds us, Levinas does not conceptualise this self (that emerges from the encounter) as a controlling, will-full, agentic 'I'. It is described as a more porous kind of self. Here, the 'I' is always *already called to respond* to the other's ethical demand for response, with no (ethical) guarantees as to the nature of the resulting dialogue. Subjectivity takes shape as a 'responsive self' (Arnett 2003) when answering this ethical demand for response posed by the other's presence.

### In search of non-models and de-centred methodologies

Having summarised the Levinas-inspired turn in IES, I now move to explore the research methods that are put forward as a response to this new existential, relational ethics. How do critical intercultural education scholars conceptualise the methods that can hold the strangeness of the address/the encounter in the perpetual openness of interpretation? Firstly, it seems to me that the new non-model methodologies (e.g., Phipps 2013) suggest a certain moral-aesthetic double gesture. Refusing the systematisation and pre-mediated concepts (of value and being), intercultural education focuses on the interpretive ('aesthetic-ethical') conduct within the moment of encounter (in communication and research afterwards). This involves a mode of being addressed and responding to the otherness of the embodied subject in encounter.

Additionally, the search for a non-model also suggests a gesture of perpetual openness to the otherness of the very notions and concepts which could plausibly represent such a moment of encounter in the language of (modern) education research. In other words, this interpretive double gesture firstly manifests in the movement of call and response when encountering otherness. Secondly, it emerges during the work of making sense of, and representing, knowledge about otherness in research. Rejecting the presupposed categorisation and subsequent instrumentalisation of otherness in education and research, 'dialogism' is proposed as a framework to understanding intercultural interaction. Rather than being geared towards the harmonic reconciliation of self and other, Ferri (2018) describes dialogism as an interaction that leads to 'the recognition of a reciprocal and common existential state of incompleteness. Intercultural encounters here represent the opportunity to discover otherness in the familiar, and to accept the fact that both self and other remain unknowable' (96). In summary, dialogism is proposed as an interpretive

non-model; one that does not gloss over the possibility of conflict and misunderstanding but regards them as constitutive of communication (110). In this Levinas-inspired dialogic framing, the other is not to be assimilated into a presupposed ontology of presence. Here, we can never confidently explain what the self and other *is* or is supposed to *become*. The other's (and also the self's) exteriority, and with that their (radical, continuous) alterity, is preserved, the rational self inter-rupted, and the understanding of *intercultural being* forestalled.

Through the conceptualisation of an intercultural encounter whose (existential) ethics is precedent and whose meaning as ethical obligation in the real world is experientially constituted within the encounter (ontological, epistemological) understanding is deferred. As a result, it can only be formulated as research after the event. The strangeness emerging from the encounter between embodied self and embodied other (and their subsequent conceptualisation in research) is hereby considered an integral interpretive movement that marks our contemporary intercultural lives. At the same time, the 'radical alterity' that constitutes the intercultural encounter is also imbued with what one might describe as a certain methodological and epistemological 'hope'. Dialogism is to act as a potential catalyst for a new methodological conduct: a new way of thinking and doing research in and about interculturality.

But how does the kind of 'truth' that emerges in the materiality of the embodied, emerging (ultimately non-synthesisable) communicative encounter between self and other, map onto the ethical obligations for the other that manifest within the experience? What kind of research methodology could account for the open, productive, estranging capacity of the intercultural encounter, conceived as a meeting of embodied, inter-dependent subjectivities without reinscribing these with (implicit) normative ethics? The tension is illustrated in Phipps (2013) call for de-centred research approaches proposed as a response to social science methods' 'zealous defining and fixing of others' (12). De-centred approaches are meant to be a way to 'allow spaces for the margins to become visible' (12) and to rupture the rational autonomy of the (zealously defining and fixing) researcher. Although the post-methods and de-centred stance of research are to slow down the researcher's epistemological/ontological rage for signification, they are however also conceived within an (implicit) alternative ethical normativity; one in which the more ethical 'exploratory, post-colonial and decentring methods' (111) are to recalibrate social science's 'unethical' tendency to 'categorise and fix' the other in data-driven research. Phipps (2013) describes the interpretive conduct and accompanying ethos of the alternative post-methods as follows: researcher and subject should be able to 'continuously negotiate the meanings and dynamics and the potential for aesthetic resonance of their speech such that the speech and speakerhoods may debate, dialogue, translate, interpret and chorus their understandings and hopes for their particular intercultural world' (18).

IES scholars (e.g., Ferri 2018; Phipps 2013) then seek a new research aesthetic; a new way of 'dialoguing' the hopes and understanding of people's particular intercultural worlds in research. This 'dialogism' is to focus on the continuous performative movement of interpretation (as a kind of embodied, precedent ethics that evades discursive closure), whilst also perhaps running the risk of re-establishing a certain new normative direction. Here, the new de-centred approaches are set in opposition to other (purportedly 'less ethical') research methods. But how does one incorporate new methods into what is

deemed a non-normative, post-methods approach? How can a researcher ever fully *de-centre* their aims and practices, when, as an embodied person in the world, one can never truly escape (and with that never really fully *de-centre*) one's cultural, social and historical situated-ness? How should one subvert 'the ideal of individual rational autonomy from which the ego emanates' (Dasli and Simpson 2021, 1) in an academic world, where one does not ever stop speaking, writing and publishing (and the ego flourishes therein).

Even if conceptualised as a responsive and fractured, rather than a wilful, agentic self (Arnett 2003), the 'rational self' still finds expression in the new aims and norms that are posited as alternatives to the existing ones. What I mean is: somebody is still thinking, writing and talking about the meaning of the non-models (in new models) in the realm of (usually written) understandable (aka rational) language. How do we navigate the search for what seems like a (still), and perhaps necessarily, value driven post-method – decolonial, socially just etc. (Phipps 2013) – that is also still formulated by a historically-located 'I' (able to conceive of the necessity of a different value base for their model)? Can a non-model be thought convincingly? Or is all that we can arrive at a sort of anti-model, one that simply derives its own conceptual potency from defining itself against epistemologically and ethically suspect data-driven social science methods and pedagogical models?

### Gadamer's hermeneutic identity and the play of dialogue

Having sketched out IES' turn to Levinas and the methodological curiosities that derive from IES' search for non-models and post-methods, I will now explore Gadamer's notion of aesthetic hermeneutics. Gadamer allows us to ask what a de-centred research aesthetic might look like *in its own terms*, when it is not just negatively defined against the 'ego-logical imaginary' (e.g., the fashion for signification thought to reside in some current social science methods). This section unfolds over four smaller steps. I will firstly look at the kind of 'truth' that is thought to reside in intercultural encounters (and our research) when considered (with Gadamer) as aesthetic phenomena. Secondly, I will investigate Gadamer's notion of play, which claims presentation as a mode of being of the work of art and human science knowledge more generally. Thirdly, I will seek to understand the role of alterity and prejudice in Gadamerian dialogue; and fourthly I will end this article by showing how Gadamer conceives of the sensory alterity of the work of art. Art, he claims, ultimately defies epistemological capture because its purpose is to be experienced.

### Intercultural encounters as aesthetic phenomena

Perhaps we can start this section by reading IES' de-centring calls not simply as a battle cry for the 'ethical re-calibration' of existing social scientific methodologies, but as turning us to a different tradition of (education) research understood as a human, rather than a social, science. Pointing towards the hermeneutic tradition as the systematic basis for all humanities disciplines, Gadamer (2013) suggests that we need to first understand that the 'miracle of understanding' that emerges from our interpretive gesture in the human sciences is knowledge of a unique kind. It is certainly different to the knowledge that we normally expect to 'create' in the natural, and often also the social sciences. Our acts of interpretation in and about intercultural encounters, when we consider these aesthetic

phenomena, produce a different kind of knowledge to that of the other sciences. This is because art always understands itself as being part of the (cultural, historical) world, and not external to it – whilst also pointing beyond itself.

As a result, art cannot be easily ‘observed’, ‘collected’, ‘coded’ and ‘analysed’ as if it was fully abstractable from its relationality to the world. It is neither knowledge that simply transcends time and space, nor is it knowledge that is only located in my subjective experience. Art, as a mode of knowledge, is always already in relation with the historical and cultural world at the point of observation and this of course includes me, the observer. The meaning of aesthetic experiences, like those that constitute our intercultural lives, then unfold in our encounter with the arte-facts and of course, most importantly, with the people and the specific historical, social, cultural worlds they speak of; a world which we ourselves are also part of and that we help shaping (whether we want to or not). Encountering art is therefore always also an encounter with ourselves, and with that, also a mode of self-understanding (Gadamer 2013, 87). If art is a mode of knowledge, and encountering an artwork means sharing in the cultural and historical knowledge the artwork speaks of, the question poses itself. What kind of truth (or hope for truth) is revealed in this encounter, given that art, like us, is always already part of the cultural world?

### *The mode of being of knowledge in the human sciences*

Gadamer (2013) suggests that truth can only ever be revealed within the movement of interpretation. This, however, requires a certain conduct of ‘dialoguing’ in the world (he calls this hermeneutic consciousness). This is an ethical conduct that is open to alterity and seeks a truth that is beyond the subjectivity of the person. What ethics here means exactly however can only emerge within the specifics of encounter. We firstly need to understand that ‘the “subject” of the experience of art, that which remains and endures [the truth], is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself. This is the point at which the mode of being of play becomes significant’ (107). The concept of play is to help us to gain an insight into the mode of being of the work of art and of human science knowledge more generally. Play, Gadamer insists, exists independently of the subjectivity of the players. It ‘comes to presentation in’ the players, but only when their usual subjective points of view, and the purposive relationships that mark their everyday lives and identities, are momentarily suspended, and they lose themselves in the seriousness of play.

That is to say, the structure of play, patterned by the to-and-fro-movement that is instigated by its specific rules, regulations and rituals, absorbs the players into itself and makes all playing also a being played (109–111). This structure of play instigates the movement of interpretation which always oscillates between resistance and reconciliation. Here, the self is not merely self-directing. It is embedded in and moved by the possibilities (of understanding) and limitations (e.g., of failed communication and ethical breakdown) that emerge within the specific game’s rules. These rules and rhythms of dialogue can hereby not be a-priori discerned and ‘prepared for’ in that sense. They are constituted ‘in-situ’ by the movement of interpretation as it occurs in a specific (historically, socio-culturally located) communicative moment. Most importantly for Gadamer (2013), we have to keep in mind that the mode of conduct of those involved in play is

intimately tied to these emerging make-believe goals of their game. The 'rules' find their ultimate purpose in being represented, usually to a (real or imagined) audience, which means that the conditions of the encounter can never be fully known before they are manifested. Presentation is thus the mode of being of the work of art, and human science knowledge more generally (119). Such a presentational mode invites a spectator to 'get in touch' and calls for their attention. Within this (potential) joy and risk of recognition (and of rupture) – of something of the world and oneself in it – when encountering art 'what we know emerges, as if illuminated, from all contingent and variable circumstances that condition it; it is grasped in its essence. In other words, is known as something' (119).

### *The role of alterity in dialogue*

For Gadamer, an openness to alterity, which includes the potential risk and joys of recognition, is at the heart of an understanding that reaches beyond subjective truth in dialogue (but also does not erase it). The circular (ever unfinished) hermeneutic task of interpretation (captured in the metaphor of play) consists in the continuous working out of our fore-projections, so that we can stay open to the (unexpected) truth(s) that might be revealed in the moment of encounter.

A person trying to understand a text or a person [in the moment of encounter] must be prepared for it to tell him *something*. This is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness [that is a consciousness trained in the art of interpretation] must be from the start, open and sensitive to the text's [and we shall add a person's] alterity (Gadamer 2013, 282).

Our fore-projections describe the expectations that we entertain in relation to what there is to gain from the act of listening, reading and interpreting the other, as person or text. On that account, the task of interpretation always involves the continuous describing, testing, questioning, and thus revising, of the expectation we have when encountering, and re-encountering (and re-encountering) the other – so that we might arrive at a truth (whatever that might be in the end) that indeed transcends our own subjectivity.

The hermeneutic conduct of interpretation then works from the viewpoint of dialogue and encounter within a shared form of life, even if this does not necessarily guarantee that the search for truth will be a harmonious one or 'successful'. It however allows us to conceptualise intercultural encounters as yielding aesthetic experiences, i.e., experiences that form and bring forth certain subjectivities in specific socially and historically, dialogically located events. Consequently, intercultural encounters are treated as productive phenomena – as producing emergent, aesthetic effect; aesthetic effects that form the relationship between my observing 'I' and my understanding: of my-self and the other self(s) – bound by the shared human world (and potential 'subject matter') that self and other 'play with' in dialogue. Interpretation (in life and art) then always involves an act of self- and other-inquiry and, necessarily, an openness to the voice of the other. Gadamer (2013) writes further:

The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias [even if we can never escape our own situatedness in the world], so that the text [and we shall add the person] can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings. (282)

For Gadamer, there is then a prerequisite for this open-ended, continuous hermeneutic movement of interpretation towards an experience of truth. This is a keen awareness of the potential tyranny of our implicit and explicit prejudice, because it can make us deaf to the voice of the embodied/textual other. Levinas (1985) would of course agree as to this (ever lurking) danger of 'signification': the act of absorbing the other into pre-established patterns of meaning and expression that can deny the other's possibility for action. At the same time, Levinas is of course also aware that even the performative dimension of the 'saying' can only be conveyed in language (the said), so that we cannot *not* take the risk of signification.

### *The role of prejudice in dialogue*

Boldy, Gadamer (2013) hereby even draws our attention to the fact that in fact *all* understanding always necessarily involves such risky forms of preliminary signification. Our fore-projections constitute a preliminary meaning-making even if we cannot exactly explain how the 'I' stands in relation to these fore-projections when it is dis-located or 'emerging' in aesthetic experience. This (necessary) *pre-judice*, as well as the act of self-inquiry into our fore-projections (and with that the risk of communication) are part of any attempt of understanding the world. And nobody can perform this risky act of self-inquiry and other-inquiry on our behalf. To put it clearly, nobody can relieve us of the risk of interpretation. Gadamer then seems to say, quite pragmatically, that we can never fully get away from our pre-judice. It is part and parcel of our existential state of (always already) being embedded in the human form of life/world. Do we have to review our prejudice against prejudice, given that we cannot 'liberate' ourselves from it, but cannot understand the world without it either? A pre-judice, in its legalistic meaning denotes 'a judgement that is rendered before all the elements that determine the situation have been finally examined' (Gadamer 2013, 283). In German legal terminology, a pre-judice is described accordingly as a 'provisional legal verdict rendered before the final verdict is reached' (283). In this view, a final judgement (as a 'just' negative consequence for the person involved in legal dispute, for example) depends precisely on the positive value of the provisional pre-judgement (the prejudice), which precedes, and is integral to, the final judgement.

Can there be truth without pre-judice then? Gadamer would probably suggest not. Our pre-judice against the term prejudice, he argues, is inherited from the notion of scientific truth that stems from enlightenment rationality where it originated as a critique of religion as an 'unfounded judgement'. Due to the fact that religion did not derive its claims to truth from an empirical basis as God (like individual consciousness, aesthetic experience) cannot be observed and measured according to the same external scientific criteria that one uses to ascertain the natural laws, religion was stripped of its claim to truth. It was declared a pre-judice, this is how the term 'pre-judice' gained its negative connotation (284).

There is then a hope and a risk which accompanies our movement of interpretation. We are inextricably in relation and seeking to respond to the ethical demand placed on us. At the same time, we always also run the risk of reducing the other (and what they have to say to us) to the same things. Levinas hereby also warns that it is the very prioritisation of words (the said) as constitutive of interpretation (as Gadamer seems to tend towards),

which can increase this risk of making us 'deaf' (unreceptive) to that which cannot be spoken in words. As a result, the gesture of interpretation (in research and pedagogy) entails a listening and paying attention to the other's radical exteriority which can never be fully assimilated into our schemata of understanding. For Levinas, this first and foremost begets a 'being with the other' (Levinas 1989, 149), even before any words are spoken.

### *Being with the work of art*

How does Gadamer conceive of such pre-ontological/epistemological moment/movement of 'being with' in his hermeneutics? In 'The Relevance of Beauty', Gadamer (2012), lays out how the aesthetic address indeed moves us to play with meaning. At the same time, he suggests that the gesture of interpretation always also involves a 'being with' what cannot be grasped in language. Here, the work of art puts forth its own double gesture. It indeed represents what can be referenced and communicated in words. At the same time (and most importantly for our discussion), it also renders present what can only be experienced. It is to this radical sensory strangeness of the work of art that we shall now turn, in order to understand how it defies (its own) epistemological capture.

### *Radical sensory strangeness*

Gadamer's (2012) notion of (aesthetic) hermeneutic identity unfolds within the event of responding to arts' address which calls us to linger, play and understand what can ultimately never be epistemologically captured, only experienced on its own terms. To put it differently, art de-centres and 'slows down' our rage for meaning by engaging us in a to-and-fro-movement of dialogue – a play. Here, we are called on to build up our image of the work of art but in the time and rhythm that art imposes on us (Gadamer calls this *Eigenzeit*). Art leads us back, again and again, to its particular, sensory structure and form. Gadamer theorises a hermeneutics that finds its identity only in the event of encountering art and does not exist prior to it. In his 'Relevance of Beauty' (Gadamer 2012), he draws on the notions of *play* and *symbol* in order to elucidate our anthropological experience of art. Here, he argues (as in 'Truth and Method', 2013) that the work of art (like all things overflowing with life) dwells in a mode of (performative) playful self-presentation, which calls us to be understood.

Whilst addressing us to play and participate in creating arts' (manifold) meanings, the work of art also necessarily undermines its own ontological/epistemological categorisation. That is because art not only *re-presents* but also *embodies* (or better, *renders present*) a non-representational truth, one whose purpose is simply its being there (with the aim of being experienced). Here, art evades any signification (that is external to itself), yet also enriches our own being in the encounter with its particular (revealing and concealing) sensory form and structure of time (its *Eigenzeit*). Hence, the radical strangeness of the work of art is marked by its (continuous) call for signification, but also by the very impossibility of (fully) re-presenting (as abstract truth) of what just is present to our senses.

This epistemological defiance, for Gadamer, constitutes precisely art's beauty and hermeneutic identity. The work of art then points towards a reality beyond itself (it always represents *something* that we can reference in thought and language, as it is of this

world). But this 'something' (that which can be represented and known) simply gets us moving. It instigates, in its own time, the movement of communication and aesthetic pleasure. It invites the play of our participation in arts' meaning (which however does not exist prior to the encounter and needs to be 'built up'). Art's unique truth and beauty (in the end) is, according to Gadamer, only revealed in its radical, sensory particularity and non-generalisability. This means that it does not exist without our participation and play in building up its 'image'. Accordingly, we have to create common ground; we have to encounter its unique features (its *Gebilde*). We have to come back to the work of art, because it always points back to itself (calling us again and again).

Hence, art conceals and reveals, and 'builds up' its particular truth in our sensory (but ultimately purpose-less) circular participation in its meaning. At the same time, this call-and-response act of signification cannot be subsumed under ontological/epistemological (or chronological time) regimes beyond itself (otherwise there would be no need for art). This means that hermeneutic identity is constituted in our pleasurable, relational play of 'building up' a dialogue with the work of art (which can of course also break down). As a result, an aesthetic (and ultimately ethical) movement that Gadamer's (2012) calls aesthetic pleasure (33) comes into play, but without a (finite) 'grasping' of art's practical purpose (as knowledge). In summary, aesthetic pleasure is constituted (again and again) where we are moved to linger in the (ultimately) concept-less and meaning-less beauty and radical strangeness of intercultural encounters as art. Such (autonomous) beauty and strangeness can indeed enrich our being. This is not because art (and intercultural encounters) allows us to understand what has conceptual currency beyond the encounter. Art enriches because it is irreplaceable. That is, art is unique in the way it invites and instigates our play (sensory, emotional, intellectual) with its particular (concealing/revealing) sensory structure, and in the rhythm of its autonomous temporality (its *Eigenzeit*).

### Conclusion: The aesthetic pleasures of IES research

In this article, I have argued that Gadamer's notion of hermeneutic identity, grounded in the aesthetic-ethical (and temporal) event of encountering the strangeness (of the other/the work of art), could support IES' aim to pursue a research aesthetic that can quieten our rage for (universal) meaning. This is because Gadamer provokes us to think about the kind of acts and accounts of 'understanding' that could plausibly emerge from within a Levinasian event of address (when it also works with the unavoidable movement from the saying to the said). As I have shown, this movement from the saying to the said in intercultural encounters can hereby not be fully represented in 'scientific' language (without being 'betrayed'), as IES scholars cogently remind us (Ferri 2018; Phipps 2013). Given that intercultural encounters' 'truth' emerges in the event of our (personal) encounter with what is ultimately an irreducible strangeness, these encounters' emerging aesthetic effects cannot be easily translated into rationalist/scientific categories. When considering research as an ethical-aesthetic *event* (which gets us moving in response to the other's call), we have to consider (with Gadamer) that its 'truth' cannot easily be made useful for other purposes beyond itself (e.g. social, political, scientific ones). As such, one might argue that any research in and about intercultural encounters, when considered an aesthetic phenomenon (and manifesting as the 'said'), has to aim to give us (e.g. readers) a sense of the 'saying's' sensory and temporal (its experiential) structure. Instigating

a form of encounter, such new ‘de-centred’ research aesthetic is perhaps best imagined as a call to linger and engage with a *rendering present* of intercultural encounters’ ‘autonomous’ beauty and radical strangeness (or at least an attempt thereof). Aiming to set in motion a (performative) movement of *call and response*, IES research could invite acts of meaning-making, which are not simply defined *against* what is perceived as less ethical acts of signification (e.g., in the social sciences). Research might instead find expression in its own, *lively presentation*, as the mode of being of art and humanities knowledge more generally. To conclude, IES’ research aesthetic is here bound up in a form of *aesthetic pleasure*, hoping to move us (emotionally, imaginatively, intellectually) - but without tying us to (exact) epistemic notions *beyond itself* (which would render art ‘meaningless’). IES research (as such aesthetic phenomenon) seeks to render present *what moves and moved us* (in intercultural encounters), but what can never be fully represented, and with that, epistemologically captured – because art is unique in its purpose to (first and foremost) be present before any words are spoken.

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